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EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Museum-university collaboration to renew mediation in art and historical heritage. The case of the Museo de Navarra

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Abstract. We present an action research project in which a university and a regional museum of art and historical heritage collaborate. The objective of this project has been to design and develop a mediation plan and its interpretation resources. First, a description is provided of the historical context of the debate regarding the educational function of the museum and mediation actions for the interpretation of art. Next, we present the theoretical principles on which our approach to mediation in museums is based and explain the two phases of the action research project. Initially, an investigation of the mediation tools offered by the museum is carried out. Next, a description is provided of how the conclusions drawn are materialized in the "All Art is Contemporary" project that renews part of the permanent exhibition and that offers accessible, rigorous, pluralistic and stimulating mediation/interpretation resources (gallery text, museum labels, etc.) that allow visitors to participate in the discourse that the museum proposes, turning it into a site of social interaction, a negotiation of meaning and an encounter between different sensibilities and identities. In short, it is a tool for continuous and critical civic education.
Keywords: Museum; interpretation; mediation; collaboration; university.

[es] Colaboración museo-universidad para renovar la mediación en arte y patrimonio histórico. El caso del Museo de Navarra

Resumen. Se presenta un proyecto de investigación-acción en el que colaboran la universidad y un museo regional de arte y patrimonio histórico y que ha tenido como objeto el diseño y desarrollo de un plan de mediación y sus recursos de interpretación. Primero se describe el contexto histórico del debate en torno la discusión sobre la función educativa del museo y la acción de mediación para la interpretación del arte. A continuación, mostramos los principios teóricos sobre los que se sustenta nuestra mirada hacia la mediación en museos y se explican las dos fases del proyecto. Se realiza, inicialmente, una investigación de los dispositivos de mediación que ofrecía el museo. A continuación se describe cómo las conclusiones extraídas se concretan en el proyecto "Todo el arte es contemporáneo" que renueva parte de la exposición permanente y que ofrecen recursos de mediación-interpretación (textos de sala, cartelas, etc.) accesibles, rigurosos, plurales y estimulantes que permiten hacer a los visitantes coparticipes del discurso que el museo propone y convertirlo en un lugar de interacción social, de negociación de significados y de encuentro entre diferentes sensibilidades e identidades. En definitiva, una herramienta de formación continua y crítica de la ciudadanía.
Palabras clave: Museo; interpretación; mediación; colaboración; universidad.

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Museo de Navarra (Museum of Navarra), the institution in which we have carried out our research, is a regional museum that houses works of art and objects of historical heritage from prehistory to the present. It is a traditional museum, although renovated in 1990, in which the works are presented with hardly any interpretation resources, such as gallery text or explanatory labels, that allow the non-specialized public to access its collection.

With the change in the regional government administration in 2015, both the director of the Museum Service of the new Government of Navarra and the director of Museo de Navarra set out to transform the institution, and for that reason, they invited our research team to work together with them in the design and development of a mediation plan.

To contextualize the meaning of our work, we begin by presenting the historical evolution of the debate surrounding the different general positions that persist today regarding the educational function of museums and mediation for the interpretation of art. Without losing sight of this debate, we have situated the theoretical principles and the criteria on which our proposal for the transformation of the museum's mediation tools was based, to subsequently detail the work performed.

Thus far, as in any action research process (Fals, 1999; Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014; McNiff, 2013), the work has been developed in two phases that are connected. In the first phase, we carried out a critical and exhaustive investigation of the mediation tools already deployed by the museum. In the second phase, based on the results obtained from this analysis, we developed a mediation plan materialized in the project titled "All Art is Contemporary." Through this project, the museum renews part of the permanent exhibit, breaking with the historicist narrative that it previously presented and offering visitors interpretation resources that allow them to participate in the discourse the museum proposes.

We believe that the interesting aspect of this work lies, above all, in the fact that it demonstrates that it is possible to develop collaborative projects based on the premises of critical museology and educational mediation in the context of regional museums, which are usually founded on traditional structures that are very difficult to change.

We also believe that collaboration between a university and a museum adds interest for those who think this experience can be transferable to other museum institutions that are immersed in similar rethinking processes.

1. Historical debate regarding the educational function of art museums

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, the triumph of enlightenment ideals led states to assume the task of culturizing the masses, and they did so by nationalizing private collections and creating the first museums.

However, we have no evidence of debates regarding the educational function of museums until the early years of the 20th century, when, in the context of a great museum movement in the United States, the *American Alliance of Museums* was founded in 1906 with the objective of serving as a forum to develop academic debates regarding museological philosophy and procedures.

