

For Whom Do We Write Exhibitions?

Towards a Museum as Commons

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The Model Reader

In 1979, Umberto Eco published *The Role of the Reader* (*Lector in fabula*), which gathered the analysis he had conducted in the previous years on audience participation in the enjoyment of narrative literature. According to the Italian semiologist, a text always implies a set of rules as well as undefined empty areas, which are set up by the producer and activated by the receiver. As a matter of fact, according to Eco, any text has inscribed in it, since its very conception by the author, an interpretative mechanism that makes it incomplete. Every text therefore always implies—or at least hopes for—a subject able to decode it. Breaking down the act of textual communication as an act based on shared codes and conventions—some of which are more stable, like languages; others are less codified, such as a set of references or contextual readings—between producer and receiver, Eco delineates the theoretical character of a Model Reader, for which every communication produces postulates and proposes more or less knowingly the following: “To organize a text the author relies upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expression he uses. To make his text communicable, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader (Model Reader), supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions, in the same way as the author deals generatively with them.”¹

The interesting element of this theoretical position is that Eco proposes that *whether this is consciously designed or not*, every text contains such abstract construction. The most important implication is that every text *demand*s the reader’s cooperation—not a total novelty—but Eco goes further and declares that such cooperation is an essential condition for the text *actualization*. To summarize, we have

an “ideal reader” invisibly inscribed in every text, and every text is totally unfinished unless a “real reader” completes it. This prominence of the reader has a clear trajectory from Roland Barthes’s *Death of the Author* (1967), which in turn elaborates some themes already anticipated by Eco’s seminal book, *Open Work* (1962), in which the Italian semiologist extensively celebrated works of art and literature that are multi-semantic and allow for the reader to follow many different interpretative paths. The higher the number of potential readings, the better the works; this is a clear guidance for the formulation of an aesthetic judgment.

Conversely, the process of cooperation between visual artist and viewer is not new to art discourse, either. Even before relational aesthetics, Marcel Duchamp already famously declared in his paper of 1957, entitled “Creative Act,” that “all in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.”² This last sentence is particularly poignant today, when so much curatorial rediscovery is taking place. It feels like Duchamp might have been thinking about himself and the role that the Neo-Dada generation in America had played in bringing his work back to the fore, possibly also partly completing it. Duchamp is a champion of the status of the work of art as *in potentia* rather than *in actus*, to borrow Aristotle’s definition of a state yet to be realized, highlighting an attitude to change, as opposed to fully formed, complete, and actualized. We should not forget that Eco’s first scholarship revolves around Thomas Aquinas’s aesthetics; a theologian who used the notions of *potentia* and *actus* in his first proof of God’s existence.

What Eco adds to the Duchamp and Barthes positions is the splitting of the reader into model and empirical—*in potentia* and *in actus*. The Empirical Reader—more akin to what Duchamp describes in the aforementioned text—contrasts with the Model Reader delineated by Eco as a theoretical construction. On the one hand, the Empirical Reader is the person who reads a text and might complete it, accepting and using the rules designed by its author, or might not complete it by not understanding them, or by applying other rules. The best example Eco uses to illustrate this is Borges’s proposal to read *The Imitation of Christ* (Thomas à Kempis) as if it was written by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, something surprisingly similar to Duchamp’s suggestion of using a Rembrandt as an ironing board. On the other hand, the Model Reader is not a person and only an ideal position that the author has designed for a reader to be able to complete the text to its maximum possible degree. In other words, the Model Reader is the construction encoded in the text that encourages the Empirical Reader to the author’s desired cooperative activity. The more the two readers overlap, the more successful the text will be. Eco speaks here of commercial success, and the word “blockbuster” comes to mind, as opposed to the one he might have himself used: “bestseller.”



Fig. 1 Tate Liverpool, Art Turning Left, 2012.



Fig. 2 Tate Liverpool, Art Turning Left, 2012.

