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Martin R. Schärer

The Exhibition – a Place of Limited Dialogue

What is the dialogic museum? Is it a museum which dialogues with its visitors? Is it a museum which provokes dialogues between visitors?

abstrakt | abstract ▷

„Muzeum dialogu“ má mnoho významů. Kdo komunikuje s kým? Vzácně kurátor přímo s návštěvníkem, možná návštěvníci, inspirování výstavou, mezi sebou. Může být využití interaktivních prvků na výstavě nazváno „dialogem“ nebo je to prostě jen modernější a aktivnější prostředek než text, který tak trochu evokuje „reakci“? Nicméně hlavním tématem není dialog, ale jednostranná komunikace od kurátora k návštěvníkům skrz výstavu; zpětná vazba je možná jen vzácně. Taková jednostranná a nepřímá komunikace informací je rozšířená v čase, neboť výstava žije jen tehdy, když je navštěvována, třeba i roky od uvedení. Můžeme toto nazývat „druhým stupněm komunikace“?

„Dialogic museum“ has many meanings. Who communicates with whom? Rarely the curator directly with the visitor, maybe the visitors among themselves, inspired by the exhibition. Can the use of interactive exhibition elements be called a real “dialogue” or is it simply a more modern and more active means than a text which evokes also a kind of “response”? The main issue, however, is not a dialogue but a one way communication from the curator to the visitors through the exhibition; a feedback is rarely possible. Such an unilateral and indirect communication of information is dilated in the time since the exhibition comes to life only when it is visited, maybe years after its creation. Can we call this a “second degree communication”?

Is it a museum which presents controversial facts through dialogue? How is all this possible? Or does it simply mean: a museum with many interactivities? Is this already a dialogue?

Does the dialogic museum, whatever this may be, really exist, or is it just an attractive term, a kind of diffuse goal, or even a dream? I'll try to show the diversity of the approaches and the complexity of the topic. There even may not be a real dialogic museum, but there are certainly very interesting attempts.

Let's start at the very beginning: with definitions! A “dialogue” is, according to dictionaries, a “conversation” or a “talk” – between individuals, we have to add.

The title of our conference has a second part: “Visitor Experience” that is linked with interactivity in a quite simple approach. So let's combine the two elements and ask some questions. In doing so we have to make a clear distinction between the museum and the exhibition, since the two are too often mixed up. I am especially interested in the second one.

The main questions are: Can the visitor experience a dialogue in a museum/at an exhibition? Who are their partners in such dialogue? And also: How does the communication between “the museum/exhibition” (sorry for personalizing them!) and the visitor work?

Let's try to give some basic answers by entering a museum with the visitor, so to speak. As a said, I am especially interested in the exhibition dialogue; I'll deal with the museum only very shortly.

It is crucial to introduce an important distinction, the one between dialogue and communication. The first one refers to person-to-person interaction, a real dialogue, a kind of ping-pong between individuals; the second one describes information flow from A to B (for instance from the curator to the visitor in an exhibition), hence not a real dialogue, but one-way communication between persons who are not there at the same time.

This leads us back to our visitor having the intention to go to the museum. It is important to say that this usually occurs on their own (personal or family/friends ...) decision. What is their motivation, his or her experiences with museum? What do they hope to find? There exists a sociological toolbox for public survey, but that is not my topic here. When entering the museum the first thing he or she may discover is a big panel: “No food, no pets, no skates...”. Such “How-to-behave-signs” are typical one-way information which can – in an extreme case – provoke a kind of dialogue with supervisors, who have to carry through the bans.

Next step is the reception desk where the visitor is welcome by a (hopefully) friendly attendant. Another short and very factual talk may arise, for instance if the visitor wishes to get a discount on the entrance fee, etc. Similar questions/answers may occur during the visit: Where is the Porcelain Hall, the exit, and so on.

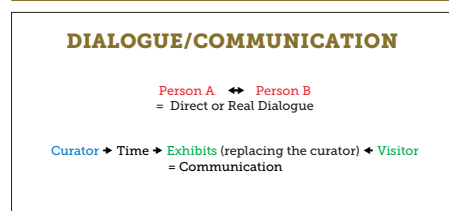
You may smile and object that this is definitely not what is meant by a “dialogic museum”. And you are completely right! All this is not interesting at all, nor is it there to amuse you.

