The researcher-curator:
What poietic experience?

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ABSTRACT

We aim to analyze the act of curation as a thought process and, even more so, as a tool for reflection for the (humanities and social sciences) researcher who engages in it: how can exhibiting one's research foster scientific discovery? What aspects of the process encourage thought experiments? The hybridization of theoretical and methodological tools from museography, semiotics, and information and communication sciences enables us to answer these questions by making the researcher's poietic process visible. Paradigmatic hybridization leads us to study the curatorial process by combining its three dimensions: technical, social, and semio-communicational. In other words, the exhibition is sometimes considered as an object (an artefact), sometimes as a practice (among the exhibitors), and sometimes as a process (of circulating meaning), enabling researchers to reflect on their poietic process. The originality here lies in the correspondence between the conception and the reception, with the researchers being both curators and observers of their practice. This practice essentially involves examining the epistemic status of the collected materials by using technical museographic tools (frames, display cases, labels, spaces, etc.), encouraging new ideas and associations by manipulating polysemic objects, and renewing the research object by alternating the different constraints inherent in the multimodal format (text, audio, image, etc.). Finally, we propose an approach based on the formulation of instructional exercises for other researchers who would like to experiment with the scientific poietics of exhibition design.

1. Context: the researcher-curator in the humanities and social sciences

The exhibition has already been widely discussed in the field of art, where curation is defined as a work of art and intellectual labor (Derieux 2007), the appropriation of museographic norms in contemporary creations has been analyzed (Putnam 2002; Pezzini 2011), and the way the exhibition institutionalizes the artistic object has been examined (Glicenstein 2009). In this field, "research on the exhibition, the exhibition of research and the exhibition as research" have already been discussed, as the editors of issue 10 of the journal *Proteus*, devoted to curation as a form of art research, point out (Athanassopoulos and Boutan 2016). Julie Bawin points out that, unlike professional curators and scenographers, artist curatorship corresponds to a different way of conceiving a work of art in its entirety:

> The question of curation arises for the artist in many different ways, and takes the form of processes that sometimes involve the 'classic' practices of self-representation (the artist exhibiting alone or in a group), and sometimes experiments designed to cast a personal and original eye on art or, more broadly, on society [...]. Asking this question presupposes the identification of a category in its own right, a curatorial genre with its own codes, forms and means, and in *extenso* a 'style,' all the more recognizable in that an exhibition, when organized by an artist, most often appears to be the materialization of an aesthetic intention. (Bawin 2017: 54, 55)

This idea of the entirety of the work in the exhibition design and production process, which we find in the artist's curation, led us to wonder about a possible parallel with what we might define as the 'researcher's curation.' How is the practice of a researcher-curator similar to that of an artist-curator? In what ways does curation represent another way for researchers to think holistically and heuristically about their practice in the human and social sciences? What are the issues involved, and what positions would be adopted?

In human and social sciences, exhibitions are often seen as a means of publicizing research results outside the academic field. The ways in which curating an exhibition impacts the production of knowledge are rarely discussed or even understood, even though the practice is not uncommon:[1] researchers in human and social sciences regularly sit on scientific committees for exhibitions, curate exhibitions,

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[1] The idea of the exhibition as a tool for popularizing science for a non-specialist audience is particularly apparent in national and international project planning, in the 'promotion' or 'dissemination' sections of proposal forms.

and study exhibitions. Starting from the premise that the production of knowledge is conditioned equally by the places, practices, and objects used by researchers (Bert and Lamy 2021) and that researchers employ a range of observation, collection, analysis, and writing tools that help them think – the famous intellectual technologies (Waquet 2015) – there is every reason to believe that exhibition curation is also heuristic in the field of human and social sciences. The contributions to *Exhibitions as Research: Experimental Methods in Museums*, edited by Peter Bjerregaard,[2] are instructive for understanding how an exhibition can produce a "research surplus" insofar as it is "a way of exploring the world around us rather than mirroring it" (2020: 1). Specifically, Bjerregaard notes three aspects of curatorial work: "the interdisciplinary collaboration involved in all exhibitions, the concrete physical engagement with objects and space, and the direct relationship with and access to a lay audience" (2020: 3).

We wish to contribute to this literature by focusing on the poietic experience of the researcher-curator, and adopting a semio-communicational approach. Recognizing the wide variety of exhibitions and research in human and social sciences (this variety makes it difficult to generalize), we have chosen a broad definition of the term exhibition. According to Jean Davallon, the exhibition is understood as a media technology "that shows 'things' and always indicates how to look at them" (1999: 7): "in its broadest sense, then, the exhibition can be defined as a device resulting from the arrangement of things in a space with the (constitutive) intention of making them accessible to social subjects" (1999: 11).[3]

Once we have clarified what we mean by the researcher-curator's poietic, our demonstration will be broken down in the same way as the definition of exhibition mentioned above, that is, into three points: we will show how the researcher-curator's poietic experience lies in the way of finding, selecting and / or producing things to exhibit, in the way of thinking about (or being surprised by) a spatial arrangement, and in the way of making the whole accessible and intelligible. Each of these three stages in exhibition design corresponds to one of the three dimensions of the communication approach, namely: 1) the exhibition as a device (thing or set of things); 2) the exhibition as a social and cultural fact (of which the arrangement is merely the spatio-temporal

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[2] As Bjerregaard points out, "This volume is based in a collaborative project between the six Norwegian university museums, entitled "Exhibitions as a knowledge generating activity," which will be referred to by its colloquial name, "The Colonization Project" (2020: xii).

