Exploring the Futurabilities of Museums
Making differences with the *Museum Divan* at the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin

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The main argument of this chapter is that organisational learning is key to enhancing the futurabilities of museums. Unlike organisations in the economic sector, where organisational learning is a tool to increase productivity, organisational learning in the context of museums aims to foster democratisation through participation. (See, for example, Brown & Peers 2003, Dahlgren & Hermes 2015, Lynch 2011, Macdonald 1998, Meijervan Mensch 2012, Mörsch 2009, Runnel & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2014, Sternfeld 2013, Witcomb 2003.)

The chapter draws on an understanding of museum organisations and heritage as relational and co-produced, as dynamic and complex, as assemblages of people, materialities, practices and ideas (Harrison 2013, Macdonald 2013, Macdonald et al. 2018, Waterton & Dittmer 2014). Knowledge in organisations is not static, and learning is not unidirectional or dependent on fixed structures. Rather, learning is a situated process that encompasses emotional, physical and cognitive elements and includes the performance of knowledge as 'knowing' (Cook & Brown 1999). As situated practices, learning and knowing are constrained by material, social, emotional, imaginary and political factors. Those need not be formal boundaries, such as departments or disciplines. They can also be communities of practice—groups of people who share a common domain of interest, collectively accumulate knowledge and classify it into new or existing categories (Argyris & Schön 1978, Gherardi 2000, Gherardi et al. 1998, Gherardi 2011, Lave & Wenger 1991, Levitt & March 1988, Pallett & Chilvers 2015, Wenger 2000, Yanow & Ybema 2009)

The heterogenous practices at play in museums are shaped by various temporal structures and ways of referencing between present, past and future. This draws on a praxeological understanding of time that refrains from a rationalist idea of the future. This means that the future is understood neither as a linear process that can be fully controlled or planned in the present, nor as a social category shared by all individuals and groups in a museum (Appadurai 2013, Berardi 2017, Bryant and Knight 2017, Reckwitz 2016, Schatzki 2010, Pink et al. 2017, Harrison et al. 2020).

The following analysis reflects on museums as mindful institutions (Janes 2010) and explores four abilities that I believe are key to fostering the futurabilities of museums: *recognising* museums as political agents to counteract social or political injustices; *allowing* dialogue about the future potential of the museum through participatory projects; *investigating* the possibilities and challenges of democratic future-making through participation; and *nourishing* ideas, practices, routines and structures that promote the envisioning of new, democratic futures.[1]

I show that the implementation of the new practice not only reveals the heterogeneous views of the future within the curatorial team, but also highlights how moving away from 'pragmatic' time regimes can promote democratic learning within a museum. This includes devoting time to unlearning, that is, to understanding one's privilege as 'one's loss' (Spivak et al. 1996: 4) and reflecting on how people may be encouraged to 'speak back' (Castro Varela, María do Mar 2017, Sternfeld 2016).

These explorations draw on ethnography as a tool for 'trying to see and experience life-worlds from the point of view of those who live them and within the context of which they are part' (Macdonald 2013: 9). As co-initiator and co-organiser of the Museum Divan, I consider the results of evaluations and autoethnographic field notes (Karra and Phillips 2007). In doing so, I use my own 'becoming-with' (Gherardi 2019: 741) as a white German academic as an epistemic strategy to understand the museum's futurabilities. This includes taking 'the terror out of error' (Mörsch 2011b) and reflecting on my own struggles and failures as valuable sources for (un)learning. Being able to do so signals trust and a deep commitment to learning. In this spirit, I wish to express my gratitude to all the participants, especially those who took the time to participate in the Museum Divan, my colleagues from the Museum for Islamic Art and the researchers involved in the TOPOI-funded exhibition The Heritage of the Old Kings: Ctesiphon and the Persian Sources of Islamic Art.

