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Semiotics x Curating

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Cover photo by **Julian Mora** *on Unsplash*

Introduction: Semiotics x curating, or why this now?

BY: **Stéphanie Bertrand** and **Sotirios Bahtsetzis**

The main question that curators must continuously ask themselves and be prepared to answer is: Why this now? In other words, what is the rationale for presenting this content in this context at this time? It is a question of public accountability and cultural significance. Curators, as institutional figures (Groys 2009), are beholden to justify why public resources and attention should be spent on their selected content and how its display contributes, in a meaningful and beneficial way, to shaping collective sense and values. Otherwise put: why should anybody care about this? – which is arguably an increasingly urgent question in today's attention economy. As guest author Isabella Pezzini observes in her text for this issue, curators, by definition, care; but the fact that they care is not nearly enough. Curators must also ensure that what they care about matters to others and the collective – and, let's face it, there are serious limits to their power of persuasion. It follows that the key question at the core of this issue, at least for us curators, is: why examine the intersection of semiotics and curating now?

Before answering this question, however, it is worth clarifying our working understanding of curation because it is a fluid and evolving term that is here being addressed in the context of a semiotic journal. Within the curatorial field, curating is generally defined as an intermediary practice that utilizes acts of selection and arrangement to facilitate interpretation – that is, to support individual and collective meaning-making – and add value. Since the mid-1990s, the practice has gained increasing scholarly attention. It has emerged as an autonomous field of study that examines the rationale,

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mechanisms, and impacts of different multimodal display strategies deployed both in the physical and digital domain, with a particular focus on identity and ideology, tracing their social, political, and cultural implications.

Curatorial studies are closely related to the field of museology (also referred to as museum studies or museum science), which focuses on examining museums' historical development and societal functions. This field also encompasses the practical aspects of museum operations, including exhibition development, collection management, conservation, public programming, and educational initiatives – often categorized under operational museology – while remaining distinct from it. Given that museums, along with their collections and collectors, historically played a central role in reinforcing the dominance of colonial Europe and narratives of cultural superiority, critical museology emerged as a response. Informed in part by anthropological research, critical museology interrogates the fundamental assumptions that underpin museum studies and museum practices, including their historical foundations, architectural forms, exhibition strategies, programming approaches, and the provenance of their collections (Bennett 1995). Additionally, critical museology engages with the economic and political ideologies that shape contemporary museums, positioning them within the broader framework of the cultural and creative industries.

In the same vein, curatorial studies critically examine contemporary and historical exhibitions, display formats within the art world and in broader cultural contexts, the work of individual curators, and the political and theoretical frameworks shaping exhibition production. The increasing impact of technological media on curating has recently expanded the practice's focus to include audience perceptions as well as constructions of reality on both an interpersonal and societal level (Henning 2005). Curatorial studies not only explore the expanded cultural role of curating beyond the creation of exhibitions for public engagement; it also interrogates the concept of the 'curatorial' as a site of value production: that is, curation as a work of art and intellectual labor (Derieux 2007), curation as a form of art research (O'Neill 2012; Borgdorff 2012; Smith 2012), curation as a heuristic dispositive in the human and social sciences (Bjerregaard 2020), curatorial practice as pedagogy (O'Neill and Wilson 2010), curating as an activist practice that questions social hierarchies and advocates for social change (Reilly and Lippard 2018; Thompson 2012), and curation as a mass phenomenon beyond the art world (Balzer 2015). This social and anthropological perspective and emphasis on curating experiences is particularly relevant in the context of "platform capitalism" (Kompatsiaris 2024), where the idea of the "curated life" has gained prominence within the broader phenomenon of "hyperculturalization" (Reckwitz 2020) and the increasing significance of the creative economy.

Having said this, we can now turn back to our initial question: why examine the intersection of semiotics and curating now? The simple answer is that while the obvious

connection between semiotics and curating – as a holding pattern for meaning – is not new and has lurked in the background of cultural mediation debates for decades, it has curiously never been adequately examined or resolved in either semiotic or curatorial literature. Since the professionalization of curatorial practice in the 1990s, there have been notable and productive crossovers between semiotics and curation. From a curatorial perspective, these have included the conception of the exhibition as a discursive, intertextually organized space; the recurring analogy of the curator as translator; the debate surrounding the "grammar of the exhibition" positing curation as syntax (Misiano 2009); the introduction of a criterion to distinguish between different exhibition-making practices based on how they fix artistic reference (Bertrand 2022); and the understanding of the exhibition visitor as a model reader (Manacorda 2016). Conversely, semioticians have analyzed the semiotic power of the exhibition space and utilized different semiotic approaches to decode not only exhibition communication, ranging from in-gallery wall texts and label copy to digital promotional material (Navarro and Renaud 2020), but also interpret the cultural practices and behaviors of museum-goers and the visiting strategies implied by a museum (Davallon 2013; Verón 2013). Notwithstanding, while the semiotics of visual arts have a long tradition, the study of curation as a semiotic system with substantive effects on signification, meaning-making, communication, and interpretation is still relatively underdeveloped and has only been the subject of isolated contributions (see, e.g., Pezzini 2021).

Accordingly, the initial aim behind this special issue was to expand and enhance existing understandings of the semiotics of curation, or, more precisely, of curating as a semiotic practice. The goal was to examine its theoretical elaboration, methodological perspectives, and manifold applications in diverse sectors where curating is now ubiquitous but effectively used to serve diverging purposes, including personalize access, signal distinction, amplifying ideological positions (propaganda), generating wealth by inflating value, and even establish identities. Otherwise put, the issue's original ambition was to explore how semiotics (with an emphasis on interpretation, framing, translation, engagement, enunciative assemblages, image-acts, storytelling, open text, multi-modality, and meta functions) could be used as a valuable toolkit to unpick and grapple with the intended and unintended consequences of human and algorithmic curation on personal and collective sensemaking and valorization processes. The range and quality of the submissions that we received indicate that this relatively underexploited area of research is vast, rich, and highly relevant today. Among other findings, the contributions featured in this issue demonstrate that exhibition visits offer a unique case study for semiotics' recent turn towards embodied social practices. Conversely, semiotic approaches offer insightful methodological tools to unpack the increasingly complex blend of physical and virtual devices used by curators and institutions to mediate cultural artefacts, knowledge and artworks, and grasp their distinct impacts.

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Since this issue is one of the first publications dedicated to the intersection of semiotics and curating, we opted to showcase different theoretical facets instead of presenting a more unified perspective, as reflected in the variety of topics and approaches outlined below:

Elena Ananiadou and **Elisabeth Miche**'s article, "The museum project of the Cases Barates: An actor in the semantic space of the Barcelona housing conflict," provides a semiotically nuanced analysis of the discourse produced by museums. It focuses on a heritage restitution research project initiated by the Barcelona History Museum (MUHBA) in 2023, which relates both to a 1929 social housing program in Barcelona and to the city's conflictual urban plans regarding its contemporary housing crisis and eviction policies. The authors position their semiotic inquiry between the expectations of "curatorial activism" (Reilly 2019) that often questions institutional policies reinforcing dominant narratives and perpetuating social inequalities, and ICOM's new museum objectives (2018), to actively engage with the social issues they address and take social responsibility (participative turn in museology). In elucidating the museum's role as a discursive actor, the authors deploy an intricate framework based on argumentative semantics, primarily drawing on the works of Carel and Lescano, that is, the Semantic Blocks Theory (TBS) and the Argumentative Theory of Polyphony (TAP), as well as New Museology. They focus on the exhibition text used in the physical and online displays to interrogate the curatorial choices related to stance-taking within this political issue. At the core of the authors' approach is the claim that "reasoning, even when it appears as informative, is inherently argumentative," which recalls both J. L. Austin's speech act theory regarding the non-declarative uses of language as well as Benveniste's work on the distinction between the *énoncé* and the *énonciation*. The semantic and enunciative analysis radicalizes this intellectual tradition and posits that discourse does not describe reality but actively constructs and transforms it. Setting the basis for the semantic theory of social conflicts, the study employs Lescano's (2023, 2024) concept of semantic space in conflicts to argue that the museum's discourse operates within a contested field of meaning, where specific programs (i.e., conceptual frames for action) are naturalized while others are suppressed. This analytical approach successfully demonstrates how discursive framing legitimizes particular social structures while marginalizing alternative perspectives. The discussion of how the museum presents inaccessibility to housing as an inevitable consequence of economic imperatives rather than a political choice underscores the ideological stakes embedded in supposedly neutral narratives.

For guest author **Mieke Bal**, making meaning transmittable, or rather sharable, is the primary point of both semiotics and exhibitions. For Bal, Lotman's notion of the 'semiosphere' marks the complementarity of disciplines studying culture, the movement towards creating a general theory of culture, and a "flexible methodology," both

explored in Bal's book on "traveling concepts" in the humanities (2002). Bal argues that the tools of meaning-making are not simply related to conceptual language but that "meaning happens" in encounters, which involve the temporal and affective aspect of looking back, listening, and establishing dialogue, as well as the performative rituals that develop within the tradition of museum culture. Drawing on a distinctive reading of Adorno's concept of the "essay" as a thinking model, the paper addresses curating as a fragmented, incomplete, partial, subjective, affective, and always dialogic practice. It allows any exhibition visitor to transform the experience through their own "semiosphere habits," which aligns with Lotman's view of semiosis as a social concept. In an earlier article, Bal investigates the difference between an empirical and ideal spectator, or between an actual, viz. 'instantiated,' and a model spectator while echoing reader-response theories to discuss "protocols of viewing," sustaining that viewing is based on codes and that "members of groups acquire their familiarity with codes of viewing, and their ability to operate those codes, to varying degrees" (Bal and Bryson 1991: 186). According to Bal, ambiguity is at the heart of intermedial curating. To make this point, she discusses her own film essay "It's about time! Reflections on urgency" (2020) – available on YouTube – as an example of semiotically oriented curating. Semiotics and curating are sites of encounter between individual viewers and the objects, be it films or artworks, that enhance ambiguity. In Bal's film, ambiguity is related to the story of Cassandra, who was fated to utter true prophecies but never to be believed, as retold by Christa Wolf. This becomes a metaphor for the curator, who persists in the indistinguishability of words and images, further drawing on Lyotard's notion of the 'figural,' which brings to mind Nietzsche's notion of philosophy as images in disguise – later addressed in Blumenberg's metaphorology. However, the past and present intertwine against the linear conception of time and our obsession with history, clearly implying Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image and the montage as history's construction principle. Quoting or re-envisioning a work of art changes it forever in active re-working that creates new versions of old images and new perceptions of the already seen. The intermedial juxtaposition of the tableau vivant, painting, and text presented as a film seeks to show the precarity of the distinction between sign and thing, in which Peircean categories of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity merge. In this regard, temporality in its threefold aspect systematized by Genette – order (sequentiality), duration, and frequency in narratology – is exemplified in the action of the film's protagonist/curator/ viewer, which becomes a crucial feature in the discussion on curating. Last, drawing on Peircean iconicity, Bal discusses color's capacity to act as a sign at length. Color advances to the status of an icon because it possesses a character that renders it significant, even though its object has no existence. In this regard, color supports the deployment of the imagination (hence, fiction), much like the workings of a dream, making it an ideal bearer of ambiguity – clearly demonstrated in abstract art or the work of contemporary artists such as

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Ann Veronica Janssens. Bal maintains that ambiguity, understood as a key to cultural complexity, is at the heart of the concept of a global semiosphere. Its political and social power for change depends on curating's capacity to enhance and perpetuate constructive ambiguity, understood as a distinct semiotic quality. This goal equally informs the curator's role and agency. Embracing the heterogeneity of semiospheres, Bal's argument is not just theoretical but deeply ethical. In a world marked by cultural instability and political crises, fostering interpretive openness becomes necessary, recalling philosopher Jacques Rancière's understanding of curatorial practice as a means of redistributing the sensible and allowing for new modes of perception to emerge that can eventually support civil emancipation. This is Bal's ongoing interest, as previously demonstrated in her seminal article "On Show: Inside the Ethnographic Museum" (1996), in which she shows how semiotics can be utilized to reveal how exhibition strategies, object placement, and visual storytelling construct the perception of cultural 'others.' Curators as essayists and curating, when approached with an awareness of ambiguity as a method, can cultivate critical engagement and social responsibility.

Camille Béguin and **Patrizia Laudati**'s key contribution lies in their proposal that curation can serve as a methodological tool to support research in the humanities and social sciences. This approach is framed within a semiotic-communicational perspective, which considers exhibitions as multimodal constructs that operate on three levels: as material devices (the artifacts displayed), as spatio-temporal materializations of social and cultural narratives, and as heuristic operators generating meaning for both the curator and the audience. Béguin and Laudati maintain that although curating is and should be related to the ethos of the academic article, understood as the main device of conducting research, it should also adhere to poietics - echoing *'poïesis'* in its original, that is, Aristotelian meaning. Studies on semantic-sensory experience and embodied cognition help to understand the embodied poietic process of the researcher-curator, which mirrors the three dimensions of exhibition semiotics: (a) finding, selecting, and producing "objects of knowledge in their own right" (b) arranging and spatializing content and (c) making the exhibition accessible and intelligible – a tripartite model that reflects a paradigmatic hybridization of methodological tools from museography, communication sciences, and cognitive studies. Choosing materials disrupts preconceived narratives and invites serendipitous discovery, echoing Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas, where meaning emerges through montage rather than preordained structures. Davallon's idea to move "from the use of space as a writing surface to writing through space" (2011: 39) informs their notion of museum spatialization. The authors' engagement with "expographic writing" (Goody 1979: 109) suggests that exhibition-making can be an alternative form of scholarly argumentation. Since the process of designing interpretative materials (labels, texts, scenography) requires researchers to translate their work into formats that are also accessible to non-specialist audiences, the authors

maintain that this act of translation is itself a heuristic device that prompts deeper engagement with the research material, revealing gaps, contradictions, and new connections. Drawing on Bäckström's (2023) concept of "the exhibition as essay," the authors propose curation as an alternative form of research-based creativity, inviting scholars to reconsider the cognitive and communicative potentials of exhibition design.

Emily Butler's "Towards a Curatorial Translation Zone" offers a compelling examination of how translation – both linguistic and cultural – operates as a curatorial practice, since *translatio* – the etymological backbone of the term translation – is understood in its threefold meaning as "a transfer from one place to another, an interpretation in different terms, and finally, a transformation into a different form." Central to her analysis is applying semiotics, postcolonial theory, and translation studies to explain curating as a dynamic process of meaning-making, renegotiation, and potential epistemic transformation. Butler draws on various theorists, including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Donna Haraway, to situate curating within a broader semiotic and postcolonial discourse. By framing the curatorial space as a "translation zone" (Apter 2006), she foregrounds the interplay between sign systems, cultural contexts, and power structures. Moreover, she extends Barthes' idea of the "death of the author" that paves the way for the "birth of the reader" (1977: 148) to curating to suggest that curators, like translators, do not impose fixed meanings but instead facilitate an open-ended engagement with the exhibits. The poststructuralist rejection of stable meaning reinforces her claim that exhibitions function as semiotic texts subject to infinite reinterpretation but also to postcolonial re-interpretation of power structures, for which "translation is necessary but impossible" (Spivak 2022: 69). Derrida's notion of "différance," which further enriches Butler's analysis, emphasizes that translation is not merely a transfer of meaning but an act of deferral and transformation. By invoking Derrida's assertion that "nothing is untranslatable; but in another sense, everything is untranslatable" (1998), Butler presents curatorial translation as a process that resists closure. This aligns with her discussion of "mis-translation" as a generative act – one that embraces hybridity rather than striving for fidelity to an original. Haraway's concept of "material-semiotic actors" (1988) is another crucial reference in Butler's exploration of curating as a politically charged act. She highlights how curators and artists operate within "power-differentiated" contexts, where translation can either reinforce or challenge dominant narratives. This perspective resonates with Homi Bhabha's (1994) critique of neo-liberal multiculturalism and his notion of a 'third space' of enunciation beyond binaries, which Butler uses to conceptualize the curatorial translation zone as a site of cultural negotiation rather than mere representation. Butler draws on curatorial literature (Harald Szeemann and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, among others) to contextualize her point on curating as a semiotic act of negotiation, disruption, and meaning-making.

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Central to guest author **Isabella Pezzini**'s "Forms of Caring" is the increasing agency of curators within the art world. The author grounds her exploration in the dual meanings of '*cura*' – as both preservation and interpretation – highlighting how curators oscillate between safeguarding cultural heritage and recontextualizing it within contemporary frameworks – echoing Nicholas Serota's twofold definition of curating, swinging back and forth between providing experience to the audience or enabling interpretation (Serota 2005). As both "adjuvant (facilitator) and destinant (authority)," the curator shapes the reception of artworks, sometimes to the extent of overshadowing the art itself. The paper critically engages with this tension, particularly in light of Modena's assertion that curatorial interventions risk instrumentalizing works of art. However, Pezzini does not merely critique this phenomenon but instead situates it within a broader discourse on the evolving responsibilities of curators in an era of rapid cultural transformation. Drawing on Balzer's notion of 'curationism' (2015), she critiques the transformation of curators from caretakers of objects to cultural auteurs, expressed in the form of romanticized idiosyncratic geniuses, enterprising professionals, and cosmopolitan super-curators. This shift, Pezzini argues, aligns with a broader societal trend in which curatorial expertise extends beyond art into commercial and digital spheres, reinforcing the curator's role both as a meaning-maker and enhancer of the museum's surplus-value. The paper discusses care in the context of the sustainability challenges faced by major museums such as the Louvre and the Pergamon, situating conservation efforts within the emerging field of 'maintenance & repair studies.' The example of a performance by artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles (1973), who has made maintenance her ongoing social practice and investigates care as a systemic, feminist and political factor, underscores the often-invisible labor of curatorship, framing it as an act of cultural stewardship rather than mere exhibition-making. Her paper is situated within the current discourse concerning curating and care studies (Krasny 2023).

Silvia Pireddu's study, "Voices in the museum: Exploring soundscapes in curatorial practices," investigates the role of sonority as a meaning-making mechanism in exhibition spaces. It examines contemporary curatorial trends that integrate digital technologies and immersive environments, emphasizing the significance of soundscapes and soundspaces in enhancing visitor engagement. These approaches either seek to augment the entertainment value of exhibitions or address the evolving expectations of audiences who seek deeper cultural contextualization. Her methodological approach is both theoretical and empirical, combining semiotic analysis with case studies spanning three distinct exhibition formats. Pireddu draws on theories in sound studies, acoustic ecology (Schafer 1994), auditory neuroscience (Weinberger 2004), and cognitive psychology (Juslin and Västfjäll 2008) to construct two tables that systematically present the semiotic schemata of sonority (including signifiers, interpretants, and cultural meanings) in terms of meaning-making.

Aluminé Rosso's essay, "Curatorship and mobile applications: The physical-digital interactions of museum visitors," offers an in-depth semiotic analysis of the role that mobile applications play in shaping museum experiences and redefining the notion of the public. Rosso draws on Goodwin's notions of the "semiotic body" and "embodiment" (2002, 2000), Mondada's notion of "interactional space" (2005), Verón's analysis of museums as spatial networks shaped by visitors' movements (2013) and Hillman's and Weilenmann's digital ethnography (2015). Employing semiotic, multimodal, and interactionist analytical tools, Rosso focuses on the interactional space of the museum (architectural/institutional), the interactional space created by the artwork (curatorial dimension), and the interactions of/among visitors (social dimension) to analyze "visitor's experience as embodied and multisensorial, mediated by technologies and socially co-constructed." By further applying Traversa's (2009) categorization of the enunciative pacts between the museum and its visitors (symmetrical, authoritarian, friendly) and bonds (complete, semi-restricted, restricted and paradoxical) to digital interactions that take place during the physical visit (through the use of mobile museum apps and social media), Rosso critiques digital applications for failing to account for visitors' embodied and in-situ interactions, such as movement, gaze, and conversation. Through case studies, she demonstrates how apps function primarily as content delivery systems rather than facilitators of engagement with the material environment. Rosso calls for closer collaboration between UX designers, curators, and educators to ensure digital tools enhance rather than detract from the museum's spatial and social dynamics and complement rather than replace embodied encounters with art.

As demonstrated throughout this special issue of Punctum, curating extends beyond the traditional role of exhibition-making, positioning itself as a critical and reflexive meaning-making practice that shapes and is shaped by social, political, and ideological contexts. By integrating semiotic problematics, curatorial studies gain a robust analytical framework, ultimately reinforcing the argument that curating is not merely about selection and arrangement but about the dynamic construction of discourse. Furthermore, the discussions in this issue underscore the inherently political dimensions of curating, particularly its potential to challenge dominant pedagogies and narratives and advocate for alternative perspectives. As the field expands, future research should further investigate the impact of emergent technologies, algorithmic curation, and participatory models on meaning-making processes. In doing so, curatorial studies can continue to evolve as a critical discipline that not only reflects on but actively shapes how cultural knowledge is produced, disseminated, and reinterpreted within an increasingly interconnected and mediated world.

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The museum project of the Cases Barates: An actor in the semantic space of the Barcelona housing conflict

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BY: **Eleni Ananiadou** and **Elisabeth Miche**

ABSTRACT

The Barcelona Museum of History has hosted, since 2023, a project dedicated to the history of housing in Barcelona during the 20th century. For this purpose, a group of *cheap houses* (*cases barates*) in the working-class neighborhood Bon Pastor, built in 1929 as part of a social housing public program, were converted into museum space. The group of houses will survive the urban renovation project of the Municipality, which involves substituting the 784 original single-plane houses with apartment buildings. The current relevance and scale of the housing conflict in Barcelona inevitably pose a discursive challenge for the museum, whose declared aim is to explicate aspects of the city. The museum avoids taking a stance on controversial issues; nevertheless, the act of enunciation itself makes it an actor in the conflict. How is language neutralized to serve this contradiction? This paper proposes a study of the language of the museum through the perspective of argumentative semantics and, more specifically, the theoretical framework developed by Marion Carel and Alfredo Lescano. Drawing from the problematics of New Museology, we analyze how the museum positions itself as an actor in the housing conflict and identify aspects of the *Real* of the conflict – concepts that are naturalized by the museum as a state institution. To do this, a corpus of texts from the museum exhibition is studied, focusing on their argumentative content and the formal aspects of the enunciation.

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1. Introduction

Taking curation as a meaning-making practice, we acknowledge it as an interpretative process that constitutes a specific way of reading, approaching, and understanding the curated subject. Through the exhibition's text, it is possible to interrogate the curatorial choices regarding stance-taking, how a museum positions itself in relation to its subject matter, as well as the relationship established with other social actors or the enunciative position from which it speaks. In the light of New Museology, both the role of the museum and its relationship with the community have been questioned: the museum has revised its traditional role and practices, transforming itself from an institution with the authority to set the terms of the *Real*, to a social instrument (Brulon Soares 2015). As the social role of museums is becoming discursively hegemonic, we are interested in how museums negotiate their relations with the communities and their position regarding social controversies and issues that constitute open social disputes.

In this perspective, we suggest applying a non-referential linguistic theory to analyze the discourse of the Cases Barates museum project, also called the Barcelona Housing Museum. This allows for a focus on the textual interplay of actions and actors. Argumentative semantics consider language as inherently argumentative, defining speaking as a language act of arguing (Carel 2023: 177). Rejecting the notion of informativity, the current study aims to move beyond the idea of neutrality, focusing, instead, on the argumentative activity within the text as a discursive intervention to an ongoing social conflict. Approaching the museological text in this manner, we do not look for the intentions or causes of linguistic choices but aim to map the world created within the text through content and enunciation, both constituents of the argumentative act. From a linguistic point of view, the interest lies in how language is neutralized to reconcile the contradictions between the premises of objectivity and social intervention.

2. The context of the study

2.1. The context of the museum

In 2023, the Barcelona History Museum (MUHBA) inaugurated a project dedicated to the history of housing in Barcelona during the twentieth century. To this end, a group of 'cheap houses' (*cases barates* in Catalan) in the working-class neighborhood of Bon Pastor were converted into museum space. The block of houses that was musealized will survive the urban renovation project of the Municipality that involves substituting the 784 original single-plane houses with apartment buildings.

The Bon Pastor neighborhood is located on the northern border of the Barcelona municipality. The Cases Barates housing estate, originally named "Milans del Bosch,"[1] was built in 1929 as part of a public social housing program, together with three more groups of houses of the same typology located in different areas in the city's surroundings, in response to the housing shortage of the time. Around the year 2000, the City Council decided to demolish these houses and replace them with residential buildings, progressively reallocating the tenants to the new constructions. This decision was not devoid of conflict, as there was a debate about the conditions of reallocation (rise in rent prices, promotion of property status), but also because part of the group of tenants rejected the urbanistic plan, claiming, instead, their right to remain in the houses. Some of them were evicted by court order (Portelli 2015). The City Council had to carry out an expropriation process before building the museum; although the property was municipal, the tenants had lifetime contracts that were broken.

MUHBA integrates Cases Barates in a broader narrative about the city, developed around the heritage sites of different chronological periods that the museum manages in Barcelona. The museum approaches the contemporary metropolis through its periphery. Cases Barates are part of the Besòs museum axis, which comprises four heritage sites in the eastern suburbs, dedicated to different aspects of urban life, including the metropolis's expansion (Roca i Albert 2019). In this way, the museum opts for a narrative that speaks about urban majorities in their ordinary dimension, making popular elements part of the city's heritage and organizing a reading of housing policies alongside the neighborhood's trajectory.

Otto Neurath's Museum of Housing and City Planning (Gesellschafts-und-Wirtschafts Museum), established in Vienna in 1923, may serve as a historical reference for a museological approach to housing. Neurath, an economist and social scientist, was involved in city planning, having been responsible for managing the settlements that emerged on the outskirts of Vienna during World War I. He devised a solution that preserved elements of the existing "communal economy" of these settlements (Hochhäusl 2011). This approach was considerably different from the policies implemented in Barcelona at the time, which were oriented towards eradicating informal settlements.

Neurath envisioned the museum as a tool for educating workers about social facts, aiming to make them more aware of the world they lived in. He understood statistical thinking as essential in revealing the nature of the modern city and the social fate of its inhabitants, regardless of their educational background. He developed a system of picture statistics, the Vienna Method or Isotype, which visualized social and economic

[1] Joaquin Milans del Bosch was the civil governor of Barcelona (1924-1929) during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship.

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data using simple symbols, and organized outdoor exhibitions to reach out to the public (Charles and Giraud 2018). Curation for Neurath had an emancipatory goal, which would be achieved by making workers aware of their condition.

In today's context, curatorial activism encompasses initiatives that question social hierarchies, such as white male privilege, and advocates for social change. Curatorial activism underscores the importance of exposing power dynamics as socially and institutionally manifested within museums (Reilly 2019). From this perspective, museums are seen as ideological battlegrounds that reinforce dominant narratives and perpetuate social inequalities. Thus, curatorial practice becomes a militant form of social advocacy, actively engaging in de-colonial, ecological, and social justice struggles.

Nevertheless, within the broader museological discourse, museums' role in society and curatorship's political horizon remains a subject of ongoing debate. The social function of museums has emerged as a dominant narrative in professional discussions, as evidenced by the topics raised in the ICOM forums for the new museum definition, reported by Brown and Mairesse (2018). There is, however, no clear consensus on what this role should entail. Should museums actively engage with the social issues they address and take social responsibility, or should they serve as mediators, facilitating dialogue between different community groups? Van Oost (2022) elaborates on the responses given by museums in the Flanders region of Belgium, which are rather hesitant about the perspective of becoming "activist institutions" and instead propose to act as "agonist spaces," meaning public venues for debate and exchange of the different views on societal issues. "At the heart of these debates is the question of whether museums should adopt a stance or keep themselves at a distance," Van Oost argues (59). We seek to go one step further and question the possibility of a neutral space that does not condition the dialogue toward one direction or the other.

Community involvement is, in any case, considered essential for museums to fulfill their social function, whether that function is fostering critical thinking, raising awareness, promoting community participation in decision-making (Girault and Orellana 2020), integrating new subjects into the museum's narratives (Navajas Corral 2022), or supporting counter-hegemonic struggles (Brulon Soares 2022). The central question remains how the specific imperatives of each museum shape its stance, this time in relation to the community, and how they define the museum as an institution that may act for the benefit of others, collaborate with others, or advocate its own position.

In the case of the Cases Barates, the museum aims to "explain the city," as stated in the physical and online exhibition (Museu d'història de Barcelona 2023), suggesting an approach that treats the city as an autonomous object of knowledge. By claiming to "explain," the museum positions itself as a neutral entity that can draw an account of urban reality rather than an actor participating in city construction. In

a study on European City Museums, published by MUHBA the same year as the museum's opening, its director, Joan Roca, explicitly distances the museum from "the most burning issues of the day" (Roca i Albert 2023: 124). He argues that engaging with contentious political issues could jeopardize the institution's stability and credibility, potentially losing trust among citizens and groups not aligned with the museum's perspective. Roca concludes that "the proposal of putting the city museum at the heart of living disputes of current times is not a prudent one" (125).

However, is it possible to avoid political engagement when dealing with contemporary housing history in a city that currently suffers from a housing crisis? Housing is considered one of the burning issues of the day, and speaking about housing positions the museums inside the conflict zone as actors that take a stand through their argumentative activity. The following sections will provide the context of these assumptions.

2.2. **Housing as a social emergency**

According to data from the General Council of the Judiciary for the 2008-2012 period, collected by the Observatori DESC and the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) of Barcelona (2013), the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008 led to 415,117 foreclosure proceedings and some 244,278 evictions throughout the state. It is estimated that 90.5% of foreclosures in Barcelona affected primary residences.

Amidst this situation, public administration's response to these facts in a preventive or corrective manner is questioned, and housing is considered a social emergency. Catalonia's ombudsman (Síndic de Greuges de Cataluña 2023) claims that the right to housing has to be a reality and asserts that "[t]he main difficulty in guaranteeing the right to housing is the high price of private market housing and the lack of sufficient housing stock for social policies."[2] Accordingly, in municipal terms, at the Barcelona Housing and Rehabilitation Forum, Carme Trilla, the president of the Metropolitan Housing Observatory of Barcelona, recounted a growing "widening gap between what citizens can pay for rent and their market price" (Peiró 2019: 12) since from 2000 to 2018 rental and purchase prices in Barcelona have increased in a way that is disproportionate to the household income available per inhabitant.

The housing conflict, as detailed in these reports, involves excluding a significant segment of the population from a fundamental human right: the right to decent housing. This exclusion not only deprives individuals of safe and adequate living conditions but also highlights broader social and economic inequalities at the societal level, reflecting a systemic failure to ensure that all citizens have access to dignified living spaces.

[2] The translation of Catalan, Spanish and French citations into English was made by the authors of this text.

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As readers of a text that addresses access to housing and public housing policies, the authors of this paper aim to interpret the account that the text draws concerning the nature of the housing conflict. To do this, the authors adhere to a linguistic tradition that goes beyond the description of a situation or a state-of-things to reach the activity taking place within discourse.

2.3. **A linguistic approach to the museum's position in the conflict**

The theoretical tradition of argumentative semantics, inaugurated by Jean Claude Anscombre and Oswald Ducrot, provides a non-referential model of linguistic analysis and, therefore, questions the notion of informativity of language. It posits that using language entails presenting facts in one way or another and not representing them as they are in the world. The theoretical assumption behind this approach is that meaning does not exist independently of language but is constructed in and with it. In other words, reasoning, even when it appears as informative, is inherently argumentative (Carel 2021b).

Adopting a linguistic lens allows for the analysis of the choices made in text curation and a response to specific questions about the museum as an actor in the housing conflict in an effort to draw the blind spot around which the text develops. Spatial or visual languages, key domains of semiotics in curating and museum studies, are also essential elements of the museum's discourse but are not part of this analysis as they fall beyond the scope of this article and its research questions.

The linguistic analysis under this theory aims to describe the sense of an utterance. Ducrot and Carel (2014) defined both the content of the utterance and how content is introduced in discourse as constituent elements of the enunciation that operate in conjunction and cannot be treated separately. They both participate in meaning-making performed by the discursive entity of the locutor. This is why the locutor's stance when expressing content is not a secondary question but a fundamental element of the sense of the utterance and, globally, of that of the text.

The analytical tools used for the present analysis were developed within this theoretical framework, by Marion Carel (2011; 2023) and Alfredo Lescano (2023). Carel provides an analytical schema for both semantic and enunciative analysis, allowing us to address how the museum stands in the housing conflict and how its discourse is put to work. With the Semantic Blocks Theory (TBS thereafter),[3] Carel (2011) radicalizes the approach of Anscombre and Ducrot, adopting the position that "there is no informative indication in the language" (Carel 2023: 26). It advances the hypothesis that even

[3] The authors of this paper employ the abbreviations of the French name of the theories, as they are commonly used: Théorie des Blocs Sémantiques – TBS, and Théorie Argumentative de la Polyphonie – TAP.

the meaning of words is argumentative, because it is created from how words and the argumentative periods are linked to each other. Notions dependent on the informative character of language, such as representation, explanatory, or neutral discourse, are therefore also interpreted under the argumentative perspective. TBS provides the tools to analyze these conjunctions and the argumentative content they convey, organizing the relations between the meaning of words in semantic blocks (Carel 2023: 39).

The Argumentative Theory of Polyphony (TAP thereafter) is considered a branch of TBS (Carel 2023: 272), which describes linguistic enunciation or how content is placed in discourse. More specifically, it traces how the locutor places the content in discourse, the reasons for their saying, the consequences and the way they use language to act over an interlocutor. TAP does not accept that discourse can reveal either the psychological background of the speaker or the veracity of a saying; it focuses on describing the discursive activity as this takes place inside the text. Just like in a painting, content may appear in discourse, in a first or secondary plane, or it may be excluded, defining the textual function of the content. At the same time, the locutor may declare themselves more or less engaged with their saying, which is described as a mode of the apparition of the content (Carel 2021a). These are the two central notions brought forward by TAP and integrated into a homogeneous analytical schema with the TBS, using paraphrases and enchainings; argumentative in the case of TBS, and enunciative for TAP.