[3] Since the first symposium on text in exhibitions, organized by Christian Carrier in Lyon in 1982, the exhibition has become an object of research in its own right, and no longer a field for disciplinary experimentation. "Approaching the exhibition as a specific medium meant thinking of it as a device for producing meaning for an audience" (Davallon and Flon 2013: 21). The 1999 definition, though somewhat dated (and refined by its author throughout the book), remains valuable for its broad applicability. As any definition is inherently a reflection of the author's perspective and priorities, we will revisit it at the conclusion of this article.

materialization); 3) the exhibition as a heuristic operator, generating meaning for both the curator and the audience. We believe that these three stages nourish the physical and emotional experience of the curator-researcher in a progressive and sometimes unexpected way, giving rise to new intellectual discoveries.

To reinforce our argument, this will sometimes be contrasted with another poietic experience, that of academic writing, the archetypal form of which today is the scholarly article. Our intention is not to advocate the exhibition's superiority over the article but to emphasize the complementary nature of the two intellectual experiences. Each framework has its constraints, and alternating between them can stimulate the imagination and encourage serendipitous scientific discovery. We believe that the current injunction to 'publish or perish,' with all that it entails, tends to lock researchers into the single mode of writing a scientific article, the exclusivity (standardization) of which runs the risk of confining them and stifling the imagination. The 'hyper-prose' engendered by this injunction should at least be counterbalanced by 'hyper-poetry,' as suggested by Edgar Morin, who reminds us that there is no prose without poetry and vice versa (1999: 41).

2. Curation and the researcher's poietic journey

In agreement with Bawin, we have already stated that an exhibition (mainly, but not only, by an artist) is the materialization of an aesthetic intention. Our approach to the aesthetic intention of the researcher-curator (as research/experience of the tangible) allows us to address this not to analyze practices with an aesthetic objective but rather to grasp the process of constructing meaning that originates in these practices: meaning is situated in the interstices between tangible experience and thought; it therefore never pre-exists the event that produces it and is continually renewed (Deleuze 1969). In other words, to paraphrase Paul Valéry, what interests us more is the action of making rather than the thing made: intellectual work exists only in actuality.

> Outside this actuality, what remains is merely an object that bears no particular relation to the mind. Take the statue you admire to a people sufficiently different from our own, and it will be no more than an insignificant stone. A Parthenon is no more than a small marble quarry. And when a poet's text is used as a compendium of grammatical difficulties or examples, it immediately ceases to be an intellectual work since the use to which it is put is entirely foreign to the circumstances of its creation, and it is also denied the perceived value that gives it meaning. (Valéry 1937: 313)

We, therefore, propose to retrace the interpretive journey of curation taken by the researcher-curator (the generative path of creativity) based on his or her own tangible experience, according to the three stages of the museographic process. This experiential journey connects the two elements of the relationship, the designer / curator and the work (the exhibition), in the act of making.

The Greek word for work (*ergon*) means both the thing made and the act of making. This means that the exhibition is not just a 'work' (the outcome of an action) but an 'intellectual work,' that is, 'creation in act,' *création en acte* (poïesis, from the Greek poïen = to make). According to Aristotle, poïesis is transitive in the sense that it has value (as a knowledge generator) only through the work produced (or in the process of being produced), which is external to the producer; in contrast, praxis (a teleological act in the literal sense), has an intrinsic value, since it is an action that has no end other than itself.

In one sense, then, the exhibition becomes the only means of making the work of the researcher-curator comprehensible to others. In another sense, the work is defined by its formal rules, its ontologies, its singularities, and even its similarities, which poietics and semiotics try to identify. All these visible and measurable elements refer, at the same time, to other invisible elements contained within the work: the intentions, desires, and dreams of its creator / producer, his or her discoveries, and so on. Poietics makes it possible to identify them: "Poietics seeks to know the ideal or imaginary seeds of initiative, the stages of establishment and the modalities of structuring, as they are imprinted (displayed or concealed) in the forms of the structure" (Budor 1994: 9). It, therefore, sets out to study the tangible or even the *absentia*, the invisible network that is made visible either by the materiality of the work (the exhibition) created by the curator, with which an audience enters into a relationship, or by the system of relationships induced between subjects.