Rawlins (1978) explains, citing Ripley (1969), that one of the issues that divided professionals in the initial meetings was "whether the museum should be a quiet sanctuary for aesthetic contemplation catering to a cultured elite or whether it should be a mass educator, a "people's institute for visual instruction" and welcome the general public*"* (Rawlins, 1978, p. 6) including through instructional activities, cultural events and informational publications.

The discussion regarding the educational function of a museum was thus expressed in the confrontation between two antagonistic positions that have since had their own development.

The first of these, which Padró (2005) identifies as the "aesthetic narrative", is that which argues that a work of art explains itself and does not require outside elements to be understood. In contrast, according to the second position, the understanding of art cannot be limited to expert knowledge, and the use of mediation resources can help enhance its educational function and make it more accessible to other audiences. Let us examine in greater detail the foundations and historical development of these two positions.

1.1. Art can be understood on its own

At the same time that the enlightenment ideal launched various popular literacy initiatives to enable citizens to access the world of written texts, art museums were conceived of as mere spaces for contemplation. Proponents of this perspective shared the Kantian view that aesthetic values can be sustained on their own and that the judgement of art can be isolated from other considerations, such as ethical and social, because aesthetic value is valid in and of itself and does not need external justifications.

This approach took root mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries through initiatives such as the *Aesthetic Movement*, which, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, confronting art and beauty with the materialism of the time, proposed an approach to art that was purely aesthetic, sensory and contemplative. It was seen as the best way to promote good taste, ease the tensions of everyday life and elevate the sensibility of the masses.

Benjamin Ives Gilman, secretary of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and a chief spokesperson of early 20th century aesthetic philosophy stated the following in his 1918 *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method:* "a museum of art is primarily an institution of culture and only secondarily a seat of learning (…) enjoyment is the chief aim of museum of art, instruction a secondary aim…" (Gilman, 1918 in Zeller, 1989, p. 29-30).

So dominant was this view that it remained common among expert museologists until the end of the 20th century. For example, the former director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, Sherman Lee, stated the following in an article published in *Art International XXI* in 1977: museums are "the primary source for [visual] education. Merely by existing-preserving and exhibiting Works of art is it educational in the broadest and best sense, though it never utters a sound or prints a word. " (Lee, 1969 in Zeller, 1989, p. 31).

A few years later, researchers Eisner and Dobbs (1986), in a study commissioned by the *Getty Center for Education in the Arts and* published in 1986 under the title *The Uncertain Profession: Observations on the State of Museum Education in Twenty American Art Museums*, showed how many museum directors in the United States continued to defend the importance of unmediated encounters with art. This could be explained by the need, governed by the market, to preserve the aura of the works of art exhibited (Robins, 2007) or by the rise of formalism as a way of "reading" and explaining art seen in the mid-20th century.

Perhaps the clearest example of this way of seeing art in a museum can be found in the idea of the white cube, which Alfred Barr, director of the MOMA from 1929 to 1943, promoted in the New York museum. Barr created a supposedly neutral and aseptic space characterized as a *"white cube"* by O'Doherty (1986) in his essays in Art Forum. It is a space that reduces to a minimum any trace of mediation: white walls without decoration, frames with little presence and an absence of interpretation resources that interfere with personal contemplation of the works. The idea of the white cube rests on the conviction that works of art speak or should speak for themselves, and perhaps for this reason, it has long been considered the best setting for communication between art and the viewer.

For our study, the most relevant aspect of this position is that it contends that education in art museums is implicit in the exhibition of the works and that the objective of sensitizing, civilizing, culturizing and enlightening visitors is already implicit in the act of exhibiting art. That is why today we still find museums created as though they were temples, unique and exclusive places where we are invited to contemplate and ritually admire artistic beauty, presenting works as almost sacred objects and in an environment of almost mystical protection capable of elevating the spirit of those who contemplate them (Hernández, 1998).

This explains why these types of institutions consider conservation, study and acquisition to be the only important functions of a museum and do not emphasize offering tools that favour a more comprehensive communication between works of art and the non-expert public (Padró, 1999).

1.2. Art requires mediation to be understood

Debates regarding the function of museums in the early 20th century in the United States also led to other perspectives, such as that of John Cotton Dana, founder and director of the Newark Museum in 1909, who advocated a type of museum institution that entertains and instructs (Zeller, 1989).

As the century progressed, there was a steady increase in arguments in favour of the idea that museums should be fundamentally an educational institution (Pastor, 2004). Even in the United States, however, initiatives resulting from this new way of understanding the function of museums were rarely implemented until the end

of the 20th century, when visitors were finally given more of a central role in the construction of meaning.