Lescano (2023) builds upon the achievements of argumentative semantics to set the basis for the semantic theory of social conflicts. This theory studies how social processes shape what can be said at a particular moment as actors intervene in the conflict's semantic space, an antagonistic discursive construction in constant transformation. The actors' discursive operations transform this space by mobilizing certain concepts or semantic schemas. The statements of each actor are not studied as individual points of view but as operations that produce and reproduce these schemas. The schemas, as different classes of utterance, express available possibilities of statements and are described as: "a strictly semantic entity, capable of being concretized by multiple statements in the most diverse forms" (Lescano 2024: 20).

In a simplified manner, a conflict is semantically read as an antagonism of different positions that appear and interact in the public space through the interventions of the different actors. It is worth noting that this theory also denies the possibility of a neutral utterance and supports, instead, that the mode of intervention of each actor characterizes the actor as a producer of a specific type of discourse. To analyze these interventions, Camus and Lescano (2021) establish, in the first place, the notion of a *program* as a semantic schema linked to a possibility of action. In the second place, they analyze the *operations* that place the programs into the discourse, seizing, attacking, or naturalizing them.

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The present study is particularly interested in identifying programs naturalized by the museum's discourse. Naturalization refers to statements of the type *a is b*, where a programme is extracted from the zone of divergence and is presented instead as an indisputable fact, as a truth that is not part of the controversy. This type of operation contributes to the evolution of a conflict in a way that promotes the availability of the position it conveys. For example, talking about wind energy as green and sustainable reinforces the position that wind farms play a role in reducing greenhouse gases. This is described as the *stabilization* of an intervention mode: producing a specific statement renders an associated program more accessible in the public sphere (Lescano 2024: 28).

Furthermore, Lescano theorizes on the *Real of the State* when referring to the programs that state institutions naturalize. He proposes "to observe in detail, in the sphere of specific positions, the distribution of the Real carried out by the State" as a way of analyzing the relations of discursive domination in conflicts where the "State is the arbiter" (2017: 88), as it is the case of housing, in Spain. It should be clarified that the museum is an institution of the Municipality of Barcelona and does not directly depend on the state of Spain. It is only under the frame of Althusser's (1974) ideological state apparatus that its discourse is regarded as part of the *Real of the State* and not under a pragmatic administrative category.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Enunciation and participation

As museum literature and practice emphasize approaches that encompass the institution's social responsibility and its potential to be an agent of change (Brown and Mairesse 2018), the participation of the communities in the museum processes is considered pivotal, and it was, in fact, included in the new definition of the museum, by ICOM. The participative turn was articulated by museological approaches of the last fifteen years – a reference point being the 1972 Santiago Round Table – that advocated for museums integrated within their communities and even projected an emancipatory vision (Brulon Soares 2022). Today, different modalities of participation are developed, mainly in the social museology framework, creating what seems to be a discursive polyphony:

> For more than half a century now, however, museums have ceased to be spaces solely dedicated to the discourse and opinions of experts and intellectuals. Other voices have been added to the dialectics and practices of action, management and participation in these social and cultural entities.[4] (Navajas Corral 2022)

[4] The translation from the original in French is ours.

At the same time, questions about the scope of the participation are also posed. Girault (2022: 5) draws attention to the ambiguity of the term 'participation' and highlights the need to distinguish between actual community participation and their instrumentalization. He recalls Mairesse's point about power relations within institutions that shape how participation is signified in each case. To approach this question from a linguistic perspective, we use notions Ducrot developed in the polyphony theory, aiming to describe the enunciative instance of the Museum of Cases Barates and how it is discursively put in place.

Ducrot challenged the "unicity of the speaking subject" (1984: 175) or the idea that an utterance has a sole author. Instead, he introduced a distinction between the *speaking subject*, the speaker in the world, who chooses the words, and the *locutor*, a discursive entity responsible for the enunciation. The literary equivalent of this is Genette's distinction between an author and a narrator of a work. This conception has set the framework for the analysis of the superposition of several voices in the utterance, as indicated by its enunciation. TAP adopted this schema but substituted what was previously described as 'point of view,' through the notion of the *enunciator*, with that of *enunciative modes*. The *conceived*, *found*, or *received* modes describe in TAP how the content is introduced in discourse and the level of engagement of the locutor (Carel 2023: 221).

The texts we used for the enunciative analysis are displayed in the museum's reception area, as part of a panel dedicated to the making of the museum, its guiding vision, and implementation. To provide the reader with a context, while the museum was created, the last stages of the residents' relocation process were still underway, which meant that there were still cheap houses in the neighborhood, and some were also inhabited. The museum involved locals in the compilation of sources, the creation of the collection (archive material and objects, included), and in the architectural restitution plan. The Bon Pastor Residents' Association is nowadays entitled to manage part of the facility.

The panel has the following title:

(1) THE CASES BARATES MUSEUM PROJECT

The enunciation of this content is done through an enunciative instance that Carel (2011: 300–301) describes with the example of *Gislebertus hoc fecit*.[5] Engraved by Gislebertus, the sculptor himself, in the center of the tympanum of the Cathedral of Autun, the enunciation represents the signature of the author of the work. Written in the third person, it indicates that the speaking subject, that is, the author of the work and the signature, is different from the locutor. The utterance masks the narrator's identity,

[5] Translation from Latin: "This is a work of Gislebertus."

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creating an effect of objectivity and impartial narration around the glorification of Gislebertus. Similarly, the enunciation of the museum project indicates the existence of a discursive instance different from that of the speaking subject; it is not the museum team that is presenting the museum project but *the museum* as a separate, discursive entity, paying respect to the museum project.

The present study argues that this enunciative instance makes the institution linguistically self-existent and independent of the speaking subject. People involved can be part of the institution, though the institution does not speak on their behalf; it is discursively detached from the speaking subject. The third person constructs the notion of the museum as an institution, putting in place a discursive apparatus. From here on, when the activity of the locutor is described, reference is made to this instance, to the producer of the museum institution.

The first paragraph of the panel, titled "A shared project," further enlightens the enunciative and argumentative construction of this instance in relation to the community.

> (2) The first steps toward the museum project Cases Barates were taken in 2010 on the initiative of the Bon Pastor Residents' Association and with the backing of the Sant Andreu district. It was finally secured through the cooperation with Muhba, which is part of the ICUB (Institut de Cultura de Barcelona). After a decade of preparatory work, the Neighbourhood Plan made it possible to open the new museum site. The whole process, from the historical research to building the collection and the work on the houses, has been a joint effort between Muhba, residents' associations, universities and other institutions. The groundwork was also laid for the shared management of the facility.

The utterances that signify the relation of MUHBA with the residents and which are interesting to analyze are: [The first steps toward the museum project Cases Barates were taken in 2010 on the initiative of the Bon Pastor Residents' Association], [It was finally secured through the cooperation with MUHBA] and [The whole process has been a joint effort between MUHBA, residents' associations, universities and other institutions]. The three of them are introduced in the discourse through an enunciative modality that Benveniste described as "historical enunciation," where he identified that "[n]o one speaks here; events seem to narrate themselves" (1966: 241). TAP does not accept that the locutor can disappear but rather involves this concept in the mode of content that is introduced in the found mode; the locutor appears to find the content in the words without intervening when it appears (Carel 2023: 207). To make the way content appears in discourse explicit, TAP uses enunciative enchaining, which offers indications of the utterance's background, as follows:

(2a) I saw how the museum project was developed, so I know that the first steps were taken in 2010 on the initiative of the Bon Pastor Residents' Association

The other two utterances can be paraphrased in the same way since their content is interpreted as facts of the world and registered in the discourse by the locutor. The locutor declares to know these facts and not to actively engage in a saying or an argument of their own (Carel 2021a: 356). Again, this study aims not to assess the truthfulness of the utterance but rather to make a point on the stance of the museum's saying. The enunciative mode evidences a locutor that is disengaged, under a tone of observation (*I see, therefore I know*), when introducing a series of facts: the project was an initiative of the Residents' Association, MUHBA cooperated, and the research, collection and architectural intervention was a joint effort.

The facts conveyed by the three utterances comprise their foreground argumentative content: the museum's intervention followed the popular initiative, bringing it into practice through a collaborative process. Argumentative paraphrasis allows one to retrieve other aspects of the relation between the museum and the residents, placed in the background, just as in the case of the second utterance which evokes the following:

(2b) There was a risk that the initiative was not going to prosper, therefore, MUHBA got involved

(2c) The initiative of the Bon Pastor Residents' Association was good, therefore, it had to be secured.

The semantic content expressed by the aspects [risk THEREFORE action] (2b) and [doing x is good THEREFORE do X] (2c) convey the forces behind the museum's intervention. The museum project is motivated by an underlying risk of failure of a good initiative. In the case of (2b), there is a lexical presupposition linked to the meaning of the word 'secured,' while in presupposition (2c), the [initiative was good] is co-signified in the background, and even if implied, it participates in the meaning of the utterance (Carel 2021a: 354). In both cases, the museum introduces a disinterested dimension of its intervention in the discourse since it accepts them, even without directly declaring that it responds to a moral need rather than an institutional agenda.

Summarizing what has been seen so far, the museum is constituted as a discursive entity responsible for enunciation, an instance different from the speaking subject. As a locutor, the museum stays in the shade when paying homage to the museum project but, at the same time, is established as an institution. In this framework, the museum's cooperation with the residents and their joint efforts in the museum-making process is actualized.

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Regarding the argument presented here, the museum appears to have established a cooperative relationship with the residents, motivated by the residents' initiative and the need to secure it. Community participation reaches beyond the domains of the collection, research, and intervention to become a driving force of the project, which provides legitimacy to the museum endeavor in terms of contemporary museological principles. Nevertheless, there is dissonance between the argumentative and the enunciative planes since the plurality of actors that appear involved are absorbed by the institutional enunciative instance.

3.2. **The museum's semantic intervention**

Since the current analysis is limited to the museum's intervention and does not include the programs promoted by other actors in the housing conflict, such as the government, the real estate market, or the tenants' unions, some semantic aspects will be briefly identified in the pertinent literature. The previously cited statements of the Catalan Ombudsman and the Metropolitan Observatory of Housing of Barcelona coincide in their diagnosis; they both name disproportionately high market prices as the main barrier to broad access to housing and housing rights. This indicates an antagonistic relation between the notion of the 'market' and 'right,' as to the conditions determining access to housing. The market poses an imperative of an economic nature, while the right to housing is one of a legal nature with an ethical background.

This semantic antagonism is reflected in the term 'financialization of housing,' used by the United Nations to refer to the dominance of financial markets in the housing sector and the treatment of housing as a vehicle for investment rather than social good. It is considered a factor that creates wealth inequality and exclusion on a global scale (Farha 2017). In the Spanish context, the exclusion of the population from housing access is also considered to be a consequence of a model that is based on the primacy of the right to do business over that of enjoying adequate housing (Rodríguez Alonso & Espinoza Pino 2017: 15). This program can be rooted back to the Franco era when private construction was used as a means of activating the post-war economy, thus subordinating housing needs to those of economic development and investment, something that still characterizes the Spanish real estate model. The above is summarized in the famous 1959 slogan of the then Minister of Housing, José Luis Arrese: "We do not want a Spain of proletarians but of proprietors."

Returning to the museum text, fragments that refer to the conditions of access in the different historical periods established by the exhibition have been analyzed to identify the program they express and, therefore, the class of utterance they evoke. In addition, attention was drawn to parts that seem to offer a broader perspective of the conflict in terms of its emergence and future.

The analysis is based on the methodological tools provided by the TBS and the TAP. The theoretical principle is that any utterance can be paraphrased by argumentative chainings, which consist of two sentences linked with normative connectors, like 'therefore' or similar, or transgressive ones, such as 'however' or similar. These chainings are associated with argumentative aspects that represent the semantic schemas of the programmes mentioned above. It is the meaning of the constitutive word of the utterance that provides the argumentative aspect and guides the paraphrasis. To analyze the way programs are introduced into the discourse – what was previously named operations – the enunciative modes are once again used; these indicate whether a program is seized, attacked, or naturalized.

The following text excerpts belong to the exhibition "Housing the majority. Barcelona, 1860-2010." The title of the section from which each fragment was taken is cited in parenthesis, and the corresponding chronological frame was added in brackets when this is not made explicit in the cited text. The choice of the excerpts was guided by the need to answer the question: What has conditioned housing access different historical moments?[6]

> (3) The period after the outbreak of the First World War triggered a prolonged housing crisis. […] Secondly, the sharp rises in rents against a background of high inflation led to an upsurge in evictions and the major rent strike of 1931. (The great housing crisis: dynamics and conflicts 1915-1953)

> (4) Subsidised rental housing was more easily accessible for the middle and affluent classes that less well-off people, mostly migrants, who had to borrow[7] to buy their property. Contrary to expectations, however, this did not deter the people living in these neighbourhoods. (Low-income outskirts are pioneers in home ownership [1960-1980])

> (5) At the same time, the general increase in land values entails the gradual expulsion of the weakest economic sectors. Thus, land values became an insurmountable barrier for increasing swathes of the population, albeit with a delayed impact due to high home ownership rates. (Land prices and changes in social topography [1993-2017])

[6] Placing more emphasis on the recent period, including two excerpts from the 1979-2011 exhibition section and none from the 1860-1915 one, was opted for because of the proximity to the current conflict.
[7] The word "endeudar" used in the Spanish version would rather be translated as "get into debt".

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(6) Rising unemployment meant mortgage defaults and a dramatic upsurge in evictions which brought the housing issue back to the forefront of the political agenda. (The housing issue is back in the forefront of the political agenda [2008-2012])

All four cases seem to convey a concept like *if there is no economic solvency, then housing access is denied* associated with the normative schema [NEG solvency THEREFORE NEG access]. To reach this conclusion, the highlighted utterances have been paraphrased as follows:

(3´) Rent prices increased, therefore, there were evictions.

(4´) Less well-off people could not access housing with their economic resources therefore, they had to get into debt.

(5´) The land value increased, therefore, the weakest were expelled.

(6´) Economic contracts were not fulfilled, therefore, people were evicted.

None of these paraphrases reflects the meaning of a constitutive word in the utterance or its broader context. This means that the utterance cannot be paraphrased, and its aspect cannot be identified based on a constitutive word, as was previously promised to do. Technically, the sense of the utterance is not decoded based on the instructions given to the readers by the meaning of a word present in the text because this word is absent. This is again linked to what Carel (2019) describes as "argumentative interpretation." In this case, one must take the reverse direction and identify the words themselves based on a doxal argumentative aspect.

It could be said that (3), for example, expresses the aspect [higher prices THEREFORE evictions], but this would not derive from the meaning of either of the words *price* or *eviction*. Therefore, the aspect [NEG solvency THEREFORE NEG access] is preferable, as it concretizes the lack of access. It expresses the meaning of the word *exclusion*.

All the above utterances are interpreted as denoting processes of exclusion, which are concretized under different terms each time. The lack of solvency is concretized in (3), as households that did not pay the rent at the beginning of the century, while in (6), at the threshold of the twenty-first century, families were faced with mortgage payments. Accordingly, (4) and (6) describe different ways of housing inaccessibility. During the sixties and seventies, the poor did not have direct access to rent or property unless they got into debt, while at the turn of the century, again, the poor had no alternative but to be displaced.

As for the enunciation, it is argued that these contents are naturalized by an operation that fits Benveniste's 'historical enunciation' and Carel's found mode very well because they are presented under a historicizing tone, as in the following example.

> (3´´) Based on the historical research I conducted, I know that sharp rises in rents against a background of high inflation led to an upsurge in evictions.

Therefore, it can also be argued that the museum's semantic intervention naturalizes housing exclusion based on a program whereby access is regulated by economic criteria. The predominance of a market imperative is expressed as a matter of fact, as a common ground that does not need to be questioned, and it is in this sense that the museum's intervention contributes to the stabilization of the dominant program: access to housing is conveyed as an economic matter.

As a program naturalized by an institution, attached to the state apparatus, and following Althusser's (1974) theorization, the regulation of housing access by economic criteria can also be viewed as part of the Real of the State. This entails that this program forms part of the overall rationale of housing policies as a constituent assumption, an axiom for the reasoning of the state's interventions.

Nevertheless, in the framework of the Real of the State discourse, the opposite concept, [NEG solvency ALTHOUGH NEG exclusion], is possible when it occurs within the framework of the state action, with the notion of *social housing*. This entails that even if there is a lack of economic resources, there is no exclusion from housing, an idea that is part of a program of equity in access. Nevertheless, framed as social, equative conditions are the basis of housing policy, but they do not apply outside of them. Housing, therefore, is a right insofar as the administration protects it, but it does not exist outside its competence because it does not guarantee it. It becomes a notion dependent on state intervention, without validity outside of it.

Further elements that frame the housing problem can be found in the exhibition's opening and end. At the first and the last exhibition panels, one can read as follows:

> (7) Finding somewhere to live has been a constant challenge for most people in the contemporary city. (Exhibition opening)

> (8) No response can overlook historic legacies and patterns; solutions need to be found with sustained action over time and without expecting immediate or entirely predictable effects. (Exhibition closing)

In (7), the word *constant* is a constitutive word, it provides meaning to the utterance, while in (8), one needs to interpret what is expressed argumentatively:

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(7`) Finding somewhere to live is a constant problem in the contemporary city, therefore the problem is not new. Attached to the aspect: constant THEREFORE NEG new.

The meaning of the word 'constant' includes the dimension of something that is now new, since it denotes a condition that excludes change. It is in this sense that the problem of *finding somewhere to live* is naturalized as something inherent in the contemporary city and, therefore, detached from a specific geographical context, such as the city of Barcelona, and a specific period of the contemporary era. Housing is challenging in contemporary cities, and so it is in Barcelona. The exhibition opens by announcing that, even though describing the conditions that shape a problem in Barcelona, it does not describe a unique phenomenon, and this makes the emergence of the problem a secondary question.

(8`) Solutions need to be found, although with action over time. Attached to the aspect: do x ALTHOUGH NEG do x now

(8``) Actions need to be sustained over time, although without expecting immediate or predictable effects. Attached to the aspect: do x ALTHOUGH NEG judge x now

The closing utterance defers the resolution of the problem and the evaluation of its effects to a future time. It acknowledges the necessity of finding a solution while asserting that any housing policy response is historically conditioned and must be assessed in the long term. This approach somehow manages the reader's expectations regarding the potential impact of the authorities' actions, establishing a timeframe for policy evaluation that extends beyond the present. It suggests a historical perspective that is not immediately accessible to the museum visitor.

The following questions arise: should this be interpreted as a call for patience and trust in housing policies? What kind of expectations is it prudent to have regarding the resolution of a problem that appears to be intrinsic to the contemporary city? The public authorities, which are established as the main political subject responsible for *Housing the majority*, are therefore given a historical time frame for the final evaluation of their policy, and the public is discouraged from reaching political conclusions and taking action in the present time.

Conclusion

As the social function of the museums is gaining strength in the museological debates, the authors of this paper consider the study of how it is materialized in the museum practice necessary, specifically in relation to the participation of the community and the position adopted by museums in social conflicts they engage with. These aspects were explored, and the museum was characterized as an actor in the housing conflict by examining the text of the Housing Museum of Barcelona through the lens of argumentative semantics. Text curation guides the reader – the museum visitor – towards a specific view of reality through argumentation. It does so even when it only aims to explain.

Following the imperatives of contemporary museology, the participation of the residents' association becomes a constituent part of the Museum of the Cases Barates since the museum is presented as a cooperative project that was developed upon a popular initiative. Nevertheless, the different voices that are part of the museum project are absorbed by an institutional enunciative instance, which discursively creates the museum. An account of the power relations that may be present in the project was not encountered, though a paradox was detected: the popular initiative is responsible for the creation of the museum in the argumentative plane, and the museum as a locutor is responsible for the appearance of the popular initiative in the text, with the attribution of its role, in the enunciative plane. This paradox indicates an unbalance between the notions of community and museum.

Regarding the stance of the museum, the argumentative activity of the museum-locutor in the exhibition dedicated to the history of housing policies and the conditions of housing access, provides evidence that even if the museum claims not to touch upon burning issues, it is inevitably positioned in the semantic space of the conflict. As an actor in the housing conflict, the museum project of Cases Barates works towards stabilizing a dominant concept, namely that economic criteria prevail over housing access, and naturalizing programs that express the meaning of housing exclusion. The way in which the framework of the housing policies is set does not foster a radical questioning of the way authorities may actively participate in the creation of housing inequalities but instead sets the basis for an apologetic discourse.

Thus, language is neutralized in an argumentative level by assuming, without explicitly declaring, a dominant discursive frame and outcasting the opposite position from the text. The adopted position is constituted as the Real, and what remains outside constitutes noise. On an enunciative level, a self-constituted institution is assigned the legitimacy of a recognized social actor, presenting its intervention as a benevolent act of popular demand. These aspects are part of what text curation is called to define.

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In conclusion, while museums aspire to be spaces for dialogue and offer multiple perspectives, the possibility of neutrality or apolitical mediation is questioned, given the argumentative nature of language. For this reason, we consider museums' social role to be intertwined with their political position. Finally, we argue that community agency must accompany community participation in both enunciative and argumentative terms. Without this, there is a risk of falling into instrumentalization, which ultimately undermines any emancipatory objectives.

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Ambiguity in meaning-making: Filmmaking, curating, and interpreting

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BY: **Mieke Bal**

ABSTRACT

Both the semiosphere we live in and the curating we practice are constantly changing. Hence, the meanings these practices produce are unstable. In this essay, I attempt to join semiotics, the theory of signs and sign use for communication, with its 'sphere,' and curatorial practice, as a mode of making art active, inter-active; to make it work. In my latest book, currently in press, I argue, through invoking life experiences of the most diverse kind, that the tools of meaning-making are not simply a solid knowledge of the language. They involve listening, dialogue, the temporal aspect of looking back, and the creativity of imagining other possibilities. Meaning happens in encounters. The practice of curating is a key one of those. And so is, to bring in my own practice, filmmaking. The primary one of the encounters that curation produces is the first- and second-person exchange between viewers/participants and the work of art (rather than artworks as things). Semiotics is the theoretical field where this is recognized and theorized so that it becomes possible to analyze meaning-making without dictionary-like simplicity and rigor, and without eliminating subjectivity, which is neither void nor all-encompassing. The second part of the concept of *semiosphere* comes from an awareness of the spacetime-specificity of meaning-making. This is what semiotics and curating also have in common. Ambiguity is crucial to meaning-making, and specific semiospheres can become prominent as the meanings shift and multiply. To understand, negotiate, and deploy meanings in the European semiosphere, alertness to ambiguity as productive is of crucial importance. In this essay, I go through several of my works in which filmmaking and curating have joint forces. The key term that connects them is the 'essay' in Adorno's sense.

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1. Entering the semiosphere

With the current precarious state of the world, the post-Brexit turmoil, and the militant aggression at the Poland-Belarus border, not to speak of the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine, it seems unproductive, even hazardous, to look especially to Europe if we seek to understand how meaning comes about in specific contexts. 'Europe,' instead, seems to be embedded in Deleuze's 'Sahara aesthetic': a constantly changing, mobile (non-) form, the instability of which carries political risks of severance rather than aesthetic binding. Europe is no longer a reliable unity, if it ever has been. This raises the question of the borders of the semiosphere: the delimitation of the cultural area within which meaning-making follows certain conventions that make meaning transmittable or, rather, sharable. This is semiotics's primary point, as it is also of exhibitions. The concept of semiosphere is, in this sense, a key term of semiotics since it acknowledges the non-universality of meaning-making, as well as its social-cultural nature. Both the semiosphere we live in and the curating we practice are 'Saharic': constantly changing.[1]

In this essay, I attempt to join semiotics, the theory of signs and sign use for communication, with its 'sphere' and curatorial practice as a mode of making art active and inter-active, and to make it work. The first part of the title of this essay is derived from a fragmented autobiographical serial publication, now in production as a book, *Moments of Meaning-Making*, of which the first installment appeared in 2021 in the journal *Philo-SOPHIA*. There, I argue, based on life experiences of the most diverse kind, that the tools of meaning-making are not simply a solid knowledge of the language. They involve listening, dialogue, the temporal aspect of looking back, and the creativity of imagining other possibilities. Meaning happens in encounters. The practice of curating is a key such encounter, and – to bring in my own practice – so is film-making. The primary encounters that curation produces are the first- and second-person exchanges between viewers/participants and the work of art (rather than artworks as things) Semiotics is the theoretical field where this is recognized and theorized, so that it becomes possible to analyze meaning-making without dictionary-like simplicity and rigor, and without eliminating subjectivity, which is neither void nor all-encompassing. The second part of the concept of the *semiosphere* comes from an awareness of the spacetime-specificity of meaning-making. This is what semiotics and curating also have in common.

[1] On meaning-making, which he terms meaning generation, as a general issue in semiotics, see Yu (2019a). I use the term "aesthetic" in the sense of Baumgarten (1970 [1750]), excessively succinctly, as 1) binding, 2) through the senses, 3) in public space. This comes close to the concept of the semiosphere. For a brief explanation, see Hlobil (2009). On Deleuze's 'Sahara aesthetic,' see Buydens (2005).

In a very useful volume occasioned by the 100th birthday of Russian-born (1922-1993) literary scholar Juri Lotman, one of the foremost semioticians, edited by Marek Tamm and Peeter Torop, the latter, an Estonian scholar of the semiotics of culture, opens his chapter on the concept of 'semiosphere' by stating that this "marks his [Lotman's] move towards *dynamic cultural analysis*." Adding that "the concept has traveled from one terminological field to another," he concludes this introductory paragraph by arguing that the "'semiosphere' marks the complementarity of disciplines studying culture, the movement towards the creation of general theory of culture and *flexible methodology*" (all emphases added).[2]

Besides everything else I can learn from that rich 2022 book, in these opening sentences, three terms speak to me in particular: 'cultural analysis,' 'the concept has travelled,' and 'flexible methodology.' The first of these, 'cultural analysis' as distinct from 'cultural studies,' formed the grounding of a research institute I co-founded at the University of Amsterdam in 1994, the thirtieth anniversary we are celebrating on December 13, 2024. The insistence on 'analysis' is crucial and congenial to Lotman's commitment to close reading. The second underlies my book on 'travelling concepts' in the Humanities. And the third statement has been a long-time directive for my research and teaching work. Boundaries between disciplines have never satisfied me and always hindered the depth of thinking and analysis. This circumscribes my personal-academic 'semiosphere.'

I don't even remember if I learned any of these concepts/ideas or all three, primarily from Lotman, or if, in contrast, recognizing these issues in his work endeared it/him to me because I was so preoccupied with them. My academic work has always been semiotic-inspired, and the three angles Torop mentions in that first paragraph explain why. Lotman, along with Peirce, has been my semiotic sources of inspiration. Lotman insisted on close analysis as a more detailed engagement than what cultural studies propagated. Hence, the "Cultural Analysis" in the title of our research institute. The fact that concepts and conceptual thinking 'travel,' adapting to disciplinary, geographical, and historical shifts in different semiospheres was particularly relevant for Lotman in his Russian-European (spatial) and politically transforming (temporal) context. My book on 'travelling concepts' explains this in detail, without focusing specifically on Lotman. And although he remained primarily concentrated on literature, that art form was never isolated from the broad context in which he worked.[3]

[2] Torop's phrases or terms I quote in the following paragraph are all on the first page of Tamm, Marek and Peeter Torop (eds.) 2022. *The Companion to Juri Lotman: A Semiotic Theory of Culture.* London: Bloomsbury.

[3] In the order of the Torop citations, see my related books: 1996, 2002, 2022. I make a case for interdisciplinarity as a "flexible methodology" in my earlier book (1988).

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When I discovered the idea of semiotics, now decades ago, my excitement about it concerned the integration of philosophy (thinking) and (close) analysis (doing), as well as the resistance against media-essentialism and disciplinary constraints, with their methodological dogmas. Semiotics offered the possibility and tools to facilitate this integration so that my passion for both, with teaching as an important third, could ease in as an activity that *made sense* – to use a semiotically relevant phrase to be taken literally as well as figuratively. On the side of philosophy, besides Spinoza, Bergson and Deleuze, Theodor Adorno always accompanied my thinking. That attachment is due to his integration of socio-political wisdom with philosophical rigour. In spring 2020, just one week before the worldwide lockdown, I encountered that double integration once again. To my astonishment and delight, I was invited by the famous film school in Łódź, Poland, to make an experimental 'essay film.'

I had one week to conduct a day-long seminar about the essay film, to discuss the project with the participants, and to shoot, edit, and finalize the film in a semi-foreign semiosphere, working with actors, cinematographers, sound engineers, and editors whose language I did not understand at all. Fortunately, English was, as usual, a helpful tool. The word 'essay' in its meaning of 'trying,' in turn in its Anglo-Saxon two meanings of 'attempting' and 'challenging,' was more than appropriate. From beginning to end, ambiguity and its productive side-effects and affects accompanied the process. Trying as it was, the activity turned out highly exciting and satisfactory. And ambiguity, with the resulting instability of meaning, made a crucial contribution. I wish to put ambiguity at the heart of the concept of the semiosphere, as well as of the practice of curating. This is what makes it, like semiotic practice in general, both stable in the sense of delimited and unstable. Curating is this, too. It happens in a delimited space but can never be fixated.[4]

Ambiguity is crucial to meaning-making, and specific semiospheres can become prominent as the meanings shift and multiply. To understand, negotiate, and deploy meanings in the European semiosphere, an alertness to ambiguity as productive is of crucial importance. The foregrounding of ambiguity in William Empson's classic book from 1930 had a decisively enriching impact on the practice of literary criticism. Through ambiguity, we can also be alerted to something like an international semiosphere, as well as intermedial curating. To make the case for the beneficial effects of ambiguity, in what follows I will first primarily consider the effect of one *sign*, in fact a simple one much used in Europe, which changed everything in the essay film I made:

[4] For my views of teaching, specifically concerning visuality, see the interviews organized by Lutters in the 2018 book. The invitation to Łódź came from Dr. Jakub (Kuba) Mikurda. The genre of the essay film has recently been discussed widely (esp. Rascaroli 2008). Mostly, however, these essays discuss films, so, they are highly self-reflexive, and relatively difficult to bring to bear on other issues, such as curating, which, for me, is crucially 'essayistic.'

the exclamation mark: '!' It is not a word nor a letter; it is not part of an alphabet nor a signifier carrying a signified in the line of Saussure. It is neither iconic nor indexical, in terms of Peirce's semiotics. Nor can it be considered part of Lotman's secondary modeling systems because it does not translate language into an artistic text. Yet, it is undeniably something like a sign, semiospherically specific as it is, and as such, it is quite powerful. It changes meanings, intonation, and interaction with addressees. It can also help transform the practice of curating from 'bossy' to leaving visitors/spectators free, as active participants. In my view, the appeal to active participation is the key to successful curating. So, curating is not primarily a mode of showing, but a mode of staging encounters, where the work of art comes alive and works to initiate a first-second-person exchange.[5]

To be precise, thanks to the exclamation mark there are simultaneously two titles to my 2020 film, each carrying its own meaning, semio-situation, and effects. The first is IT'S ABOUT TIME. – ending on a full stop, denoting the subject or theme of the film – what the film is 'about' in the ordinary sense of that preposition. This is a kind of 'third-person discourse,' the impersonal language use where the object (the 'about') is absent from the scene. This thematic center concerns my ongoing interest in and argument for revising our sense of history by turning the linearity of chronology into a mutual movement or directionality between present and past. I have argued for that temporal mutuality by proposing the term 'pre-posterous' (1999). This term is ambiguous, with a self-ironic wink, alluding to the way I have been scolded for writing about art in a (wrongly) allegedly ahistorical way, considered 'preposterous' in the sense of 'absurd,' whereas I simply ('literally') sought to make the prepositions 'pre-' and 'post-' dialogic.[6]

But the small sign – a term I will continue to use, if only because it is so simple and short, but without essentializing it – that changes everything in the film's title is the exclamation mark '!' The title is, in the final version: IT'S ABOUT TIME! with the subtitle: REFLECTIONS ON URGENCY, appealing to a typical phrase current in the Anglo-Saxon semiosphere: it's about time we do something; something must happen! This is the rallying call for climate activism; as such, it is a first-second person discourse in a personal, interactive language situation. Of course, it is also, or should be, the rallying cry for the abolition of racism and the current anti-Islamic and anti-migration hysteria. This small sign completely transforms the meaning and the communicative situation. The exclamation mark also changes how we pronounce the title, becoming a sound figure. It makes us raise our voices and even, imaginatively, raise a

[5] William Empson's book on poetry first published in 1930, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, had a decisive impact on literary criticism in the 'close reading' mode, especially concerning ambiguities and other complexities of poems.
[6] I won't debate the possibility of using the term 'sign' here. Many replace it with 'model,' as a "form of meaning." See Yu (2019a) and, more extensively, Sebeok and Danesi (2000).

