

# Evaluating the reception of an exhibition: DeTermination at the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art

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*Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo, 2019, 7:1:41-55*

## *Evaluating the reception of an exhibition: DeTermination at the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art*

The aim of this paper is to analyze the impact of an exhibition on visitors' thinking process. Applying Greiman's model, we used the exhibition DeTermination by the artist Daniel Pešta at the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art in Prague and explored the exhibition as a story. The model is used as a tool to better understand the thinking process of the visitor stimulated by the exhibition. Qualitative research approach was used. In order to capture a message of the exhibition, interviews with exhibition creators were conducted and afterward interviews with exhibition visitors. This article summarizes the creative methodology created by the authors, followed by a discourse analysis. The study asks questions like: what is the place of mediation in contemporary art? What is the impact of an exhibition on visitors' thinking process?

Key words: museum, narratology, mediation, artist, contemporary art

*“At first, we thought we would not give any title and we would not add any text in the exhibition, we wanted visitors to create their own story.”*

Daniel Pešta, artist

## Introduction

This article combines issues and attitudes from evaluation, presentation and communication with the emphasis on visitor studies in museums and other arts organisations. For the latter, exhibitions are the main tool of communication. According to Dolák<sup>1</sup>, exhibitions are necessarily a type of text, and therefore they depend much on understanding and interpretation. The goal of our study is to analyse the understanding of interpretation of an exhibition by its visitors and mainly what the impact on their thinking process is.

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<sup>1</sup> DOLÁK, Jan. *Muzeum a prezentace*. Bratislava : MKD, 2015.

The term “evaluation” became a buzzword. During the last decades, evaluations have played a significant role in all aspects of our society and museums, and other arts and cultural institutions are not exceptions. Museums and arts organisations have been pressured to prove their existence by evaluating their activities, very often, by using quantitative analysis. These attitudes, when artistic activities are reduced to numbers have risen many critics. The purpose of evaluating arts organisations should not be for them to account for various stakeholders, for instance a political power. As Pontin<sup>2</sup> points out, the positive results from evaluation can encourage further grant funding in the sector. However, too often this evaluation lacks critical discussion of weaker aspects of the project.

Evaluation attitudes can be generally divided into three groups: qualitative, quantitative and these that use both qualitative and quantitative methods. The approaches used for an evaluation vary depending on the focus of the researcher. The researcher will use different approaches of evaluation depending on his particular focus.

The purpose of the evaluating arts organisations should primarily be the desire to improve the knowledge of their audience and their offer of services and program. Evaluation is and should often be used in educational programs by arts organisations, evaluation studies in this case then focus on the assessment of the change knowledge, attitudes and the quality of life. This approach is also used for the purpose of this study, where we observe the impact of an exhibition on visitors’ thinking process.

Audience development and visitor studies have been a topic of great attention in arts organisations. Many studies have been conducted so far and our aim is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of these studies, but to provide a new insight and approach for studying visitors. According to Falk<sup>3</sup>, museums and other arts organisations today have no other choice but to think seriously about who their visitors are, the reason they are here and their perception of the visit. If we knew who visited our institution and what meaning they took away from the experience, we would know something about the role that our organisation plays in society, but also, we would better understand the role it plays in people’s lives. How art institutions and their programme make a difference within the society, how it supports the public’s understanding of the world, as well as of themselves. These are all important issues and alone justify the effort to better understand visitor’s experience.

Another reason why museums and other arts organisations should focus on exhibition evaluation is that they have moved into a more proactive stance towards their parent communities, the educational mission has become a primary focus of an exhibition<sup>4</sup>. Thus, they need to assess that their mission and effort are well executed and perceived by visitors.

## Methodology

This article analyses the implementation of storytelling and the reception of an artist’s message as part of an exhibition. We wanted to apprehend the modalities of the mediation between the artist, his work, curator, exhibition architect and the institution itself, and the public through museographic context. To do so, we started from two points of view. The first analyses the exhibition as a narrative and the second looks at the exhibition as a medium of communicating a message.

<sup>2</sup> PONTIN, Karl. Understanding Museum Evaluation. In: LANG, Caroline – REEVE, John – WOOLLARD, Vicky (eds.). *The responsive museum: working with audiences in the twenty-first century*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2006.

<sup>3</sup> FALK, John H. (2016). *Identity and the museum visitor experience*. Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> DEAN, David. *Museum exhibition: Theory and practice*. Routledge, 2002.

