

# The neighborhood assembly in the art museum: Practicing cultural citizenship

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**Abstract** The crisis of democracy calls upon public art museums to reflect on what is expected from them as public spaces. This article investigates the art museum as an engaged political participant in its local surroundings and the neighborhood assembly as the platform of this participation. Through original interviews with museum professionals, the article examines three examples of museum-based neighborhood assemblies in different geographical contexts: the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Spain), Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (Chile), and Whitechapel Gallery (UK). Drawing on political theory to analyze the horizontal, discursive, and performative features of these practices, the article examines their democratic potential and limitations. The argument is put forward that the neighborhood assembly functions as a practice of participatory cultural citizenship, whereby the art museum can enter a space of co-authorship of the local cultural environment with the local constituents and can be a participant among many.

**Keywords** participatory practices, localness, constituent museum, institutional theory, museum participation

## INTRODUCTION

At a time when democratic spaces have become a resource to be defended, it is crucial to reflect on what kind of democratic space the public art museum can provide. In museum studies, questions of participation often focus on the power dynamics involved in the redistribution of authorship and expertise, particularly within participatory and socially engaged art practices, and, through these power dynamics, scholars discuss the political potential of participation in the museum context. This article seeks to approach the question of participation in the art museum from an alternative angle: instead of asking how museum participation is or can be political, this article asks how the art museum can participate politically in its local environment.

The article proposes new empirical and theoretical approaches. Rather than proceeding from an instance of arts-based practice, the article takes as its point of departure a form of democratic participation within which art organizations are actively involved, namely the *neighborhood assembly*. The article draws on three examples, derived from the Museo Nacional Centro Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid, Spain), the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (Santiago, Chile) and the Whitechapel Gallery (London, UK). Six original semi-structured interviews with the directors and public programmers of the selected art organizations provide insight into the experience of participation from the institutional perspective. On the theoretical level, the article revisits the notion of *cultural citizenship* and investigates the assemblies as participatory processes of cultural citizenship formation.

I begin by bringing together relevant theories of assembly as a form of political participation, as well as scholarly debates concerned with the political potential of art museum practice. Then, the interview material is leveraged to present the three aforementioned examples. Finally, the article discusses the assemblies' political potential by tending to their horizontal, discursive, and performative features as key components of what are defined here as practices of cultural citizenship.

Overall, the article investigates the art museum as an engaged political participant in its local surroundings, and the neighborhood assembly as the platform of this participation. In the next section, I begin by clarifying the terms of the discussion.

## WHAT IS AN ASSEMBLY?

Since the early 2010s, in conjunction with the spreading of social movements such as the Occupy movement, there has been a growing interest in discussing and enacting forms of gathering as assembly. As a result, various disciplines have yielded different understandings of what constitutes an assembly.<sup>1</sup> Here, the term refers to gatherings of people taking place in physical spaces with a political intent. This article employs theories that interrogate the *assembly as a political form of organizing* to examine the democratic potential of these practices in the art museum context. I draw on assembly literature located mainly within political theory to identify the core features that are relevant to my discussion of assemblies as political practice in the art organization. These are discursivity, performativity, and horizontality.

In her book *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly* (2015), American philosopher Judith Butler defines assembly as “a provisional and plural form of coexistence” that represents an alternative to individuality. Overall, theories of assembly posit a plurality constituted by “the multitude” (Hardt & Negri, 2017), “the many” (geheimagentur et al., 2016), or “the people” (Butler, 2015), all of which are to be understood as heterogeneous political subjectivities who come together as an internally differentiated collective, rather than a unity. Therefore the assembly’s first task is to negotiate its plurality. In this regard, alongside Canadian sociologist Elise Danielle Thorburn (2012) in her article “A common assembly,” I wish to emphasize the discursive element of the assembly as a “commitment to debate and dialogue” whereby disagreement can be negotiated (p. 271). For Thorburn, the assembly’s speech-intensive environment provides space for healthy antagonism, whereby differing opinions can be held (or changed) without resulting in conflict, “a spatial and temporal togetherness” (p. 271).