In addition, we should pay particular attention to the involvement of the senses, sensation, and perception in meaning construction.[4] Several studies on semantic-sensory experience and embodied cognition have already explored how information is acquired through various sensory, sensorimotor, and emotional modalities, as well as the process of perception leading to meaning (Barsalou 2020; Roppola 2012; Bordron 2010).

In this vein, we postulate that in the curator's practice, the various senses (touch, smell, taste, hearing, sight), kinaesthesia, motricity, and sensations play a part in the embodied action, bringing out the 'self' and the 'world for itself' of the researcher-curator (Varela et al. 1993). In this way, the modes of sensing influence the poietic

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[4] For a more in-depth look at this subject, we refer the reader to the volume "Modes du sensible et syntaxe figurative" of the journal *Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques* 61-62-63 / 1999.

approach of the researcher-curator, that is, the materialization of his or her aesthetic and reflexive intention during the process of exhibition design and production. "The semiotic development of the tangible begins just after the initial contact, as an overture into inference, as a suspension of automatism, as an imperfection in the contact itself, as a gap, finally, between what was intended and what is grasped" (Fontanille 1999: 54). Wouldn't this opportunity for inference be a real discovery?

3. The three stages in the researcher-curator poietic

We analyze in more detail the three stages in the researcher-curator poietic, which coincide both with the different phases of the museographic process and with the three dimensions of the communication approach: 1) Finding-selecting-producing things, the exhibition as a device; 2) Thinking about the arrangement, the exhibition as a spatio-temporal manifestation of the social and cultural fact; 3) Making the whole thing accessible/intelligible, the exhibition as a heuristic operator. It should be pointed out, however, that these different phrases do not follow a linear, deterministic logic, since the process may at any moment present opportunities for inference, that is, other possibilities that are not the logical and unequivocal consequence of a prior stage.

3.1. Finding, selecting and producing things: the exhibition as a device

The exhibition, this device, this artefact, is first and foremost an object or a set of objects, of things chosen and arranged by the curator in the service of a project. The first stage of curation, then, is to select the subject (the why) and the place (if it has not already been decided) of the exhibition; and to construct this subject, the curator must assemble the elements that feed it, that illustrate it, that evoke it, and tell its story. The inflationary use of the term curation[5] (particularly as 'content curation') tends to equate curation with the simple selection of a predetermined set. But before making the selection, we need to look for what will make up the whole, which is not just a juxtaposition of things. These things interact with each other and with things outside themselves, weaving together a discourse belonging to the curator: The semiotic approach is based on the premise that the principles governing the organization of discourse are objects of knowledge in their own right and that we can recognize in them regularities that can fuel a scientific project of their own. In the same way, the objects found and selected for exhibition are objects of knowledge in their own right, whose shared logic will feed into the very subject of the exhibition without prefiguring it entirely.

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[5] See in particular the introduction by (Persohn 2021: 20).

An idea, to whatever degree precise or vague, always exists at the start of an exhibition. If the discourse comes first (in the submitted project, in the intention), the curator is quickly led to work with objects (understood in the broadest sense) and wonder what can be shown to say what the curator wants to say. Still, there are gaps between the initial project and the final one, and between the virtual project and the result, as Golsenne points out: "When you make an exhibition, you can't have all the works you'd dream of, unlike when you write a book, which is a kind of virtual exhibition: such and such a work is too expensive to move, or too fragile, such and such a work is being restored, or the museum doesn't want to lend it" (2016: 54). More generally, by depending on objects, the gap widens throughout the project between what we thought we would do and know, and what will be done and discovered.

We can distinguish two types of discoveries linked to objects for the researcher-curator. First is the discovery of a new object to add to our corpus, a new piece of data that constitutes a new example or counter-example. As Anne Reverseau points out, we expand our corpus by suggesting new cases, suggestions made by colleagues for example (2023). The search for an object potentially leads to chance discoveries: serendipity comes into play when browsing a collection database or searching through the reserves of a museum (which is reminiscent of 'the law of the good neighbor' in the organization of libraries used by researchers). Second, we can also look for an object, not to exemplify our point, but to illustrate it metaphorically. In this case, we have an idea of the object in question and we think we know what to look for, but we encounter a different object that makes us think differently, shifts our view slightly or substantially. We then understand what we were looking for only when we see it and feel like we have found the right way to say things. However, finding the right way to say something implies having simultaneously found something new, since to say something differently is also to think something different.

