

# Postmodern Exhibition Discourse: Anthropological Study of an Art Display Case

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## ABSTRACT

The article studies tendencies in contemporary museum exhibitions and art display trends. While analysing current status quo of art in the museum context, it discusses the limitations of curatorial impact on the audience perception of the displayed objects. The paper presents a case study of a permanent museum exhibition with an added performance element. As argued in the article, such approach allows a stratified narrative and provokes a dialogue between the audience, performers, and curators, fully reflecting postmodern polyphonic tendency. The aim of the article is to comment on postmodern trends in museology, the status of the displayed art (object), and contemporary exhibition identity.

## KEYWORDS

Postmodernism; Art Display; Museum Exhibition; Anthropology of Art; New Museology; Interactive Art; Performance.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Museum exhibitions, in modernity, provided the curator with the potential of becoming a master of the show who shapes the overall exposition image. The status of *spiritus movens* of art display allowed the curator the capability of determining and defining the possibilities as well as the limits within a visitor's perception of the exhibition. Art display was perceived "not so much as a transparent medium produced by an institution but as the work of an individual with a particular name" (Heinich & Pollak, 2000). The idea of curatorial authority prevailed, providing museums with the rank of a place responsible for promoting and communicating the "truth" (Harrison, 1993). We can argue that many of the current trends in museum exhibitions challenge such almighty role of the museum curator. In this article I intend to analyse a particular museum event, which represents a more general trend in contemporary art displays. I will refer to a performance organized in 2010 and 2011 in Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis in Porto as a

case study, which reflects a postmodern tendency in museum exhibitions. The event took place on museum's premises, within its limits, and the visitors were cruising around rooms following the exhibition route. Nevertheless, their perception of the displayed art was to go beyond the curator's vision.

The show "In Situ – In Transit" performed by a group called "Teatro Plástico", was an event feeding directly from curatorial ideas for exhibition. However, by providing an author's commentary to them, the performers managed to create a postmodern event, where the confrontation takes place between the museum (one of the most emblematic in Porto) and the performing arts. It is the case of interactive art, where the ephemeral (performance factor) meets the long lasting (permanent collection of the museum), and the dynamic is confronted with the static. The case study serves as a starting point for unravelling semantic connections between exhibition trends and postmodernity as an identity.

The article proposes an anthropological reading of artistic event. One of the essential assumptions of anthropology of art as a discipline is that "Taken cumulatively images are signifiers of culture; taken individually they are artefacts that provide us with very particular information about our existence" (Prosser, 1998). The described artistic event is therefore a source of information on "our existence" in the postmodern reality. Art serves in this particular case as a system of representation of the condition of ("Western") societies: "Art has increasingly become part of cultural commentary and of political discourse" (Morphy & Perkins, 2006). It enables the understanding of socially and culturally vital dilemmas.

## **2 | POSTMODERN MUSEOLOGY**

Postmodern discourse has been present in the area of museum exhibitions since the 1970s. It materialized at the same time as the general postmodern revolution, which introduced new philosophical and cultural paradigms. A "round-table" meeting was organized in Santiago de Chile in 1972. It gathered museum and art professionals who announced the need for the implementation of New Museology, promoting a change in how museums function. During that debate it was established that museums should engage with their community and respond to

their environment's needs. In here the term "environment" "refers to the social, cultural and natural environments shared by the communities" (Davis, 2008). If we put in a wider context these initial New Museology related findings, we might argue that museums are responsible for engaging in a dialogue with their visitors and society at large. French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that art in the Western context has been a symbolic capital, an extension of power of the influential elite (Bourdieu, 1984). Art as a consumption area for the wealthy was isolated from the remaining part of Western societies. Contrary to that tradition, New Museology remains closer to the needs of various communities. Rather than being an elitist domain, it encourages a dialogue with diverse audience. Postmodern Museology represents "a move to a museum which is open to inter-disciplinarity, to the public, to society, and to criticism" (Davis, 2008). The new postmodern trend in the area of museology was grounded in the idea that museums had been elitist and thus isolated from the contemporary world and its needs (Hudson, 1977).

Postmodern ideas for exhibitions have been including radical slogans, which reflect socially vital dilemmas. They have served as a form of protest against some of the racist or sexist modern museum tendencies (i.e. the feminist group Guerrilla Girls' famous motto: "Do Women Have to be Naked to get into the Met. Museum?").

This far-reaching contemporary tendency provoked radical changes in exhibition concepts and themes. It led to the museum's space reinvention. These concepts were implemented by (among others) Centre Georges Pompidou, which established an entirely postmodern building in terms of architectural form and design. Postmodern thought, deriving from the concepts of an open, non-hierarchical dialogue (reflecting the end of the "great narratives" from the modern era), influenced some of the artists who found alternative, open spaces for their exhibitions. P. S. 1 – a niche, urban gallery in New York is just one example of informal in terms of structure display settings.

The performance "In Situ – In Transit" took place in a museum. The overall approach towards the displayed art, however, reflected a postmodern adoration for open, non-hierarchical, non-institutional spaces. The

performance, which was based on direct interaction with the permanent museum display, allowed the audience to redefine the structure of the Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis.