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warning finger, with a transformation of meaning and of address as a consequence. It is what turns a film on (about) an intellectual issue into a political one – thanks to the ambiguity of English – with the result of integrating the two. And similarly, it is what turns an exhibition from a 'purely' aesthetic occasion for enjoyment into an enticement for thinking. Thus, it inflects the quick absorption of information from so-called 'social media' – which are not social at all – into a more time-consuming, (self-)reflective attitude. This integrative transformation through ambiguity is, for me, the most crucial aspect of semiotics over disciplinary fields – its relevance. But how can this small sign that hardly belongs to a category of signs be understood in a semiotic framework, how can it address, call on the visitors of an exhibition? This is the question I am raising here. It is crucial for the encounter between semiotics and curating. Both fields are sites of encounter between individual viewers and the objects, be it films or artworks, they are invited to respond to.[7]

2. Trying semiotics

The kind of film I was asked to experiment with was called 'essay film.' This essay is about the essay, then. This is what the essay has in common with curated exhibitions. Not the essay as a genre, though, but as a form (as Adorno called it) of thought alive that is 'partial' in the two senses of that felicitously ambiguous word: subjective and fragmented. This sounds excellent as a definition of curating. Thinking as social, performative, active, and always unfinished; as dialogic. Rather than taking a fixed semiotic theory as my point of departure, as a filmmaker and curator, I had to start in practice; from the essay film as a text in the film medium, and its needs, in search of suitable concepts, techniques, and creative ideas. This is also part of semiosis, not easily fitted in Lotman's sequence of language-text-culture-semiosphere. Instead, language comes in as a helpful tool for providing information, in curating through captions and catalogues, and in film through dialogue and subtitles. But in both cultural practices, the key point is the freedom of the viewers to think and to change their opinions if they see the point of that, solicited by what they see. To begin with, the film needed a story to hold viewers' attention, just as curating needs to bring in artworks or other objects they can focus on, mostly unified in historical position, thematic relevance, or stylistic commonality. And, as a film, it needed (audio-)visuality. Specialists in communication theory call this 'transmediality' – a term I decline to use

[7] The essay film can be watched on my website, at http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/its-about-time/ My 1999 book *Quoting Caravaggio* lies at the heart of the intellectual reflections on time ('about'). In the film, Cassandra, playing a teacher (with Walter Benjamin as her student) quotes from that book.

because of the 'indifference' implied in the preposition 'trans-' but here, indicating a transformation from one medium to another; hence, let's call it 'intermediality.'[8]

This was my primary challenge. For developing the script, which I wrote before traveling to Poland and encountering the participants, I took on the mythical figure of Cassandra. She could foresee the future but, in an antique *#MeToo* case, when she declined to sleep with him, was cursed by her boss Apollo to never be believed. With Cassandra's story, retold by East-German writer Christa Wolf in an updated, 'pre-posterous' version from 1983, I tried to 'figure' the rallying call implied in the English phrase "It's about time!" The verb 'to figure,' on which more below, stands for the effort to make a figural shape for the thoughts on the indifference of people towards the imminent ecological disaster of the world, and through that figuration, to make those thoughts 'contagious.' The exclamation mark in the title indicates that side of the film's title. But if Adorno so enigmatically but also inspiringly called the essay a 'form,' I had to find a corresponding form that would integrate story and image, audiovisuality and language, as I had done in 2017, while curating an inter-medial exhibition. This is how curating and meaning-making join forces, media, and skills.[9]

For my purposes, along with Lotman's key concept, I was compelled to (intellectually) cross the Atlantic and, acknowledging that he had become a world-wide semiotic master no longer confined to the American semiosphere, to call on Charles Sanders Peirce. Primarily through Umberto Eco's work, Peirce became semiospherically European. At first sight, Peirce's concept of the 'icon,' the category of signs grounded in correspondence, relied too much on resemblance, raising the unanswerable question of the referent. Peirce's index could work but lacked the visuality cinema and exhibiting need. And 'symbol' would remain too close to convention, whereas innovation was my goal. Instead, after much reflection, I temporarily suspended the semiotic framework to end up with French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the *figural*. This concept is not particularly semiotic, although I find it very fitting in semiotic thinking. The philosopher came up with that concept in his attempt (essay) to overcome the tenacious word-image opposition. In his 1971 PhD thesis, he argued for language as more dynamic than it is usually seen, turning it into a force, a movement. As such, he argued, language is closer to the Freudian unconscious as laid out in The *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) than to any Saussure-derived structuralist conception of it; dynamism as opposed to structural stability.

[8] All terminology and ideas on (inter)mediality are engaged with the two-volume collective work edited by the late Lars Elleström (2021). His introductory essay is a theory on its own. I wrote a foreword to these volumes. On intermediality, see also my 2024 article.

[9] The Cassandra story came to my attention again through the brilliant artwork by Indian artist Nalini Malani, who mobilized it in several works of painting, video-shadow-pays, and animations. See my study on her video-shadow-plays (2016), the first chapter of which is devoted to the Cassandra work she made for the Kassel Documenta in 2012.

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And the importance of visuality and other sense-based aspects in Freud's theory of interpretation, with its semiotic implications, has not been appreciated enough, whereas it is crucial for his thinking. In a sense, it implies a form of intellectual curating: bringing images into contact. Including, especially, *force* in his concept of language, Lyotard describes meaning as sense, in terms that include affect, sensation and intuition, movement, and also spatiality. For him, language and the meanings it produces are primarily dynamic. This corresponds with Lotman's flexible methodology as invoked in Torop's aforementioned paragraph. I consider Lyotard's concept as an ideal encounter between semiotic and curatorial thinking and practice; between entering a semiosphere and creating one. In that sense, an exhibition is a particular, spatially limited semiosphere, becoming intensely activating. And if the visitors walk through it, the moving nature of film comes nearer. So, let's consider Lyotard's concept. Force, for Lyotard, is inherent in language, and it is

> ... nothing other than the energy that folds and wrinkles the text and makes of it an aesthetic work, a difference, that is, a form... And if it expresses, it is because movement resides within it as a force that overturns the table of significations with a seism that makes sense...[10]

I find the word "seism" particularly powerful in this revision of what language is and does, akin as it is to images, to movement, to figuration, to any endeavour to *show*. The word re-introduces iconicity in the figural view of language. These words affiliate language with, specifically, cinematic language, based on the etymological sense of 'movement' (*kinetic*) rather than any technical specificity. Both languages, in their great diversity in Europe, and the cinematic as an informational tool, a mode of communicating and an art form, are prominent in the European semiosphere. And we can juxtapose curatorial practice to these two semiotic forms or even embed them into curational practice.[11]

I also found it remarkable that Adorno's extensive writings on literature (two volumes in English) begin with an essay on... the essay, thus giving that category pride of place in literature, coming before poetry, prose, or theatre. But surprisingly, it comes as a 'form.' I interpret that term in Adorno's essay title as congenial with Lotman's sense of 'structure' as a 'secondary modelling system,' although without the rigour Lotman attached to structure (probably in line with Saussure). However, Adorno does not define

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[10] I quote from film and philosophy scholar D.N. Rodowick's rendering of Lyotard's concept (2001: 9-10). To grasp the concept more fully, it is rewarding to read Rodowick's first chapter, 'Presenting the Figural,' 1-44.

[11] For another solid explanation of the figural in relation to and distinction from 'figure' and 'figurative,' within the context of art history in its relation to psychoanalysis and philosophy, see Vlad Ionescu (2018). The author discusses the ideas of influential image theorists. I discuss the conception of the cinematic as kinetic apropos of the paintings by Edvard Munch and Flaubert's prose in *Madame Bovary*, making an implicit case for the figural (2017: 24-43).

his key word 'form.' Did he have difficulty defining it? I suppose so. What kind of form is that, where nothing can be fixed? In line with Deleuze's 'Sahara aesthetic' I decided to give the film, as well as the essay I published in the wake of it, the formless and unfixable form of short fragments, which could be seen with the full stop/third-person discourse, and the exclamation mark as the sign of second-personhood. I did something similar when I was invited to curate an exhibition at the Munch Museum in Oslo and was asked to integrate our video installation MADAME B: EXPLORATIONS IN EMOTIONAL CAPITALISM in it. This was an opportunity to foreground the interdisciplinary encounter that both semiotics as a theory and curating as a meaning-making practice compel.[12]

Adorno devoted much of his essay on "The Essay as Form" to bridging the gaps that binary oppositions tend to dig, which he did through nuancing, even if he does not foreground that verb. This resistance against binarism is one of the motivations for my ongoing interest in this philosopher. The following passage characterizes the philosophical *tone* – a nuance that goes well with Adorno's use of "form":

> The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character. (Adorno 1991:9)

Along with the series that ends on the rejection of reductionism, of these words of wisdom, 'partial' – mind the ambiguity of that word! – and 'fragmentary' in particular seem to bring us closer to what an 'essay' can be or do, as well as what curating, with its choice-making and activating force, consists of. Both words resist the idea of the total, of the encompassing whole, but also, in its shadow, the totalitarianism that seems to have many places of the current world in its grip. Adorno contrasts binary thinking with an endorsement of ambiguity, as I do in the present text.[13]

In addition to being the opposite of totality, 'partial' also means 'subjective,' in the sense of acknowledging that what the essayist brings forward cannot pretend to be an objective, factual truth but instead, lays close to her or his heart. This is where semiotics and curating join forces. This subjectivation accords well with semiotic thinking, where acknowledging the indispensable role of the act of interpretation is always a key element.

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[12] The video installation of MADAME B was displayed in its most extensive, 19-screen version. For more on it, and the exhibition as a whole, see my 2017 book, which was initially meant as a catalogue but became a fully-fledged study of Munch's work, our installation, Flaubert's literature and of curating as a meaning-making practice, which relies on semiotics to be possible.

[13] I published an essay on experimental film in *Text Matters* (2020a). Mark the productive ambiguity of the journal's title. I recycle some of the ideas laid out here from that essay. Ambiguity, crucial in my analysis here, is not just reducible to Empson's seven types, but more generally, a kind of uncertainty of the kind Cobley advances (2016: 88).

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Elleström, who was keen on implicating semiotics, called it "cognitive import": the transfer of the message/sign/ 'media product' – to use a media-unspecific term ¬– to the perceivers, who are set to work to transform it into their own semiospheric habits. For interpretation is social, responding to what others have advanced on the text or image, the 'media product' under consideration. This makes curating such an important practice. In curation, interpretation in this social foregrounding is the basic semiotic practice without which curation would be senseless. Partiality also means 'passionate,' in that the holder of the view brought forward cares about it. And then, there is the element of 'rational,' since partiality also encompasses the wish to persuade. And this can only be done through rational arguments. In curatorial practice, such arguments remain implicit, but activating viewers requires their presence. As for 'fragmentary,' this accords well with the non-total(itarian). Let us keep these two words, 'partial' and 'fragmentary,' in mind, with their multiple meanings, together foregrounding even more strongly that nothing can be whole – which is a key feature of curatorial practice. Following Adorno's thinking, my semiotic reasoning here, is geared towards ambiguity as a key to cultural complexity. This is always bound to particularities of semiospheres and therefore undermines any ambition of universalism. The primary task of curating is to preserve, and foreground, ambiguity, as an incentive to think on your own.

'Essay': in addition to taxing, difficult, the word means 'trying'; attempting to say something for which no ready-made (literary) form or genre exists as yet. This is the Sahara aspect of the semiosphere, as well as of curatorial practice. And 'genre' is not where we should look to understand the essay, then, but rather, keeping the words in movement, explore the word-name itself. The modesty that word includes is crucial: trying is attempting, groping towards, fumbling, even floundering. That modesty itself acknowledges that nothing is perfect nor finished, and also, that no one does anything alone; that making something is collective and social, and always in process. Curating resonates with that view of making. This accords well with Lotman's view of semiosis as social, as well as with curatorial practice. It also has a temporal consequence since it intimates the idea that 'things,' such as artworks or films, are never completed; they are, as the Deleuzian saying has it, 'in becoming,' since 'trying' is never over. If anything fits well with the attempt – essaying – that curating is by definition, it is this insistence on becoming.[14]

But 'essay' also includes 'thought.' You don't try something without, first or during, thinking about it. As it happens, one of my films that Kuba Mikurda considered essay films, and which had enticed him to invite me for this experiment, REASONABLE

[14] For a lucid and succinct explanation of Deleuze's conceptual use of the verb form 'becoming,' see Biehl and Locke (2010).

DOUBT: SCENES FROM TWO LIVES (2016), concerns precisely thought; the social, collective, performative aspects of the activity and the resulting ideas. The narrative strand of that film consists of scenes from the life of René Descartes, Western modernity's primary rationalist who, as my film suggests, was far from being so exclusively rational as we have made him out to be. According to the essayistic thrust of that film, thinking itself is tentative. Thinking, then, occurs in the essay-mode. This makes the essay an important, indeed, crucial cultural phenomenon, and an indispensable support for curating. I would even contend that curating is, by definition, in this Adornian sense.[15]

3. Relationality

There is one other aspect of the essay that I consider as fundamental as arguing through implicit choices because it is as social as it is semiotic, one that derives from it. That is reciprocity, mutuality, reversibility: dialogue, not monologue. This is the socially crucial aspect of relationality. Whether or not curators as essayists are alone when making/writing it, they are already responding to other ideas that are around; an essay is bi- or multi-lateral. As convinced as the essayist is likely to be when embarking on making an essay, the fact that nothing can be done in isolation – even sitting in a study in front of a computer, one is intellectually, mentally surrounded by others – entails a responsive attitude to the call and contribution of other people inhabiting the same semiosphere to the topic of the essay and the essayist's argument. This is the dialogic nature of thought and of the subsequent 'trying.' In this sense, the essay 'as form' is a model of thinking in general, and its figuration (its form) is exemplary in this sense. This holds not only for the other people directly or indirectly involved, which, in curating, are usually quite a few, but also for what, in our binary mode of thinking and considering the world, we take too easily to be the 'object.' In my work on visual and literary art, and my few curations, I have frequently advocated an open ear and eye for what the object, so to speak, has to say. In this line of thought, I have put forward one of my academic catchphrases, "the object speaks back." By that phrase, I mean that the object of analysis must be given the opportunity to resist an interpretation the subject, the academic, comes up with. This can be done by employing a simple

[15] On this and my other films, see http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/ This film, on René Descartes and Queen Kristina of Sweden, premiered in the Muzeum Sztuki MOCAC in Kraków, in the film and philosophy festival in 2016. Professor Roma Sendyka made this possible. Simultaneously, the Museum of Photography displayed the 5-screen installation that I made on the same subject, curated by Roma Sendyka and Curatorial Collective, with an Open Access catalogue (in Polish): http://jagiellonian.academia.edu/KolektywKuratorski. A book on this project appeared later (also in Polish).

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procedure: whenever we cite or quote something or use an image to 'illustrate' an argument, it pays off to look back and check the alleged example against what we just wrote about it. The point is this. If it doesn't quite match, so much the better; thinking that non-matching through, we learn from the object.[16]

This bi-lateral collaboration also holds for thought itself. The most effective formulations of this I know come, not coincidentally, from a psychoanalyst and from a cultural analyst, both brilliant and original in their respective fields. Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas wrote, in one of those sentences that became an enduring guideline for my work: "I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it." (1987: 10) Not only does this phrasing express modesty – the author acknowledges that he does not yet know precisely what he is busy thinking about or thinking out – but also, it qualifies the intensity ("engaged") and the liveness of the thought-in-becoming. Most importantly, Bollas's idea of trying to think up itself collaborates with him. This should not be taken as an unwarranted personification. Instead, it signifies the limit of the thinker's power, as well as the dynamic quality of thought as an activity. The author and his 'object,' the idea he is working on, the idea in becoming, do it together. The idea 'wishes,' strives to be thought; it even struggles to achieve the status of idea. Rather than personifying the idea-in-becoming, the phrase acknowledges the need for collaboration, the integration of tentative process with Saharic results, and "second-personhood," that crucial feature of curating.[17]

In a strikingly comparable formulation, the cultural analyst, semiotician and film scholar Kaja Silverman formulated her theory of the image of, or *as* memory, in the following way:

> If, in trying to make sense of this strange account of unconscious memories, I am unable to avoid attributing to them the status of a subject, that is because subjectivity itself is in its most profound sense nothing other than *a constellation of visual memories which is struggling to achieve a perceptual form*. (2000: 89, emphasis added)

That struggle is not only bilateral; given that both Bollas, the author and the idea-in-becoming, are connected to many other beings, issues, and things, it is multiple. It is more like an exhibition than a simple dialogue. Silverman's word 'constellation' intimates that same multiplicity. This is also a feature of the essay as form, approach or genre, if we endorse the following summing up in a reflection on Adorno's essay:

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[16] See for a more detailed explanation the interviews in Lutters, 2018.
[17] I borrow the very useful term "second-personhood" from the feminist Canadian philosopher Lorraine Code (1991).

> Nearly all the familiar topoi are here: the apparent spontaneity of presentation, the emphasis on rhetorical sophistication, the exaltation of the incomplete, the rejection of a purely deductive logic, the eschewal of heavy-handed profundity, the antipathy toward systematic dogmatism, the treatment of non-scientific, often unconventional subject matter, the central importance of play, the insistence on human fallibility, the image of a meandering, exploratory journey. (Pourciau 2007: 624)

When read in detail and with ambiguity, this passage can be seen as a philosophical curation of an idea. If we continue to read for intermediality, this can be understood in a way that brings the visuality in more strongly. This list reads like an impressionist painting, Sahara-like unstable. The features are like the dots that, without line drawing, end up figuring something. There is nothing systematic about it, which, in positive terms, helps to characterize the essay even better. It assists us in avoiding any prematurely fixating attempt to define the essay as a genre. It also helps to renounce efforts, on the part of the essayist, to fulfil all these expectations, since incompleteness is part of the essay-as-attempt. In curatorial practice, the possibility to make changes in an exhibition during its tenure can lean on the passage as well. In an exhibition I co-curated and that travelled to four different countries, this openness became central when we decided that in each country, a local artist would be added to the exhibition.[18]

So, if only as a tactic in curatorial practice, it is useful. But how, then, could I begin thinking of an essay *film*? From the awareness of the importance of bi-laterality and without fear of contradiction, let me briefly enter into the fictional world, which is undeniably an element of the semiosphere. I now reflect on my primary interlocutor, who is a fictional being – one of those struggling ones. Fictionality is omnipresent in art, even abstract art, where it is possible to invoke the potential of 'visibilisation' in the case of a film I co-made with Lena Verhoeff, the migrants with whom the busy urban people in the European countries decline to engage.[19]

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[18] This was the exhibition 2MOVE I curated with Miguel Angel Hernández Navarro in 2004-2008. The ambiguity of the title integrated the moving image of film and video with the movement of people in migration. The videos were not *about* migration. See our book from 2008.

[19] See our semi-abstract film REFUGEEDOM: LONELY BUT NOT ALONE, which I made with Lena Verhoeff in 2022-23. The genre of the essay film has recently been discussed widely (esp. Rascaroli 2008). Mostly, however, these essays are films on films, so, they are highly self-reflexive, and relatively difficult to bring to bear on other issues. The concept of 'tactic' as distinct from 'strategy' has been developed by Michel de Certeau in the introduction to his 1984 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In a brilliant recent study, Tingting Hui brought it to the present world. Exceedingly briefly put, a strategy is for the powerful who seek to win a battle; a tactic for the ordinary people who seek to live (Certeau xix).

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4. Figuring characters as signs

In my search (attempt) for semiotic forms that could make the thoughts I wanted to propose and convey, the ambiguity had to remain intact. Hence, the 'about' and the rallying cry had to stay paired, even intertwined. The characters had to figure meanings as signs, no matter what (Peircean) category is the principal one. Iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity are always merged in any sign use, albeit in different proportions. The primary issue is the interaction between the figures, where narrativity comes into play. I figured the 'about' idea through the enactment of a tableau vivant of Cassandra's lover Aeneas as Caravaggio's *John the Baptist in the Wilderness* (1604), with an allegedly abstract but in fact, highly sensuous contemporary painting by American painter David Reed shifting over it; and by interactions of Cassandra with two paintings by South-African-Dutch painter Ina van Zyl, which precariously balance on the sharp and impossible distinction between reality and fiction; as well as semiotic utterances and 'real life.' This is how filmmaking, in my practice, becomes a form of curating, and vice versa: how curating, by compelling visitors to move around in the exhibition space, produces movement that turns the visitors into cinematic figures. The enactment juxtaposed with the historical painting becomes a live commentary on the latter. The juxtaposition speaks for the resulting image combination, to which the viewers are invited to respond. In such cases, film viewers and exhibition visitors share their participation in the 'work' of art.

Figure 1. The enactment

Figure 2. The lesson

In both instances, the characters become figures, and as such, figurations of ideas. The living body of the actor playing Aeneas, and the photocopy of the 17th century painting – a still of a still – intermedially produced a media product: the *tableau vivant*. Then, during a history lesson in which Cassandra (now acting as a teacher) explains pre-posterous history to her lover-student, who was dressed up as a Walter Benjamin look-alike, the media whirl around. In a discussion with his teacher, Aeneas quotes a passage from Benjamin's fifth thesis on the philosophy of history, which has been profoundly influential for my thinking on history: "[E]very image of the past that is not recognized by the present *as one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably" (emphasis added). Theory – here, philosophy – participates as a medium in itself. But this quotation also foregrounds the urgency of curating as a mode of compelling thinking in the visitors/participants now. For, curating works in and for the present, even if artworks from the past are included in the exhibition. Through its compelling effect on visitors, it insists on the simple but often-forgotten fact that looking, by definition, is an act in the present tense.[20]

It is after this quoting-reading, with the staged copy of the Caravaggio painting, with the *tableau vivant* just seen still in the perceiver's mind, that this is literally and concretely turned into an intermedial product when the painting by David Reed shifts over it. For a moment almost – but not quite! – this contemporary painting hides the older work, or 'pre-text,' as I like to call such precedencies. In the same vein, 'figuration,' here, is a more precise and specific term for a particular kind of intermedial sign. These figures are also needed as a controversial, slightly polemically entangled couple of lovers. Cassandra, in one of these cases – the other one concerning the precarious distinction between sign and thing – also acts as a teacher of history, which is key to her later decisions. In that role, she explains the concept of 'pre-posterous history,' in a slightly pedantic tone. And Aeneas, allegedly her student, responds to her teaching in the (quoted) words and with the looks of Walter Benjamin. These two figures are thus figural instances of pre-posterous history, as its personifications. Whether you wish to call them in that capacity signs, figurations, or models, is up to you. This depends on your theoretical semiotic framework. But the effect of these moments in the film brings the essay film very close to curation.[21]

For Cassandra (played by Magdalena Żak), I had to develop ideas about how to visually render stubbornness and despair. In that context, I also thought about something

[20] Needless to say, this Benjamin quote supports the idea of "pre-posterous history." To preserve the past, it must be made actual in the present and have relevance there. This can be considered an epigraph to all my work on or with art, including my few curatorial experiences.

[21] Cassandra reads the key passage from the introduction of my 1999 book on pre-posterous history, and the enactment of the Caravaggio, with the Reed painting shifting over it, is an example, or embodiment of it.

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that seems banal but is, in its materiality, also firmly anchored in the semiosphere: costumes. As a teacher, she looks proper and serious in a black suit, with her hair in a bun. For the scenes in the palace, but also a scene where she explains her position and vision to the public, I brought a shapeless and colourless (off-white) silk dress, underneath which she wore her own contemporary 'punk' half-boots. I also brought a large link necklace, a chain that, coming close to merging iconicity with indexicality, would bring in the idea of captivity. This brought the serious historical (alas, non-fictional) topic of slavery into the temporary European semiosphere. Is that historically justified? Unfortunately, it is. Slavery is a theme I had been intensely focusing on in the video project I had made in 2019 and am currently showing, DON QUIJOTE: SAD COUNTENANCES. For each presentation of this installation I did what I had done much earlier with my project NOTHING IS MISSING, a multiple-channel video installation (5 to 17 screens), of 25–35 minutes (looped), on mothers of migrants, from 2006–2010: I asked the local museum managers or curators to curate, hence, to make the installations.

Although Cervantes created Don Quijote after five and a half years of suffering slavery in Algiers, hence, outside of Europe but captured within the Mediterranean, we know only too well that slavery also continues to occur within the European semiosphere. In Wolf's novel, from (then) East-Germany, Cassandra reflects on her captivity, even if it is in the rich palace of her parents. This poignant contrast had to be figured as well, and the location in the Herbst Palace, part of the Museum Sztuki, was perfect for this contrastive figuration.[22]

For the role of Aeneas, Kuba's creative expertise found the actor Adrian Budakow – like Magdalena Żak, a true find. To make a somewhat banal point, which does, however, concern the semiosphere: a preliminary question I asked him was if he would mind appearing half-naked in a figuration I had conceived but not yet written. This was the impersonation just mentioned, as a *tableau vivant*, of Caravaggio's 1604 *John the Baptist* – an act I had been nurturing for some time, even before I embarked on filmmaking, as a demonstration of my concept of 'pre-posterous history' as well as my conception of Baroque as both philosophical and artistic. Such mundane-seeming issues are all part of designing a film and curating an installation or exhibition. No strictly delimited semiotic theory can obscure it; the semiosphere is also a socio-political sphere. Thankfully, Adrian didn't mind.

[22] The 16 screens of the Don Quijote project are available at: http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/installations/don-quijote-sad-countenances/ An extensive catalogue of the Don Quijote project has been published in English and Spanish (see Bal 2020). On slavery in Cervantes's case, see the incisive, well-documented, award-winning study by Colombian literary scholar María Antonia Garcés (2005). On contemporary slavery, see Bunting and Quirk (eds.) 2017. NOTHING IS MISSING is documented on my website, at miekebal.org, under artworks/installations. I have written about it in different places, the first being "Nothing is Missing," in *Intermédialités* 8, ed. Johanne Villeneuve (2006: 189–224).

Then, as another banal-seeming issue, a title was needed, which would have to harbour the allusions to the many aspects of the Cassandra figure and of time. Semiotics does not easily signify time. Determined to bring together, not in harmony but as a "discussion," my many concerns about time, the ambiguous title IT'S ABOUT TIME! came up, with the exclamation mark as the shifter between the two sides of the sign's meanings. As mentioned above, I have developed and put to work a notion of time that acknowledges that not only does the past influence the present, hence, also the future, but also the other way around. But the title contains a warning, too: hurry up! figured through the exclamation mark. Hence the subtitle, REFLECTIONS ON URGENCY. But there is more to temporality, and the semiotic figuring of that is not so easy. Another figural aspect of time is rhythm. This has a bodily side to it, which is essential if we want to recognize the importance of the body as not separate but at one with the mind. This was a decisive issue in the film on Descartes I mentioned above. In the essay film, rhythm is always important, but especially in one which is about time. In view of the second meaning of the title, the rhythm is almost hectic, becomes stronger as the film progresses, and closes on a frantic dance by Cassandra. She ends up saying: "the future is now," perverting chronology even more strongly, but with a real-sounding urgency. In fact, the different episodes of the film I have mentioned can very well be displayed, curated, as an exhibition. This is a feature of all my films, whether or not we made an exhibition version along with the feature.

Indeed, the backbone of the essay film is Cassandra's temporal awareness. This is another crucial feature of curating. When visiting an exhibition, viewers are compelled by time. Standing and strolling around burdens the body. This is why I have insisted on providing seating whenever I have curated a show. Cassandra's repeated call for urgency is key, both to the ancient myth and Wolf's subjectivation of it, as well as to my attempt to make an essay film on this issue. Aeneas's interest in participating in political power, his rationality and his resistance against Cassandra's wisdom, figure the other side, the impossibility of Cassandra's wisdom winning the upper hand in a semiosphere where men have more influence than women, and (official) politics rules over, and overrules, the (social) political. And in addition to the three aspects of temporality – traditionally, in narratology, called order (sequentiality), duration, and frequency – the one that falls under 'duration,' rhythm, is figured in Cassandra's frantic disco dance towards the end. The most personal, intimate moment in the film, I thought, should be one when the near-future infringes on the figures' personal lives, and the power relations are put on hold.[23]

[23] The three aspects of temporality have been first systematized by Gérard Genette (1973). See my *Narratology* for succinct explanations (2017a: 66-103), and for examples of analysis based on them, Bal (2021: 100-124).

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This became the moment when, walking in the rainy city streets, holding hands, Cassandra breaks up with Aeneas as her lover because he remains too close to the powers-that-be, resulting in a near future in which he would become stultified. Whereas he asks her to come with him to escape from the dangerous place wherein they are caught, she simply, and still, affectionately, refuses. This, in her wording, concerns the future – one she rejects. She abandons him with the poignant words: "I cannot love a hero. I do not want to see you being transformed into a statue." This wording can be comparable to the exclamation mark: a gearshift of meanings. The metaphor of 'a statue' suggests rigidity, stultifying, death. This is the ending of Wolf's novel. Cassandra's words cited above, "the future is now," spoken after her frantic disco-dance, marks the end of my essay film.

5. Space as a semiotic tool

One of the primary reasons for the relevance of semiotic thinking for curating is to expand the realm of meaning-making beyond language. This is as obvious as it is difficult to theorize and to fit into a methodology. To make the case for this "other" of language, remaining with the Lyotardian concept of the figural and engaging the communication theorists mentioned above, I will now turn to the least language-like medium for meaning-making, which is, precisely, curating. The work of art, in its inter-activity, has come to stand for certain social groups and the moral values it seeks to invoke; for moods, and event-occasions, historical periods, and ideas. This is certainly not universal but bound to the borders of particular semiospheres. The architecture of the space, the colours painted on the walls, and, before anything else, the selection of working artworks and their disposition in specific combinations, which, together, present the meaning of the exhibition, make curation the creation of a specific semiosphere.

This brings semiotic theory back in again. In an explanation of his three primary categories, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness (of which the concepts icon, index, and symbol are better known to most), Peirce wrote:

> If the universe is thus progressing from a state of all but pure chance to a state of all but complete determination by law, we must suppose that there is an original, elemental, tendency of things to acquire determinate properties, to take habits. This is the Third or mediating element between chance, which brings forth First and original events, and law which produces sequences or Seconds. (1992: 234)

To historicize Peirce's thoughts, it is useful to consider modernism. In a brilliant study of the modernist novel, Robert Caserio argues that any attempt to understand modernism itself as a totality and hence, to sum it up and surpass it, "goes against the grain of what modernism 'stands for'" (1999: 3). The most relevant element in this discussion of colour in the European semiosphere, however, is the paradox we cannot avoid running into. Here, we need to include Freud, who also kept wavering between law and chance in his theorization of the psyche. On the one hand, the psyche is self-divided and thrives on the haphazard wanderings of Eros, "which plays havoc with the attempt to render desire uniform and intelligible" (Caserio 1999: 20).

On the other hand, Freud insisted just as strongly on the fact that nothing the psyche does is accidental. The psyche is both plural and unified, but not coherent. The insight that chance with its agency is always around the corner makes any attempt to prescribe how art should be and how it should be received, futile by definition. Therefore, instead, curation is an essential contribution to the 'second-personhood' of art – the way it is active; it *works*. That is why I prefer to speak of 'the work of art' instead of 'artworks' as things. The task of the curator, or rather, the curatorial team, including the artists, is to make art *work* in this active sense, including meaning-making. That means that art must be set to work, 'speaking' as a 'first person' to the participating 'second persons' that are the viewers or visitors.[24]

One aspect of curating is chance: which space happens to be available, which work can work there, Surrendering entirely to chance, however, would be a disempowering attitude that might even lead to cynicism, and to giving up on the possibility of communication, which is the ground for meaning-making in semiotics, the concept of semiosphere, as well as the activity of curating. And denying chance in an absolutist belief in laws risks leading to destructive sciences, boring exhibitions, and totalitarian politics, which is equally disempowering. The solution is to be found in the tension between the two – a tension that is unstable and subject to a heterochronic temporality. This is productive to the extent that it provides agency and, at the same time, compels modesty. It is a case of temporal ambiguity. Here lies the power of art, not to compel viewers to open themselves up to the potential emergence of new forms and, subsequently, new social existence, but, paradoxically, to allow that to happen when chance meets habit.

In the face of totality, chance is both an opportunity and an obstacle, argues Caserio (1999: 6). He proposes the term *tychisms* (from the Greek *tychè*, meaning chance) for the different conceptions that not only admit chance but also its dual capacity to preclude totality and offer an alternative for it. In other words, tychism allows for the

[24] In addition to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, for this integration of language, text and culture, I rely in this section on Caserio 1999 and Doane 2002, as well as Carlo Ginzburg's fundamental article on the index (1980).

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agency of chance; its work. The insistence that chance is not just an occurrence, that it has agency and can cause things to happen, is key to understanding its philosophical importance and its compelling force in curation. Both William James and Charles Sanders Peirce struggled with chance in its opposition to the totality of law. In this guise, chance is an alternative subject for the second half of the well-known slogan: man proposes, chance disposes. Abstract artists often felt limited by the predominance of symbolicity and wanted to get iconicity and indexicality back in there. Hunting for ways out of the restrictive effects of these conventions, they looked to music and the language of poetry. This is where curatorial activity can meet semiotic theory.[25]

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[25] For the bond between visual art and poetry, see art historian Michael Ann Holly's new book (2025).

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The researcher-curator: What poietic experience?

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BY: **Camille Béguin** and **Patrizia Laudati**

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.

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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,

[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

[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.

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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

[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.

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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.

[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

[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).

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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

[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).

[9] As Jean Davallon explains, "the organization of space as a whole has become the materialisation of a mental construction", especially since the shift he identifies "from using space as a writing medium to writing through the space" (Davallon 2011: 39).

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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

[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.

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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)

[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

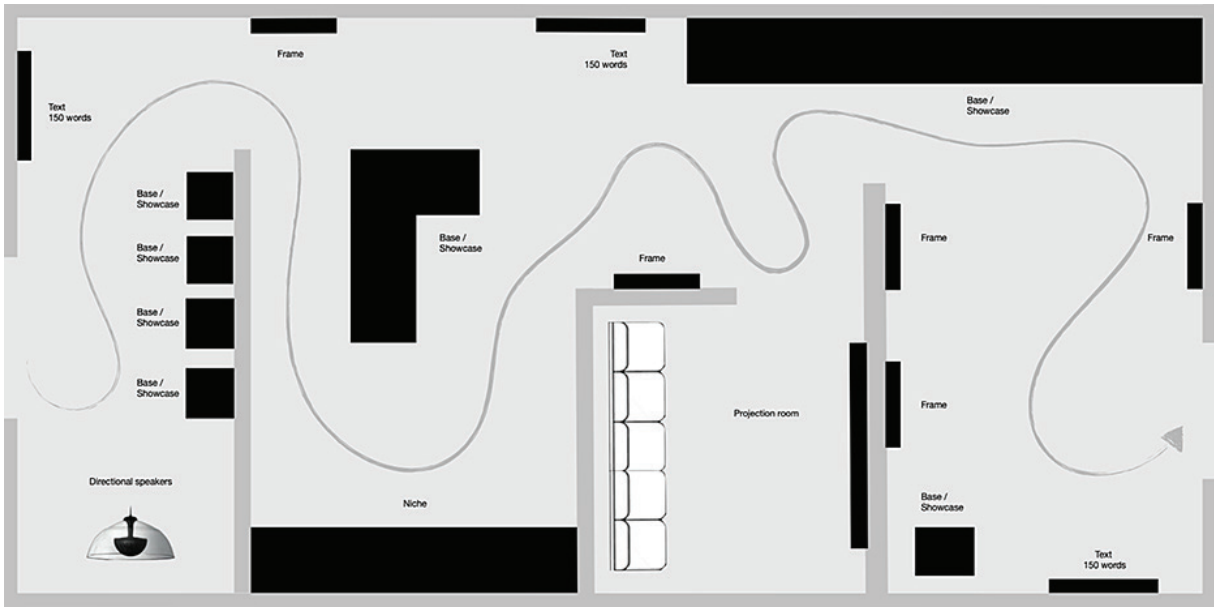

Figure 1. Fictitious exhibition plan for a constrained curation

[13] Project funded by the French National Research Agency under the Investments for the Future UCA[JEDI"] program, reference no. ANR-15-IDEX-01.

