

EDUCATIONAL SERVICE IN MUSEUMS AND CHILDREN'S IMAGINATION SPACE

This research was made in Rio de Janeiro, the second largest city in Brazil, with more than 7 million inhabitants. As a mirror of the country's situation, Rio de Janeiro is full of contrasts – a few people live very well, whereas most people live without access to their basic needs. Therefore, to talk about culture in this situation may sound strange... but it is my challenge.

Although we have large and good museums, we are a 500-year old country that was colonized in a particular way. The general level of education is not very high, and also, people's relationship with cultural goods is very specific. We do have strong popular art, not only in music and dance, but also in visual arts – but otherwise, the access to general western art is not easy because museums represent, in part, the arrogance of the rich and privileged .

To increase public participation, some of our largest museums have created, about ten years ago, their first educational services. In 1997 - year of my PhD research – only a few museums offered these services, and they were very different from one to the other. The challenge is to find different ways to help people to appropriate to themselves the museum spaces, which, after all, belong to all citizens. In theory, the right to the access of cultural goods is guaranteed by the constitution; in practice, however, it is denied to most people. Also, we cannot forget that one of the most important functions of museums is to present the knowledge of culture's objects in a critical way, stimulating their dialogue with the public. Given this situation, my specific question in this speech is: how can museum exhibits help children to construct their cultural knowledge and, specifically, improve their imagination?

I would like to show you the answer – or not – with two experiences.

Experience number one took place in Rio's largest museum, The National Fine Art Museum, with lots of national and international works. In 1998, they promoted a mega-exhibit of Salvador Dali. They already had organized similar exhibitions with Rodin and Monet, in the previous years. This time, the educational service scheduled visits with

schools every day, all the time – thousands of children came to see the paintings, sculptures and photographs.

They did not provide a guided tour but, at the end of the visit, every student could go to a specific place called “Children’s Room”, where they were invited to watch a nine-minute video about “creative process in art” (made by a graphic artist) and, then, draw the picture they liked best. The ones that preferred could make sculptures with modeling clay. Those tri-dimensional products were destroyed immediately after their authors left, because the material had to be used again by another child. Their drawings, when close to Salvador Dali’s work, were selected to be presented in the room’s wall. All the others were thrown away... This is why I was able to get more than three thousand children’s drawings.

The second experience I’ll describe today took place in a small cultural centre, called Solar Grand Jean de Montigny, also in Rio, inside a University, with a Portinari exhibition – he is one of Brazil’s greatest painters in the twentieth century. In this case, the educational service scheduled guided visits with supervisors which tried, very hard, to explain each picture, its meaning, the author’s intention, techniques, style etc. After the tour, the children were invited, once more, to draw the picture they liked best.

Well, the question is: can we consider those experiences as aesthetic ones? Do they really help the children’s imaginative process? I would like to discuss two aspects today: the guided visit and the post-visit drawing session.

With respect to guided visits, the first experience did not offer them, in contrast to the second one. I claim that when someone is free to see, to guide his own eye, his sight improves; he or she is able to make unique relations between things already seen and the ones being seen for the first time; can organize the tour based on pleasure, desires, what calls attention; they also can spend any time they want, and consider necessary, in front of a specific picture, just contemplating. Time is essential to improve and increase our imagination. When the tour guide goes on and on, almost running, calling attention to what he considers to be important or good to be seen, he is not allowing the children’s view to unfold. It is very important to offer time and let children see with their own eyes, triggering their imagination. Otherwise, they will not feel the aesthetic experience as a particular and special one, and will not be touched by the images in different ways – and that is what makes art’s meaning plural and multiple, as the artistic process is open... Once I introduce

myself to the artwork and establish a direct relation with it, questions emerge, curiosity grows and I begin to develop a new desire – I need information, I want to know more, and more... At that time, it is perfect to imagine that we will find, at the museum, a person or even some good didactic material, that can help me with my doubts. The frequency on aesthetic experiences is also important.

With the guided visits I've seen, the process was the opposite – the tour guide, first of all, told children his own answers, for his own questions. Those children were induced by the guide's eyes; they could not construct their point of view, but learned the guide's view. The association, the relation within the pictures themselves or between them and other things were all made by the guide.

For example, in front of "Retirantes", a guide asked: "How many people are there?" Some seven or eight-year olds answered: "Five". "No", she corrected. "Six" - said children. Satisfied, she pointed: "Is this a woman or a man?". "Man", they answered. "No. A woman. And she is pregnant".

In a five-year old group, in front of the same picture, after those kind of questions, a child asked her: "What is that on the floor, besides them?". "These are bones. In the Northeast region it is so dry, so dry, that animals die and become only bones". "This is which animal's bone?" – continued another child. "Oh! In art things are not that way! We just close our eyes [lots of children closed their eyes] and imagine what we would like it to be. For example, I close my eyes and imagine that is a cow's skeleton". Suddenly another child commented in high voice: "I think that it's a dinosaur's bone!" – but she corrected him immediately: "No way this is a dinosaur! At that time dinosaurs did not exist anymore... where you see people, there are no dinosaurs, understand?"

