

Socio-cultural visions of Interactivity within Museums

Angelina Tsitoura

The ideas on which this paper is based are drawn from my thesis “Interactivity in Museums. A Relationship Building Perspective” written in 2007 for the fulfillment of the Master Degree in Museology at the Reinwardt Academy in Amsterdam. The main arguments are that the notion of Interactivity conceptualized within a technological orientation coupled with the pedagogic approach of mere information transmission need to be reconsidered; that Interactivity in museums is a conception both misinterpreted and under-implemented; and that the problems of understanding Interactivity will resolve by identifying the aspects which define Interactivity and most importantly focus on why they matter in a broader socio-cultural context within museums. Without an intention to attribute all the developments and advances associated with new museological practice, in some deterministic way, solely to politics and economic change, I argue that the new strategies adopted by museums towards progression and broader accessibility –at least regarding interactivity, seem to be linked more with a dominant commercialization of culture and education, than with a belief towards an effect on social change through the promotion of social interaction within a pluralistic and multicultural society, acknowledging the diversity of nature, opinion and practices, which can be combined instead of contrasting each other.

A broader perspective of socio-cultural factors focusing on processes of meaning making rather than outcomes and on natural ways of interactions needs to be discussed. Such a perspective may not only improve the conception of interactive exhibits but also broaden the role of Interactivity in museums;

within the last framework a potential relationship building approach is proposed. It is suggested that Interactivity acts as a variable of relationship building between museums and the public. The notions of engagement and participatory culture by means of collaboration, dynamic dialogue, active involvement and participation rely heavily on the quality and duration of human relations formed, thus making Museums accountable on their part in terms of the way interactive relationships are implemented and sustained.

Museums are very clear about incorporating interactivity in their exhibition techniques usually centering the discourse on interactive devices. Within this context, the role of an exhibition, the channel of museum's communication function, can be thought as entity transmitting and receiving information. However in order to determine whether the selected approach to Interactivity is doing a good job, we need to know first what this job is supposed to be doing. Interactive applications have been approached by many museums, used as learning tools, justified by educational policies and/or as attraction points for justifying contemporary relevance; often resulting in a tension between "educational" and "commercial" objectives driving the implementation of interactive applications to the edges: towards an either strict didactic solution or a mere entertaining one. In none case however the educational outcomes are always verified (Adams & Moussouri, 2002; Pekarik, 2002; Heath et al., 2005; Zheng et al., 2005), while the communicative function of museums can be said to lacking strongly of interactive qualities¹.

In museums, the term "interactivity" is strongly associated with the use of "interactive exhibits" and consequently with the notions of education, entertainment and socializing, where it is being used as a variable of the effectiveness certain activities may have on visitors' learning and appreciation within the

¹ See for example the case study Naturalis in Interactivity in Museums; A Relationship Building Perspective (Tsitoura, 2007)

museum. A considerable confusion and misunderstanding concerning Interactivity within museums derives from the notion of Interactivity evolving around the use of “interactive exhibits”. The latter, equate the concept mostly with technological means, ignoring social and emotional aspects as well as wider spatial and social contexts within which, both exhibits - as forms, and Interactivity - as a process, can take in museums. Exhibits tend to be called interactive by the inherent use of technology even if their interactive “value” is very limited. On the other hand, non-technologically based exhibits usually called “hands-on”, “minds-on”, or “participatory” tend to be distinguished by the “interactive” exhibits, despite their potential ability to provide opportunities for interactivity within museums. Hence, although the words interactivity, interaction and interactive are used very widely, there seems to be a concentrated focus on technology as a main property of exhibits and displays. However interactive exhibits alone are inadequate in creating a powerful, successful interactive experience, mainly due to a lack of input options and the inability to provide more than a sequence of reactions. Despite this, museums bank on the notion of such applications -being connected with popular experiences through immersion, active involvement and knowledge enhancement-, in order to fulfil their educational role but also to attract visitors by positing a renewed image separated from the traditional public conception of museums. “The personal encounter has been acknowledged as the ground of an experience, and museums bank on it to fulfil their educational promise” (Hein, 2000).