Moreover, scientific discovery can also be made not from discovered objects but from objects already there (and therefore rediscovered). The researcher-curator who exhibits his or her research can use materials that have never found their place in academic writing: objects collected for their aesthetic or emotional value, souvenirs from the field, rough notes, etc. Since a priori everything can be exhibited (although not everything is easily exhibited), researcher-curators can work with other materials, such as the 'picturesque' surrounding them or everyday materials.[6] However, by using and

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[6] We refer here to the analysis of writers' walls of images by (Reverseau et al. 2023): writer, and researcher in our opinion, "is indeed 'wrapped in the picturesque' in the sense used by Mac Orlan of the power of images, that is, elements that surprise, intrigue, and interest them" (Reverseau et al. 2023: 14). The authors also refer to the work of Michel de Certeau, in *L'invention du quotidien* (1990), in which he emphasizes "the active appropriation of everyday materials each time in unique conditions, whether or not individuals exercise formal artistic or creative professions" (Reverseau et al. 2023: 17).

manipulating other materials, the synthesis produced (the results obtained) is likely to be of a different nature too. Exhibitions tied to research projects often showcase the scientific process, giving visitors a behind-the-scenes look at research and presenting science being produced. From the visitors' perspective, these presentations help convey that research is situated and contextual, fostering critical thinking about knowledge production. For the researcher-curator, however, they also raise specific questions: From what perspective am I speaking? What do I choose to show or omit, and why? How were these data produced? In other words, acting out oneself (both as a professional and as an individual) places the researcher in a reflexive position, prompting them to examine their methods and personal subjectivity. This reflexivity, in turn, is itself heuristic: as Pierre Bourdieu (2003) explains in his concept of 'participant objectivation,' critical reflexivity is essential for producing more rigorous scientific knowledge that is mindful of the researcher's sociocultural biases (a reflexivity that does not always have its place in academic writings).

Searching for objects is carried out simultaneously with selecting them and, therefore, creating a whole: the famous 'list of works' of museums or, more generically, the list of exhibits. If the list is an enumeration, it is also an association. Thus, associative thinking can be a source of discovery. Not only did I find A, B, and C, but I also found AB or ABC or AC and so on. Objects embody ideas, so they also associate and assemble them together.[7] The highly polysemous nature of some exhibits allows many museums to renew their discourse and build new narratives from unchanged collections (Bishop 2013): for the researcher, it is rearrangements that offer these possibilities, and that "simply provoke new intelligibilities," as the historian-commissioner Philippe Artières has analyzed (2021: 198). This evokes the *Atlas Mnémosyne* of Aby Warburg (1921-29) whose thought by montage (and its heuristic potential) has been widely commented on and analyzed. As Georges Didi-Huberman writes:

> The inexhaustible, in the *Atlas Mnémosyne*, is a procedure capable of setting new 'spaces of thought' in motion. (Didi-Huberman 2011: 281, own translation)

It should be added that, unlike the *Atlas Mnémosyne*, exhibitions do not require manipulating representations of objects (their photographs) but of the objects themselves. Just as the painting of a pipe is not the pipe itself,[8] the photograph of an object

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[7] The exhibition allows a certain freedom of association because it is not a unifying medium: everything can be mixed together. Unlike films or books, which retain "a homogeneity in the technical medium" (Davallon, 1999: 13), the exhibition is characterized by a heterogeneity in its components.

[8] In reference to Magritte's work, *La Trahison des images*, 1928-29.

is something other than the object. The objects of the exhibition have a materiality that is unique to them, and a size that is also important. The object takes up more or less space, whereas the relative scales are erased in the photographic reproduction adjusted for the paper edition or the computer screen. Which brings us now to what the arrangement of these things in a three-dimensional space produces.

3.2. The exhibition arrangement: spatialization and shaping of social and cultural fact

While an exhibition consists in manipulating concrete objects, it is also realized in a space that is itself concrete. The characteristics of this space can be interesting "architectural opportunities," to use the words of Arnaud Sompairac (2016: 31), not only to make it "a particular scenographic event" in which the challenge is "to find the 'right' dramaturgy," but also to think of a greater meaning, which is specific to the semiotics of the space.[9] As Jean Davallon explains, "the organization of space as a whole has become the materialization of a mental construction," particularly since the shift he identifies "from the use of space as a writing surface to writing through space" (Davallon 2011: 39). According to Manar Hammad, "the interpretation of material configurations does not reveal fixed functions but rather the inscription of modal configurations (the distribution of modalities in space) that condition potential actions. In other words, the content embedded in spatial configurations is not functional but meta-functional, modal" (Hammad 2022: 22). So, if we consider this spatialization of the exhibition as a discourse 'in act,' capable of continuously transforming situations, we can say that the field of this discourse is simultaneously a field for presentation, a positional field (of things exhibited), and an intermediary field a catalyst for new significations, for the audience who passes through it.

First, to better understand the first two fields (presentation and position), we can draw a parallel with cabinets of curiosities, those primarily private spaces where scholars arranged their collections and isolated themselves to reflect. This comparison can be fruitful because it adds a third dimension to the researcher-curator's reflection. Extending beyond the book's space and the page, the extra dimensions allow us to experiment with opposing polarities: height-depth, front-back, inside-out, side-by-side or facing each other. Symmetry, for example, to use Mauriès' words, "is a means of dissecting, distributing and accentuating secret parallels; it is the principle that offers, a priori, a feeling of understanding" (2011: 34).