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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).

[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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Towards a curatorial translation zone

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BY: **Emily Butler**

ABSTRACT

In a globalizing world, the act of translation is potentially everywhere (Bassnett 2014; Blumczynski 2016, in Vidal 2022). It involves a creative process of transfer, interpretation, and transformation across sign systems, cultures, and worldviews – an act with profound socio-political implications. Within the visual arts field, it describes the practice of artists and curators who work increasingly internationally as 'material-semiotic actors' (Haraway 1988: 595), engaged in renegotiating semiotic and cultural frameworks while questioning the socio-political status quo. Yet, what are the limits of translation? What is lost or gained in this "necessary but impossible" act (Spivak 2022: 69)? Who translates in 'power-differentiated' contexts (Haraway 1988: 579-80)? This article outlines how artists and curators explore the possibilities and limits of translation within contemporary art to put forward the poetics of the untranslatable (Cassin 2014; Glissant 1990). It develops the concept of (mis)translation and positions the curatorial space as a translation zone (Apter 2006) – a dynamic, impermanent site of semiotic and cultural renegotiation, where hybrid languages, new forms, knowledges and relations can emerge (Bhabha 1994). In doing so, it embraces a 'kaleidoscopic totality' of world views (Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant 1990).

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Introduction: definitions of translation

Translation is a dynamic process of semiotic and cultural renegotiation – that can also be called *(mis)translation* – and a fruitful activity for artists and curators seeking to challenge the socio-political status quo and the limits of our worldviews, which are so embedded in language and signs. Rather than mourning what is lost in translation or lamenting the untranslatable, I explore the creative possibilities that emerge within a 'curatorial translation zone' in contemporary art.

In the visual arts, 'translation' has become a widely used metaphor to describe the conversion of a concept into form, the shift from one medium to another, and the movement of artworks and exhibitions across the globe. It signifies an act of transfer, interpretation and transformation. For artists and curators working across media, disciplines, locations, languages, and socio-political contexts, translation is not merely a tool but a means of interrogating those very structures and systems.

More broadly, translation is central to daily life as we navigate and consume information and objects from around the world. As Piotr Blumczynski asserts, "translation is – at least potentially – everywhere" (in Vidal Claramonte 2022: 8). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term originally comes from the Latin *translatio*, meaning 'transferring.' It can be understood through three interrelated concepts: a transfer from one place to another, an interpretation in different terms, and finally, a transformation into a different form.

Exhibitions, events and talks, which invite the movement of people and objects across different locations, can be understood as forms of transfers in the first sense of 'translation.' A curator can 'translate' an artwork in many ways – through a loan, within a group show, in a different country – requiring subtitling, contextualization and interpretation for new audiences.

All translation is, fundamentally, a process of communication: a transfer from sender to receiver across place and time (Otsuji and Pennycook, in Vidal Claramonte 2022: 7). Semiotic theory has emphasized the role of audience interpretation in communication (Barthes 1977), a concept I will explore further in the next section. Within this framework, artists, curators, and audiences can all be seen as 'material-semiotic actors' to use a term coined by Donna Haraway (1988: 595).

Consequently, the second key sense of 'translation' is 'interpretation.' Lawrence Venuti asserts that "every text is translatable because every text can be interpreted" (In Torop 2020: 266). Interpretation can be defined as: firstly, the act of explaining or the resulting explanation; secondly, a personal version of something; and thirdly, a variation of the original, whether into another language, sign-system, or medium. The roles of author, translator, and reader – or artist, curator, and audience – are equally important and deeply entangled in the process, which is

far more than a simple transfer. Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal argue that translation is also an experiential activity, shaping and transforming all parties involved (2024).

The third understanding of the term translation, therefore, emphasizes transformation – it is also a creative act (Malmkjær 2020). As an ongoing process of authorship, of rewriting semiotic 'texts,' translation can be seen as a form of creative expression. Edwin Gentzler argues that "all writing is rewriting, copying a new form of creativity, […] modifying a text becomes authorship" (in Vidal Claramonte 2022: 21). For instance, an artist's concept can be translated into different media: first a sound piece, then a video, a textile work, and finally a sculpture. Creativity lies at the heart of translation, which makes it such a compelling metaphor for the work of artists and curators. Within the visual arts, translation is "one of the most vital forces available to introduce new ways of thinking and introducing significant cultural change" (Gentzler in Vidal Claramonte 2022: 64).

Despite its rich semantic possibilities, translation is also a limited process. One of the main insights from Walter Benjamin's seminal text *The Task of the Translator* (1923) is his critique of 'faithfulness' in translation: "It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards to the original" (1970: 71). A translation may result in an inferior imitation or a radically different iteration.

Moreover, translation is not a seamless transfer, as languages exist within complex systems and are shaped by specific socio-political contexts. In 'Translation as Culture,' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques the unequal terms of translation concluding that "translation is necessary but impossible" (2022: 69). This paradox extends to the curatorial space, which I will argue functions as a 'translation zone' – a space of semiotic and socio-political re-negotiation, akin to the space of comparative literature outlined by Emily Apter (2006).

As I have argued, translation is an act of communication, that involves transfer, interpretation and creative transformation. However, it has limits, making it 'necessary but impossible'. My research focuses on artists and curators who make these exchanges between sign-systems and contexts visible, exploring the possibilities of (mis)translation.

In this article, I analyse intersemiotic and intercultural processes in translation. I explore the limits of translation, what may be lost or gained in these processes, the question of the untranslatable and a possible universal language. I then examine who translates and who holds the power to translate within the field of contemporary art, with particular focus on the roles of artists and curators. Finally, I explore translation as a dynamic process of epistemic renegotiation – or (mis)translation – and introduce the concept of a curatorial translation zone.

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Intersemiotic movement

Translation has traditionally been seen as a linguistic process – a process of carrying meaning from one language to another. Rather than privileging artists working with text-based media, this article adopts a broader semiotic understanding of 'text' in contemporary art. In this section, I draw on Roman Jakobsen's influential essay 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation' (1959) to examine intersemiotic translation movements, encompassing interlingual and intermedial shifts. I also consider Mª Carmen África Vidal Claramonte's argument that translation is an intersemiotic activity that is "multilingual, multimodal, and multisensory" (2022: 1). In other words, translation involves a shift between media (drawing to sculpture), stimulates different senses (vision to sound), uses different scales and modes of engagement (text to performance) and different temporalities (photograph to multi-channel video). Artists are primed to be translators in all senses of the word, using processes such as quotation, homage, and adaptation. In the process, they also provide meta-reflections on the codes, context, and frameworks they operate.

Umberto Eco also challenges the notion of carrying meaning over between two languages; he highlights the complexity of meaning, favoring the term 'interpretation' to describe the process, placing emphasis, instead, on the audience's reception (Eco 2003: 13). As we have seen, this interpretative dimension is central to translation. During the second part of the Twentieth Century, Translation Studies developed in parallel with Semiotics, conceptualizing translation as a dynamic, interpretative act, albeit grappling with a dilemma: the impossibility of considering formal equivalence over sense, of 'domesticating' or rendering 'foreign' a text, and ultimately of replicating an 'original.' Influential philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt famously observed that "all understanding is at the same time a misunderstanding, all agreement in thought and feeling is also a parting of the ways" (von Humboldt in Steiner 1998: 181). Meanwhile, Lydia Liu argues that translation theory has emphasized transferring meaning or sense too much. At the heart of translation theory since its inception lies the enduring problem of "presumed commensurability or incommensurability amongst languages" (Liu 2019). She urges us to consider, instead, the 'absence of sense' as a starting point for translation, shifting focus toward the transfer between codes and the encoding technologies, such as 'scripts' and 'media.'

While Eco, Spivak, and Liu highlight the challenges of defining meaning, semiotics provide frameworks for analyzing how meaning is constructed. Drawing on Saussure's foundational work (1966), Roland Barthes (1977, 1991) outlines how every text-based or visual sign consists of a dynamic relationship between signifier (the mental image) and the *signified* (the concept). In the visual arts, both artworks and exhibitions function as advanced sign systems, semiotic texts open to interpretation and translation.

According to Barthes, the relationship between signifier and signifier is often arbitrary, yet society tries to fix these through processes of cultural connotation and myth-making (1977). Connotation emerges through repetition and reinforcement; culture is shaped through 'language,' and inversely, 'language' is culturally connotated. Curatorial and artistic translations operate in this sea of encoded signs and objects between languages, cultures, and socio-political contexts. In fact, the arts help affirm symbols, myths, and ideologies, as per the work of the photographer and designer of the 1955 *Paris Match* cover examined in Barthes' essay 'What is Myth Today?' (1991). Yet, in counterpart, creatives such as artists and curators also have the power to make this myth-construction apparent.

In 'The Death of the Author' (1967), Barthes focuses on the receiver of the message. He argues that no text has a single stable signified in semiotic terms. Instead, meaning is constructed through interpretation, with the (male) reader emerging as the unifier in its reception (1977: 146). He famously argues that the "death of the author" paves the way for the "birth of the reader" (1977: 148). Venuti's earlier reflection that everything can be translated as everything can be interpreted (Torop 2020: 266) builds on these ideas. Freed from the constraints of authorship, artists as translators test the limits of sign-systems and power structures, inviting endlessly re-interpretations from their audiences. By extension, this also frees the curator from needing to provide a definitive 'reading' of an artist's work since intersemiotic and intercultural translations are neither stable nor final.

Jacques Derrida extends Barthes's ideas through his concept of *différance*, arguing that "A linguistic system is essentially negative in that it comprises only differences amongst signifiers and differences among signified elements, not similarities" (Thomas 2011: 149). Translation, then, operates within a system of signification based on "similarity, difference and mediation," as Stecconi suggests (Harding and Carbonell i Cortés 2018: 19). Texts and artworks function as complex sign-systems, structured through differences and deferral, rather than fixed meaning. Spivak's evocative image of 'language-textile' in 'The Politics of Translation' (2022: 38) extends Barthes's idea of a semiotic chain, emphasizing that language, and by extension, translation, is fundamentally relational, based on difference rather than repetition or continuity.

How, then, to tackle Barthes's assertion that "everything has a meaning, or nothing has" (1977: 89)? As have seen, this paradox lies at the heart of translation theory, as per von Humboldt's claim that all understanding is at the same time misunderstanding (in Steiner 1998: 181), and has been explored in different ways by various schools of semiotics. If, as per Spivak and Liu, meaning is no longer a helpful concept, and if, as Venuti claims, every text can be translated because every text can be interpreted (Torop 2020: 266), perhaps Barthes's statement should be re-read in these terms: everything can be interpreted and/or nothing can. This formulation emphasizes that the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive and aligns with the Derridean notion of *différance*, in which 'everything' and 'nothing' exist in a state of interdependence.

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Emily Apter explores the dilemmas of translation through the lens of comparative literature, framing translation as existing on a spectrum where everything *and/or* nothing can be translated (2006). She terms this the 'translation zone.' Expanding on this notion, I propose the concept of the curatorial translation zone, where meaning is not fixed but relies on the input and reception of artists, curators, mediators, viewers and critics and other actors in the field of visual arts. These participants function as 'material-semiotic actors' (Haraway 1988) in a sea of encoded signs. Consequently, translation becomes an arena of experimentation with meaning-making at what Spivak describes as the "selvedges of the language-textile" (2022: 38).

Intercultural movement

Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) inspired a 'cultural turn' in translation theory through its analysis of identity construction, social agency, and national affiliation. This seminal publication, which has influenced many artists and curators, examines how meaning in Western hegemonic discourse is structured around binaries – self and other, colonizer and colonized, among others – thus reinforcing hierarchical dualities. Bhabha calls for the subaltern subject to reinscribe meaning, to disrupt these binaries to create a space of ambivalence and difference, akin to Derrida's notion of *différance*. By disrupting them,

> [it] opens up a space for translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. (1994: 25)

For Bhabha, translation is a powerful tool for reforming meaning and challenging fixed identities, where the neither/nor is renegotiated. The resulting space of translation he calls the "Third Space of enunciation" (1994: 37).

In his critique of neo-liberal multiculturalism, Bhabha argues that while efforts to reflect a more diverse and inclusive society may attempt to incorporate the perspectives of other cultures, they often fail to fully understand or acknowledge the complexities of representing them. He cautions against the trivialization of difference through what he calls 'cultural pluralism' and 'spurious egalitarianism' as per his critique of *Les Magiciens de la Terre* show at the Centre Pompidou in 1989 curated by Jean-Hubert Martin – one of the first major cross-cultural, cross-temporal, global shows (1994: 245). This critique remains relevant to many recent international projects, such as art biennales. Referencing Walter Benjamin, Bhabha calls for a "'foreignness' of cultural translation" (1994: 227). In other words, a cultural translation decanonizes the original,

putting meaning in motion and fostering hybridities that are *neither one nor the other*. In short, Bhabha views cultural translation as an opportunity to reformulate fixed notions of culture and to redefine the terms of its discourse.

Spivak, however, approaches the term 'cultural translation' with caution. Whilst she agrees with Bhabha's critique of culture as a fixed container of identity, she argues that the unequal terms of globalization prevent genuine cultural exchange. As a result, she warns translators against becoming 'native informers' who open their culture to being appropriated by others. Spivak cautions: "When we move from a linguistic translation into cultural translation, we are providing ourselves with an alibi… culture is the last thing that can be known or translated" (2008: 3). In essence, as culture is an abstract site of difference – as per Bhabha's definition – Spivak contends it cannot be translated. Like James Clifford, who described the museum as a 'contact zone' (1997), she frames translation as a site of struggle, where intimacy with the 'other' can occur, nonetheless, through a deeper embrace of difference.

In the field of contemporary art, artists have been exploring cultural translation, treating objects as hybrid carriers of histories – I will return to this topic when analyzing Kader Attia's notion of 'Repair.' Meanwhile, curators are increasingly aware of diverse audience demographics and varied modes of engagement. More frequently, they integrate meta-reflections on their own curatorial and cultural translations within shows, critically examining the limitations of their frameworks, for instance, the institutions they might be working in. Ultimately, both artists and curators are increasingly striving to establish what Bhabha calls the Third Space of enunciation (1994: 37), a space of perpetual translation, a possible curatorial translation zone as exemplified by Amilcar Packer's show at CRAC I will outline further in the article. Yet, despite growing self-reflection, questions remain: Have the terms of the exchange between artist, curator, and audience become more equitable? And, are those in positions of power also becoming better listeners?

The limits of translation: from the untranslatable to (mis)translation

Having explored intersemiotic and intercultural movements in translation, I now turn to its limits. Returning to Benjamin's critique of the possibility of being 'faithful' in translation, I will explore whether something is 'lost' or 'gained' in translation. Let's consider first the notion of loss. According to Derrida's concept of *différance*, which extends the chain of signification, Spivak argues that while each new sign erases the previous one through difference, its trace remains. She refers to this 'trace' of anterior writing *archi-écriture* (1976: xiv). Rather than identifying a point of origin, this concept suggests an infinite trace – a perpetual construction of the sign through self-deconstruction.

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If we cannot speak of loss since traces of anterior writing always remain, can we speak of gain in translation? In theory, yes, each translation provides a new version of a text in perpetual re-formation. Citing poet Octavio Paz, Susan Bassnett observes that "every text is unique and, at the same time, it is the translation of another text" (2002: 46). In other words, no translation can be definitive, each is a version within the 'textile' of signification to use Spivak's metaphor. Ultimately, translation entails both loss and gain, but rather than viewing these as opposing forces, it is more productive to conceive of translation as a process of continuous transformation as per Spivak's reference to *archi-écriture*. More valuable still is Benjamin's notion of the 'afterlife' of translation, which opens limitless possibilities to artists and curators.

Rather than focus on loss and gain, could one consider the 'untranslatable'? Emily Apter tackles the question alongside Barbara Cassin in their monumental *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2014). In the preface, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood argue that the untranslatable does not mean the impossibility but rather the 'interminability of translating: the idea that one can never have done with translation' (2014: vii). This idea aligns with Derrida's reflection: "nothing is untranslatable; but in another sense, everything is untranslatable; translation is another name for the impossible […] it is easy for me always to hold firm between these two hyperboles which are fundamentally the same, and always translate each other" (1998: 56-57). Spivak's more clear-cut summary is "translation is necessary but impossible" (2000: 69).

If the possibility of translation always remains, can we conceive of a universal language? Both Umberto Eco and George Steiner have argued that a theory of Darwinian diversification of language holds more credibility than the utopian dream of a 'pre-Babel' common language (Steiner 1998: xiv). In his writings, Édouard Glissant critiques universal concepts, viewing them as remnants of imperialism. Instead, referring to the myth of Babel, he asserts that "It is given, in all languages, to build the Tower" (1990: 123). Building on this idea of 'polysemic vertigo,' Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant champion Creole as a radical example of a 'kaleidoscopic totality' expressed through art (1990: 901, 892). They propose:

> we recommend to our artists this exploration of our singularities, that is because it brings back to what is natural in the world, outside the Same and the One, and because it opposes to Universality the great opportunity of a world diffracted but recomposed, the conscious harmonization of pre-served diversities: DIVERSALITY. (1990: 903)

Like Derrida and Bhabha, Glissant recognizes the importance of difference and relationality in constructing knowledge. "In binary practice, exclusion is the rule (either, or), whereas poetics aims for divergence – which is not exclusion but the accomplished

surpassing of a difference." (1990: 96). He emphasizes how identities, like languages, can "' change by exchanging' in the energy of the world" (Glissant, Chamoiseau, and Plenel 2021: 38-39). For Glissant, exchange, circulation, and linguistic diversity are essential to the vitality of the universe. Difference enables exchange, while hegemony, stasis, and monolingualism stifle change. From their side, Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant urge us to consider the concept of 'kaleidoscopic totality' and 'diversality' rather than the idea of a universal language (1990).

Glissant's influential writings call for a space of discourse that embraces rhizomatic relations and polyphonic vertigo, allowing for complexity, opacity or irreducibility, and, at times, incommunicability. In this space, translation and untranslatability intermingle amidst order and chaos, fostering radical new languages. Crucially, Glissant opposes reductive synthesis and argues that exchange is enriching. Concerning the visual arts, he declares: "You, we, must multiply the number of worlds inside museums" (Glissant and Obrist 2021: 204).

As I have argued so far, there are limitations in all the following statements: everything has meaning vs. nothing has meaning; everything vs. nothing is translatable; gain vs. loss in translation; connection vs. division through translation, etc. These oppositions reflect the paradoxes inherent in the translation zone. What emerges consistently is the redundancy of a sacrosanct 'original,' as well as the idea of universal mutual translatability (Ricoeur 2006). A potential way forward may be 'infidelity to the original' as Spivak puts it (2022: 142) – or what Sarat Maharaj describes as 'perfidious fidelity' (1994) – engaging in the 'afterlives' of texts, as Benjamin suggests. Consequently, artists and curators are uniquely positioned to experiment with linguistic and cultural translation processes: they can (mis)translate. (Mis)translation is one of the key creative possibilities within the curatorial translation zone.

Who translates in the contemporary art field? The artist as translator

After analyzing the possibilities and limitations of translation more broadly, I will now examine how artists and curators engage with (mis)translation in contemporary art. I will begin by exploring the broader language and discourse of the art world.

In a globalizing world, translation is potentially everywhere to return to Blumczynski and Bassnett's reflections (Vidal Claramonte 2022: 9; 84). As the art scene expands internationally, language is central in establishing the symbolic and financial value of artworks, exhibitions, and artistic and curatorial practices across geographies. To borrow a definition by Michel Foucault, the resulting art world discourse operates within a set of rules of limitation, inclusion, and exclusion (1971), and it is driven by its 'material-semiotic actors' to return to Haraway's term.

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A satirical take on this supposed art world discourse is presented in an article by Alix Rule and David Levine published in *Triple Canopy* in 2012, where they infamously coin the term 'International Art English' (IAL). They describe it as a delocalized and artificial form of rhetoric, heavily influenced by French Poststructuralism and the vocabulary and syntax of the Frankfurt School. They argue that beyond its function to reach an international audience, IAL's main aim is to preserve an air of authority to "consecrate certain artworks as significant, critical, and indeed, contemporary" (Rule and Levine 2012: 6).

Despite the article's shortcomings in providing a thorough analysis of the 'language' of the contemporary artworld, two points are worth noting: first, the role of language in bestowing symbolic value and, ultimately, commodifying artists' work; and secondly, the notion of English as a 'universally foreign language' (Rule and Levine 2012: 5). While it is undeniable that English is the lingua franca of the art world, it is also shaped by its key players across the globe. In short, the English employed in the art world is shaped by and consolidates its discourse, to return to Foucault's term.

Having briefly touched the broader context of artworld discourse, I now turn to the role of artists and curators as related cultural producers, as authors and translators working between signs, cultures, and contexts through their respective and different forms of 'text.' While other 'translators' exist in the field, such as public and private funders, art schools, sales platforms, galleries, advisors, the media, collectors, etc., this paper focuses on the curatorial sphere.

Over the past forty years, in parallel with globalization, there has been an exponential increase in artists working internationally, thereby translating their work across different countries, contexts, and languages. In the process, they perform semiotic, linguistic, physical, cultural and epistemic translations – that is, intermedial and intercultural movements outlined earlier – both within their artistic practice and in interpreting their own work.

The curator plays an equally important role in this process as an associated translator supporting the transmission process, as a mediator and interpreter. In theory, there is no hierarchy between an artistic and a curatorial translation, they are 'associated' in the sense of being rhizomatically connected, in line with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept (1987: 7). A curatorial translation can take place before, after, or at the same time as the artistic 'translation.' For example, a curator's interpretation usually follows the artist's concept, though both can also happen concurrently, and an artist can also follow a curator's prompt. Nevertheless, 'power-differentiation' remains at play between artists and curators, as Donna Haraway notes (1988: 579-80), as well as other actors in the visual arts field, such as the host institution or organization.

Let's first turn to artists' works, which span media and disciplines, creating complex sign systems as we saw in Barthes's semiotic analyses. Barthes claims that "art is a system which is pure, no unit ever goes wasted, however long, however tenuous may be the thread connecting it to one of the levels of the story" (1977: 89-90). Artists also add layers in the process, in writing or conversation, discussing their work and that of others to reveal their influences and references.

Complex linguistic, cultural and epistemic translations, are exemplified in Sky Hopinka's *wawa* (2014). This video interweaves an interview between Hopinka and anthropologist Henry Zenk, discussing Zenk's experiences interviewing community elder Wilson Bobb about the Chinuk Wawa language in 2013. Chinuk Wawa is a northwest Pacific Creole and jargon, developed for trade purposes between indigenous and non-indigenous people, drawing from the Chinook language. *Wawa* also includes film and audio recordings of Hopinka teaching Chinuk language lessons, reciting Chinuk vocabulary, footage of a Chinuk phrasebook, and the re-enactment of an interview between Zenk and Bobb from 1983.

Wawa is, in turn, legible and not to non-Chinuk speakers, as it both offers and withholds translation. Zenk's speech is sometimes understandable through English subtitles and when Hopinka re-enacts Bobb's responses in English. At other times, however, English subtitles are absent during Chinuk dialogue. Gradually, Hopinka disrupts clear divisions between past and present, between languages, and between cultures, transforming the complex audio-visual piece into a palimpsest.

Wawa critiques our expectations as global artworld audiences who anticipate a full translation into English. It reflects on linguistic revival in the context of indigenous languages having been repressed, with English forced upon communities through residential school systems in the USA and Canada, for instance. The work interrogates the intentions of those with settler-colonial ancestry, such as anthropologist Zenk's attempt to learn Chinuk, and it considers the linguistic, cultural, and political divides between English and indigenous worldviews. As such, wawa, is a meta-reflection on the dynamics of translation. Aware of the double edge of preserving a language but also the potential of becoming a 'native informant' as termed by Spivak, Hopinka navigates the act of translating and withholding translation (2022: 197). His work exemplifies (mis)translation – a process that enables translation while remaining faithful to a different worldview.

Spivak's oeuvre warns against the cultural imperialism of English and seeks to give voice to the subaltern, furthering her conclusion that "the subaltern cannot speak" (1988: 104). She views translation across borders not as a mere convenience for legibility but as a form of activism. In 'The Politics of Translation' Spivak argues that translation should be seen as "the most intimate act of reading," a process of moving towards the other and loving the original (2022: 208). In the same way that Spivak describes

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translation as a double bind, "necessary but impossible," Hopinka tests the limits of legibility in *wawa*. His love for Chinuk is apparent in his teachings of the language and personal implication in its future transmission. However, a meta-critique of the power imbalance between Chinuk and English is also evident in the work. Following on from Roman Jakobsen's elaboration of the Italian saying *'tradutore, traditore'* [translator, traitor] to "translator of what messages? betrayer of what values?" (1959: 238), and Spivak's term 'native informant,' artists can choose what to translate and critique the process to avoid betraying their own values.

Through invitations to exhibit internationally, artists also translate their work geographically, emphasizing processes of cultural translation. For instance, Kader Attia revisits his concept of *Repair* in different venues. Drawing on Michel Foucault's writings, Attia sees *Repair* "as an underlying principle of development and evolution in science and religion… [since] the biggest illusion of the Human Mind is probably the one on which Man has built himself: the idea that he invents something, when all he does is repair."[1] Instead of the capitalist drive to replace in the name of progress, Attia links physical repair, cultural repair, and reparation as essential processes of post-colonial reflection and healing. He pairs 'continuum' with *Repair*, suggesting that knowledge can be repeated, rewritten, or repaired ad finitum.

In his site-specific commission *Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder* at Whitechapel Gallery in 2013-14, Attia explores *Repair* in relation to collected systems of knowledge, such as books gathered in an 'infinite' library and objects in a cabinet of curiosities. He sees *Repair* as analogous to the process of art and, by extension translation: "art is just an endless process of constant evolution… [and] of constant reinvention" (Butler and Attia 2014: 23). Attia translates his concept between exhibition venues and contexts, while also incorporating these epistemic and cultural movements back into his practice. He acknowledges the context and history of the exhibition space in his work – at Whitechapel, for instance, its history as a former public library. His work centers on *Repair*, but it also embodies a continuum of this notion; in other words, he translates and is translated.

The curator as a translator

Let's now examine more closely the role of a curator, which involves defining the framework of a project and its participants, including possible audiences, conceptualizing and inviting artists to exhibit, and making decisions about placements in the space, the catalog, and the production of events. The curator also writes interpretation

[1] Kader Attia: Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder at Whitechapel Gallery [accessed 7 February 2024]

and press copy, introduces shows, and leads discussions. Both written and spoken language are used for interpretation in curatorial work, creating new 'texts' and extending the 'language-textile' as per Barthes and Spivak. The term 'curating' also comes from the Latin word *cura*, meaning to take care of; in short, a curator 'cares' for the audience, work, and artist.

Building on Harald Szeemann's definition of the curator as a 'generalist', Hans-Ulrich Obrist expands by adding:

> the curator is administrator, sensitive art-lover, preface writer, librarian, manager, accountant, animator, conservator, financier and diplomat. To which we added: fundraiser, teacher, editor, blogger, web-master, documentarian and most important of all, someone, who has conversations with artists and other practitioners. Curators are agents of trans-disciplinarity. Last, but not least, there is the notion of the translator. (Miessen and Basar 2006: 17-18)

Like Attia, Obrist suggests that translation – as a metaphor for epistemic movement – is an essential component of both curatorial and artistic practice, acknowledging their roles in transmission and as part of a continuum of 'Situated Knowledges,' as per Haraway (1988).

Whilst the curator often sets up the terms of the translation, the public completes its reception. For instance, the public response to Attia's Whitechapel Gallery commission was divided. Some praised the immersive Jacob's ladder effect and Attia's ability to weave on the array of different knowledges in the space, while others found it challenging to connect all the threads with Attia's concept of *Repair*. This mixed reception highlights the challenges of carrying over artistic terms into institutional language, be it in the form of spoken or written interpretation. For example, only 200 words were allocated to describe the project on the text panel and website, which is jointly produced by the curators and internal team members, in other words, several 'material-semiotic actors' as per Haraway. Whilst curatorial translation may not be realized on all levels, Attia's work reflects on the power dynamics at play within the project, continuously testing them in new situations. His work is 'untranslatable' in Cassin's sense, meaning that one is 'never done' with translating it, opening up the curatorial translation of Attia's work for infinite revisions (2014: vii).

Whilst the curator has gained power since the 1990s, when it was consecrated as a professional vocation and championed by figures such as Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Okwui Enwezor, their agency remains limited. There are many other 'material-semiotic actors,' as I have already mentioned, including the institution itself, as seen in the case of Kader Attia's show at Whitechapel Gallery.

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The curatorial space as a translation zone

According to Emily Apter, a 'translation zone' is "a zone of critical engagement' that transcends national boundaries and cannot be reduced to a post-national concept" (2006: 5). Apter argues that translation engenders a subjective and epistemic shift:

> Cast as an act of love, and an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalising citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pregiven domestic arrangements…Translation failure demarcates intersubjective limits, even as it highlights the "eureka" spot where consciousness crosses over to a rough zone of equivalency or crystallizes around an idea that belongs to no one language or nation in particular. Translation is a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change. (2006: 6)

Although Apter is writing from the perspective of comparative literature, her description of translation could be applied to contemporary art, its 'authors' and 'readers' being artists, curators, and visitors. For example, exhibitions frequently aim to test people's 'intersubjective limits,' question the status quo, and call for 'political change.' In this context, 're-formation' and 'change' emerge as key terms within these subjective and epistemic shifts.

Vidal Claramonte also highlights epistemic shifts that occur in translation:

> Art addresses issues in which translation is immersed. These issues include schizophrenia between the defense of the local versus the global in the defense of indigenous artistic practices. It also highlights issues of identity in the context of international flows, diasporas, and migrations, with nationalisms and ethnicity (James Elkins *et al.* 2010), the deconstruction of historical discourses based on dichotomies, hierarchical organization and centers of power, to favor 'transnational, pluralistic, horizontal, polyphonic and multidimensional historical-artistic narratives' (Anna María Guasch 2016: 21). (in Vidal Claramonte 77)

A curatorial translation zone, based on Apter's concept, serves as a space where the paradoxes of translation can be addressed. It prompts us to reconsider our 'semiotic technologies' as per Donna Haraway (1988: 579). Drawing on Derrida's concept of *différance*, translation addresses both the 'and/or' of meaning, evoking rather a condition of 'schizophrenia,' as cited by Elkins in Vidal. The false dichotomies of binaries, such as the local/global, center/periphery cited above, the Western/Other

divide unpicked by Bhabha, and the imperial/subaltern by Spivak, are challenged in this space. Analogous to Bhabha's Third Space (1994), the curatorial translation zone is a space where cultures, nationalities, identities, subjectivities, histories, politics and worldviews are reinterpreted.

Haraway argues that the formation of knowledge is situated and subjective, where meaning can be read in multiple ways, where knowledge is not necessarily readily transferable between 'power differentiated-communities' (1988: 579-80). She states: "Translation is always interpretative, critical, and partial. Here is a ground for conversation, rationality, objectivity – which is power-sensitive, not pluralist, 'conversation.'" (1988: 589) In this sense, the curatorial space as a translation space is vital: it offers a platform for negotiation, aware of its 'material-semiotic actors' and their 'situated knowledges' within specific socio-political contexts.

Like Spivak, Haraway also cautions against the globalizing tendency of "translation into resource," where bodies, objects, languages and culture are all bound together (1988: 593). Instead, translation can serve as a means to address the 'schizophrenic' post-colonial and migrant condition, it can address the gaps between histories and languages and power-differentiation. Translation can open a space of resistance, of possibility. As Glissant proposes, through negotiation, "I can change by exchanging with the Other, without losing or diluting my sense of self" (Glissant, Chamoiseau and Plenel 2021: 111).

The Third Space, the interstitial, marginal, schizophrenic zone, this zone of crossing, of exchange, all resonate with the concept of the translation zone outlined by Emily Apter. When applied to the field of contemporary art, the curatorial translation zone becomes a space of polyphony, criticality and pluriversalism. It allows semiotic actors to sit side by side in their 'difference' rather than being co-opted by a monoculture or Anglo-American hegemony. In this context, the notions of self and other are continually reformed, alongside the broader transformation of language and belief systems. Notwithstanding, the curatorial translation zone must always acknowledge its specific socio-political contexts, as Haraway stresses.

An example of a curatorial translation zone is the show curated by artist Amilcar Packer at CRAC, Altkirch in 2022. He describes his project in the following terms:

> *The Four Cardinal Points are Three: South and North* is an essay. More a trial than a test. More notes than text. We could say it's an assemblage, collage, composition, configuration, kaleidoscope, juxtaposition, conjugation, image, constellation, cosmovision. We could say a dream and an invitation. Out of habit we say exhibition.[2]

[2] https://www.cracalsace.com/fr/607_les-quatre-points-cardinaux-sont-trois [accessed 21 August 2024]

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It is the outcome of Packer's collaborative, research-based practice and his PhD, which explores the relationship between matter and epistemology, aiming to "confront the colonial, racial, and cis-heteropatriarchal matrix of structural and systemic violence." [3]

In the show, Packer assembles objects from different time periods along with works by 13 artists. These include drawings by Yanomami people from the Amazon basin, including Naki Uxima Uxiu Thëri and Taniki Xaxanapi Thëri – created in dialogue with Swiss-Brazilian photographer-activist Claudia Andujar – along with her notes on their symbolism and translations. Also featured are performances by Afro-Brazilian artist Ayrson Heráclito – a Candomblé Ogã of Jejê-Mahi matrix, artist, researcher, and curator – and other works.

These objects co-exist with minimal interpretation, primarily through labels, allowing viewers to form their own readings. However, a rich education and engagement program accompanies the show: three performances during the opening weekend; a collaboration between a local school class and the Peruvian radio Apu; a weekend symposium on 'critical matter' led by Packer; an online tarot reading and screening by artist Denise Ferreira da Silva; a screening of the *Pearl Button* (2015) by Patrizio Guzmán and a talk with artist Emma Malig at a local cinema.