For our analysis we selected a case study: the solo exhibition titled ‘DeTermination’ by the artist Daniel Pešta. It took place at the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art in Prague from 26 January to 7 May 2018. Daniel Pešta is a multimedia artist. His work reflects a number of issues, such as genetics, racial determination, the absurdity of politics, social stigmatisation of minorities, gender stereotypes and other social issues. The DOX Centre for Contemporary Art was created in 2008 as a result of a private initiative during the reconstruction of a former factory in Prague. Its mission is to create a space for research, presentation, and debate on important social issues, where visual arts, literature, performing arts, and other disciplines encourage a critical view of the so-called reality of today’s world. Many studies have been already conducted and published in visitor studies. In general, these studies aim to know who the visitors are, their origins, their background, etc. Some studies focus on museum audience in general, as showcased by Pierre Bourdieu’s work<sup>5</sup>, some others observe visitors of specific museums<sup>6</sup>, or some focus on the effect of museum policy, like the work by Marine Le Gall-Ely on the effects of free entrance on museums’ audience<sup>7</sup>.

However, our study does not focus on visitors’ identification, but on their emotional and reflexive response during the visit, even though, as it is stressed later, some of the characteristics of the visitors may impact the reception of the exhibition.

Through this case study, we wanted to question the visitors’ thinking process in the context of an exhibition of contemporary art and to what extent the exhibition and its content encourage intellectual reflection of its visitors. At this point, an intersection of different stories occurs. The first story is a story of the exhibition inside the institution represented by the artworks, architecture of the exhibition and environment of the institution. The second story is the one around the exhibition influenced mainly by public opinion. Followed by a story of visitors, their experience of an exhibition visit described as a narrative, and last but not least are stories collected from the interviewees as part of our analysis. They include testimonies by the artist, the curator, the exhibition architect, DOX’s director, and its director of communication.

In order to answer this question, we have set up a specific analysis process, within which the exhibition is analysed as a narrative. For the analysis we used different competences of each member of the research team, namely economics, semiology and narratology and set up a particular methodology.

## Setting up an original research approach

### The exhibition as narrative

Lisa Roberts in her book *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum* argues that what matters is not what museum owns or display but how visitors interpret it. Personal experience of each visitor becomes as legitimate a source of meaning as curatorial knowledge, which, according to this point of view, is also contextual and interpretive rather than an unassailable truth<sup>8</sup>, resulting in the necessity to study exhibitions as narrative.

<sup>5</sup> BOURDIEU Pierre – DARBEL Alain. *L’amour de l’art*. Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 1966.

<sup>6</sup> EIDELMAN Jacqueline. “Qui fréquente les musées à Paris? Une sociographie des publics des musées de France”. In: *Culture & Musées*, vol. 2, no 2, 1992, pp. 19-47.

<sup>7</sup> LE GALL-ELY Marine – URBAIN Caroline – GOMBAULT Anne et al. “Une étude exploratoire des représentations de la gratuité et de ses effets sur le comportement des publics des musées et des monuments”. In: *Recherche et Applications en Marketing (French Edition)*, vol. 22, no 2, 2007, pp. 23-37.

<sup>8</sup> ROBERTS, Lisa C. *From knowledge to narrative: Educators and the changing museum*. Smithsonian Institution, 2014.

Analysing an exhibition as a place, where visitors' thoughts and ideas are being created and changed, needs to take into account various elements involved in the creation of the thinking process. This approach is associated with a question: how does an exhibition create or change thoughts? The analysis of the effects of the artworks on visitors does not have to be a single content analysis of the artworks. We need to take into account the exhibition's context and the context and environment in which the exhibition is placed. According to Melot<sup>9</sup>, we all know that an exhibition communicates a meaning, if it is intended by the organiser or not. Nevertheless, exhibition criticism usually tends to mainly deal with exhibited objects, as if their meaning was not modified and influenced by the exhibition as whole.

The space of the exhibition itself represents a stroll for visitors, it sends different messages to them, and creates processes of potentially diverse thoughts. The exhibition becomes a place of communication of messages, a medium, an interface, between various intentions and diverse visitors. In order to create a comprehensive analysis, a study of different phases relating the transmission (coding) and the reception of this message (decoding) is realised. The exhibition space, the arrangement of the artworks, the artworks themselves and all the other scenographic and mediation elements present in the space can be studied separately. The aim of our study is to analyse the exhibition as a whole and its impact on visitors thinking process. In order to do so, we conducted interviews with various people involved in the creation of the exhibition such as the artist Daniel Pešta (DP), the curator Terezie Zemánková (TZ), the exhibition architect Ivana Brádková (IB), DOX's director Leoš Válka (LV) and its communication director Michaela Šilpochová (MŠ). These interviews were conducted in order to discover what the intended message of the exhibition is and whether it is shared by all participants in the creation process of the exhibition.