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The representations of these cabinets that survive through engravings or paintings, which always show spaces crammed full to every corner, must not make us forget that the void is equally important and can be exploited when recognized. As Philippe Artière points out, writing by installation (*écriture par accrochage*) also allows us to play with empty spaces and reveal gaps where academic writing conventions and publishing standards do not allow it.[10] We agree that what does not exist is as important as what does exist or that what cannot be shown because it is absent matters as much as what is present.

Although both pages and walls are planes, signs may be inscribed differently on them: in western culture, the linearity of the academic text, sometimes punctuated by figures, is read from left to right and top to bottom. The exhibition wall space is a more open medium. Significantly, since the exhibition is in a space, the verticality of the picture rail can be extended into the horizontal plane. The order of reading is prioritised differently: the vertical, parallel to the body, is taken before the horizontal, which requires a bending, a coming together. Besides, symbols can ask to be discovered, to be activated, in different ways (i.e., through interactivity in the exhibition). And while the academic page remains frozen in portrait mode, the exhibition space is more malleable: we can change a direction of movement, add partitions, design constrictions. It can be convoluted, punctuated by staircases, niches, columns, openings to the outside world or, in contrast, darkened areas. These topographical constraints can also be "enabling"[11] insofar as they offer an additional meaning (or at least encourage us to reflect) because they help to shape the whole.

The spatialization is accompanied by a forming of the exhibits, which for the researcher-curator consists of using the languages of the exhibition, which have become almost conventional over decades (and which we all absorb to different degrees during our visits to exhibitions): labels, frames, display cases, plinths, lighting, etc. They also produce meaning. As Jean Davallon explains: "the effects of meaning are produced not only by reading texts, or recognizing objects, but also by 'perceiving' the layout, decoration and design; in short, 'perceiving' the formal qualities (aspects) of the presentation itself" (1999: 71). Just as contemporary artists adopt these codes (Putnam 2002), researcher-curators are also led to use them and in doing so, to reflect on the epistemological status they give to things, to the data collected, and to the research materials. The configuration of the spatial arrangement

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[10] The author specifies: "Social science publishing does not allow us to transpose the exhibition into the book form. It is difficult today in the middle of a social sciences book to leave three pages blank. Discourses must be hierarchized according to codes; the discontinuous, it is said, does not immediately have its place" (Artière 2021: 199).
[11] Manning and Massumi speak of the "enabling constraint": "an enabling constraint is positive in its dynamic effect, even if it can be limiting in its form/strength as such" (2018: 42). The reader is also referred to the literature on constraints, for example the work of the Oulipo group.

of material objects conveys not only the modalities of movement of audiences present at a given moment, for example, in relation to walls that block passage between two contiguous spaces (Hammad 2022), but also the deictic modes of enunciation of the researcher-curator himself and/or the subsequent interpretation by other audiences at other times.

By playing with these museographic techniques, curation appears as a means of 'putting knowledge in order.' This formulation is borrowed from the anthropologist Jack Goody, who showed how the ordering of knowledge is characteristic of writing in graphic form. He identified techniques specific to graphic knowledge, such as the list and table (composed of rows and columns) that are not "simple modalities of presenting or transposing speech" but rather "a means of putting knowledge in order," encouraging the abstraction, generalization, and formalization characteristic of science (Goody 1979: 109). If we follow and paraphrase this reasoning to analyze the heuristic functioning of expographic writing (exhibition writing), we consider that it is based on techniques specific to expographic knowledge, such as spatialization, showcasing and framing, which are not simple presentation modalities, but means of putting knowledge to encourage, in this case, the identification of a status given to things, exhibits, that is also characteristic of the scientific approach. Using expographic writing would, therefore, be an opportunity for the social science researcher to question the status of what is collected since indicating how to look at a thing requires knowing or having decided beforehand what that thing is.

We also mentioned a third field in the arrangement of the discourse 'in act': the intermediary field, in the sense that the space traversed (or avoided) contributes, through the walked experience (both for the researcher-curator and the public), to the effects of the meaning of the exhibits and participates in the communication process. The architectural space of the exhibition is, therefore, not only an envelope (in the sense of Fontanille, 1996) in which the expographic work will take place; the space itself constitutes a full-fledged communication mechanism that is part of the expographic work of the researcher-curator. At the same time, exhibitions and their spatial arrangement embody both a means of disseminating a specific culture and know-how and a synthesis of what makes a given society cohesive, often based on assumptions that confront it with other societies or cultures and times. Curation refers, therefore, to the total social fact, in Marcel Mauss's sense (2001); in a metonymic way, the underlying phenomena of the explicit discourse are evoked: historical, economic, religious, aesthetic, ethical, legal, etc. In the next section, we will try to understand how the objects exhibited and their arrangement are made accessible and intelligible to the audience.