The exhibition brings together multiple languages, worldviews, and belief systems from Latin America – Spanish, Portuguese, Yanomami, Candomblé, etc. Objects and artworks are transferred into different contexts, prompting a critical re-examination of historical, scientific, political, and artistic frameworks. Most importantly, Packer reflects on the semiotic tools at his disposal, employing different modes to engage his audience while deliberately leaving room for interpretation and dialogue. He openly discusses his role as a translator and the significance of 're-presenting,' 're-materialising,' and 're-imagining,' in short, of 're-appropriating.' Packer's project functions as a temporary assembly open to negotiation, an 'essay' that reflects on its epistemic positioning or 'situated knowledges.' As a visitor, I left more attuned to my own 'semiotic technologies' to borrow Haraway's terms (1988). In sum, Packer's project interrogates hegemonies by reconsidering subjectivities and epistemologies.

Within the curatorial translation zone, an unsettling yet exhilarating panorama of endless artistic and curatorial translations unfolds – an evolving network of textual 'afterlives,' spanning physical and digital realms. This temporary zone recenters subjectivities, epistemologies and hegemonies. Translation is necessary as it shifts perspectives, but impossible since it is never complete, as per Spivak. With advancements in code-switching, translation appears limitless, yet the crucial question remains: Who holds the power to write the code?

[3] https://www.cracalsace.com/en/635_study-session-amilcar-packer [accessed 21 August 2024]

Conclusion: the limits of translation are the possibilities of (mis)translation

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously stated: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (1922: 74). This assertion highlights the limits of interlinguistic commensurability, but more importantly, cultural and epistemic boundaries. Yet, as poststructuralism has taught us, a limit is also the opening to a possibility. Throughout this article, I have highlighted the paradoxes of translation, recognizing it as being both 'necessary' and yet 'impossible' as per Spivak. I explored the dilemmas of loss and gain in translation, untranslatability and universal languages, and the 'double bind' of translation which, according to Spivak, encourages 'infidelity' to the original (2022: 103, 142). Within the artworld, I have noted that there are many 'translators,' and whilst I am only focusing on artists and curators, I have noted that power differentiation persists, echoing the dynamics of globalization, as Haraway and Spivak remind us. Whilst English remains the lingua franca of Anglo-American hegemony, a critical shift is occurring: the rethinking of source, target, and bridge languages, center and periphery, and the broader discourse that structures the art world.

Glissant, Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant offer a path beyond binaries and hegemony, through changing 'by exchanging' and embracing 'diversality' (Glissant, Chamoiseau, and Plenel 2021: 38-39; Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant 1990: 903). Artists and curators are in a unique position to move 'beyond difference' by highlighting the impossibility of universals, the gaps between languages, the urgency to decolonize discourse, the right to opacity, and the generative possibilities of (mis) translation. The limitless creative possibilities of code to generate hybrid languages opens an endless panorama for artists and curators that resists reductionism and instead fosters *diversality.*

Faced with 'the necessary but impossible' nature of translation, I propose to conceptualise a curatorial translation zone – a space for transmission, transformation and critical reflection on the signs, power structures and epistemologies that shape us. In a globalized, post-colonial world where linguistic and cultural loss accelerates, the curatorial translation zone functions as a dynamic, impermanent negotiation space. It nurtures hybrid languages, novel artistic forms, and emergent knowledges, celebrating a 'kaleidoscopic totality' of cultures.

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Forms of caring

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BY: **Isabella Pezzini**

ABSTRACT

The article examines the issue of art curatorship by looking at two extreme understandings of the practice that derive from the different meanings of the Latin word 'cura,' implying diverging valorizations of so-called cultural artefacts. In the first case, curatorship is primarily oriented toward safeguarding the material permanence of cultural artefacts; in the second, it is mainly focused on the effervescence of their semantic dynamics. On the one hand, it involves a set of practices whose aim is preservation, that is, reducing the risks of the material degradation of heritage. On the other hand, it designates a set of practices that keep up with contemporary interpretive currents and further contribute to and enhance these meanings, as exemplified by the central role that the figure of the 'curator' has assumed. Owing to the curating vocation as a discipline of 'meaning care and social therapeutics,' the semiotic method can play a significant role in analyzing and evaluating these different paths, both from a theoretical point of view and through examining emblematic case studies.

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If there were only great men or geniuses in the world,
everything would be even more complicated.
You need people to keep things under control,
and to take care of the practical problems.

Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Beach*
(chap. XXXIV)

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Assault curators

"The curator, initially a champion of new objects (the modernist era), has become a champion of new ideas (the conceptual era) and finally a champion of himself as a futuristic institutional entity: in this evolution, he has changed the avant-garde forever." This lapidary statement appears in David Balzer's *Curationism. How Curating Took Over the Art Word and Everything Else* (2014). Despite its polemical slant, the book is an intriguing reflection on the dramatic importance the curator has assumed nowadays. This crucial figure has come to outflank and often replace more established institutional art world figures like critics, conservators, or museum directors in prestige and fame, both within the art system and without. Balzer speaks of curationism, introducing a neologism into English to indicate what he believes has become a mass phenomenon even outside the art world. It is a neologism, he writes, "that plays on the assonance with creationism and recalls its connection to religious fervor, divine creation, and grand narratives" (Balzer 2015: 14):

> Curationism is, then, the acceleration of the curatorial impulse to become a dominant way of thinking and being. I contend that, since about the mid-1990s, we have been living in the curationalist moment, in which institutions and businesses rely on others, often variously credentialed experts, to cultivate and organize things in an expression-cum-assurance of value and an attempt to make affiliations with, and to court, various audiences and consumers. As these audiences and consumers, we are engaged as well, cultivating and organising our identities duly, as we are prompted. (Balzer 2015: 8-9)

Balzer offers a reconstruction of how and through which leading personalities this general dissemination and enhancement of curatorship comes about, almost by contagion, focusing first and foremost on the art field. Among these personalities, he cites, for example, the undisputed and original figure of Hans Ulrich Obrist, born in Zurich in 1968, who he describes as a tireless traveler, scholar, and connoisseur – the prototype of the independent curator – before becoming (in 2006) the co-director of the exhibition program at the Serpentine Gallery in London. His biographical achievements include curating his first group exhibition at the age of 23 in his home kitchen, with works by artists that have since become part of the Pantheon of contemporary art, such as Fischli/Weiss and Christian Boltanski! In addition to organizing several influential exhibitions, Olbrist's scholarly activity also includes an ongoing exploration of art institutions, particularly curating.

He has helped to define it as a specific profession bordering on art practice through exhibitions, books, archives, and above all, interviews, some of which were collected in the book *A Brief History of Curating* (2008), in which he dialogues with the 'pioneers,' independent or 'structured,' who in the 20th century in his opinion have operated in

the art system more innovatively. "For me," says Olbrist, "the curator is a catalyst, a generator, and a motivator: a sparring partner who accompanies the artist to the construction of the exhibition - and the curator builds bridges, especially with the audience." Or again: "I think that artists are the most important people on the planet, and if what I do is useful and helps them, then that makes me happy. I want to be useful."

Care and maintenance

Keeping these interesting statements in mind, to which we will return, let us better characterize how the figure of the curator has come to take on connotations of creativity and prominence, joining the already crowded procession of people connected to the art world. Semiotician Yuri Lotman already emphasized the composite and collective dimension of museum management, comparing it to the semiosphere. He described the museum as a sphere of coexistence, interweaving, in a single meaning-producing environment, very different enunciative instances. Typically, the museum's upper management consists of a director, a conservator/collections manager, an educational services manager, a public relations, marketing, fundraising, and communication manager, a security manager, and an administrative and economic/financial procedures manager.[1] These roles are associated with a set of tasks and are inscribed in a specific organizational model. They are linked to determinate positions in the institution whose manifestations are largely predictable.

In this sense, if we go back to the historical genesis of the curator's role[2] and consider the simple dictionary definition of the word, the curator appears to align with the role of the conservator/collections manager. Indeed, the dictionary states: "He who is delegated to the exercise of particular functions of assistance, custody, administration, and surveillance in cases provided for by law," and again, "The scholar to whom the philological edition of a text is owed."[3] This work is specialized and 'behind-the-scenes.' It is fundamental in importance, falling within the broader scope of maintenance or upkeep activities that 'cultural heritage' (Eco 1988), as all material expressions of human life, require. Museums and the artworks they house are characterized by a distinct sense of temporal suspension, functioning as *heterotopias* in Foucault's meaning. That is, they are detached from any potential use value, and they must convey a sense of permanence and, consequently, transcendence around the values that they represent. In reality, however, they are inevitably immersed in time and thus subject lead to the transformations that this entails.

[1] These are the minimum requirements, necessary for all museums to obtain accreditation and inclusion in the National Museum System, expressed in DM 113 of 21 February 2018.
[2] See chapter 'Curare,' in Modena (2024: 253-281).
[3] Google dictionary provided by Oxford Languages.

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The alarm raised by Louvre curator Laurence Des Cars in a confidential report to the French Ministry of Culture, which has become public, about the worrying condition of the museum that stands as the symbol of Parisian cultural hegemony, is topical. Every year, the museum welcomes twice as many visitors as its facilities can sustain. The Louvre's facilities have become obsolete and insufficient even with the major renovation ordered by President Mitterand, symbolized by the famous crystal pyramids designed by Sino-American architect Ieoh Ming Pei for the new entrance (30 March 1989). What seemed to be the height of audacity and innovation and contributed, in no small measure, to launching the architectural fashion for new museums (Pezzini 2011) today requires radical care to continue to operate. This is not to mention the drastic restoration of the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, which started in 2023 and is only slated to be completed in 15 years. Likewise, the recent fire at Notre Dame Cathedral (15-16 April 2019) in Paris showed the extraordinary fragility of even secular works, perhaps heightened precisely by today's hypermodernity. Hence, the constant work of museum agents involved in the preventative conservation of collections and museum facilities and spaces, acting at best according to an ecological approach, although they belong to different departments ('heritage and collections' and 'technical and security services').[4]

When it comes to sustainability, which is now at the heart of the contemporary cultural debate and the concerns of discerning politicians and economists, a new strand of study, the so-called *Maintenance & Repair* studies, is indeed emerging. Denis and Pontille's book *Les soin des choses. Politique de la maintenance* offers a significant example in this field (2023). The two sociologists begin and end their discussion by reflecting on the work of conceptual artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who thematizes the issue in his practice. One of his performances, in a museum in Hartford, Connecticut, consisted of the meticulous cleaning of the glass case in which an Egyptian mummy on loan from the Metropolitan Museum has long been kept, with the final inscription/title 'Maintenance Art Work.' It is a gesture that amounts to cleaning the shrine housing the precious artefact: "The performance," notes Gianfranco Marrone, "had led to seeing the invisible, that is, to perceiving the conditions of possibility, material and moral at the same time, of the gaze, of every gaze, towards the world, and in some way to questioning the hierarchy of values normally taken for granted" (Marrone 2023).[5]

[4] Practices - *savoir-faire, knowhow* - studied by museum anthropology: see Beltrame (2024).
[5] In 2023 and 2024, the International Centre for Semiotics in Urbino (CISS) hosted seminars dedicated precisely to the 'care of things', cf. https://semiotica.uniurb.it/

Curating and re-semantization

Given that the organizational chart of the museum is hierarchical, it seems evident that the figure of the 'curator,' as it has recently evolved, is more complex and is merging with that of the Director. This latter role, at least in Italy, in a distinct type of state museum, the so-called 'super museum,' has been very much emphasized in this sense. Such positions have been filled, for example, through open competitions at an international level instead of being exclusively reserved for internal candidates coming from supervisory agencies and national ministries. The declared objective of this wider candidate search was aligned with a more general plan to foster the modernizing of museums in accordance with the successful 'new museum' model. That is, a spectacular museum, attractive for its architectural form or at least for its interior design; a cultural pole expressing a continually renewed offer; a center of services appreciated by an increasingly vast and stratified public, strongly connected to tourist flows; a public space instead of a space reserved for the few.[6] The results of these initiatives were not long in coming and often accompanied by controversy. To give some concrete examples from Italy, the GNAM (Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea) in Rome has changed three general displays in a few years, at the change of each Directorate, based on very different concepts (Maria Vittoria Clarelli 2012; Cristiana Collu 2016; Renata Cristina Mazzantini 2023). This has ranged from a historical and thematic itinerary of the works in the collection to the negation of an actual itinerary, with the proposal of unprecedented juxtapositions between works from different periods.

Another example is the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, which, during the COVID-19 pandemic, launched unconventional online promotional campaigns through social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok aimed at a younger audience.[7] New museum directors are now expected to adopt a highly personal management style and become super-curators, in the sense above. If, intuitively, the role of the director once seemed linked to greater stability, while that of the curator was associated with freedom – akin to the difference between employee and freelancer – this distinction has now blurred. At the same time, the 'romantic' image of the ingenious star curator is becoming institutionalized through specialized study courses, a common occurrence when prominent personalities create new professional profiles traceable, at least in part, to specific and replicable skills and practices.[8]

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[6] See Velotti (ed.) 2021.
[7] Cfr. Peverini-Pezzini 2024.
[8] David Balzer (2015) devotes the part of his book entitled 'Jobs' to this aspect, in which he examines the curricula offered by various training institutions. In particular, he dwells on the list of the various tasks, organized in several stages, from concept to post-production, that should characterize the professional curator (2015: 124-130).

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Let us try to analyze the 'curator' from the point of view of narrative semiotics. By considering this figure as an actor capable of drawing great narrative potential from the art system as a reservoir, we can see the curator both as an actantial role – that is, in terms of the modal positions that a narrative subject can assume along the narrative pathway that is proper to him – and as a thematic role – that is, in terms of the unfolding of themes or semantic paths. In the former case, it is, as we know, a matter of analyzing the competence that the curator pours into his performances in modal terms, i.e., of want, duty, knowing, and power, both on the side of *being* and *doing*. There is no doubt that the curator we are examining is a What seemed to be a highly motivated subject, an expert who, in some ways, retains aspects typical of the amateur since he is endowed with a competence that is not merely technical but also passionate, dynamic, cohesive, and steadfastly focused on his program (Marrone 2021).

To characterize the thematic role of the curator, and thus his discursive programs, let us focus on the term 'care,' which comes from the Latin 'cura,' and from which we derive not only the curator but also the curious. 'Care' thus implies both the idea of guarding and of being interested in something. In the first instance, the curator, driven by his curiosity, is a seeker. Balzer rightly compares his work to a form of bricolage that Lévi-Strauss speaks of in *La pensée sauvage* (1962). At the basis, there is a free-roaming thought that unites artists who freely invent, using the most disparate materials in their ateliers, with unscripted human groups who observe their environment, experiment, categorize, and construct theories, employing a non-formalized science. It is a quest for intellectual as much as aesthetic enjoyment and, hence, for something of profound value. That which is to be taken care of, articulated as attention, care, commitment, and, at a later stage, implies public affirmation and dissemination.

Somewhat like the 'curate' in the religious sphere, the contemporary curator is supposed to foster the public's 'faith' in art and artists and to successfully do so within the confines of the museum or gallery's political mechanisms. With regards to this last point, we can characterize the curator's competence as endowed with a specific savoir-faire, a strategic competence approaching the Greek Metis, which, as Detienne and Vernant write, implies a complex yet very coherent set of mental attitudes of intellectual behaviors combining intuition, sagacity, foresight, mental poise, pretense, the ability to get out of one's way, vigilant attention, a sense of expediency, skill in various fields, experience acquired after many years. It applies to fleeting, mobile, puzzling, and ambiguous realities, which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation, or rigorous reasoning (Detienne and Vernant 1974).

This type of enterprising curator, so to speak, has little to do with the tasks of a simple custodian of works assigned to him by tradition: i.e., intent on preserving

their material integrity, protecting them from all possible risks to which they are exposed and working to ensure that they are enjoyed in the best possible way. According to some, including critic Boris Groys (2007), the curator/author as understood today, namely the discoverer, theorist, and re-organizer of works – whether new or not – is precisely the opposite of that, and even a potential iconoclast, since he "can't but place, contextualize, and narrativize works of art – which necessarily leads to their relativization."

Elisabetta Modena, in her recent book *Display. Luoghi, dispositivi, gesti* (2024) observes that according to some, "the mere fact of inserting a work or an object in a context, in a narrative or an exhibition space would determine an emptying of its autonomous meaning" – including, moreover, what happened historically with the removal of most works from their original contexts (for example, churches and palaces, but also nations) to collect them in designated spaces. "Even today, the curator 'instrumentalizes' them for his ends, using them as raw material for a project that has its own independent and recognizable authorship, so much so that artists have increasingly claimed to organize the exhibition of their works autonomously" (Modena 2024: 249).

This observation is radical. It implies a value judgement on curatorship that qualifies it as a form of 'cultural deterioration,' an expropriation of the meaning of the work of art. One could argue that this is a rather unjust generalization. In some instances, the super-curator identifies or creates a framework that helps to better understand both individual works and their ensemble. This happens when an artistic movement takes hold through the occasion of each new exhibition of works, even those already known, whose organization in a broader or hitherto unthought-of constellation highlights specific paths of meaning in them. In this sense, one can think of the 'invention' of different art movements: in Italy, for example, the Transavanguardia movement coined by Achille Bonito Oliva or Germano Celant's Arte Povera.

But more generally, it is worth considering the distinction made by Nelson Goodman between the execution of a work and its *implementation*. By execution, he means the entire process of creating an artwork. By implementation, he means everything that contributes to the making of a work, which works, in his view, to the extent that it is understood, to the extent that what it symbolizes, and how it symbolizes it, is discernible and influences the way we organize and perceive the world (Goodman 1984). In a broader sense, Goodman understands implementation as all the processes initiated to 'make the work operate,' regardless of their outcome: just putting a frame on a painting can either activate its meaning or paralyze it, and this applies all the more to the organization of exhibitions and other curatorial actions.

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Semiotics as caring

Here, the meaning of 'caring' ranges from the seemingly simple custodianship of something whose value is already given and only needs to be reaffirmed and maintained to a form of curating that establishes or adds a specific, potentially new value. Obrist himself, though often cited as the prototype of the curator/creator, explicitly positions himself in his statements more in terms of an Adjuvant towards artists, not as a Destinant, even though he may end up appearing as such. Of course, narrative semiotics have taught us that within the same actor, several roles can coexist and that only the analysis of concrete cases can provide answers regarding the dominance of one or the other.

In this regard, I find it interesting to reread the pages that Umberto Eco dedicates to the figure of the *critic* on the occasion of this recurring cultural polemic because they can be usefully extended to the curator. Eco observes that the critical act always takes place in a context that is a theatre of passions: one hates or loves, one adheres to or distances oneself from the choices he proposes. However, in his view, the 'perfect critic' is the one who clarifies the reasons for his passions for the benefit of all (Eco 1989).

With regards to the role that semiotics can play in the analysis and evaluation of curatorial pathways, there has, in fact, recently been a desire in Italy to characterize the field's contribution precisely in terms of a "cure of sense" (Marrone and Migliore 2022), to recover its vocation as a 'social therapeutic': that is, at the same time 'knowledge' and 'action on the state of things,' not therefore in the abstract but in its capacity to transform them, in the wake of the teachings of its best masters (Greimas 1987; Fabbri 1995).

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Voices in the museum: Exploring soundscapes in curatorial practices

punctum.gr

BY: **Silvia Pireddu**

ABSTRACT

The semiotics of curating is a theoretical approach that focuses on constructing, communicating, and interpreting signs, symbols, and meanings in museum exhibitions. With the increasing prevalence of digital technologies, curators are tasked with balancing different technologies, encompassing visual, sound, and multimodal experiences. In this perspective, the paper examines the role of sound as a semiotic dimension within exhibition contexts, analyzing how it functions as a potent signifier and enriching the interpretation of curated spaces with exhibited artefacts. This study explores the semiotic dimensions of soundscapes by analyzing examples from an exhibition at GAM Turin, Italy, the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, USA, and the work of Nicholas Party at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Canada. It will study how sonic elements such as music, language, and ambient noises intersect with cultural contexts to create layered, polyphonic interpretations of exhibited artefacts. I will finally discuss the potential of sound as a powerful medium for conveying meaning, evoking affective responses, and immersive engagement of the public.

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Introduction

The semiotics of curating investigates the construction, communication, and interpretation of signs and symbols within exhibitions and museums. By observing 'from above' how the elements composing an exhibition or a collection are organized, this approach analyses the mechanisms by which the visual and textual elements intersect in creating meaning (Lorente 2016; Pezzini 2021).

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In recent years, the integration of technologies, virtual experience, and immersive environments has broadened the scope of curatorial semiotics to incorporate various sensory dimensions, thereby underlining the need for a more complex theoretical framing of curatorial practices. From this perspective, sound can be seen as a crucial semiotic resource that contributes to the meaning-making processes and is a signifier capable of enriching the interpretative skills of visitors: music, spoken language, ambient sounds, and immersive soundscapes involve visual and spatial elements, resulting in a multi-layered, polyphonic interpretation of exhibited artefacts.

This article explores the role of sound in curatorial practices, focusing on how it is meant to shape the visitors' experiences. It analyses the use of sound across three settings: a museum exhibition, a permanent collection, and a contemporary art installation to examine its semiotic dimensions and the ability to evoke emotional responses, convey meaning, and enhance visitor engagement with cultural artefacts. I consider the case studies as prototypical. I will not address specific art forms that involve sound, as this research focuses on curatorial practices and uses sonority as a signifier. Needless to say, the work of artists or artists-curators equally offers significant opportunities for investigation, but it will not examined in this article.

Current trends

The practice of curating has long been associated with the visual arrangement of cultural artefacts (Dziekan 2016). By curating, we interpret a pattern within the museum space that allows visitors to create a narrative and develop an interpretative frame for the exhibits. The museum content is mediated to the public in a sort of 'outward semiotic gesture' that arranges the exhibits to educate and entertain the public. The curator's gesture may be visible and acknowledgeable or 'transparent,' i.e., hidden and apparently irrelevant whatever the approach. The museum space is arranged around selected concepts that make it readable, i.e., a text (Zunzunegui 2003: 18-36).

In recent years, to attract more visitors and meet the needs of a public immersed in media, visual culture, and hyperconsumerism, museums have developed strategies to enhance the entertaining aim of exhibitions and ease or, at times, lessen the educational function. As the boundaries of curatorial practices also expand in response to technological advancements, there is a growing use of multimodal communication in the exhibition space to entertain in all categories of museums, art or science, etc. (Pierroux 2024; Smart 2024; Diamantopoulou et al. 2024). Multimodality in curatorial practices integrates digital technologies, flexible spatial designs and devices that enhance the information and narrative of a collection by expanding how

the object is observed, decoded, appreciated and evaluated. As a result, visitors develop their knowledge more personally and independently by resorting to previous knowledge or ideas and competencies that may not be related to the exhibit but are activated by the curator's 'invisible hand.'[1] The availability of web content relies on the visitor's ability to navigate, explore, and interact, shaping the interpretive framework of the experience. As users move into a virtual gallery, they interpret the icon on-screen, i.e., the virtual museum, *as if* interacting with a real space. Similarly, self-guided tours employ hyperlinks, concise textual descriptions, and high-resolution images to facilitate navigation across key art movements or historical contexts. For example, each mode of communication, written descriptions, visual imagery, and structure convey specific information. Thus, when combined, these elements create a cohesive and immersive experience.[2]

These innovations respond to the evolving expectations of audiences and the need for a more significant commitment to the cultural contexts surrounding what is offered by the museum. Diverse channels are believed to establish a network of ideas that are more appealing and functional to contemporary sensitivity (Kassem 2022). Moreover, issues regarding the inclusion of visitors with special needs are also improved using technology, which further links museums to the expectations of contemporary society (Fotiadi 2024). In this perspective, exhibition spaces are transforming, with culturally hybrid and performative characteristics becoming increasingly prevalent. These qualities require the adaptability of collections, the coexistence of diverse channels, and the complexity of mediation, as testified by the debate about decolonization (Tso and Lau 2019; Rauber 2022; Nikolaou 2024).

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[1] One might consider The National Gallery (London), which offers VR tours in presence and 360° virtual ones for home exploration of the collections, online activities for children and catalogues. The rooms are reproduced on screen, and each item can be experienced by a very detailed closeup visualization of the exhibit, and a description (label) read aloud at will something that may not match the typical behaviour of a visitor who does not perceive minute details as the work of art is distanced or may not hire an audioguide or a guided tour. Another interesting example is provided by *The Stories* section of the Rijksmuseum website features a diverse array of narratives that bring attention to important historical and artistic figures, as well as notable cultural artefacts. For example The interactive page on *The Love Letter* at the Rijksmuseum invites users to explore Johannes Vermeer's painting through a combination of high-resolution images, detailed close-ups, and interpretive storytelling. The platform allows viewers to zoom in on minute details of the artwork, such as pigment particles, offering insights into Vermeer's techniques. https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/stories/story/love-letter

[2] For example, the 'sonified painting' section on the mobile app of the National Gallery integrates auditory elements with visual analysis. In Gossaert's *The Adoration of the Kings*, the surface of the painting is divided into specific scenes or semiotic areas, that focus on key details, enriched through a combination of narrated text and ambient sounds. Meanwhile, the surrounding sounds, such as the soft clink of metal from the kings' crowns or the distant hum of the crowd gathered in reverence, deepen the immersion, situating the viewer in the scene's royal and sacred atmosphere. By offering a multisensory experience, the app guides the viewer's perception and invites a deeper exploration of the painting's historical and cultural layers. Visit https://jubilee.moyosaspaces.com/; and https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/visiting/virtual-tours/sensing-the-unseen-at-home; this video comments on the project and reactions of the public to this experience that was planned in the aftermath of the pandemic https://youtu.be/AazsXDiDbEo

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Because of the public's new needs, exhibitions have a contained museum life and an extended inside and outside communicative space dimension; with online content, visitors can pre-visit or re-visit an exhibition in the virtual space: the time of the visit is personal and discontinuous. For example, immersive technology and the realization of virtual museums such as the Bassin des Lumières in Bordeaux, France, are indicative of a broader trend in exhibition design, whereby the concept of experience is accorded more significant importance rather than the object itself, which is magnified enlarged, strained in its dimensions as the container of the experience, in other words, the building, the architecture surrounding the object is 'multiplied' in size and motion and the visit is a personal experience.[3] This evolution necessitates the development of new interpretations that can accommodate the complexities inherent to modern exhibition spaces that move the senses (Sharji et al. 2020).

A brief literature overview

To describe an interpretative semiotic frame of the sense dimension in museums, I will sum up some key issues by surveying past research. The integration of sound into curatorial practices has attracted considerable attention within the field of museum studies, primarily through conceptualizing the museum as a 'sound space' or 'soundscape' as a parallel to the growing importance of immersive museums and visual communication. This approach acknowledges that museums, traditionally regarded as primarily visual spaces, also possess rich auditory dimensions that significantly contribute to the visitor experience. The concept of 'soundscape' originated from the field of acoustic ecology and was popularised by R. Murray Schafer in his seminal work *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977). Schafer defines soundscape as the acoustic environment, encompassing all the sounds surrounding them in a particular setting (3-13). In museums, soundscape describes all the sounds within an exhibition space. This term encompasses intentional auditory elements, such as music, narration, sound effects, and incidental noises, including footsteps, conversations, and ambient sounds from outside the

[3] The *Bassin des Lumières* occupies a wartime submarine base, a structure laden with historical and ideological significance. Its monumental concrete walls, imposing dimensions, and industrial design evoke the militaristic past, serving as physical signs of wartime Europe. These architectural elements constitute a text that communicates narratives of conflict, resilience, and transformation. On the other hand, the usage of the space and the spatial arrangement of famous paintings expanded on the wall creates an environment where visitors are dwarfed, emphasizing both the scale of history and the naivété in repurposing the space for artistic expression. On the other hand the message conveys an 'art wins all' action that contradicts the original purpose of the building https://www.bassins-lumieres.com/fr

exhibition area. In other words, the term soundscape is used to describe a multi-layered auditory environment that contributes to the sensory experience of the museum. In particular, audioguides provide technical support for integrating words (narrative/ description/ storytelling) and sounds (background/ tridimensional setting). Sounds can be selected and arranged to create specific atmospheres and enhance the interpretative experience of the exhibits. Such soundscapes are designed to evoke emotional responses, reinforce the thematic narrative of an exhibition, and immerse visitors in a specific time, place, or culture. For example, a historical exhibition might comprise a soundscape incorporating the music of a corresponding era, the ambience of a marketplace, and recorded oral histories, collectively facilitating a sense of being transported to that period (Yraola 2024).[4]

In contrast to soundscapes, which focus on the thematic and content coherence of auditory elements, soundspace prioritizes the spatial relationships between sounds and their physical or virtual environments. Designing a soundspace means studying the acoustics of the exhibition area, including factors such as reverberation, sound diffusion, and the placement of speakers or other sound sources. In other words, soundspace describes the spatial aspect of sound within a given environment. This term encompasses how sound is distributed, perceived, and interacts with the physical dimensions of the museum space. This concept is grounded in acoustics and spatial theory, which examines how sound is positioned within a physical or virtual environment and how it influences the perception of space (Gallagher 2024). In practice, the soundspace is defined by how sound interacts with the architectural features of the exhibition area. These interactions may manifest as resonances, echoes, or fading and are tailored to the design of the space in question. In particular, art installations or performances may use sounds that integrate the experience and the surrounding space in the art project. In other cases, the configuration of the sound space is foregrounded to influence the appreciation of the exhibition, directing attention to specific artefacts or sections of the exhibit through the use of auditory cues. For example, a soundspace may incorporate directional audio, guiding visitors through a linear narrative path as audio descriptions. Alternatively, it may employ spatialized sound effects, creating the impression of being surrounded by the sonic environment, thus enhancing the immersive experience (Perego 2023; Hutchinson 2023; Privitera et al. 2024).

[4] One may consider these two examples: this one from Musei Capitolini, Rome which is an audioguide for children which animates the experience with a cartoon-like tale https://www.museicapitolini.org/en/node/1002146 or the Cutty Sark audio guides that provide the audiotour, and the soundscape as a distinct resource, being the latter a solo independent enjoyment of the environment to leave to the imagination to fill in the experience created by composers and artists https://www.rmg.co.uk/cutty-sark/attractions/cutty-sark-audio-guides/soundscape

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The concept of soundscape was also investigated by scholars such as Bruce R. Smith (1999), who proposed that sound, like visual elements, is fundamental in shaping the spatial and sensory dynamics of an environment that can be reconstructed from a historical perspective. Observing literature, drama, and music in Early Modern England suggested that soundscapes are not merely background noise but are integral to how spaces are perceived and experienced, influencing the audience's atmosphere and emotional responses. All contributors to the volume *Hearing Cultures, Essays On Sounds, Listening And Modernity*, edited by Veit Erlam in 2004, also found traces of soundscapes in literary texts. However, sound is always mediated by words that describe it rather than a direct perception. In practice, the sound dimension is formed by a sense of sound, and evokes the affective dimension. Instead, hearing implies a direct activation of the emotions and all the physical sensations involved in it.

In this perspective, Michael Bull and Les Back (2003) provided a more comprehensive view and evaluated the complexities of words and sounds in semiotic systems. The authors contended that soundscapes contribute to meaning-making by superimposing additional interpretative possibilities onto visual displays. This perspective was further developed by Karin Bijsterveld and Trevor Pinch (2012), who emphasized the significance of sound in shaping social and cultural meanings within museum spaces.

In their discussion, Bijsterveld and Pinch address how curators can use sound to facilitate interpretation, evoke memories, and construct immersive experiences that transcend the visual plane. Similarly, Jonathan Sterne (2012) proposed that sound in museums conveys information and shapes the affective atmosphere, influencing how visitors connect with the artefacts and the narratives they represent.

From this perspective, Suzanne MacLeod (2013) also proposed that designed soundscapes augment the narrative coherence of exhibitions, thus integrating the sound into the narrative as a textual cohesive device linking, highlighting, correlating, or separating through perception. From this perspective, sound is a narrative instrument and a spatial component that influences the visitor’s exhibition experience. Sound also serves as a guiding tool, drawing visitors’ attention and influencing how they interpret the material on display.

The table below presents the key points collected from the contributions discussed. In particular, it lists the usage of sound in the museum environment and the qualitative relationships that sounds establish with the listener.

Table 1. The Use of Sound in Museums

Signs (Auditory Elements in Museum Spaces) Ambient Sounds (e.g., rustling leaves, distant machinery hum) Narrative Voiceovers (e.g., guides, character voices) Music and Soundtracks (e.g., classical, thematic, or contemporary music) Interactive Sound Cues (e.g., user-triggered sounds) Sound Effects (e.g., environmental sounds like rain, urban noise, birdsong)
Signifiers (The Sensory Input/Audible Cues) Frequency (high/low pitch, tonal qualities) Amplitude (volume, intensity) Duration/Temporal Structure (rhythm, pace, time-based patterns) Spatiality/Directionality (source of sound, its perceived location in space) Reverberation/Acoustic Properties (echoes, resonance in exhibition space)
Signified (Cultural or Contextual Meanings Evoked) Historical context (e.g., sounds of past environments, period-appropriate music) Cultural Symbols (e.g., folk music representing ethnic traditions) Emotional Responses (e.g., serenity from calm soundscapes, tension from dissonant music) Symbolic Association (e.g., church bells signifying spirituality, birdsong implying nature) Narrative Elements (e.g., a voiceover narrating historical events, reinforcing the story of the exhibit)
Interpretants (Visitor's Cognitive/Emotional Interpretation) Interpretive Engagement (guiding how visitors interpret the objects/artworks) Emotional Connection (enhancing personal and collective resonance with exhibits) Cognitive Understanding (clarifying the context of the exhibit through auditory reinforcement) Atmospheric immersion (creating an environmental ambience that envelops visitors) Behavioural Cues (influencing how visitors move through the space when to pause, reflect, or transition)

In sum, sound within an exhibition can help echo and reinforce its thematic content, creating a lasting auditory experience. Soundscapes reflect and amplify the exhibition's thematic content, creating a more cohesive and immersive experience. Sound can introduce alternative interpretations, generate layers of meaning within an exhibition, and stimulate the emergence of multiple interpretations through the strategic deployment of contrasting or unconventional sound choices (Sterne 2012). However, one other aspect must be considered: the contribution of auditory acoustic studies.

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Suggestions from perceptual and auditory acoustic studies

The selection and design of sound in museum spaces imply understanding how humans perceive and process auditory information. Research from perceptual psychology and auditory neuroscience suggests a context for creating immersive and meaningful auditory experiences based on the physiology of acoustic perception. The human auditory system is susceptible to specific sound characteristics like frequency, amplitude, and temporal structure. These factors play a role in influencing how sounds are perceived and interpreted within a particular context (Bem 2023; Lin and Lang 2024).

