

ACCESSIBILITY TO ART EXHIBITION: NEW PARADIGMS IN MUSEOLOGICAL COMMUNICATION

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³⁵Museological Communication: a change of paradigm

This paper is a reflection on the important role of the museum as a channel of public communication that is represented through mediation strategies applied both within the exhibition space and through the institution's educational actions.

Analyzing museological communication strategies in contemporary society in her doctoral thesis, Cury³⁶ points out that:

Exhibitions and educational actions are manifestations of the museum's communications policy and, for the visiting public, are effectively what defines the institution, as it is through these actions that it puts itself forward and becomes relevant to society.

However, what happens within a cultural policy based on the new museological paradigms is that the communicational process surrounding the cultural object goes beyond its traditional function of transmitting a pre-determined message to adopt the more flexible and democratic function of establishing interaction between an issuing-subject (museum professional/mediator) and a receptive-subject (the visitor)³⁷.

Museological communication operates through the language of objects, but it comes into effect via the interaction between the museum and the audience concerning the meaning being proposed, learned, re-elaborated and negotiated.

³⁸The idea is to resize the communicational process and prepare a new footing for the relationship between the two subjects—issuer and receiver.

Through this new communicational paradigm, that of fostering a broad-

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³⁶ CURY, 2005, p.87.

³⁷ BRUNO (1984) cited by Cury (2005), p. 54, based on studies about interaction between the museological institution and the visitor, he describes the museum (and its staff) and the visiting public as subjects in the communication process.

³⁸ CURY, 2005, p.88.

er interactivity between the museological object and its public, the mediation strategies begin to reconfigure the way the receiving subject—hitherto the passive, simple assimilator of a message—moves toward a more dialogic participation, that is, toward assuming a more active role in grasping and re-signifying the cultural object on show.

However, in order to succeed in the challenging task of affording greater interactivity between the cultural object and the visiting public it is essential that the museum staff adopt an interdisciplinary cultural policy through which all those professionals involved with matters of communication and mediation can contribute with their experiences and specificities in conceiving the exhibitions, not to mention the educational actions targeting different publics, in such a way that these can allow and encourage the full exercise of perception, fruition and the re-signification of cultural objects.

Cury analyzes this new allocation of roles among museum professionals, specifically those whose functions lie with museological communication and the public, from the perspective of what the social sciences identify as two key paradigms: the traditional and the emerging.

These two concepts, applied to communicational issues in museums, translate more clearly the models most commonly used by museums today: the traditional model and the emerging model.

These models are mutually antagonistic. If the traditional model operates in the field of knowledge by emphasizing the content of communicational process, presented as per the vision of the specialist or curator, the emerging model no longer looks upon the content as the essential core, i.e., the pre-established message to be transmitted, but rather the dialogue that is struck between the baggage the public brings with it to the table and the multiple meanings obtained through interaction with the cultural object.

As such, the above-cited author sees the learning and fruition of the cultural object within the museum space as related to the active participation of the public in meeting its ritualistic expectations during the visit, as it [the public] is the agent of the very experience in which it participates sensorially, emotionally and physically, as the viewer uses the body as a means of appropriating (within) the museum.³⁹

Concluding her analysis of the issues related to the shift of paradigm in the process of museological communication toward a new relationship between the public and the cultural object, the author remarks:⁴⁰

By shifting the museum's educational character away from emphasis on the content, a new space opens in which the museologist and the educator can dispense with the primacy of the collection researcher and directly engage in managing interdisciplinary teams and processes. These two professionals are responsible for the communication processes that sustain the essential goals of promoting dialogue between the experience of the museum visit and the public's everyday life. So what we have here is more than a paradigm shift, but an actual rupture with the museum's authoritarian structures.

39 *Idem*, p. 84.

40 *Idem*, *ibidem*, p. 85.

Speaking about new conceptions of the public's interactivity and participation in the exhibition, with focus on the museological object, it is also important to underscore that we cannot afford to abandon entirely the traditional concept of museological communication, based as it is on the transmission of knowledge through the contextualization of the exhibited object, because the museum is, and always will be, also a space related to teaching, even if understood in non-formal terms, that is bound to its source—the museumified cultural object.

As such, the museum professionals responsible for museological communication and mediation need to have a clear understanding of the possibilities of expanding these fundamentally antagonistic elements and, in planning their communications projects, factor in the dual aspects of teaching and learning.

Communication strategies will often favor the teaching theory, while others more concerned with the construction of meaning for and by the public will tend to favor that of learning. One privileges emission, the other receipt. However, to favor one does not mean to ignore the other, but rather to establish a vantage point from which to subject the communication process to critical observation⁴¹.