The exhibition space in this case study is considered as the medium, the interface, between a message emitted by the artist and the producers of the exhibition, and an audience. The purpose of the exhibition is clearly stated: "*What is the goal? If we were to find a common denominator of this exhibition, it would be to get people to think.*" (LV). In order to understand how the thinking process is encouraged by the space, one must understand who the sender of the message is, who seeks to trigger this thinking process and what means are available to achieve it. Jean Davallon explains that: "*We can admit today that museum technology is constituted by the exhibition. The development of techniques, the emergence of production standards, the use of media, the control of the effects sought from the design stage allow museums—at least some—to become real economic units for the production of exhibitions conceived as true communication tools.*"<sup>10</sup>

In order to grasp how to unfold this thinking process, we made a hypothesis that the venue may be perceived as the place of stories. Indeed, in the context of this research, the narrative seems to be tightly linked to the thinking process within the creation of the exhibition. For example, the lexical field of the narrative is very present in the interviews conducted: "And such a climax was reached when I presented two videos that are here in the exhibition, their name is 'I was born in your bed'." DP. "In order to create a dialogue between visitors and works [...], we have to create a story [...]" IB.

Studying the exhibition as a narrative presupposes a story, a journey, a transformation. This hypothesis has already been put forward several times: "Exhibition is an art of the sequence and,

<sup>9</sup> MELOT Michel. De l'ostentation à l'exposition". In: *Les cahiers de médiologie*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1996, pp. 221-233.

<sup>10</sup> DAVALLON Jean. Le musée est-il vraiment un média ? In: *Publics et Musées*, n°2, 1992, pp. 99-123.

consequently, an art of narrative and argumentation”<sup>11</sup>. We also noted a professional interest in these questions, the story becoming a way for art institutions to ‘captivate’ the public, to convey the message to the best of their ability. This was particularly visible during the ‘Récits et dialogues au musée’ conference organised by the Société des musées du Québec in partnership with the Canadian Museum of History in 2016. The aim of the conference was to develop:

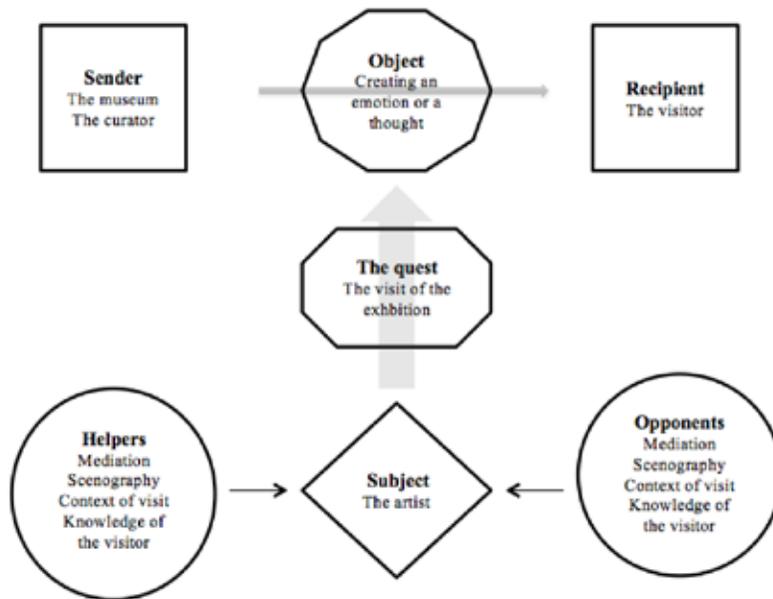


Fig 1: Greimas' actant model applied to the visit of an art exhibition

*The modality of access to the “utopian world” of the exhibition is reversed: it is no longer the meeting of material objects—whether natural, artifacts or tools—set in space in the exhibition that serves as an entry to this world, but it is the materialisation of this world that will serve as an envelope for meeting objects. The exhibition then uses this peculiarity which characterises it to make a visit a fictional representation whose visitor is the main actor and which is composed of micro-sequences developed from the visitor's stopping points and which follows one another according to a scenario that corresponds to the course of the visit<sup>12</sup>.*

Assuming that the exhibition can be narrated, narratology becomes an interesting tool for the researcher. A narratological analysis allows us to better understand how the exhibition creates an impact on visitors' reflection and thinking process. For example, the actantial scheme, as thought by Greimas, allows the analysis of different facets of this thinking process<sup>13</sup>. When used, the action of the exhibition is divided into six actants (subject, object, sender, receiver, helpers, and opponents). Initially, this model is based on interviews with the curator, the artist, the architect of the exhibition, and the director of the DOX and the PR manager. In the actantial model, the subject (the hero) corresponds to the one who seeks to reach a goal

<sup>11</sup> MELOT, ref . 9, pp. 221-233.

<sup>12</sup> DAVALLON, ref. 10, pp. 99-123.

