

# PROPOSITIONS FOR MUSEUM EDUCATION

International Art Educators in Conversation



Edited by

Anita Sinner

Patricia Osler

Boyd White

# Propositions for Museum Education

# Artwork Scholarship: International Perspectives in Education

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The aim of the Artwork Scholarship series is to invite debate on, and provide an essential resource for transnational scholars engaged in creative research involving visual, literary and performative arts. Approaches may include arts-based, practice-based, a/r/tography, artistic, research creation and more, and explore pedagogical and experimental perspectives, reflective and evaluative assessments, methodological deliberations, and ethical issues and concerns in relation to a host of topic areas in education.

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Propositions for Museum Education  
INTERNATIONAL ART EDUCATORS IN CONVERSATION

Edited by  
Anita Sinner, Patricia Osler and Boyd White

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Chapter 31 'Co-imagining the Museum of the Future: Meaningful Interactions  
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## Land Acknowledgment

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As is our practice in Canada, we offer a land acknowledgement to recognize that Canada is a land of many, many nations.

Anita Sinner learns and teaches on land that is the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy̓əm (Musqueam) People at The University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Boyd White, as a long-time member of McGill University, acknowledges the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations, a place which has historically served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst nations.

Patricia Osler honours the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation as current treaty holders of Toronto, where she resides. Tkaronto has been caretaken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Huron-Wendat. This territory accords with the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Canadian Great Lakes region.

In accordance with the United Nations Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we join with all authors in this book to recognize the many places where we reside, and the rights of all Indigenous Peoples globally, to ensure the dignity, freedom and well-being of all peoples, and to share and protect the lands, territories and resources, respectfully.



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## Preface-*ing*

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Anita Sinner, Patricia Osler and Boyd White

Ongoing conversations about dynamic, educative movements now underway in museums prompted our curiosity to invite artful “xchanges” among educators in this collection. Our goal was twofold: to exchange views and attend to the incremental “x,” for we suggest there is an unknown qualitative shift underway that is magnifying, and indeed multiplying, our understandings of museums today. By attending to such between spaces, we invoke in this collection an interplay of situations, conditions, bodies, spaces and artworks, co-creating together an unpredictable yet discernable change. Much like neo-phenomenologists, we adopt a position that the intensification of the felt body in relation to museums moves us to “thinking in constellations,” where we mediate our “embodied happenings” as openings to engage with works of art in new ways (Gugutzer, 2019, p. 189).

As art educators preoccupied with pedagogic intention, we sought to bring together diverse worldviews with contributors sharing candid perspectives that survey, investigate, prompt and propose possibilities for museums as contiguous sites of learning. Dónal O’Donoghue creates the conditions to enliven this conversation with a thoughtful introduction and commentary, storying how we live with museums as sites of educative transformation. The chapters that follow deliberate decolonizing museums, with emphasis on social, cultural, historical and ecological justice as a relational act and action. Extending from decolonizing practices, museums of purpose – be that peace, heritage, history, memory, science, participatory, or otherwise shifting in purpose (e.g. museums joining with community or school partnerships) – are at crossroads of change. Such movements advance pedagogic pivots by attending to how we mediate art, and why multimodal methods as creative catalysts enhance what it means to know and not know. Building upon these sections, sites of sensorial practice invoke affect and explore presence, body traces, and health and well-being. This brings us to the conversation in our last section, where authors unpack virtual museums as immersive iterations of technologies and digital delivery.

Reflecting constellations of thought shared among authors, it is important to note that chapters blur and overlap discrete sections, often addressing multiple themes, and so may



be read differently depending on one's positionality. The dispositions, definitions and practices offered in these 33 chapters from 19 countries – Zimbabwe, Honduras, Colombia, Estonia, Poland, Malta, Turkey and Brazil, among others – articulate how museums are nuanced and situated as social institutions and why collections enact responsibility in public exchange, leading cultural discourses of empowerment in new ways. To ensure a blended and balanced flow of ideas across each section, we intersperse and mingle chapters that are diverse in issues, challenges, art forms and museum orientations to consider more fully, as Donna Haraway (2016) advocates, how the act of “composting” issues intersects with visual arts, teaching and learning. Our goal in drawing together international perspectives is to facilitate deeper thinking, making and doing practices central to museum engagement, opening an “artful xchange” across global, local and glocal contexts.