I am not interested in the question of accessibility: How to open the museum for disabled persons or – in general – how to make it more visitor-friendly. Today the trend goes clearly from the object/collection to the visitor, that is, in favour of the visitor and away from the objects. I am not going to deal with educational purposes or methods either.

So let's go to the exhibition, where the real dialogue may be experienced by the visitors – at least let's hope so!

The real dialogue was defined as a ping-pong-discussion between individuals. There are three types of people in the exhibition hall. First: wardens to whom we referred just before: Questions/answers only, no real dialogue, hence out of interest for us. Second: Other visitors (from your party or complete strangers). Interesting dialogues inspired by the exhibition may occur among visitors. This is of critical importance and we should never forget that the exhibition is also an important social space. This repre-

FIGURE 1



sents an interesting way of participation. Visitors could find, by dialoguing with each other, their own way through the exhibition, provided that it has no imposed story-line and that it is in some way non-linear (not like a book). And why not use this element to change or even create new exhibitions; to be serious about the visitor by installing a real dialogue among them and with the curators with the objective to improve/ create an exhibition? Ecomuseums and community museums have explored such possibilities with success. Another level are questionable participative museums, often like adventure parks. Back to the exhibition: Why not create exhibits that may shock visitors and provoke dialogue among them?

And finally the third group of people (unfortunately) rarely present at the exhibition, but leading us (finally) to the central question contained in the conference theme: The dialogic museum! I refer to the scientific or educational staff in the exhibition. Since it is quite normal to encounter those people in relation with guided tours (also indirectly as audioguide) or children's activities, we seldom find explainers. They are much more common in science centres than in museums and may also offer performances at fixed hours; so they don't really have time to establish dialogue with individual visitors. But they could be of great importance, which is too often underestimated. I really plead for this kind of staff also in fine arts and history museums – and, why not, in all types of museums. These explainers (who should never be too active and should let visitors address them) can establish a real dialogue – I believe the most important direct person-to-person dialogue that exists in an exhibition.

All other phenomena in an exhibition are indirect and dilated communication elements. I don't like to call them "dialogues"; that's why I entitled my presentation "The Exhibition – a Place of Limited Dialogue".

I have to introduce a very important new element now: The connecting link between the exhibition curator and the visitor: The exhibition itself!! The two parties are not simultaneously and physically present at the same time at the exhibition, but the former communicates to the latter through an extremely wide range of visualization means. That's not a real dialogue at all but an exciting communication phenomenon, as described in fig. 1.

Let's start with theoretical approach to better understand the exhibition itself and what is happening in it! My definition of an exhibition is the following: "The exhibition is a place of interpretative visualization of absent clusters

of circumstances (facts, situations) with objects and staging elements as signs." Every visualization, every exhibition is an act of interpretation. The objects are present, but the context, the exhibition theme, is absent. Such absent reality is brought before the visitors' senses with objects and staging elements (showcases, lighting, colours, pictures, audiovisuals, and so on). All these elements can be considered as signs referring to outside world.

FIGURE 2

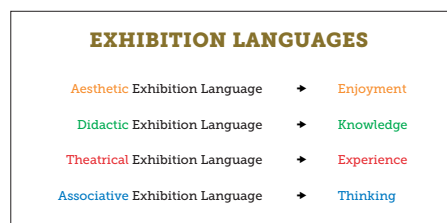


The exhibition can be described as an important part of a communication process between an emitter (sender), the curator, and a recipient, the visitor. That is the classical one way communication system, approaching the museum to the mass media. I prefer to inverse the right arrow and to consider the visitor not as a simple recipient but as a (more or less) active participant.

Between the two is the message, the absent clusters of circumstances. There is no exhibition without a defined or unconscious message. Finally there are three exhibition elements: exhibits (original or didactic objects), staging elements (as mentioned above), and room components which are the same in every exhibition in the gallery of a specific museum (floors, basic lighting, security elements etc.).