<sup>13</sup> Developed in GREIMAS AJ, *Sémantique structurale*, Paris, PUF, 1986, and used in GERTSEN MC, SODEBERG AM, “Intercultural Collaboration Stories: On Narrative Inquiry and Analysis as Tools for Research in International Business”. In: *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 42, Issue 6, 2011, pp. 787-804.

through a quest. In the proposed model of the story of the exhibition, we consider that the subject is the artist. The purpose of the object is to encourage visitors to think and feel and to develop a reflection around themes. A sender gives the tasks, initiates, or allows the event, in our model based on our assumptions, it is the DOX itself, and/or the curator. The recipient of the message is then the visitor. The variables of the good or the bad reception of the message as intended by the sender then become helpers and opponents of this quest led by the artist. Helpers and opponents support or oppose the hero's quest. For example, we suggest mediation or scenography as elements that modify the visitor's experience; these elements can be both positive and negative, helpers or opponents.

## Cross methodologies

### *Phase 1: semi-structured interviews*

The study is based on a series of four semi-structured interviews with the creators of the exhibition: Daniel Pešta the artist, Ivana Brádková the architect of the exhibition, Terezie Zemánková the curator, Leoš Válka founder and director of the DOX, and Michaela Šilpochová (MS) director of the communication. Note that the interview with LV and MŠ was conducted as a joint interview. Our corpus is also composed of all the documentation available around the exhibition, as well as the scenography of the exhibition. These elements aim to analyse the different roles of each interviewer in the creation of the exhibition as well as to grasp the creative process around this exhibition.

### *Phase 2: Quantitative survey*

Within the exhibition, we set up a self-administered questionnaire according to two modalities, pre-visit and post-visit. The questionnaire consists of two parts, one allowing us to know the intrinsic characteristics of the visitor – sociodemographic data, cultural practices and knowledge of contemporary art – and a second part that seeks to know their thoughts on the issues raised by the exhibition, especially the relationship between social predestination and free will of humans. One group of visitors would fill the questionnaire before visiting the exhibition and another group after visiting the exhibition. While the first part of the questionnaire allows us to create clusters of visitors, which enabled the comparison between the before and the after-visit, the second part allows us to compare the perception differences of the themes included in the exhibition. This questionnaire was available online through QR code or on paper at the front desk and visitors were encouraged to participate. Some days the panel was arranged at the beginning of the visit, the other days, immediately at the end of the visit.

We had to compare the responses of different individuals within the same cluster according to the moment of answering the questionnaire. We monitored when people were asked by the DOX's staff to fill in the questionnaire, before or after the visit of the exhibition. If the answers were not significantly different after the visit, we could conclude that the exhibition does not affect the visitor's perception of the themes addressed, and vice versa. These findings, together with the feedback gathered through the next phase (qualitative interviews) on visitor experience elements, were intended to assist the organisation in designing future exhibitions. We hoped to be able to create a model for the analysis of the impact of an artistic exhibition that could be transposed to other exhibitions and museums.

However, this phase did not achieve our desired results and only a few visitors answered the questionnaire. Due to the lack of responses by the visitors we decided to launch a parallel qualitative survey conducted in the exhibition space at the exit of the exhibition.

### *Phase 3: qualitative interviews*

The aim of the set of questions was to understand how the visitors experienced the visit, which path they chose, why, what they chose, whether they paid more attention to a particular artwork, to determine what narrative they developed while visiting the exhibition. We conducted 61 semi-structured interviews with diverse visitors. These interviews made it possible to observe the actual reception of the exhibition and thus to question the success of the quest of those involved in the creation of the exhibition.

### Methodological limitations

This work was not without obstacles and difficulties. Language barriers have, of course, complicated the procedure. As two of the co-authors were French-speaking, the last Czech-speaking, the working language was English, the interviews conducted and transcribed in Czech had to be translated into English to be analysed in French. Therefore, bias and some lost meaning in translations might occur.

Ideally, in order to better know the narrative of the visit, it would have been necessary to be able to 'follow' the visitors in order to be able to compare their verbalised narrative and their practices, wanderings and rhythms in the exhibition space. This first attempt on this methodology shows its complexity and we hope to learn from difficulties and to be able to improve the process and the quality of the survey.

The various field analysis in phase 1 led us to retrace five main types of stories:

- the story of the exhibition (work, scenographic),
- the story about the construction of the exhibition (the launch of the quest by transmitters to the hero/artist),
- the narrative of the works,
- the story of the creative work (work, journey, works of artists),
- the story of the visit.

These types of stories helped identify different items. We propose here to briefly develop three of them.

