

From the mass media museum to the social media museum: investigating the museum space in the era of mobile devices

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ABSTRACT

E liseo Verón has defined the museum as a mass medium whose discourse is materialized through the body of the visitors: their spatial appropriations manifest not only the gap between the spatial proposal and its reception but also the bonds they establish with the institutions. Applying to the museum the notion proposed by Verón to refer to the bond between media and audience, these bonds crystallize different types of *visiting contracts*. Nowadays, the idea of a contract is central in visitors' consolidation of the museum experience: it is no longer a matter of merely visiting exhibitions but of sharing content on Instagram, sitting down at the café to study, or frequenting the esplanade to walk the dog. Thus, the bonds branch out into direct contracts (commercial or educational) and distinctive agreements (e.g., allowing the transformation of the esplanade into a park). This bifurcation enables us to rethink the notion of museum visits and analyze contemporary visiting practices. Following Verón's methodology and based on a seven-year-long study of museum visits, we present some conclusions regarding the practices developed on the esplanades and in the entrance halls of Centre Pompidou and Museo Reina Sofia. In these places, visitors and museums maintain their bonds. We also reflect on contemporary technical possibilities, such as the 360° audiovisual recording used in interactional linguistics and the necessity of studying the links between virtual and physical museum experiences.

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: 09

Issue: 02

Winter 2023

ISSN: 2459-2943

DOI: 10.18680hss.2023.0024

Pages: 165-187

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KEYWORDS:

Model visitor

Museum visiting contract

Interactional linguistics

1. Introduction: From the mass media museum to the social media museum

The transformation of the museum experience is historically associated with the development of mass media, which has been highly accelerated since the last decades of the twentieth century with the advances of television, mobile telephony, and the Internet. Such phenomenon, and the evolution of the technical-technological devices it involves, operate both in the production and reception of the museum proposal by incorporating new devices into exhibitions (audio guides, screens, QR codes, augmented reality, mobile applications) and, consequently, by modifying the modes of access to the museum experience. Thus, new physical and virtual visiting practices emerge, which involve new modes of contact with the artworks and the institutions.

Anticipating later debates on the popularization of the museum, Eliseo Verón highlighted these issues in the studies carried out with Levasseur in 1983 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, in which they developed a typology of museum visits. The authors defined the museum as a mass media characterized by a specific condition: its dominant order is metonymic. Accordingly, the visitor's body functions as a space of resonance for all the indexes of the spatial discourse that define the subject's contact with the spatiotemporal materiality of this discourse.

The museum's territory constitutes a network of redirections in space temporalized by the signifying body of the visitor at the moment of appropriation. Thus, the visit is established as the result of a *negotiation* understood as the complex articulation between the properties of the proposed discourse and the subject's strategies of spatial appropriation (Verón and Levasseur 1983). The visitor's behavior expresses the gap (*écart*) between the *production* and *recognition* (Verón 1998) of the museum's proposal, which is involved in what Verón calls *circulation*.

The concept of *circulation* refers to the intermediary network of the productive system materialized in the form of a difference between the production and the effects (*recognition*) of discourses (Verón 2005: 42). Verón explains that the *circulation conditions* are highly variable according to the type of material-technological support of the discourse. In our case, various supports constitute the multiple materiality of the museum experience: building, artworks, exhibition materials, and the visitor's body. But is it exclusively so? We will later see that the materiality of the museum's discourse is multiple and that, at present, the appropriation of the physical space by the subjects forms only a part, indeed the essential part, of the experience.

Regarding circulation analysis, it is also necessary to consider the participating temporal dimension. According to Verón, it is possible to conceive *circulation* as a *continuum* from the synchronic study to the diachrony of historical time. "In the first case,

the conditions of circulation depend on the conditions of society at a given moment [...] in the second case, the circulation of discourses becomes a properly historical dimension, which refers to the social history of discourses” (Verón 2005: 42-43). This point is essential in studying the museum experience since the double approach of analyzing *circulation conditions* enables us to observe the progressive incorporation of technological layers or prostheses to the museum visit and the historical configuration of “good visiting practices.”

Thus, the *negotiation* between the museum proposal and the visiting practices performed by the public reveals the bonds between the museum and its visitors. If we conceive of the museum as a mass media (or social media), these bonds could be understood as *visiting contracts*, applying the notion of the *reading contract* developed by Verón (1985) to study the relationships between the media and their audiences. In this article, we will review this concept and revisit the research at the Centre Pompidou to propose applying this method to study the contemporary multimedia and multispatial museum experience.

2. When technology comes into the museum

Almost ten years after his research at the Centre Pompidou, Eliseo Verón reflected on the “growing hybridization between museography and spectacle techniques” (Verón 1992: 34). He explained that to understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to go back further in time: the massive interest in visiting museums responded to the mediatization of post-industrial societies, a process that began with the print media and accelerated after World War II with the development of cinema, television, and radio.

In these reflections, Verón (1992) mentioned that although new technologies – both in the field of materials (building materials and architectural materials) and in the field of communication itself (processing of writing, sound, light, and images) – and new supports (such as video and interactive devices) had entered the museum, they had not changed the nature of what he called the oldest mass media in the world. The technical modernization of the museum did not explain the explosion of its public but was instead a *réponse décalée*. The fascination with the museum is focused on its uniqueness as a medium (which appeared long before electronic media): it is a medium in space, a collective place (Verón 1992). Museums became increasingly attractive to the public in response to media development and to what was its dominant aspect at the time: television.