However, implying this dialogic nature of the assembly raises the problem of clarifying what lineages are being considered for this form of gathering. For example, in the exhibition catalog *Making things public: Atmospheres of democracy* (Latour & Weibel, 2005), French philosopher Bruno Latour reminds us that a discourse-based notion of assembly may be “a very ‘logocentric’ and anthropocentric idea of political activity, an idea that we have inherited from a very specific and restricted parliamentary situation” (p. 98).

In contrast to Thorburn, who analyzes the assembly in relation to class struggles and the history of workers’ movements, Butler offers an alternative perspective. While concerned to avoid flattening all assemblies to particular national histories of public assemblies, she focuses nonetheless on their similarities. Butler (2015) approaches the dilemma of discursivity by asking whether the plurality of bodies coming together “already signifies in excess of what is said” (p. 8). This performativity of the assembly is the second feature I would like to highlight. In other words, Butler maintains that the “presence” of bodies that stand in solidarity in the street is already a “deliberate and active form of political resistance” prior to and independent from any speech act. In her theory, Butler builds on Hannah Arendt’s “right to appear,” famously theorized in *The human condition* (1958). Arendt argues that the “capacity of action” is a necessary condition for democracy and that this performativity of publicness always implies the presence of an audience. Overall, for Butler (2015), “assertions are but one form of political enactment, which is why the sphere of political performativity includes and exceeds verbal and written utterances” (p. 163).

1 For an overview, see, for example, Parry, K. (2022). *A Theory of Assembly*. University of Minnesota Press.

I seek to retain both discursivity and performativity as salient and complimentary features of the assembly. Discursivity, understood as a commitment to dialogue and debate, is a central part of the technologies of public engagement employed within the examples considered later. Performativity, understood more specifically as the visibility of collective practices, is a useful concept for thinking about the presence of communities in the museum space and its symbolic value. This is further connected to ideas of representation, which I discuss later through the examples presented.

The third and final feature of the assembly I consider is its inherent horizontality. Building on the idea that the assembly is a form of commoning (Thorburn, 2012), the assembly operates through horizontal structures and a networking mentality. Thorburn (2012) argues that in virtue of the heterogeneity, yet interrelation of the social subjectivities involved, “the assembly can be seen as the structure through which radical politics, politics of common, can be formulated and developed” (p. 275). Thorburn also reflects briefly on the idea that “some elements of earlier, more vertical organizational tactics [are] necessary to consider in contemporary, horizontal organising” (p. 262). On this, I expand later in the article by drawing on the examples and on relevant museum studies literature to reflect on whether experiences of horizontal participation are at odds with the traditionally vertical structures of the art museum, and how this unfolds in practice.

But one may ask: how does this relate to museum practice? To what extent can democratic and political potential be realized within the art museum? To respond to these questions, I now turn to theories of museum studies that have sought to examine the political role of the art organization. I draw on the “constituent museum” as introduced by Byrne et al. (2018), namely, a museum that builds mutual relationships with its local constituencies and operates through models of collaboration that are continuously renegotiated through dialogue.

## CONSTITUENCIES, NOT AUDIENCES

The notion of a *constituent museum* began to circulate in discussions among members of L'Internationale, a confederation of European museums formally established in 2010 with the idea that the “constituencies, the people, are the political basis of any democratic institution” (Zelevnik & Carrillo, 2022, p. 36). In the following years, the constituency paradigm became central to the confederation’s research and programming, and culminated in the publication of a reader entitled *The constituent museum* (Byrne et al., 2018). Alongside the proposal to put relationships at the center of museums’ operation, the volume mobilizes the constituency paradigm to argue for civically minded art museums that operate through strategies of collaboration and co-production, with a particular focus on education, mediation, and interpretation.