Recognising the museum's social agency

The Museum for Islamic Art belongs to the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation's State Museums and is housed in the Pergamon Museum on Berlin's Museum Island. Founded in 1904, most of its collections were acquired at archaeological excavations or purchased on the art market (Kröger and Heiden 2004). The museum presents itself as occupying 'an unrivalled position in Germany—no other institution contains such a systematic and comprehensive collection of masterpieces of art and applied arts and objects of material culture stemming from Islamic societies as well as the Christian and Jewish communities living among them'.[2]

The museum's founders, directors and curatorial staff have played a vital role in the emergence of Islamic art history as a discipline. When I joined the museum in 2009 as part of a third-party funded project,[3] I quickly noticed staff members' alignment with the intellectual heritage and curatorial approaches of the institution's past. This included interpreting the material heritage of regions with Muslim-majority populations as 'art'. One rationale for that approach was that it valued Muslim-majority populations as a 'denominator for global achievements'. Another explanation was the partial lack of

knowledge about the symbolic meanings of objects from these eras and regions. Adding other layers of knowledge could lead to an 'overinterpretation' of objects (Gonnella 2013: 147–148).

Object specialists at the museum regarded themselves as 'cultural experts' (Carpentier 2014: 117) with knowledge accredited by academic degrees. Their task was to nurture, contribute and share the knowledge produced by the institution. Education and outreach were neither part of curation nor embedded in the museum itself. Rather, it was provided by a single representative from Visitor Services, a centralised department formally attached to the State Museum's General Directorate. The 'services' were geared towards complementing curatorial work through educational programmes, guided tours and pedagogical material (Schmidl and Nolte 2008). Opportunities for exchange and learning across professional communities were rare, and overarching debates, such as the lively discussions about 'participation' in the field of education, did not find their way into the museum (Jaschke and Nora Sternfeld 2012, Kazeem et al. 2009, Mörsch 2009, 2011a, Gesser et al. 2012, Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2007).

Seen through the lens of theories about learning in organisations, the community of curators at the museum was 'sticky' (Wenger et al. 2002: 153). They were members of a prestigious group of experts, and as such had felt no need to expand their professional boundaries or to reimagine traditional ways of interpreting objects.

Change came in 2009 with the appointment of a new director, Stefan Weber, who was entrusted with revamping the museum. He formulated a new vision early on in his tenure with 'New Spaces for Old Treasures' (Weber 2013b). Colleagues inside and outside the Berlin State Museums believed that his view represented a 'new era' and 'a fresh wind' (field note, 3 February 2009).

Amid increasing anti-Muslim racism in Europe and an overall negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims in public debates, researchers at the time reflected critically on representations of 'Islam' in museums (Kamel 2004, Shalem 2012, Shaw 2012, Shatanawi 2012). Drawing on postcolonial theories, most prominently Edward Said's critique of orientalism (1995), they pointed to the intellectual appropriation of 'Islamic' cultures into a Western canon of art history, and criticised the neglect of the symbolic meanings attached to and the practices associated with objects in their regions of origin (Necipoğlu 2013, Rabbat 2013). Despite critical debates over art historical methods, the museum's main actors had always 'defined the qualitative otherness of the subject, since in most cases there was no one to look back, thus no agency on the other side to be counted into the equation' (Troelenberg 2015: 228).

Acknowledging the debates on the historical traditions that shaped Islamic art history, Stefan Weber suggested displaying objects not only as art but as material culture in order to make 'the many layers of meanings of an object accessible' (Weber 2013a: 39). Unlike his predecessors, Weber recognised the controversial debates on Islam and Muslims (Weber 2015) and envisioned the expansion of the museum's role as an educational space to help counteract essentialising perspectives. The museum would present contemporary perspectives on the diversity of Islam and its global entanglements in the past and present.

The emergence of 'messy' diversity: the Museum Divan concept

The new director, eager to put his visions into practice, was acutely aware of the lack of resources for education and outreach. Discussing the situation during a planning meeting for the new permanent exhibition, he said: 'We know a lot about art history, but when it comes to communicating with our visitors, we have to learn a lot, we are clueless') (field note October 2010). To enhance the Museum's educational potential, he co-initiated several third-party funded projects.[4]

It was at this particular moment in time that I began to conceive the Museum Divan. It was meant to respond critically to the Western epistemological traditions that had shaped Islamic art history and to give voice to Berlin's diverse urban society in order to foster learning among museum professionals.