Verón (1992) argued that the reflection on transformations in the museum experience due to technical advances needed (and needs) the analysis of the conditions for these changes to occur. Hence, the requirement is to adopt a diachronic approach that includes the museum within the mediatization process of modern and contemporary

societies. Studying the museum as a mass media does not imply considering the quantitative aspect of its public, but a type of *circulation* that makes its messages accessible to a plurality of individuals under certain conditions. In the words of the author: “What is of interest is to specify the nature of these conditions” (Verón 1997: 13).

While Verón established the importance of carrying out a diachronic analysis of the museum’s relationships with the development of media and devices, such a historical reconstruction remains to be done. This paper highlights four recent episodes of the museum’s mediatization history linked to cinema, television, digital photography, and smartphones, mainly concerning using the latter for social media.

Of course, the press and the radio also influenced the museum’s transformation (and undoubtedly its success). We may recall the exhibition *The Family of Man*, held at MoMA in 1955. It is a paradigmatic case for reflecting on the crossover between the museum and the graphic press beyond the media topics linked to art criticism. *The Family of Man* uses (we speak in the present tense since the exhibition is preserved in Luxembourg) elements typical of scientific magazines (such as National Geographic), both in its thematic proposal and expository rhetoric. Its *mise en scène*, undoubtedly shocking for the time of its initial showing, is in line with the layout of this type of media and today sets a clear antecedent to the enunciative strategies applied in contemporary exhibitions.

The four episodes we present below are topics of the works of theorists from different disciplines who have studied how the development of new communicational devices has contributed to the transformation of the functioning, conception, and staging of exhibitions and, foremost, to the changes in the notion of museums and audiences.

3. The history of the world’s oldest mass media in four acts

3.1. Act I: The 1980s and the massive museum sensibility

In 1995, Andreas Huyssen presented an overview of the transformations in the functioning of museums since the massification of cable television in 1980. In the context of the multiplication of television offerings (both in terms of broadcasts and devices), a generalized *museum sensibility* emerged, as the author called the popularization of museums. This phenomenon highlighted the importance the public assigned to the socialization experienced inside the museum, contrasting with the solitude of the television experience.

According to Huyssen (1995), the museum had to integrate the logic of spectacle, starting from its direction and management and extending to its institutional and architectural communications: posters, lights, and banners on the front of the buildings. These changes would aim to respond to the “changing” desires of the public for “star events.”

The impact of new technologies on the museum meant abandoning its role as an educational institution where to preserve the canon to become another mass media. This change included incorporating new devices in the exhibition, such as audio guides, which modified the behavior of visitors and their modes of contact with the artworks and the objects on display.

3.2. Act II: The 1990s and the triumph of the blockbuster

The emergence and success of blockbuster films eventually led to the birth of blockbuster exhibitions. The museum's sensibility became more evident with the massification of this type of show, which was born in 1970 and became dominant in the 1990s (Barker 1999). According to Emma Barker (1999), this exhibition format, which is based on the model of Hollywood cinema, transformed the ways of programming, designing, and promoting exhibitions.

These super productions aim to attract mass audiences and obtain economic benefits from sponsors and merchandising sales. Following such a logic, the exhibitions, advertised in the same way as blockbuster films, are dedicated to the most famous artists, mainly male, white, and European. The blockbusters present *the star system of painting* as Hollywood biopics that mix the love affairs of heterosexual male masters with the evolution of their artistic careers (Rosso 2022b).

3.3. Act III: The 2000s. From digital cameras to smartphones

The Kodak Culture (Chalfen 1987), since the 1960s, established new habits for producing intimate, personal, and family memories. Later, the development of digital cameras made it possible to evaluate, delete, and retake images, making photography an increasingly everyday practice. These tiny cameras, whose digital storage capacity was increasing, began to sneak into exhibition rooms, setting up an arduous debate between the acceptance and rejection of cameras in museums. In most cases, institutions forbade the total or partial use of cameras, mainly the use of a flash, arguing that it affects the conservation of the artworks (Appiotti 2022).

With the integration of cameras into cellphones and the subsequent emergence of social media, the prohibition became more challenging to manage, and each institution took different measures: the general decision was to prohibit the practice of photography or to limit it to some rooms (until a few years ago). Then, doing the opposite, institutions decided to encourage visitors to take photos in the exhibition rooms and publish them on social media. Incorporating photography in the museum involved changes at the exhibition and architectural levels. Nowadays, the spaces designed *for taking photos* are increasingly recurrent, and we can also find completely photogenic exhibitions.

3.4. Act IV: After 2010. From the selfie in the museum to the explosion of the QR code

The phenomenon of the photographic camera in the museum has become a tool for marketing and positioning as well as for mediation and education. In the first case, museums promote the production of photos of and in their buildings by incorporating hashtags in the exhibition halls and inviting visitors to share their pictures on social media (the most remarkable example is the international campaign #MuseoSelfieDay). In the second case, museums take advantage of their visitors' use of phones to lead via QR codes to their pedagogical content published online. In both cases, the institutions invite visitors to follow their profiles on social networks.