### Creative work: a multi-voice model

#### The Artistic Creative Work Narrative: A New Conception

The exhibition studied is a result of cooperation between the DOX and the artist. The goal was to make a monographic exhibition of Daniel Pešta. It is the presentation of works realised during the last ten years, as well as works created exclusively for the exhibition as site-specific projects. It has been the largest exhibition of the artist in the Czech Republic so far. According to the artist, these new works made it possible to link all the works and thus to propose a complete and coherent narrative. The image of the artist proposed in the different narratives agrees on one point, an image of a form of dazzling art, inspiration that would come to move the artist. For example, the artist explains that he 'always dreams of an idea', likewise, the other

participant in the creation of the exhibition puts forward this discourse of the inspired artist. The artist creates:

*'[...] because some things really afflict him, the creation is not only something he wants to do for art or for the purpose of being exhibited in a gallery, he is a type of artist who really lives things (everyday life, media, etc.), experiences them [...]. This is something really important to him, he does not programme himself for works to do saying, 'I am an artist and I will do that' MŠ*

Here, we find the idea of two types of artists, one motivated by a depth and great reflection, the other motivated by the desire for recognition as an artist. However, by tracing the diagram of the exhibition as a narrative, a number of opponents to this idea emerge. First, Daniel Pešta seems to work often with specific places and sometimes creates site-specific installations, which necessarily directs his work. The creation presented as coming from an idea, a message to pass, depends on a certain number of variables. As part of this exhibition, for example, the choice of works and the production of new works have to be adjusted according to the original architecture of the space.

The story behind the creation of an exhibition of contemporary art: a creation with several voices

The story of the creation of the exhibition is presented as contradictory. Take the example of the origin of the exhibition. The initiators of the quest, the curator, mingle according to who tells the story of the origin of the exhibition. For Daniel Pešta, Terezie Zemánková is at the origin, for her it is about Leoš Válka, while she admits that it was her who presented the artist to Leoš Válka. In all cases, the organiser is the DOX itself. The narrative held depends very much on the general attitudes and positions—power relations—of the interviewees.

Everyone had a role to play in the deployment of the message sent to the visitors. This exhibition is polyphonic, like any artist's monograph, it is as much a showcase for the artist as for the DOX.

Giving a voice to the creation: the mediation of the narrative, the mediation as narrative

The storytelling of the scenography

The strolling of the visitors is partly subject to the mode of visits chosen by the curators of the exhibition. The visit can be free or guided. The De'Termination exhibition is presented as a hybrid model, there is no imposed path, but the layout of the works is thought according to a typical visitor route, so it guides part of the visit. The narratological questioning around the exhibition seems even more relevant because this exhibition is initiated as a narrative by its creators: *'in order to create a dialogue between visitors and works of art [...] we must create a story'* IB.

In order to create an atmosphere that can trigger a feeling of anxiety, the scenography features high and dark walls between the works. The exhibition seeks to warn about some emerging issues and 'determinism' of individuals. The artist and the producers of the exhibition want to put the visitor in an uncomfortable position: *'The exhibition is not comfortable, it is not an exhibition in the classical format [...] it is an exhibition of avant-garde, an exhibition that destabilises'* IB. Mediation therefore involves the arrangement of the works and the aesthetic choices in the scenography. The creators of the exhibition, including the architect, made the choice to include only minimal information in the exhibition space: the captions are very rare, there is no other conventional mediation device, like an audioguide and so on.

If the art exhibition can be perceived as being of aesthetic pleasure and/or of the knowledge contribution, the goal of DeTermination is thus: *'What is purpose? If a common denominator is to be found, it is to make people think about their reality.'* LV. The thinking process seems to be intrinsically linked, for the actants of this exhibition, to changing the preconceived opinions of the visitors. Beyond highlighting some societal issues, the exhibition would ideally influence the opinion of visitors: *'I expect that the main impact is a slight change in their opinions, that the public will find connections between things they would not have linked'* TZ.

The place of the exhibition becomes the theatre of the expression of subjective opinions, ideally influenced by these messages sent by the senders through the works of the artist and the exhibition device; the thinking process becomes a priority: *'It's not just paintings, it's really a conceptual exhibition, where the concept, the message, the thoughts are more important than the form, because the form that the artist has chosen is at the service of these topics.'* TZ

As part of this exhibition, the thinking process is individualised. The transmitters of the message do not live in the utopia of a reception without modification of the message. The public becomes a set of individuals whose reception and therefore the thinking process depend on individuality: *"Good reception is something that cannot be fully planned, it cannot be analysed, it is a question of an artistic field."* LV. The exhibition aims at a widest possible audience, assuming that they are unknown and come with a "baggage" that influences their perception of the exhibition: *"Of course, because he is an artist, he knows he can only expose his work to the unknown visitor and he (the visitor) brings his degree of understanding, knowledge, sensitivity, aesthetics, psychology, it works differently for everyone"* LV. If the way of placing works and the scenography directs the wandering of the visitors in the space, there is no other guide to the visit of the exhibition. The works, their arrangement and scenography from the narrative are the only guarantors of the transmission of meaning. Thus, pure mediation is absent due to the scarcity of captions and texts. *"I originally thought, or we thought, it was my suggestion, that we leave the entire exhibition without captions so as to get what I wanted, what we wanted"* DP; *"We decided from the beginning and I still think it was the right choice, that we would not explain it, that we would not write descriptive texts."* TZ.