Since research on museum users and exhibition evaluations are not carried out on a regular basis at the Berlin State Museums, in-depth knowledge about people's perspectives and behaviours in the galleries was lacking. The director and I agreed that implementing evaluative practices was a useful tool for learning. As I have argued elsewhere (Gerbich 2014), such evaluations are a means for democratisation. The idea was to foster dialogue concerning the uses of the museum in the lives of Berliners—including their motivations for visiting the galleries, their experiences in the museum, their ideas about what the future role of the Museum could be—and thus incorporate alternative perspectives on the collections. Overall, the approach aimed to challenge preconceived notions about the 'the general public' or 'the visitor'. The approach drew on an understanding of publics as performed and emergent (Barnett et al. 2010). It sought to bring together groups of people that would develop reflexive qualities in the process of working together (Chilvers and Kearnes 2016). Rather than approaching people as members of neatly defined 'target groups', the Museum Divan understands diversity as 'messy', a tangle 'of cross-cutting and intersecting diversities – of, say, gender, sexuality, ableness and religion' (Macdonald 2018).

'Doing diversity' in this way was about avoid framing 'migrants' or 'Muslims' as homogenous groups.[5] Drawing on research revealing significant differences between 'migrants' with regard to their socio-economic status, cultural lifestyles (Haug et al. 2008, Sinus Sociovision 2007) and beliefs, we abandoned the concept of the 'migrant community'. The Museum Divan recognises the diversity of a 'postmigrant' society (Foroutan 2015a; Foroutan 2015b) and pays attention to the heterogeneity and intersecting inequalities within 'communities' (Crooke 2010, see, e.g. Watson 2007).

We thus decided to contact people with gatekeeper roles through which the museum's networks could be expanded. Given the regional focus of the museum and the need to build new networks, we mainly approached stakeholders with migrant experiences from Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran and other Muslim-majority countries. To understand the perspectives and questions of novices, we also approached people who had never been to any of these regions.

Investigating processes of learning through participation

To investigate the learning potential that the Museum Divan offered, I use data collected during the making of the exhibition The Heritage of the Old Kings: Ctesiphon and the Persian Sources of Islamic Art.[6]

Funded by the TOPOI Excellence Cluster,[7] this exhibition was organised to showcase the work of nine researchers from the Museum for Islamic Art[8] and various universities in Berlin. It addressed cultural entanglements and dynamics during pre-Islamic times in the Mediterranean and their influence on cultural production after Islamic conquerors took power. The focus of the exhibition was a set of objects excavated in the late 1920s and early 30s from the ancient ruins of Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sasanian Empire (224–651AD). My colleagues—trained in archaeology, architecture, art history and restoration—were interested in the city's architecture, among them the ruins of Tāq Kasrā (Arch of King Chosrau) and an īwān (or vaulted hall). They described the objects as 'iconic', featuring as they do on postcards, stamps, and 'in every school-book and in all good history books' (workshop transcript, C3, 10.06.2014). The exhibition aimed to experiment with new practices of curating and to include a 'mediator' in the process. A Ph.D. scholarship student in the TOPOI programme, I took over this role and suggested to my colleagues to organise a Museum Divan.

'This is not museum reality'.

Future-making does not happen overnight. It is a process shaped by a constant renegotiation of ideas and a refinement of practices (Gherardi 2012: 217). In the process of implementing the Museum Divan, I became aware of their conflicting notions of 'knowledge' and 'learning', of the different ideas of museum users, of the role attributed to Museum Divan participants and of the lack of knowledge regarding evaluative practices.

During one of our first team meetings, the director described my role as being 'to prove whether our messages come across in the end' (field note, SW 5 May 2014). Another colleague, citing a survey I had conducted several years earlier, remarked with consternation: 'But, there have *already* been evaluations, and they already have a huge influence on what we are doing. We *always* ask ourselves now how our displays affect people and whom we are addressing' (field note, C1, 5 May 2014). I realised that my colleagues did not understand the difference between summative evaluations (carried out at the end of an exhibition project), and the process-oriented evaluations I had in mind. I explained to the team the idea of learning as participation, and how members' contributions and criticisms could be used as a tool for reflecting on our messages and their epistemic assumptions.