However, the recent incorporation of QR codes (in museums, monuments, and even for art criticism-dissemination) shows that the use of mobile devices includes more actions than just taking pictures. It is a complex phenomenon that continually forces institutions to establish new modes of contact with their visitors and to redefine their space (both physical and virtual) and the type of experience offered. Also, thanks to a gradual reorientation of institutional communication (symmetrical and bilateral) and the use of social media, visitors have become active participants and co-creators of knowledge, content, and experiences (Romanelli 2021).

Today, museum audiences include all people interacting with the institution, whether online, remotely, or *in situ* (Anderson 2019). We are facing the overlapping of visitor-follower categories, which is fundamental to understanding contemporary exhibition proposals. Museums must implement mediation, communication, and exhibition strategies to create solid synergies between physical, online, and mobile experiences and recognize how people interact, behave, and learn in these three spheres (Kelly 2016).

Given visitors' positive response to the museum's new proposition, institutions exploit the use of cell phones and the motivation of audiences (online and physical) to produce content and to *do things*¹ in, with, and for the museum. Museums re-post visitor-produced images on their Instagram profiles as one of the leading institutional communication strategies. The photos of city views, art installations, buildings, and even drinks in museum cafés posted by visitor-followers on social media illustrate this point.

If we refer to Huyssen's (1995) notion, we could think of a new wave of massive *museum sensibility* strongly linked to the emergence of social media and the growth of international tourism. As Isabella Pezzini (2014: 43) notes: "Every year around the world, one hundred new museums open their doors to the public. Opening a new

¹ The efforts to encourage audience participation in social media also affect other media such as television and cinema: Sarah Atkinson (2014) has studied cinematographic cases in which viewers' comments published on social networks determined the progress of the plot, and James Blake (2017) has studied the phenomenon of the double screen in film and television.

museum is the dream of every architect, curator, collector, and sponsor, rightly due to the new symbolic value tied to this matter.” This museum explosion involves architectural and curatorial changes that affect the relationship institutions establish with their visitors, who become the center of the museum experience (Pezzini 2014). Thus, architecture became *starchitecture* (Bishop 2013), and curatorial discourses became an essential part of marketing strategies applied to address different audience segments; the latter would justify the triumph of thematic exhibitions (Fleck 2014).

This brief historical journey brings us to the condition of today’s museum visits: it is mediated by exhibition devices and mediatized by social media that connect its physical and virtual instances. The content posted on Instagram shows how the museum’s physical space extends into the virtual space and vice versa, as well as how this social media became a catalog of model visitors (Davallon 1999) and “good practices” for visiting the museum.

Jean Davallon adopts the concept of the *model reader* developed by Umberto Eco (1993)² to propose the *visiteur modèle*, which is a sort of “programmed orientation (guidance) for the visitor, who will dialogue, interact, complete, or modify the visitor’s program. The visitor now knows that the objects are not arranged in a random order: their arrangement allows him to assume an intentionality on the part of the producer” (Davallon 1999: 214-215).

Indeed, the notion of the model visitor is strongly linked to the contract of long semiotic tradition, which refers to the bonds between producers and receivers of discourse involving expectations, interests, trust, and motivations. Following Eliseo Verón’s concept of *reading contract* (1985),³ we propose the term *visiting contract* to describe the bonds between museums and visitors, which emerge by analyzing the architectural and expositive proposals but also the circulation of the discourses, mainly visual, that configure their *model visitors* through the different epochs.

Through Carol Duncan’s work (1995) on the rituals of civilization configured by museum devices and the analysis of the historical representations of museum visitors (that we will present below), we have established the following hypothesis: the *bonds* or *visiting contracts* that museums establish with their visitors at present have been configured over time both through their spatial proposal and through the visual representation of *model visitors*, first through engraving and painting, then through photography and videos circulating on mass media and nowadays mainly on social media. In this way, the transformations of the museum experience must be understood as an articulation of social practices that correspond to the historical representations of the museum visit and those that currently involve new technologies, especially mobile devices.

² The Model Reader “is a set of textually established felicity conditions that must be satisfied for a text to be fully actualized in its potential content” (Eco 1993: 89).

³ Eliseo Verón did not apply the concept of reading contracts to museums, but the latter appears repeatedly in his studies on mass media. He even made the analogy between readers’ different forms of appropriation of newspaper discourses and visitors’ various strategies when touring an exhibition (2005: 226).

4. The circulation of the Model Reader's image

Our social museum representation pursues the program drawn up in 1792 by the Louvre Museum, which served as a model for most Western museums. The mission of the museum institution was to allow artists to study the history of art in the presence of masterpieces and to make the national heritage available to the public. Numerous artists have represented these two functions, building the ideas of the museum experience and the correct behavior of the public. Such behavior involves being a “good visitor”: knowing how to behave in front of the artworks, how and at what distance to stand, how long to remain in front of them, and even how to dress for the museum visit.