This absence of mediation might be possible thanks to the readability of the artist's work: *"It is not that he would refer to some philosophers that no one never read, or that you would have to read some terribly long texts in order to understand it. That is actually why we did not even include any long text. We did not want to explain because, we came to see that his work is understandable without any instructions."* TZ. Indeed, more than the will to let the public the possibility to create their own opinions, the interviewees put forward a meaning accessible by the works and their arrangement in space.

*"If you have noticed there are no captions or texts, because we suddenly considered it as one big dramatic situation, such as the world and the world is not described. Whatever, everyone thinks what he wants to, we just put it in some shape that created an organism, and we hope it is communicable, and there is no need to describe it and limit the people who should visit it, really not. You never choose a viewer."* IB

However, the interviewees seem aware of the existence of a number of opponents to the success of the quest, namely of the good reception of the message: for example, IB had concerns about children visiting the exhibition and that the adults would not impose a false vision of the message on them: *"I just hope that the whole exhibition, the concept, the presentation of the concept through the works of Daniel Pešta is so clear that they will not tell them nonsense about it. That the emotion that breathes from it should be the primary message."* IB



Photo 1: Entrance of the exhibition\_Photo\_Jan Slavík, 2018, copyright\_DOX, Centre for Contemporary Art

To tell the exhibition, the exhibition's tale

The study of the communication strategy of the exhibition can be used into a reception study. The communication study allows us to see two points: (1) the representation of the artist and of the art centre into the public space and therefore (2) the way the exhibit tries to influence the reception. The museum flyers and communications are supposed to inform, to find potential public, to create interest, but are also transmitting content. By giving a non-objective point of view on the exhibition, it gives a first reading grid for the public. This communication study uses several materials: the official representation on the internet and

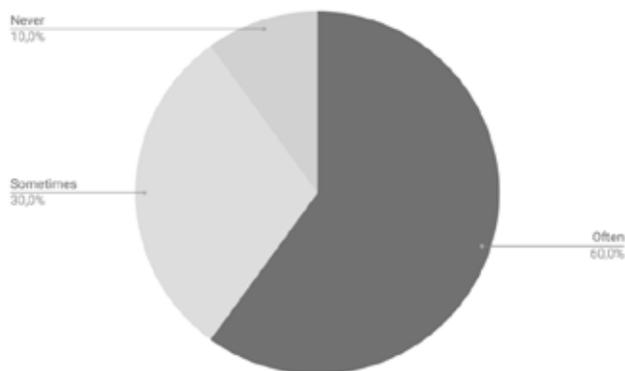
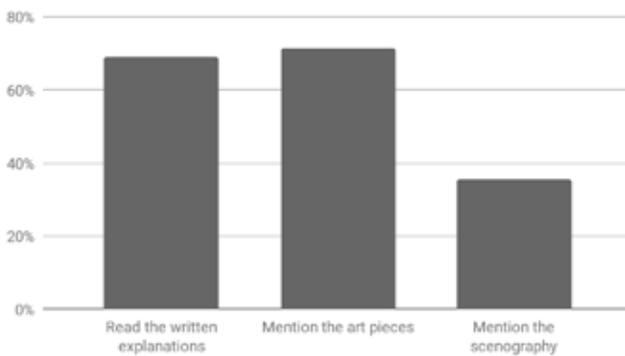


Fig. 2: Frequency of visits of contemporary art exhibitions

physical advertising supports (DOX website and social media accounts, posters...), newspaper articles, etc.

The DOX created a media monitoring containing all the articles speaking mainly or partially about the exhibition. We used this media review and analysed the articles. The media reviews consisted of 35 articles from specialised press, mainstream press and specialised journals. Most of the articles were informational, not using an advertising tonality. All of them draw attention to the thematic of the exhibit. By thematic, we understood the main message of the artist's artworks, the impression he wanted to give through his artworks. Meaning the focus on what the exhibition is supposed to be about: genetic, racial and social determinations. The art centre official communication about Daniel Pešta's work focused on the thematic as well. The press is using the main communication strategy of the DOX, there is not an important production of reflexive papers and expert critics. The communication tools are transmitting what the creators of the exhibition want the public to think – to be the message of the artist. This communication about the thematic is copying the main discourse of the first and only explicative text at



**Fig 3:** Relation to the mediation of the exhibition

the beginning of the exhibition. The message – understood as the political and social thematic addressed by the exhibition – is at the centre of the communication strategy, a message highlighted in the title of the exhibit.