3.3. **Making the whole accessible: the exhibition as a heuristic operator**

Referring to the above-mentioned definition of exhibition, we accept that its objective is to make a set of things accessible in a space (physically and intellectually), that is, to produce meaning and encourage exhibition visitors to make inferences. To do this, a varied range of more or less conspicuous 'intermediaries' is commonly developed. In museology, the benefits of these intermediaries have often been analyzed from the point of view of the public: the care taken to make texts understandable, the presentation of objects, graphic design, and lighting to produce a specific modality of receiving the exhibition (and sometimes to ensure a 'good' interpretation). What we are interested in here is to explore the viewpoint of the designer of the exhibition (the researcher-curator working on this accessibility) rather than the audience it is intended for, although the audience is present in the imagination of the researcher-curator who plans their visit (as in the case of Umberto Eco's model reader).

Concretely, this work on accessibility can begin at the beginning of the exhibition project, which requires, as Anne Reverseau points out, a distance from the academic research: we do not start an exhibition with a "state of the art," as in a scholarly article. To problematize one's subject, one can start from the received ideas or false assumptions about the research object. Similarly, an exhibition's interest in an article's results (often historiographical, methodological, or disciplinary impact on peers) may lie elsewhere. Where this interest lies raises questions, and the answers can be instructive. Thus, with the exhibition (as with other types of scientific intermediary), "the adaptation of research discourse is less strictly a simplification than a dramatization of this or that case" (2023).

Sometimes, making one's research accessible is like identifying other reasons for being. What are the motivations of visitors? What interest should be emphasized and focussed on? This work of research into motivations is helpful for the researcher in human and social sciences because it requires them to formulate an explanation meaningful to a collective, which no longer necessarily follows an academic logic (described by Anne Reverseau) but a social and cultural logic. Curating an exhibition also means submitting to validation not by one's peers but *others* – by other communities. As Thomas Golsenne said about collective curation: "It is making explicit what is at the heart of scientific research, but which is covered by the ideology of objectivity: that research is done and validated by humans who are thinking, wishing, political, economic, sensitive subjects, like everyone else" (Golsenne 2016: 54).

Making the curator's reflection accessible involves writing text: not a single linear text, coherent in its unity, but a set of texts expressed on several levels and conveyed in different communication spaces. The reflection is fragmented in the texts for the rooms, the labels, visitor guide booklets, information on the institution's website, the presentation flyer, and so on. To write these requires rewriting, reformulation, transformation, and redundancy. The variety of formats complicates the task.

The temptation to use concepts to make up for the limited number of signs (words) allowed must be resisted: in exhibition texts, we do not condense our reflections; we sort them and make them explicit. Choices must be made, and writing requires us to ask ourselves what we mean. Writing for a non-specialist audience requires time and is never simple. Precisely because it is complex, it is a source of discovery, as formulated by Jean-Claude Ameisen:

> We think we know what we will write, but the writing reveals dimensions we were unaware of before we started writing. Writing is not giving back what we already think we know or understand. It is to go into the unknown in an adventure to meet what was perhaps already confusingly present in itself but which will take shape only at the time of writing. Writing science is not about asking yourself: 'What will the reader understand from what I would like to convey?' but: 'In trying to transmit, to translate, what will I discover again, compared to what I was used to?' [...] As soon as we try to formulate things differently, to be understood by non-specialists, as soon as we really wonder about the meaning of what we think we know, we realize that some cause and effect links that seemed obvious to us, some interpretations that we thought were self-evident no longer work so well. [...] we see contradictions, paradoxes, questions arise where we thought we had answers... (Ameisen 2010: 31-32, own translation).

Furthermore, while it is generally accepted that exhibitions are aimed at non-specialist visitors – aligned with the idea of a 'general public' medium – it remains true that the researcher-curator is mindful of their peers' perspectives, as they too may be potential visitors. This dual expectation makes the writing of exhibition texts, and more broadly, the staging of research, all the more demanding for the researcher-curator.

Thus, expographic work becomes a heuristic operator for the researcher-curator throughout this approach; it allows the researcher to access his or her own poietic by making the 'self' and the 'world for itself' emerge (in the sense of Varela, 1993). The world for itself corresponds to the universe of the researcher-curator, who, through sensorimotor interactions informed by memory and anticipation, produces actions / sensations that integrate the external world into his or her universe. Thus, in line with work on neo-connectionist cognitivism (Laks 1998), we consider that the reflexivity of researcher-curators on their practice, as well as the meaning they attribute to it, 'emerge' during the interactive process in actuality with the place and objects of the exhibition that they have progressively put in order. There is, therefore, a gradual acquisition of knowledge and of the meaning of one's approach / research, rather like the process of writing a text.

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4. An overture into informal curatorial practices?