The adoption of the constituent language warrants clarification. While, in political discourse, the meaning of constituency would be traditionally associated with the idea of bounded communities sanctioned by the national state, this article, alongside Byrne et al., adopts a broader meaning which is influenced by post-national and postcolonial theory (Sánchez Cedillo, 2018). It is not applied to coherent groups but rather to “communities of interest” (Papastergiadis, 2020), and it is rooted in a pluralistic and relational worldview (Borja-Villel, 2020). This semantic choice aims to replace the vocabulary of publics, audiences, and users with that of the constituent subject, understood as “one endowed with the capacity to question the institution providing it that way with substance and legitimacy in democratic terms” (Zelevnik & Carrillo, 2022, p. 38). Finally, the constituent language is a device for thinking about the museum as “a democratic and collective process rather than the ideological embodiment of a centralised dogma” (Graham, 2018, p. 46).

Connected as it is to the idea of public culture as a site of democracy, the constituent museum is also intended to facilitate “the construction of an active and critical citizenship, rather than just the straightforward transmission of institutional discourses” (Martínez, 2022). Hence, this article

contributes to these debates about the civic role of art organizations by investigating instances of neighborhood assemblies as the terrain in which collective experiences of democratic processes can take place. In order to combine theories of democracy and debates on civically minded participatory museum practice, I extend the current discussion through the notion of cultural citizenship.

## REVISITING CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP (CC)

For more than three decades, CC has been the object of an inherently multidisciplinary debate, including but not restricted to cultural policy studies and political theory. While a comprehensive critical review goes beyond the scope of this article, here I engage with what I identify elsewhere as the *participatory strand* of CC, one that has emerged in the last fifteen years.<sup>2</sup>

Political theorist Pieter Boele van Hensbroek (2010) lays the foundations for a rethinking of CC as “co-authorship of cultural context” (p. 69) in his article “Cultural citizenship as a normative notion for activist practices.” Boele van Hensbroek mobilizes CC to unpack the dynamics of contemporary public spheres, to think about new civic spaces and modes of belonging, and constantly question what constitutes the political in present times. The application of a participatory CC – I maintain – can be found within media studies (Hermes, 2020), arts education (Kuttner, 2015; Thomson et al., 2019; Thomson & Hall, 2023), visual art (Camps and López, 2023) and museum studies (Wheadon, 2022). Taken together, these studies operationalize the notion of CC to address the inherently political questions of participation in culture through a focus on knowledge production and the co-creation of one’s cultural context. Next, I focus specifically on one contribution as a stepping stone for the ensuing investigation.

Arts education scholar Paul Kuttner (2015) outlines a tripartite typology of cultural citizens, from informed (able to critique a work of art) to participatory (able to produce artistic work) and justice-oriented (able to critique modes of production). Kuttner argues that arts education in itself is a process of CC involving questions of belonging, participation, democracy, and social change, because “if arts are cultural production, then we cannot escape the ways in that artistic practice is implicated in larger social, economic and political systems” (p. 86). Further, Kuttner prompts scholars and educators to ask themselves, “what kind of cultural citizenship are these programs encouraging?” (p. 87). Kuttner has the merit of bringing the discourse of CC into the realm of cultural practice, where I argue it can be the most productive. This article aims to pursue these lines of inquiry by applying the theory of CC to the study of neighborhood assemblies in the art organization as a form of political organizing.

## THREE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSEMBLIES

The following examples build on six semi-structured interviews with museum directors and heads of public programs conducted between May 2021 and October 2022. They were conducted within a wider international survey of community-oriented, place-based public programming in art organizations. The choice of interviewees resulted from the study objective, which focused on investigating how art organizations are creating and defining new forms of participation in their local environments. Rather than a detailed appraisal of specific outputs, this institutional focus yielded a rich understanding of approaches, visions, and tactics. Hence, the article is best positioned to discuss the strategic vision underpinning the neighborhood assemblies and the political significance of these practices, rather than to evaluate how this is experienced by the local

2 Gigante, L. (forthcoming). *The spatial politics of art organisations: Public programmes as sites of cultural citizenship* (PhD dissertation, University of Leicester) provides a critical literature review of CC since its emergence in the 1990s, with the aim of producing a comprehensive critical model of public engagement for cultural organizations.

communities.

The interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis with the aid of CADQAS software (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Alongside what Lucy Pickering and Helen Kara (2017) define as the “ethics of engagement,” the article takes a careful approach to the ethics of writing with the words of others, and purposefully employs long quotes from respondents to deliver the “narrative” through their words (Nasheeda et al., 2022).

### ***Museo Situado and the MNCARS (Madrid)***

Museo Situado (the Situated Museum) is an active collaboration network between feminist, artistic, and migrant collectives and associations from the adjacent Lavapiés neighborhood and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS).<sup>3</sup> Officially, it is described as “an ongoing and open assembly, whereby decisions on initiatives to be carried out are made communally in a constant exercise of listening, deliberation and questioning” (MNCARS, no date). Head of Public Activities Ana Longoni (2018–2021) mentioned how the museum “had never been connected with the neighborhood,” despite sitting within Lavapiés. Overcoming this disconnection required a targeted intervention from the Public Activities team, which built initially on sporadic initiatives such as the exhibition *Really Useful Knowledge* (2014) and, since March 2018, on more sustained collaboration.

The creation of Museo Situado was spurred by specific local events. In another published interview I conducted with Jesus Carrillo, former Head of Public Activities (2008–2015), he explained:

Its formation followed the death of Mame Mbaye in March 2018, a Senegalese street vendor who collapsed at the door of his home in Lavapiés, not far from the museum, after being chased by the police. The death of Mame, described by the authorities as provoked by “natural causes,” instigated massive protests and a night of riots in Lavapiés. As Ana Longoni, Head of Public Activities of Reina Sofía, says, the museum could not be blind to the struggle for life taking place out of its gates (Carrillo & Gigante, 2021, p. 134).

While setting up Museo Situado was the institutional response to the urgent social and political instances emerging from Lavapiés, its day-to-day implementation required “a gradual process of gaining trust because, at first, the collectives did not understand very well what the museum wanted from the neighbourhood,” as Longoni explained.<sup>4</sup>

In practice, Museo Situado functions as an assembly-based organization for the neighborhood. It operates through monthly assemblies at which the local collectives discuss matters regarding the neighborhood and some of the museum’s public initiatives, including discursive programs and mutual aid initiatives (Mir, 2022). The activities organized by the assembly vary from open, free, and regular roundtable discussions such as *Situated Voices* (2018–ongoing), to an annual neighborhood picnic in the museum’s garden, artistic projects such as *Language or Death* (2020), and several activist campaigns across Lavapiés and Madrid. Additionally, from Museo Situado stemmed a series of workshops such as the Training School for Community Health Advocates (2020) to share information about the Spanish healthcare system and the right to health amid the Covid-19 crisis, the *School of Rights* (2021) to offer advice and community legal support, *Live to See: See to Live* (2020–2021), a Spanish language school for the migrant and often undocumented population of the neighborhood, and finally, *The School of Situated Mediation* (2022), a mediation training course

3 For a history of the museum and of its public activities, see Carrillo, J. (2022). *El Museo. ¿Un Proyecto Inacabado?* La Oveja Roja.

4 The interviews with A. Longoni, C. Zaldivar and I. Biskupovic were conducted in English and mainly Spanish. Translation is my own.

for conducting museum visits in the global–local languages of Lavapiés.

As the assembly continued to grow, structures were needed to scaffold it. For example, Ana Longoni explained that the assembly introduced certain conditions for participation. These included established relationships with collectives already present in the assembly, active initiatives in Lavapiés, and a commitment to regular attendance. Staff participated in the meetings, too, but, in the words of the Director Manuel Borja-Villel (2008–2022):

The difference between the museum and them is that they are an assembly, and we are part of them. And there is also an element of care, mutual care and complicity. They [the assembly] know we occupy, I mean, they know the institution does not belong to us [the museum staff]. We occupy them [the institutions], and we are trying to create bridges.<sup>5</sup>

The ongoing institutional experiment of Museo Situado can be read as what Nina Simon (2010) defines as “hosting” – a participation model whereby the institution supports community members in developing projects independently and using the space for their own purposes. The assembly was created in response to citizen politics unfolding on the museum’s doorstep in an attempt to repair the mistrust of local constituencies through a space of listening, dialogue, and collective action.