Presented within these pages, a wide range of topics and arts-based modes of inquiry imagine new possibilities concerning theory-practice, sustainability of educational partnerships and communities of practice with, in and through artwork scholarship. The individual chapters are well-situated within museum studies and related literature and grounded in creative disciplines while enlarging discussions with *trans*-topographies (transdisciplinary, transnational, translocal, transindividual and more) as critical directions for art educators. Authors rupture predictive discourses of museum education and counter existing museo-narratives in style, order, sequence, framework and structure. This effort brings us to radically different museum education contexts and to emergent knowledge clusters that enfold cultural activism, sustainable practices and experimental teaching and learning alongside transformative exhibitions, while all the time questioning – Who is a learner? What is a museum? Whose art is missing?

International art educators committed to redefining museum education impart collective diversity through richly textured exposés, first-person accounts, essays and visual essays, informed by socio-materiality and more-than-human perspectives, in unison with traditional forms and historical expressions of researching museums. With formal and informal approaches, experiential and systematic inquiry, authors embrace innovations for teaching and learning from museum studies, education, fine arts, curatorial inquiry and philosophy to consider how institutions bring into conversation community activists, change agents and social policymakers. In turn, we see how museums, as cultural brokers within wider society, facilitate public pedagogies among visitor audiences, patrons of museums and tourists alike. From the perspective of art educators, museum education is shifting to a new paradigm, which this collection showcases and marks as threshold moments of change underway internationally.

For this edited collection, curated with movement and reverberation, we deeply appreciate the many ways authors initiate educative potentials from the standpoint of art education, bringing us to lively, vibrant and forceful dialogues in the process. Seldom do we encounter such a uniquely provocative series of propositions. May we continue to welcome and anticipate ever more eloquent conversations beyond these pages.

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## **Chapter 31**

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### **Co-imagining the Museum of the Future: Meaningful Interactions Among Art(efacts), Visitors and Technology in Museum Spaces**

Priscilla Van Even, Annika Wolff, Stefanie Steinbeck,  
Anne Pässilä and Kevin Vanhaelewijn





## The museum space and its multiple purposes and meanings

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For quite some time, museums have been exploring the potential of technologies and tools for visual literacy education, visitor engagement and exhibition curation, among other things. The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns have, however, accelerated the digitization of museums and intensified the focus on the use of (digital) technological interventions and tools within museums. This trend is mainly received with enthusiasm and excitement by visitors, researchers and museum professionals, but the use of technology should be handled with a certain caution. Technology can be supportive, but it can also become a distraction from the initial and actual purpose (Van Even & Vermeersch, 2019). We inquire in this chapter into how we can establish meaningful interactions among visitors, art(efacts) and technology within the museum space of the future, unlocking the potential of using technology so that it functions as an enabler instead of a barrier.

To dig deeper into these interactions, we first direct attention to the purposes and meanings of museums. The museum space has acquired multiple meanings and purposes throughout time. Where once the museum setting tended to focus on collecting and storing objects, since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the use of object-based information for educational purposes became the dominant function in the museum space. Modern museums have turned into places of learning, where education and training may take place through both formal and informal processes (Günay, 2012).

The purpose of contemporary museums is now to collect, preserve, classify, document, exhibit and curate artefacts and treasures that – depending on the type of museum – have cultural, artistic, historical or scientific significance in order to educate people, support their self-directed learning and last but not least, inspire them. After this fast-forward journey, we are of course tempted to imagine and explore the possible purposes and concepts of the future museum space from the perspective of technology. Will technological change have an impact on the museum concept? And, specifically of interest in our research, how can and will technology be used in a museum setting to support these purposes? What will new technology bring about?

To try and answer these questions, we first discuss the future museum co-imagined through the eyes of youngsters as part of a project in 2018 called RETINA (RE-thinking Technical Interventions to Advance visual literacy of young people in art museums) and connect this project with the notion of meaningfulness. We contrast this with insights from a co-creation workshop in 2021, with museum professionals and researchers, on

contemporary uses of technology and their potential role, the supportive and distractive functions of technology, technological enablers and barriers and co-imagined future scenarios (dystopian and utopian). Reflecting on these different perspectives, we end with some conclusions on the possible role of technology within museums of the future.