We want to conclude these reflections on the researcher-curator poietic with some possible paths for experimentation, addressed to other researchers. Feedback from these experiments could enable our reflections 'in actuality' to reach a degree of completion that has not yet been achieved at this stage.

In view of the heuristic approach inherent in exhibition design, curation can thus be seen by the researcher as a methodological tool, a form of trial-and-error, "in the trivial sense of the word [trial] – let's try to see if it works or if it fails, if it makes our vision clearer or if it obfuscates it, and then let's try again either way" (Didi-Huberman 2011: 279), that can be used at different stages of a research project (while in progress and not just once it has been completed) to sketch out ideas or create "intermediate versions" (*écrits intermédiaires*) that help us think (Achard 1994).

The concept of 'the exhibition as essay' was developed by Mattias Bäckström (2023) to describe the exhibition as a research tool capable of producing potential knowledge.[12] He characterizes the exhibition as an essay: "as a way of conducting collaborative research, which includes inter-knowledge and inter-experience processes. This kind of essayistic collaboration considers its form, its content and its participating interpreters, with their organisation of the research work, as well as the specific characteristics of the exhibition as spatial and temporal medium" (*ibid.* 158). His 'essayistic approach' seems particularly fruitful when the essay is understood in a dual sense: as a means of testing before validation (in a sense akin to experimentation) and as a literary style. This second dimension aligns with literature on researchers' tools, highlighting how scientific culture relies on writing. Thus, the 'expographic essay' – if we may use this term to emphasize its graphic nature – shares the same benefits as the literary essay, previously discussed, such as in anthropology by Georges Balandier:

> It allows for greater freedom, loosening the constraints imposed by scholarly texts that bind the reader through demonstrative closure. It provides a space for intuitions and interpretations to be 'tried out' (because they are open to critique). It tolerates 'poaching,' or deviations, within the realms of other disciplines. It can be read as a text of exploration and experimentation. It reveals the importance of words and the art of writing in communicating knowledge beyond the professional circle. (Balandier 1994: 30, own translation)

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[12] Although this 2023 text synthesizes his 2016 book, titled Att bygga innehåll med utställningar: *Utställningsproduktion som forskningsprocess* (To Build Content with Exhibitions: Exhibition Production as Research Process), he specifies that his understanding of an exhibition as an essay "is still a work in progress" (*ibid.*157).

But how can our readers (likely other academics) use this tool? This is one of the ultimate questions we are asking ourselves as part of the "Exhibition as Research Factory" project,[13] particularly in the context of the practical workshops for other researchers that we are about to set up: how can we help our colleagues to use so-called 'alternative' writing tools (as opposed to academic writing) to produce a research surplus? We have no intention of formalizing a methodological protocol that would prevent us from letting go of our grip on the objects, the intermediaries to be designed, and the space. We are simply trying to formulate possible avenues of experimentation to encourage "informal exploratory practices" (Helen Kara 2020: 43-44) without any desire or obligation to make them public.

In practical terms, we suggest that researchers choose one of their articles that they would like to exhibit, already published in a journal. Once they have chosen the article and are comfortably seated at their desk or on a café terrace, they should take hold of the plan below, printed out in advance for jotting on (Figure 1). The plan depicts a fictitious space of around 100m^2, furnished but empty of content: frames, pedestals, a glass table, a projection area, a life-size niche, a sound shower, and three text panels waiting to receive objects and ideas. In the spaces reserved for objects, the researcher thinks about what he or she could display, though it is always possible to change these. For example, not all the containers have to be occupied: a display case can be left empty to emphasize an unanswered question or missing data; a large
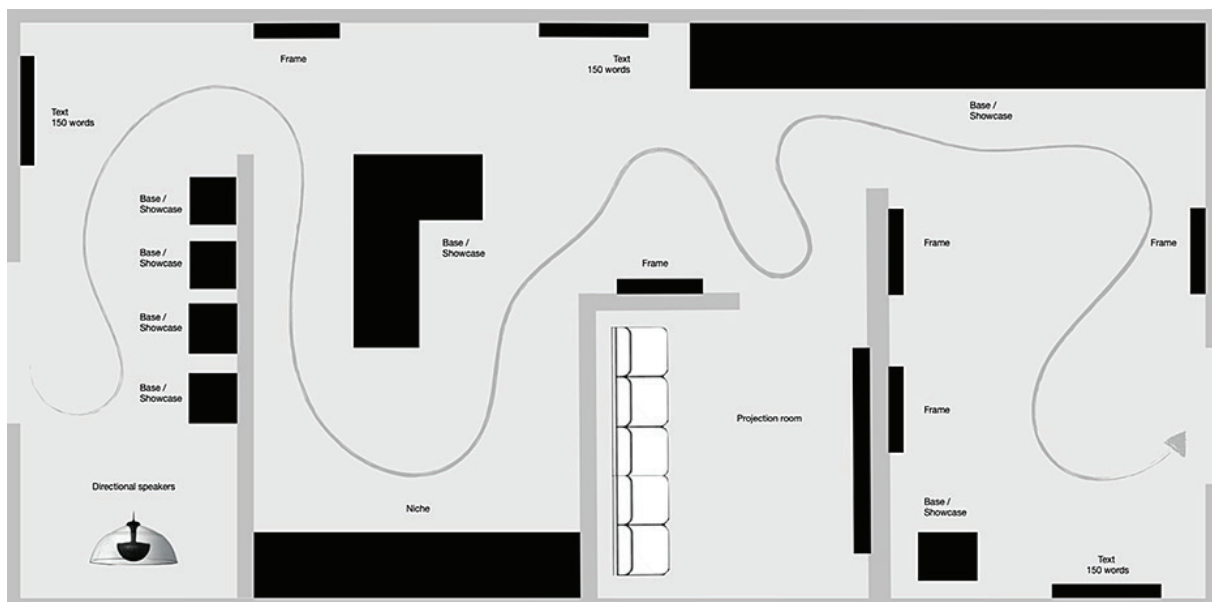

