

Ideas spring from reality: an essay on art museums

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**Abstract** – This essay aims at examining educational mediations proposed by art museums and at legitimising their educational role. The article is organized into two sections: in the first, we will focus on the Portuguese context; in the second, we will highlight the need to innovate within this field. Three concepts – outside of museum studies – will be used in order to understand the aesthetic experience of art museum visitors.

**Keywords** – art museums; aesthetic experience; potential space; regression; amusement; learning

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“If you don’t stop, you don’t see anything.”

(Rika Burnham)

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Everything indicates that twenty-first century art museums are going through a period of intense change, with an impact on their identity inherited from the past. This ongoing change has implications for the development of museums’ current communication practices with their communities of visitors. The premises of global cultural development, a problem debated today by philosophers and sociologists, are at the origin of this change<sup>1</sup>. In fact, museums were entrusted with the responsibility to assert worldwide their intention to become visible institutions with an important social role, mainly directed at the cultural involvement of people living in cities. This intention is followed a bit everywhere. One of the factors that most contributed to this clear change in the last decade is free access to collections – today possible due to the contents made available on museums’ websites. People can access collections by means of direct tools that the best museums include in their everyday practice. The problem of access to collections, the quickness of this access and its impact on individuals are, therefore, important objects of study. Results of studies in this field will enable new ways of understanding the role of museums in contemporary society, with benefits for both museums and their communities of visitors.

As we will see, the problem and debate about the educational and integrative value of knowledge of museums’ collections and exhibitions and the importance of improving interactions with audiences is today the object of relevant studies and theorization. The topic of access to

collections, of what may be termed “potential connectivity”, and the impact of that access on individuals, is of the utmost relevance at two intersecting levels: first of all, it widens the possibility for theoretical debate; second, it appears as one more device to optimise museums’ communication practices, bringing people to the centre of their attention, giving importance to the Utopia proposed by Umberto Eco.

In a 2001 conference at the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum, published in 2005 in an article in *Revista de Occidente*, founded by Ortega y Gasset, Umberto Eco challenged those who were listening to him – museum directors, aesthetes, art historians, curators – to reconsider the educational mission of art museums. According to him, it is necessary to organise exhibitions that serve the interests of the public. In order to emphasise this plan, he proposed an exercise centred on the visitor: if the *Allegory of Spring* by Sandro Botticelli was presented by recreating the environment of Florence during the artist’s lifetime, by recreating the culture of his time and the mystique of Renaissance Rome, and was integrated in an exhibition alongside works by artists who were his contemporaries, who preceded and followed him, visitors would have the possibility to create for themselves an exceptional image not only of that work but also of the time when it came into being. The use of photography, sound or other media would allow a better understanding of the temporal and spatial complexity in which the artist worked; however, the amount of information would be carefully weighed so as to avoid the excessive stimuli that inhibit the enjoyment of art. Umberto Eco’s suggestion, although obvious for museologists, is relevant for the reflection and theorization about the work that can currently be carried out with art museum visitors.

Umberto Eco’s utopia, of putting the museum at the service of visitors, responds to what art museums intend to accomplish when, through different types of mediations, they attract audiences for the activities they organise. In order to attain this goal, they use a series of strategies, common to other areas besides cultural programming. Thus, the diversity of educational mediation devices translates museums’ wish to adapt to the uniqueness, heterogeneity and specificity of audiences by including a wide range of activities in their programmes, such as: different types of guided tours; interactive and practical activities; theatre animation; games; school visits; didactic publications; audio guides; videos; exhibition leaflets; CD-ROMs; interactive mobile devices with multimedia applications. Besides these devices, there are informal learning programmes: workshops for families; other types of workshops; training courses; the celebration of special days; partnerships with other organisations; and online information about the artworks.

Sometimes the museum moves out of its own space and into other places, organising centres of educational resources for educators. This set of proposals – resources and learning

activities – is aimed at promoting the autonomy of museum goers. However, despite the diversity of the activities proposed, guided tours, workshops and conferences continue to be the most common activities in the majority of art museums.

