

THE

THE CONSTITUENT MUSEUM

CONSTITUENT
MUSEUM

What would happen if museums put relationships at the centre of their operation? This question inspires this publication, which offers a diverse, rigorous, and experimental analysis of what is commonly known as education, mediation, or interpretation within museum institutions. It takes the visitor not as a passive receiver of predefined content, but as a member of a constituent body, who it facilitates, provokes and inspires. Moving beyond the practice of mediation as such, the publication situates these practices within the social-political (neoliberal) context and the physical and organizational structure. By placing the relation to one's constituent at the centre of the museum organization, and by considering a constituent relationship as being one of collaboration and co-production, the relative positions of both the museum and its constituencies begin to shift and change. Understanding this change holistically is what this publication aspires to.

As a composition of new commissions and case-studies, *The Constituent Museum* draws from the diverse experiences of the institutions that together form the museum confederation L'Internationale, and the partners with whom it has collaborated during the five-year programme 'The Uses of Art: The Legacy of 1848 and 1989'. Central to the development of 'The Uses of Art' project was the instigation of a 'Mediation Task Force' that began to explore and address some of the key issues surrounding the evolution of relationships between museums and their publics. Initial debates around these complex and shifting relationships were played out through an examination of the terms 'use' and 'usership'. As museums begin to see themselves as sites of collaborative knowledge production, and begin to replay their earlier, nineteenth-century roles as active sites for the co-production of new civic identities, it became apparent that the terms use and usership did not fully implicate the necessity for museums to re-think their own operating systems and managerial structures. Or, to put this another way, it began to seem apparent that museums could do little more than 're-brand' their existing relationships with audiences—as the oneway and non-reciprocal broadcast of established knowledge—unless museums were prepared to open themselves up to the reciprocal possibility of change. Parallel this was the realization that many who work within, or collaborate with, existing museum structures already share in the belief that institutions need to change if we are to begin to reimagine our futures for the better. Furthermore, it also became apparent that many also

believe that museums have a key role to play in this social reimagining of our futures: and that new forms of fluid, flexible, and collaborative institutionalization are necessary if this reimagining is to move beyond the level of symbolic and utopian rhetoric.

With this in mind, the Constituent Museum actively seeks to present and make visible the diverse and sometimes contradicting strategies that institutions deploy when working to implement this change, depending on the context in which they operate or the size and history of the institution. In order to do this, the publication is introduced by a piece of fictional writing and then organized into five Chapters, composed of essays, project studies and discussions, which focus on different elements of museum practice that could be affected by a rethinking of the relation between the museum and its constituency. In 'The Rainbow Wrasse', Francis McKee gives us a 'future fiction' of a Constituent Museum yet to be in the form of a written email dialogue between Uschii and Leila. As Uschii arrives at the former terminal of Glasgow airport in 2068, he is part of a familiar landscape of scarcity, recycling, repurposing, reimagining and hope. As such, McKee's 'The Rainbow Wrasse' helps us to look back upon some of the key questions that are arising for us all now and, in doing so, begins to ask key questions of constituent commitments to both possible pasts and probable futures. Following this, Chapter One 'Becoming Constituent' seeks to frame some of the overall debates that underpin our relationship to the term 'constituencies' as a site of active, and ongoing, political struggle. By simply accepting that constituencies themselves are always mutable, fluid, protean and self-generating, it becomes possible to re-frame this term as one of active engagement. If this is the case, then we can also begin to re-imagine the Constituent Museum as being a generator of social change, a site in which meanings and identities are themselves coproduced and continually re-negotiated through our collaborative uses of art. Chapter Two, 'Architectures of Use', attempts to build on the broader themes and issues of the Constituent Museum by looking at some of the developing relationships that are opening out between the physical specificity of the museum as institutional edifice, and its ideological roles and functions as producer of meanings, site of exchange, and progenitor of social re-imagination. Chapter Three, 'Pedagogies of Encounter' begins to imagine the Constituent Museum as a space for the emergence of both critical discourses



and practices, in which new forms of hybrid and constituent education allow for the coproduction of difference, encounter and dissent, whilst relationships between aesthetics, politics, and knowledge are problematized and redrawn. In the light of this, Chapter Four, 'Distributing Ownership and Empowerment', turns our attention to the thorny, real as well as hypothetical, issues surrounding constituent collaboration and coproduction. What does it really mean to empower constituencies, publics and audiences? Beyond the rhetorical and well-meaning, such an activity would require that museums renegotiate certain levels of control in collaboration with their constituencies or, at the very least, that they at least begin to problematize previously received wisdoms surrounding traditional and sedimented forms of operational logic. Finally, Chapter Five 'Collecting Relationships' begins to think about a future in which relationships, and constituency, are already a core part of a museum's operational and relational logics. At the heart of this institutional re-imagining is the use of the archive as an active and constituent tool in the production of power and knowledge regimes. As the institutional archive is traditionally invisible, or at least less visible than the other dimensions of the museum (which is, after all, an institution dedicated to developing certain regimes of visibility and display) what would happen if the archive became the central, and most accessible, form of institutional constituency and collaborative and/or open-source self-management. This final Chapter, and it is hoped the overall critical, theoretical, and practical narrative arc of the book as a whole, will lead us back to the future, to our opening fiction and, most importantly, to the stark reminder that our constituent futures will largely be shaped and formed by the dreams and actions we take today and tomorrow.