

Comment

Are museums places where science and society can really engage in a dialogue? A positive example related to the rubbish emergency in the Campania region

Luigi Amodio

Beyond interactivity lies dialogue

Museums have always been places for dialogue. What else, if not a dialogue indeed, is the special relation established – on various levels – among all the players in a museum experience? Collectors, designers, the public and institutions participate differently in a process that – through preservation, research and exhibition – must also guarantee another aspect of the “museum dialogue”: the fact that a work of art (a finding, a technical instrument), should “speak out” to experts and to the general public.

In this process, however, a problem arises.

Very frequently – as Francesco Antinucci has wisely pointed out in his excellent essay (*Comunicare nel museo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2004) – this dialogical mission is left aside; the reasons for this are manifold and cannot all be mentioned: out of negligence, or for want of professional instruments, or for a precise ideological choice that – acting against simplification – prefers to silence rather than to tentatively meet the needs of those whose age or cultural background are bereft of the most suitable instruments.

Scientific museums appear to run this risk to a lesser degree, precisely because of their very nature (cf. Paola Rodari and Matteo Merzagora, *La scienza in mostra*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2007), as they were instituted firstly to allow discussion and communication within the scientific community and then to develop a relation with an increasingly wider public. With the creation of a science centre model, communication is the main purpose. Nonetheless, in recent times, the need for dialogue has apparently become more urgent in scientific museums as well. This need is not entirely unexpected. We believe it is not only a symptom, in negative terms, of a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction towards the “myth of interactivity”, of a “hands-on” practice that, alongside its extraordinary potential, has now shown its limitations. It is actually a crisis in the relation between the scientific community and citizens, due to many factors: the forceful and unceasing progress of contemporary technosciences that escape also a disciplinary classification comprehensible through old instruments; the success of a post-academic science ever more linked to politics and the manufacturing industry; in more general terms, a crisis (probably more evident in our country particularly in the past few years) of the social ties, based on mutual understanding, that kept our societies together until the end of the 20th century.

All of this is joined, in positive terms, by the prominent role citizens have started to play – either in a structured way or not. They now believe that the time has come for their voice to be heard on some decisions related to science and technology that they refuse to accept passively and want to scrutinize and to put into question if need be.

New instruments to dialogue

To face this need, museums have implemented a vast array of instruments that, besides presenting “facts”, aim at raising questions, opinions, points of view. On the one hand, the adjustments of participatory techniques drawn from the ecopacifist practice or from participatory planning; on the other the increasingly frequent use of multimedia applications that give you the opportunity to be informed and also to take a stance. The examples are out there, as recently documented also by several projects, publications and international partnerships.

It should be noted, however, that the label “dialogue at any cost” often hides substantially traditional activities (conferences, meetings with experts, interactive laboratories, etc.). Nevertheless, what emerges in the vast majority of the cases, and beyond the instruments adopted, is a very important event for our community: the public shows great confidence in us and considers us to be reliable counterparts(?); in short, people are willing to find in museums and science centres an arena where they are welcome and the mediating role played by the employees is appreciated and respected.

This trend has been reconfirmed, right in the past few weeks, by myself and my staff, overwhelmed – as all the Campanian citizens – by the rubbish emergency. In cooperation with the University Federico II and the daily paper IL MATTINO we have timely implemented a dialogue system between researchers and citizens on many worrying aspects of this emergency. The contents that have emerged from this activity have been documented on the website of our institution, whose pages devoted to the emergency have reached high peaks of visits, and by the events implemented in the science centres. Likewise, there have been many requests – by single citizens and educators – for information as well as suggestions on educational activities and workshops to involve people, especially students, in a situation in which the community’s self-confidence and its hopes for the future – as well as everyday life tolerability – put to a hard test.

The procedure may appear, at first sight, as traditional. Any citizen, via telephone, text or e-mail, was able to ask some questions to the editorial office of IL MATTINO, which then forwards them to the university and Citta' della Scienza. The latter institutions provides an answer almost in real time. On the following day questions and related answers are published in IL MATTINO and posted in the website of the Citta' della Scienza.

At a closer look, however, this process may offer various interesting aspects, especially at a methodological level, which I would like to highlight.

Firstly, the quality of the answers is considerably dependant on the quality of the questions, i.e. the frequent sensationalistic nature of science news in newspaper pages has given way not only to the main, concrete, everyday information needs of the citizens facing the emergency, but also to curiosity and questions of a more general and often very strictly scientific nature.

Secondly, the *agenda setting* implemented in this case by the readers of IL MATTINO was really useful for the science centre. The task carried out by internal staff of classifying the questions in uniform clusters entailed an adjustment of the messages and communication to the public, devised to correspond more to real information needs.

Thirdly, on the institutional level, the image of the university – and more in general the image of scientists – has acquired a concrete form in the eyes of many people (IL MATTINO historically is the most widespread paper throughout Naples and the whole region), and is now seen as a “useful” resource and not as a place of an abstract research practice.

Finally, on the organisational level, the Science Centre has decided to set up an internal “editorial office” which will be entrusted with the main task of monitoring, documenting and organising resources on the dialogue between science and society.

All of this has spurred us to carry on with this experience, which has moved from a daily to a weekly basis, also on other themes with a scientific relevance, beyond the rubbish emergency that somehow is going to be tackled.

Ultimately, “dialogue” in a scientific museum is also about this. It is about knowing how to listen attentively to the queries of your users; how to interpret our role as mediators with the necessary care; most of all, it is about knowing how to intervene as an active party in a collective communication process.

For us this experience has provided not only an acknowledgement of our role, but most of all the certainty that the best science centre in the world can be a dead, empty place if it is not constantly “experienced” by a public that permanently sees itself as a protagonist.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

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