What is central for our theme are the objects of course, but also the staging elements, and the way they are used in different languages. There are many of them and very often they are mixed; I suggest their distinction in four basic types.

FIGURE 3



Mere putting beautiful objects (better: objects considered as beautiful!) on display in front of visitors' eyes for them to enjoy is the main goal of the aesthetic exhibition language. Visitors are expected to learn something by the time they reach the end of a didactic. The theatrical exhibition language is certainly the most popular one – unfortunately, because the scenes are taken as real reconstructions of the past. It goes (nearly) without saying that history is lost forever and that nobody knows how it really was. But museums have an excellent credibility: Since the objects are original the story must be true!

The associative exhibition language is by far the most fruitful and creative one. It aims to make the visitors think by juxtaposing objects which have never been together in real life to convey a message. Since the object is mute and does not tell anything about its former life, it is also polysemic and can be given any meaning.

Now we have to ask a crucial question with respect to our theme in such a context. As we have seen, the curator (as a sort of "emitter") puts the staging elements on display for the visitor (as a kind of "recipient"). Can we claim that these staging elements (and the objects of course) replace in some way the curator, and that, as a result, his presence is no more needed, since the staging elements take over his role and since the visitor can open a kind of dialogue with such elements?

From such point of view, we have to ask the question: Is there a fundamental difference between exhibition texts and sophisticated electronic interactive programmes? And finally: Can this kind of visitor experience be called "dialogic"?

Sometimes it is also claimed – especially by fine arts museums – that there is direct "dialogue" between an object and a visitor. In a very broad sense we can accept this as a kind of "inner dialogue", a dialogue by the visitor with themselves, inspired by an artwork.

Let's come back to the dilated communication through the exhibition itself, understood as an assemblage of exhibits and staging elements. We personalize them in some way by introducing interaction between them and the visitors. These means can, as any exhibit, as I said before, provoke real dialogues between visitors, or even collaboration if asked for, for instance in systems that are called "social media".

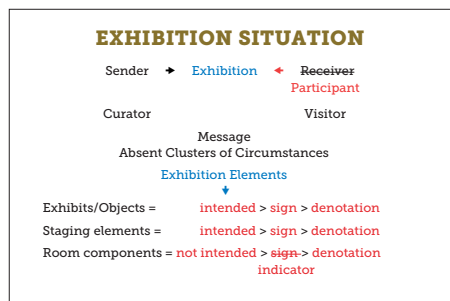
In any case, I believe that the principles are the same. A real object (e.g. a prehistoric vessel) or an abstract phenomenon (e.g. a mathemati-

cal principle) is explained by staging elements: a special showcase, texts, sketches, maps, computer games etc. There is no difference in principle. In reality, one means may be more appropriate, more attractive. The effect on a theoretical level is the same: A better understanding of the message.

Here I also have to mention another meaning of “dialogic”, a very global one. Such a philosophical context envisages an all-embracing definition. All thinking, every thought appears dialogic, in the sense that everything ever expressed can be considered as response to a former expression as well as an anticipation of further responses. We can interpret this as an endless “dialogue”. According to the nature of the content, the linking-up with such an everlasting process is very important or nearly inexistent (but never totally absent). An example of the latter is the instruction “It’s forbidden to eat in the museum!” An example of the former is the title of an exhibition unit “Imagine a prehistoric man, moved by a time machine, visiting this exhibition with you!” Both utterances are only understandable on the basis of cultural knowledge which is created by a long-life dialogue.

We can also interpret such circumstances semi-otically. I recall my exhibition definition: “The exhibition is a place of interpretative visualization of absent clusters of circumstances (facts, situations) with objects and staging elements as SIGNS.”

FIGURE 4



In a context like that exhibition situations present differently. All exhibits and staging elements are signs (not sign-bearers, but signs in themselves) and refer to something else, for instance to prehistoric or to mathematic facts outside the museum. They are intended as and denote a specific element. The visitor has to interpret them on the basis of accumulated knowledge. On the other hand, room components are not signs, since they are not-intended. They are not elements of the semiosis, the sign process, and can also be described as indicators

evoking connotations, for instance the shabby grey walls of the exhibition hall indicating the museum’s (too) limited budget.