By observing the images of museum visitors that have circulated throughout history, we can attempt to reconstruct the configurations of the *model visitors* of each period, which implies the stabilization of the ways of exhibiting and appreciating art by appealing to the reproduction of these behaviors in the physical space of the museum. Thus, it is possible, through the representation of museum galleries and their visitors in the nineteenth century, to observe the staging practices of the period: the walls were entirely covered with paintings according to an exhibition logic that determined that the more prominent works should be placed higher up (because they were easier to



Figure 1. Alexandre Brun (around 1880) *View of the Salon Carré at the Louvre*. Out of copyright.



Figure 2. Adolphe Giraudon (1897) *View of the Caryatids room in the Louvre Museum, Paris, France*. Out of copyright.

see from afar) and sometimes at a slight angle from the plane of the wall to suit the viewer's eye; the paintings considered most important were displayed in the central space and the lesser ones at ground level (O'Doherty 1999).

This ingenious mosaic of frames imposed specific ways of seeing: each painting was considered to form an entity, totally isolated from its neighbor by the surrounding frame and a closed system of perspective – the exhibition space needed to be more consistent and categorizable. The nineteenth century was taxonomic, and the visitor's gaze recognized the hierarchy of genres and the authority of the frame (O'Doherty 1999). The *model visitor* knew this logic and understood how to navigate the museum landscape, as we can see in paintings and engravings of that time.

We find more images of empty museum rooms towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, when museum visiting practices appeared to be institutionalized. This was also when the practices of drawing, painting, copying, and photographing the galleries became a nuisance before being regulated and taxed (Appiotti 2022). The disappearance of the visitor's body in the pictures representing the museum was accentuated by the emergence of the modern museum and the ideology of the white cube.



Figure 3. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Great Hall; View facing south, 1910. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

As O'Doherty (1999) points out, while the mind and the gaze are accepted in this white cube, the body is not. Therefore, it was erased from the representation of the museum's space. The *circulation* of images of the bodiless rooms added a new piece to the museum's social representation, so crucial that even today, thousands of visitors wait in the rooms, crouching with their cameras, to capture the moment when the sacred object has become solitary, with no bodies to obstruct its appreciation.



Figure 4. Peter A. Juley (1930-1931). Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. IN9.2.

Although the visitor's body is an invasive intruder in this auratic space,⁴ it is the necessary agent through which the museum institution becomes visible and its values transmissible. The visitor embodies the museum experience. Nevertheless, the body is insubordinate and can always profane the devices, particularly those of the exhibition. Eliseo Verón's study (1983) shows that, as in any phenomenon of *discursive circulation*, there is always a gap between the proposition of the museum and its reception. History shows us that, in the end, the visitor (and his insubordinate behaviors) takes the reins of such *negotiation*.



Figure 5. Thomas Struth. *National Gallery I*, 1989, London. © Thomas Struth Thomas Struth. *Hermitage 3*, St. Petersburg 2005 © Thomas Struth.



Figure 6. Alécio de Andrade (1993) *Le Louvre et ses visiteurs*. Musée du Louvre, Paris. ©Alécio de Andrade, ADAGP, Paris 2024.

⁴ On the notion of aura see: Heinrich, Nathalie 1983. L'aura de Walter Benjamin. In: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*. Vol. 49, *La peinture et son public*, 107-109

As we have mentioned, introducing new ‘prostheses’ to the visit experience, such as audio guides and digital cameras, has made it possible to integrate new ways of behaving in the museum space. This is shown in the images taken by Thomas Struth and Alécio de Andrade, which expose visitor behavior as never before: tired, bored, uncomfortable, disobedient, confused, but also happy, in love, creative, and even crowded together to take pictures with their mini cameras. These works were coincidentally produced simultaneously as the reflections on the museum and the media: from the 1980s through the first decade of the 21st century.

Later, as we have seen, the appearance of smartphones and social media forced institutions to transform their visit proposals since today’s visitors are also image-producers. The French government even launched the *Tous Photographes* code of conduct to encourage photography in museums. In this way, some museums use the images produced by visitors by republishing them on their social networks (as Centre Pompidou does) and by including them in their exhibition space (as did the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille).

There exists a dialectical appropriation of the museum experience: visitors appropriate the museum in ways never imagined, and, in return, the museum appropriates the content of its visitors and uses it for promotional purposes and to educate in new visiting practices. The re-appropriation of the contents produced by visitors exposes how institutions *patrimonize* their public and select and exhibit the best examples of their *model visitors*. Since then, Instagram has offered an exhaustive catalog of gastronomic, touristic, educational, leisurely, artistic, and even romantic experiences in or near the museum.

The analysis of the images circulated between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries⁵ reveals the transformations of the museum experience over time and, consequently, the configurations of its *model visitors*. Even the artworks show that these *model visitors* emerge from the *negotiations* between the institutional proposal and the public’s reaction to this proposal. For this reason, we proposed applying Eliseo Verón’s (1985) notion of *reading contract* to study the museum experience since this notion focuses on the *gap* between the production and the recognition instances of cultural offers. We now present this concept and its adaptation to the study of the museum visit.