In his work on auditory scene analysis, well before the pervasive presence of media-modified communication in Western culture, Albert Bregman (1990) clarified how the brain categorizes sounds into perceptual streams, directing the focus towards specific auditory elements while simultaneously filtering out others. Hence, to create an engaging and non-intrusive auditory environment, sounds must complement the visual and spatial aspects of the exhibition, taking care to avoid causing sensory overload. For example, ambient sounds characterized by low-frequency tones, such as the hum of distant machinery or the rustling of leaves, can create a subtle backdrop that enhances the atmosphere without dominating the visitor's attention. Such sounds are less likely to impede visitors' cognitive processing of visual information, ensuring a coherent and immersive exhibition experience. Conversely, more prominent auditory elements, such as music or spoken narration, must be carefully timed and spatially located to guide attention and reinforce key messages within the exhibition. Research conducted by Norman Weinberger (2004) in the field of auditory neuroscience also indicated that music, particularly when synchronized with the thematic content of an exhibition, could evoke emotional responses and enhance memory retention. Incorporating culturally or thematically related music can enhance visitor engagement with the exhibits, thereby facilitating a more memorable and meaningful experience (Hodges and Thaut 2019; Vuust et al. 2022).

As previously stated, the concept of the soundscape forefronts both natural and constructed environments when devising auditory experiences. Using environmental sounds, such as birdsong, water flow, urban noise, and recordings of native wildlife or ambient forest sounds, can facilitate an immersive experience for visitors, situating them within the depicted ecosystems and creating a sense of (fake) authenticity and context. Such sounds may also be balanced with the other auditory stimuli, so the spatial configuration of sound within an exhibition space represents a crucial element in optimizing the aural experience. In relation to this, the findings of Trevor Cox (2014a) in the field of architectural acoustic showed the importance of contemplating the acoustic properties of the physical environment when devising sound installations. The perception of sound is subject to significant alteration by the specific characteristics of the materials, room shapes, and sizes involved. These

aspects affect the clarity, directionality, and reverberation of sound. These acoustic properties must be considered when positioning speakers or designing sound installations. For example, in an ample, reverberant space, sounds with long decay times may become indistinct, rendering speech or intricate music challenging to comprehend. In such instances, Cox proposes the utilization of directional speakers or acoustic treatments to regulate reverberation and guarantee the clarity and intelligibility of the auditory experience. Alternatively, curators may employ localized sound sources in smaller, more intimate exhibition spaces to create a focused auditory experience, thereby directing visitors' attention towards specific artifacts or narrative elements (Cox 2014b).[5]

Furthermore, spatial sound design can be employed to create immersive experiences through techniques such as binaural audio and 3D soundscapes. These technologies simulate how sound is perceived within a three-dimensional space, thereby enhancing the sense of presence and immersion. As observed by neuroscientists Olaf Lippold and colleagues (2019), the utilization of spatial audio techniques can markedly enhance the realism of virtual and augmented reality exhibits, thereby facilitating a more engaging and interactive experience for visitors (Anuar et al. 2024; Grgurić and Luttenberger 2024). Furthermore, while digital tools, such as location-aware audio guides or binaural soundscapes, offer significant possibilities to transform visitor experiences, they also raise questions about their use's unintended consequences. For instance, integrating sensory stimuli, such as sound or scent, may overwhelm audiences, detracting from the contemplative engagement many museums seek to foster. Successful applications must balance innovation and curatorial intent, ensuring that technologies are employed to deepen interpretation rather than merely as a spectacle.[6]

The table below (table 2) summarizes what I have outlined, providing functional insights into the semiotic dimensions. It represents a comprehensive overview of how sound operates in museum settings, which I will illustrate by examining the case studies in the following paragraphs.

[5] Contemporary art museums frequently emphasize experimentation and integrating auditory elements as a key aspect of their identity. This allows for greater autonomy for artists, enabling the fusion of soundscapes and visual art into unified multisensory experiences. In contrast, permanent collections prioritize cultural heritage preservation, with soundscapes employed to enhance thematic coherence or contextualize historical artefacts. This is typically guided by curatorial oversight; in this perspective, sound strategies must align with the institutional objectives and audience expectations.

[6] Evaluating the distinction between artist-driven and curator-driven approaches is important to gain insight into collaborative exhibitions. In artist-driven projects, sound is often regarded as an integral part of the creative process, integrated seamlessly into the work's conceptual framework. In contrast, curator-driven initiatives may adopt a more external perspective, utilizing auditory elements to support broader narratives or interpretative goals. These differing roles influence the methodologies and outcomes of sound integration.

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Table 2. Summary of the semiotic functions of sound in museums

Aspect	Description	Semiotic Function
Human Auditory Perception	Influenced by frequency, amplitude, and temporal structure; perceptual streams focus attention and filter sounds.	Rhetorical (Guides focus through perceptual streams, potentially enhancing narrative or thematic understanding).
Auditory Scene Design	Complement visual and spatial elements	Iconic (Mimicking real-life sounds, e.g., rustling leaves).
	Low-frequency ambient sounds create subtle backdrops (e.g., rustling leaves).	Indexical (Pointing to a context, e.g., natural settings).
	Prominent sounds (e.g., music, narration) require timing and spatial placement to guide attention.	Rhetorical (Narrative or informative role, e.g., narration guiding experience).
Acoustic Properties	Room materials, shapes, and sizes alter sound perception.	Indexical (Pointing to the physical characteristics of the space).
	Use acoustic treatments or directional speakers to manage reverberation and ensure clarity in large spaces.	Rhetorical (Improving the intelligibility of narrative elements).
	Employ localized sound sources in small spaces for focused auditory experiences.	Rhetorical (Focusing attention on specific artefacts or narratives).
Advanced Sound Techniques	3D soundscapes enhance immersion.	Iconic (Reproducing realistic spatial soundscapes, e.g., 3D environments).
	Spatial audio techniques improve realism in virtual and augmented reality exhibits.	Rhetorical (Enhancing narrative and interactive engagement).
Music in Exhibitions	Evokes emotional responses and may enhance memory retention.	Symbolic (Symbolizing themes through music, e.g., evoking transcendence with a classical score).
	Culturally and thematically aligned music.	Symbolic (Abstract meaning tied to cultural or thematic content).
Environmental Soundscapes	Utilize natural and constructed sounds (e.g., birdsong, urban noise) for authenticity and context.	Iconic (Mimicking the environment, e.g., birdsong or marine sounds).
	Balance environmental sounds with other stimuli.	Indexical (Contextual grounding for exhibits, e.g., situating visitors in depicted ecosystems).
	Immerse visitors within ecosystems or depicted scenes.	Rhetorical (Enhancing narrative immersion).

Table 2. Summary of the semiotic functions of sound in museums

Aspect	Description	Semiotic Function
Art vs. Heritage Exhibitions	Experimentation with sound.	Symbolic (Abstract artistic expression, aligning soundscapes with conceptual themes).
	Use soundscapes for thematic coherence.	Indexical (Rooting soundscapes in historical or cultural context).
Artist vs. Curator Approaches	Artist-driven: Sound integrated as part of the creative process.	Symbolic (Sound as part of the creative and conceptual framework).
	Curator-driven: Sound used to support narratives or interpretative goals.	Rhetorical (Supporting thematic and educational narratives).

Case study: Sound and silence in the exhibition at GAM Turin

The exhibition Silenzio/Suono - Sound/Silence at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (GAM) in Turin (June 2024 – March 2025), curated by Elena Volpato, explored the intricate interplay between sound and silence within contemporary art.[7] By focusing on experimental music and poetry, this exhibition emphasizes that sound, or its deliberate absence, is not merely an auditory experience but an integral aspect of visual experimentation that evokes a wide range of emotions and interpretations in its audience. The collection showcases 471 artists' records featuring a wall array of record covers, many artist-designed, creating a visual narrative that complements the auditory experience. Visitors are invited to listen to audio tracks and consult documents from the collection, either within the exhibition space or in the enhanced video library. This setup allows for an immersive experience where the auditory and visual elements coalesce, creating a holistic encounter with art, poetry, and music.

[7] https://www.gamtorino.it/it/evento/silenziosuono-soundsilence/

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The collection witnesses the evolution of sound and poetry within the canon, beginning with early Futurist sound experiments by pioneers like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Luigi Russolo. Their dynamic declamations and musical executions laid the groundwork for a tradition of artistic sound experimentation. Dadaism is represented by Richard Huelsenbeck, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball, and Raoul Hausmann, as they further pushed the boundaries of sound as an artistic medium. Their phono-poems, composed of syllables in asemantic relationships, challenged conventional notions of language and meaning, presenting sound as an abstract yet compelling artistic expression. Moreover, sound experimentation in the 1960s marked a central moment in the arts, characterized by a radical departure from conventional music and a deep exploration of the boundaries between sound, noise, and silence. This era was guided by a spirit of innovation and a desire to challenge traditional perceptions of what constituted music and art. The 1960s also saw the rise of electronic music and the use of new technologies in sound creation. The advent of synthesizers and tape manipulation techniques opened new possibilities for artists to explore. In this context, artists such as Nam June Paik and Yoko Ono, whose works were made available, comprised an interdisciplinary approach that blurred the lines between sound, visual art, and performance. Everyday objects and unconventional instruments in their performances created sound art that was as much about the process and experience as the final auditory result.

Although the recordings may be complemented by a video or the availability of the vinyl cover text or the original video of the performance, for the most part, the audience listens to the recording as they are, i.e., by selecting a recorded track on a computer. In other words, the visual-performative elements that would typically integrate the acoustic experience of an experimental poem are not available; therefore, the experience forefronts the auditory dimension, minimizing distractions and favoring individual interpretation rather than a collective immersion in a typical museum room. Since the exhibition is conceived as a 'solo act of interpretation,' three sound performances were set up as a balancing or contrasting 'action' and are still available on the museum website. These events are prototypical of what experimental poetry is as they entail ideas of community and communal sharing of emotions focused on the moment of the performative act, an open space where the actions take place along with the use of computers and other technical devices that generate and modulate the sonority of the event. The clash between these performances and the 'isolated' tracks of the exhibition shows a tension between two modes of engaging with sound and poetry: one rooted in the immediacy and communal nature of live performance and the other centered on solitary, contemplative listening. This duality highlights a curatorial dialogue between the transient, ephemeral quality of live acts and the permanence of the recorded items. While live performances cultivate a sense of shared temporality and collective emotional resonance, recordings allow for introspective engagement, encouraging individual meaning-making removed from the context of a performative audience.

This juxtaposition invites a broader reflection on the semiotic dimensions of sound-based art in the museum space. The exhibition challenges visitors to navigate the relationship between presence and absence, immediacy and mediation, by presenting live and recorded elements. The live performances, relying on communal energy and spontaneous interaction, contrast starkly with the isolated act of listening to recordings, which privileges subjective interpretation and the intimate construction of meaning.[8] All in all, what sets this exhibition apart is that an archive is turned into an experience that is freely offered to visitors in constructing their experience. The basic design of Silenzio/Suono allowed visitors to understand the exhibition at their own pace, selecting their listening patterns according to their interests and curiosities. This autonomy in engagement was a distinctive aspect of the exhibition, which encouraged a personalized process of meaning-making led by the visitor's intrinsic motivations.

Figure 1. The Silenzio/Suono - Sound/Silence exhibition, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (GAM), Turin (June 2024 – March 2025)

[8] Performers were: Riccardo Baruzzi and Elena Busni providing an interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci's *Treatise on Painting*, combining sonic effects and performance art. Francesco Cavaliere interprets a storytelling performance using a glass sculpture inspired by marine flora and archetypal human unconsciousness. Jacopo Benassi interpreted + *Untitled Noise*, a deconstructed, spoken-word performance involving audience interaction and photographic documentation. Recordings of the performances are available at https://www.gamtorino.it/it/evento/silenzio-suono-soundsilence/#module-5

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Case study: The role of sound in enhancing visitor experience at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, provides an example of how sound can be integrated into the visitor experience, enhancing the interpretation and emotional engagement with artworks. This integration is achieved through a collaboration with Art Processors, a creative technology company specializing in developing immersive and interactive experiences.[9]

The project 'A Beautiful Disruption: Experiencing the Bloch Galleries' represents a pioneering approach to redefining museum visitor experiences. By blending historical interpretation with dynamic, immersive technologies, this project challenges conventional modes of engagement with art, offering a multisensory, emotionally driven journey that prioritizes human connection over a more traditional didactic approach. As mentioned in this article, social connection and communal healing have become central to public engagement in cultural spaces, especially in the post-pandemic era, and many institutions are asked to act as cultural hubs within local communities. The emphasis on connecting people is thus crucial, and it receives funding and support, stimulating the experimentation of new technologies and approaches.

The project draws upon existing technological infrastructure, including programmable lighting and speaker systems, to craft an interactive, 'eyes-up' experience. Unlike traditional audio tours that rely on passive information consumption, this approach invites visitors to navigate the space, guided by dynamic lighting and thematic audio narratives that explore the relationships between the Impressionist artists featured in the gallery. In doing so, the museum moves beyond static interpretation, encouraging personal connections to the artworks through the lens of shared human experiences.

Crucially, the project reflects a shift from cognitive understanding to emotional engagement, turning the visit into a social experience. This reframing positions the museum as a space for dialogue and interaction rather than solely dedicated to transmitting knowledge. Removing conventional interpretive tools such as wall labels further reinforces this shift, allowing for a more open-ended, visitor-driven experience that creates a sense of community. In other words, the conceptual foundation of 'A Beautiful Disruption' lies in exploring the personal relationships between the Impressionist artists, using their correspondence as a narrative framework. The inclusion of personal stories points to the human dimension of the artistic process, connecting the struggles of these 19th-century figures to contemporary experiences of doubt, criticism, and perseverance. By centering on these universal emotions, the exhibition seeks to bridge the past and the present, making the artworks more relatable and accessible to the modern audience.

[9] https://www.artprocessors.net/projects/nelson-atkins-museum-of-art

Immersive sound design and programmable lighting also shape the visit. The wireless network of LED lights, installed initially during the 2017 renovation of the Bloch Galleries, is used to its full theatrical potential, choreographed to synchronize with the script and audio narrative. This interplay between sound, light, and space creates a visually stimulating and emotionally evocative environment. The organization of these sensory elements fosters a more comprehensive experience, where the spatial and atmospheric qualities of the gallery become integral to the storytelling.[10]

Emily Thompson, in *The Soundscape of Modernity* (2002), maintained that soundscapes can ground an audience in a particular time and place, thereby facilitating a more nuanced comprehension and appreciation of the visual elements and that this is rooted in contemporary culture being a socially motivated collective, shared act (Thompson 2002). By providing auditory cues that evoke the setting or origin of the artworks, the Nelson-Atkins Museum enriches the visitor's sensory experience. It deepens their connection to the art, facilitating more engagement with the historical and cultural contexts. Audio guide systems designed to be responsive to the visitor's movements and interactions within the museum space create a customized experience that can vary from person to person in line with research in auditory perception and cognitive psychology, which suggests that tailored auditory experiences can significantly enhance engagement and memory retention (Goldstein 2010a). As visitors approach specific artworks or exhibits, the audio guide evokes soundscapes or narratives that provide additional context or interpretation. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art has been keen on experimenting with sound. Already in 2019, Christina Butera, for example, explored the concept of creating a soundtrack for the museum's sculptures. Drawing inspiration from her daily walks through the sculpture park, Butera developed 'Suite for the Passersby,' a composition that engages directly with the museum's outdoor art. The project, deeply rooted in the Kansas City cultural landscape, reflects Butera's intent to merge environmental context with musical expression, highlighting the significance of location-based soundscapes in contemporary composition.

The resulting work, presented as a smartphone app, used GPS technology to trigger specific musical pieces as users approach different sculptures. The composition was divided into seven parts, each linked to a particular sculpture and performed by solo instruments, voices, and electronics. This interactive format allowed for manipulating instrumental timbre in ways that transcend traditional acoustic capabilities, offering a dynamic and immersive auditory experience. Furthermore, Butera integrated natural sounds, such as bird calls and children's voices, to connect the music with its physical surroundings and the listener.

[10] https://nelson-atkins.org/nelson-atkins-at-home/listen-at-home/#sound-inspired-by-visual-art

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Designed without a fixed sequence, a continuous audio experience adapted to the user's movement through the sculpture park. This structure challenged traditional notions of musical form, requiring the composition to be flexible enough to transition smoothly between different sections depending on the user's path. By ensuring that each location could accommodate multiple transitions, Butera created a composition that was both site-specific and uniquely personalized for each listener. The work covers key areas of the sculpture garden, offering a comprehensive exploration of the space through sound while inviting users to interact with the art in an innovative, multisensory manner.[11]

The integration of sound with storytelling constructs a multisensory narrative experience that informs visitors and engages them emotionally. This exemplifies how sound as a narrative tool conveys complex ideas and emotions in a manner that is both accessible and compelling. The success of these projects indicates a broader trend in museum curation towards creating multisensory experiences that engage visitors on multiple levels. This is consistent with the findings of auditory neuroscience, which suggest that multisensory experiences can enhance memory formation and emotional response by engaging multiple sensory pathways in the brain (Poirier et al. 2005). In other words, sound enhances the immediate experience and contributes to a more enduring impression on visitors, rendering the museum experience more meaningful and memorable.

Figure 2. *A Beautiful Disruption: Experiencing the Bloch Galleries* by The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and the Art Processors

[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MZ_mjDf2Uk

Case study: Integrating music and visual art in L'Heure Mauve at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

The *L'Heure Mauve* exhibition by Nicolas Party at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA in 2022) integrates music into the visual art experience to create a multisensory environment. By pairing atmospheric paintings with an original soundtrack composed by Quebec singer-songwriter Pierre Lapointe, the exhibition demonstrates how music can act as both a complement and counterpoint to visual art, enriching the emotional dimension of artworks. With their haunting melodies and subtle harmonies, Lapointe's compositions reflect the soft purples, eerie landscapes, and surreal figures in Party's work, intensifying the exhibition's ambience and guiding the viewer's emotional journey through the space.

Portraits, still lifes, wooded landscapes, and ancient ruins represent the primary themes that have consistently occupied the Party's pictorial and sculptural production. These themes are presented within impressive settings, including wall paintings and trompe-l'œil, which activate a new reading of the work and enhance the brilliant colors and simple forms.

Party's work is inspired by the 1921 painting 'L'Heure Mauve,' created by the Canadian Symbolist painter Ozlas Leduc. This inspiration is reflected in the exhibition's title. Party's work explores the diverse conceptualizations of the relationship between humanity and the natural world as depicted throughout art history. The result is a natural environment in a state of constant transformation. It is a place of hazards and disasters, a domain to be subdued, and an area strewn with the remnants of ancient civilizations or voids where human traces are absent. Nature then becomes the setting of the Anthropocene, where the connection with human beings has become irremediable and where the passage of time and finiteness give way to feelings of melancholy.

Visitors were encouraged to bring a pair of earphones and a smartphone to experience the exhibition's accompanying soundtrack, created by Quebec-based musician Pierre Lapointe.[12] Lapointe's musical compositions can be listened to by scanning the various QR codes in each exhibition room. The soundtrack, comprising 14 songs, features previously unheard material and reinterpretations of classic songs.

The thematic alignment between the visual and auditory components in *L'Heure Mauve* shows the capacity of music to amplify the emotional engagement of visitors. Cognitive psychology research, such as that by Juslin and Västfjäll (2008), confirms that music evokes strong emotional responses, which can influence the perception and

[12] https://pierrelapointe.bandcamp.com/album/lheure-mauve

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interpretation of visual stimuli. Lapointe's soundtrack thus enhances the multisensory experience by deepening the connection between the viewer and Party's paintings. The tonal shifts in the music, which oscillate between serene and meditative to tense and dissonant, mirror the changing atmospheres of the artworks, stimulating corresponding emotional responses from the audience.

The integration of music into the exhibition does more than complement the visual elements. It also functions as a narrative device, guiding visitors through the space and creating a temporal framework. As Duncan (1995) suggests, the rhythmic structure of music can establish a sense of progression, encouraging a more personal and introspective engagement with the artwork. The soundtrack evokes specific emotions and sets the pace of the visitor's movement, transforming the exhibition into a coherent sensory experience where sound and vision are in constant dialogue.

L'Heure Mauve creates an immersive environment beyond traditional art exhibitions by exploring the relationship between sound and vision. This case study illustrates how music can serve as a curatorial tool, enhancing visual art's interpretive depth and emotional impact. The exhibition's success indicates that integrating music and other auditory elements is central to enriching the visitor experience.

Figure 3. 'Head' by Nicholas Party, part of *L'Heure Mauve*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), March-October 2022

Conclusion

A soundscape grounds the visitor in a specific time or place, reinforcing the temporal and thematic setting of the exhibit. The sound directly relates to what is being visually or thematically presented, making it an effective tool for immersing visitors in a specific historical or environmental context. Incorporating sounds into the exhibition space creates immersion by mingling with the exhibit's atmosphere, strengthening the exhibit's authenticity, and offering visitors an emotional or sensory connection to the subject matter. Specially composed music in an art exhibit might evoke concepts like timelessness, spirituality, or the contrast between past and present. This function plays a significant role in shaping the emotional and intellectual interpretation of the exhibit, using sound to engage visitors on a more conceptual level. The flexibility of the symbolic function allows for a more profound, more complex interplay between sound and meaning. Still, it also requires curation to avoid ambiguity or confusion in its intended message.

Soundscapes that narrate history or dramatize key moments, such as voiceovers or sound effects, are examples of how sound can direct the visitor's engagement with the exhibit's storyline. This function is often the most explicit in its intentions, aiming to inform or lead the visitor through the exhibit in a structured way.

The incorporation of sound into curatorial practices, as evidenced by the case studies of Silenzio/Suono - Sound/Silence at GAM Turin, the interactive soundscapes at the Nelson-Atkins Museum, and the auditory-visual fusion in *L'Heure Mauve* at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, provides insights into the evolving role of sound in enhancing the museum experience. These examples illustrate how sound, in its various forms, can transcend traditional roles to become a crucial element in shaping visitor engagement with art.

The Silenzio/Suono project at the GAM Turin illustrates how sound can reframe the interpretation of visual art from a historical perspective. Sound is a significant aspect of 20th-century experimental art that cannot be excluded from the visual.

The integration of soundscapes, including both ambient noises and composed pieces, into the exhibition space challenges the visual-centric nature of traditional museum spaces by adding layers of meaning and context to the exhibited artefacts (Truax 2001).

Background sounds can affect emotional responses and cognitive processing during art viewings. The integration of personalized soundscapes through Art Processors' technology in the soundscapes at the Nelson-Atkins Museum exemplifies how auditory elements can be tailored to the specific experiences of individual visitors. The utilization of location-aware audio guides, calibrated to adapt to a visitor's position within the museum, facilitates the creation of a personalized auditory environment that links with the visitor's journey through the space, personalizing the

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experience (Goldstein 2010b). In other words, sound can transform an art space into a more immersive environment, enabling visitors to engage with the artwork's physical and conceptual dimensions (LaBelle 2010; 2015). Furthermore, the audio guides' interactive nature encourages visitors to engage with the exhibits more actively, creating immersive and interactive experiences that encourage visitors to become co-creators in their museum experience (Simon 2010). The *L'Heure Mauve* exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts illustrates how music can serve as a narrative and atmospheric tool that complements and enhances visual art. Pierre Lapointe's composition, specifically created for this exhibition, interacts with Nicolas Party's paintings to create a cohesive sensory experience. The alignment of music with visual themes allows for a deeper emotional engagement, demonstrating how sound can enhance the interpretive intensity of visual art (Hegarty 2007). Further innovation in using sound in museums and developing technology will create immersive and responsive environments that are visually engaging and rich in sensory and emotional depth. In conclusion, integrating sound into exhibitions represents a significant advancement in curatorial practices, offering new opportunities to enhance visitor engagement and deepen the interpretative experience.

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Curatorship and mobile applications: The physical-digital interactions of museum visitors

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BY: **Aluminé Rosso**

ABSTRACT

This article presents a semiotic analysis of the mobile applications employed by various European exhibition spaces, including the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the History Museum in Vienna, the Louis Vuitton Foundation, and the Pompidou Centre in Paris, to examine how these digital tools participate in the configuration of the visitor experience. The study examines the design of these mobile applications, with a particular focus on the activities that they propose during the museum visit. The analysis delves into the types of interactions that they propose with the museum's architectural, curatorial, and artistic discourses, as well as between the visitors themselves. It seeks to address the following research question: How do museum applications, strongly linked to the use of social networks and access to online content, transform visiting practices and expand the museum experience beyond its physical confines? The findings indicate that while these applications can enhance the accessibility and personalization of the content available during the exhibition, their design disregards the spatial and material dimensions of museum visits, which involve the presence of other individuals with whom visitors interact and share the exhibition spaces. By interrogating the enunciative strategies of these digital tools, it becomes evident that the actions promoted by mobile applications involve practices whose spatio-temporal dimensions are incompatible with those of physical visits. This highlights the challenges of integrating mobile applications into contemporary curatorial practices.

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Introduction: the physical-digital interactions of museum visitors

The study of visitor behavior in both physical and digital museum spaces is crucial since it enables the collection of data based on the public's experiences. This data is highly beneficial in terms of designing a visit that integrates the complex materiality of the exhibition space, which is composed of the institutional discourse (understood as that which fulfills the task of informing and orienting the visit by providing didactic and educational materials) and the curatorial discourse (which creates a bridge between the institutional discourse, the artworks, and the public). Furthermore, the museum space encompasses visitors' interactions with these discourses and the works of art, as well as with other visitors.

In this regard, contemporary semiotics, interactionist, and multimodal studies provide several analytical tools that can be used to analyze visitor practices. Their methodological approaches allow us to study the current state of museum visits and to design future digital tools that encompass the three fundamental aspects of the museum experience: the *interactional space* of the museum (architectural/institutional dimensions), the *interactional space of the artwork* (curatorial dimension), and the interactions of visitors between themselves.

Given these aspects, this analysis presents a semiotic study of the mobile applications available at different types of art museums: the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Museum of History in Vienna, the Fondation Louis Vuitton, and the Pompidou Center in Paris. The objective is to explore the different modes of contact with the displayed artworks that these digital tools propose. The term 'digital spaces' encompasses both social media platforms – from YouTube to Instagram – that mediatize the museum experience, making it circulate in the digital space, and mobile applications that function as educative tools inside and sometimes outside the museum. The corpus presented allows us to reveal the phenomenon's transversality.

1. The multimedia-multispatial experience

Historically, the evolution of media phenomena has systematically transformed the experience of the museum visit. This process has significantly accelerated in the latter part of the 20th and early 21st centuries. Nevertheless, integrating mobile devices and applications into the museum space, which has become a standard practice over the past decade, has resulted in even more significant changes that have impacted both the production and reception of the museum experience.

Incorporating new techniques and technologies into exhibitions has extended the museum space into the digital sphere. Most of the museum's digital content, accessible through mobile applications, is hosted on social media and digital platforms, including YouTube, Spotify, and Instagram. In the physical space, engagement techniques, such as using hashtags on exhibition walls and providing spaces especially designed for photo-ops, encourage the production of images that are meant to be published on visitors' social networks and, in some cases, to be reused by the institution. In this way, the museum experience is positioned between the most popular cultural attractions for local audiences and international tourists, and trending social media posts from audiovisual content produced in the museum.

From the visitors' vantage point, these techniques and technologies have established new visiting practices that entail new ways of accessing (and consuming) the museum experience and the artworks. As a result, the relationships between institutions and their visitors have undergone a significant transformation. Social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, enable museums to become more *present* in people's daily lives by disseminating content that functions as regular 'microdoses of art.' Such content, designed to be *shared* by users, represents one of the most dominant positioning strategies in museum communication today. When republished, the circulation of such images and videos contributes to constructing the public digital identity of users who align with specific institutional values.

In turn, the content produced by visitors equally contributes to the construction of the museum's institutional identity, whether through *mentions* (tags) on the museum's Instagram account, the use of hashtags, or, even more so, through *reposting* of visitor-generated content on the museum's official profiles. In this way, institutions foster enhanced connections with their audiences, collectively constructing the museum experience promoted on social media (this includes even those *followers* who, despite never physically visiting the museum, contribute to its promotion by republishing the institution's content) (Rosso 2024).

The advent of mobile applications has also altered how people engage with museums. These 'apps' offer users the possibility of personalizing their visit and making more efficient use of their time by proposing 30 to 90-minute tours typically structured around different topics that highlight the masterpieces in the collection. Sometimes, these 'apps' also provide more innovative proposals, such as musical tours curated by artists or influencers. As previously stated, these pedagogical and educative digital tools are closely linked to the use of social networks to mediatize and promote the museum experience online. In fact, these apps often direct visitors to the museums' Instagram, YouTube, Spotify, and SoundCloud accounts, inviting them (directly or indirectly) to *follow* the museum on each platform.

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Furthermore, many of these applications can be downloaded and used without being physically present within the museum building. Even if, in some cases, it is not possible to access certain services (such as live location and itineraries), users can still access the artworks and their related educative (or commercial) content by viewing a digital representation on the screen. Thanks to these applications, it is possible to 'visit' museums without being in them.

The application developed by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (Fig.1) is a relevant example of a 'remote museum visit.' This digital tool welcomes users by asking them to state their location (e.g., at the museum, in public transportation, at home) and offering different options tailored to each case. Although its main objective is to help users plan a visit, the fact that the works of art are absent is not a significant issue when accessing the content, as will be discussed in the analysis.

Consequently, the notion of the museum visit must be reviewed, particularly its spatiotemporal determinations. Incorporating apps and social media into the exhibition space has dramatically affected these determinations, highlighting the need to study the museum visit in its entirety: that is, both in terms of its physical and digital components.

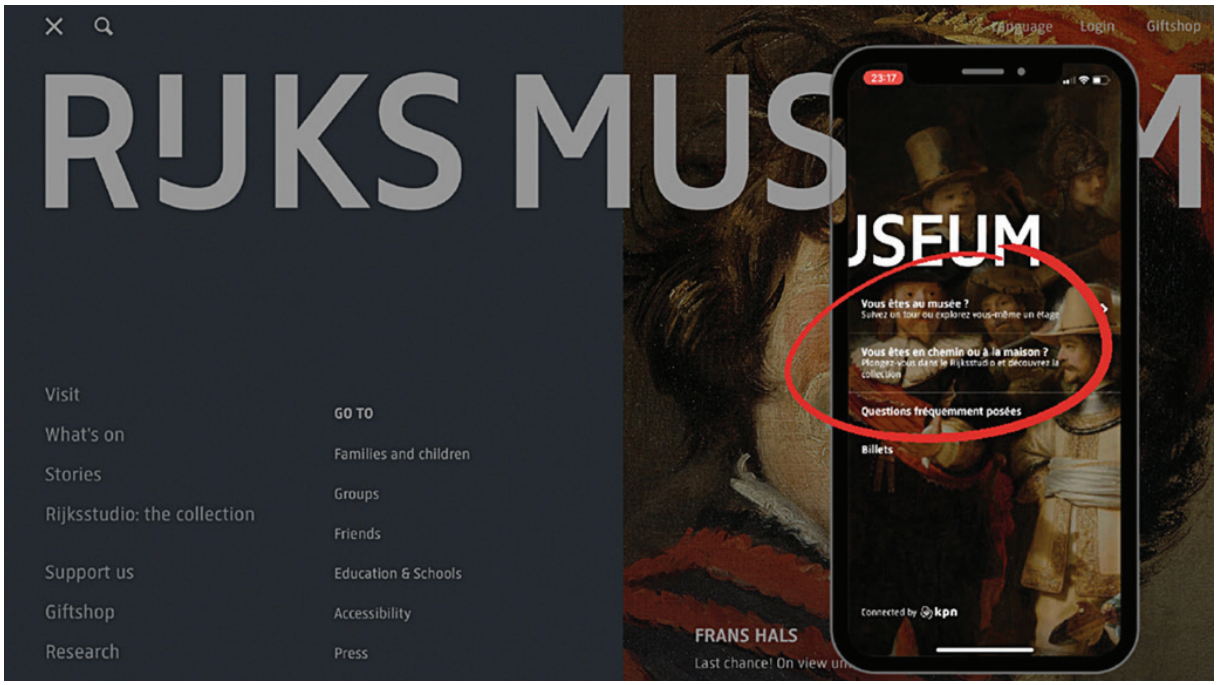

Figure 1. Rijksmuseum mobile application (image created by the author).

2. The study of visiting practices

Interactionist studies have long been concerned with visitors' museum experiences. Interactionist studies focus on how people's physical actions adapt to, utilize, and shape their material environment. In this view, space is not a fixed entity but is rather created through the interactions and arrangement of participants' bodies within that space (Mondada 2005). Interactionist studies employ audiovisual technologies that seek to capture the actions of individuals in their natural context (data collection techniques include, for example, 360° cameras). The audiovisual recordings are decoded according to a method of notation that highlights the interactions between the bodies participating in the action and the environment, exposing the combination of resources (gestures, words, movements) employed by the actors to carry out their actions.

Some of these studies pursue Charles Goodwin's (2018) notions of the semiotic body (2002) and *embodiment* (2000), emphasizing the importance of considering the environment as a structuring factor in individuals' interactions. According to Goodwin's theory, practices occur within a "semiotic field" (2000: 1490) comprising a range of resources, including the body, the environment, and objects. Building upon these proposals, Lorenza Mondada (2005) proposes the notion of *interactional space*, defined as a space configured by the relationship between the acting bodies and the material constraints of the environment. This configuration is shaped by the *participation format* appropriate to the activity in progress and the relationship between the bodies involved.

The concept of *interactional space* underscores the need to consider the *ecology of interaction*. In this respect, Mondada (2017) emphasizes the complexity inherent in studying social practices that involve movement and displacements in space. One such practice is the museum visit. Based on Mondada's proposal, Yaël Kreplak (2014) adapts the notion of interactional space to analyze the exhibition space as human beings apprehend it: during the action (Mondada 2005). Her primary interest lies in the space of the artwork as an *interactional space*. Accordingly, she finds that the *interactional space of the artwork* is not a given; rather, it is constituted through a diversity of spatialized activities and practices.