### **The future museum co-imagined and co-designed by youth**

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Our co-imagining of the future museum with youngsters builds further upon insights from three case studies in the RETINA research project of the KU Leuven University in Belgium, which took place in 2018. This project explored how digital tools can enhance the visual literacy skills of young people in art and design museums by organizing two- to five-day co-design sessions with children (aged 10–14 years) in three museums – Ludwig Forum in Germany, Design Museum Gent in Belgium and M Leuven in Belgium – to develop low-tech prototypes for visual literacy tools for the museum of the future (Figure 31.1). This participatory approach included different stakeholders (young visitors in the design process and museum professionals in the evaluation and reflection follow-up) and brought in their different perspectives on digital tools, visual literacy and the future role of museums.

Interestingly, despite the co-designing taking place in different museums with different groups, we found common characteristics with the low-tech prototypes to enhance visual literacy skills and visitor experiences. When we looked at the museum of the future through the eyes of youngsters, we saw there was a strong attraction towards the s(t)imulation of different senses (multisensorial), an experience instead of an information orientation, a focus on contextualization (which exceeds a mere historical background) and an attraction to technological tools with an interactive component. These findings hint at a possible paradigm shift in the future museum concept and purpose and show us how children perceive meaningful interactions with technology.

We did discover, however, some (possible) negative side-effects of using technology during these sessions; namely: (1) some museums do not want to (over) stimulate and actually want to be a place where visitors take time and slow down to *really* look at works; (2) there is a thin line between engaging education experiences and entertainment, and devices often start to become the focus instead of the art(effect); (3) a more nuanced point: interactive tools are attractive, but there are several degrees in interactivity and participation that suggest passive engagement, and sometimes the tool itself is the focus and medium of interaction instead of stimulation for communication between people. In this way, the technology does not necessarily distract from the art(effect), but it lacks a sufficient social component.

As a result, the role of technology in the museum space appeared to be ambiguous in the RETINA project and directed our attention to the importance of a meaningful interaction between museum visitors, technology and art(effects). Experiences from the RETINA project have shown us that interactions between technology and visitors that lack this element of



Figure 31.1: Co-designing prototypes in the Ludwig Forum Museum, 2018.

meaningfulness can easily lead to a distraction from what we actually want to achieve. In the worst case, technology rather becomes a replacement for art(efacts). There is a danger that the technology becomes the object of interest itself and the primary attraction for visitors. Therefore, meaningfulness should be considered crucial when exploring technology uses and potentials.

### Meaningful interaction components

---

In our case, the interactions we seek are captured by the term “meaningful.” To inquire how we can establish a meaningful interaction among museum visitors of all age groups, art(efacts) and technology, we first need to better understand what constitutes the different components of a meaningful interaction.

In the work of Mekler and Hornbaek (2019), we can distinguish different meaning components that can support us in developing user-friendly technology, namely (1) connectedness (connected to the self and the world), (2) purpose (sense of aims, goals and directions), (3) coherence (comprehensibility and making sense of one’s experiences), (4) resonance (feeling and intuition) and (5) significance (value and importance).

Based on our experience, some other crucial components can be added to Mekler and Hornbaek’s framework that are more context-specific to the museum setting and relate to the visitor experience and the orientation towards art(efacts). Therefore, we suggest (6) collaboration and participation, (7) discovery and (8) authenticity.

Visitors do not always want technology to tell them where to go or what to look at, but rather more meaningful use of technology may be found in the ways in which it fosters collaboration (Sharples et al., 2014) or allows for serendipitous encounters and knowledge discovery (Buchanan et al., 2020). Collaboration and a participatory orientation can be seen as a form of action in which the museum audience plays an active role, and visitors thus participate in the construction of critical meaning-making within a curated process. Different kinds of activities can lead to a participatory approach, such as stories and storytelling or immersive technologies, which merge the physical world with a digital or simulated form of reality. Visitor or audience participation and collaboration, combined with storytelling, is a process of critical interpretation and sense-making of various perspectives, voices and points of view captured in art(efacts). In a museum context, curation of such a process is crucial because interpretation conveys a logical, intuitive and emotional understanding of socio-cultural aspects and actions (Bruner, 1990). A participatory orientation invites audiences to rethink the museum as an interactive space where they can engage as visitors with open-ended questioning (generative questioning), which underpins reflection and investigation of social and cultural assumptions.