The performance provided the audience with the opportunity to experience a personalized and non-curatorial vision of the exhibition. Performance genre has always encouraged the spectators to reflect on “their own notions of art and its relation to culture” (Goldberg, 2001). Similarly, “In Situ – In Transit” interpretations could embolden people to pertain art to their everyday life experience. The event as described below, raised questions, which were ultimately left unanswered and thus provoked personal interpretations. It reflected the New Museology focus on relationships between the past (displayed artefacts) and the present (“on the spot” interpretation of the showcased art, performed by “Teatro Plástico” artists). The “In Situ – In Transit” performers implemented elements of Interactive Art; they played with, and relocated some of the displayed objects. I interpret these manoeuvres as an exploration of New Museology concepts, which promotes a discussion revolving around a socially constructed meaning of the showcased objects. This meaning is “altered by museums through the recontextualization of objects in the museum setting” (Stam, 1993).

In the article I use the term “Interactive Art” outside of its traditional association with media art. Some researchers are concerned about restricting the use of that nomenclature to digital arts discourse. I adopt the understanding of Interactive Art as an activity, which exceeds, surpasses merely intellectual perception of art (Kwastek, 2013). It encourages experience, interaction between the displayed object and its audience. In some contemporary works, scholars emphasise that Interactive Art is not exclusive to human-machine interaction and media art. There are other, numerous artistic endeavours, which stimulate and activate the audience without the inclusion of the digital component. In this article the understanding of Interactive Art is build on “the sociological concept of interaction – in other words, on the basis of the ideal of face-to-face communication” (Kwastek, 2013). In the described event such communication between the displayed art, performers and the audience

allowed reconstruction of the museum space, and reinterpretation of the exhibition concepts.

### 3 | POSTMODERN CONFUSION

Postmodern discourse perceives reality as the constant process of tackling new emerging ideas. It allows multiple interpretations of reality and art can be perceived as the perfect arena for communicating such diversity. The number of reality’s interpretations often equals the number of its interpreters (artists), which reveals the immanent character of postmodern discourse relativity (Bauman, 1997). “In Situ – In Transit” reflected that trend thoroughly. The performers were suggesting sometimes two or three possible understandings of the same displayed object, never providing an ultimate solution in favor of one particular meaning. In the area of postmodern discourse even contrasting interpretations have an equal status and a comparable potential for defining the “truth” (commas are used here to emphasize the general postmodern crisis of episteme, cognition, and concepts of ultimate truth). Lack of hierarchy and the melting pot of potentially equal options create a dilemma: which criteria could help us choose what is really important. Drawing from these uncertainties, “In Situ – In Transit” intensified the feeling of confusion by providing surprising, controversial, contrasting, and even shocking commentaries on famous works of art. Such situation took place in part of the exhibition devoted to Marques de Oliveira’s paintings. One of the male performers presented a historically based, erudite (though highly personalized and entertaining) commentary on “Cephalus and Procris” work, impersonating a museum curator. His speech was followed by a female performer’s interpretation of the same work of art. Her analysis could be perceived as laic, amateur, even naïve when she said: “I think that this painting is very romantic: there is a woman and a man in it. It is pretty, romantic; I am a romantic too... I really like that painting!” Such contrary and almost “inappropriate” interpretations of renowned works of art do not surprise in the postmodern context.

### 4 | POSTMODERN OBJECT

Performers greeted the audience with a particular prop, which is an object used on stage by those involved. This prop materialized in mirrors covering their faces. Such attempt could be read as a figurative

encouragement to acknowledge the visitors' presence in the museum context (in line with postmodern emphasis on a social dialogue). Peter Virgo (1989) says about New Museology: "I would define it as a state of widespread dissatisfaction with the 'old' museology... I would retort that what is wrong with the 'old' museology is that it is too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums". It is worth mentioning that the museum's purpose, its mission can be seen as a "forum, or a dialogue between the curators and a public" (Stam, 1993). I interpret this use of mirrors in the performance as permission for an individual perception of the display. I perceive this artistic maneuver as a metaphor for the contemporary museums' mission to aid visitors in their self-conducted search for knowledge (Stam, 1993).

The presence of mirrors as an essential requisite can also resemble some contemporary exhibition tendencies of providing contextualized information by placing explicative objects in the display. As Peter Virgo (1989) recalls, such attempts were implemented in the Austrian exhibition on Franc Joseph's life. Merely aesthetical objects were accompanied by other props, informative or explicative in character. They were providing the context for the exhibition, while at the same time creating an interesting alternative for conventional instructive labels, written quotations etc. A parallel to such a curatorial attempt was even more clearly visible in another "In Situ – In Transit" maneuver. In one of the museum's rooms, dedicated to oriental art, actors performed a parade of dolls/puppets. They used these (here: explicative in character, yet rarely seen in the context of a museum) objects to provide an entertaining, controversial, and highly personalized history lesson. By including in the performance symbols of political power and impersonating Asian emperors, they engage in a dialogue with the "high art". In the tradition of performance "Live gestures have constantly been used as a weapon against the conventions of established art" (Goldberg, 2001). The "doll show" was performed at a 16th century Japanese artwork created by Biombom Namban. Contrary stylistics (puppets versus works of a great artistic value) can coexist in a postmodern discourse: "Aesthetics which exclude one another cooperate forming a type of

coalition, and none of them is performing the leading role" (Bauman, 1997).