The popularity of such exhibits adding to the “success”, which has come to be measured in terms of visitors’ numbers responding to these kinds of “experiences”, has resulted in a trend that has overwhelmed their use, usually illustrated even by the solid presence of interactive exhibits within exhibition settings (Caulton, 1998; McLean, 1999; Gammon, 2003). This can be interpreted as the broadening of the visitor base has resulted in mere visitor attraction aiming to more attention, sponsorship and funding, thus making the rhetoric about

democratizing access, being driven by economic calculations through some broad mission to empower public access. "Museums increasingly look to a general public audience for support, and competition for a market share of people's leisure time is a driving force that focuses the heat on exhibitions" (McLean, 1999). Furthermore, as the educational intention is being blurred with a marketing one, attracting visitors to museums by offering "enjoyable" educational experiences has lost sight of a wider purpose of museums; that of promoting critical thinking for the sake of individual's and society's development.

While the idea of incorporating interactivity in museums is not new, the lack of identification that purely incorporating technologies in museums does not immediately distinguish them as "interactive" seems to diminish the potential use of Interactivity within such spaces. Notwithstanding the arguable learning outcomes of such implementations, museums not only put at stake their accountability towards the public, but also fail to realize or acknowledge the wider purpose of establishing interactive relationships with the visitors and the impact Interactivity can make when conceptualized as a process and implemented towards establishing connectedness and trustworthiness next to the deep-seated belief of contribution to educational and enjoyable experiences. Therefore by deconstructing the concept of Interactivity within museums it is possible to identify in which aspects current practices and technologies fail to promote interactivity and in which ways apart from incorporating technologies, museums can establish interactive relationships with their visitors.

Andrea Witcomb (2003) has described her objections to the technological approach to interactivity seen in many science museums and increasingly in other sorts of museums. She gives examples of two other types of interactivity, which she calls Spatial Interactivity and Dialogic Interactivity, which according to her seem particularly appropriate for cultural and historical exhibitions. In both her examples the notion of

Interactivity is being used as opposed to mere access to finished statements and fixed narratives and far from being purely technologically driven. Nevertheless it requires high levels of knowledge and common consent as an approach. Witcomb's examples provide an interesting viewpoint on providing opportunities in museums for active interpretation and personal meaning generation within exhibitions. Nevertheless, the possibility of museums to allowing different perspectives to be represented engenders a lack of curatorial perspective within a political discourse (Witcomb, 2003). In this sense the difficulty for those museums, which wish to be less didactic and more interactive is to achieve a balance between multiple points of view while maintaining an editorial line which is not reductive to fixed meanings. The need is then to develop an approach to interactivity that remains open ended but which nevertheless engages in a dialogue from a position. This kind of interpretation needs to be explicitly demonstrated within the context of the exhibition, providing an opportunity for dialogue and allowing an exchange of views and interactions between the museum and the visitor and among visitors themselves.

A further implication is that in order for visitors to be engaged in such a dialogue, they may require high levels of knowledge concerning not only the content of the exhibitions but also the processes of knowledge generation within the museums; therefore such an approach to Interactivity can be considered inaccessible for the general public. The need here is to take into consideration the nature of visitors' backgrounds - the knowledge, experience, and social dynamics -, since they constitute an important element in combination to the type of influences people can "take away" from their museum visits. Museums may provide a platform on which meaningful conversations can be built if only they are able to also use and incorporate the "tools" that people bring with them.

Socio-cultural theory on learning emphasizes the idea that meaning emerges in the interplay between individuals acting in social contexts and the mediators - tools, talk, activity

structures, signs, and symbol systems - that exist in that context. Spatial theories uncover body-space relations and examine how meaning emerges during the process of human experience in a physical space. "Exhibitions provide a safe and interesting environment in which to bring people together, and the presence of people- whether they are visitors or staff- transforms a constructed exhibition setting into a dynamic public space. Staff explainers, docents, storytellers, artists, and actors enliven exhibitions, create context, and encourage people to interact with each other and with the exhibits. Even without staff, an exhibition designed to encourage face-to-face interaction and dialogue among visitors-often strangers-is arguably one of the most vital contributions museums can make to the social dynamics of our times" (McLean, 1999). Without social interaction, it is easier to deliver content about objects than to teach skills in discovering content in any object. That is why the curatorial voice expressed via written materials prevails in most of museums. And although educators recognize the importance of discussion and guided observation, the sole use of interactives present in most modern museums is perhaps an attempt to achieve the give-and-take of live facilitation without the facilitator.