It goes without saying that objects and staging elements can also evoke (personal) connotations which may be in conflict with the intended sign message. From the curators’ point of view they are disturbing elements! This is for example the case when a visitor seeing an old soup tureen in a showcase imagines the special soups he or she ate from a similar tureen at their grandparents’ table and hence doesn’t understand the intended message: the soup tureen as a sign for old food habits.

Looking at exhibitions very closely, now we refer to “The visitor experience”. According to dictionaries “experience” (in our context) means “process of gaining knowledge or skill by doing and seeing things”. Here again, the processes are similar with all communication means. Visitors can “experience” a simple text as well as a sophisticated experimental machine. The core question however is: How to create an attractive exhibition? An exhibition which is not perceived as boring (like a brochure pinned to the wall), nor as a mere and mindless amusement park (like an endless series of flashing and rattling machines)? According to the modern web experience the former will be more often the case, I believe!

Exhibition designers have an overwhelming wealth of means (staging elements) at their disposal. Their adequate selection depends on four criteria: The type of museum, the theme of exhibition, the target public, and the attractiveness of the communication tool.

I believe I don’t need going through all the possibilities declining them like in a paradigm. I confine myself to some general reflections.

Whatever means is used it should always be a communication tool and never get a value in itself. The exhibition has a message to convey. The medium should therefore never be the message itself; in such case the visitor would be seduced by marginal element. The medium has no value in itself and has to be always in the service of the exhibits.

In the last century computers were an attraction in a museum. Today everyone gets in the cradle. The trend may go more and more back to simple, even mechanical devices. I don’t intend to enumerate all the recent phenomena. I phones, iPods etc. seem to be now the latest fashion, but things evolve very quickly.

Anyhow, I would like to encourage you to use also unusual means – if they “don’t take over

the command” but are used as what they are: communication aids. We have to pay attention that we don’t over-estimate all the technical gadgets!

The curator decides, he or she has the power to make nearly everything, but at the same time they are powerless, because controlling the visitor’s moving and thinking is almost impossible. The visitors have their freedom, they can move freely in the exhibition space, they can go forth and back, stay for three hours or go home after five minutes, refusing the exhibition. The curator never knows what the visitors think, if his or her message is understood, if the communication process is really achieved, if the exhibition is newly “created” by the visitor. These facts make the exhibition work as uncertain as fascinating; it is really an open process!

An exhibition can be compared to a theatre (I already mentioned “staging elements”) – in my eyes a very stimulating exercise.

Both museums and theatres are sites of experimental (informal) learning and not of formal classroom learning, and “learning” occurs only in the process of visiting an exhibition or attending a stage production. Both the theatre and the museum situation have characteristics of mass communication.

FIGURE 5



A brief definition of theatre could be: The author communicates something which is absent and is visualized (“happens”) every time as a new performance through mobile actors on an arranged stage for a seated audience, thus creating its own play. For museums the definition would be: The author communicates something which is absent and is visualized always the same way through immobile objects in an arranged environment (the stages) for walking audience who become a kind of co-author when defining space, time, and focus (content) of the personalized visit, thus creating every visitor’s own exhibition. In the theatre, actors operate and interpret in the present; in an exhibition, on the

contrary, the objects have been previously arranged and vie for attention with their static, pre-arranged environments. This schematic approach applies to “normal”, not experimental theatre and exhibitions.

What could we learn from the theatre for new visitor experience? Should we “mobilize” the objects? This is very difficult because of their value. But why not work with copies? Sensorial access to objects is very important. Should we introduce performances? Definitely yes: Explainers handling objects! Result: Mobile objects and mobile “actors”. By such means we could create more lively exhibitions since every performance is new and can be adapted to specific visitors. Such initiatives are also in line with actual trends in museums: a shift from the object to the visitor.