Figure 1. Fictitious exhibition plan for a constrained curation

niche can be crammed full or used to dramatize a single object; the direction of the path through the exhibition can be reversed; the furniture can be adapted (display case covers can be removed, pedestals turned over to serve as seats). The sound shower can broadcast an interview, an audio archive, musical ambience or sound effects, while the projection space can show a film, a reading of a text transcribed onto the screen, a slide show or a still shot. At the same time as selecting the objects and arranging them, the researcher begins to write texts for the three rooms and the labels for each object, explaining their presence and interest according to the three modalities described above (presential, positional, intermediary). Another exercise, probably less time-consuming, could be to use the article as the basis for a poster to advertise a fictitious exhibition: formulate an exhibition title, possibly accompanied by a subtitle, choose an image or create a visual, and at the bottom of the page affix the logos of the partners, in particular that of the host venue (which is essential for trying to identify the target audience). Then test the poster with colleagues, at the end of a seminar for example, or with friends and family: ask them what they expect to see, understand, and possibly do when they visit the exhibition. Throughout this exploration, the researcher will remain attentive to his or her own poietics: what does it lead me to do and think? Or, what does it lead us to do and think, if the article to be exhibited is co-written (collective experimentation can be an opportunity to explore in greater depth what each person understands by a concept, or by any other implicit meaning). In short, the next step is to think about exercises based on the notion of productive constraints and designed to enable those involved to "listen to the medium"[14] – in this case, the exhibition – and explore its potential, whether or not the researcher considers his or her research to be expogenic.

Conclusion

The relationship between exhibitions and science has long been studied from various, often overlapping, perspectives. Some research has focused on the representation of science within exhibitions – initially in natural history museums – identifying the narratives and ideologies embedded in the staging of scientific knowledge (e.g., Macdonald 1998). Other studies have concentrated on how diverse audiences engage with scientific exhibitions (notably Edelman and Praët 2001), examining the effectiveness of displays, audience interactions, and broader participation in scientific processes. Still, other works, particularly in art, have explored experimentation in exhibitions (as installations), questioning the implications for institutions, artworks, and artists (Staniszewski 1998; Greenberg *et al*. 1996).

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[14] Expression used by Yves Citton in the afterword to Manning et Massumi (2018: 118).

The rise of research-creation and experimentation in the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Ingold 2013), following certain epistemological turns – the spatial, practical, and material turns starting in the 1960s (Daston and Galison 2001; Jacob 2007, 2011) – has inspired new investigations. More recently, studies have examined how exhibitions impact research (Macdonald and Basu 2007; Lehmann-Brauns *et al.* 2010; Bjerregaard 2020), particularly research conducted within museums through their collections, though sometimes beyond these contexts. This contribution aims to enrich ongoing discussions about the heuristic potential of exhibition design for researchers. Exhibitions are no longer mere showcases for results; they are becoming active tools in the research process. Here, we hope to have demonstrated that exhibitions are a powerful means of testing and refining interpretation. For this reason, we find it appropriate to conclude this article by offering a definition that reflects a semiotic approach to the tool (semantic, syntactic, pragmatic).

> **Exhibition:** A heuristic tool for the researcher-curator, whose use fosters the study of the meaning of research materials discovered or rediscovered (objects, archives, artworks, etc.), the study of their relationships within various units of meaning (display cases, wall sections, rooms, etc.), and the study of their interpretation by visitors with diverse communicative competencies, anticipated at different stages of the process. By engaging with the tool, the researcher-curator is placed in a reflexive position, revealing their own poietic process.

Experimenting with this tool is, therefore, a means of producing – not merely transmitting – a scientific statement, as such statements never circulate unchanged (Jeanneret 2008). They are always subject to reformulation and rewriting, and thus creating something new – in this case, knowledge.

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