Building on the educational and wider social role/responsibility proclaimed by museums, it is argued that Interactivity conceptualized as a characteristic of mediated communication (socially and/or technologically) may increase with mutual apprehensibility of shared goals. Interactivity is here conceptualized as having some meaningful social and psychological relevance beyond its technical and technological status as a property of media systems or message exchanges. Interactivity is reviewed as opposed to mere access to finished statements and fixed narratives and as from being purely technologically driven towards examining spatial, social and cultural aspects of its implementation within museums. This approach to Interactivity needs to be re-conceptualized within its potential to bridge the gaps of current "distorted" communication among individuals and institutions alike. This

line of thinking certainly moves a step beyond the interactions supported by the majority of current interactive exhibits existing in museum galleries. However further work is needed to locate ways, in which dialogue can occur by involving broader audiences, support visitor's expectations in such situations so that they know how to approach, extend and enrich their understanding and provide opportunities for visitors to be involved in mutual cooperation and contact with each other. By viewing communication as culture, instead of communication as transmission, we may move the focus towards the multiplicity and the socio-cultural aspects of interpretation and narration (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). This raises however yet another set of questions regarding the form of museum narration, the power-relationships between curators and different visitor groups, and the politics of museums' exhibition design.

However, the possibilities from applying the cultural model of communication far outweigh the disadvantages (ibid). The potentials for museums encompass:

- The incorporation of new learning styles
- The recognition of differentiated audiences
- The development of museum professionals to incorporate a wider set of competencies
- Creation of innovative partnerships with their audiences
- Regeneration of museums as vital contemporary institutions

Those museums that seek to enhance their character in the function of interpretation and mediation of heritage, in providing access and enhance understanding by becoming places for dialogue and by promoting participation need to invest on establishing relationships with their visitors. Therefore they have to redefine the term Interactivity and rethink its implementation beyond the current conceptualization. Interactive exhibits if reconsidered may be one, but not the only way. For relationships to be built and to

be sustained mutual trust, understanding and effort from both sides is required. Communication is not inherently interactive; neither is a two way communication, unless there are relevant responses and reciprocity of messages exchanged between the participants involved; and interactions need not only take place between individual visitors and exhibits but among visitors and between visitors and museum staff.

Within such an approach a dialogue instead of a monologue is supported and enhancement of knowledge instead of information transfer adds value in a participation of both the museum and its visitors in a relationship based on mutual trust and effort. Investment on Interactivity in this way promotes cooperation, which in a strong sense means that actors work together, create a new emergent reality and have shared goals; they all benefit from co-operating and can reach their goals in joint effort rather than on an individual basis; they learn from each other mutually, and can be interconnected in a network seeking to direct social and cultural life rather than merely following it. If the implementation of the concept which so far seems to be meeting consumer-marketed intended objectives within a leisure-industry-market oriented solutions won't be critically revised, the role of museums will only contribute to the already mass customization of services provided in cultural consumption and will only be able to serve the society in reproducing existing patterns of communication rather than contribute to its further development by posing a critical thinking attitude which is more likely to meet the purpose of museums as places where cultural heritage is not only preserved and presented but also generated and discussed, integrated and understood within a contemporary environment.