Vom Lehn, Heath, and Hindmarsh's (2002) interactional research likewise highlights the *reflexive constitution* of the artwork and the museum space through the visitors' practices. Based on visual records produced in museums and galleries, their analysis demonstrates how visitors socially organize their viewing activities, maintaining an *ecology of participation* with and around the exhibits. Visitors progressively

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give each other access to different parts of the artwork by applying *peripheral monitoring* that enables them to notice other people's behaviors and organize their own conduct accordingly in museums and galleries. Their concept of *ecology of participation* is paramount for the general study of museum visits and the analysis of the visiting practices proposed by mobile applications.

As far as multimodal studies are concerned, they share certain points in common with interactional linguists. Overall, this approach is defined as a discipline that "interrogates how the resources and processes of meaning-making shape and are shaped by people, institutions, and societies," focusing on a range of "modes" that includes, for instance, the gaze, gestures, movement, and posture. According to Diamantopoulo, Christidou, and Blunden (2024: 250), multimodality provides concepts, methods, and theoretical frameworks "for the collection and analysis of a wide variety of visual, aural, embodied, material, and spatial aspects of interaction and environments and insight on the relationships between these."

It is important to note, as the authors point out, that this perspective draws from and is embedded in other disciplines, including social semiotics, systemic functional linguistics, conversation analysis, and interaction analysis. Thus, the notion of 'mode' has been met with some disagreement within the field of study and is accepted or rejected depending on the authors' theoretical-methodological perspective (Mondada (2023); for example, adopts the notion of 'resource').

Nevertheless, what is interesting about this perspective is that very early on, it interested in on the museum context and in the study of "the meanings that emerge both in and among the wide range of museum resources used in museums today, and of the visitor's experience as embodied and multisensorial, mediated by technologies and socially co-constructed" (Diamantopoulo, Christidou, and Blunden 2024: 251). Accordingly, multimodal studies have explored various aspects of the museum visitor experience, including visitor conversations in museums (Leinhardt et al. 2002), visitor interactions with exhibitions (vom Lehn et al. 2001), with musicographic devices (Roppola 2012), and with digital technologies (Fatah and Moutinho 2012).

In a related way, contemporary semiotics has also centered on studying practices. The proposals of Jean-Marie Floch (1990), Jacques Fontanille (2008), Marita Soto (2014), Oscar Traversa (2014), Eliseo Verón (1983-2013), Maria Giulia Dondero (2015-2016-2017), and Pierluigi Basso (2017-2021) provide fundamental analytical models for studying user behavior and the functioning of public social spaces, including libraries, subway stations, supermarkets, museums, and other public spaces.

In this regard, Eliseo Verón's (1983) work on visits at the *Centre Pompidou* in Paris represents a seminal contribution and a crucial methodological reference for contemporary visitor experience studies. His methodological proposal for studying practices shares certain similarities with the proposals of interactionist studies, in which the relationship between the visitor's body and the material dimension of the museum's spatial discourse plays a central role.

However, Verón's method is distinguished by its *analytic formula*, which focuses on the *gap* between the production of discourse (in this case, spatial discourse) and its recognition (in this case, the appropriation of space by visitors). Following this proposal, Verón first investigated the curatorial discourse (observing the unoccupied exhibition rooms) and then formulated hypotheses regarding potential routes and appropriations proposed by the discourse, which he subsequently corroborated through fieldwork analyzing visitor behavior using visual records, trajectory diagrams, and interviews.

This study of the visiting strategies of the *Centre Pompidou*'s visitors – which has become a renowned typology of visits including ants, butterflies, fish, and grasshoppers – enables Verón to define the museum as a *mass media*, characterized by a specific condition: its dominant order is metonymic. In this way, the museum space is constituted as a network of spatial redirections, which are temporalised by the visitor's spatial appropriation. Consequently, the visit can be understood as the result of a negotiation between the properties of the proposed discourse and the subject's spatial appropriation strategies (Verón 2013).

Verón's methodological proposal shares some key theoretical-methodological references with interactionist studies. In an article published in 1988, the researcher not only exposes the links between Bateson's theory and Charles Sanders Pierce's semiotics but also clarifies his theoretical and methodological position regarding these two approaches:

> Ma position est inséparable d'un triangle: celui que l'on peut tracer entre Buenos Aires, Paris et la Californie, sorte de dialogue Nord-Sud qui eut une importance considérable pour certains d'entre nous tout au long des années soixante. Depuis la position décentrée de Buenos Aires, nous étions en contact à la fois avec la recherche qui se faisait aux Etats-Unis et en France, ce qui nous donnait une 'double description' du développement des sciences humaines. (Verón 1988: 171)

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Aside from interactionist and multimodal studies and semiotics, another perspective that can be used to analyze visitors' behaviors is *digital ethnography*, which investigates the physical-digital visitor experience. Hillman and Weilenmann (2015) adopt this approach to study visitors' use of mobile phones and social networks in cultural institutions. Their research aims to integrate an analysis of social media activities into a study of physical visiting practices. The researchers are interested in examining the entanglement between content creation and social media consumption in museums. They propose the concept of *social media trajectories*, which defines the relationship between online activities and actions in the physical space. This concept emerges from studying physical-digital behaviors observed through audiovisual recordings and creating a heat map of activity on Instagram during museum visits.

Furthermore, the authors employ in-depth interviews conducted after the visit. Their studies demonstrate that visitors orientate their social media presence according to how they appropriate the physical space. In other words, their spatial trajectories shape how they edit and share content online, which is directly linked to their experience in physical space. Hillman and Weilenmann's methodological approach offers certain benefits when it comes to studying how mobile applications extend the museum space. However, despite their approach's significant contributions, it does not address the relationship between the three spatial discourses (institutional, curatorial, artistic) that operate in the staging of the museum experience, nor does it address the interactions between the visitors who are mobilized by the use of social networks in the museum.

As previously mentioned, the museum visit environment includes the museum's (architectural and institutional discourses) interactional space, the artwork's (curatorial discourse) interactional space, and the visitors' interactions. Therefore, it is necessary to return to Verón's (1998: 8) postulate: "We access meaning through packages of signifying materials whose support can be varied," which range from the materials of the museum building to the bodily appropriations of those who visit it. Following Verón's theory, the semioticians of the Buenos Aires School (Soto, Traversa, and Steimberg) have shown a particular interest in the material environment where actions take place and how media devices that manage individuals' contact with the materialities of the discourses contribute to shaping social practice.

For this reason, we propose to apply Oscar Traversa's (2014) notion of the 'device' to study the relation between the physical museum experience and mobile applications, more specifically, how these apps 'redirect' the *museum's interactional space*. Traversa connects three central issues for both pragmatist semiotics and interactionist studies: the devices' materiality, the users' actions, and the enunciative possibilities given by this materiality.

3. Museums, media devices, and visitors

In accordance with Oscar Traversa's proposal (2001), devices act as contact managers between the materiality of discourses and actors' bodies, mobilizing technologies and techniques that regulate and stabilize certain social practices. The material support of the discourse (in other words, the *interaction environment*) occupies a central place in this conceptual model since the device organizes this materiality, potentially pre-determining social practices. To this end, the device admits certain enunciative pacts made possible by its material characteristics.

For instance, the material conditions of mobile phones (their materials, size, weight, and functionalities) enable different possibilities (and places) of use. Even the materiality of museography devices promotes or forbids different visiting practices: some devices *invite doing* (contemplating, sitting, circulating), and others *forbid doing* (touching, smelling, or approaching a work of art). Thus, the materialities of the exhibition devices, from the vitrines, the pedestals, or even the glass covering the paintings (which sometimes make it difficult to contemplate the works due to the reflection of the lights) establish modes of access to the works and enunciative pacts between the museum and its visitors (symmetrical, authoritarian, friendly). In this way, the device pre-establishes potential *bonds* between visitors and the museum.

Traversa's (2009) notion of *bond* is fundamental because, on the one hand, it gives a central role to the materiality of the devices and, at the same time, it focuses on the attributes of the bodies acting in different situations of discursive circulation, as well as the techniques at play in each of them. 'Technique' here indicates the implementation of specific procedures to achieve a relatively homogeneous result: walking, looking, photographing, touching, etc. It also involves the enunciative dimension as an articulating agent between the materiality of the discourse and the body. In the case of mobile applications that function as guided tours, the articulation of these three elements (materiality, techniques, and enunciative pact) that are integrated into the device reveals the different ways in which the institution allows the public to appropriate the exhibition space and *intermediary spaces* (stores, cafeterias, terraces, esplanades) (Rosso 2022).

According to Traversa (2009), there are four types of links managed by media devices. These bondsdesignate different bodily techniques and spatiotemporal dimensions that connect the discursive materiality, and the interaction of the actors involved. In this context, we take up his typology of linkage in light of the notion of the *interactional space* of the museum and the artwork. This functional distinction enables us to segment and map the visitor's interactions. It is important to note that there are overlaps and gaps (or pauses) between the moments that visitors interact with the institution and the moments they interact mainly with the artworks (and other visitors, of course).

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Complete bonds: The actors' bodies interact in the presence of materiality through corporeal techniques such as walking, looking, touching, and talking. This type of link is observable in the *museum's interactional space*. Thus, these bonds involve a temporal and spatial coalescence with the materiality of the museum visit (with its overlapping enunciation: architectural, institutional, curatorial, artistic) and with the other visitors.

Semi-restricted bonds: The mediation of a technical resource reduces some of the actor's bodily dimensions. This type of bond is observable in interactions with, for example, the museum's social networks. More specifically, the visits transmitted live through social media (such as Instagram) occur in temporal coalescence but not in spatial coalescence. Users can interact with museum vistors through the social network, but these bonds take place in the digital interactional space of social media.[1]

Restricted bonds: One of the bodies is absent, and the other is in front of a text. It is the mode of contact with most of the museum objects exhibited (primarily paintings and sculptures), as well as other forms of time-based media implying repetition techniques, such as cinema and music, and reproductions, as in the case of books, photographs, and records. These links do not include temporo-spatial coalescence and are observable in the *interactional space of the work of art*.

Paradoxical bonds: These emerge from the technical aggregations that disrupt how the body and its faculties participate in the constitution of bonds. They involve all technical procedures from the 20th century to the present, from radio to mobile screens. In this case, the temporal and spatial coalescence are variable, involving several variants of bodily behaviors. These links are observable in the use of applications and social networks that leverage the resources of the three previous categories: it is possible to watch videos, chat, produce texts, take pictures of a work of art, or share photos. In the museum, these bonds are established in three spaces: the interactional space of the artwork and the museum and the digital space of the mobile application.

In the case of museum apps, these operational categories highlight how devices configure different types of linkage between institutions and their visitors. Thus, when studying museum visits, it is necessary to consider the multiple devices and materialities that organize different practices, even more so when museum guides organize the visit as a script that must merge physical and digital experiences. Even if institutions conceive the two levels as a continuum, different devices (e.g., room paratexts and exhibition podcasts) configure different bonds with the visitors. Traversa (2009) argues that although the substance of *what is said* – namely, what is proposed by the museum – may be very similar, even identical, in the physical and digital space, in each case, *each device will model the content differently*.

[1] See: Thornborrow, J. (2017). The Interactional Spaces of Social Media: Ethics, Methods and Research Practice. *Discours des réseaux sociaux: enjeux publics, politiques et médiatiques*, 43-62.

Consequently, the analysis of museum visits must center on the enunciative strategies applied in the institutional and curatorial discourse, as well as on apps and social media. These devices generate new bonds between museums and their audiences while transforming visitors' interactions with architectural space, institutional discourses, curatorial proposals, and works of art. From this perspective, we analyzed more than a dozen mobile applications proposed by art museums to visitors to study what kind of experiences they offer. These digital applications were examined in terms of a) the user experience, b) the proposed contact with the curatorial discourse, and c) the practices (involving physical and technological techniques) involved in the physical visit.

4. Iconoclastic applications?

Our examination of mobile applications as devices that articulate the physical and digital dimensions of the museum experience led us to conclude that they are not designed for art appreciation. Their contents are disconnected from the in-situ experience, revealing that these pedagogical engagement tools ignore the museum and the artworks' interactional spaces.

The companies that produce mobile applications maintain that they offer visitors self-guided tours and provide access to all the content they need without having to join a group at a specific time. They also purportedly improve accessibility by offering multilingual content, audio, text, and subtitled videos. The companies propose their apps to institutions as solutions to reduce the clutter occasioned by paratexts, thus 'visually cleaning up' the exhibition space and reducing visitor crowding. Apps also offer a solution to renting audio devices that must be constantly sanitized, allowing visitors to use their own devices. Finally, they hold the promise of increased membership sales and donations.

However, these solutions overlook several fundamental questions: What kind of museum experience do they offer? What type of art appreciation do they foster? What criteria do they use to select the works of art that make up the proposed itineraries? The applications respect the basic principles of UX/UI design: screen flow, interactivity, interface functionalities, and wording, but they do not consider the physical context of their use: the exhibition and museum space.

Even in the case of apps more focused on the physical experience, such as the application developed by the Vienna History Museum (Fig. 2) in collaboration with education and mediation professionals, the proposed activities do not consider the museum's *interactional space*. This space includes factors like the size of the room, the objects, the constraints imposed by the presence of other visitors, and the overall experience of being in the museum.

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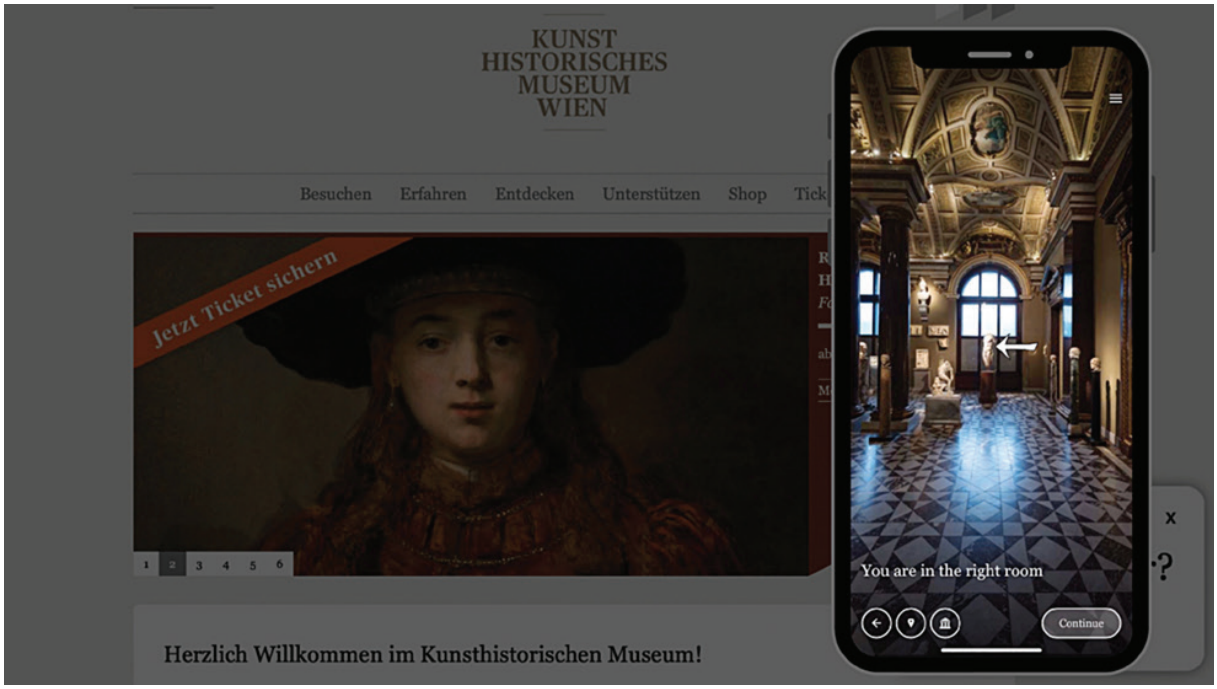

Figure 2. Vienna History Museum mobile application (image created by the author).

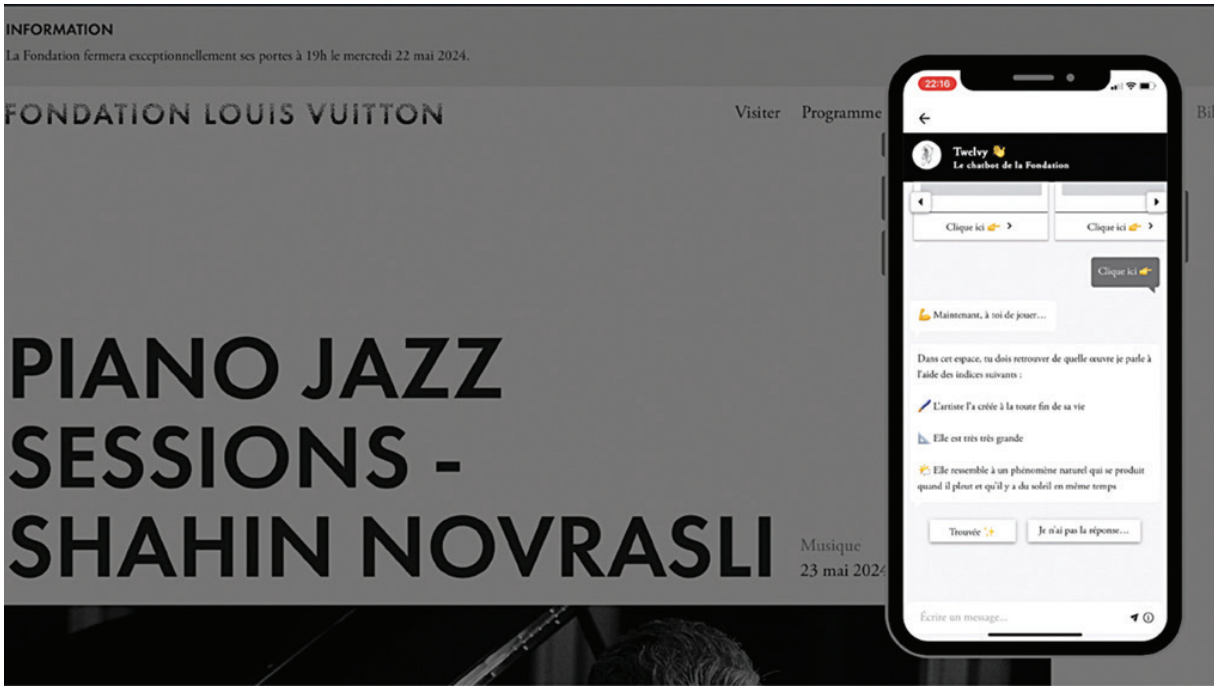

Figure 3. Louis Vuitton Foundation mobile application (image created by the author).

We encountered the same situation with the application created by the Louis Vuitton Foundation for the Ellsworth Kelly exhibition (Fig.3). This application includes various educational and entertainment tools, offers customizable maps and itineraries, audio and text content, and even a chatbot designed with artificial intelligence to answer personalized questions. The content is also differentiated according to the type of audience: families with children or teenagers, and adults. However, the proposed content does not take into account the *interactional space* and the essential issues of visiting exhibitions: the time spent in front of each artwork, the distance between visitors, the flow of visitors, the waiting times to approach the artwork, the total duration of the visit: in short, the *ecology of participation* mentioned by Vom Lehn, Heath and Hindmarsh (2002).

The experience proposed by these various museum applications is interactive within digital space and essentially created to circulate outside the museum's physical space. This is clear from the fact that these apps encourage users to *share* the proposed content through social media and email and can be used autonomously outside the museum (Rosso 2023). Indeed, as can be verified in cell phone app stores, many of these applications can be downloaded and consumed outside the museum, as in the case of the Rijks Museum, the Fondation Louis Vuitton, the Musée de la Vie Romantique, the Andy Warhol Museum, among others.

The Rijks Museum presents an interesting case because it offers content adapted to mobile and remote visits. Users can plan their visit or take a virtual tour by accessing high-quality information in an audio guide (or micro podcast) format, as well as audiovisual content. Users can also share the content on their Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp profiles and email it to their contacts, as well as buy tickets and items from the online store.

This raises the issue of the connection between social networks and mobile applications, exposing the role that they play in marketing, segmentation, and positioning beyond cultural mediation and education. Above all, by *sharing* content on their social networks, visitors become active participants in promoting the museum experience, establishing other types of bonds with the institutions, and embodying new roles as co-promoters of the museum and co-producers of its institutional identity.

To illustrate this point, the following section provides a more detailed analysis of the chatbot *Suivez le guide!* developed for the Pompidou Center. It constitutes an exceptional case for studying the different bonds (and enunciative pacts) configured between museums and visitors through the overlapping practices proposed by exhibitions, architectural and curatorial devices, social networks, and mobile applications.

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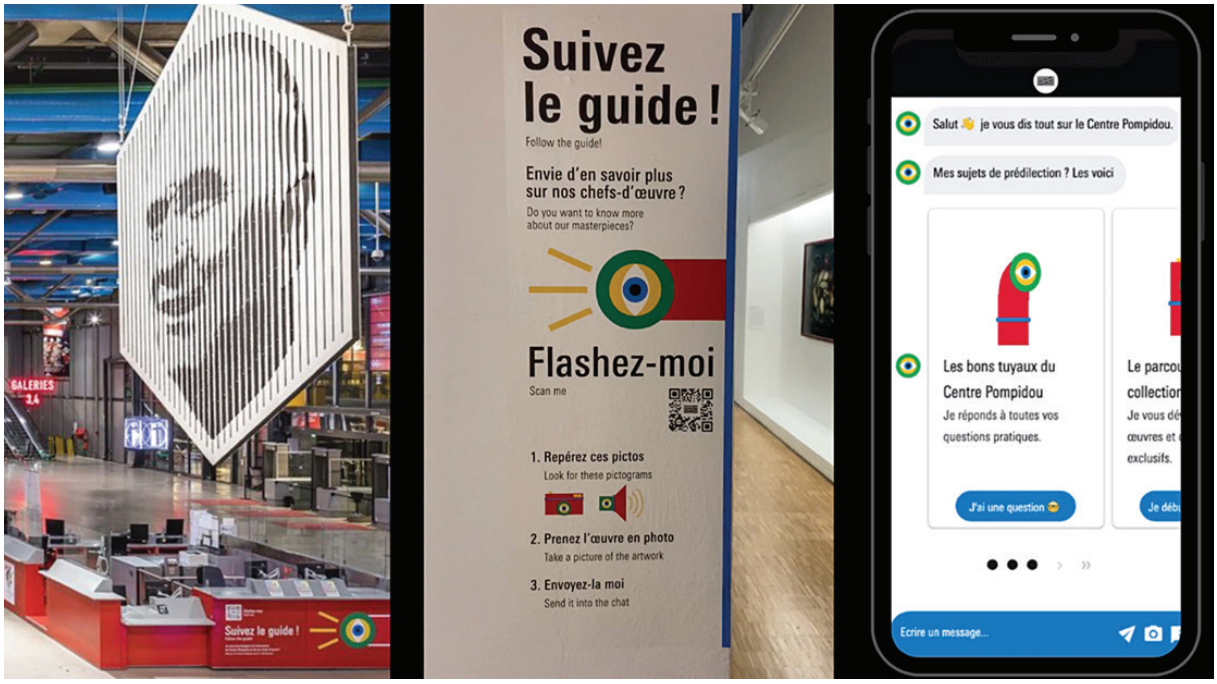

Figure 4. Centre Pompidou chatbot (image created by the author).

5. Follow the guide: the multimedia and multispatial space of the Centre Pompidou

The Centre Pompidou has integrated into its digital offering a chatbot called *Suivez le guide!* (Fig. 4), accessible through a QR code, as a pedagogical and didactic tool to help visitors discover its collection. This chatbot lets visitors initiate a conversation with the virtual guide without downloading an app on their phones. To do so, they must take photos of selected artworks classified as VIPs (indicated by icons in the galleries) and upload them to the chat, allowing them to access content in different formats. Throughout the conversation, the guide provides information about the artworks and their authors, offering texts generally published on the web, videos on YouTube and Instagram, and podcasts on Spotify. Its goal is to provide organized, pleasant, and friendly access to the vast educational content published in *Beaubourg*'s digital universe.

Interestingly, once visitors have scanned the QR code, the chatbot can be used outside the museum by uploading the images taken during their exhibition visit. If the works are part of the VIP selection, visitors will receive the same information as they would in the museum; otherwise, the virtual guide will recommend trying another

artwork. Once the content has been viewed, the guide asks the visitors about their sensations, suggests options, and responds with a certain complicity: "I understand you." The chat continues to offer information and options about the content that the museum has published online on its website and on social media (Spotify, YouTube) and repeats the question about the visitors' feelings after each exchange.

Take as an example a dialogue with the chatbot about the work *Plight* (1985) by Joseph Beuys, which is on display in the museum and part of the digital guide database. Once visitors upload a photo of the work, the guide offers three types of content (as it does for each work): a video, a podcast, and text. We chose the two-minute video that tells the story of Beuys and *Plight*. The content (hosted on YouTube) takes the format of Instagram videos, which does not consider the fact that visitors are in the museum, in front of the artwork.

As a result, while it provides valuable information in a pleasant tone and classic social media format that presents the data dynamically, allowing access to details of the work almost inaccessible in the room, such as the thermometer over the piano, it does not encourage us to physically experience and engage with the work: to smell, to feel the warmth of the material, and to listen to the acoustics of the space, three actions central to the experience of Beuys's work.

As for the conversation with the chatbot, users mainly interact with the platform by selecting options. Thus, both the guide's words and the visitors' pre-established answers have an informal tone, abounding (or exaggerating) in emoticons. The configuration of the enunciator is not entirely clear if the user is not a visitor capable (e.g., old enough) of performing all of these actions: scan the code, recognize the VIP artwork, take the photo and upload it, and choose the content that they want. So, why resort to an infantilizing enunciative tone?

This friendly, informal, and complicit enunciation is, in fact, commensurate with the *Centre Pompidou*'s Instagram profile but conflicts with the more 'classical' enunciation of the paratexts in the exhibition room. Moreover, the chatbot's enunciative strategies also differ from the friendly but still academic ones that typically characterize Spotify content, to which the app also directs users. Integrating these contents into a single device poses difficulties linked to the specificity of each digital platform, but above all to the types of contact established with the museum space and the artworks: their 'representation' and presentation.

Thus, each content hosted on different social networks implies:

a. Different enunciative scenes and, consequently, different enunciative pacts and *bonds* with the institution. As mentioned, on social media platforms such as Instagram, the museum becomes a provider of daily 'micro-doses of art' and even a 'legitimizer of users' identity.'

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b. The bonds are manifested in different social practices that regulate access to this content. In the case of Spotify, listening to podcasts is not usually associated with a visit to the museum, but rather with moments of relaxation, waiting, or traveling. Podcasts do not function as audio guides but rather as radio broadcasts wherein there is no emphasis on the physical context in which the content is consumed.

c. In that sense, social practices imply and demand different genres or discursive types that correspond to the specific requirements of each distinct social media environment. This means particular manners of production and distinct modes of reception tailored to every kind of digital content.

d. Finally, although the list is not exhaustive, the museums' social media contents pursue institutional objectives that differ from those of audio guides and traditional educational tools. These institutional objectives are two-fold. On the one hand, they aim to get visitors to join the online community of each social media platform; on the other hand, they aim to facilitate the circulation of these contents on social media, particularly Instagram. In other words, institutions encourage the viewing and sharing of content so each *follower*'s 'community' can view it and share it anew.

6. Preliminary conclusions: do not follow the (digital) guide

Integrating social media content inside the museum space highlights the complexity of the overlap between the *mediated museum experience* and the *mediatized museum experience*. Although these experiences can occur in parallel, we understand the mediated museum experience as one that contributes to *in situ* contact with the artworks, the museum, and curatorial discourse (in the case of the apps, the artwork is mediatized in its passage to the screen of the phones). In contrast to the mediated experience, the mediatized experience breaks with the time and space of the museum experience by fostering its circulation in digital space (i.e., the content about the visit posted on social networks). In the case of the chatbot used inside the museum, it is possible to describe this particular museum experience as *mediatized in proximity*.

In some cases, the *mediatized visit* effectively establishes enunciative scenes of complicity. It allows access to details or information unavailable in the exhibition room, as confirmed by *Plight*'s video or podcast that offer more information than the text on display. However, the chatbot does not refer to the physical visit in the museum, nor to the bodily dimensions that are at the core of this artwork. Thus, its function does not seem to 'guide' the visitor by proposing digital tools that encourage *interaction* with the artworks *in* and *with* the museum's physical space. On the contrary, it ignores the museum space by suggesting content that does not consider that visitors are in front of the artwork, surrounded by other people, and mediated by museographic devices.

The app only mentions the museum space when it asks questions about the visitor's feelings in front of the artwork, but the question could just as well refer to the digital content presented.

In sum, the virtual guide provides a solution to the challenge of sustaining the type of enunciative pact proposed on Instagram – where visitors build *together* an interactive and collective experience by sharing or producing videos, photos, and comments – within the exhibition space, which is structured according to specific rules linked to order, silence, and contemplation. The chatbot does so by bringing together and providing virtual access to all of the content scattered on the various digital platforms of the Centre Pompidou.

However, the proposed outcome is an *assemblage* of media experiences that cannot easily coexist since the museum must address at least three different publics: its onsite visitors, its digital *followers*, and its different online communities. These media experiences establish distinct types of *bonds* with the complex materiality of the museum experience through diverse devices providing varied access to its physical and digital spaces. Thus, while the intention is for the chatbot to serve as a guide to the Centre Pompidou's collection by linking content published on different platforms and social media, the actual experience is far from a guided tour supporting education and engagement with the museum's complex materiality.

The challenge of combining different media experiences in a single mobile application lies precisely in the difficulty of sustaining similar enunciative pacts on platforms that establish different *bonds* between the museum and its different collectives, which consist of:

1. The visitors, traditionally considered as those who visit the museum's physical space.

2. The users on platforms such as Spotify or YouTube, who consume the content and can react and comment but do not necessarily produce audiovisual content; and

3. Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok followers, who 'must' produce or interact with the content on offer.

These three collectives are embodied through different practices determined by the material supports of the institutional and curatorial discourse (the building, the collection, the museography, the phone screen, and the artworks) and by the modes of access that, in each case, offer distinct experiences. Even if, hypothetically speaking, we could consider the cell phone, among all the devices that intervene in the exhibition space, as the only contact manager with the materiality of the museum experience, we would still see that access to the institutional discourse varies according to:

1. Different spatial contexts: The phone screen in the exhibition hall differs from the same screen (even if it has the same educational content) in the subway, at home, or at work.

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2. Different temporalities: time spent visiting an exhibition *vs.* listening to a podcast about the same artwork.

3. Different enunciative pacts: The museum applies specific enunciative strategies and discursive types according to the kind of audience and the communicative situation: an exhibition opening in the museum *vs.* its live broadcast on Instagram.

4. The different content formats and the horizons of expectations that they set: An audio guide differs from a podcast, and an Instagram video differs from a didactic content conceived for the exhibition space.

These points allow us to see that, although the different platforms offer thematically similar and even, at times, identical discourses, the devices effectively shift the focus from the *énoncé* to the enunciation. The museum experience is materialized precisely by the opposing and complementary enunciative *games* involved in each media device (exhibition space, social networks, digital platforms, mobile applications). In this way, the visit is shaped by combining different ways of 'making available' and 'consuming' the museum's multiple materialities.

Conclusions

Mobile applications, as pedagogical and entertainment tools, hold out the promise of personalized access to content related to the physical visit and the artworks on display. However, this involves a spatial and temporal rupture with the experience of the artworks, now mediatized (in proximity) on the screens of cell phones. Users remain in a spatiotemporal coalescence with them in the museum's physical space. Yet, mobile applications often forget that their users are museum visitors who interact with other visitors as well as exhibition devices and information, and experience noise and thermal sensations.

Using apps also introduces new temporalities that disrupt the visit's past, present, and future. Consequently, using these media devices in museums adds complexity to the experience's material supports and, therefore, to the contact with them, generating new social practices that imply new behaviors in physical and digital spaces.

The parallel physical spatial analysis proposed by interactional linguistics and semiotics shows that the design of digital platforms and applications that function as visitor guides must always consider the museum's physical space. Thus, UX researchers should consider the research conducted by these disciplines; meanwhile, UX designers should work with curators and education specialists to create adequate tools and quality visitor experiences.

In this respect, an example of good practice can be found in the recent project *Augmented Artwork Analysis* (AAA), which aims to produce a tablet application that augments the perception and interpretation of works of art encountered in museums.

Once completed, it will allow links to be forged between the paintings exhibited *in situ* and works in other museums, creating a *complementary museum*. Thus, this digital tool will link two ways of observing: directly, in front of the painting in the museum, and augmented, creating a network of images connecting with it. In this way, the application will be involved in what we call museum and artwork's *interactional spaces* while operating in the interactive digital space.

To conclude, if the applications do not consider the specificity of the museum's and the artwork's *interactional space*, viz. the particularity of the devices and their enunciative contrasts, the physical-digital visitor experience will be constituted as a set of disjointed communicative and consumption proposals that will alienate individuals from the exhibition environment and the artworks, which are and have always been, at the core of the museum experience.

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Jappy's neo-Peircean approach

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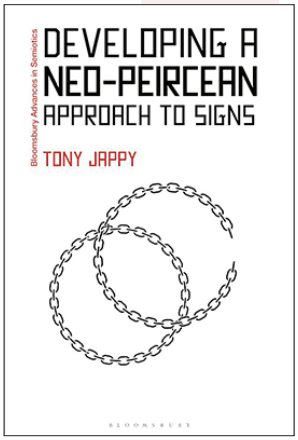
BY: **Priscila Borges**



Tony Jappy

Developing a Neo-Peircean approach to signs

London: Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics, 2024, pp.197,
ISBN 9781350288829, $91 (hbk), $81.90 (eBook).

The title of Jappy's new book – *Developing a Neo-Peircean approach to signs* – may cause strangeness due to the prefix 'neo,' just as it sounds strange in the concept of 'neo-human,' which refer to the human beings in relation to the many technological revolutions that brought us to the current world. Yet, just as 'neo-human' does not refer to anything post-human but to human beings in the specific context of the current world, Jappy's work does address the theory of C. S. Peirce and not something post-Peircean.