As opposed to the previous perspective, this new perspective was based on the notion that works of art do not speak for themselves, and hence, like science museums, art museums should also assume a commitment to giving more attention to the installation and interpretation of collections. Along these lines, Francis Henry Taylor, director of the Worcester Art Museum, asked curators in a 1939 article (in Zeller, 1989, p. 61) to organize exhibitions that take into account the needs of the general public and provide simple and understandable explanatory text for the average visitor.

Several factors influenced the progressive development and flourishing of this educational narrative.

One of these is the rejection of museums conceived as mere containers of objects and works of art seen among avant-garde artists, critics and experts. This rejection resulted in the establishment of the *International Museum Office* in Paris in 1926 to discuss the issue.

Soon, the renunciation of the idea of a museum as a container brought the need to systematize the organization and exhibition of collections based on a taxonomic logic that would foster a didactic perspective on them (Padró, 2005). This was understood by George Brown Goode, secretary of the *Smithsonian Institution,* who argued that an educational approach should include the systematic organization of collections, explanatory text and public seminars.

When choosing the discipline with which to organize their collections and offer educational mediation resources, most art museums chose a vision of art history emphasizing issues such as attribution of authorship, iconography, historical period, style or biographical information. In those early stages, only in a few cases were interdisciplinary approaches proposed that would present art museums as places to learn about subjects not exclusively focused on art or its history. In all cases, however, the aesthetic quality of the work and the aura attributable to its condition as an original artefact ceded some of its importance for the benefit of its educational power, its ability to instruct.

Another decisive factor in changing views on the function of museums came from the field of education and educational psychology. The progressive educators of the 1920s, such as J. Dewey and M. Montessori, with their emphasis on the use of experience and action with real objects, offered many arguments in favour of the experiential potential of works of art and the learning situations that museums can offer.

Their arguments were reinforced by advances in the psychology of learning in the 1930s, by giving importance to the relationship between art and childhood. Authors such as Frank Cizek and the emergence of concepts such as children's art laid the foundations of a pedagogy that also began to claim space in museums. Museum education was not immune to all these influences, although for decades it was noticeable more in theory than in practice.

Also very relevant in this gradual transformation of museums into educational institutions were the reforms promoted by President Roosevelt in the United States in the 1930s or the rise of Marxism and trade unionism. It was at this moment that new voices began to be heard, such as those of the Frankfurt School, regarding art and popular culture.

The result was a new shift in which museums became part of instruments for social change to promote democracy and human well-being. Transforming museums into a service to the community with "popular education" as their main objective (Adams, 1937; Low, 1942, 1943; Rea, 1932; Taylor, 1939; Youtz, 1933; in Zeller, 1989) also justified their public funding. To the aesthetic and instructional mission of the museum was added a social mission (Zeller, 1989) that placed visitors at the forefront through the development of physical and intellectual access policies.

A final shift in this narrative would propose a radical redefinition of the role that visitors must assume in the interpretation of works and exhibitions, as Lisa Roberts argues in the book From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum (1997), which soon became a reference to explain the paradigm shift. In this work, Roberts stated that the emphasis on the viewer's role in interpretation sought to recognize the "personal experience as a source of meaning *different but no less valid than* curatorial knowledge" (Roberts, 1997, p. 70), thus placing expert and profane knowledge on the same level.

In reality, as Canclini states, "the turn towards the recipient is not just an endogenous change in art. It is the result of the relocation of artists and institutions in social and political shifts" (2009, p. 19). It is part of the narratives driven by postmodern, constructivist and post-structuralist theories that have placed the viewer, at least in their discourse, at the centre of the production of meaning (Mayer, 2005), something that was previously forbidden. Consequently, we see in recent years that the educational departments of some museums have begun to encourage participation among visitors, either by adding their comments to the exhibits, asking them provocative questions or allowing them to write their own exhibit labels (Hein, 2006).

2. Rethinking mediation at Museo de Navarra in collaboration with a university

2.1. The basis of the proposal

The debate presented above inevitably requires us to take a stance. In previous works, we have demonstrated our preference for a type of art museum that exploits all the possibilities offered by its collections, both those conducive to aesthetic enjoyment as well as more strictly educational. We also agree with the notion that meaning is not immanent in the artistic object and that works of art do not, in themselves, offer sufficient elements to be understood. Thus, for their interpretation, it is necessary and enriching to utilize information that goes beyond what they show.

Consequently, to develop our mediation and interpretation plan and in accordance with the staff of Museo de Navarra, we opted for a perspective that combines understanding art as a cultural system (Geertz, 1983) and conceiving of it as an experience (Dewey, 1934).