Let us now focus on contemporary art museums and art centres in Portugal. In the last decades, many art collections have been organised by private institutions (economic groups, big companies, etc.). Some of them were made available to the public, across the country, namely by museums and art centres. The main task at this time was to gather and organise the collections, neglecting dialogue with the public. Some of these collections were created with the expectation of financial profit and their organisation was entrusted to a restricted group of specialists. Two situations are a good example of what has just been said: the José Berardo collection and the Manuel Brito collection. The first became *Museu Coleção Berardo*, occupying a space provided by the State and, as the museologist Raquel Henriques da Silva wrote in 2008: “where the State annually invests 500 000 Euros to enrich a collection that does not belong to it” (p. 114). The private collection of Manuel de Brito became an art centre, occupying a space belonging to the Municipality of Oeiras. Despite the extraordinary dynamism that guided the organisation of these and other private collections, art museums under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture went through, and are still going through, difficult moments in the field of our topic. In fact, the tendency of education services was to do what was possible with a non-existent, or close to non-existent, budget.

The interest in communication and education strategies has been theoretically developed through research carried out at some universities. Some contemporary art museums have clearly invested in their communication with audiences, with greater visibility since the end of the 1990s. However, these are exceptions since the best initiatives nearly always come from private foundations, which have more resources to sponsor the arts across the country. While private collections have become public, inscribed in public spaces, the work developed by contemporary art museums with their audiences is deficient. There are different reasons at the origin of these difficulties but, for reasons of space, only two will be described here.

The first difficulty concerns the attitude – a hidden prejudice – towards education carried out by museums. This attitude is linked to a certain insensitivity to education – an unexplainable blindness affecting museum directors and decision-makers. Education is often tolerated because it is indispensable to respond to a demand to fulfil museums’ social status, responding to what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1989) termed “the explicit role of museums” – to respond to what is stated in their bylaws – and thus achieve a certain balance with another role: the latent role, whose objectives are most of the time discreetly ignored. These are usually those interests that nobody speaks about

because they are too obvious or embarrassing. By neglecting this last aspect – for example, fundraising – some museums seem to be doomed to close or gradually die out.

The second difficulty concerns the continuity of mediation activities with the groups of users of collections. It is hard to keep up a continued work with the visitors of contemporary art museums. When it comes to school groups, the situation gets worse. It is extremely difficult for state school teachers to take their classes to a cultural space during the school year. Transport is expensive. However, this problem is among us not only financial but also cultural and, therefore, requires a change in mentality that only can come with continued work and time. In countries such as England and Germany, museums are traditionally part of schools' learning routines. Museum programmes are part of the syllabus that, for example, schools establish for the artistic and cultural education of their students. On this matter, we recall the decision of the first director of Montreal's *Musée d'Art Contemporain*, who created a specific fund to pay for the transport of students from Montreal, in the sincere belief that this would attract new visitors.

These are only two of the main difficulties hindering museums' work with their audiences and reflected in the scarce theoretical studies produced in our field of research.

2.

In this section we present some reflections about innovative experiences in art museums carried out in different places. Museums are seeking, without reservations, to innovate their relationship with audiences and, in order to achieve this goal, they use, as previously mentioned, a broad set of strategies and programmes that they widely advertise. The current trend of contemporary art museums worldwide is to radically change communication practices and to introduce more inclusive and participative activities. We have been witnessing an avalanche of skilful techniques, artful marketing and different tricks aimed at simplifying the access of audiences to collections. As seductive as these techniques might be, they aim at providing fictitious solutions to the multiple problems arising in the educational practice of museums. Techniques for attracting masses of people, as if it were for a big national exhibition, are often advocated.