My approach was meant to break with the existing understanding of curators as cultural experts. From the reactions of the colleagues, it became clear that they had different ideas about the future.[9] Some understood the future as a space to anticipate new possibilities. Among these were the director, who pledged his support to join meetings. Another colleague self-critically reflected on an encounter that made him aware of the different meanings that archaeologists and local people attached to a certain monument: 'It

was a shock. I think one should definitely go and ask lay people. Talk to them. The earlier the better. So that they can connect. Wherever they come from. Because we are very much professionally entangled. And this, I think, is not always a useful filter' (C2, 5.11.2015).

Other colleagues formulated their expectations against the background of existing experiences. They were critical about the necessity of adding additional voices, emphasising that the focus of the exhibition had already been decided: 'It was very clear that this [the exhibition] would be a stage for TOPOI to present its work, to transmit the research to the public. *This* is what we do' (C1, 5.11.2015) On another occasion, one member of the museum staff argued that implementing the Museum Divan was too ambitious: 'This is not museum reality!' Working together with citizens was thought to be 'too time consuming', a source of stress that would add to the overall workload that the museum staff faced.

Indeed, changing curatorial practice was a complex and difficult undertaking. Soon after implementing the Museum Divan approach, I became aware of the rhythms that shaped our practices. At the beginning of the project, specialists shared their knowledge about the objects and their ideas about what the exhibition should communicate. Decisions about which objects to display and what kinds of information to provide on the labels were usually made in the final stages of exhibition preparations. But I wanted the specialist to communicate their knowledge and make their ideas explicit earlier. That way, I would be able to discuss objects with Museum Divan members ahead of time. But making their ideas explicit was time-intensive and interrupted their workflow.

Learning about and renegotiating the different time routines that shaped our daily work was important but the process was often impeded by the many other concurrent projects at the museum. Tight schedules and the fact that the team worked from separate locations in Berlin made regular conversations difficult. Minor tasks, such as compiling lists of objects for focus groups, took way more time than expected.

Time was not only a crucial resource. It was also a constant source of struggle in the work of putting the Museum Divan into practice. Specialists felt that they had devoted more time than they would have otherwise to such a small project. I felt up against an established and powerful time regime that stood at odds with the new practices that we had agreed on. One of the most important lessons to arise from the Museum Divan learned was the politics of time (Osborne 1995). As I show in the next section, taking time and spending it generously instead of sticking to pragmatic time regimes are key for democratic future-making.

Taking time for relationship-building

Together with Jana Braun, an experienced museologist who supported me in organising the Museum Divan, I approached Berliners who might be interested in longer-term collaboration due to their personal or professional interests in the region. Noting the challenges we faced, Jana ironically remarked: 'It's not exactly that people have been waiting for us' (J., field note 10 September 2015).

Among those who decided against participating were members of a network of social workers in a district of Berlin where the *Alternative für Deutschland*, a nationalist party

promoting anti-Muslim racism, had gained many votes. The network of social workers provided creative after-school programmes for socially disadvantaged youth. After contacting them several times, they finally allowed me to attend a meeting. There I presented the Museum Divan as an opportunity to learn about Islam and Islamic regions, to voice criticisms and to formulate new visions. The social workers showed little interest in joining, however. The network coordinator later explained their reluctance: 'Well, their [the social workers'] first obstacle is always: "It doesn't fit into my… I don't care. Islamic art, well, what will I see there?" They've never been to the museum before, but they associate it with a certain kind of detachment.… Another obstacle is "art". Whenever you use the word "art", they tend to hesitate' (J. interview, 5.11.2015).

Participation is a voluntary act that requires those who become involved to share an interest and develop a common understanding of a theme or problem (Botkin et al. 1998 (1979): 30). As my example reveals, one of the challenges faced by the museum was its privileged position as an authority and its reputation as an elitist institution.