The perspective of a relationship building between museum space-places and the public through the concept of interactivity challenges established and dominating tenets encountered in current interactivity approaches and implementation. While usability and measuring results -like attraction and holding power- refer to the exhibit's aspects and

support the creation of a product, the relationship building perspective relies on expression and the shaping of activities of humans regarding perception, inducement and sense experience in supporting a process. The approach contrasts efficiency and accountability of the product to quality of the process. While educational objectives and knowledge transmission prevail in the current implementation of the concept, the new perspective draws attention to meaning creation and cultural awareness supported by the entire environment. While in the first case visitors are assumed to be participants or more likely consumers in the new perspective they are perceived as performers and recognized as partners.

The conceptual framework of museum-society provides the ground for communication and cooperation among people, organizations and institutions within society, which share a vision and work towards a common goal. Within this dimension lies also a potential attitude of museums enabling visitors to participate actively in the setting up of exhibitions, to provide a space for contemporary discussions and debates as well as casual social interaction. The opportunity of visitors being actively involved within museum spaces can be regarded as the core feature of the concept of interactivity within museums. The involvement of visitor in having an effect on the museum environment implies a truly interactive experience to the point where the visitor has as much influence on the actions as the museum. It can then argued that Interactivity has the potential to support the notion of participatory culture by means of forming and sustaining strong relationships based on equal partnerships, collaboration, active participation and dialogue between museums, cultural organizations, educational institutions, social service organizations and the public.

Generation of such a dialogue between the museum and visitor, between nationalities, generations and regions, with one impacting on the other, can promote the concept of museums as sites for intercultural dialogue, encouraging respect and understanding of cultural diversity. Application of

such a concept in museums is aligned with “New Museology” perspectives such as the epistemological shift towards viewing the museum as a heterogeneous space of multiple perspectives and critical thinking; challenging dominant views towards representing race, class and gender; and prioritizing the role of content over material objects. Interaction in this sense emphasizes communication and balance between the participants involved as well as integration of all human aspects (mental, emotional, physical and spiritual), creating an empowered and mutual relationship. It is based on shared goals and active participation of all parties, especially through communication, caring and sharing. Synergistic and symbiotic differences complement and enhance shared goals.

Relationship building by Interaction consists of recognizing:

- Thoughts, feelings and actions culminating in teamwork.
- Creative energy, active involvement and initiative that constantly builds and recreates itself in new ways.
- An opportunity to a deeper connection between people who share common values as human beings, acknowledging their socio-cultural diversity.

In order to survive, museums must not claim to compete on purely economic terms but must emphasize the unique role they play in the creation of social and cultural value. The social and economic goals of the museum need not be in conflict, rather cultural activity can be used as an economic force.² Museums have the potential to bring about economic regeneration and social change as well as become leading cultural institutions with not only an educational focus but also a socio-cultural one.

² Round Table discussion on the Conference Theme of "Managing Change: the museum facing economic and social challenges". 19th General Conference and 20th General Assembly of the International Council of Museums, ICOM 2001, Barcelona

The museum is a space for many diverse people who view the world in different ways, whose previous experiences may be very different. The challenge is to create an environment where many needs are met. Education and outreach activities, together with access to information and decision-making, are the essential initial steps in unpicking the barriers – physical, intellectual, sensory, emotional, attitudinal, financial, cultural and technological. The removal of these barriers is complex, involving a holistic approach by the museum. The discussion about how to create interactivity in future museums is obviously not only about specific physical features of interactive exhibits; the discussion have to be keenly aware of ideological, societal, and historical aspects of how and what to communicate and what forms of participation and activities should be enabled to fit into a changing society. This is probably a good starting point in future studies of what Interactivity may consist of in the next generation of museums. It is also important to avoid homogenization and realize the uniqueness of each museum as well. No “one size” fits all. Each case has to be examined in its own characteristics, features, demands etc. “The situation of museums is obviously very complex and I think when we try to work out how to deal with this complexity, it is important not to reduce our reflections to one single model but to study several different ones, historical models, but also contemporary models. One of the real threats of globalization is the homogenization of the world of museums, and it is urgent to actually generate a situation which is receptive to interlocking spaces or bridges between old and new, but also keeping in mind the notion of acceleration and deceleration, moments of speed and moments of slowness, where you have zones of noise and where you have zones of silence, where you have actually also negotiations between the private and public space”³.