Regarding these techniques, we should not forget Jean Clair's harsh critique in *Malaise dans les Musées* (2007), where he describes the euphoria triggered by different types of interests, hovering over museums and big exhibitions. Let us focus on what George Ritzer (2003, 2010) highlighted as the four mechanisms that make some contemporary museums a success<sup>ii</sup>. George Ritzer compared the major contemporary art museums to cathedrals of consumption and theme parks. In order to attract audiences, both museums and theme parks bring four mechanisms into

action: simulation; the search to fulfil the drive for the consumption of objects and experiences; and the manipulation of two dimensions – space and time.

Simulation refers to the decontextualisation of objects. A distant context is simulated for an object displayed in a confined space. Therefore, when art is exhibited in a museum, it loses its authenticity because it is taken from its natural context. Regarding the second mechanism for attracting audiences, museums create in their own space different places for the drive for consumption, such as restaurants or different types of shops. The third mechanism is the manipulation of space. In this case, we recall, for example, the Louvre or the Prado, which were expanded and refurbished in order to attract more visitors, or new contemporary art museums such as the Bilbao Guggenheim or the Getty Museum, which recreated a sort of sacred environment, where architecture works as a bait for visitors. Finally, there is the manipulation of time: museums explore the atemporality that derives from the classification and exhibition of artworks, creating the feeling and the idea that, for example, art history can be condensed into a constructed discourse that curators so much appreciate. After all, museums' *raison d'être* lies in the manipulation of time, as underlined by George Ritzer. In order to fulfil their mission, contemporary art museums adapt to the new reality, i.e. to the erosion of the previous distinction between high culture and popular culture. Despite all this, art museums cannot lose the specificity that distinguishes them, for example, from theme parks.

The origin of this trend towards change is marked by the benefits that technological innovation entails, well explained in an article by Terry Ray Hiller, published in 2001. This innovation will shape, and is already shaping, the learning experiences and relationship of visitors with the arts in some contemporary museums. New information technologies will force the change and redefinition of what art museums will do during the next decades. Specialists and institutions dedicated to the arts invent new ways of attracting groups to take part in their activities. One possibility is to involve people in the use of information and communication technologies, for example by promoting the use of interactive digital media in the access of visitors to collections. The universe of online communication confirms today that the number of museum visitors grew extremely rapidly in those museums that have the most innovative, attractive and functional websites in terms of their communication with visitors. Learning takes place online, namely through portals with links to different institutions such as schools. Concerning this type of concatenations, we will now highlight two interactive experiments: *Pockets Full of Memories* and *Explore a Painting in Depth*. The two are different and took place at different times.

As an example of the openness to technological innovation, we mention the exhibition *Pockets Full of Memories*: an interactive installation organised for the first time at the *Centre*

*Georges Pompidou* in Paris (2001)<sup>iii</sup>. The exhibition was designed as an installation on the theme “archive and memory” and was displayed on the main floor of the museum. During the exhibition, approximately 20 000 visitors took part in this installation, contributing with over 3300 objects belonging to them, scanning them and then describing them. The information gathered was stored in a database, organised according to an algorithm self-generated from the data introduced by the participants. This algorithm placed objects with a similar description close to each other, on a two-dimensional map. The map of objects was projected in the gallery space and accessed online, through a portal organised for the purpose, where visitors at the gallery and at home could see the objects again and add comments to any of them (Figure 1). This experience clearly demonstrates the possibility of visitors becoming an active part of the programme proposed by curators and being the protagonists of their own learning.

Figure 1. *Pockets Full of Memories II*, Museum of Contemporary Art – Kiasma, Helsinki (Summer 2004). Installation: screen projections, scanning station, terminal and wall of images. Courtesy of Timo Honkela.

