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Rhetorical Problems in the Digitizing of Collections

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Abstract: This is a reflection on the implications involved in the transformation of a designed object into a digitized image in preparation for an exhibition celebrating a hundred years of Mexican design history. An extensive description: Based on the project History of Graphic Design in Mexico and the compilation of more than seven hundred original pieces that have required photography and digitizing, the issue of physically altering the object has been faced. The previous has implications of form and depth, the first referring to physical aspects of the objects' re-presentation and the latter being related to the receiver's interpretation of this collection in which the opportunity to appreciate the paper's texture, the object's antiquity, the design's physical characteristics and other morphological attributes such as colour, definition of the form, sharpness of the photograph, etc., has been lost. Likewise, a visual rhetoric is generated parallel to direct visuality, we could speak of the forming of a virtual visual rhetoric in which sense is altered by the object's conditions of observation, the change of proportionality, the transformation of sensorial bonds with the receiver, and the dialogic alterations between the internal issuer and the one who interprets the image's meaning, considering that there is a metamorphosis between the original object - for example, a poster or a book - and its digitizing, which henceforth is considered a fixed, two-dimensional and flat image.

Keywords: Exhibition, Image, Rhetorics

Introduction

MORE AND MORE frequently we see in museums and heritage sites the use of digitized images. In fact, there are some exhibition sites in which there seems to have been a decision to eliminate or at least reduce the number of objects and substitute them with digitized ones.

This growing notoriety of the digitized image surely has to do with the advantages that it offers as a visualization resource with important museography attributes in virtue of the possibility to change its dimensions, printing support materials, placement, etc.

However, the digitized image alters the object reading patterns; this turns its advantages into potential disadvantages given that perhaps one of the most important promises of the digital image is the possibility to create more powerful narratives that involve non-linearity. But the museography narrative is fundamentally, by definition linear and requires elements of continuity; the digital image potentially cancels the feasibility of a narrative structured by the spectator.

Perhaps the solution to this dilemma lies in the mean's own possibilities: not to opt for one or the other, but offer both options to the public and let the public add to the value of the original piece the visualization of the digital images that enrich the interpretation which, in principle, focuses on the objects and elements that the visitor chooses in regards to number and sequence, surely emphasizing his decisions based on the adjunction of the digital image.

The Importance of the Object

The human environment is the stage in relation to which one lives in inclusion or reclusion, but in any case, it is a place of action. It is the receptacle but also the product, created, invented, constructed, manufactured, and transformed by the human being.

In the environment, the object acts as an essential mediator of the social body; it is a communicator in that it is a carrier of symbols and values (a progressive passage is created from the function object to the communication object), and therefore it must be considered “in its selection, its organization, and its practice, as the support of a global structure of the environment... an active structure of behaviour”¹, here, Roland Barthes suggests the possibility of what he calls *object philosophy*, destined to ponder over its existence and make it evident.

From these viewpoints, objects are a connecting element between man and nature, they are a connecting factor among men, and carriers of a surplus of meaning or what has been called a sign value, which allows them to function as connotation elements. As a whole, the system of object relationships constitutes their phenomenology.²

Etymologically, *objectum* means *thrown against, a thing that exists outside ourselves, a thing placed in front and is of a material nature*: all that is offered to the sight and affects the senses; some philosophers assign to the term the epistemological sense of that which is thought opposed to the subject who thinks it.

Abraham Moles, in *Theory of Objects*, defines objects as “elements of the outside world, produced by man and which he can hold or manipulate... they are independent and mobile... their character is submitted to man’s will”.³

The system of objects, as a group of morphological relationships, syntactic articulations and semantic correspondences, is manifested as a symbolic world of which social identification and interpretation go beyond mere usefulness.

The analysis of isolated objects is senseless and serves only as a statistical data, their evaluation must be understood as a product of their structural relationships according to the perspectives and circumstances to which they belong.

When considering the anthropological character of the world of objects, one must consider its value of causality and finality, since they play a fundamental historical role in the survival and evolution of *Homo sapiens*.