5. The reading contract

According to Verón (1985), a medium’s success, or at least survival, lies in its ability to propose a contract in congruence with its audience’s expectations, interests, and motivations. The only way for a medium to address its readers and build its “personality”

⁵ The corpus includes more than 70 artworks representing museum visitors: prints, paintings, photography, and performances. In addition, since 2017, we have been studying the content published on the Instagram profiles of Tate Modern, Moma, Malba, and the Pompidou Center and the content posted by their *followers*.

and a particular bond with them is through its enunciative strategies as, from the point of view of content, the offer in the same area of direct competition is more or less the same (Verón 2005: 200).

A medium, or, in our case, the museum, must establish its particularities and differences from others. However, it must also establish the particularities and differences of its public by contrasting it to others. These differences are configured according to the *modalities of saying*, constituting what Verón (2005: 173) calls the *enunciation device*. This device includes:

1. The image of the enunciator involving the position (or positions) that the enunciator attributes to itself and its relationship with what it states.
2. The image of the addressee to whom the discourse is addressed: the addressee and the place the discourse proposes that it occupies.
3. The relationship established between the enunciator and the addressee proposed in and through the discourse.

We use the pronoun it because “it is, therefore, necessary to distinguish clearly, on the one hand, the ‘real’ speaker from the enunciator and, on the other hand, the ‘real’ receiver from the addressee. Enunciator and addressee are two discursive entities” (Verón 2005: 173). It is essential since the same media or museum may construct different enunciators for different addressees.

As Verón points out “every media contains its enunciation device: the latter may be coherent or incoherent, stable or unstable, it may be fully adapted to its readership or adapted only to a certain degree” (2005: 173). In the case of the graphic press, this device is called the *reading contract*, and in the case of the museum, we propose to call it the *visiting contract*. To arrive at a description of the *reading* or *visiting contract*, the first step is to recognize through what type of mechanisms and at what level of functioning the discourse configured it. For this reason, it is not possible to describe it through the analysis of the content – which is only a part of the media proposal and, in some instances, as Verón (1985) has specified, the least important part – since it is assumed by one or by multiple enunciative structures. Three requirements preside over the localization of the *reading contract*:

- a. The regularity of the properties described: they do not appear by chance in a single edition (of a newspaper or exhibition) but are relatively stable and recurrent in its global discourse.
- b. The differentiation obtained by comparing the media: an analysis of *contracts* always attempts to locate the similarities and regular differences between the cases approached to determine the specificity of each one. In this

sense, we must study our objects according to the system where they are performed (in our case, modern art museums).

- c. The systematicity of the properties exhibited by each support: the description of the *contract* must result from the localization of all the properties linked to the two preceding criteria of regularity and differentiation. In turn, it should be possible to identify its strengths and weaknesses, areas of ambiguity, and eventual inconsistencies.

Verón has indicated that “an analysis of the enunciation device is an analysis in production, but the contract is consummated, more or less completely at the moment of reading: in recognition” (2005: 179-180). Thus, it is necessary to carry out field studies through interviews, focus groups (with readers and non-readers), and, in the case of the museum, an ethno-semiotic analysis. Following this method, the study of the *contract* implies, on the one hand, selecting the corpus of media (or museums) that allows reconstructing the *grammar of production* of each one of them (their specificities and differences) and, on the other hand, trying to reconstruct, from the discourse of the readers (or visitors), the *grammars in recognition* that are always multiple since the enunciation devices never produce only a single effect (Verón 2005: 182).

6. The visiting contracts

Analyzing the museum's visiting contract implies considering a set of enunciative regularities that allow the institution to differentiate itself from others, build its own collective, and establish its visitors' specificity to find its specificity. If we think of the Centre Pompidou, the institution presents enunciative regularities that position it differently in the universe of modern and contemporary art museums in France and worldwide.

Centre Pompidou's building is characterized by bureaucratization, which is evident in the functionalist organization of each architectural space. Regarding exhibition rhetoric, *Beaubourg's* style is recognized by the *quasi-rupture* with the logic of the white cube, exposing its structure (ceilings) and letting the Parisian landscape in through its vast windows. On the contrary, its program of activities follows the strategies currently prevailing in Western museums, oscillating between star events, usually linked to visual arts exhibitions, and niche events, mainly in terms of lectures, performing art, and film programming. Nevertheless, the Centre Pompidou pays special attention to the topics announced in its mission, such as social inclusion, immigration, ecology, and gender studies. This institutional positioning implies specific ways of presenting itself as a museum and certain ways of approaching and exhibiting the art history, conceiving its program, and configuring its *model visitors*.

The *model visitors* of *Beaubourg* understand how the building works: the activities carried out on each floor and its rules of access, use, and permanence. They also know that if they share their photos or videos in the museum on their Instagram account accompanied by the hashtag proposed by the institution, they could be lucky enough to have their content shared on the Centre Pompidou's profile. Thus, the institution establishes its collectives, made of visitors and followers, through its program of activities and the manners in which the public can inhabit the physical and virtual space.

In the studies conducted between 2017 and 2020, we studied the museum space while seeking to elucidate the visiting contracts of the Malba, MoMA, Centre Pompidou, and Tate Modern museums (Rosso 2020). We observed the most stable museum spaces: the esplanade, the façade, and the entrance hall since they maintain recurrences in their organization and, consequently, in the contact of visitors with the museum's materiality.⁶ Following Verón's proposal, *visiting contracts* also focus on the stable qualities, i.e., the building and not the exhibitions. We analyzed those museum sectors as molds, as templates filled with different contents. Those *intermediary spaces* configure different bonds with visitors that emerge from analyzing their spatial organizations and the possibilities of appropriations they offer to visitors (Rosso 2020).