The other interactive experiment in an art museum, *Explore a Painting in Depth*, was conceived and described by Austin Clarkson and Douglas Worts (2005) in an article in *Curator: The Museum Journal*. This experiment took place at the Art Gallery of Ontario, in Toronto.<sup>iv</sup> A landscape painting, *The Beaver Dam*<sup>v</sup> (1919) by the Canadian artist J. E. H. MacDonald (1873-1932), was displayed in a small room of the museum and could be seen by two visitors at a time. Visitors could use headphones and a touchpad to select among three audio programmes: the first gave an introduction to the painting; the second presented a three-minute account of the artist (artist’s portrait); and the third, the exercise for exploring, the central aspect of this experiment, lasted 12 minutes and involved the visitor in a creative process with the images of the painting. After a few minutes of relaxation induced by words, participants were invited to use their imagination, i.e. “to enter the image” and identify with colours and shapes. At the end, participants described their experiences using words and/or images on a cardboard called *Share Your Reaction*, with an approximate size of an A4 sheet. This experiment took place between 1993 and 2003.

Figure 2 – *Explore a Painting in Depth*, a booth at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 1993. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario, AGO, Toronto, Canada.

During that period, 2000 cardboards were collected. Approximately 2% of the people left their impressions. Between 75 000 and 100 000 people were in this room and somehow interacted with the painting. One of the revelations of this experiment was the extraordinary creativity demonstrated by the visitors in their responses to the landscape by this twentieth-century Canadian painter. The drawings and words left on the cardboards allowed to track the mental and sensory associations made by the people who visited this work, which was enriched by the experience of visitors.

We will adopt the expression “concepts from outside”, employed by the philosopher José Gil in his *Final Lecture*, delivered in 2010 at Universidade Nova de Lisboa, when he spoke about the method he used to describe Malevitch’s *Black Square*.<sup>vi</sup> In our case, these are concepts outside the general scope of museum studies, outside the field of study dedicated to the attitudes and behaviours of museum visitors, whose concepts we usually use to understand and justify educational mediations in art museums. There are three intersecting concepts that allow us to understand the relationship that individuals establish with the arts: regression; amusement; and learning.

Before moving on, we would like to stress our view of the art museum as a potential space for cultural experience. By introducing this idea, we will better understand what methodologies and paths can be followed by educational mediations. The idea of potential space was coined by the English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) and served his theory of emotional and cognitive development. He defined it as an intermediate area of human experience, situated between two realities: inner psychic reality and external reality. Games, dreams, transitional objects – different types of tools that contribute to the emotional and mental development of individuals – are included within this space.<sup>vii</sup>

The question that interests us can be formulated as follows: why do there seem to be emotions connected with a certain type of experiences, such as the experience with art, with no connection to other types of emotions that individuals experience in other spheres of life? In fact, our different types of emotions are similar, whether they are felt in relation to artworks or any other reality of life that is external to us. However, the experience that comes from contact with art is particular. The dimensions of aesthetic experience, just as the one that occurs when we encounter artworks, are developed within the museum, understood as potential space.<sup>viii</sup>

The importance of individuals’ aesthetic sensitivity seems to be repeatedly forgotten; sometimes we forget, for example, that touch is related to emotions: to feel or to touch are notions that refer to the world of sensations and emotional responses that precede the production of ideas. António Damásio (2010) highlighted that "emotions and their underlying phenomena are so

essential to the maintenance of life and to the subsequent maturation of the individual that they are organised in a safe way straight from the beginning of development" (p. 159). Senses and emotions are very present in the relationships we establish with everything that surrounds us: contemporary artworks also tend to explore these two dimensions. To consider the museum a place for potential emotional and cognitive development, a place that is distinct from other places where learning experiences occur, is a valid operational element to work with museum audiences.

The other concept, from outside, which helps to understand educational mediations, is the concept of regression. The experience of individuals in their relationship with artworks can be understood as regression. In its formal sense, regression is understood as a negative psychological phenomenon, a defence mechanism that the individual puts into action in situations of conflict, present or imagined uncertainty, and cognitive dissonance. In general, regression is considered a negative thing, but it can also be interpreted as a reversible and temporary psychological process and thus be used in a constructive manner. In this case, regression can be a run-up to other situations, which in turn can also generate intrapsychic conflict.<sup>ix</sup>

From now on, regression will be understood as a resource enabling a clear step forward in several situations, such as those that occur when we dream, daydream, respond to artworks, and, more evidently, during the creation of art. We find positive regression in many forms of cultural expression: individuals or groups of individuals search for relief from tensions by taking part in different types of activities, such as traditional festivities or other types of festive gatherings.