Thinking about art as a cultural system implies considering it as a symbolic system whose products participate in a network that interacts with other cultural systems that it draws from and to which it provides meaning. Understanding art as an experience, Dewey (1987) suggests ceasing to see it as a transcendent fact in itself, external to life, and to instead focus on its ability to unite and generate human experience.

In adopting this perspective, we advocate placing art within a broader framework that allows us to favour a type of interpretation according to which understanding arises when works are explained based on their cultural context and when we connect the experience that they condense (Agirre, 2000; Greene, 2000; Shusterman, 1992) with the life experiences of spectators.

This notion of art is complemented by an educational mediation perspective that combines the principles of critical pedagogy with those of critical museology (Mörsch, 2009 Padró, 2005). This point of view approaches museums as spaces traditionally linked to power and hegemonic narratives and understands that every educational act is a political act (Freire, 1970) because it affects personal and social transformation.

Therefore, we also share the idea of a museum that welcomes and gives a voice to all types of audiences, not just experts, that is, a museum that favours complex views of the art world and that encourages encounters that call into question, through dialogue and debate, the limits and prior ideas on which established knowledge is based. In other words, a museum constituted as a learning community in which visitors, experts and professionals who work there build knowledge together.

In short, we defend a type of mediation that stimulates the challenge of actively building and extending visitors' knowledge, skills and abilities, promoting the exploration of works based on "notions of struggle, conflict, controversy" (Padró, 2005, p. 42) and applying a "polyvocal interpretive treatment" to them, with feminist or postcolonialist interpretive perspectives assuming special relevance in this process of analysis.

2.2. Analysis and diagnosis of existing mediation tools

Our work with Museo de Navarra began in 2016, when we were invited to give a training seminar/workshop, which we titled *"Museums and audiences: dilemmas and experiences"*. It was attended by representatives of the entire staff, from management to security guards, as well as personnel from other museums relying on the Government Museum Service and the director of the Service.

The main objective of the seminar was to provide a reflection on the type of experiences that the museum had been offering to its audiences contrasted with current trends and to establish guidelines for a mediation plan. To do this, our team conducted prior research on mediation devices, which allowed us to make an initial diagnosis of their weaknesses and agree on the approach to be applied in the future. This analysis brought to light different problems that failed to foster a pleasant experience among visitors, which we present below.

The first of these relates to the distribution of spaces and the location of the works. On many occasions, the aesthetic presentation promoted under the reforms made in 1990 arranged the works in a way that hindered their visibility. In some cases, this was because they were located in spaces that were not very visible or lacked adequate lighting. In others, hindered visibility was due to failure to take into account the perspectives of people in wheelchairs or children (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Visibility problems for people in wheelchairs or children. Museo de Navarra. Source: Authors' own photography.

We also identified problems with the location and type of mediation devices. Often, the exhibit labels were located far from the pieces or had been printed on materials or in font sizes that made them difficult to read (Fig. 2).

Figure 2**.** Hard-to-read exhibit label printed on transparent paper with excessively small font. Museo de Navarra. Source: Authors' own photography.

These tools thus were guilty of many of the "deadly sins" pointed out by Serrell (1983) in 1983 and expanded on by Bitgood (1989) in 1989 in their reviews of visitor studies conducted regarding interpretation resources.

However, the most relevant problems, according to our idea of educational mediation, are found in the type of information and the interpretative approach of the text that accompanied the works.

In most cases, the exhibit labels only provided identifying information, that is, information regarding the work's title, location, period, material, authorship or attribution. This information, in addition to being irrelevant, was not written according to consistent criteria. Thus, some exhibit labels only provided data on location, while others only provided the date or identification of the theme represented, for example, *Pantocrator*, *Tetramorph* or *Herod's Visit*.

When the exhibit labels did offer more information, it was mostly descriptive and focused on the formal characteristics of the works, with expressions such as "markedly linear style, with little use of colour...". Sometimes, the labels referred vaguely to the artistic style of the piece, as in the case of a label stating that "the stylistic vocabulary used obeys Romanesque models", or provided biographical information regarding the author, although always from a mythifying perspective.

This type of information, so characteristic of museums of artistic and archaeological heritage, presupposes that the average visitor possesses previous knowledge regarding artistic, technical or religious narrative styles. When an exhibit label states that a work shows *The evolution towards thirteenth century Tuscan Italianism,* it is presenting an exclusive interpretation resource, one aimed exclusively at experts that does not favour accessibility of interpretation or connect with the personal experience of visitors.

During our investigation at Museo de Navarra, we thus observed a tendency typical of traditional museum mediation: employing the supposedly objective and neutral knowledge and meanings legitimized by experts to represent the voice of the institution. This tendency is widely criticized among museum education researchers (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Mayer, 2005; Padró, 2003, 2005; Reese, 2003; Roberts, 1997; Wallach, 1998).