#### *Local Cabildos and the MSSA (Santiago de Chile)*

The second example of neighborhood assemblies taking place inside the art museum is drawn from a different geographical context, Santiago de Chile, but it too originated from a moment of political and social upheaval. Specifically, I refer to the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (MSSA).<sup>6</sup>

On October 18, 2019, the Chilean government’s announcement of a rise in metro fares was met with violent protests that quickly spread across the city. The city witnessed an unprecedented social outburst in response not only to the increased public transport costs but, more broadly, to the cost-of-living pressures. While other museums in the center had already shut their doors, the staff at the MSSA decided collectively to keep on working. Claudia Zaldívar, MSSA Director (2012–present), explained:

Internally, as a team, we work horizontally. So we said: what do we do? Because we couldn’t keep the exhibitions open. [...] So we said: let’s close the exhibitions and open the museum to the community. [...] We took this decision to make the museum available to the social process of our neighbourhood.<sup>7</sup>

When Ignacia Biskupovic, Coordinator of Vinculación con el Territorio (community engagement) (2018–present), reached out to community members asking how the museum could be of help, the answer was straightforward: “We are organising this *cabildo* [citizen assembly], it would be great to do it in the museum.” Biskupovic emphasized that the ability to establish quick and direct contact with the residents was the result of a year-long process involving monthly community workshops.

On October 23, the MSSA hosted its first open *cabildo* (assembly), organized by the República Junta de Vecinos (neighborhood association) in the presence of almost two hundred participants. The agenda was as simple as it was urgent: discuss and reflect on the political context of the neighborhood and, more broadly, of the country. The minutes from the meeting and the document

<sup>5</sup> Interviews with M. Borja-Villel and A. Longoni were conducted respectively on May 20 and May 24, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> For a history of the museum, see Zaldívar C., Valles P. & José Vilches M. (2022). Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende. *ReVista*, XXII (1).

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with C. Zaldívar and I. Biskupovic were conducted on October 27, 2021.

describing the organizing principles of the assembly were (and still are) publicly available on the MSSA website, open to whoever wished to participate in the process.

Biskupovic reflected on the communities' expectation that the museum would participate "as another neighbor" and on the fact that, from the institutional perspective, this can feel at times like "a very big challenge and responsibility." This highlights the complexity of building trust with heterogeneous constituencies as a process involving expectations of mutuality and long-term commitment.

After the first, more *cabildos* followed, building on the interests of the general assembly and of the different thematic subassemblies that were created. On the role of the MSSA in this process, Zaldívar commented:

At the museum, we work as a platform. If we facilitate the processes, we don't get involved in directing the processes. Yes, we direct them a little bit, organising and providing facilities to help in the organisation, but they have the word, and we are very clear about that.

In the following days, community members – or "neighbors" as Biskupovic often referred to them – used the museum space for citizen assemblies, wellbeing workshops, and a series of dialogues on topics that the constituencies had an interest in. This unfolded through a process of careful listening. "We realised that the community wanted, for example, a conference about the new constituent process, the new constitution, yes. And we left the experts two sessions to speak with the community," said Zaldívar.

Between October 2019 and January 2020, the MSSA hosted three general assemblies and three thematic ones focused on public education, feminist motherhood, and textile crafts, all attended by local residents. The protests continued without interruptions until, in March 2020, another outburst – the Covid pandemic – forced everyone home.

As with Museo Situado, this example also coheres with Simon's (2010) hosting model. While the museum-based assemblies stopped with the beginning of the pandemic, some of the communities of practice born out of the thematic assemblies continued to collaborate remotely and went on to inform subsequent public programming. For MSSA, hosting the local *cabildos* represented a step toward engaging in local citizen politics in line with the museum's civic mission.