The work of the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist allows us to think about this possibility of positive regression. Born in 1962, Rist works with film and music. During the last two decades, she has occupied an important place in contemporary art, exhibiting her work on giant screens and billboards in many cities.<sup>x</sup> Pipilotti Rist is well known for her video installations that, as Boris Groys (2011) wrote, exist "here and now". These installations play with scale and, through the use of colour and sound, involve individuals' emotions in a direct way. Rist's works are imaginative in the way they use sound, images and space, harmoniously involving the senses and depicted scenes with the concerns of our time, exposing the body to the environment and disclosing the relationships between body and mind.

In 2010, Rist presented her latest work at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki: a series called *Elixir* including six audio video installations projected on multiple screens. For this exhibition, she created intense visual worlds in which sounds, colours and forms mixed with meditative landscapes and images of bodies projected in all directions. This created situations connected to the very meaning of the title of the installation, i.e. a kind of medicine to heal the minds of visitors.



Figure 3 – Installation view, *Elixir*, Pipilotti Rist at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki/FI, photo: Pirje Mykkänen. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

And now, a few words on amusement (entertainment). Amusement is an essential need of man, though often looked at contemptuously by certain intellectuals and ascetics, among others, who are filled with a heavy seriousness that leads them to consider it superficial and despicable. Man's recreational activities and diversions in general are likely to be residues of a certain magico-religious attitude, which slowly began to disappear with desacralization. As Mário Casimiro (1977) considered, entertainment and amusement are non-religious techniques to master fear and anguish. Amusement breaks up the monotony of our existence and is present in many of the interactions we establish with contemporary art objects and the places they inhabit. Contemporary art museums often organise festivities where amusement is the "touchstone" of programming. The museum experience also takes place during people's free time, dedicated to leisure.<sup>xi</sup> In fact, during or after these experiences, we are led to interact with other visitors or the people who came with us to the exhibition.

Finally, we will take a look at a concept that often emerges in the work with audiences: the concept of learning. In 2008, during a visit to the Tate Modern, I was surprised to see that the department dedicated to the work with audiences had changed its name. The previous Education Department had become the Learning Department. This change of designation is surprising owing to its free use, directly applied to the service of a super-museum. What motivated this change of designation was, according to Anna Cutler (2008), not only the reflection about the different disciplinary ways of understanding the concept, but also the acknowledgement that learning can take place at all times and in different contexts of the lives of individuals. We all agree that museum goers look for museums with the aim of learning and that learning flows in various conditions and contexts.

It is interesting to stress that neuroscientists use the concept of learning to describe the consequences involved in the neurological processes of receiving, processing and restructuring data. The processes we usually use to learn are very similar; the human brain has endless, continuous plasticity to adapt to changing circumstances, always attentive to the acquisition of new knowledge throughout life. Thirty years ago, as Sarah-Jayne Blakemore (2007) wrote, it was accepted that the brain structure developed during childhood but became unchangeable after reaching adulthood, with few possibilities to change the learning schemes consolidated until then. The link between learning

and emotions is, in our context, much deeper than generally thought. This is underlined by the words of important contemporary authors, such as António Damásio and Mary Immordino (2007):

[...] the relationship between learning, emotion and body state runs much deeper than many educators realize and is interwoven with the notion of learning itself. It is not that emotions rule our cognition, nor that rational thought does not exist. It is, rather, that the original purpose for which our brains evolved was to manage our physiology, to optimize our survival, and to allow us to flourish (p. 3-4).