We analyzed the four buildings following the values associated with the modern art museum according to the typology of art museums proposed by Zunzunegui (2004).⁷ Then, we carried out a graphical analysis: the presence of logos, promotional banners, and signage, and a discursive analysis of the texts presented in the spaces observed. Finally, we analyzed the spatial design: the security devices, the furniture, the display cases, the lights, and each object – artistic or not – that, as a system, attends to the expectations, interests, motivations, and knowledge of the visitors (Rosso 2020).⁸

Our studies resulted in the description of *contracts* similar to those Verón (2005) had outlined in his studies on magazine covers. The contracts oscillated between the enunciative positions: didactic/non-didactic, transparent/opaque, distant/dialogical, and objective/complicit. We have titled the four *visiting contracts* as follows (Rosso 2023a):

⁶ At the time, the use of cellphones did not extend beyond their use as photo cameras. However, the selfie in the museum was already trending, and hashtags were becoming installed as an obligatory paratext in the exhibition halls.

⁷ We may recall that the modern museum was established as an abolitionist reaction against the Fine Arts museum. The modern art museum presents itself as a civic center for a modern citizen who would be able to dispense with the pedagogical device.

⁸ The elements that constitute the materiality of the museum experience have been studied following the methodological propositions of Oscar Steimberg (2013) and Oscar Traversa (2014), which Marita Soto has systematized in a method with three analysis levels. Firstly, each object has been analyzed according to its material dimensions (its support and its emplacement) and according to its functions as a medium and as a device. Secondly, each object has been analyzed according to its genre and style. Finally, its thematic, rhetorical, and enunciative dimensions have been analyzed to observe how each object participated in configuring a global enunciative scene that determines the museum's institutional image.

- *Malba: un museo para Barrio Parque* (non-didactic, transparent, dialogical, complicit);
- *MoMA: This way, please* (didactic, opaque, distant, objective);
- *Tate: let it be* (didactic, transparent, dialogical, complicit);
- *Centre Pompidou, ou Beaubourg?* (didactic, opaque, distant, objective/non-didactic, transparent, dialogical, complicit).

We saw what is possible to do in the museum, how to do it, and when to do it to establish the museum's bonds with its public over time. Those who frequent it regularly, as well as those who follow its profiles on social media, value these ways of *being a museum* and telling the history of art, but also the ways the institution provides them for being themselves and *doing things* in or with the museum. Even certain users follow museum profiles on social media because they value *something* stable and enjoyable over time. However, many do not physically visit the museum, have yet to visit it, or never will. The phenomenon of *following but not visiting* is fundamental to understanding the current notion of the museum public.

In the last few years, we have added another instance to the analysis of *visiting contracts* that involves the study of the mediatization of the experience by social networks insofar as the discursive strategies staged in the physical space lead to the virtual space and vice versa. That is, in its physical space, the museum makes use of its virtual contents by providing different modes of access (hashtags, QR codes, devices to take photos, to store or share them on social networks), and in the virtual space, the museum highlights (through its contents) the inhabitability of its physical space.⁹ In both cases, the museum promises a multimedia and multispatial visit, compelling us to rethink our methodological tools and the notions of bonding, visit, and visitor (Rosso 2023b). The *visiting contract* would then emerge from studying the differences (the gap) between what the museum proposes and what visitors do in the physical, virtual, and hybrid spaces.

In this sense, the one-sidedness of the museum proposal changed to incorporate new practices previously considered *foreign* to the art world, or at least to the museum space. The phenomenon of participation and acceptance of visitor disobedience adds new nuances to the veronian notion of contract, highlighting the concept's importance. Since 2021, we have entered the second phase of our research: analyzing the *recognition* of the *visiting contracts*. During this new work period, we reflect upon the implications of the notions of *reading* and *visiting contracts*. In 1985, Verón emphasized that, in the case of mass communications, it is the media that proposes the contract. This statement

⁹ The study of museum social network profiles follows Verón's proposal for the study of the *reading contract* (an enunciative analysis). However, the study of followers' interactions on the one hand and of the contents produced and posted by visitor-followers on the other hand constitute today a theoretical and methodological challenge.

also applied to the museum for a long time. Still, as we have seen in our brief historical tour, visitors today participate in creating and promoting the museum experience as never before (Rosso 2023b). Thus, we propose to divide the bonds the museum establishes with its visitors into *visiting contracts* and *visiting agreements*. We will explain this point below and review the work that guides all our research on museum audiences: *El cuerpo como operador* (Verón 2013), which takes up the research of 1983.

7. The body as operator in 2023: The multimedia and multispatial museum experience

The research developed by Verón and Levasseur (1983) at the Centre Pompidou has provided our theoretical and methodological framework for developing studies of museum audiences. The work, divided into three stages, focused on observing the visiting strategies executed by people in an exhibition entitled *Vacances en France 1860-1982*. However, the research did not analyze the exhibition's content but the visitors' modes of spatial appropriation.