### ***Angel Alley and the Whitechapel Gallery (London)***

Finally, the third example focuses on Angel Alley, a small pedestrian street next to the Whitechapel Gallery (WG) in Tower Hamlets, one of London's most diverse and deprived boroughs. Richard Martin, Director of Education and Public Programmes (2021-present), explained:

Difficult things have happened within this small space, acts of violence, and some really difficult histories. [...] It's almost like all the political, economic, social, cultural ideas, historical ideas are all flowing through this space because it asks really interesting and important questions about what the gallery's relationship is to its local area, what its responsibility is, how it thinks about civic engagement, how it thinks about community engagement, how it thinks about urban politics.<sup>8</sup>

In the summer of 2021, after six months of research, WG started a project centering directly on the alley, in collaboration with Freedom Bookshop, Britain's oldest anarchist press, and other local organizations, in particular Cardboard Citizens, a local theater company that works with individuals

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with R. Martin and S. Forshaw were conducted on August 24, 2022.



experiencing homelessness. While this example differs from the others in scale, like them, it operates through an assembly-based model where local constituents come together to discuss the alley's everyday issues and plan a public art intervention. In thinking back about how the project came to be, Siobhan Forshaw, Curator of Community Programmes (2019-present), said:

There was a real interest in having a regular space where people would come and talk about Angel Alley. And these are like local people, people in local businesses, the Freedom bookshop that I mentioned, the theatre company that I mentioned [Cardboard Citizens], the citizens and then other kinds of community groups as well who care about the project and just want to come along.

During the interview, the project was at what Forshaw called "phase zero." This had involved many conversations, much archival research, and a great deal of listening and learning for everyone, including the gallery, in thinking about what kind of intervention, if any physical intervention at all, might be well received by the communities using the alley. In Forshaw's words:

We're very conscious of the impacts that public art can have on the multiple issues that the site represents – so people experiencing homelessness, people using drugs, people engaging in sex work, and all kinds of other activities that take place down this alley. We're really aware of this constituent group, basically, or people whose voice is not easy to centre in a project.

The Angel Alley project – or the "Angel Allies" as the participants call themselves – is about "what it means to be a good neighbor and about social interconnectedness and mutual aid," noted Forshaw. As with the other two examples, WG's role was to provide resources, to facilitate connections, and to act as a platform in a way that would encourage the assembly's autonomy. Forshaw highlighted that the assembly itself could be considered "a major outcome of the project" as a regular neighborhood space for discussion.

Commenting on the project's significance, Martin reflected on the ways in which the project brought the alley's issues front and center in institutional conversations, making the gallery reflect on its position toward its civic responsibilities. As with the other examples, this initiative too was prompted by contextual factors. Martin observed:

I think one of the catalysts for this current engagement has been what the space felt like during the pandemic as well because obviously, at that time, and during lockdown, there were far fewer people engaging with the space on a daily basis, and it meant that often the space was much more isolated. [...] But I think the other catalyst around this is about a decade of austerity and then a pandemic. And this is a project about social provision in the welfare state.

While no information about the Angel Alley project has yet been made public, recent correspondence with Richard Martin disclosed that WG was planning on launching a dedicated online digital hub and publishing a short publication, as well as starting a new round of work in Autumn 2023. Perhaps the Angel Alley small-scale assembly captures a different stage in an art organization's process of engaging with local constituents, highlighting the slow-paced and delicate mediation required to build an assembly-based collective out of a heterogeneous group.



## PRACTICING CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

What does it mean, then, for art organizations to take part in these assemblies? How does this account for ideas of CC? In this section, I bring together theories of assembly and discussions on art museums as agents of political practice to argue for the neighborhood assembly as a practice of CC that realizes political potential by opening up spaces of discursivity, performativity, and horizontality. While analyzing the similarities and differences between the three assemblies presented above, I will also consider their limitations.