As explained by Reese (2003), Hooper-Greenhill (1992), McLean (1999) or Roberts (1997), these interpretations are presented as singular and authorized truths, closing the space for other interpretations, failing to open up other perspectives for a critical and reflexive search for the personal construction of meaning.

3. Results

3.1. New interpretation resources through the project "All Art is Contemporary"

The diagnostic research revealed two of the challenges that Hooper-Greenhill (2000b) noted as the most characteristic of postmodern museology: on the one hand, that of a narrative, that is, questions related to the interpretation and construction of meaning, which should emphasize both the content of the discourse and the principles and purposes on which it is constructed; on the other, that related to voice, that is, who speaks and who listens, or who possesses the legitimacy to generate speech, and what role is left for the viewer.

Dialogue with the staff of Museo de Navarra and the Museum Service allowed us to verify that the renovation of the institution required more than clear ideas, strategies and formulas for mediation. We had established a good starting point, but there were other problems, for example, a staff shortage with whom to undertake important changes and, although it may seem strange, a government policy that prevents the museum from having and managing its own website, thus limiting the deployment of important mediation resources.

However, based on dialogue with museum staff and management, we were able to move from the diagnostic study to action, designing a comprehensive educational mediation plan for the museum based on the aesthetic, educational and museological principles that we outlined above. The plan was aimed at reordering the collection in a way that, without sacrificing academic rigour, makes it possible to better connect with non-expert audiences.

This plan began with a five-year reorganization project of a part of the permanent collection-- the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries -- which had remained virtually unchanged since 1990. The title of the project, "All Art is Contemporary", emphasized the will of Museo de Navarra to break with chronological discourse and move away from traditional division by eras and styles to instead present art as a timeless phenomenon, one that always deals with the same great human concerns: "a fluid system of communication through which artists express and communicate, through their works [...] interests, questions, fears, illusions, feelings... of both the individual and the community, of men and women in society." (Museo de Navarra, 2018)

Thus, through a new contract with our university to transfer the results of the research, in 2018, Museo de Navarra offered us the opportunity to apply the results of our analysis -- the design and creation of the interpretation tools for this project. We were also able to do this by working in an interdisciplinary way as a team composed of museologists, museographers, architects, designers and accessibility specialists using a formula for museum/university collaboration that is unprecedented in our context.

Our intervention consisted of the design of several programmes and resources that we will describe subsequently, although without fully developing them in this text, and in the renovation of the banners, gallery texts and exhibit labels in the renovated area, which motivated the presentation of this work.

To do this, we sought to apply the aesthetic, museological and pedagogical principles mentioned above, intertwining the idea of art as a cultural system with that of art as an experiential fact and understanding the act of interpretation as an open process that requires the viewer's cooperation. With this, we share the idea that discourse regarding art does not reflect any intrinsic or essential property of the works and that all interpretations are subjective and biased.

Conceiving of educational mediation with art in this way thus presented us with the dilemma of how to create tools that would offer accessible, rigorous, plural and stimulating information regarding the museum's collections, exhibitions and works that would also be conducive to the appearance of diverse meanings that are open to negotiation and legitimately subjective (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999). Successfully combining these two aims without implying that all possible interpretations of the works are equally relevant is the challenge we faced and that we will explain below, describing the resulting actions.

3.1.1. Accessible information

All contemporary museology agrees with the notion that museums should aim to eliminate all barriers preventing interaction with their works by people with different abilities. Consequently, there was a collective effort to ensure that all the text was written in a way that was accessible, both intellectually (that is, regarding the language used and its content) and from the point of view of their formal characteristics and the media on which they are provided.

Regarding the former, we focussed on length and legibility, limiting the wall text to approximately 110 words and the extended exhibit labels to approximately 45 words and avoiding technical vocabulary, based on the recommendations of experts in interpretation and heritage (Morales, 2008) and the guidelines of museums with extensive experience in designing interpretation resources (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2013).

The final version of the text, in terms of font size, typography, etc., was also supervised by a company dedicated to guaranteeing universal accessibility, which in turn designed an easy-to-read booklet for the entire exhibit.

3.1.2. Rigorous information

Making knowledge accessible should not mean vulgarizing, much less neglecting, historical or academic rigor. For this reason, to compose the exhibit labels, we relied on information provided by the museum's specialists, as they possess the most thorough knowledge of their collection. Once drafted, all text was reviewed by these specialists.

As noted, it is important for museums and exhibition centres to provide information that helps place "art in the context of other expressions of human initiative," as advocated by the anthropologist Geertz (1983, p. 119), such that visitors may have experiences that are both culturally responsible and personally significant (Barrett, 2000; Hubard, 2007; Lachapelle, Murray, & Neim, 2003; Lankford, 2002; Meszaros, 2007a, 2007b).