The use of puppets in the context of a National Museum is allowed in the light of postmodern relativisation of the concept of art. Together with relativisation of the perception of truth, the vision of art also became a blurred concept. The clear distinction between "high" art and non-art (or "low" art) withered, allowing a collage of aesthetics in the museum context.

Postmodern discourse allows "controversial" elements – public expression of naïve comments on renowned works of art or the use of dolls, which "profaned" paintings of great historical value. The repertoire of such artistic procedures can be completed by enumerating two more "In Situ – In Transit" attempts. In the Museum's gallery dedicated to Antonio Soares dos Reis, two performers interacted with the sculptures, using their bodies to imitate the artworks "Conde Ferreira" and "The Exiled". When the performance reached its apogee both of them undressed. Human body (often naked) exists in a postmodern rhetoric as a "cultural center". Nudity is one of the basic contemporary means of conveying artistic message and as such can be present even in the situations, which do not presume its appearance.

Another permanent art display element in the Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis is the collection of Portuguese faience, dating from 18th to 20th century. While passing by the collection visitors could hear sounds of dishes breaking. The dissonance comes immediately bearing in mind the actual value of the pottery in display.

The "doll show", amateur commentaries on famous paintings, the case of faience display, all reflect postmodern love of pastiche and travesty. New Museology "is an attempt to make museums less elitist, and encourages the use of humour, cynicism, sarcasm and provocation in museum activities" (Davis, 2008). The comical effect of pastiche can be achieved in art through the confrontation of a majestic, serious subject with a colloquial, or amusing form, language etc. (Dyer, 2007). "In Situ – In Transit" performers did not refrain from making use of this trope. Not only by providing naïve interpretations of great works of art, but also by commenting on them

using perverse literature quotations. The tendency to quote or use direct references to other works is one of the core postmodern ideas; it is based on the postmodern assumption that all possible innovations and turning points had already taken place.

## 5 | EXHIBITION IDENTITY

A unique case of a “play” within a dis-play provides a chance for an interdisciplinary event. Theatrical performance (with limited chances for preserving – on museum premises – the identity of a theatre as an institution) however, needs to remain “submissive” to the exhibition rules. In many of such cases where visual arts meet performing arts, the performers have to follow the curatorial ideas for the exhibition route. This is to avoid a commotion and prevent a feeling of confusion among the visitors. Performers’ deconstructive (in a post-Derridian sense) interpretations are feeding directly from curatorial inspiration for the displayed art. They rely on a fixed arrangement of exhibition paths. Even when redefining a curatorial approach towards the displayed art, the performers have to make use of curatorial ideas as a base and essential reference point.

We are discussing the transversal aspects of art i.e. the confrontation between a performance genre and a museum display. In this case, the performance becomes a site-specific example of art, directly affected by its’ existence in the museum context. Its’ characteristics and its’ meanings are defined by the performance’s specific location (Kaye, 2000). It is therefore important to acknowledge the interaction between the dynamic (performance) and the seemingly permanent (museum) element. Museum exhibitions are ephemeral regardless of the character of a particular display (permanent or temporary). Even permanent expositions are inherently connected with the change factor. It may be due to their constant rearrangements and relocations of objects (Virgo, 1989). Permanent, “static” displays also provide the opportunity of a prolonged contemplation and can be experienced by visitors each time differently. It might be due to their evolving perspective or even the change of natural light, during different times of a day (Serota, 2000). All these elements reinforce “the transitory and ephemeral act of viewing in the gallery” (Kaye, 2000). Naturally, such dynamism is multiplied when confronted with theatrical performance. Such

event depends on performers, their energy, ever-evolving interaction with the audience, and unexpected events. Performance reemphasizes the ephemeral and changeable nature of museum exhibitions.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Postmodernism may appear as a significant power, which constitutes a contemporary social reality. It determines concepts of truth (or its uncertain status) and means of cognition (or their shortage). Postmodern dialogue is polyphonic and multi-narrative. The inclusion of Interactive Art in the museum expresses a polyphonic tendency, which stimulates an exchange of ideas, a dialogue between the performers, the curators and the audience. It allows the viewers to become the producers of artistic meaning. It encourages participation of art in socially important topics such as postmodern confusion, contemporary fears, lack of leading figures. It allows art to become a form of social experience. It reflects the trend of “artistic practices since the 1960s that appropriate social forms as a way to bring art closer to everyday life” (Bishop, 2006). This is the role of a contemporary museum as a socially responsible entity.

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Marta Wieczorek is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University in Dubai. She has research experience in Spain, Portugal, Poland, and India. She gained her PhD in Cultural Anthropology after completing a thesis on the semiotic reading of flamenco. Her research interests lie within the areas of Anthropology of Art, Anthropology of Dance, Urban Anthropology, and Gender Studies.