The title of this paper suggests my intention to analyze exhibitions as texts that are “written”—or maybe better said, *encoded*—by curators to be read, or *decoded*, by their public. I am not trying to compare exhibitions with works of literature here, thereby implying curatorial practice being equivalent to art, but rather consider them as communicative constructs; texts using a combination of iconic, textual, aural, and exhibition-specific morphemes and grammatical conventions that need decoding. To this purpose, the notion of text I use here clearly expands beyond written or printed words and refers to the poststructuralist approach where Barthes and Eco navigate, in which a text is considered as any coherent set of signs that is designed to transmit a message. The textual condition of exhibitions is particularly complicated by the fact that they are also meta-texts that use already autonomous units of signification—works of art—to compose a *temporary* message, narration, thesis, or even history. Films and audiovisuals using previously authored material are the only similar meta-texts potentially addressed to a large audience.

Writing exhibitions

Following Eco’s theory, every text is incomplete and has hidden within it a Model Reader. It is easy to verify whether exhibitions, too, have a similar theoretical construction, an implied set of codes that its public needs to have in order to fully actualize the show. As mentioned above, an exhibition’s textuality involves a variety of signs and other texts being woven together; this includes the works of art, but also other key textual components, such as their titles, interpretative panels, direct quotes from the artists, extended captions, the exhibition’s accompanying printed matter, and three-dimensional associative enunciations—display conventions such as the juxtaposition of works to generate meaning through similarity or contrast. This is just a sketch of a “grammar” of exhibition-making which I think would be foolish to try to codify, as it is inherently unstable through a constant evolution similar to filmic language. These instruments are all used to send out a complex message, which has a receiver (the viewer) who is supposedly and hopefully able to make sense of it. As with other open works, the more open the message is, the larger the contribution requested of the viewer will be. Eco’s description of texts as machines fits very well the relationship between an exhibition and its viewers, “the text is essentially a lazy machine which counts on the plus-value of meaning that the reader introduces,”³ as if to fill a series of blank interstitial spaces.

So for whom do we, as curators, write exhibitions? Perhaps because of the profession being so connected with scholarship, very often the Model Viewer that we have in mind is a peer. In any text, the Model Reader requires a certain degree of knowledge, a competence—Eco calls this “encyclopedia”—to be able to decode the text. To understand fully the complexity of exhibitions written for such Model Viewers, Empirical Viewers need to have, or be provided with, the same encyclopedic knowledge that the



Fig. 3 Tate Liverpool, Art Turning Left, 2012.



Fig. 4 Tate Liverpool, Art Turning Left, 2012.

writer has, including a reservoir of history that allows an understanding of the intertextual references to both art and curatorial histories. Without it, the viewer will not be able to actualize all the meaning-content of the exhibition. I would like to use as an example Christopher Williams's exhibition at MoMA, which travelled to the Whitechapel Gallery in London. The show includes a group of photographs installed in choreographed walls that are imported from previous displays of the exhibition's tour. The captions are available on a printed brochure that includes Williams's key textual element: his titles normally list special parameters that determine to quite a large extent the image signification. A great deal of the knowledge required to decode this show relies on the viewer's cooperation and his/her encyclopedic erudition to fill the gaps of the text. Nonetheless, this very knowledgeable Model Viewer might not be the only possible one: viewers can also enjoy the exhibition without actualizing all the potential worlds that Williams had encoded in his text, as critic Peter Schjeldahl eloquently phrased in his *New Yorker* review of the show at MoMA:

[Williams's] withholding of the often intricate backstory that informs each of his works leaves a viewer with three choices that I can see. One is to be maddened by the tease. Another is to be stimulated to consult the catalogue, which is replete with brainy curatorial essays and with extended quotes from such cynosures of the art-school seminar as Jean-Luc Godard and Pier Paolo Pasolini, and from artist friends, including Barbara Kruger, Daniel Buren, and Lawrence Weiner. (Williams is nothing if not collegial, suggesting an audience that is less a public than a Masonic fellowship.) Still a third is to relax and enjoy the mute and striking elegance of an installation that amounts to an exhibition about exhibiting. I have tested all three options. They all work.⁴

As Schjeldahl argues, the Model Reader/Viewer is more a fragmented subject than a Cartesian ego: it can be designed as provided with multiple personalities able to decode with partial encyclopedia, but even more interestingly, the text itself and its Model Reader can be designed to provide some of that competence within its limits. This introduces in Eco's model a key pedagogical potential, which is particularly relevant in relation to exhibition-making. How can a show be designed to provide within its text tools for the viewer to increase its decoding ability? I would argue that this requires a conscious and less "accidental" construction of the Model Viewer, which might leave too much of the audience modeling to the museum's marketing or education departments after the text is "written" in curatorial isolation. I think that it is a responsibility of the curator to forecast and deliberately design his/her Model Viewer and be accountable for it—whatever such model might be. "To envisage the model reader doesn't merely mean to hope he or she exists, it means also to move a text in order to construct him or her. A text does not just rely on but also produces a competence."⁵ I consider an ethical duty of the curator—especially the museum curator—to facilitate the various possible actualizations of exhibitions for audiences of different backgrounds. The answer to this imperative does



Fig. 5 Tate Liverpool, Art Turning Left, 2012.