We were determined to do this in our work for the museum. However, the limited space for gallery text and the impossibility of using other tools did not ultimately allow us to meet this objective. Overlooking this hurdle and responding to the need to provide a context that helps promote better understanding is a complex task given the financial circumstances of Museo de Navarra, although the intention is that this will be done in later phases through another type of resource, such as catalogues or entries on the website.

For now, in accordance with the museum, we chose to design and develop a timeline (Fig. 3) that related important events in the history of Navarran art with historical events or milestones in the history of art and culture, in both the national and international contexts. With this, we sought to enable viewers to situate each work in the collection within a historical and cultural context, thus expanding their possibilities for dialogue and interpretation with the exhibits.

Figure 3. The timeline in the room for rest and mediation. Source: José Luis Larrión, Museo de Navarra.

Based on the critical perspective described previously, we focussed on avoiding an ethnocentric view of culture and applying a gender perspective in the selection of milestones, seeking to counteract the traditional erasure of women's presence in history, art history and cultural history.

3.1.3. Plural information: diverse perspectives, different voices

Experts and researchers in museum education, such as Barrett (2000), Hooper-Greenhill (1992, 2000b), Garoian (2001), McLean (1999), Padró (2005), Reese (2003), Roberts (1997) and Wallach (1998), argue that museums should develop practices that combine and juxtapose diverse perspectives and multiple voices, opening up the possibility to generate plural interpretations. These are practices that, in the words of Reese, "nurture multiple 'knowledges' rather than knowledge, facilitate multiple interpretations rather than a single interpretation, and encourage interaction among numerous narratives rather than the presentation of a single narrative". (2003, p. 33)

In accordance with this idea, in our proposal, we believe that it was not enough to introduce many voices if they do not also include those that also challenge traditional narratives, such as those coming from feminist and postcolonialist positions (Padró, 2005), that is, those that foster debates on issues related to gender, race or social class (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, 2000a; Padró, 2003, 2005; Reese, 2003; Roberts, 1997).

Based on this critical perspective, we wanted the gallery text to pose a problem from which to approach each work or the room as a whole, taking care to ensure that different perspectives or approaches appeared in each of the spaces. In some cases, the problem we proposed was artistic in nature. In others, it was social in nature, and in still others, we focused more specifically on emphasizing the gender perspective,

always seeking to avoid adhering to the androcentric Western gaze so present in the traditional interpretation of art and art history.

We did so, for example, in the room "Ways of Living" through a selection of representations of women and themes that are uncommon in art history, such as women's work outside the domestic sphere (Fig. 4), and gallery text to indicate that "Art also began to reflect the diverse roles played by women in society as it moved beyond the standardized images of women as representations of beauty and moral icons". Additionally, the only work in the room that bears an exhibit label, *La escabechería* by Inocencio García Asarta, presents text that emphasizes the work-life balance issues faced by women in the past and today.

Figure 4. *La Escabechería*. Inocencio García Asarta. Museo de Navarra. Source: Authors' own photography.

This plural and critical perspective is also present in another initiative that we call "Complicities". This is a programme, already underway, through which three important figures in the social and cultural life of Navarre outside the museum and the art world were invited for a personalized visit to the collection to see the works through their eyes. A total of three itineraries were designed, each containing a selection of six works that the author considers near to their interests or specialty. Each proposal is presented in a booklet that, as a personalized visit, reproduces the chosen work accompanied by a short general text and a text of approximately 50 words in length for each work (Fig. 5) written by the invited individual. These are not comments that report on the work from an expert point of view. Their function, rather, is to divert the visitor's gaze from what they are already predisposed to see, demonstrating that other interpretations are possible and thus opening up spaces for a freer and more personal experience of each of the works.

Figure 5. Thematic itinerary *We (women) are all well*, created by Maite Pérez Larumbe. Source: Museo de Navarra. Design: Estudio de Diseño Ken.

In some cases, the same works appear in more than one itinerary. Far from being a problem, we saw that this served to encourage visitors to find two or more different interpretations of these works, thus broadening the range of perspectives and responses to the same object. In this way, we wanted the museum to offer its visitors the possibility of creating an informed and thoughtful response (Hubard, 2007; Lankford, 2002; Meszaros, 2007a, 2007b) based on the contrast between their own opinions and those offered by the institution and outside professionals.