The influx of objects in language development is obvious because from the moment in which they are incorporated into daily life, they require a man to identify them. The denomination of objects is given according to their use, and criteria can be distinguished which serve as reference for their naming and their impact on language development.

The wide variety of objects has motivated researchers of different specialities to attempt to make classifications that will allow the methodical study of these objects, among these classifications and merely as an illustration, we have Andre Ricard⁴, who classifies objects according to their degree of complexity and their function: simple, because they involve no mechanical devices and act as a monolithic whole substituting some part of the human morphology; articulate, structured as a set of pieces combined to perform a specific function;

¹ Cf. Roland Barthes. *El grano de voz*, pp. 38-45

² L.C. Vilchis, *Metodología del diseño*, pg. 70

³ Abraham Moles, *Teoría de los objetos*, pg. 32

⁴ Cf. André Ricard. *Diseño ¿por qué?*

and machines, which are different from articulate objects in that they do not require human energy to work.

Bernd Löbach classifies objects into four categories: natural, created without man's participation; natural, modified by man; artistic, designed to satisfy aesthetic preferences, and for use, destined to satisfy needs.

Actually, every author can attempt the formulation of different classifications according to very varied criteria, in a way that it is evident that these classifications, in the best case scenario, have a didactic and illustrative orientation and can serve as guide for the integration of collections.

In this sense, Baudrillard's opinion is relevant, regarding the fact that in spite of form, matter, colour, duration, use, spatiality, etc., objects are constitutive elements of their own code and it is the individuals and groups who shape their particular repertoires and grant the object "the same use as any moral or institutional code, they use it in their own way: they play with it, cheat with it, and speak to it in their dialect of class".⁵

The Museum Object

The museum object is that which has been distinguished among the world of ordinary things to represent a specific aspect of reality: historical, anthropological, ethnological, axiological, and sociological, among others. The decision has been made by an expert human being, impregnating the object with its first subjectivity aura: one as a significance of the whole, as a symbol of a specific moment or context.

Based on the selection of a series of objects, a repertoire is formed which is part of a language with defined purposes, of voluntary meaning, or a semiotic imperative. Objects carry the weight of the sense and expressivity of a concept specified as a discourse of which systematization places it within the museological field.

Sign objects, according to Felipe Lacouture, include three moments: "visual tactility of the object itself, the emotiveness that provokes their presence, like experience, taste or rejection, and last, reflection."⁶

The purpose of an object that is chosen and is contained in a collection is its exhibition. References here are the articulation elements of the object discourse added to the museography discourse with a precise purpose and a structure that is materialized in a script that indicates routes and alternatives of perception and comprehension.

Thus, objects add their individual sense to the collection's sense and both incorporate a surplus of meaning through spatial-temporal codes such as: light, colour, container, supports, volumes, textures, dimensions, corporeal penetration, quality and diversity.

Also, the objects' semantic charge is amplified due to provocation incited by texts in the halls and info cards that reduce to phrases and sentences the considerations on what has been seen.

Every museum object, *per se* impregnated with the subjectivity of the decree, is located in an intersubjective network that transforms it into a mirage, whose deterioration and posterior interventions for restoration and conservation place it in another dimension.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard. *Crítica de la economía política del signo*, pg. 13

⁶ Felipe Lacouture. *El discurso con el objeto*, pg.18

The previous is affirmed because in these objects, which are subject to taxonomy and to the visual rhetoric of a concrete discourse, simple syntax shows complex semantics that at the same time organize a pragmatic universe: pragmatics depend on kinesic, proxemic, synchronic or diachronic, and connotative aspects.⁷

Thus, the object belongs to what Eliseo Verón⁸ defines as an *order of sense* in which an indication analysis is proposed by the visual rhetorical implications that affect the iconic and symbolic orders.

The Digitized Object

Nowadays the museography discourse proposes innovations and updates that inevitably insert digital technology in projects, processes and results. Objects, of course, have been noticeably affected by the immersion of museums into new technologies.

It is important to reflect especially on the digitizing of collections and their presentation to the spectator in stead of the object.