First, I wish to draw attention to the issue of “designation” or “demarcation” (Butler, 2015), that is, the problem of defining the boundaries of the assembly and understanding “who are the people?” as Judith Butler would put it. In other words, who participates in these assemblies? Can they be considered representative of the local constituencies? Undoubtedly, in each example presented, participation is conditioned by certain factors. While for MNCARS, there is one specific condition (namely established relationships with current members), emphasizing once again the networking mentality of the assembly, all of these assemblies center on situatedness and localness: they are all anchored in localized issues. Hence, these assemblies cannot be considered representative of the totality of local constituencies, in line with what Butler discusses as the paradox of representation, that is (to put it concisely), the impossibility of representation as synchronous physical presence. For instance, in the example of WG, some constituencies were difficult to engage and therefore absent, as the community programs curator acknowledged. However, the neighborhood assemblies, and through them the art museums, strive to cultivate democratic processes by being open-ended, building on common ground, and opening up the space of dialogue, which takes me to my second observation.

Discursivity in the assembly is the medium through which heterogeneity and difference are brought together in negotiation. As in theories of assembly, the constituents do not form a unity, but rather a coming together of singularities who, through “a commitment to debate and discussion” (Thorburn, 2012), build a world in common. In this sense, the assemblies facilitate the core feature of a participatory CC, that is, co-authorship of cultural context (Boele van Hensbroek, 2010). Discursivity in the art organization is often linked to the debate of the “educational turn in curating” (O’Neill and Wilson, 2010), which in the early 2000s saw the proliferation of speech-intensive formats in public programming, such as seminars, workshops, and symposia. Here, rather, discursivity is mobilized in more literal ways to refer to dialogue between participants. Through debate, the assemblies discuss shared local interests linked to the issues and struggles of the neighborhood (or the immediate surroundings, in the case of WG) and move toward collective action in planning public activities that emerge from these assemblies. While some of the outputs of the assemblies may link to artistic practices (for example, the textile workshops at MSSA, the public art intervention at WG or *Language or Death* at MNCARS), the assemblies do not adopt artistic processes. They may act as pathways to art, but do not center on it. This consideration is crucial when reflecting on the art organizations’ strategic thinking behind these practices. These assemblies provide the art organizations with a platform to meet their communities halfway and negotiate relevance together. This highlights the potential of assemblies as forms of place-based public programming, creating a bridge between constituencies that were disengaged and institutions perceived as disconnected.

Further, participation in these assemblies is not regulated by the art organization through traditional gatekeeping. In all three cases, the art museum performs the function of a *host*, providing infrastructure and resources (spatial, material and human) for the “processes of the neighborhood,” as Zaldívar said. In this sense, it is crucial to connect this endeavor with what curator nico wheadon describes as “museum as neighbor” and “museum as citizen” in her recent book *Museum metamorphosis: Cultivating change through cultural citizenship* (2022). Through a practice-oriented study of CC drawing on conversations with museum professionals, wheadon argues that “museums

must learn to enter those communities as fellow citizens and as equals” (p. 7). In other words, it could be said that by taking part in these assemblies, the art museum becomes “an instance of a collective,” which Christopher Kelty (2019) describes as “an experience of participation that aims at sustaining or transforming the very means of association. [...] A form of ownership or identity with the collective” (p. 254). This also has implications for what has been defined earlier as the performativity of the assembly and its inherent collective dimension. Similarly, in theories of CC, media scholars Peter Dahlgren and Joke Hermes (2015) speak of “intervisibility” in relation to the idea that our self-identities emerge through interactions with and in the presence of others.

Yet, what happens to institutional hierarchies when the museum seeks to enter an experience of participation as a fellow cultural citizen? In this sense, theories of assembly, and therefore of the commons, often discuss how instances of verticality coexist with horizontal structures by necessity. While Isabel Lorey (2013) speculates on how “new vertical condensations” can emerge (p. 97) beyond traditional representational models, Thorburn (2012) suggests hybrid modes to “rethink the dichotomy between vertical and lateral organizing” (p. 271). Thus, the neighborhood assembly in the art museum can be framed as an experiment in horizontality, one that the museum approaches as yet another participant in the attempt to open up a space to think *with* its constituencies about what matters, alongside retaining some aspects of verticality, for example, in the implementation of assembly-initiated public activities. This could also be discussed through Simon’s (2010) models of hosting and co-creating, depending on the degree of autonomy granted to participants. Nonetheless, inherent power imbalances persist in these relationships, even when organizations share resources in solidarity. Further research is needed to fully investigate how this dynamic is addressed in practice.