The message is presented as a message belonging to the artists, while the interviews have shown that this message is a discourse coming from the artist's point of view, but also from the contribution of other participants during the

creating process of the exhibition. The articles are mostly about determination seen from the artist's point of view.

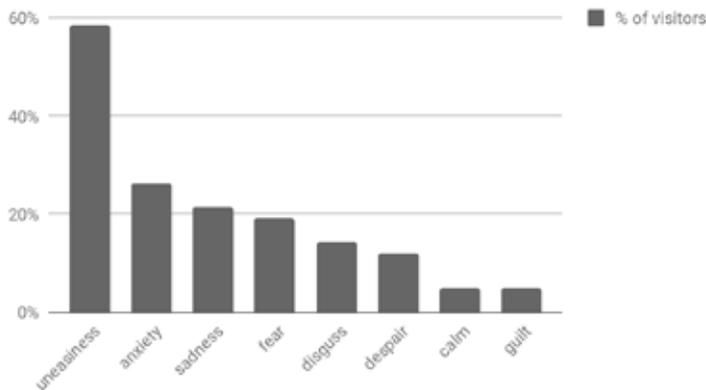
## Towards receiving of the message

### The public of contemporary art: descriptive information

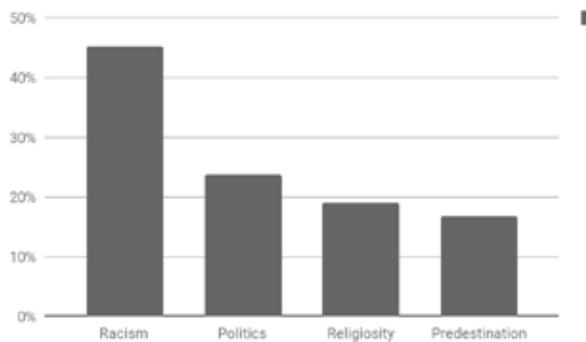
The creators of the exhibition want visitors to be active, and lead them to act; the artist seems to wish a performativity of the exhibition. The awareness of some important subjects to the artist aims to lead to action and to change visitors' minds. We decided to go to the exhibition space and conduct interviews with visitors.

After the interview with the creators of the exhibition, we decided to study five points. First, the more descriptive items, such as prior knowledge of the visitor (did they know the DOX and the artist, do they visit exhibitions of contemporary art often?) or the reception of the visit (importance of the textual information, scenography), the fundamental characteristics (profession, age, gender, nationality). The majority of the visitors (24) are frequent visitors of contemporary art exhibitions.

Furthermore, a lot of them affirm that they read the explanation text. Therefore, we are speaking about visitors that are familiar with contemporary art. This public has an appetite for art and culture.



**Fig. 4:** *Emotions cited by the visitors exiting the exhibition through their narration of the visit*<sup>14</sup>



**Fig. 5:** *Themes quoted by the visitors exiting the exhibition through their narration of the visit*

We originally supposed that the text at the beginning of the exhibition would make visitors focus their attention on different topics. But this hypothesis was not confirmed regarding our analysis. According to Hana Gottesdiener<sup>15</sup>, the single act of reading texts in exhibitions is not enough to catch attention, but the process of reading can do so. But she admits that under some conditions, that have to be studied, text can help the visual exploration of artworks. This premise does not occur in our case.

We noticed that the artworks were clearly mentioned during the interviews with the visitors, more than the scenography. Some artworks seem to be emblematic, as they are mentioned several times. The ambiance inside the exhibition space is noticed but the reactions seem to come more from some parts of the “story”. It doesn’t mean that the story does not exist and that only the artworks are transmitting a message. We rather suppose that these artworks are

<sup>14</sup> Visitors can quote several emotions in their discourse

<sup>15</sup> GOTTESDIENER Hana. La lecture de textes dans les musées d’art. In: *Culture & Musées*, vol. 1, no 1, 1992, pp. 75-89.

highlighting the exhibition, yet part of the whole story. For example, the specific video artwork is mentioned very often.