Fig. 6 Tate Liverpool, Art Turning Left, 2012.

not have to be the lowering the textual complexity of the show. There are at least two other solutions: firstly, make more polyphonic texts that can be successfully read with different levels of competence (envisaging more than one Model Reader); secondly, embed tools for decoding in the design of the Model Reader (thereby giving it a pedagogical dimension and progressive path of increasing competence).

Co-authoring with audiences

The question of responsibility leads us to the focus on how to deliberately increase the cooperation with the public, finding ways of writing—or designing—exhibitions that allow, stimulate, and encourage their readers/viewers to contribute. I would like to push this to its metaphorical extreme: would it be possible to contemplate that the reader/viewer cooperation might not just be circumscribed to the interpretation and actualization of a text, but more literally in the territory of co-authoring? There is a clear divide between the reader and the author in Eco's writing, which corresponds to the location of the text in between them, but what I would like to propose is to reimagine our relationship to the public. To do this, I would like to import a more contemporary framework and entertain the possibility of having exhibitions whose complex text is open-source and co-authored with the museum's public. This needs to take into consideration that exhibitions use already complete texts—the artworks—which are definitely open, although not to co-authorship, except in some isolated cases. What I am proposing is to find ways in which the meta-text, the curatorial enunciation, is open and half-completed in order to accommodate for a different, larger reader/viewer cooperation.

Such a model is grounded on an equalitarian relationship between writer and reader, which postulates the museum as an institution that co-produces knowledge with its public. Inspired by notions originated in emancipatory pedagogy, this proposal aims to bring back into the center of the museum's mission its originally educational drive. It is not by chance that the first institution to be called "museum" was an area of the Library of Alexandria dedicated to poetry and music, plus a room for the study of anatomy, another for astronomy, and a philosophical school with a collection of texts. People like Archimedes and Euclid held seminars there. Like in that initial vision, I would like to imagine readers/viewers—let us call them consistently from now on our "public"—as contributors to the growth of human knowledge around visual art, adding to the archive their elaborations, interpretation, and actualizations of the text they are proposed. This, out of metaphor, involves the public openly and officially cooperating with the institution in the production of knowledge; in a framework—rather than a Model Reader, a Model Public as a textual mechanism—which the institution co-designs to facilitate such cooperation and its future use. It is essential that this proposal never loses sight of the double levels of cooperation I mentioned earlier: artworks as texts have a certain degree of cooperation, while curatorial and museum discourse as text



Fig. 7 *Tate Liverpool, Art Turning Left*, 2012.

is the only thing that I am proposing to be open-source. While user-generated content is often meant to merely gather existing knowledge, such as in the Wikipedia or crowdsourcing models, I am proposing here to turn exhibitions into pedagogical environments in which questions are asked and answers are constantly renegotiated.

Rather than Eco's "lazy machine," in this model the museum is like a learning machine. One that learns *with* the audience in a pedagogical relation that is bidirectional. If the traditional museum can be compared to a broadcasting television or radio station that distributes knowledge generated by experts to general learners who grow by acquiring information and new knowledge, the museum as a learning machine sees all involved actors in the learner position, although not everyone would occupy the expert position as well. *To educate the public about contemporary art*, a statement contained in nearly every institutional mission, might not be a viable and strong enough expression anymore.

