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## Digital storytelling and the concept of the “modern” museum [Postface]

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<https://www.aracneeditrice.eu/en//pubblicazioni/museums-and-forms-of-digital-storytelling-elisa-bonacini-9791259949653.html>

PUBLISHER

Aracne editrice

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This book chapter was accepted for publication in the book Museums and Forms of Digital Storytelling by Elisa Bonacini [© Aracne]. The publisher's website is at: <https://www.aracneeditrice.eu/en/index.php>. This book chapter appears here with the permission of the publisher.

LICENCE

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Liguori, Antonia. 2022. “Digital Storytelling and the Concept of the “modern” Museum [postface]”. Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/21621351.v1>.

## Postface

### Digital Storytelling and the concept of the “modern” museum

The time has come for subversive storytelling  
(Zipes, 2016)

Storytelling is by its nature rooted in the past, influenced by the present and projected towards the future. It is so in its form and content, and digital technologies exponentially expand its channels of diffusion, broadening its horizon in the spatial dimension and accelerating its impact in the temporal dimension.

As I write this afterword, with my mind still in full swing after reading the stimulating reflections and flawless reconstruction of this rich and profound book, my eye falls on a Twitter notification that pulls me into a “legitimate” distraction. That distraction, in reality, proves to be decisive in finding a thread to follow in these few lines that can give voice to my idea of using Digital Storytelling as a participatory tool to build “a just future” and to my expectation of finding in Museums that “social space” in which to preserve the stories of the past, listen to and represent the stories of the present, collaborate with local and global communities with ambition to imagine new stories and build a better future together. For everyone.

The tweet that “distracted” me led me to read the piece written by Lonnie G. Bunch, Secretary of the Smithsonian, on some recent cases of racial violence in the United States against African-Americans and in particular in response to the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota. His reflections on a “fragile and at risk” democracy, undermined by strong cultural and racial divisions, and by widespread inequality exposed even more by the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrate the urgency felt by those driving one of the largest museum institutions in the world to make its voice heard and to relaunch the active role of museums to what Lonnie G. Bunch defines as a “monumental task”, that of fighting the inequalities present in our society. It is not a coincidence that the voice of the one who in the Smithsonian also contributed to creating one of the most innovative museums in the application of various approaches to Storytelling, not only in terms of use but also, and above all, for the co-creation of content, namely the National Museum of Afro-American History and Culture, also reminds us that the past has shown that it is “ordinary people”, when they unite and work together, who allow us to overcome what we perceive as insurmountable barriers. Those “common people” who, through their own stories, allow us to explore the complexity of today’s world and who, through that approach to storytelling that Daniel Meadows defined as “holistic”, can become an active and essential part of promoting the spread of creativity and dialogue. And it is precisely the stories of “ordinary people”, when they are listened to, shared, and “exhibited”, that demonstrate that the hierarchies of knowledge can be overcome if “social spaces” are created to activate full participation.

Nevertheless, “ordinary people”, despite the fact that global access to digital technologies has transformed web users from “consumers” to “knowledge producers”, still feel that a sense of distance from the “official” channels of cultural production, museums and the so-called places of culture, which they certainly are. This shows that, although we are obviously experiencing a new phase of the “Participatory Age”, described so thoroughly by Elisa Bonacini in this book, the process of democratization of knowledge is not yet complete, although digital technologies can sometimes give us that illusion.

Perhaps we could rather speak, in reference to the relationship between places of culture and the potential interactions between visitors and museum institutions, of partial or imperfect democratization or perhaps – as Lonny G. Bunch wrote looking at the concept of democracy in a completely different context – of a “fragile democracy” (in our case in the area of knowledge production).