Authenticity is also a crucial component. When contemplating the potentials of digital interventions in museums, a central element is how these may affect visitors’ experience

of the authentic nature of the museum and art(efact) representations. This desire for authentic encounters goes beyond wanting to see and interact and engage with “real” things. It is increasingly connected to audiences wanting a meaningful experience, which satisfies their emotional needs. Thus, the question becomes if and how museums can implement digital interventions that enhance the authentic nature of their exhibitions while supporting the development of meaningful interactions and experiences for visiting audiences. One example of a digital intervention that can enhance an authentic meaningful experience with a participatory orientation is the use of immersive technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality and mixed reality technologies in exhibitions.

All these components should be considered when incorporating digital technologies in museum settings. When one of the components is absent, technology will become more of a distraction and a barrier rather than a supporter and an enabler. This fragile line between distraction and support is further explored in the following scenarios.

### **The future museum co-imagined by museum professionals and researchers**

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In our search for a meaningful use of technology in the (future) museum space, we organized a follow-up co-creation workshop in May 2021 with museum professionals, technology developers and researchers to co-imagine the future museum with different stakeholders. This co-creation workshop took place on Miro, an online whiteboard and visual platform. We asked the participants to brainstorm and share their past work experiences and future ideas during interactive brainstorms and discussions on curation, education and visitor experience. This approach adheres to the principles of participatory methodology, as does co-designing, where you develop *for* people *with* people (Ehn & Badham, 2002). We engaged the different stakeholders – professionals with work experience in museum education, research, curation and technology development – in conversations during the co-creation workshop and added to this set of ideas on how technology is used to look through different professional lenses.

### **Contemporary uses of technology: Support or distraction?**

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In the first part of the co-creation workshop, all the co-creators of the museum of the future gave us several examples of current technology uses they were familiar with, and they gave multiple examples of best practices with a high “meaningfulness” level. These practices were based on exhibition experiences: for example, augmented reality immersion of a Van Gogh exhibition in Brussels. We also asked about experiences with technology they disliked and queried what technology cannot replace. Based on these examples, we generated several characteristics for both positive and negative technology uses.



## **Supportive and supplementary functions and technology enablers**

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According to museum professionals and researchers, technologies and tools can be used to engage people with art(efacts) and scientific data in new ways. To establish a meaningful engagement with the technology, it was recommended that people be allowed to insert their own narrative as well. This approach leads to visitor involvement and brings in an element of openness.

Another additional and enriching function is to use technology to s(t)imulate sensorial experiences and include the different senses when looking at an artwork or artefact. In the RETINA project, we also found that multisensorial experiences with a s(t)imulation function offer value since they bring (an) art(efact) to life and make the interaction a “lived experience” wherein contextualization and a sense of authenticity can take place.

The use of technology can also assist with knowledge translation practices and offer further conceptualization. Some participants considered facilitating independent knowledge construction as a desirable condition. Technology can offer visitors the possibility of going deeper into the background or additional information and can even include items that are not in the museum’s collection. As discussed earlier, immersive technologies can help create an “authentic experience” and make the knowledge translation process easier: for example, putting an artefact in the original setting with its original colours. Furthermore, it is difficult to visualize knowledge such as geographical mobility, cultural exchange and trade on static carriers like text boards. This can be better achieved with digital screens that offer the possibility to present this dynamically.

The aesthetic experience of artefacts can also be enhanced using supportive technologies. For example, we can “restore” a decayed artefact to its former glory without material reconstruction by, for example, augmenting its original state via a mobile app. This has the advantage of keeping the original artefact intact in the condition it was originally found, adding a broader archaeological context to experiencing the artefact.