Like the social workers, many of the people we approached had never been to the museum before and were much in doubt about their ability as 'lay persons' to contribute to the knowledge of 'specialists'. Most of them had never heard about the Sasanians, and could not relate to the exhibition's subject matter. Moreover, some wondered why a museum for Islamic art would deal with objects from the pre-Islamic era, and why an 'art' museum would engage in archaeological research? The entire process—finding potential partners, introducing the Museum for Islamic Art, presenting researchers' complex ideas in comprehensive language and negotiating their potential role—was therefore incredibly time-consuming.

Such difficulties aside, Jana and I managed to assemble a diverse group of people in terms of age, gender, social and educational background, migrant experience, religious identity and location. Among them were professionals from other parts of Berlin's cultural sector interested in talking about the art and regions of Muslim-majority regions. These included the co-initiator of the Arabic film festival, a stage designer working for a post-migrant theatre and an artist from Iraq. There were also two people with a professional interest in the regions, two archaeologist and two journalists. Others were also interested in forging relationships with the institution: JUMA (Jung, Muslimisch, Aktiv – Young, Muslim, Active)—a network of young Muslim activists—two employees of Berlin's cultural administration and a social worker providing cultural activities in the Eastern part of the city. One person had participated in a previous Museum Divan event and expressed an interest in joining again to break up her usual routine. As compensation, the participants were made honorary Friends of the Museum for one year, which provided them with free admission to all Berlin State Museums.

Taking time for listening out

Judging by the evaluations from another exhibition project, I knew that the staged grandeur of the Museum's galleries could produce uncomfortable feelings in participants. Therefore, Jana and I took the time to reflect on our own positions as white, academic representatives of a powerful institution. We were familiar with the quotidian

practices that are needed to stage and preserve a museum's grandeur, and we have acquired social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, Bourdieu et al. 1990), such as knowing dress codes that allow us to move through the museum's galleries with confidence.

From those reflections, we decided to 'hack' (Spivak 2004: 559) ritual practices of professional performance—and bend our own time budgets. For example, when first meeting people, we travelled to locations of their choosing, asked them to address us by our first names (uncommon in Germany) and scheduled in ample time for initial chats. We told them that our knowledge about the collections was restricted, talked about the Museum Divan's aims and explained what their potential roles could be. We encouraged them to be 'honest' and critical, and explained that sharing even trivial-seeming comments, thoughts or experiences could help. We also made clear that our own powers were limited, and that we were not in full control of how their contributions would feed back into the future exhibition. We embraced listening as a political act to disrupt power and privilege (Bassel 2017). Such 'listening out', as Kate Lacey has argued (2013: 8), means being attentive and responsive to differences between ourselves and our partners (Connolly 1995). As the following example reveals, listening out was crucial for learning about alternative perspectives on Ctesiphon.

In November 2015, Jana and I met a potential participant. It was freezing cold that day, but in the first minutes of our encounter, our partner started sweating, and talking fast. He said that he felt honoured but also 'all in a dither' to meet people from 'one of these big museums on Museum Island'. He came 'from a neighbourhood where ordinary people live, mostly migrants from Turkey, or Iraq. Many immigrants have fears. Everybody who is blond, who looks German, reminds them of the public authorities.' Jana offered refreshments and I opened the window and took the time to listen before we explained what the Museum Divan was all about. The participant began to tell us about his art, the inspiration he took from his migration to Germany from Iraq in the 1980s and his experiences with loss, such as the collection of photos he burned before fleeing his country. After first contacting him on the phone, Jana mentioned that he was unfamiliar with the Sasanians and their capital. Now it turned out that the opposite was the case. Among the photos he had left behind were many from Tāq Kasrā, where he had worked as a photographer for tourists. His accounts revealed much about the meanings that locals attached to the site, which later shaped our exhibition. At the end of a long and lively conversation we explained our plans. 'The Divan is about an exchange of thoughts and ideas. And you might have noticed, Jana and I don't know much about the place. You are the expert.' He thanked us: 'It was nice meeting you, and it really took away my fears. Now I know what to expect' (field note and interview, 11 November 2015).

