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'Narrate an Exhibition as a Film' or a Museum of Cine-memories (Items 1-5)

Eugénie Zvonkine

The art-based research project *Narrate an Exhibition as a Film* aims to construct an 'imaginary museum' composed not of art pieces (as the one invented by André Malraux), but of individual memories, emotions, and imaginations. As Shaun McNiff (1998) has defined it, art-based research allows for gaining research knowledge through artistic experimentation. Maggi Savin-Baden and Claire Howell-Major (2013) have insisted on the capacity of art-based

research to explore the artist's and the audience's subjectivities. The specificity of the art-based research method is that it is 'guided initially' by a 'research question' (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny 2014: 46). Here, such a question would be: What do educated and non-educated visitors remember after an exhibition, what makes a visit memorable, and, most importantly, how do visitors construct in their minds what an exhibition and a narration are?

Keywords: art-based research, exhibition, film, memory, narration

Imaginary Museum of Memories

The idea of the exhibition as an ephemeral artform prompted me to start this project, that lets us explore one of the 'blind spots' of art history. These five captured moments are remnants of unattainable experiences, since we, today, cannot experience and visit these exhibitions. These short pieces have been conceived on a research-based systematic methodology but also allow for emotional and imagination-stimulated response.

Why do it through video films? Stendhal or Proust have written down such memories for centuries (Stendhal 1817, Proust 1923). Cinema also appeals to a strong emotional response. As Jean-Luc Godard expresses it in *Cinema, Cinemas* (1987, TV program by Michel Boujut and Guy Girard): 'What is cinema? It is a collective transport. In the affective sense of the word.' A decade earlier, in 1975, Kenneth Hudson, in his *A Social History of Museums, What the Visitors Thought* insisted on the importance of taking in account the myriad of individual and emotional reactions to exhibitions by their audience (Hudson 1975).

We have all tried (and failed) to convey through discourse and

words experiences of exhibitions as well as of films. The project can then function as a 'collection' and a preservation medium of *individual* memories otherwise doomed to disappear, but also of *collective* events already vanished in the past or still unrealized, since the exhibition is most often experienced in the crowd and in a collective way.

I filmed the participants telling their stories in one single shot, five minutes maximum each. Through these five videos, I attempted to explore these discourses while questioning the categories inherent to the relationship between cinema on one hand and museum and exhibition practices on the other hand. It presupposes that in our minds, whether they be 'competent' because of years of education (art and cinema scholars), or by praxis (artists) or even not yet fully competent (children), these categories are immediately associated with specific qualities. The participants in the project are Ludmilla Barrant, teacher at the Ecole Nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Lyon, Thomas Buswell, a young artist and student at the Beaux-Arts of Paris, Céline Gailleurd is a Senior Lecturer in cinema studies and film director, Ekaterina Odé is a young cinema PhD holder. Zoé Perret is a 9-year-old child whose speech appears as a counterpoint to the educated and specialized points of view of the four other participants.

I asked participants to interact with me in a ludic way. I asked them only one question: 'Narrate me an exhibition as a film' and let them answer as they wish to do so without my further intervening. Thus, the whole point was not to 'explain' this question but let every participant work with it, based on their personal and/or educated perceptions and their individual memories. For this reason, I didn't state in the video the status of the participants, even though the viewer can make it out quite easily, based on the ways in which they answer the question.

I didn't want to provide information on the specific exhibitions talked about by the participants either. One of them does not even exist yet, it is to be created. Some of the participants state the full name and date of the venues, others don't and that is part of the process. These are not videos documenting specific exhibitions, but rather the ways in which our memory and discourse can convey them or fail to do so.

In some ways, the participants tell us of a dreamed-up exhibitions that are no more or that are not yet created. They struggle with words and gestures to try and resuscitate (or make us imagine) fragments of the visions and sounds they seized in a museal space and tell us about the sensations and emotions that struck them then and there.

Play With the Concepts: What is a Film, What is Narration?

A little girl talks about her discovery of the *Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped*. While she speaks about her understanding of it, we can make out in the back several construction cranes. A lively young woman narrates a shooting incident in the Pompidou centre. A very calm young man softly talks about

a sensorial exhibition that he is about to create. Little by little, a collection is gathered; a collection of faces, gestures and speeches, of spaces, lightings and soundtracks. Little by little, a larger image of what remembering an exhibition is appears to us. What we see is that the sensorial and emotional part of it is what stays most with the visitors, but also how the world around us (the *acqua alta* in Venice) impacts our perceptions and the way we narrate our lives to ourselves.

Walter Benjamin described the writer as 'a ragpicker,' who 'at daybreak, picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick and tossing them, grumbling and growling, a little drunk, into his cart' (Benjamin 1930: 310). This is in part what this project intends to do, gathering individual scraps and remnants of visited exhibitions.

