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interdisciplinar Lab

IÑAKI ARRIETA URTIZBEREA

KEYS TO EXPERIMENTAL MUSEOGRAPHIES AND EXPLORATORY LABORATORIES IN TROUBLED WATERS

One of the main innovations or reinventions taking place in museums has to do with the importance that exhibitions have acquired in these cultural infrastructures. Until the middle of the 20th century, the political, social and scientific relevance of the museum was mainly based on the collections it housed. However, in recent decades, the museum's functions of disseminating and exhibiting have become more important than that of conserving. This has been due, among other reasons, to the progressive generalisation of the principles of "cultural democracy" and the "democratisation of culture". According to these principles, the museum must open up to society, and one of the ways to achieve this is through exhibitions.

According to the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de muséologie*¹, the term "exhibition" means the *action* of exhibiting, *what* is exhibited, as well as the *space* in which it is exhibited. This short and simple sentence hides a very complex process, because the exhibition, or the action or the process of exhibiting, is not *simply* a matter of presenting objects. It is a process of communication, which tries to convey ideas, concepts, phenomena, facts, events, values or emotions through a discourse, supported by objects distributed in a space and used as signs of something that in itself is, more or less, absent, namely, those events, ideas, concepts, emotions... Therefore, although the degree of complexity of what is to be communicated varies, the exhibition tries to *bring it to life* through certain elements that are, in themselves, part of that complexity or are related to it. In this sense, the process of exhibiting is a creative act, insofar as its aim is to communicate what is *absent* on the basis of certain partial elements of this complexity. This process is also creative, or can be creative, insofar as it can generate new knowledge and experiences in the recipients of the discourse exhibited: the visitors.

The need to elaborate a discourse, in order to account for this complexity, clearly highlights the *constructed* nature of the discourse in any type of show. This construction is carried out according to the interpretative strategy of its producers, designers, curators, etcetera. A strategy that is conditioned by their subjectivity.

The constructed and subjective nature of the action of exhibiting leads us to ask ourselves about who takes part in this communication process. And a first approximation shows us the varied and diverse array of agents or actors that participate in this process. On the broadcasting side, we have politicians, sponsors, conservators, scientists, specialists, curators, project managers, designers and technicians, each with their interpretative repertoires, knowledge, skills, values and interests. Thus, the action of exhibiting objects conceals a complicated game of negotiations between all these agents. The process of exhibiting constitutes, therefore, a field of forces in relation to who, what, how, where, when, and why it is to be communicated. Obviously, this game is not played between equals. Within the field of forces constituted in the action of exhibiting, there is an unequal distribution of power when it comes to suggesting or imposing the contents of the discourse and the type of narrative. This *confrontation* concerns both general questions of discourse, which have to do with ideological or scientific aspects of the message to be transmitted, and more specific issues related to the establishment of the route or the type of explanatory panels to be installed, for example. These latter issues, considered by some to be minor or of lesser importance than the former, have also a major impact on the discourse to be conveyed.

However, whatever the objectives of the senders of the show's communication process and the forcefulness of the discourse to be transmitted, it must be borne in mind that this discourse is interpreted by the receivers, namely the visitors. As Freeman Tilden argues, the visitor perceives through his own eyes and interprets the message on the basis of his own knowledge and experience. For this reason, in recent decades, more interactive and dynamic exhibition approaches have been developed, making the action of exhibiting even more complex.

This interaction, in relation to the visitor, can be approached on two levels. On the first level, the designer or curator refrains from establishing the exhibition theme in an unquestionable way in order to allow the visitor to construct or develop his or her own point of view — following, for instance, the methodology of the *muséologie de la rupture*. The second level involves encouraging a greater degree of participation by the visitor. It implies a full participation of the visitor in the action of exhibiting, involving him/herself in the very elaboration and presentation of the discourse. It is about the visitor intervening in the field of forces of the exhibition, taking part in the decision-making process. It is nonetheless clear that the range of participation is very broad, going from consultation once the discourse has been elaborated to full involvement from the beginning of the exhibition project.

However, public participation at this second level poses important challenges, which are not easy to solve, if at all. So far, we have talked about the visitor, but it is clear that there is no *visitor*, but *visitors*. Therefore, our next question should be who the visitors are, that is, who

constitutes the public of an exhibition. But the answer is not easy because, in general, little is known about the composition of the public who visit museums or exhibitions. This lack of knowledge is even more pronounced if we move from the demographic or socio-economic characteristics of visitors to their cultural backgrounds, which are the basis from which they interpret the exhibition proposal. Nevertheless, new formulas are being implemented with the aim of overcoming the challenge of participation. Among others, for example, the approaches known as “multiple voices or narratives”, “multiple perspectives” or “contact zones”.

To conclude with the variables that affect the action of exhibiting, we should highlight everything that has to do with stage design, that is, with the formal and material aspects of the exhibition in which the discourse takes shape. Thus, in the project *Aguas Turbulentas*, contemporary art and scientific research merge with the standardised-established route of the Aquarium of Donostia-San Sebastian in an experimental way and as an attempt at new exercises. Since the exhibition space, with all its objects and installations, is not just a physical space in which the discourse will be displayed and shown just as it has been drawn up on paper in the offices of the designers or curators, the stage, its layout, also conditions the reception of the message. Without wishing to be exhaustive, the action of exhibiting is conditioned by the lighting, the pedestals, the showcases, the lecterns, the panels and other support elements, the audiovisual and interactive resources, the colour of the walls, the dimensions and decoration of the rooms, the exhibition routes, the informative texts and, of course, the building itself.

Iñaki Arrieta Urtizbera is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy of Values and Social Anthropology at the University of the Basque Country/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea in Donostia-San Sebastian. His research work focuses on the fields of museology and cultural heritage.