I would like to use the exhibition *Art Turning Left*, which took place in 2012, as an example to quickly illustrate how we experimented with these ideas at Tate Liverpool. The framework of the show in question was to investigate the way that political beliefs had changed how artists produced their work or their attitude towards the ownership, management, and re-design of the means of art production. Such a concept was an ideal scenario to question if knowledge can be produced in exhibitions, or if it is effectively merely distributed. Issues of equality, participation, access, and collective authorship were thematized in the show, and Brecht's *distanciation* approaches were instrumental in the conception and design of the curatorial enunciation. The first principle adopted was to organize rooms not by themes, but rather use questions as aggregating principles. Different artworks were gathered as possible solutions to a problem that artists had been concerned about across history and geography. We deliberately did not use context to guide visitors, and we borrowed from Brecht the principle of non-contiguity between adjacent works. Wall texts elaborated how these questions could lead to other unresolved issues shared by artists in different situations. This negation of a pseudo-morphological reading and historical continuity was designed to demand from the viewer a good deal of intellectual work around the question of why works were in the same room and how they positioned themselves in relation to the questions asked. The wall texts never provided answers to the questions, and instead were written to support this extra activity the audience was invited to perform, often selecting information that would have helped viewers to formulate their own judgment. The introduction was titled as a user's guide, and explained the principle of the show and its textual mechanisms.

In addition to this approach, the center of the show featured an Office for Useful Art, realized in collaboration with Grizedale Arts, which functioned as a public and bookable classroom, workshop, and debate space. Users could

request works from the show to be relocated in the Office to produce new thinking and discourse around them. Activities were marginally designed and directed by Tate staff, instead being mainly solicited to and managed by external partners who responded to an open invitation, and included art theory seminars taking place in the Office and the Socialist Singers choir using the space for rehearsals. The Office had no door, so that all activity was open to the incidental visitor. This open-endedness was meant to also symbolically highlight how the exhibition was a text to be added to, enriched, and debated—not necessarily only in a positive way—which was made visible by the accumulation of textual and visual material left behind by the Office’s users every day.

My proposal is to make the Model Public less a construct, a semiotic strategy, and more a pedagogical paradigm. I earlier mentioned that Eco describes commercial and popular success when a Model Reader and an Empirical Reader of a text coincide. What would happen to such equation if it were the Model Author and the Empirical Reader’s overlap that needs expansion? Can we imagine exhibitions designed to include an open author, rather than to be more or less consciously an open text? I am not sure that this points at a literal actualization of as wide an approach to exhibitions as demonstrated by Wikipedia texts. The key is to design pedagogical tools inside the textual strategy; a Model Public in which the cooperation is not just “foreseen and stimulated,” to again use Eco’s words, but necessary to the writing of a collective text. The Model Public I propose here does not have a defined role and position like in Eco; it is not a public we write for, they are not our customers, clients, marketing segments, and not even employers (in their role of taxpayers), but rather a public which is de facto a collaborator in an equal exchange, partners involved in designing a museum that does not exist yet, but which they can—or maybe I should say must—help us invent. If we want a museum of commons, we cannot design it to involve the public. We need to design it with the public.

Francesco Manacorda is Artistic Director at Tate Liverpool since April 2012. Francesco has curated numerous group shows, including *Subcontinent: The Indian Subcontinent in Contemporary Art*, *The Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art*, *Radical Nature*, and solo exhibitions with artists such as Clemens Von Wedemeyer, Hans Schabus, and Tobias Putrih, as well as large-scale events like the *Alighiero and Boetti Day* and *Simple Rational Approximations* with Lara Favaretto. He has curated the Slovenian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and the New Zealand Pavilion in 2009. He is also a writer, having extensively contributed reviews and features to many publications, including *Domus*, *Flash Art International*, and *Art Review*. He has also written artists’ monographs and contributed to a wide range of group exhibition catalogs. He has a Degree in Humanities from the University of Turin and an MA in Curating Contemporary Art from the Royal College of Art, London. In 2013, he was a member of the International Jury for the 55th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

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1. Umberto Eco. Lector in Fabula: La Cooperazione Interpretativa Nei Testi Narrativi (Milan: Bompiani, 1979), 55 (my translation).
 2. Marcel Duchamp. "The Creative Act (1957)," in Marcel Duchamp, ed. R. Lebel (New York: Paragraphic Books, 1959), 78.
 3. Eco. Lector in Fabula, 52 (my translation).
 4. Peter Schjeldahl, "Sharp Focus: Christopher Williams's Sophisticated Pictures," *The New Yorker* (August 4, 2014).
 5. Eco, Lector in Fabula, 56 (my translation).