It therefore behooves the museological institution in tune with its times and history to prepare the museum for new perspectives and functions intrinsic to its nature, both conceptual and social, as an emerging museum, that is, one engaged in permanent dialogue, internally (between its staff) and externally (with its public).

This conception, tied in with the new paradigms of contemporary museology, is, without doubt, the one closest to a museum that is aware of its important communicative function, believing the museological space to be a field that is symbolic, receptive, provocative, and evocative of the understanding, fruition, and de-codification of cultural objects for a range of audiences, whose interests and specificities it takes into account, whilst remaining open to multiple interpretations and re-significations that allow one and all to construct, appropriate and plot new courses that take museumified cultural heritage as a point of reference.

And yet, by proposing for itself this new reading, it has to seek new ways of thinking reading, ways that go beyond the traditional act of reading toward a new, broader concept that launches the reader into the unexplored and unknown.

However, as Jorge Larrosa⁴² suggests, this new proposal arrives at its deconstruction of the traditional forms of reading via a Nietzschean take on education—that of dismantling the hermeneutic presuppositions of the old humanist approach.

Quoting Steiner, Larrosa⁴³ says that the reading experience is about more than simply grasping the meaning of a text, but is about actually living

41 Idem, *ibidem*, p. 318.

42 LARROSA, 2004, p.9.

43 Idem, 2004, p.17.

it, and this would also be the best translation for the act of reading an object and deriving therefrom a meaningful experience.

This is where the relationship of reading meets the experience—concrete experience— of life, paving the way toward multisensory knowledge and perception, that which widens the public's access to the most diverse channels of experimentation and exploration, enabling the audience, each in-line with its own characteristics and specificities, to grasp the cultural object to its full potential.

Larrosa says⁴⁴ :

The task of forming a reader is to multiply his perspectives, open his ears, sharpen his sense of smell, educate his palate, hone his sense of touch, give him time, to shape a free and intrepid character...and make reading an adventure. The important thing is not to have a method for good reading, but to know how to read, that is: know how to laugh, dance and play; know how to venture jovially into uncharted territories, to produce new and multiple meanings. The only thing that makes for a master-reader is to show that reading is a free and infinite art that requires innocence, sensibility, courage and, perhaps, a little malice. (...) All books still wait to be read and their possible readings are multiple and infinite: the world is there to be read in other ways; we, ourselves, have not yet been read.

Multisensory perception of the cultural object for publics with special needs

The change in paradigm in museological communication proposed by the emerging model paves the way toward new exhibition techniques that are both indirect (devised for the exhibition space) and direct (involving educational actions in direct contact with the public). In both cases, the aim is to broaden and stimulate the visiting public's reading of the cultural object, urging the visitor to perceive, analyze, interpret, criticize and, ultimately, de-codify the object, exploring it and appropriating its content and essence, and making the experience as meaningful as it is pleasing.

Perception of the museum object, the primary source for the appropriation of culture, represented by universal heritage, finds in the museum its space of mediation, which, consequently, encumbers the institution with a massive political and social responsibility to promote interaction between the cultural object and its public.

As such, the museum's mediation would mean nothing without its first ensuring all possible opportunities for full access to that heritage, which entails opening the institution to all manner of publics, especially those who, in virtue of social, sensorial, physical and intellectual limitations, belong to groups less equipped to partake of these spaces.

In endeavoring to open the museological space to all publics, one has to take into account new factors that bring multiple forms of dialogue to bear

44 Idem, *ibidem*, p. 27.

upon processes of communication, as equity of rights is intrinsically related to respect for collective and individual diversity.

It is in this manner that mediation strategies should broaden the use of channels of perception, not only verbally (in speech or in writing), but in interactive and experimental forms as well, as, considering all possible publics, museum professionals come up against an important and considerable portion of society—the impaired and disabled—which demands added and adapted strategies for actions involving multisensory perception.

Multisensory perception is also an inherent part of a semiotic approach to museological communication that favors an understanding of stimuli issuing from objects and the senses, with special emphasis in this specific case on reception related to the fruition of the cultural object through all sensory channels besides the visual, namely the tactile, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and kinesthetic⁴⁵.

These sensory channels can be stimulated using media devices⁴⁶ specially designed to facilitate the perception of the cultural object by the special-needs visitor, a factor that is fundamental to the understanding and signification of this object.

Sharing Ballesteró's⁴⁷ recognition that the senses of touch, hearing, vision, smell and taste are extremely valuable channels of information acquisition, we might add that the development of multisensory perception heightens the individual's receptiveness and attunement to the environment and to peers.