Digital technology assists in increasing inclusivity and accessibility in the museum: for example, for people who are visually impaired. It can help overcome cultural and linguistic barriers – such as using an audio guide in multiple languages – to make the museum more inclusive. Also, through digital exhibitions, the museum can be made accessible even for those not able to visit the museum physically.

During the workshop, we identified several technology enablers that should help the museum achieve its supportive goal. It was identified that this vision of technology should be part of the general strategic management of a museum concerning where and why technology should be applied. Only through such an integrative approach on all levels of management does the museum make sensible decisions, both in the short and long run, on how to implement these technologies. According to participants, museum management should also pay attention to the sustainability of the technologies they wish to implement.

Another aspect of this strategy concerns the inclusion and participation of different stakeholders: management, curators, visitors, educators and technology developers.

Furthermore, the museum needs dedicated technology experts in their staff team, who oversee the complete processes of technologies in the museum and are aware of new advances in technologies.

### **Distractive elements, barriers and shortcomings**

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The use of (more) technologies, especially digital technology, can create a tension with the art(efacts). Often, new technologies are accompanied by a strong belief that they will enable more participation, provoke more sensations and increase fascination. However, we should not forget that originally, the objects of the exhibition themselves were the very reason to attract visitors. The art(efacts) should not become an excuse to deploy new technologies. In such a technocratic paradigm, the role of the museum and the meaning of art(efacts) could become endangered.

Technologies can also prevent people from interacting with each other and museum staff. Technology is not intended as a replacement for the experience of an art(efact) itself, nor is it a substitute for real social encounters, nor can it replace the authenticity of things. A virtual exhibition cannot replace the actual museum visit although it can address issues of accessibility to some degree.

Another distraction is that a museum budget might be tempted to overspend on technologies that perhaps do not deliver the expected results. Investing in “traditional” resources that are not part of a hyped-up trend – such as more staff or educational resources and ventures in general – might actually give the results a museum is seeking.

During our co-creation activities, we identified several barriers to good and meaningful use of technology. The most obvious is that the technology itself can become a barrier when it is not user-friendly. Also, technologies are easily prone to be impersonal, in contrast to a museum guide. A different but possibly related barrier is seen when a given technology leads to a lack of participation or even a form of pseudo-participation. The level of participation can depend on the type of tool or technology being used. Some enable a higher form of interactivity than others: for example, an explanatory video leaves little room for interactivity while a touch screen can offer several exploration options. Therefore, we need to reflect on their characteristics to distinguish which are more participatory-oriented than others.

The economic barrier must also not be forgotten. Museums lacking the funds needed to invest in new technologies may need to outsource this activity, which is not always desirable if the museum wants to remain sovereign. Moreover, outsourcing may not lead to strategies that are long-term oriented or sustainable when the museum staff lacks the competence to maintain these technologies.

Technology does not just offer new possibilities but also introduces limitations, as discussed earlier. We must remain aware of both possibilities and limitations to create sensible uses for these technologies. A possible misuse happens when a technology adds

nothing new to the knowledge translation or experience of a collection and the museum space as such.

## Future scenarios

### A dystopian view

The first group of dystopian scenarios we distinguished is included in [Figure 31.2](#) (red squares). During the co-creation workshop, some participants discussed the possibility that technology becomes a pure distraction that serves entertainment to the detriment of cultural enrichment. In the worst case, technology transforms the museum into a kind of amusement park. One vision sees that artefacts are substituted by technology in the museum. In this future, authenticity is replaced by simulation and meaning by entertainment. When thinking back on the meaning components, we can conclude that this use of technology lacks vision, purpose and resonance.

The second group (black squares) voices a similar concern, but this goes deeper, revealing the digitization of humanity itself. In this dystopian vision, human life is reduced to or

