

## « From viewers to protagonists: participatory museum experiences and performative practices in museum education »

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The main aim of my projects as art historian and museum educator is to mediate the relationship between the artists, the audience, and the museum through embodied strategies based on participation and play. It is in this context that I research and design participatory museum experiences. I use the participants's bodies as a starting point, and I integrate movement into the experience, constructing 'spaces' of knowledge and relationships. Ultimately – if I am successful – I engage the public through performative practices.

When I design an art mediation format I always have on my mind two important questions:

1. «Generally in museum hall the “sight” is the predominant sense: How can I offer to the visitors a more dynamic sensorial experience?»
2. «How can I blur the boundaries between active and passive spectators?»  
(or better: «How can I transform the visitors into active protagonists of the experience?»)»

The educational projects that I design start from the desire to reconsider the meaning and the format of the traditional guided tour and the unidirectional transmission of knowledge. “From viewers to protagonists” means above all to move the focus from the objects to the subjects, from the artworks to the audience. The focus for is not only the transmission of knowledge but the experience of the original, the live encounter with the people and the artworks.

The key lever I choose to bring people closer to art is the *body*. Putting the body at the centre is the key to involve feelings and to bring the entire person into the experience.

When I say *body*, I mean that each human being is a whole, a unity, a global complexity of body, mind, memories, emotions. The body is corporeal, biological, sensual, social, cultural and ultimately relational.

The experience of art is about us and our surroundings, it cannot just be passively observed, but must be actively embodied.

This form of *embodiment* is the premise of my educational projects.

I prefer to call them “Participatory museum experiences”. Participation is a key word and means to offer to the audience an active role in the construction of meanings.

From the mere vision of art to the experience of art, participation allows awareness to emerge.

I research and design participatory museum experiences and performative practices for museum education, using the participants's *bodies* and *movement*, to construct 'experiences' of knowledge and relationship.

Exploring museum galleries requires movement, the experience of dynamism in the museum halls is the natural counterpart to the static nature of the works of art exhibited. The human body in motion is but the first step to reclaim the exhibition space.

Movement is explored in every detail of its language, and by these I also mean the movement of thoughts and the flow of emotions.

Here are some concepts that are very important in my pedagogical approach.

### *Experience*

The concept of *experience* is crucial. For example according to John Dewey, “*an experience is a*

*product, of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world<sup>1</sup>”.*

It's important to distinguish between an intellectual experience, rational and abstract compared to the sensory experience, bodily and concrete.

#### *Aesthetic experience*

The experience of art should produce an aesthetic experience. The museum is the ideal space to make an aesthetic experience, the best place for a live and direct relationship with works of art. In the aesthetic experience we are engaged with all our senses (thus with our body), our emotions, our memories and our thoughts. It's an experience that involves one completely. Today we are used to living with our senses "anesthetized". We 'see' a lot of things but we can't observe them, we listen but can't hear, we are subjected to many stimuli, but we can't seem to pay attention.

#### *Relational experience.*

A work of art is born from the encounter between the object and its observer. Art can foster relationships in all directions. The relational space in museum education is not only between artworks and visitors but above all and foremost between people who shared the experience. It's an encounter between objects and subjects, between people and ideas, between generations, etc. Art can foster the encounter between ways of seeing and ways of being.

#### *Transformative experience*

The experience of art has to be a space for individual and social transformation and not just mere transmission of knowledge. Exploring the museum is like traveling through time and space, it means you can move freely back and forth through all sorts of borders – between different cultures, for example, or between the real world and the world of imagination.

I don't want to teach the audience something about the artworks exhibited but I want to let them think, using art as a medium to foster critical thinking, dialog and relationship.

#### *Participatory experience*

Participatory museum experiences research a dynamic involvement of visitors to free them from the passive state of viewers engaging them to become active protagonists.

Through various en-actions that take place in the exhibition halls, the participants go beyond the passive state of a guided tour, to explore the museum galleries from a dynamic and sensorial point of view. A rounded sensorial involvement: visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory, with a special attention to the perception of “kinesthetic sense” and “spatial sensitivity”.

The result of these actions is the creation of a unique embodied performance. The consequence is a possibility to find new and unexpected aspects of the reality in the museum, with the ultimate goal of encountering an entirely new and authentic experience.

To better explain the aim of these participatory museum experience, here is a recent project I designed, that is the practical synthesis of the principles mentioned above.

#### CORPS À CORPS<sup>2</sup> (Hand to hand combat)

The project “corps à corps” is a performative workshop designed for the exhibition “The war which is coming is not the first one – Great war 1914-2014”, MART Museum (Italy)

Context: The exhibition draws a distance from a simple reflection about history and offers a more complex overview regarding the topicality of the conflict, which is still today at the centre of debate. The First World War remembered in the exhibition now was one of the most dramatic and significant events of the modern era, and here represents the starting point for a broader investigation running through 20th-century history to the conflicts of the present day.

The aim of the “Corps à corps” project is to respond in a participative and collective way to the

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1 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1932

2 Short video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQfmboY5q>

general questions raised by experiencing the exhibition.

“Corps à corps” is a performative workshop where the body is a protagonist, a relation between people, objects and thoughts, but also and foremost an opportunity to build a space for 'dialog' against any conflict or war.

The result is a performance that does not seek spectators but only active participants.

The premise is that the conflict exist in our everyday life and it must be approached in a positive way. I decided to scale back the conflict to an interpersonal relationship, since the clash between two human beings is already the archetype of war.

Participants were engaged in actions to put into tension their bodies.

The awareness that comes through the experience of the body, “*embodied cognition*” is capable of going deep into the consciousness, and of speaking to a condition in the individual which goes beyond rationality. The body itself – with its own tensions and physical limitations – becomes a space, a screen where contradictions, conflicts, needs and themes of our times are projected.

The participants experienced dynamics of confrontations, non-verbal interaction and empathic communication, as well as physical tensions, balance and instability in the relationship with themselves and with others.

My role was to stimulate the relationships, encouraging the participation, adapting the contents to the degree of interest and participation.

Visitors come to the museum with very different attitudes, emotions, motivations, personal experiences expectations and knowledge. Through the “games and exercises” training, inspired by the techniques of awareness and physical mechanization developed by Augusto Boal, I bring into play the dynamics of relationship with the bodies to dissolve the bodily and perceptive rigidity of participants.

Throughout this project most of the actions belonged to Augusto Boal's Image Theatre, a physical representation of thoughts and ideas, a form of unconventional theater, with a strong political and educational value.

It's a theater that keeps the audience active, exploring, staging, analyzing and transforming reality.

A form of participatory theater to address the real problems with the collective intelligence.

The starting point of the exhibition path is to invite the participants to get fully involved, listening to themselves and to the environment, to live the group experience in the museum in a whole new dimension.

A sort of “confidence pact” in which they choose to be led not only in the path of a guided tour, but above all in an exploration of selves and of relationships with the other.

Gradually, the involvement of the protagonists' bodies increases towards wider spaces of relationships until reaching physical contact between them, the encounter or confrontation between them, intended as physical tension between the two.

The body becomes an instrument of connection and communication in the group work, an intense confrontation through the bodies.

The path ends with a collective action, a unique and unrepeatable performance that participants have conceived about the “conflicts”, researching and developing collectively critical solutions to overcome them in a positive way.