If you think that such approach is not convenient for a serious museum, never forget that museums should not be viewed as teaching institutions. Let schools do the teaching job! Museums have an educational function, of course, but that is different. A museum should be a pleasant place, a place for cheerful discoveries. The more the museum is perceived as a school the worse it is! There is an ugly term to describe what I mean: Edutainment. Learning by an emotional bridge, first comes the pleasure and only afterwards learning as a kind of by-product. I think that this is of importance for all target groups. Or other words: what matters are the questions not the answers!

A good and successful exhibition is neither a learning place nor a fun fair, but rather an excellent mixture of the two. I don't advocate any cheap compromise between the two but rather a kind of intelligent synthesis. In this context it is also important to say: It is completely wrong if museums intend to copy amusement parks, especially also by saying that dialogues with the visitors are created. Those institutions do the job better and more professionally. But I agree: We can learn from them, especially in marketing.

And don't forget: Museums have what no fun fair can offer: real things, objects. Let's exploit them! Let's put them into the centre of our programmes! Let's be different on the basis of our strength and uniqueness! And, finally, on the other hand, do not let us neglect the objects only for the sheer visitors' fun!

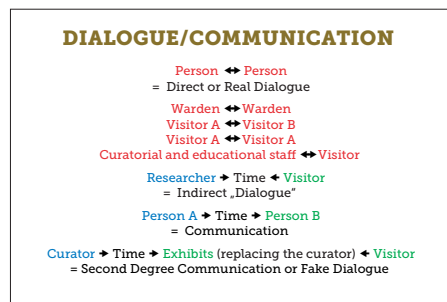
But, by doing so, pay attention to the fact that the object is completely mute, needs interpretation, as I mentioned before. It is not a data carrier dialoguing with the visitor. Every exhibition is a mental construct of the curator;

it never shows the reality. In this respect there is no objective or genuine exhibition.

Until now we have only looked at the formal communication process, at the expography, leaving aside the content of the exhibition. A controversial theme, like genetic engineering, can be shown in a dialectic way as a pro/con/exhibition. The kind of “dialogue” being part of the exhibition itself will certainly provoke dialogues between the visitors. Nearly any theme can be shown in comparative elements like for instance mysticism in different religions. Such an exhibition can foster the ability to engage in meaningful conversation and in an intercultural dialogue. Or in an art museum: By a provocative juxtaposition of art works you can provoke a dialogue among visitors or in an individual visitor's mind.

To sum up, let us go back to the communication process. I arrange the elements of this communication process in a different way, by systematizing what I developed before, and according to the title of my presentation: The Exhibition – a Place of Limited Dialogue.

FIGURE 6



There are very few (real) dialogues (defined in the traditional sense): those among visitors (including also “inner dialogues”) and those between visitors and staff members simultaneously present in the exhibition.

We can call indirect “dialogue” (but is it really one?) a dilated one, for instance through visitors' studies (on paper or on screen).

According to the classic communication scheme we could interpret the exhibition communication as dilated communication (not a dialogue) between the curator (who started it maybe a long time ago) and the visitor (who creates the exhibition anew when visiting it).

By extending the term we could also admit a kind of “dialogue” between the visitor and the communication means (e.g. a special lighting, a text or a computer) – “dialogue”

which I would call “second grade communication” or “fake dialogue” since the person who created the programme is replaced by other elements (e.g. a special “performance”, a verbal explanation or a machine) that may allow some “interactions” or maybe participative experiences but only within a very limited and pre-established setting.

In a very large and philosophical sense, however, we can assume a permanent everlasting dialogue which does not need people speaking to each other.

According to such a wide circumscription of “dialogic” my presentation is a kind of response to things that have been said before and anticipation of things that will be said in response. I really hope that I can provoke many responses!

Revised version of a keynote speech delivered at the ICOFOM annual meeting in Taiwan, 23-26 October 2011, entitled THE DIALOGIC MUSEUM AND THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Klíčová slova:

muzeum, muzeologie, výstava, návštěvník, dialog, komunikace, předmět, vizualizace, divadlo

Keywords:

museum, museology, exhibition, visitor, dialogue, communication, object, visualization, theatre

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