The study included a period of indirect observation, fixed cameras recording the trajectories, and the direct observation, discreet surveillance of some visitors' behaviors. The next stage involved schematizing these trajectories on the exhibition floor plan. Based on these observations, the researchers established four types of strategies and contrasted them through in-depth interviews with visitors corresponding to these categories (Verón 2013). As a result, they proposed a typology of visits that included, metaphorically, ants, butterflies, lobsters, and fishes. These types of visits show the strategies chosen while touring an exhibition – variably ordered and directed – and reveal not only the bond people established with the Centre Pompidou but also their imaginaries regarding museum visits.¹⁰

As mentioned, this methodological design has been used in our research between 2017 and 2020 to study the *experiential promises* and the *visiting contracts* configured by the *intermediary spaces* of four museums (Rosso 2020). However, several factors (already pointed out in our brief diachronic study of the incorporation of devices in museums) have required revising the methodology applied in our field studies: a) the increasing use of cell phones by visitors, b) the application of communicational strategies that encourage visitors to produce and share content on social networks (since 2020), and c) the incorporation of QR codes that allow visitors to access to pedagogical content on their cell phones (Rosso 2022a).

¹⁰ This typology still serves to study other institutions as in the case of Jordi Ferrero's research *Estudio del paisaje*, carried out at the Thyssen Bornemisza in Madrid.

The museum nowadays is presented as a set of media devices¹¹ that establish specific modes of contact with hybrid materiality (virtual and physical) and certain types of practices that overlap in the complexity of the museum, participating at different levels in the creation of its materiality, as well as in its modification. How, then, to analyze the reception of the multimedia and multispatial visit to the museum? Currently, the study of the museum visit requires observing the organization of the physical space (including communicative, security, and exhibition objects) and the behaviors and actions of visitors, both technological and physical (walking, touching, photographing, scanning) prepared and anticipated by this spatial organization. The latter embodies the extension of the experience into the museum's virtual space (digital platforms and social media) as the spatial organization makes provisions for using mobile devices, especially smartphones.

We must point out that the museum, as discourse-object, could be thought of as immaterial, that is, as a type of entity or, more specifically, as an institution that materializes itself through:

1. The experience it offers, i.e., the *modes of access* it regulates as a medium.
2. Its architectural-artistic-curatorial materiality and the modes of contact managed by the multiple devices that compose it.
3. The role it plays according to the museum genre orienting certain visit expectations and practices.

The museum thus acquires its materiality from the configuration of a communicative system that involves both its physical space and all the elements that make up its identity from crystallized metonymic fragments: its logo, its colors, its icons that refer to its physical space, the contents published in its social media, the organization of its website, its architectural design, that is, all the discursive strategies that support and characterize the museum's proposal.

Revisiting Verón's (1983) study today allows us, on the one hand, to analyze visitors' behavior in both the physical and virtual spaces and, on the other hand, to study contemporary institutional strategies, which merge with practices outside of the field of art. How should this complexity be approached? Regarding the physical space, we propose that Verón's method be combined with Charles Goodwin's ethnolinguistics (2018), which prioritizes the analysis of individuals' physical, gestural, and discursive behavior.

Behavior observation employs audiovisual records transcribed via a specific notation system (variable according to each laboratory) and transposed into diagrams expressing the relationships between the body and verbal language. Lorenza Mondada (2010) and

¹¹ We follow Oscar Traversa's (2014) notion of device defined as contact managers between agents and discourse supports (its materiality), articulating social practices and constituting reiterated and shared social habits and behaviors.

the researchers from the ICAR laboratory (France) applied this method to study guided museum tours. The Augmented Artwork Analysis (AAA) project, led by Pierluigi Basso (ICAR's director), studies guided visits at the Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon, the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille, and the Nationalmuseum Förschmaart of Luxembourg to create a *complementary museum* through the design of an application for tablets. The project aims to help visitors view and interpret artworks exhibited on-site and from other museums.

The methodological proposal of ethnolinguistics allows us to analyze the visitors' verbal discourses simultaneously as they interact in (with) the museum space. This method adds a new dimension to studying the *negotiation* between the planned and experienced visits. In the case of the second instance of our research (2022-2025) discussed above (Rosso 2023b), the current study of the *visiting contracts* configured by the architecture of the Reina Sofia (Madrid) and Centre Pompidou (Paris) museums combines Verón's ethno-semiotics and ethnolinguistics as developed at ICAR. This methodological design uses audiovisual recordings made with 360° cameras to simultaneously study all the activities occurring in the museum. In this way, we can observe visitors' spatial appropriations and establish "zonings of practices" that can contribute to rethinking the notions of contract.

The first conclusion we draw from observing the esplanade of both institutions is the existence of other instances of contact with the institution extending the visit beyond the exhibitions. We have provisionally called them *visiting agreements*. The notion of agreement suggests greater familiarity, trust, and everyday contact between museums and visitors. However, it also implies non-regulated access modes beyond the commercial contract of buying a ticket to visit an exhibition. It is a matter of allowing practices the institution did not plan but accepts through their reiteration.

