

Dolák, Jan

[Davis, Ann; Smeds, Kerstin (Eds.). Visiting the visitors: an enquiry into the visitor business in museums]

*Museologica Brunensia*. 2017, vol. 6, iss. 1, pp. 68-70

ISSN 1805-4722 (print); ISSN 2464-5362 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/137202>

Access Date: 22. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

## RECENZE LITERATUREY/BOOK REVIEW

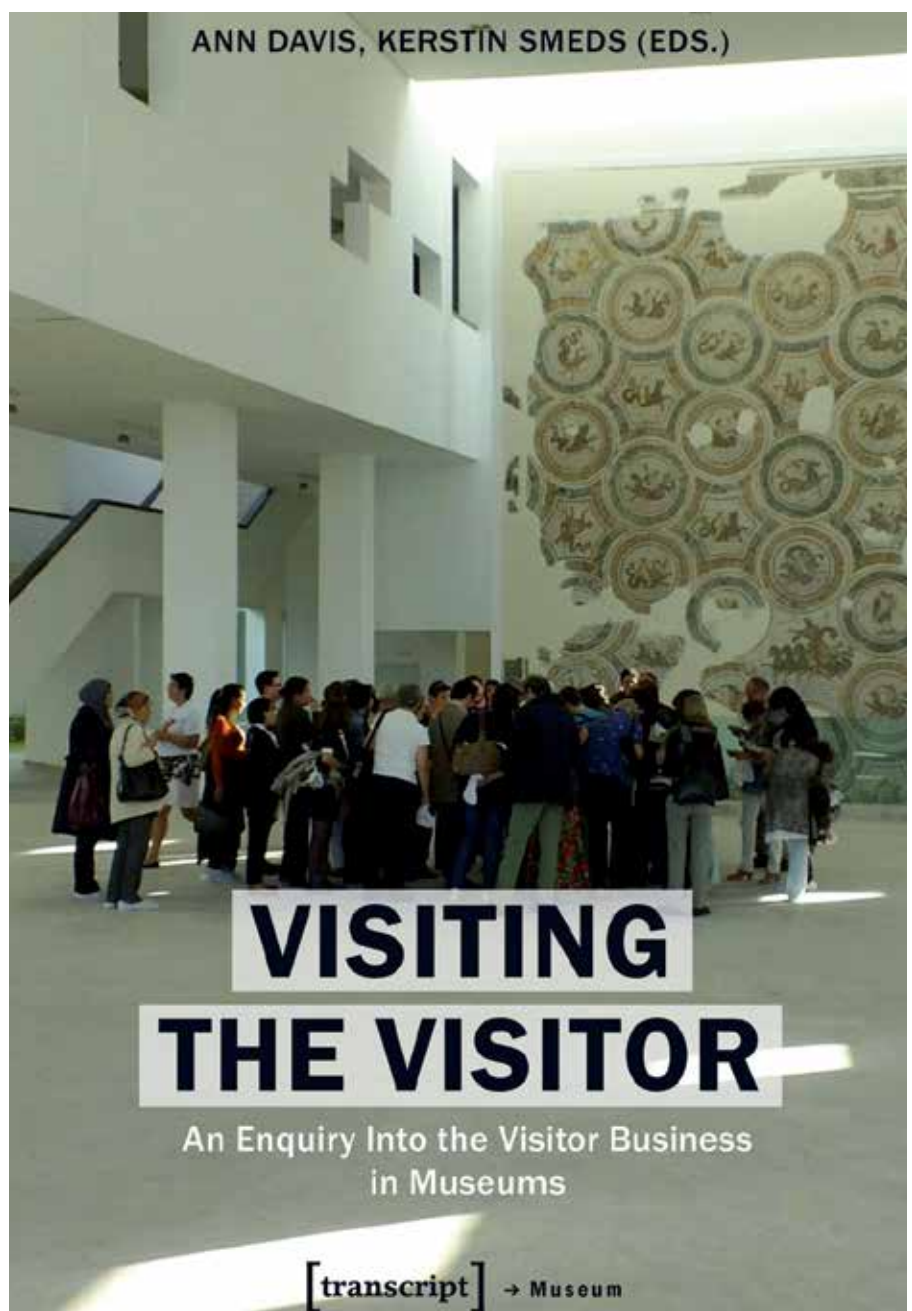
ANN DAVIS, KERSTIN SMEDS (EDS.).  
*VISITING THE VISITORS. AN ENQUIRY INTO THE  
 VISITOR BUSINESS IN MUSEUMS.*

BIELEFELD: TRANSCRIPT VERLAG, 2016. 250 PAGES.  
 ISBN 978-3-8376-3289-7.

JAN DOLÁK

If one were to look for the most frequent subject among the current museology output, it would probably run like this: the visitors and their needs. This phrase also characterises an anthology published in 2016 by the transcript publishers in Bielefeld, Germany. Its title is *Visiting the Visitors* and the book was edited by the Swedish professor of museology Kerstin Smeds and Ann Davis, the former president of the ICOFOM international committee and former director of The Nickle Arts Museum, a small university museum in Calgary, Canada. Brief introductions from both editors are followed by fifteen contributions by fourteen authors, chiefly from the circle of the ICOFOM that also financially supported the publishing.