Here we are dealing with another object, digital printing, which substitutes the real object, it is a re-presentation of another representation of a reality, and so there is a juxtaposition of connotations.

Lev Manovich⁹, who defends digital objects as cultural objects because they contribute to forming external references, enumerates some of the implications of digitized objects:

1. Representation vs. simulation, because with the digitized object, the spectator becomes involved with fiction taken to a different semantic level due to the virtuality term.
2. Representations vs. control, because the digitized object shows the result of a process that is operatively dominated by the senses of one or several individuals who handle digital input and output devices.
3. Representation vs. action, because the object loses its dimensionality and acquires a different perspective from the printed design or from the monitor's formats.
4. Representation vs. information, because access to a corpus of information is offered with no account of the loss of knowledge that this entails.

The object, after digitizing, is transformed into image and with this emerges a series of implications:

The first is related to *semantization*.¹⁰ Since the image is a re-presentation of the object, significance conditions are created through sign transpositions between the object's semantic field and the image's semantic field.

Semantization becomes an evocation influenced by factors such as: ambiguity, contrast, sequence, association, emotiveness, identity, experienced relationship and correspondence. All of these agents are intimately linked to the possibilities of analogy and, no doubt, to the horizons of verisimilitude.

⁷ See Charles Morris, *Fundamentos de la teoría de los signos*, pp. 31-36

⁸ Cf. Eliseo Verón. *La semiosis social*

⁹ Lev Manovich. *El lenguaje de los nuevos medios de comunicación*, pp. 60-62

¹⁰ L.C. Vilchis. *Diseño. Universo de conocimiento*, pp. 37-46

The second extension is linked to *visual rhetoric*. Conceptually, the image's background will have anchors with the visual rhetoric of evocation, which supposes mnemonic relationships, and the visual rhetoric of pseudo-feasibility which shows the facts as possible.

Formally, the image will inevitably show a series of visual rhetorical figures¹¹, among which stand out the synecdoche and the ellipsis, in that a whole is presented through a part, synthesis, because the object is reduced to the minimum identification or attenuation because object elements are hidden.

It is possible that due to the materialization of digital images, other figures are displayed, like the hyperbole, which shows objects in different proportions than those of the real object, or amplification, which visually exaggerates the objects.

And definitively, in the visual rhetorical field, the object's digitized image can always be considered a metaphor by replacing an element by another one which substitutes it by analogy or resemblance, without forgetting the connotative variants that are originated from anchors, and inferences by verbal-iconic figures in which info cards point to what must be read in the image, forcing the spectator to interpret and conclude based on that.

Last, the alteration of the essence of what we recognize as "sense of reality", the *haptical-optical bonds* that the spectator tends to have with the objects and their transference to merely visual nexuses.

The five most relevant activities of the haptical-optical¹² action that are cancelled are: the distinction between textures, the stimulation of distances between objects, the discrimination of distances to several points of the skin, the observation of differences among degrees of static pressure, and the observation of differences between mobile objects and one's own mobility.

Conclusions

Problems with visual rhetoric in the digitizing of collections refer us to the alteration of sense due to the loss of important sensorial capacities of discriminative sequences that integrate perceptive aspects such as the tactile-kinesic.

This new visual rhetoric modifies the conscience and the attention to textures, temperatures, vibrating surfaces and materials of varied consistency. Likewise, the sense of the form and the structure are altered; by visualizing objects from different viewpoints, their distinctive components become isolated until reaching recognition.

The image loses the relationship of the parts with the whole that the perception informs when it visualizes the object, and so the conceptions of mental space, association, fragmentation and unit vary.

Last, the spatial concepts that are internalized based on actions are displaced because the mental space is no longer built as the movements and actions of an object's exploration and observation are coordinated and related, instead, there is a frontal, static perception conditioned by the location of the digitized image.

Therefore, a future museological reflection would be the relevance conditions of the digitizing of collections in benefit or detriment to the meaning and sense of the objects that integrate them.

¹¹ Alejandro Tapia. *De la retórica a la imagen*, pp. 51-60

¹² Cf. L.C. Vilchis. "*Hapticidad e imaginación*"

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