³ Presentation | Hans Ulrich Obrist, Art Basel Conversations | Thursday, December 2, 2004

http://www.art.ch/global/show_document.asp?id=aaaaaaaaaiwor,
<http://www.art.ch/go/id/ern/>

Museum literature on interactivity in museums is, through its narrow view of interactive exhibits proves insufficient to research the opportunities Interactivity may bring to museums. The current interactive applications in most of the museums likewise are limited to the refashioning of older concepts and formats. New ideas are emerging, which offer exciting opportunities for museums to redefine Interactivity and its purpose though, in the sector as a whole, there remains considerable confusion and misunderstanding. The situation is worsened by the fact that many equate interactivity solely with technological means ignoring the wider forms it can take in museum philosophy and practices. Research suggests that there are a number of very different ways in which museums and galleries can implement meaningfully the concept of Interactivity though these are not always understood or accepted both within and out of the sector.

Interactivity can be applied with technology, but also form the basis for non- technological practices and products. A holistic approach offers many new concepts that surpass the idea of Interactivity as means for previously existing functions, and can be useful to museums. The concept of Interactivity as has been examined here causes a change of behaviour of its users and their expectations and by this necessitates a changed approach by museums. Possible changes for the museum are: a new approach in the presentation of collections, towards a use of concepts such as social interaction and participatory culture, and a revaluation of both analogue and digital means for explanations. A new approach of the visitor: a participator in the development of knowledge and meaning and a partner in cultural value. If indeed Interactivity is not a promise unfulfilled but rather a concept not yet realized, the museum as facilitator of debates, forum of ideas, learning environment about past and current issues and developments, and a hub between different (inter)national knowledge centres, events and the visitor might find its new role in society.

References

Adams, M., Moussouri, T. (2002). The Interactive Experience: Linking Research and Practice. In V&A Conference Proceedings: Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design, May 2002.

Available at:

http://www.vam.ac.uk/files/file_upload/5748_file.pdf

[last accessed 9 November 2006]

Caulton, T. (1998). Hands-on Exhibitions. Routledge (London)
Gammon, B. (2003). Assessing Learning in Museum Environments. A practical guide for museum evaluators.

Available at: http://www.ecsite-uk.net/about/reports/indicators_learning_1103_gammon.pdf

[last accessed 21 September 2006]

Heath, C., vom Lehn, D., & Osborne, J. (2005). Interaction and interactives: collaboration and

participation with computer-based exhibit. *Public Understanding of Science* 14 (1): 91-101

Available at: <http://pus.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/14/1/91.pdf>

[last accessed 9 December 2006]

Hein, H. S. (2000). The Museum in Transition A Philosophical Perspective. Smithsonian Institution

Press (Washington DC)

Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000). Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture. Routledge

(London)

McLean, K. (1999). Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue. *Daedalus* 128(3): 83-107

Pekarik, A. (2002). Developing Interactive Exhibitions at the Smithsonian. Office of Policy and

Analysis, Smithsonian Institution, May 2002

Tsitoura, A. (2007). Interactivity in Museums; A Relationship Building Perspective. MA thesis, unpublished. Reinwardt

Academy (Amsterdam)

Witcomb, A. (2003). Re-Imagining the Museum. Beyond the Mausoleum. Routledge. (London)

Zheng, S., Adam, M., Woodcock, A. (2005). Surprise and

Illusion: Design strategies for
Interactive Museum Exhibits. VIDE Research Centre, Coventry
School of Art and Design. In
International Workshop: Re-Thinking Technology in Museums:
Towards a New Understanding of People's Experience in
Museums, Limerick (Ireland), 29th-30th June 2005

About the author:

Angelina Tsitoura works as a freelancer on online communication for the Netherlands Media Art Institute. Graduated in Graphic Design, holds a masters degree in Museology from the Reinwardt Academy of Cultural Heritage, faculty of the Amsterdam School of the Arts. Currently studying for the Master's Programme in Comparative Arts and Media Studies at VU University Amsterdam focusing on Intermedialities, an exploration of crossovers and synergies between different media.