In the first article, Professor Jennifer Harris from Perth, Australia contemplates the present era, which she refers to as “postcolonial” and “post-holocaust”. According to Harris, the importance of objects is decreasing and, in contrast, the importance of visitors, their influence and perception is on the rise. Harris maintains that we are witnessing the collapse of the rational mission of the museum and a decrease in the power of objects. She further discusses the “affect museum” with reference to the ideas of Ronald Barthes. She demonstrates



some of her views on hyperreality represented by museums on the example of the “Earthquake House” in the Te Papa Tongarewa museum in Wellington.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, Harris’s opinions appear to resonate with the approach of the major part of the current museology production that would, however, require an in-depth analysis.

In another contribution, M. Elizabeth Weiser (USA) examines individual identity and collective history, with interesting examples from Uzbekistan. Daniel Schmitt (France) rightly points out that the term “average museum visitor” is a myth and assesses the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires supplied during museum visits and afterwards. His research involved 41 mini-cameras attached to the visitors’ bodies.

Professor John Falk from Oregon also centres on visitors, as does the Canadian museologist Ann Davis: in her study *Empowering the Visitors* she discusses the approach of Bruno Soares who understands (factually correctly) the museum as a stage. Swedish Professor Kerstin Smeds in her article comments on the current radical individualization of society craving self-formation and self-performance. With reference to Zahava Doering, she divides the visitors into foreigners, guests and clients. The article is marked by the author’s leanings towards existential philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> While the professor from Perth hesitates to give a clear assessment, the reviewer’s opinion is unambiguous. The Earthquake House is a small house at the exhibition that, by means of modern technology, moves with varying intensity and the visitor can thus “experience” an earthquake of different intensities of the Richter scale. An enormous brick that has “fallen” into a cot evokes the intended emotions. Next to the house is a “weight,” and you can measure how strong an earthquake you have caused by a hammer hit. While the first example (house) shows a suitable use of technology, in the second case the museum has resorted to exhibiting a cheap fairground attraction.

These articles are followed by a quality piece by the Brazilian museologist Bruno Brulon Soares shedding light on his take on reflexive museology. He believes that the museum is a performative institution (which is definitely true), yet the performance theory has, in his opinion, never been developed by museologists. According to Soares, reflexivity is not a quick moment but a whole set of socio-cultural components that shape the audience as such. The author goes on to point out the common features between the museum and theatre. The cultural performance genres are not just mirrors but “magic mirrors of social reality”. He maintains that new museology does not present something to museum visitors but represents the visitors themselves. Visitors are participants (here, he draws on a well-known book by Nina Simon). Aida Rechena (Portugal) contributed the article *Social Representation Theory and Museum Visitors*, while the museologist Anna Leshchenko from Moscow explores the relationship between museology and linguistics. Her article is based on the presumption that we neither see an object nor understand its message; instead, we perceive and interpret it in a relative way. The author limits a museum visit time to 40 minutes for children and 1.5 hours for adults. Two interesting and well-written articles come from the museologist and museology historian Vitaly Ananiev from St. Petersburg. First, the author warns against the automatic transfer of philosophical terms to contemporary museology, namely Martin Buber’s dialogism. He then moves on, perhaps rather surprisingly, to research into the numbers of visitors in the Soviet Union, roughly from the year 1920 until the early 1930s. At that time, museums were ruled by the official ideology, yet other areas were prioritized within the

framework of the “reinforcement of the Soviet power” (police, army, industry, agriculture); as a result, the Tretyakov Gallery and the State Museum of History (both in Moscow) operated relatively freely. This favourable period ended with the arrival of hardline Stalinism in the early 1930s. Among Russian museologists, apart from Fjodor Schmit, Ananiev mentions names that are relatively unknown in the context of Central Europe (Oskar Waldhauer, Věra Beliavskaia, Boris Brullov and others).

Croatian museologists Žarka Vujić and Helena Stublić examine visitors from the perspective of information sciences, which is hardly surprising for Zagreb museology, and admit that the Central European concept of museality has not been widely employed. According to the authors, the system of Ivo Maroević (the most prominent Croatian museologist) places emphasis on museum objects as symbols, suppressing the role of visitors as interpreters. They further discuss work with visitors in the former Yugoslavia, from the late 19th century through the 20th century until the present. In another contribution, Maria Cristina Vannini ponders general issues behind the creation of permanent exhibitions, especially with emphasis on authenticity, in the Museo Civico Sansepolcro displaying the work of Pietro della Francesca. Taiwanese scholar Wan-Chen Chang introduces the readers to her research into visitors’ perception in Taichung City. This exhibition focusing on prehistoric facts makes a good use of modern technology and models (e. g. a tyrannosaurus with a baby). Wan-Chen Chang explored the perception of authenticity in relation to the Real/Fake matrix formulated by Gilmore and Pine, and shows that in some cases authenticity is not necessarily the

most attractive aspect.<sup>2</sup> In the last contribution Canadian museologist Collete Dufresne-Tassé discusses her research regarding museum visitors conducted by a team from the University of Montréal in museums in Montreal and Paris. In her opinion, visitors only read 50% of all texts and only view ca 50–80% of exhibits. The book closes with brief biographies of the authors.

The book is an anthology, and as such suffers from the usual problems of works of this kind, i.e. a (expected) lack of balance between the individual contributions. Along with articles beneficial to museology it includes some rather flat offerings. However, as a whole the book is certainly worth reading. In addition, the reading and the comprehension of the articles are made easier by a large number of black-and-white photographs.

JAN DOLÁK

Department of Ethnology and  
Museology, Comenius University in  
Bratislava, Slovak Republic

---

<sup>2</sup> The reviewer's research into this exhibition brought similar results.