The use of recent contributions from neuroscience and the more informed knowledge about how we function emotionally and cognitively will help to change the way we act in our relationship with art and how we relate this to the scope of the topic dealt with here.

Before we end our notes on this topic, we would like to highlight two aspects resulting from our reflection. First of all, when we speak of cultural democratisation, it is in fact important to think about individuals and to develop programmes in today's art museums that aim at strengthening the relationship of people with museums. One way of doing this is by narrowing down the concatenations between the contents proposed by museums and the needs of those who search for them. As Gilles Lipovestky (2010) wrote, museums as cultural institutions (just like schools) have a relevant mission: to organise and provide tools that will allow individuals to go further, to excel, to be "more", cultivating their passions and their creative imagination in any sphere of action and creation in which they act. Second, it is important to deepen theories about educational mediations, namely through the fundamental research of what we call "reality". This will be achieved with the work of important players working in different fields, namely education and communication sciences, psychology, neurosciences, sociology, museum studies, curatorship and art history.

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<sup>i</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy claim that globalisation is also a culture. Today we witness the huge growth of a "third type" of culture, a kind of transnational hyperculture termed *world-culture*, a concept accurately developed by Gilles Lipovetsky in *La Culture-monde. Réponse à une société désorientée* (2008).

<sup>ii</sup> Just like George Ritzer, Rosalind Krauss (1990), Saloni Mathur (2005), Gilles Lipovetsky and Hervé Juvin (2010) have also discussed the changes in the identity of contemporary museums, caused at least by two phenomena: museums' turn to business and cultural globalisation. Culture, just as other areas in contemporary societies, has become spectacle and merchandise.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.mat.ucsb.edu/~g.legrady/gIWeb/Projects/pfom2/pfom2.html> (website indicated by Prof. George Legrady).

<sup>iv</sup> Douglas Worts wrote about this experiment for the first time in *Extending the frame: forging a new partnership with the public* (Susan Pearce, *Art in Museums*, 1995).

<sup>v</sup> *The Beaver Dam*, 1919, J. E. H. MacDonald (Canada, 1873-1932), oil on canvas, 81.6 cm × 86.7 cm, gift from the Reuben and Kate Leonard Canadian Fund, 1926, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (ID 3636).

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<sup>vi</sup> This lecture was published in the book *A arte como linguagem* (2010).

<sup>vii</sup> The psychoanalyst Ellen Handler Spitz (1985) criticised Donald Winnicott's theory of transitional objects, which she considered not sufficiently clear in explaining the difference between "children who hug teddy bears" and adults who create artworks. Adults who regress do not become children; instead, they reveal a primary way of functioning that is similar to that of children. The release of something that persists and was internally repressed throughout time also takes place.

<sup>viii</sup> On these dimensions of aesthetic experience, see the second chapter of the book by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick Robinson, *The art of seeing: an interpretation of the aesthetic encounter* (p. 27-71). Csikszentmihalyi proposes four dimensions for the organisation of aesthetic (artistic) experience, namely: the cognitive – historical and cultural knowledge; the emotional/affective – emotional experience, curiosity, fantasy, hilarity; the perceptual/sensory – the beauty of objects, technical and stylistic comparisons; and the communicative - self-discovery, introspection, attachment to objects, attention to the universal values of different cultures and times.

<sup>ix</sup> Danielle Knafo (2002) considered that regression can be understood from three situations that overlap and intersect each other: temporal regression – a regression to primary stages of psychosexual development, for example to a certain childish behaviour; regression as risking decompensation - when, for example, we challenge the limits of the self, of identity and of reality; and, third, topographical and structural regression - the free access to primary modes of thought.

<sup>x</sup> On the work of Pipilotti Rist, see Peggy Phelan, Hans Obrist and Elizabeth Bronfen's book, published by Phaidon in 2001.

<sup>xi</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is visited annually by five million people (Roberson, 2011). It is known that many thousands of people travel to museums outside their country to see their architecture - such is the case of the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum, for example.