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Robot, Researcher, or Exhibit? Tour Guides in Museums

In this paper I will focus on guides in museums and different ways of thinking about them. This is an important subject for me, because apart from my academic work, I work as a tour guide in an art gallery. Being a guide and knowing this profession from my own experience challenged the way I approach museums when writing or talking about them in an academic setting. This experience helped me understand the plurality of people and phenomena, which shape the experience of visiting a museum. Exhibitions are usually seen as static representations of what was chosen by the curator, and often as results of the politics led by directors of institutions. However, there are many people involved in the process of producing meaning, and in the final effect experienced by the visitor.

Guides are crucial elements of the ecosystem of a museum – they give meanings to objects and act as facilitators between the museum and the visitors. As Erik Cohen describes, guides work mostly in two dimensions: as pathfinders (leading an audience around a site) and mentors (providing information about sites) (Cohen 1985: 5–29). Sometimes they help visitors see the exposition as a linear story with a clear narrative and sometimes they disturb this narrative with their approach, allowing different voices and interpretations. They cater to the needs of visitors: their approach depends on the age, level of knowledge, or possible disability of members of the audience. Their main function is to give the objects on display a body and a voice. At the same time guides often seem invisible – they're easy to forget, as their function in the whole museum experience is supplementary. Even their bodies seem transparent in comparison with the materiality of objects on display at the exhibition. They function as invisible guides to the visual sphere.

In this paper I would like to propose a typology of different models of thinking about the tour guide or rather *through* the tour guide:

- The guide as robot.
- The guide as exhibit.
- The guide as researcher.

Of course, these three categories constitute ideal or pure types as understood by Max Weber (Weber 1949). In reality, we usually approach this subject using a mixture of two or three of these. What is also worth remembering, these typology does not contain all possible models of thinking about tour guides, they're just a representation of a few basic ones. That being said, having even an imperfect typology will be useful for further investigations on this matter.

The guide as robot

In this model of thinking about guides, the guide's only function is to evoke the thoughts or the curators, mechanically repeating information about exhibitions. The robot-guide collects data on a particular subject and later presents the data in a way enjoyable for the audience. In this model the guide is almost fully transparent and serves as a representation of what the museum wants the visitors to see and hear. As I have mentioned before this is a constructed "pure type" – in reality the particular opinions and personalities of guides often exceed the rigid frame of robot-guiding.

An obvious example of this model are actual robots "working" as guides in museums. Using mechanical robots as guides is surprisingly common in modern museums, especially in those specializing in science. One of the first robot-guides was Rhino, who worked in the Deutsches Museum in Bonn (Burgard *et al.* 1998). Rhino was a part of a much larger project called named TOURBOT – this name is an acronym for TOUR-guide RoBOT (Argyros *et al.* 2001). Another robot, Lindsey, was created in the Centre for Autonomous Systems at the University of Lincoln and worked as a guide in The Collection Museum in Lincoln. The most famous robot-guide, Pepper, works in five of the Smithsonian's branches, including the National Museum of African Art, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Hirshhorn Museum, the Smithsonian Castle and the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (Dafoe 2018). Pepper is knowledgeable, kind, and speaks many languages. To entertain museum visitors, Pepper often dances and poses for selfies.

Why are robots so popular as tour guides? One obvious answer could be that robots are better workers than humans. Robot guides know all the information about exhibitions of museums in which they work – they can remember every tiny detail, much more than a human could. When they guide tours of temporary exhibitions, they can be easily reprogrammed to learn all the new information,

instead of having to take time to prepare like a human would. They speak different languages, so they can help to break down language barriers and engage with visitors from various countries. One more thing is important to notice – the robots do not need to be paid. They are an investment made by the museum – they have to be paid for once and then they can be reused without paying additional salaries.¹

However, there is one more thing that makes robot guides popular. They are interesting in themselves, and their own attractiveness transfers to the matters they talk about. Topics like history, biology, or technology are hard to popularize and having a robot talk about them makes them more plausible for a large audience. But why exactly are robots interesting? Paradoxically, they can trigger more intensive emotions than human beings. Robots can make us experience the uncanny (*das unheimliche*), by being somewhere between an object and a person, dead and alive (Freud 1917–1919: 217–256). Another factor is the “cuteness” of robots. Pepper has often been described as “nice” or “cute”. It is not hard to guess why – with its huge eyes and friendly smile it clearly has been designed to evoke this particular feeling. But why was he designed this way? In part maybe to offset the above-mentioned *unheimliche* of robots – the uncanny is pleasant in small doses, but it might also make the visitor feel uncomfortable.

The guide as exhibit

In this model the guide becomes a part of the exhibition and acts like an artwork on display. This strategy is usually used to undermine the assumptions the audience may have about guides, museums, or the artworld in general. The most classic example of the “guide-as-exhibit” model would be Andrea Fraser – the American artist, who staged several performances touching the subject of museums, institutions of art, and the contemporary artworld in general. Fraser, one of the most prominent representatives of the institutional critique movement, dwelled in practices disrupting the perception of museum exhibitions, showing the construction of the institution itself. In 1989 Fraser conducted a series of guided tours called the Museum Highlights in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She acted as Jane Castleton, an invented persona – a tour guide, or, as she called herself, a museum docent. Fraser (or Castleton) led a “collection tour” centered around selected pieces of art and spaces. The audience was a mixture of both people who came to listen to the Contemporary Viewpoints Artist Lecture by Andrea Fraser, as well as people who came to participate in one of the museums many guided tours. So,

¹ Thinking about more traditional museum formats, audio guides function in a similar way. They take a lot of work to be written and recorded, but when they’re ready they replace the work that would otherwise be performed each time.

both people who wanted a classic tour (with the guide as robot model) and people who were expecting something completely different.