In short, we sought to value personal experience as a source for the interpretation of works of art (Padró, 2003, 2005; Roberts, 1997), with the additional objective that, upon encountering this diversity of interpretations, visitors would feel that their own perspective was legitimized. In fact, the brochures included a space for visitors to select a work connected with the corresponding itinerary and write their own interpretation, which would not necessarily resemble those that might be formulated by authors and experts.

3.1.4. Stimulating information

We have already explained that, in our opinion, the crux of any act of educational mediation should be the resonance that the work produces in the viewer, such that our mediating action should aim to generate the emergence of such resonances in those who contemplate and interact with the works. In this regard, we decided that the mediation resources offered to visitors by the museum should be conceived of based on the experiential notion of the relationship with art (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 2000; Shusterman, 1992) that we presented above. According to this notion, art is not understood as something separate and distant from life but, rather, something that connects us with knowledge, emotions, concerns or experiences that we can all share.

Using this aesthetic and museological principle as a point of departure, instead of focusing the content of the new rooms around themes (understood as a discourse constructed as a condensation of what is known about something), we decided to have each room address and propose a reflection on a problem or question of perennial and almost universal interest, presented in the form of a motto and accompanied by gallery text that allowed the viewer to establish connections with their own experience.

We were very conscious of the fact that in order for the text to fulfil the mission of reconnecting art with the personal life experience of the visitor, the writing and content had to appeal to the viewer and thus activate the interaction with the exhibited works. The result of the application of this ideology was text that attempts to promote reflection, curiosity, connection with the personal experiences of visitors and connection with current interests and debates, honouring the idea that all art is contemporary, as the title of the project states, and stimulating collective dialogue in all cases.

To achieve this, some of the text poses direct questions that seek to connect the works with the viewer's current experience. We shall provide an example so that this may be better understood. In the room in which we propose the thesis regarding the role that art has played in the configuration of an imaginary and a sensitivity that causes us to enjoy landscapes, we close the gallery text with paradoxes and questions: "Paradoxically, while art reflects this aspect of nature, its inhabitants have often had to uproot themselves, creating new landscapes, urban, industrial ones whose aesthetic values can also be enjoyed thanks to Art. Would this explain our fascination with the mountains, the attractiveness of city skylines or for certain places and corners within cities?"

This idea of fostering readings that evoke responses and problematize knowledge already anchored with respect to art was developed with greater intensity through a programme that we call "Coexistences". It is a programme, promoted by museum staff, consisting of inserting current works of art in rooms corresponding to other historical and cultural moments. Our work here, in coordination with the staff, was to foster relationships and demonstrate, by means of gallery text, what kind of questions or meanings the works may share despite having been created at different times. The works in the museum allowed us, for example, to establish relationships that stimulate reflections on the similarities or differences that link ways of narrating Romanesque art and Cubism or the ways in which artists from different eras and places have represented the religious experience.

3.1.5. Giving the viewer a voice in the construction of meaning

The personal contribution expected from visitors to a museum with an educational vocation is not only that of a response in the form of a reaction to a physical stimulus or a first impression but, rather, the result of an integrated action in which the senses, information and thoughts are articulated with one's own experience. This is where museums and works of art can offer a space for the consummation of a performative educational act (Aguirre, 2004; Greene, 2000; Van Moer, De Mette, & Elias, 2008), thus making the viewer a key element in the creation of meaning.

Educators such as Barrett (2000), Lachapelle et al. (2003), Meszaros (2007a, 1007b), Hubard (2007) and Lankford (2002) inspire us in this regard when they

suggest that the dialogue between the meanings provided by visitors, those belonging to other cultural traditions and those of the institution itself is what makes it possible to construct richer and more meaningful relationships with art. Lankford puts it this way:

> *Constructivist theories of learning and recent research into aesthetic experience suggest that most people actually benefit by instruction in various means of engagement with art and that engagement is most fulfilling when it actively challenges, builds on, and extends the knowledge, aptitudes, and abilities of museum visitors.* (2002, p. 141)

The result of the application of these ideas in mediation in museums is that, in recent years, many have placed the viewer at the centre of the production of meaning in both their discourses and educational practices. Along these same lines, through our mediating intervention, we also sought to make the voices and interpretations of visitors enrich the institutional discourse and assume a visible place within it (Padró, 2003, 2005; Roberts, 1997). Through the programmes and text designed, we seek to generate a negotiation between the narratives proposed by the museum and those that visitors provide, developing resources to overcome the traditional dichotomy between producers, translators and consumers of knowledge (Padró, 2005).

Thus, based on our recommendations in 2016, Museo de Navarra began to follow in the footsteps of institutions that have for years been articulating programmes that include the voices of visitors, such as the Tate Britain gallery (*Write your own label, Turner Prize Comments Room*, etc.). To make up for the deficiency identified in this regard during the diagnostic study, the museum has been inviting its visitors to provide reflections and opinions by writing notes that are visible to the public within the exhibition space (Fig. 6).