The empirical material also emphasizes the slowness and fragility of these processes, as with all relational processes that require trust and relationship-building (Byrne et al., 2018). While these are not necessarily weaknesses, they certainly raise questions about long-term sustainability. This emerged clearly in the conversations with the art professionals across all the case studies. Along similar lines, Kelty (2019), for example, makes a plea for giving participation “inertia,” or in other words, continuity and stability.

Significantly, these are all recent projects, activated between 2018 and 2021 in response to instances of severe crisis that brought local struggles into the purview of the art gallery. In the first two examples, the assemblies sit at the intersection between institutions, social movements, and “forms of ‘assembleary’ democracy” (Felicetti, 2023). In particular, the Chilean example is part of “one of the most remarkable processes of political change driven by activism. It features democratic innovations, in some of the foremost institutions of the country up to the constitutional level and had a role for citizens’ assemblies too” (Felicetti, 2023, p. 381). Whereas the Museo Situado assembly was likely a legacy product of the anti-austerity 15-M movement, also known as the Indignados Movement (Mir, 2022). Spreading across Spain in 2011, the 15-M movement “prompted a deep questioning of the country’s young democratic institutions from the bottom up” and gave rise to forms of feminist political organizing, “eventually reaching public art institutions in unprecedented ways” (Mir, 2022, p. 119). Finally, despite its smaller scope, the third example at the Whitechapel Gallery is also indicative of new concerns confronting art institutions about their civic role and of the gallery’s awareness of local struggles. Moreover, the examples from the MNCARS, the MSSA, and the Whitechapel Gallery are not isolated in the art world, showing that the *assembly in the art organization* is indeed a recurring phenomenon across art organizations internationally. For instance, in her recent publication about place-based engagement, Johanna K. Taylor (2020) describes the phenomenon of the community councils taking place, for example, at the Oakland Museum of California, at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, and at the Queens Museum, NY. As such, these assemblies can be read as signifiers of innovative practices of CC, developed with constituencies and responding to localness.

## CONCLUSION

The neighborhood assembly in the art organization raises exciting questions about the responsibility of the art organization toward its hyperlocal environment. Drawing on theories of democracy, the article has analyzed how these museum assemblies presented features of horizontality, discursivity, and performativity, which enabled the creation of a space of dialogue and negotiation with and between all constituencies involved. Further, all these assemblies focused on localness, whether this meant the neighborhood (as for MNCARS and MSSA), or a highly localized but significant space within the neighborhood (as for WG). The notion of a participatory CC in the context of place-based participation practices such as the neighborhood assembly was helpful in capturing the political dimension of museum work and framing the question of the role of art institutions in contemporary democracies. Overall, the argument put forward is that the assembly creates for the art organization the opportunity to practice CC by entering a space of co-authorship of the cultural environment with the local constituencies, and by being a participant among many, an “instance of a collective” (Kelty, 2017, p. 88).

While the space created by neighborhood assemblies in the context of an art organization offers transformative potential above all for the organization itself, the biggest challenge, as this article argues, lies in its sustainability. How much can the assembly grow before it outgrows the organization? This was always the hope of MNCARS Director Manuel Borja-Villel, who stated:

For me, it's very important to create this structure of the commons, this other type of institutionality, this structure of caring, this structure of people [...] My objective would be that once we leave the museum, it [the network] becomes so strong. And also, they are connecting with each other so that, of course, they don't need the museum.

Perhaps this is precisely where the transformative and democratic value of these experiences of participation lives: in creating a network of cultural citizens within and beyond the art museum.

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