The esplanades of these institutions become playgrounds and soccer fields for children, parks for holding picnics, places where to meet or to rest, areas to walk pets, and are even used as solariums. We also observed some cases of people taking pictures of the buildings and leaving without going through the museum door. This type of behavior is central because it expresses what several authors have indicated: museums must fulfill the expectations and experiences of those in contact with them in a virtual, remote, and mobile way. For this reason, our study pays considerable attention to cell-phone use in the museum space.

Our study of the appropriations of the esplanades and entrance halls includes working with visitors who carry a 360° camera with a harness on their chest. This strategy allows us to observe the use of mobile devices: when they use it, how they use it, and for what purpose. In this way, it is possible to verify the instances in *recognition* of proposals such as hashtags and QR codes, as well as the type of content they produce (photos, videos) or the activities they perform (chatting, answering emails, making phone calls, contacting someone they are waiting for). This way, the use of GoPro 360° cameras allows us to obtain data from an internal and external point of view: placed with a harness on the chest of the visitors, it will enable us to observe the effectiveness

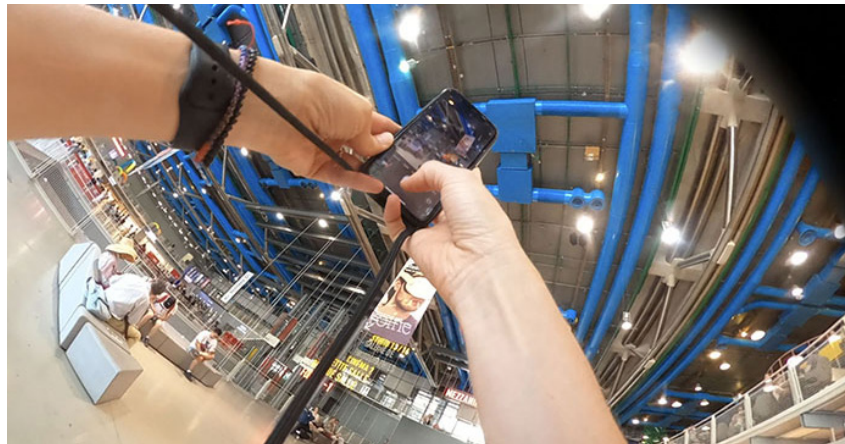


Figure 7. Registration of fieldwork done with the 360° camera at the Pompidou Center Photograph taken by the author.

of the spatial strategies proposing the use of cellphones. Placed on a fixed support, such as a tripod, the camera allows us to observe the different practices involving using cell phones occurring in parallel in the analyzed spaces.

Our methodological approach and research objectives have strong commonalities with what Hillman and Weilenmann (2015) have defined as *digital ethnography*. Their approach aims to incorporate the study of social media activities into the study of visiting practices in cultural institutions. They are interested in examining how the production and consumption of social media in museums are intertwined. This approach has allowed them to answer several questions from their empirical studies: To what extent is there a connection between the *online narrative* and the physical trajectory of a visit to a cultural institution? How does the orientation towards an online audience affect visitors' trajectories in a designed exhibition space? (Hillman and Weilenmann 2015).

The researchers have coined the concept of *social media trajectories* to define the relationship between online activities and physical movements. This concept emerges from studying physical behaviors (audiovisual records) and creating a heat map of activity on Instagram during museum visits. The authors also use in-depth interviews conducted after the cultural visit. Their studies have shown how visitors are oriented towards their social media presence while attending to physical space during a visit and how the trajectory forms editing and sharing processes through space.

These research techniques can contribute to unraveling controversies about the use of cell phones in museums. In addition, they can provide some tools for conducting digital reception studies that bring new insights to analyzing the social network profiles of visitors and museums. The incorporation of this dimension to the study of the museum visit would allow us to corroborate hypotheses on the reception of specific enunciative strategies applied by the museum today and to understand the new contracts or agreements proposed to its public.

Conclusion: Contracts and agreements

Forty years after Eliseo Verón's proposal, the notion of reading contracts remains productive. Our interest in studying *visiting contracts* following Verón's methodological propositions lies in the social implications that it mobilizes. The *visiting contract* is about the construction, maintenance, and evolution of a bond over time, which implies not only consumption habits but also trust and belief. In the words of Verón:

I am faithful to the media in which I have placed my trust, in which I believe. "In social relations, says Michael de Certeau, "the question of believing is the question of time" (1981). This is related to the problem, crucial in democracy, of the management of social representations (Pizzorno 1985). And here we are at the heart of what happens in reception. (Verón 2005: 223)

The study of the *visiting contract* is more significant today when museums seek to be more inclusive concerning both the new technological practices and the multicultural nature of their audiences. As mentioned, the images of visitors that historically circulated in the West, from the representations of privileged visitors in the amateur cabinet to the photographs posted on Instagram, have shaped, and continue to shape, our social representations of museums and exhibition spaces. Most importantly, they shape our representations of *model visitors* and *good visiting practices* that, even today, involve social inclusion and exclusion issues.

We must add the multimedia and multispatial dimensions (which involve different temporal dimensions) to study visitors' bonds with institutions since these dimensions confront us with new modes of *circulation* of the museum experience. Therefore, adding nuances to the notion of contract, for example, proposing the concept of a *visiting agreement*, could highlight how institutions can demarcate what is part of the museum experience and what is not, in physical and virtual terms as well as in technological and social terms.

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