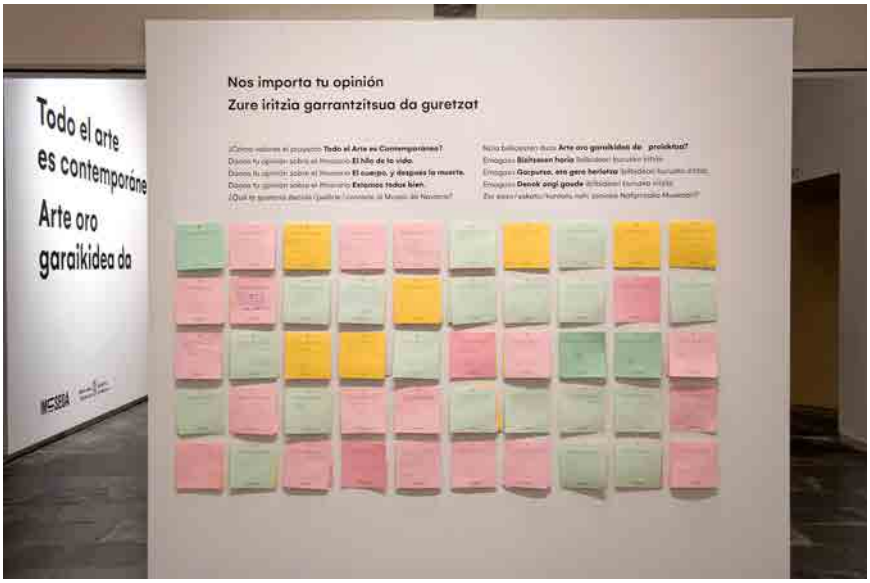

Figure 6**.** Display room of the project "All Art is Contemporary". Visitor comment panel. Source: José Luis Larrión, Museo de Navarra.

In the same vein, to alleviate the deficiency identified regarding the museum's scant cultural impact on its surroundings, it has since that same time been promoting a programme titled *We are neighbors/Auzokideak gara*. This is a collaborative programme in which groups in the neighbourhood where the museum is located are invited to use the institution as a catalyst for their own interests. They do so, for example, through activities such as choosing and interpreting some of the museum's works based on their concerns and experiences and recording the opinions gathered in videos that are available online (Museo de Navarra, 2018-2019).

4. Conclusions

Conceiving of art museums as places for instruction and working to improve accessibility for new audiences is somewhat complex and can be even more so in regional public museums because they are institutions that commonly face legal, historic, political and museological impediments.

In this case, however, thanks to the impetus of new governmental cultural policies, Museo de Navarra was able to launch a process of rethinking that affected what is exhibited, how it is exhibited and how knowledge about what is exhibited is communicated, putting the experiences of visitors at the forefront. To do this, the museum requested the participation of our research team in this journey, and the experience developed there has allowed us to draw conclusions regarding the importance of taking into account several factors to ensure that these processes of change are satisfactory.

As in any investigative study that results in action, it is essential to accurately diagnose the problems, limitations and opportunities presented by an institution of this nature. In this case, we have confirmed the importance of involving all museum staff in the process, from management to security guards, because this collaborative work leads to a broader, more diverse and precise analysis of the institutions' mediation problems and opportunities.

It also contributes to success in the shift towards the consensual adoption of a perspective of educational mediation in the arts based on which to propose the transformation of the institution and the renewal of its educational tools. In our case, the museum and university research team opted for an idea of mediation that promotes practices and activities aimed at connecting the exhibited works with visitors' experiences based on an ethical and political stance that contributes to shaping subjectivities and stimulates critical thinking and invites viewers to become involved in what is happening around them.

In doing so, we also developed interpretation resources to contribute to reversing the unidirectional flow of information from expert to visitors and overcome the traditional division between producers and consumers of knowledge.

The study carried out and the mediation proposal consequently elaborated have allowed us to verify, also, that mediation that promotes dialogue and encounters between different sensitivities and identities helps to turn the museum into a tool for continuous and critical citizenship training. With this, we believe that we have successfully aided the museum in nearing its objective of ceasing to be an elitist institution isolated from its environment, to instead become a place that is open to

social interaction, a space for the negotiation of knowledge and meanings that breaks with the model of the vertical transmission of culture.

Finally, we have found that collaboration between research teams, which provide up-to-date information regarding academic debates, and museum institutions, which are more closely linked to practices, is a good way to optimize resources, to advance museological standards and to bring about important changes in both institutions.

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