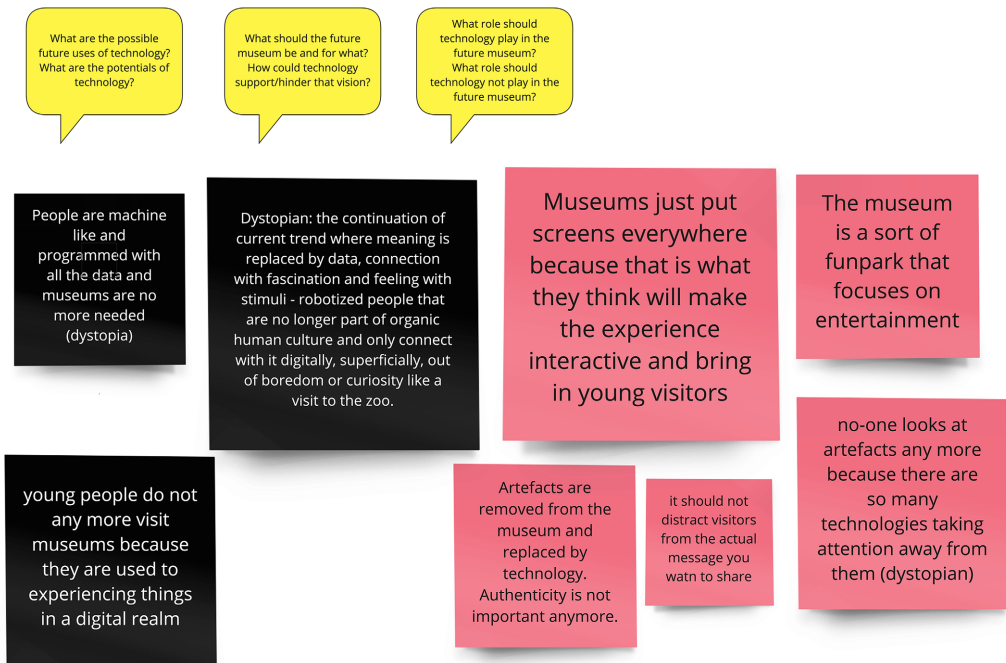


Figure 31.2: Future dystopian scenarios on Miro.



mediated by data. Because in such a future, digitization has become part of the psychology of people, all experiences are reduced to digital information, which is independent of physical space. Clearly, the meaning component of connectedness is missing in this technology vision.

### A utopian view

Two main scenarios can be discerned in the utopian future of the museum (Figure 31.3). The first category (yellow squares) speaks of a future where technology enhances, stimulates or augments the experience and connection people have: both with their cultural heritage and with museum collections, through involving the different senses in a positive and enjoyable way that encourages creativity and engagement. In this scenario, hidden qualities are brought within reach with the help of technology.

The second group of scenarios (green squares) speaks of a personal involvement with the museum and its collections. Technologies help bring in voices from outside the museum and cultivate a culture of responsibility and ownership among a broader public. This



Figure 31.3: Future utopian scenarios on Miro.

“cultural democracy” encourages self-reflection and critical thinking within its population. In its most evolved form, the museum experience is no longer confined to the walls or a particular collection: it becomes part of daily cultural life. The lived experience of culture does not make the museum obsolete; on the contrary, it makes an authentic experience of the museum natural.

## **Concluding reflections**

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In this digital era, museums must reinvent themselves and walk new pathways whereby they explore new purposes and concepts of the museum space. Technology plays a prominent role in this transformation and has a strong influence on the experience of visitors, curation practices and education. These tools and interventions can be used to engage people with art(efacts) and scientific data in new ways, stimulate sensorial experiences and assist with knowledge translation practices. They should, however, be supportive of the purposes of the museum and not distract from the art(efacts).

In this chapter, we have discussed the interaction among art(efacts), technology and visitors in the museum space to find ways to keep this interaction meaningful. To establish these conditions in the museum setting, we need user-friendly technology that incorporates different meaning components such as connectedness, purpose, coherence, resonance, significance and discovery. Moreover, we need to make sure that the orientation towards art(efacts) remains authentic and participatory. Different and sometimes conflicting visions of the future museum have been expressed by stakeholders who participated in the research. We cannot exclude the possibility that different museums will take on different future scenarios, just as they do today. The common ground between the different scenarios is to be found in the conviction that people need real interaction with objects, with other people and with the world. This includes all our senses, meaningful dialogues and lived experiences.

We conclude this chapter with a question that we stumbled upon during our study that demands further research: How does the museum type (for example, a natural history museum versus a design museum) have an influence on the use of technology, and would there be different requirements to establish a meaningful interaction?

## **Acknowledgements and contributions**

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