Taking time for joint learning

In gauging people's response to future exhibition objects and collecting ideas about how to engage them, Jana and I organised two workshops to revisit the collections.[10] To stimulate conversation, we prepared a mock-up exhibition using cardboard dummies of five objects that curators were planning to put on display in the future. Each was 'displayed' on a table, and participants were asked to suggest which information and additional mate-

rials would be useful. Every participant was asked to choose an object and to write down their thoughts, guided by a set of questions prepared in advance (see Figure 11.1).

The first workshop had eight participants, including Stefan Weber, the Museum's director. After the others left, he stayed to talk with Jana and me. In the previous workshops I organised, people had actively discussed the objects and contributed many new ideas and suggestions. This one was different. The participants were slow to choose an object and had difficulties relating them to their own lives. The themes that the exhibition sought to address—such as the development of stylistic features from pre-Islamic to Islamic times—did not seem to interest them. Stefan begged to differ, however. He sensed that the people had been enthusiastic about the topic, and suggested we provide more context to make it easier for them. We also discussed whether the time spent organising such a workshop justified the output it provided.

11.1 Museum Divan participants Cathrin Schaer, Fadi Abdelnour, Dani Mansour and Farzad Akvahan engaging with object replicas during a revisiting collections workshop, November 2015. Photograph by Jana Braun.

Taking the time to talk through such issues was, I submit, most valuable for our joint learning. And taking the time to participate in the workshop allowed us to share information about the needed resources and to discuss issues of interpretation for specific examples. The context-bound understanding of people's reactions, hesitations and questions was used on several occasions as we developed labels and interactive spaces. We also took into account the significance that the participants attached to Sasanian objects. Consider the following response: 'I remember the stories about the Sassanians. I like the exhibition, because you can walk through the history of the region where I come from. This is

brilliant. The Sassanians were so powerful, but few people here know about them.' Such voices had hitherto been neglected at the Museum for Islamic Art.

Taking time for unlearning through affective engagement

There are ways of knowing that are difficult to communicate through brief evaluations, and which hence may be easily discounted or dismissed (Yanow 2004: 11). These include the affects and emotions that people feel at an exhibition.

One of the methods Jana and I employed to collect people's perspectives on the museum's galleries was photo elicitation. We asked Museum Divan participants to photograph everything in the museum that they found interesting, or worth remarking on. After their tours, they sent us the images, which then structured the interviews that followed (Collier 1996: 281). Among the participants were people trained in archaeology, Islamic art history and Islamic studies, as well as a group of young Muslim activists with migrant experiences from the JUMA network.

During our conversations, the participants' ambivalent feelings regarding the museum's representational strategies became apparent. Many of their accounts were shaped by enthusiasm for the aesthetic qualities of objects and their ability to counteract the negative ways in which 'Islam' and Islamic regions were depicted in the media. They imagined the museum as a space enabling people to learn about the cultural, social and religious diversity of regions with Muslim-majority populations and their global entanglements. Some described the galleries as a space that allowed them to wonder and dream, to travel through time and space, to reimagine their social position, as a spiritual space in which objects serve as a means to experience the divine and to connect believers across time and space.

At the same time, they expressed dissatisfaction and critique. They questioned whether the museum staff was willing to talk with novices in Islamic art history. Some pointed to details that they perceived as indicating a 'careless' attitude to gallery visitors. Many noted the 'sterile', 'loveless', 'dreary' and 'cold' atmosphere of the displays, which they said were unable to show the affective dimensions of Islam and Islamic regions. They wanted the museum to do a better job recognising the symbolic and spiritual meanings of the objects by, say, introducing other forms of artistic expression. Without referring explicitly to postcolonial debates, they criticised Eurocentric perspectives on the arts and cultures of Islamic regions (field notes, November 2015).

The conversations with the participants were not only time-intensive but also emotionally charged. It confronted us with our privileges (white, German citizenship, formal degree in higher education, etc.). And it forced us to reflect on the effects of long-standing curatorial traditions that had preferred objects over people, their cultures and their beliefs.