Smells, textures, sounds and tastes allied with touch become the protagonists of a broader understanding of everything that goes into experience (...) thus acquiring a greater sensibility toward our peers and toward nature.⁴⁸

Mediation strategies that conduct multisensory perception, applied to educational actions in a museum setting, present didactic and pedagogical aspects drawn from both non-formal and formal education, with special focus on methods that accentuate learning through concrete experiences and approximation with the surrounding environment.

Part of this conception is Multisensory Science Learning, developed by the science professor Miguel-Albert Soller⁴⁹ (himself visually-impaired), who writes:

45 Kinesthesia: the sensation of movement in muscles, tendons and joints; muscle sense. Source: Random House Dictionary, 2014.

46 Media devices: assistive sensory materials – objects, replicas, maquettes, sound extracts, among others, used as mediating instruments between the public and the cultural object.

47 BALLESTERÓ, 2003, p.12. According to the author, "Touch, hearing, vision, taste and smell can act as entry channels for valuable information (...). Though these data enter via different channels, they share a common destination: the brain; precisely where they interrelate and acquire the meanings we grasp. For this learning to be adequate and complete it is important that no sense or channel be neglected, as to do so would limit, reduce and impoverish the information from which the brain ultimately draws its learning."

48 *Idem*, p. 83.

49 SOLLER, 1999, pp.17-18.

[...] current teaching, from primary to third-level, receives a didactic treatment that is almost predominantly focused on the visual. The direct consequences we can imagine this bias having are: fragmentation of the environment that surrounds us and a merely partial interpretation of the phenomena that occur within it; [...] a reduced, restricted and impoverished vision of scientific observation that fails to pick up on a great deal of non-visual data; presentation of material to blind and visually-impaired students that fails to motivate them, thereby adding a further obstacle to study and perceptual development; when we perceive normally we tend to look, primarily, which neglects the information obtained by other sensory channels.

This research, in principle related more specifically to learning by blind and visually-impaired students, holds equally true for students with other forms of disability, as well as those who present no impairment at all.

In fact, perceptual experiments conducted in accordance with a multisensory approach yield a more rounded understanding of reality, as well as of human and environmental representations, whilst exercising and stimulating perceptual potentialities in people with or without disabilities and expanding their capacities to recognize and apprehend the world, thus ensuring the consolidation and incorporation of knowledge and discoveries obtained through readings of works, capable of effecting transformations in individuals and, by extension, in society.⁵⁰

Drawing from Gardner, Ferraz and Fusari⁵¹ describe how working perception helps us to “see better, make subtle distinctions and grasp the connections between things”.

In pursuing equity of rights and respect for diversity and focusing on special-needs publics, with their specificities and potentialities, which can and must be developed within the museum space, it is essential that we equip our communications processes and educational actions with resources and programmes geared towards sensory access (direct and indirect communication) based on the principles of multisensory mediation, availing of resources that enhance fruition beyond the purely visual, stoking perception by other means and fruition through other senses.

The possibilities of use and application of these resources may vary from exhibition to exhibition, include original objects or reproductions in relief, add similar and referential materials, introduce interactive proposals that draw upon the senses as a means of expanding perception, de-codification and interpretation of objects through an experiential and concrete perspective that also allows those with sensory, physical or mental disabilities to assimilate and empower their experiences through all possible sensory channels.

A multisensory approach by museums avoids exclusion. Using written and oral information with varying degrees of complexity and employing visual, oral, tactile and interactive modes of communication enables museums to accomplish their mission more thoroughly, communicating more

50 CHIOVATTO, 2006.

51 FERRAZ & FUSARI, 1993.

effectively with a wider spectrum of publics. This approach does not imply any dumbing-down or loss of information quality. On the contrary, it allows the institution to reflect on its set goals, assess the efficacy of its work so far, reach a wider audience, enrich its exhibitions and discover new value in its collections⁵².

In conclusion, suffice it to say that, by contemplating personal differences and the diverse forms of apprehension through which an object can be approached, mediation strategies based on methods of multisensory perception furnish truly stimulating solutions that can be applied and shared by everyone, regardless of impairments or special needs.

It is also important to stress that the concepts presented by multisensory perceptual methods, applied in both formal (educational institutions) and non-formal (sociocultural institutions) learning, corroborate the thesis of a shift of paradigms involving teaching and learning today, evincing the need for structural and pedagogical changes that respect inclusion and a more effective participation of all members of society.

Multisensory perception and accessibility in art exhibitions: a case from experience

If we look at museums in terms of their social function we must also see them as instruments of public policies, especially those designed to foster wider access for more diverse publics. New paradigms are proposed for Museological Communications that foresee a greater level of interaction between the visitor and the exhibit through channels that draw not only on sight, but on the other senses as well (touch, hearing, taste, smell, kinaesthesia).