**Photo 3:** *Odnikud nikam\_video\_Photo\_Jan Slavik, 2018, copyright\_DOX, Centre for Contemporary Art*

### An emotional reception

The reception appears as a homogeneous experience. We noticed two types of reception, both can occur simultaneously to one visitor, one does not exclude the other: the reception of a more encyclopaedic knowledge (thinking processes about political and social issues) and the emotional reception. Emotional reception was more frequent as discovered during the interviews with visitors. A large majority of respondents described their feelings after visiting the exhibition as “hopeless” and “anxious”, followed by the words “uncomfortable”, “disgusted”, “frightened”. It is interesting to observe a recurrence of exact terms in a semi-directive qualitative survey: *“All the works give you a sense of hopelessness and anxiety, the space is very dark and personally, it felt very uncomfortable, for example, the video of the men transferring fire to each other, it was loud, interesting but scary at the samtime.”* (26, male/female, student, German). The accent is thus generally placed on the emotions and sensations provoked.

The interpretation of these results is very complex. The function of the scenography and the artworks need to be questioned. For example, we can legitimately wonder if the fact that the same video draws attention of many visitors because of its content, or because of the specificity of the medium. Are some artworks more subject to interpretation of the encyclopaedic signifier and scenography to the emotional signifier?

The accent is thus generally placed on the emotions and sensations provoked.

### The visitor's background: an opponent or a helper?

One of the most important variables for the reception seems to be the visitors' nationality. We can see that the emotional reception is less effective on Czech people. They seem to be less sensitive to the artworks and exhibition content. Visitors from other countries are more likely to highlight the issues hidden behind the artist work. It was a surprising result, because Daniel Pešta's creative work is deeply rooted in the historical and social context of the Czech Republic.

At least, we clearly see that the background and knowledge can be a helper for foreigners to understand the message and it seems to act as an opponent for Czech visitors. The same object can act as a different actant depending on who the subject is. The thinking process seems to occur during the wandering in the exhibition partly created by the artworks and the scenography. This storytelling of an exhibition, linked to the thinking process, clearly change depending on each visitor. If the actants of the exhibition are motionless, the subject is the one who systematically changes. The storytelling of the exhibition constantly changes because it is not a complete story without its subject, without the visitor. In classical narratology, the reception, of course, varies from one reader to another, but the substance of the story never changes. In this contemporary art exhibition, the visitor is the recipient, the subject and somehow the reader, he is part of the storytelling. As a matter of fact, the creators of the exhibition wished to think of the visitor as a part of the story. As it is well known in communication studies, there is always feedback in a communication situation and the reception is never perfect or at least as the transmitter wishes it to be. The creator of the message, in this case study, counts the feedback, the 'noise' inherent in every communication situation and the individuality of reception, as part of the construction of the message. Maybe that is where the thinking process truly is....

### The thinking process beyond the exhibit

As we interviewed visitors right after the visit, we were questioning the immediate reception. This immediate reception is mostly emotional. Some visitors pointed out that they needed more time to process what they just saw: *'Hmmm. I think it is possible to understand the exhibition that us as individuals are kind of stopped by to society to express ourselves. And that the individuality is suppressed. I really need more time to think about it.'* (31, male, software engineer, Slovak); *"I must really think about it more, really, I am not able to say right now what the message of the exhibition is."* (18, Student, Female, Slovak). As we are studying the visit of the exhibition as an action, as a moment in time, we are not looking at the reception hours or days later. But the last phase of analysis looking at the reception moments after the visit compared to the immediate reception could help to understand this immediate reception.

### Conclusion

The aim of the study was to analyse the impact of an exhibition on the visitors' thinking process. To do so, we used narratology and Greima's actantial model. First, in order to disclose the message of the exhibition, we conducted five interviews with creators of the exhibition and afterwards we interviewed 61 visitors right after they visited the exhibition. Visitors were asked to narrate their visit through the exhibition, describe their feelings and impression, describe topics that were represented in the exhibition from their point of views. Results out our analysis showed that majority of visitors captured topics and issues intended by the creators

of the exhibition. Analysis shows that exhibition impacted visitors in terms of rising diverse feelings and opened questions related to racism, politics, religion and gender issues. From a geographical point of view, the study shows that Czech audience was less sensitive to the emotion reception of the exhibition, which was quite surprising. We expected Czech visitors to react more actively to some artworks, since some of them deal with issues associate with Czech society.

There are many other results and items in this survey, such as the importance of post visitation in the visitor's thought process, or the importance of the relationship between the initiators of the exhibition in the message design and the implementation of the message, form of its mediation. Also, this method deserves to be used again, because it presents a relatively complete vision of the exhibition. The comparative study of the different results obtained between the surveys would allow a new look. A reflection is also very present on the meaning of these emotions, especially on moral issues raised by visitors; while these are absolutely not explained by mediation and exhibiton. An imaginary, knowledge and common values seem to allow a fairly uniform perception of the exhibition.

Maybe the emotional reception is a reception of the artistic work, of the artworks but also of the art institution and the scenography on its whole.

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