Intonations, Imprecisions

Another layer of expressivity and interpretations is added by the way the participants talk (that is 'perform')—either with a lot of facial mimicking and large gestures or calmly and with restraint. This aspect of filmed speech has been largely explored by fiction films. For instance, in *Twenty Days without War* (1976) by Alexey Gherman Sr, in a train in 1942, we witness two monologues. A young aviator tries to talk about his exploits during an air attack to two bemused women. He agitates his arms while saying 'I go like this, he goes like that, I go like this, he goes like that.' His description of the way he manoeuvred, probably combatting a German airplane, is completely unclear and even resembles more a little boy giving an account of a war movie, than a real account of a war scene by a direct participant. But at the same time, it does convey something else—his emotional state when he tries to convey this memory. His gestures and tone of voice inform us at least as much as his words themselves. Another man talks about his wife's betrayal for almost ten minutes, closely framed by the camera. His account is disorderly and once again, the gestures, the tone of voice and even the imprecisions inform us as much as the discourse itself.

In a more restrained manner, it is the same for my participants. Some of them convey emotions, others—sensations, still others try to apply theoretical constructs to their stories. Their specific expressivities and choice of story and words also evoke different types of conceptions we can have about what a narration is (or is not). I chose to frame them the way Eric Rohmer did in his films, so that their hands and arms gestures are visible, because they are an important part of speech and performance (Rohmer 2013).

Thus, another question one might ask after watching these videos, is: do we learn more about the exhibitions or about the narrators throughout this experience?

Document a Memory Inscribed in the Present Time

I chose the framings and the settings so as to play with the idea of museal and/or cinematic spaces. Sometimes, I chose an exterior location, in order to confront the stories to their settings. I also chose to register the sound with a directional microphone, so that the voices are clear and audible, but the life around still exists and even sometimes breaks in the canvass of the videos, disrupting the soundtrack and creating surprising comments to the narrations (like the police siren that turns on when one of the participants talks about a transgressive experience in a museum). This type of a microphone does highlight the voice but doesn't isolate it from its surroundings, as a lapel microphone does.

This understated *mise en scène* is thus opposed to the plethora of interviews (the infamous 'talking heads') made on a regular basis, where only the recorded voice is important and where the location is usually chosen on the criteria of the most silent possible surroundings. My choice of framing, setting and sound recording is more inspired by documentary filming, and by self-staging we have all experienced during the lockdowns when the in(ter)vention of our image was limited mainly to a choice of setting and lighting (zoom, skype, etc). Another reference is early art by the French artist Valérie Mréjen, who has 'collected' short accounts of individual experiences by different people (young and old, female and male).

These videos also serve as a living trace of these people—an art scholar, a cinema scholar, a film director, a little girl, an artist—but also of their personalities.

Narration/ narrations

Furthermore, I have composed a narrative order for these separate videos, numbering them from one to five, but I decided to present them separately, so that the viewer is free to follow this suggested order or to contemplate the videos in disorder, creating alternative narrative structures between the videos. Finally, these videos are evocative of the film *Timecode* by Mike Figgis (2000), which exposed four different points of view of a collective narration through a 93-minutes split-screen. Here, the accounts are not of the same exhibition, but they get intertwined at diverse points through the personal memories of the participants, through intellectual reflexions on what cinema or an exhibition is ('film is a more intense version of life' says one participant, 'there is nothing that separates cinema from any physical art object' states another), but also through accounts of impressions, sensations and emotions provoked by exhibitions and art objects. All these accounts form in our mind a collective image in its diversity and complexity.

This is the first state of the project, but one can easily imagine completing this 'collection' to further explore the ways in which willing participants can make this question their own and express themselves through it. When he made the series of portraits of cinema directors for

the French television—*Filmmakers of our Time*—André Labarthe said that he was thus creating a ‘living history of cinema’ (Labarthe 2020: 30). Such a collection of imagined and remembered exhibitions encapsulated in short videos could become part of a ‘living history of the museum.’

The subtitles were elaborated with the help of Noah Teichner.
Videos produced by Les Melvilliens.

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Author’s bio

Eugénie Zvonkine (PhD and Accreditation to supervise doctoral research) is an associate professor in the film studies department at the University of Paris 8. She writes on history and aesthetics in Soviet and post-Soviet cinema from the 1960s to the present day. She has published three monographs on Soviet and post-Soviet cinema, including *Kira Mouratova: un cinéma de la dissonance* (2012), and (co-)edited the collective volumes *Cinéma russe, (r)évolutions* (2018) and *Ruptures and Continuities in Soviet/*

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