Nurturing change means curbing pragmatism

This chapter has explored the futurabilities of the Museum for Islamic Art—the institution's ability to grasp its potential for democratic future-making along with the obstacles that lie in the way. The means for understanding those futurabilities was the Museum Divan, a participatory approach geared to a 'messy' diversity. The programme was initiated in response to increasing anti-Muslim sentiment and in recognition of the museum's responsibility to counteract stereotypes about Islam and Muslim-majority populations.

11.2 *Interactive space with images of Museum Divan participations and comment board in the exhibition The Heritage of the Old Kings. Ctesiphon and the Persian Sources of Islamic Art, November 2016. Photograph by John-Paul Sumner.*

The work of the Museum Divan has shown that the curatorial team has different visions of the museum's future, and different reasons for engaging in new practices. Moreover, it has highlighted the importance of abandoning 'pragmatic' approaches to time. Taking the time to build relationships, listen, learn with others and unlearn old patterns is crucial for bringing about real change. Many obstacles to change needed uncovering: an insufficient theoretical understanding of the problems, stubborn attitudes to participatory practices in museums, the museum's status as an authority and the failure to see the interests, needs and feelings of exhibition users.

For all the diversity of the participants, they shared some views: the sense that they cannot compete with museum experts, and a tendency to see the museum as a world different from their own, but also as a source of inspiration to learn, reflect, rethink stereotypical ideas and hope for more democratic futures.

What is the best way to nurture such futures? The generous funding provided by TOPOI and the trust that the museum's leadership placed in its organisers have been vital for exploring future possibilities and leaving our familiar comfort zones. The work may not lead to a complete reconsideration of existing practices or an abandonment of all past knowledge. But slipping into the role of 'amateurs' in a Saidian sense (Said 1994) can facilitate zones for utopian future-making and help us better understand epistemic traditions and their alternatives. Openness to these sorts of negotiations offers unexpected perspectives on the collections and on oneself.

Unlearning is a strenuous process, and it demands a deliberate rejection of pragmatism, which tends to reaffirm the way things are. The Museum for Islamic Art has made several steps towards a new future by focusing more on relationship-building and initiating processes of systematic reflection. Museum Divan participants' perspectives were presented in an interactive space where people could leave their comments and questions on the exhibition (Figure 11.2). During my time at the museum, the number of people working in public engagement has increased vastly and with them the efforts of the museum to interconnect with society. As the share of people shaped by migration has increased, and the Museum Divan project has been repeated many times over, debates on the decolonisation of Islamic art history and museum practices have begun in earnest. It is because of and not in spite of these struggles that a more hopeful future stands before us.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   This was inspired by a mindfulness approach taught by Tara Brach (2019).
2   See http://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-islamische-kunst/about-us/profile.html (accessed 27 November 2017).
3   Museum Laboratory: A Project on Mediating the Histories of Islamic Art and Cultures was initiated by Susan Kamel, Susanne Lanwerd and the author, and funded from 2009 until 2014 by VolkswagenStiftung. See Kamel & Gerbich (2014).

4   For an overview, see www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-islamische-kunst/collection-research/research-cooperation/ (accessed 27 February 2021).

5   In her essay 'Refugees sind keine Zielgruppe' ('Refugees are not a target-group'), Carmen Mörsch (2016) argues that using marginalised social positionalities as a category for defining 'target' groups may be a gesture at equality, but it also helps ascribe fixed qualities to a group. As an alternative, she proposes reconsidering the aims of cultural education by taking clear positions against discriminating practices.

6   The exhibition ran from 15 November 2016 to 23 April 2017.

7   See www.topoi.org/project/c-3-1/ (accessed 6 February 2021).

8   https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-islamische-kunst/collection-research/research-cooperation/ctesiphon.html (accessed 22 November 2019).

9   For more on the topic, see Bryant & Knight 2017.

10   The methodology was developed in 2005 by Museums, Libraries, Archives (MLA) London and Collections Trust. See: https://326gtd123dbk1xdkdm489u1q-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Revisiting-Museum-Collections-toolkit.pdf. Last accessed 21 November 2019.

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