The term 'neo-Peircean' is not new. It was previously employed by Shapiro and Kull,[1] who worked on the relationship between semiotics and other areas, namely linguistics and biosemiotics. Jappy, on the other hand, focuses strictly on Peirce's semiotics. What led him to adopt the term 'neo-Peircean' was a series of criticisms directed against the application of Peirce's semiotics and the development of Peirce's systems of sign classification. Although in many ways more Peircean than the critics he addresses, Jappy recognizes that it is "potentially deceitful" to call contemporary Peirce-based semiotics as Peircean since Peirce himself never did a semiotic inquiry such as the ones he and other researchers are doing.

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[1] These are the authors Jappy refers to in the book. Other authors have also adopted the term neo-Peircean: Wilson and Price (2018), Wilson and Little (2016), Skaggs (2015), and Jacquette (2009).

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Researchers and students of Peirce's thought and semiotics will find in the book an excellent presentation of many of the issues yet to be discussed by Peircean semioticians. Chapters are devoted to careful exegeses of Peirce's published texts and unpublished manuscripts. Besides, all the new perspectives developed and proposed by the author are explicitly stated in the book as new and thus presented to the reader as matters to be discussed and not as finished ideas that must be accepted. The gerundive in the title, 'Developing,' also indicates that it is a work in process. In fact, the research on Peirce's semiotics is far from being finished: "the most important of Peirce's statements on signs have to be sought piecemeal from scattered published and unpublished sources, with the unfortunate consequence that the recently coined sobriquet 'neo-Peircean' denominates a research enterprise fraught with difficulties." (p. 2)

The book is divided into six chapters. The first one, dedicated to the relevance of Peirce's theory of signs, also deals with the challenges and obstacles to developing this theory. The following two chapters are quite exegetics. Chapter 2 presents Peirce's system of sign classification of 1903, and Chapter 3 deals with the transitional period between 1904 and the introduction of the concept of semiosis in 1907. Then come the chapters designated as neo-Peircean, which discuss the late systems of sign classification. Chapter 4, the least neo-Peircean chapter of the three, presents the system of 1908 and targets the hostile critical assessments of this system. Chapter 5 examines a draft left by Peirce of a curious system of ten classes in 1908 and discusses Peirce's semiotics in relation to contemporary studies. Chapter 6 associates the 1903 system, which is purely formal, with the idea of semiosis developed before it, in case studies illustrating the contributions of a hybrid neo-Peircean perspective.

The proposition of the neo-Peircean perspective in the last chapter depends on some conceptual discussions made throughout the previous chapters. Two of such concepts begin to be discussed in Chapter 1: the relationship between Peirce's classification systems of sciences and signs and the concept of semiosis. Peirce identified semiotics as one of the branches of normative sciences, which is part of cenoscopy, that is, of philosophy, a science that does not observe current events but is based on the careful examination of common thought, of ordinary experience (Kent 1987). What is currently called applied semiotics does not fit into this type of science. For Jappy, the applied semiotics practiced today belongs to the branch of special sciences, which Peirce also called idioscopy because this branch of science reaches new discoveries from observing current events (Kent 1987). It is essential to highlight the difference in the mode of observation used by each of the two sciences, as the issue of the mode of observation will reappear at the end of Chapter 5, where Jappy compares and ponders the current relevance of the Peircean perspective in view of the development of cognitive sciences, neurosciences, and semiotics in proposing models of knowledge, experience, and relationship with the environment.

The second fundamental discussion for developing Jappy's neo-Peircean approach, as well as Peirce's late systems of sign classes, is about semiosis. Throughout Jappy's book, the notion of semiosis appears repeatedly until it becomes central to the neo-Peircean perspective. In Chapter 3, semiosis appears in the discussion on the order of interpretants. It is also related to the classes of signs taken as classes of semiosis in manuscript R318. Finally, semiotics is defined as the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible semiosis. With this perspective of classes of semiosis, Jappy makes his neo-Peircean proposal for approaching the sign in Chapter 4.[2]

Considering all the problems involved in dealing with a theory under development and not completed, Jappy chooses the chronological order in chapters 2, 3, and 4 to present the system of 1903 and the development of fundamental concepts in between to make sense of the 1908 system. Instead of abandoning it, as some have suggested, the author follows the most challenging and risky track, but the only one that may lead to a new discovery.

Even the presentation of the 1903 system, which establishes the ten classes of signs and was widely discussed by Peirce's commentators (Ransdell 1966, Savan 1988, Marty 1990, Liszka 1996, Santaella 2000), may surprise those familiar with Peirce's semiotics, as Jappy is cautious to avoid mistakes that some general presentations of Peirce's semiotics had done, which end up combining aspects of different periods without considering their context. One of the problems that permeated the reception of Peirce's work until recently was precisely the difficulty of accessing the texts and the poor quality of the first editions. Jappy uses the new sources available, namely the new chronological editions and manuscripts recently made available online, to make a fresh presentation of the system of 1903, which many people thought to be already consolidated.[3] The result is a careful discussion that returns to essential issues such as the difference between sign and representamen, the order of determination of the three correlates of the sign, the continuity or not of the processes of semiosis, the concept of degeneration, and hypoiconicity.

Chapter 3, entitled "The Transition," presents important aspects of Peirce's thought from 1903 to 1908 that led to the 1908 systems. Using published texts and several manuscripts from that time, Jappy shows that during this period, Peirce made the sign more complex by describing two objects and three interpretants and anticipated a typology of signs, which was later taken up again in 1908, when he presented six divisions for signs. These objects and interpretants, however, received various names until Peirce arrived at a proposal Jappy considers more regular.

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[2] The relevance of semiosis to Peirce's semiotic has also been defended by Fisch (1986). Other authors also adopt semiosis as a fundamental concept to understand the sign classes: Merrell (1996), Müller (1994), Queiroz (2004), Borges (2010, 2022), Deacon (2014).

[3] A great source for a chronological and exegetic approach that shows the development of Peirce's Speculative Grammar is Bellucci's book (2017).

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Another fundamental topic for developing Jappy's neo-Peircean perspective, the notion of sign as a medium, is also presented in Chapter 3 as a theoretical novelty of the transition period. The definition of the sign as a medium of communicating a form brings up an important discussion about what is the form of the dynamic object communicated in the sign by the immediate object.[4] The answer found by Jappy in a manuscript is that this form is not a singular thing. Otherwise, it would cease to be in the object when it passes into the sign (R 793 4-5, 1906). The notion of object, therefore, expands in relation to the 1903 proposal and cannot be restricted to an existent. This notion is essential for understanding the 1908 proposal of a division of the sign that considers the nature of the dynamic object.[5]

Finally, Chapter 3 advances the discussion on the division of icons. While the previous chapter presented the well-known and widely discussed division of hypoicons (found in the 1903 Syllabus to the Lowell Lectures), this chapter presents four different divisions of icons found in manuscripts that are practically unknown or scarcely discussed. A table summarizes the four versions of the subclasses of icons that should feed a necessary re-discussion of the texts that deal with hypoicons (Nöth 1990, Farias 2002, Farias and Queiroz 2006, Santaella 1995, Jappy 2019 and 2014, and Borges 2010).

In Chapter 4, the neo-Peircean approach begins to be presented. Jappy discusses the notion of category in relation to the universe, which is a recurring concept employed in 1908 to describe the divisions of signs. While categories are related to phaneroscopy, the notion of universe is related to logical concepts, such as the notion of set. Jappy bases his neo-Peircean proposal on the hierarchical principle of the universe, which is the same as the principle of categories, since phenomenology precedes and nourishes logic in the classification of sciences.

Next, he discusses the interpretants and the order of determination of the divisions of the sign, considering semiosis and the idea that the classes of signs are classes of semiosis. This leads to the conclusion that the 1908 hexadic system shows a flow of determination that implies a process driven by a purpose, not by chance.[6]

From the hexadic division, Jappy chooses four sign correlates for his discussion: the two objects, the sign, and the final interpretant. From their discussion, he dedicates the end of the chapter to showing (1) how the idea of universes linked to objects leads to an ontological system, (2) how intention and purpose are related to the final cause, and how the final interpretant leads to a classification of the "telic nature of semiosis and the precise purpose of the sign" (p. 109); and (3) how the 1908 system has a dynamism specific to the idea of semiosis that the 1903 system did not have.

[4] On the relation of Peirce's thought to communication see: Bergman (2009).
[5] On the notion of Peirce's object see: Borges (2023).
[6] On the order of the trichotomies see also: Müller (1994), Flórez and Mesa (2021), Borges and Franco (2022).

Although the decadic sign division and the 66 sign classes were also proposed in 1908, Jappy declares that deriving the 66 classes is not a priority of his study. He does not even approach the 28 sign classes resulting from the hexadic division. As a justification, Jappy states that he does not want to promote an extended classification based on the divisions in this book. His neo-Peircean approach is, therefore, restricted to the hexadic sign division. The reader interested in the 28 sign classes, the decadic sign division, and the 66 sign classes, however, should not be discouraged. All that has been presented so far, along with Jappy's approach to the hexadic sign division, are relevant and necessary for thinking about sign systems of any size.

Chapter 5 begins by consolidating the idea that the 1908 hexad is not just a typology but a representation of the process of semiosis. This idea of semiosis is corroborated by how Peirce constructs a diagram with ten classes at the end of the draft of a letter to Lady Welby dated December 28, 1908. Unlike the ten classes proposed in 1903, which consider the mode of being of the sign itself and the relations between sign and object and between sign and interpretant, the ten classes in this letter concern the correlates of the sign ordered as three stages of semiosis. That is, the mode of being of the dynamic object determines the mode of being of the sign, which in turn determines the mode of being of the final interpretant.

An important difference between the ten classes of 1903 and the ten classes proposed in 1908 is that the classes of 1903 do not depend on knowing the identities of the object and the interpretant. In the 1908 system of ten sign classes, signs cannot be analyzed without this information. The procedural perspective proposed by Peirce in 1908 to compose ten classes of signs may lead us to rethink an idea widely spread among commentators: that the 1903 system of ten classes is a consolidated system and the one with which we can perform semiotic analyses, while the others would be weaker, unfinished proposals. The mere fact that Peirce redesigned the system of ten classes may indicate that in 1908, he was rethinking what he had proposed in 1903. In addition, if we want to avoid taxonomic typologies that name signs without explaining their mode of action, I dare say that adopting the ten classes of 1908 may be a solution, or rather, the first step before reaching the system of 66 classes, which resists any taxonomic approach.

Readers interested in semiotic approaches to observing phenomena will find in Chapter 6 some examples of how the 1903 and 1908 systems can be used, their advantages, and how they can be combined in Jappy's neo-Peircean approach. Several discussions may arise from these examples. For instance, Jappy restricts the idea of the dynamic object to the individual intention of the utterer of the message, disregarding the social context, which usually reveals the purpose of the message. As the approach only considers the six divisions of the sign, excluding the relation between the sign and its object, Jappy recourses to the hypoicons to deal with the

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relation between sign and object, which he calls a hybrid approach. Such a procedure, however, would be unnecessary in an approach considering the ten divisions since they include the relationship between sign and object, and thus the issues concerning the icons.

Regardless of these and other minor details concerning the analyses in the last chapter, Jappy's book is much welcome. After a fruitful time for Peircean semiotic studies that began with the publication of the first editions of Peirce's writings, criticisms of applications of Peirce's semiotics and the studies on the classifications of signs such as the ones Jappy discussed in Chapter 1 resulted in a decline in these studies. Jappy's book is a necessary resumption of semiotic approaches committed to Peirce's thought, even more so due to its careful exegesis of Peirce's texts. A response to the critics of semiotics began to be given, and I hope it will stimulate others.[7]

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[7] For an approach on the iconic signs in Peirce's extended classes see: Farias and Queiroz 2006, and Borges (2013). See also the discussion on metaphors and the objects of a sign made by Hausman (1987).

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In search of meaning: Architecture between semiotics and biology

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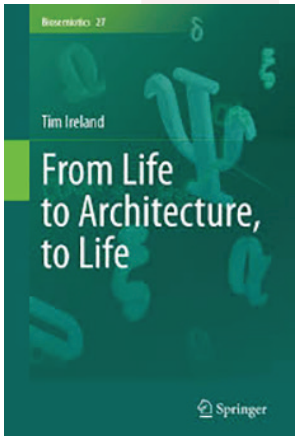
BY: **Dimitris Gourdoukis**



Tim Ireland

From Life to Architecture, to Life

Springer Cham, 2024, pp. 409, 49 b/w illustrations, 73 illustrations in color, ISBN 978-3-031-45924-5, € 139 (hbk), ISBN 978-3-031-45927-6, € 139 (pbk), ISBN 978-3-031-45925-2 ,€ 107 (ebook).

Computational tools have changed dramatically how we approach, produce, and understand architecture over the last 20 years. Among the many reasons behind this radical change is purely quantitative: the vast number of outcomes, forms, and experiments we can produce through these tools. However, while digital tools already had such a profound effect during the 2000s and 2010s, today's AI-powered tools are taking that proliferation of design outcomes to a whole new level. Not only can we generate an almost infinite number of variations, but we can do so in much less time and with much less effort. In fact, one can argue that AI-powered tools seem to threaten the architect's role.

In that admittedly disorienting condition, an 'old' concept seems to become relevant again: that of *meaning*. Lacking the criteria – and the ability – to decide within this abundance of computer or AI-generated variations, architects are forced to search for meaning within that field of possibilities to start making sense again. Of course, as Charles Jencks has explained in his famous 1969 article "Semiology and Architecture," whether explicitly or explicitly, architecture is always searching for a meaning to justify its production. According to him, architecture searches for and produces meaning, even in

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the case of the radical avant-garde that purposefully tried to deny the existence of any meaning – producing meaning through its denial. The book under review, therefore, Tim Ireland's *From Life to Architecture, to Life* is, in principle, very relevant to the current condition described above because it tries precisely to approach meaning in architecture through the field of biosemiotics.

Architecture traditionally has approached its quest for meaning in two distinct and, in most cases, separate ways. One was looking at the inside; the second was looking at the outside. In other words, architecture was either trying to find meaning by looking at itself - its history, tradition, etc. - and therefore claim its autonomy, or by looking at other disciplines - sociology, mathematics, etc. - and thus find justification in the rules and principles of that external discipline. The starting point of *From Life to Architecture, to Life* then, is highly original because by looking at the relationship between architecture and biosemiotics, it brings together two concepts that – when examined separately - are following each one of those two opposite paths: Semiotics is one of the main tools that architecture employed in the 20th century to look at itself, its history of forms and symbols. An approach has been closely related to postmodernism in architecture (of which the article by Charles Jencks was an important part). However, biology is a field that architecture has been referencing consistently throughout its history – during the 20th century from Antonio Gaudi to Frei Otto and more recent computationally driven, biology-inspired approaches. Biology is a field that architecture uses – selectively – to find inspiration, design principles and rules, and ultimately, justification for its actions, forms, and operations. Therefore, meaning, according to the premise that Tim Ireland sets forward, can be found by looking simultaneously at the inside and the outside. At the same time, an equally important starting point for this research is the theories of Jakob von Uexküll, and more precisely, his 'Umwelt theory' that explores the relationship between a subject – or an organism – to its surroundings. A theory where space acquires meaning only through that organism and its ways of interpreting signs.

The central part of the book examines exhaustively the premises set at its start and, therefore, becomes a very useful reference point. It is structured in three parts, where the first two are, in a certain sense, a 'mirror' of one another. The first part starts with architecture and moves towards biosemiotics. It references many architects of the 20th century and their approach (Oskar Strand, Adolf Loos, Joseph Frank), with a focus on the idea of parts being connected in larger assemblies, and finds in Frederick Kiesler an early precursor to the application of biosemiotics in architecture (a theme to be resumed later). The reference to Kiesler and his concepts of the endless house and architecture as a field of forces serve as a great early example that renders the understanding of biosemiotics in architecture and the following chapters of the book easier to comprehend. At the same time, however, the analysis of Kiesler's work provides a very interesting approach to the work of the Austrian-American architect that can also stand independently from the rest of the book and is therefore valuable as such.

The book's second part follows the opposite direction and goes from biosemiotics to architecture. It begins with Charles Sanders Peirce, whose semiotic theory is the second main reference point after Uexküll and extends the semiotic analysis into the behavioral models of Charles Morris. Computation and algorithmic design take a more prominent place in these chapters and 'reveal' one of the main reference points of the study, which is the computational experimentations of the late '90s and the '00s and their often biologically inspired processes. Accordingly, it seems that the research presented began initially from an interest in biology and its relation to design and architecture. Semiotics seem to have entered the frame later and became the vehicle that ultimately provided the direction of the approach. Consequently, while semiotics and biology start on equal footing, as the books proceeds and the arguments are presented, their relationship is altered: Biology and life appear as the main subject, while semiotics are transformed into the lens through which that subject is examined. Semiotics serves as a tool through which the relationship between architecture and biology is studied. Therefore, the opportunity for a simultaneously internal and external approach to architecture is left on the sidelines. At the same time, however, a fascinating study of the relationship between architecture and biology emerges.

The book's second part concludes with an extended attempt to define the concept of space. After a brief reference to several thinkers (Lefebvre, Marcuse, etc.), space is defined through an interpretation of Jakob von Uexküll's definition of space (grafted with the work of Pierce and Bateson but without losing its main properties): a space that is operational, understood through the senses and defined by the organism that occupies it and perceives it. An organism-centered space that evolves around the concept of the Umwelt. A subjective universe, consisting of signs and therefore a universe where space is understood as information.

The book's third part is appropriately titled 'Architecture to Life,' emphasizing the book's focus. It utilizes the definition of space acquired through the worldview of Jakob von Uexküll in the previous chapters to conclude on the importance of the affect of space – and therefore of architecture and buildings – on the wellbeing of the humans that occupy it. This idea is developed from a similar concept set forth by Kiesler. It claims that the design of the space around us involves some profound ethical implications because it affects the health of the subjects that occupy it. While the concept of well-being forces a precise understanding of the analysis provided in the previous two chapters, that understanding is not exclusive. The book ultimately leaves the interpretation of the research exhaustively presented, open for the reader to interpret.

The text has a consistent Heideggerian undertone throughout that sometimes contradicts some of its positions. However, this is justified by Uexküll's – and the writer's – extensive use of the concept of the Umwelt, which Heidegger also took up in his work. After all, Jakob von Uexküll was not free of his contradictions. He is a controversial figure: On the one hand, he developed an extensive array of unique concepts and

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ideas that remain relevant today and can provide the starting point for new ones. On the other hand, he held and expressed profoundly anti-democratic political views. He actively participated in the formation of the theoretical agenda of the National-Socialist Party in Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s – albeit distancing himself when the party's antisemitic views came to the forefront (Schnödl & Sprenger 2022). His political views were not independent from his greater philosophical positions, so they can't be easily dismissed. However, the persistence of his ideas after all these years means that we have several different readings of his works at our disposal. In fact, his contradictions most probably enhance this pluralism. Therefore, next to Heidegger's use of the Umwelt, for example, we have Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's use of Uexküll's work in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Uexküll's reasoning helps them define their understanding of the body, to carry out the inversion of the dualism between object and subject, and to develop – in a radical re-reading – the concept of becoming-animal.

Similarly, *From Life to Architecture, to Life* lays out several concepts and ideas related to semiotics and – mainly – biology that can help us to produce methods and practices that will allow us to start making sense of the current state of the world; in other words, to help us outline meaning today. It achieves that without offering predefined solutions or, when it does, without letting them exclude alternative readings.

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Translation in music and dance: Insights and interdisciplinary perspectives

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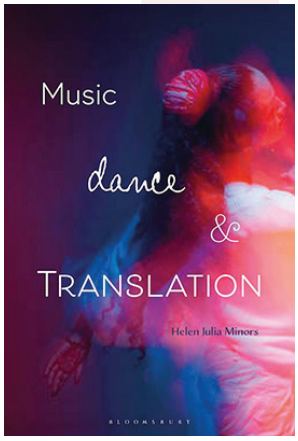
BY: **Loukia Kostopoulou**



Helen Julia Minors (ed.)

Music, Dance, and Translation

Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 200 pp.,
ISBN 9781350175730, £ 95 (hbk), 9781350371606, £ 29 (pbk),
ISBN 9781350175754, £ 68.40 (Epub).

In today's globalized world, the concept of translation has widely expanded to include all forms of multimodal communication (cf. Kress 2010). As Minors underlines (p. 3), "in an increasingly globalized and digital world, we communicate across cultures, across nations and across all forms of perceived and physical borders, as well as across languages." Hence, "[t]here is a place, between the arts, in the creative process, within the trace of the work, and within the reception of the work" (p. 13) that is yet unexplored. The notion of translation now includes several practices and modes, thus finding itself being applied in several disciplines (Marais 2022). This decades-long gradual transformation into something more performative and multimodal is worth further examination.[1]

This leads us to *Music, Dance and Translation*, a new volume edited by Helen Julia Minors that probes the interrelationship between music and dance in various contexts, genres, and artistic forms and delves into the concept of translation as it is used in the realm of dance. Coming as a sequel to the previous book,[2] also edited by Minors, which explored translation in relationship to music, the present volume questions the

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[1] Also see Petrilli & Li (2023) and Minors (2023).
[2] Also see Minors (2013, 2016, 2019).

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dialogue between the arts of music and dance during the performance and in the collaborative and interpretation process (pp. 3-4). Bringing together theoretical and empirical research, a critical question is discussed – a question at the core of the book's investigation: "[D]o music and dance offer us further insights into translation, and can translation offer us further insights into the relationships between music and dance?" (p. 5).

The book comprises four parts and eleven chapters, in which theoretical proposals and practice-based research alternate. Part One, "Translation and dance," begins with the introduction, which situates the concept of translation within the disciplines of music and dance and moves towards the proposal of a theory of translation within these fields of study. The next chapter – Chapter 2, "The role of translation in the practice of dance reconstruction," discusses dance reconstruction as a process of translation and gives essential insights into the processes Hodson and Archer use to establish their reconstruction works. As Minors asserts, "[t]o start the process of making a reconstruction one *starts with deconstruction"* (emphasis in the original, p. 19). Diverse modes across multiple decades and cultures must be analyzed to reconstruct the given cultural text.

Capturing the words of Hodson and Archer, who have shared a creative partnership for over three decades, Minors notes that while reconstructing a ballet, they look at as much evidence as possible: *"we look at everything, music, design, the choreography, and everything around it, everything connected, all the contemporary magazines"* (emphasis in the original, p. 19). She suggests that the question of authenticity is of pivotal importance in dance reconstruction and goes on to explain that "Translation, like dance reconstruction, is creative, but we *translate in a different way […] to ensure everything is dancer friendly*" (emphasis in the original, p. 21). Thus, the target audience, as well as those involved in said reconstruction, are of paramount importance.

Part Two of the book, comprised of Chapters 3 through 5, "Gestures between music and dance," showcases the point of contact between music and dance and presents case studies from musicologists and choreomusicologists. Chapter 3, named "Bases for translations between music and dance," written by Lawrence M. Zbikowski, investigates how music and movement are connected and how meaning-making in these media emerges through analogy. The author delves into the work of choreographers Mark Morris and Twyla Tharp and outlines how these choreographers reconstruct and reimagine the resources that music offers. The following chapter, "Interactions and correspondences between music/sound and dance/movement as permanent negotiations of translation processes" by Stephanie Schroedter, explains that translation is a process of continuous negotiation and explores whether sound creations initiate movement or vice versa. Chapter 5, the conclusion of Part 2, "Collaborative ballet dialogues in translation and creating *La Parade* (1917) in Paris," written by Helen Julia Minors, seeks to address the process of translation as a collaborative process. It outlines how all the parties involved

in the creative process (composer, choreographer, designer, and librettist) used translation as a way "to mediate and interpret each other's contributions" (p. 10).

Part Three, "Translation through music-dance performance," looks into translation as used in producing the performance. It starts with Chapter 6, "Maurice Béjart's variations in Wilde's *Salome* and kinetic translation of words and music in *La Mort subite* (1991) and *Boléro* (1960)" by Juliette Loesch and captures the ongoing interactions between dance and music. The author assumes that "[T]hough Ravel's piece was not inspired by Salome, it has become a variation […] via both Rubinstein and Béjart, up to *La Mort subite*" (p. 96). In Chapter 7, "The music has the movement in it," Lesley Main examines the role of translation in staging a dance work. It studies examples that reveal the relationship between music and choreography and their impact on the other. Translation, seen as a communication process, investigates the impact on a work from various perspectives, including that of the director, the performers, and the audience (p. 99). Main infers that "translation creates different platforms for engaging with a work […] and, thus, creates the potential for new meanings in a work to be discovered that may not hitherto have been apparent through more established staging practices" (p. 114). Chapter 8, "Cranko's reinvention of Pushkin's text in his ballet *Onegin* (1965)," by Anna Ponomareva, displays a strong connection between Pushkin's text and Cranko's Onegin through the framework of intersemiotic translation. Ponomareva underlines the importance of maintaining stylistic features of the original text in the target translation version, which is expressed not in words but in other semiotic systems.

The final part of the volume, "Institutional representation: Notation, archives and the museum," begins with a chapter written by Heili Einasto. Einasto inquires into a case of intersemiotic translation, a literary text translated into a musical-choreographic form. As the author suggests, ballets show characters' emotions "via imagery that has its roots in bodily sensations" (p. 133). Einasto shows how Bingonzetti interprets the ballet and how he transforms the production within contemporary settings. Chapter 10, "Fruitful intersemiotic transfers between music and choreography in the national ballet of Canada's *Romeo and Juliet*," illustrates how the choreographer transforms music into narrative dance. As Denise Merkle argues, "[n]either the exchange between music and dance, nor creativity and interpretation operate in isolation; they are all interconnected and nurture one another to produce the final intersemiotic cultural product" (p. 161). The final chapter, "Dancing symbols. Movement notation as a form of translation" examines how dance notation translates "physical movement into a form of written documentation," recording several elements such as the parts of the body that are involved, the speed, the positions, the dancer's gaze, etc. (p. 163). Mary Wardle concludes that when we expand the field of translation to include "the transfer from movement to dance notation and back," we can enrich the ongoing debate (p. 177).

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The book also features a very extensive bibliography on music, dance, and translation, which will be particularly useful for researchers in these disciplines. Through various case studies spanning diverse genres, media, and cultures, the volume prompts the audience to expand its consideration of translation and broaden its applicability to the sound and movement arts. Written in an accessible style, the book will appeal to readers interested in translation and intermedial studies as well as the arts of music and dance.

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Comics and the democratization of knowledge

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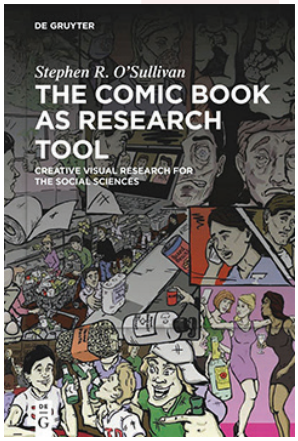
BY: **Chiara Polli**



Stephen R. O'Sullivan

The Comic Book as Research Tool: Creative Visual Research for the Social Sciences

Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2024, 242 pp., ISBN 9783110781052, $101.99 (hbk)

Since Umberto Eco's (1964) ground-breaking study *Apocalittici e Integrati*, which first presented comics as a medium worthy of academic attention, research on comics has slowly but steadily increased in different areas. In the field of semiotics, several studies unpacked the meaning-making processes and communicative potential of comics (see Barbieri 2017, Groensteen 2007, Floch 2002, among others). The publication of Scott McCloud's (1993) *Understanding Comics* also paved the way for a new application of the comic medium, which is considered a research topic and a legitimate academic platform through which knowledge is produced and disseminated. Although the comic book format has also been employed by other researchers (e.g., Cabero et al. 2021) in the wake of McCloud's seminal work, research through comics is still underutilized and underinvestigated in academia.

In this context, Stephen O'Sullivan's *The Comic Book as Research Tool* (2023) represents an invaluable addition to the debate on the potentially innovative and interdisciplinary use of comic books to conduct and present academic research. The author contends that integrating visual and verbal elements enables the creation of rich and compelling multimodal narratives that can enhance knowledge dissemination and engage a broad, diverse audience. In this respect,

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one of the focal arguments of O'Sullivan's book is the democratization of knowledge. Throughout the volume, the author describes how the comic medium can effectively increase the accessibility of scholarly research even to non-specialists since complex concepts can be broken down into more easily digestible, creative, and visually stimulating storytelling.

Following an introduction that outlines the scope and contents of the volume, O'Sullivan's study is structured into ten chapters. Chapters 1-4 provide the theoretical background of the research. Chapter 1 delves into visual culture and media studies by focusing on the impact of communication technology on culture, society, and human behavior. To do so, O'Sullivan grounds his reflection on the so-called "socio-cultural media spiral" (p. 7), which summarizes four fluid stages of media progression and the corresponding impact on a socio-cultural level: artistic narrative (i.e., prehistoric and pre-printing press creative art), modern order (i.e., the changes brought by printing press invention), illusion of life (i.e., the advent of photography, radio, cinema, and television), and digital claustrum (i.e., the advent of the Internet and AI technology). O'Sullivan maintains that "human intelligence and creativity are moving towards passive dimensions" and digital media fostered "societal apathy" and "passive indifference" (p. 21).

In front of a "crisis of creativity" (ibid.), the author advocates a significant involvement in visual narrative tasks and devotes Chapter 2 to a discussion of a "creative visual research agenda" (p. 29). The chapter opens with an overview of visual research areas, methodologies, and tools, especially in relation to social sciences and ethnography. O'Sullivan advocates a more art-based approach to research and the creation of alternative scientific narratives aimed at the methodological revitalization and democratization of knowledge production. In this context, the comic book is introduced as a powerful means to achieve such goals, being a "vivid, emotive, democratic, collaborative, and imaginative narrative tool" (p. 54).

Chapter 3 is dedicated to exploring the comic medium from a historical perspective, from the early antecedents of illustrated narratives to contemporary graphic novels. The chapter summarizes the salient stages of the evolution of comic forms, contents, and industry, including references to cartoonists, events, and works that shaped this medium. As the author himself recognizes, the chapter is centered on the Anglo-American comics tradition, and little is said about other comics schools. Still, the aim of the volume is not to offer an all-encompassing history of the comic medium from a global perspective but rather to corroborate the thesis that this medium can engage a broad and diverse audience and "foster an imaginative agency" (p. 81) by challenging the primacy of word and linear thinking.

This point is further developed in Chapter 4, where the anatomy of comics is investigated in semiotic terms with the support of theories from comics scholars such as Barbieri (1991), McCloud (1993), Groensteen (2007), Cohn (2013), and Zanettin (2015).

The chapter discusses the specificities of the 'language' of comics (mechanisms such as frames, panels, braiding, and splash pages) and how meaning-making processes depend on word-image interactions. In so doing, O'Sullivan anchors the discussion to studies on multimodality, which de facto is the field of inquiry that prompted a novel interest in comics research in recent years (see, for example, Dunst et al. 2019) as well as the shift of paradigms from the primacy of word to the idea of communication as an interplay between multiple socially constructed semiotic resources (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2020[1996], among others).

Chapters 5-9 shift from theory to practice and show how the specificities of the comic medium can serve the purposes of O'Sullivan's creative agenda. Chapter 5 focuses on research design and data generation, thus challenging the "rigidness of academic writing" (p. 94). The chapter lists a set of exercises for researchers tailored to stimulate their creative abilities. Exercises progress in complexity (from drawing creative shapes to collage and decoupage; from seen to unseen narratives) as well as in the level of narrative research engagement, including group reflection and participatory knowledge production. The process of producing a research narrative is equated to that of creating a comic book.

Chapter 6 discusses how the comic book structure can assist the process of creative inference, particularly data management, manipulation, and interpretation. It details the steps of creating analytical comics that integrate traditional inductive and deductive methods. While this chapter explains how comics can aid the 'coming to know' phase of research, Chapter 7 offers a practical analysis of comics as knowledge representation and dissemination tools. O'Sullivan explains how comics can make social science research resonate with a broader audience by overcoming the crisis of traditional communications of science. To do so, he details the step-by-step procedure that led to the creation of his original ethnographic comic book *Toxic Play (*see Appendix 1 of the book), based on data gathered from his fieldwork on the professional beer pong community.

Chapter 8 discusses another original work by the author, *10 Business Days* (see Appendix 2 of the book), as a case study on comics as a method. This approach aligns with visual anthropology and ethnography. While *Toxic Play* is an example of support for data representation, *10 Business Days* is the outcome of a study on the COVID-19 experience designed as a comic book since the beginning. The flexibility and adaptability of the comic format enabled the integration between traditional scientific approaches to data analysis and novel emotionally invested narratives to account for the changes brought on a societal level by the pandemic.

Chapter 9 explores comic books as a means of knowledge transfer in interdisciplinary research. It stems from a theoretical reflection on the translation turn in social science, including processes such as transmutation, transmediation, and intersemiotic translation. The tools and exercises O'Sullivan introduced in Chapters 6-8 are

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employed here to create multi-representational knowledge translations to engender different "shapes of knowledge" (p. 175) according to the diverse composition of the audience and contexts. Humor and satire are also introduced as contemporary forms of public intellectual translations of knowledge about complex social and cultural practices into more accessible forms. The role of the public as semiotic investigator and co-creator of meanings is also considered, thus paving the way for the final discussion on the liberation of knowledge and creative knowledge translation, developed in Chapter 10. The idea of using the comic book medium to create alternative shapes of knowledge is a response to the aforementioned passivity of the digital world, the crisis of creativity in academia, the rigidity of traditional knowledge production and dissemination methods, and the fracture between the self-enclosed academic sphere and the public audiences.

O'Sullivan's argument for including comics in academic research is persuasive and well-supported, drawing on a wide range of theoretical studies, personal experiences, and practical case studies. The reasons why the comic book format is deemed the ideal tool to achieve these goals are clearly stated in the book. However, such advocacy may be perceived as somewhat idealistic since potential limitations and criticalities of creating research comics are often overlooked in favor of a thorough discussion of successful examples and applications. Rather than a limit, the critical examination of the challenges of research *through* comics may represent a future area of investigation that encompasses, for instance, how to overcome the risk of oversimplification, the potential biases introduced by the visual mode or by the comic medium in general, and the need for collaborations, novel platforms, and resources to create and disseminate research comics.

Overall, O'Sullivan's book is compelling and thought-provoking. It challenges traditional notions of academic publishing and research communication, rekindling a much-needed debate on the potential for reviving academia. It opens new possibilities for researchers, practitioners, and educators looking for innovative methods to research social sciences and engage with wider audiences.

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