The travelling exhibition *Sentir prá Ver: gêneros da pintura na Pinacoteca de São Paulo* (Feeling to See: genres of painting at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo) was entirely designed toward that end.

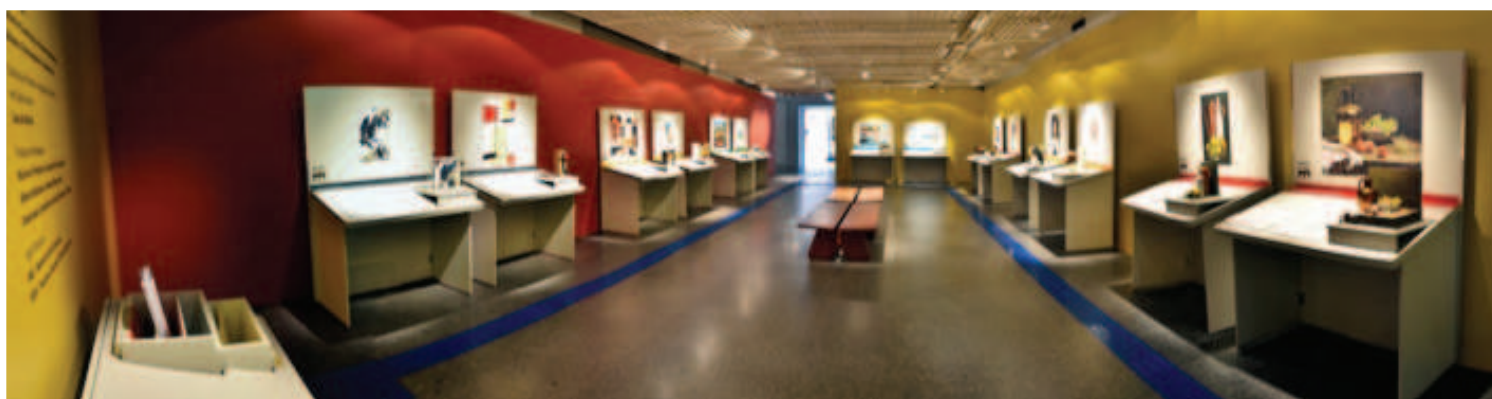


Figure 1: Panoramic view of the exhibition *Sentir prá Ver* (Feeling to See)

⁵² *Museus e Acessibilidade*, 2004, p. 22.

The exhibition *Sentir prá Ver* features 14 photographic reproductions of works from the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo collection. The selection spans Brazilian artists from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries and illustrates all the main artistic genres: still life, portrait, scenes, seascapes, landscapes, cityscapes, and abstraction. The artists on show include Pedro Alexandrino, Carlos Scliar, Almeida Junior, Di Cavalcanti, Francisco Rebolo, and Arnaldo Ferrari. Each theme is represented by two works that present different treatments or approaches, allowing for comparative readings that enrich the visitor's artistic and cultural repertoire.

The curatorial program followed universal accessibility standards, ensuring qualitative access for people in wheelchairs, with impaired mobility, partial or total loss of sight and/or hearing and intellectual limitations, whilst proposing a greater level of interactivity between the museum exhibits and the visiting public, expanding the traditional sight-based approach to a fully multisensory appreciation.

Respecting accessibility criteria and aiming to stimulate and expand knowledge and appreciation of works of art through all of the senses, we created a range of multisensory support materials, including reproductions in 3-D relief, tactile models, sound extracts and associative games (poems and detail hunts), along with investigative texts available in audio and dual reading (large-print and braille). Guided tours by educators specially trained to attend special-needs visitors were also deployed to mediate between the artwork and the visitor, bringing further possibilities to the interaction with the works and their content.



Figure 2: Accessibility Resources for the multisensory recognition of works of art

The curatorial and pedagogical project also meets attitudinal accessibility guidelines, with special training given to all those involved, especially those with a direct attendance role.

Sentir prá Ver has featured in two exhibitions, first at the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, from April to July 2012, and again at the Inclusion Memorial, run by the São Paulo Secretariat for the Disabled, from January

to March 2014. In both cases the show met with wholesale approval from the public. On one hand, people with disabilities had their needs recognized and met, giving them access to cultural content traditionally out of bounds to them, while, on the other, people with no such disability were able to experiment with a new way of appreciating art, further proving that initiatives of this kind expand the communicability of museum content and make museums genuine instruments of social inclusion.

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SITE with information about the Museum Accessibility Program and publications by the author, available at: www.arteinclusao.com.br/publicacoes/publicacoes.htm