Fraser gave a tour, which was based on both classic topics, often talked about in such situations (the institution, its history, and its collection) and on topics outside the canon: the cafeteria, the cloakroom, and the toilets. Fraser's tour was later described in the "Philadelphia Inquirer" in an article titled *An Indecent Docent Lectures for Laughs* (Heller 1989: 4D). The article suggests that this work has been seen as humorous, light, and funny. Maybe this is something emblematic for different attempts at deconstructing a museum – all changes seem frivolous in comparison with the stable, almost unchangeable institution. The guide in this model is on display, as one of the museum's exhibits. As the artist explained: "Jane Castleton is neither a character nor an individual. She is an object, a site determined by a function. As a docent, she is the museum's representative, and her function is, quite simply, to tell visitors what the museum wants – that is, to tell them what *they* can give to satisfy the museum" (Fraser 2007: 242).

Fraser's work can be seen as a metacommentary on the topic of guided tours. The result is the unmasking of the construction of a guided tour and creating and piece of site-responsive performance art. It is also worth mentioning is that her artwork is directly linked to the robot-guide model. Its sense relied on the assumed form of guided tours – visitors expect the guide to perform a certain way, as a transparent transmitter of the curator's ideas. Fraser's performance worked on the juxtaposition of these assumptions with a completely different case, which might trigger a shock reaction². This is what made this artwork so powerful, but also this is the source of its humor. What is interesting is that this strategy works even when visitors can expect the tour to be different. A part of visitors watching Fraser's work knew who she was, but this did not mean that the pieces lost their power – the assumptions about typical practices of a tour guide are too strong to stop working, even when the visitor understands that they are taking part in deconstructing these assumptions.

The guide as researcher

In the third – and final – case the guide acts as a researcher, which means that they use the tour for research purposes. Instead of acting as a "robot" or "exhibit", the guide observes the audience observing the guide and collects data while conducting a guided tour. We can imagine this in both an academic and non-academic version. In the purest form of this model the guide is a researcher from a univer-

² This can be seen in the above-mentioned article *An Indecent Docent Lectures for Laughs*, in which the author expressed her first emotions about Jane Castleton (Andrea Fraser) as feelings of misunderstanding and pity for an unsuccessful performance as guide: "Poor Jane, perhaps she had a rough night. A good doctor might be able to help" (Heller 1989: 4D).

sity or other academic institution and uses the museum as a space for their exploration. However, all guides collect data during their work, at least in the amount needed as feedback for their performance, by observing how visitors react to their actions.

One good example of using the position of the guide for conducting research is the work of Polish anthropologist, Ewa Klekot. In her academic explorations, Klekot focused on Polish national heritage and how it is constructed. In the years 2002–2010 she conducted research based largely on participatory observation. She finished the official courses necessary to conduct guided tours of the Royal Castle in Warsaw and to participate as an additional guide on tours of the Wawel Castle in Cracow (Klekot 2011). The participatory observation was completed with additional research, consisting of archival surveys and interviews with both the audience and the workers of these museums. This research resulted in articles concerning national heritage and how it is constructed, but also the guided tour situation itself. Of course, Klekot had to tell the audience that she is conducting research, however, she was still in the position of a guide – with the appropriate name tag, costume, and knowledge. Klekot’s research using the position of a guide helped her enter the social world of museums from an unexpected point of view. It allowed her to deconstruct the power relations between the guide, the audience, and all the other actors in the museum’s network. It also allowed her to collect data about things crucial for her work, like the imaginations about monuments of national heritage and the process of their social construction.

When I wrote about the “robot-guide” model, I mentioned that the guide represents the institution. What I meant is that in this model the guide is nothing more than the representation of the institution. However, Ewa Klekot’s research and articles point out another aspect of this position – the power that comes with representing an institution (Klekot 2011). The guide has access to what Pierre Bourdieu called “legitimate culture”, these parts of culture that have been deemed right and in accordance with good taste by people with appropriate “symbolic capital” and access to institutions (Bourdieu 1984). This means that the relation between a guide and an audience is always based on some form of disproportion of power.

As I have explained before, the three described models of guides are ideal types, which are never fully realized. A “robot-guide” can act as a “researcher-guide” when they are collecting feedback to better their performance in work. A “researcher-guide” sometimes has to act as a “robot-guide” when they are explaining facts about the exposition or the institution. The situation of a guided tour is always a performance, during which the guide is watched by a group of visitors and acts as part of the experience, thus engaging in the “exhibit-guide” model. As I have mentioned before, the whole idea of guide-as-exhibit would not be possible without the guide-as-robot model. However, in some cases one function of the guide overpowers other functions and becomes the most important

one. Further investigations into this subject could help us understand why certain models come into play in particular circumstances.

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