And this story confirms what I’m trying to say here. In the spring of 2018, I facilitated a Digital Storytelling workshop in Virginia, USA, in partnership with the Smithsonian Center for Learning and Digital Access and the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, as part of a Latin American family

program in the county of Fairfax. One of the participants who was there with her daughter, told me that in the past she had worked for the garbage collection right on the “National Mall”, where most of the Smithsonian museums are located. Even knowing that the entrance to the museums on the “Mall” was free, she told me that she had never gone beyond the entrance staircase. I was struck by this and asked her why, and she told me that she had always felt intimidated by what she could see inside the museums, and somehow mortified by the fact that she had not had the opportunity to study in her life; she was convinced that she would not be able to understand and in any case she would not feel comfortable in that environment, nor worthy of having access to that place of Culture. I remember that I smiled and stared at her with complicity, as if to make her understand that I understood what she was talking about, as if I had felt a similar sensation too, and I promised her that in the following days we would try to explore together a new way of conceiving that idea of a museum. We worked together with her and other migrant families from Latin America for three days. On the first day, two Smithsonian educators and I went to their school where they used to meet and participate in various training experiences, a familiar place for them. The storytelling workshop involved the use of prints and digital representations of museum objects taken from the exhibition “The Sweat of My Face” to stimulate the sharing of personal stories about their sense of cultural identity and belonging (“Perteneceer” in Spanish). During the second day we decided to organize the second phase of the workshop, the one during which we would have perfected the script and started working on the storyboard, in the museum: the goal was to invite the participants, after having become familiar with the museum objects in an informal context, to observe the exhibition live and recreate in the museum space that same dialogue with the works of art that we had started the day before, but this time while we were observing the entire exhibition. The same person who had told me the day before that she had never entered a museum for fear of feeling inadequate, called me aside, while we were there in the National Portrait Gallery, and told me that the creative and participatory process of storytelling had given a way for her and the other participants to feel and demonstrate that “we are all part of the culture”. At the end of the three days, after the screening of digital stories, among the various comments on the experience there was one that particularly struck me: it was always her, the woman who had never entered a museum before. She told us that the storytelling experience had represented an opportunity for them to discover a new language of expression, to be able to recognize their own stories in art objects and to share their stories as a means of connection first of all with their inner world, and, through their emotions, with other people involved in the creative process, and with museum objects. This time seen and interpreted by each of them with different eyes, told and represented through their personal stories. Each different from the other.

Elisa Bonacini in this book has clearly highlighted the risk hidden behind the use of technologies, of confusing “interaction” with “participation”, especially where she analyzes successful cases of “audience engagement”. The story I told you has a sequel, which shows how the success (in terms of “audience engagement”) of the workshop just described can foster participation experiences not only during the visit to the museum, but also in the medium and long term – which are the real success experiences carried out by / with returning visitors.

The impact on the participants generated by that digital storytelling workshop, in particular on their initial way of conceiving the museum as an “exclusive” space, then prompted the educators of the National Portrait Gallery to involve that same group to become leaders of initiatives to celebrate the Latin American culture inside the Museum and to facilitate themselves short sessions of participatory and collaborative “storyboarding” with other groups of visitors.

This is an example that allows us to experience first-hand a change of perception from a “museum of collections” for a few to a “museum of participation” for all, and which can also give us a way to expand the very notion of a “museum of interaction”, intended as a place to facilitate the visitor’s involvement not only with the museum object, but above all to encourage interaction between people and between different cultures (in space and time): a museum and place of culture that is indeed a “common heritage” (as defined in the *Carta di Pietrelcina* 2020), but also a place to build a “common future”.

This book and other experiences that some of us can tell, such as the example of the workshop in Virginia, force us to escape the temptation to entrust the highest levels of engagement to the most advanced technology. The stories of “ordinary people” remind us that creativity is what makes the difference, and the more participatory the process of designing and developing new storytelling techniques and paths is, the greater its success. The essential step to take is that from the democratization

of content and access to technologies, to the democratization of the creation of paths: therefore, not only in the production of “user generated content”, but finally “user generated pathways” of development. We are in fact talking about an interaction no longer limited to use, but extended to the design of new spaces, paths and strategies.

In order to be able to give concrete answers to that “monumental task” described by the Secretary of the Smithsonian, my ambition here is to propose a new model of a “contemporary” museum, which takes up Benedetto Croce’s idea of the contemporaneity of history, that history which, even if told in the near or distant past, answers the questions of the present to build a better future. For everyone.

The digital is a channel for access, creation, experience, and communication of the contemporary world, but this does not mean that it can answer the questions of the today; rather, it can create new ones, and, above all, it can offer museum institutions new opportunities and new tools for listening to the stories and questions of contemporary society: those stories of “ordinary people”, which, when they unite and work together, allow us to overcome what we perceive as insurmountable barriers.

Antonia Liguori  
Loughborough University, UK