On Plasticity: Curation and Exhibition Design with/for Children

Antoneli Matos Belli Sinder
Pontifical Catholic University Rio de Janeiro, Canada

"But tell me, my brothers, what the child can do, which even the lion could not do? [...] Three metamorphoses of the spirit have I told you: how the spirit became a camel, the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child."

This article examines some issues surrounding the presence of children in art exhibitions in museums. Children are usually approached in the specialised literature either as objects depicted in the works of art, or as the target audience of educational programs. This study, however, intends to approach the topic from a third perspective: What can children do in museums? What do they provoke? What can they generate?

Structured around a comparison between the exhibitions The Century of the Child: Growing by Design – 1900-2000 (2012, MoMA, New York), and (Hi)stories of Childhood (2016, Masp, São Paulo), this paper specifically investigates the ways children interact with the space and the art in museums, considering the experiences and materialities that can be triggered by the disruptive character of their presence. Oblivious to ropes or tapes meant to separate viewer from artwork, children touch, lick, bite, and smell the objects of their interest. I approach the roles of children by childhood’s own perspectives, through one material aspect that can be seen as an intersection between art and childhoods: plasticity, the material capacity that allows the creation of shapes.

Building upon the work of Dewey, Berger, Tauton, Smith, Danto, Koops, and Zuckerman, this article discusses how artistic phenomena play an active role in children’s cultural experiences and processes and how children could be seen as also (trans)forming institutions such as the art museum.

Keywords: Childhood, Art Museums, Child Bodies, Expressivity, Museum Studies