How could these proposals stimulate children's imagination? Should we guide someone's eye when they contemplate? Was there any room for listening? Did the monitor consider children's prior knowledge? Had children had opportunities for active contemplation? Could they increase their imagination? If not, what is the objective of this kind of guided visit?

My concern is: the guide asks, children answer, he or she corrects them; children ask, another answers, they comment, another correction. When the guide told children that they could imagine the bones to be whatever they wanted – but at the same time

disapproved of the boy's desire of dinosaur bones – the guide was showing them that they do not know things; that their thinking is wrong. All the time, it seems that the guide wants to make them believe that there is just one way to see and understand a picture – the *right* way – so that, at the end of this supposedly aesthetic experience, children could understand that there is a *correct way* to contemplate a work. Always looking in a piecewise way, without a total and particular view of it; without getting close and then far; without establishing relations with their prior repertoire.

The second aspect I would like to analyse here is the after-visit drawing session. When we talk about children's art production after the exhibit, the idea sounds pretty good. The problem I see in these two experiences is that both of them ask children to draw, necessarily, the painter's picture they liked best. And so, I ask: what for? Why? Do they want to check if children paid attention? Why would boys and girls copy the painters? Why couldn't they draw whatever they wanted, considering that they could even want to draw as that painter? Or even, nothing? Just because they have been to a museum, should children, necessarily, want to draw what they have seen there? The visit, in itself, increases their desire to draw? And, specially, should they dream of drawing *just like* that artist? Does this kind of guided drawing instruction increase their imaginative process? Does it help them construct the meaning of a visual experience?

I understand that giving children an opportunity to drawing is a good thing. However, the children should choose what, how and when to draw. In Portinari's exhibit, sometimes the guide even decided which picture or object boys and girls should draw. In contrast, I propose that they should be stimulated to express their own lines and colours. My proposal is particularly against the guides telling children what they should draw, with a specific material (already separated), with a sheet of paper positioned – some of them horizontal, other vertical – exactly when this guide decides that it is time to draw, and how much time they have to complete the drawing! In Salvador Dali's exhibit, for example, children had about five minutes to draw, because there were lots of visitors and the space was insufficient. And the guides frequently told the children that they already finished their drawings! How can this be? No one but the children themselves know if it is finished or not. In other words: the drawing was all directed by the guide: theme, material and time of

execution. When, despite the guide's directions, they drew the painter's picture in their own way, or any other thing they wanted, they were not selected for the wall!

This is another point: when the guide chooses the "best ones" to show in the wall – meaning those that best copied the author, used colours and the whole paper; when the guide, discreetly, throws away some drawings or destroys sculptures, or even when children are hurried to finish whatever they are doing, it means, subliminally, that their own creation – the ones that really reflect their imaginative process – are not so important, given that to create something, we need time, peace, curiosity, frequency, opportunity of experimenting, security, freedom, space, options, respect... Ultimately, they are contributing to create people that reproduce images mechanically, instead of creative and imaginative ones. So, those apparently small and inoffensive instructor acts can be dangerous to children's imaginative process.

In my studies, I see that the imaginative process depends, basically, on both opportunities: appropriation and production. To give children significant aesthetic experiences is fundamental. Everything you see, touch, listen, smell or taste improves your repertoire. They need frequent visits to different museums; good quality art books; trips to numerous places; opportunities of exchanging ideas with several people; experiences with other art languages, such as music, literature, dance, theatre etc. – and also have materials available so that they can try, try, try again, transform, destroy, create another, begin again, transform once more... any time they feel the need, respecting their timing for creation and, specially, their product as a personal and singular expression. The appropriation and production process are two pillars of the imagination in visual arts, remembering that, the more languages they can know and access, the better it will be.

The dialogue with different authors, the observation of more than three thousand drawings, the interview with guides and the observation of guided visits made in this research, led me to the conclusion that it is urgent to modify the process of being introduced to artworks in Brazilian museums: we should talk less, listen more, let children observe, give their opinion, ask, establish relations. Only a significant aesthetic experience is able to unleash imagination's development, leading to more elaborate and original works. So, the imaginative process is directly related with children's appropriation and production conditions.

Thinking like that, my concern nowadays is: how can a teacher, or a guide, that has not had those significant aesthetic experiences and their personal expression recognized, give children these opportunities? How can they mediate children's relation with art? In 1999, Maria Cristina Carvalho (In: Leite, 2001), also in Rio, interviewed some future-teachers about those experiences in museums. The speeches were something like that: "I have that kind of things, statues... God! I hate that! I see nothing good in them" or another one talking more specifically: "I do not understand Rodin: they are images with no arms... no legs..." It is well known that no one can give something that they do not have. Therefore, a cultural and plural formation of teachers and guides, with rich and significant experiences, is the key – is the key that will open children's imaginative process in museums – and my challenge in Brazil since my PhD.

LEITE, Maria Isabel. *O que e como desenham as crianças? Refletindo sobre as condições de produção cultural da infância*. 2001. Tese de Doutorado. Faculdade de Educação, UNICAMP, Campinas/SP.