The injunction to share photographs: A form of participation that benefits the public or the institution?

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The injunction to share photographs: A form of participation that benefits the public or the institution?

Sébastien Appiotti
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1 Democratizing photographic practices in society is not new, as Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated in his analysis of photography’s role in validating the family, as a unit and identity. Nevertheless, the state of photographic equipment and practices has vastly changed with the arrival of digital technology. In recent years, digital cameras and now smartphones have completely transformed our relationship to art exhibitions through photographic practices. The increase in image production among museum and gallery visitors is the starting point of my article.

2 Photographic practices among the public seem to fall into two conflicting camps: in the first, photography is seen as a right, a popular activity of appropriating artwork. The other, conjuring up the “aesthetic shock” of Malraux’s imaginary, considers photography to be an obstacle which prevents a direct relationship with artwork, and devalues photography as a narcissistic, recreational pastime. Considering this context, cultural institutions appear to be caught in a vice, both acknowledging and even stimulating these practices, while on the other hand reigning in the visitor’s body and behavior by imposing limits – even banning picture-taking.

3 In this article, I will examine this first perspective. For indeed, certain cultural institutions have begun to develop strategies that encourage photographic participation among their visitors. Some cultural (and entertainment) sites are even, by nature, designed around and for photography, such as the Museum of Ice Cream (Los Angeles) or Mad Dimension (Paris), self-described as “the insta-worthy, pop up museum.” In public museums and around historical monuments, certain spaces are equally dedicated to photographic practices: they stage the public’s presence through
the use of mirrors, (Coliseum, Rome), and often encourage visitors to share their photos on social media platforms (Oceanographic Museum, Monaco; Renwick Gallery, Washington).

4 At the same time, several researchers in the last few years have observed a surge in the development of digital facilitation in cultural institutions. Joëlle Le Marec notes a reconfiguration in museums which has expanded and changed the nature of participation: “The expansion of participation into a museography that involves the visitor but is void of any political dimension is recent: it coincides with the development of digital-based approaches.”

5 This transformed participation goes hand in hand with an alliance between certain cultural institutions and social media platforms, on which visitors are supposed to post and share their photographs. These two types of social players collaborate around what is presented in the discourse as a celebration of ordinary creativity, though it is used simultaneously to promote the institution while giving platforms access to cultural content.

6 What are an institution’s underlying interests in devices that encourage photographic participation? And with this context in mind, what is the role of the injunction to participate in the institution’s communication strategy?

7 This article is based on research from my doctoral studies covering a group of temporary exhibitions from the Réunion des musées nationaux – Grand Palais (RMN – Grand Palais). Within this group, I have chosen to examine the way in which these so-called “participatory” devices materialize in situ, inviting the public to photograph their surroundings and themselves and possibly share their images on social media platforms. An ethnographic study, based on participant observation and communication anthropology was conducted across five exhibitions:

   • Dynamo. A Century of Light and Motion in Art (2013), a selection of modern and contemporary artworks exploring concepts of space, light, motion, and vision;
   • Empires (Monumenta 2016), an unusual installation by Huang Yong Ping in the nave of the Grand Palais on themes of trade, globalization, and power struggles;
   • Rodin. L’exposition du centenaire (2017), a centenary retrospective on French sculptor Auguste Rodin and his heirs;
   • Mexique (2016-2017), dedicated to Mexican avant-garde artists from the first half of the twentieth century;
   • Rouge. Art et utopie au pays des Soviets (2019), featuring specific art forms produced in tandem with Russia’s communist society project.

8 I selected these exhibitions for my research group based on specific criteria: location (the RMN – Grand Palais), the presence of at least one “participatory” photographic device (mobile application, photo booth, etc.), and several types of museology. The consistency in location and in the use of a participatory device allowed me to analyze in particular the possible influence of museography on the public’s photographic practices. In certain mobile applications made for visitors, I also analyzed what specifically counts as editorial enunciation namely, the discreet traces often left behind by mobile application developers when conceiving of these devices. My socio-semiotic approaches, combine Peirce’s pragmatic semiotics with a French semio-pragmatic approach of digital writings. This allowed me to understand the constraints and technical bearings of the screen pages studied, and to connect my analysis to the social context of production. By this, I mean understanding design practices and
representations of the public and their participation, thanks to semi-structured interviews carried out with professionals from three of the institution’s departments (communication, facilitation, and digital content). Lastly, I should specify that while my doctoral research involved direct observation of the public’s photographic practices, in this article I have focused rather on how the public is socially represented and modelized, within the exhibition as well as in the interviewees’ social discourse.

First, drawing on a theoretical framework using the exhibition as media, I will discuss the double reconfiguration of photographic practices and participation among the contemporary public. Next, based on the aforementioned set of exhibitions, I will analyze the RMN – Grand Palais’s strategies for structuring and stimulating photographic participation.

The exhibition as a media for analyzing the reconfiguration of public participation and practices

The exhibition, a socio-symbolic apparatus

In the introduction to L’Exposition à l’œuvre (2000), Jean Davallon draws a close parallel between the elements of an exhibition and those of media. In particular, the researcher invites us to understand the exhibition as “a mode of receiving” heritage objects that interact with the public within a space. The exhibition is defined here as a composite that the visitor experiences physically. Its social practices are meaningful, whether they are expressed as contemplation, participation, rejection, or adherence to a value system. As a socio-symbolic apparatus, the exhibition intentionally arranges objects inside a space, which become key to interpreting a text, subsequently actualized by its recipient. This actualization is similar to a creative, dynamic act of interpretation, which effectively creates a new text, involving the public in its production of meaning. In our case, for example, it could cover everything between distant contemplation and the public’s photographic practices.

In 2019, researcher Yves Jeanneret expanded on this definition of the exhibition as media, by placing the exhibition, a strategic media, at the heart of other media productions (posters, catalogues, facilitation devices, etc.). He calls these tactical media, with the understanding that they are “less the object of cultural practice than its accessories.” Analyzing tactical media within the exhibition is essential to this article, in order to understand how the mechanisms of mediatization are at play, both in the public’s social practices and in the definition of participation.

Liberalizing picture-taking within the exhibition

Since 1979, a ministerial decree on internal museum regulations in France has stipulated the public’s proper behavior when wishing to take a photograph: on one hand, the practice is authorized in permanent collections and must respect security rules and the conservation of artwork; on the other hand, it is forbidden in temporary exhibitions. In reality, this decree conceals a diverse number of situations within cultural institutions: some partially prohibit photography (Louvre Museum, 2005) some
entirely (Orsay Museum, 2010-2015). Other institutions, on the contrary, have explicitly encouraged these same practices, such as the RMN – Grand Palais, beginning in 2013.

13 This regulatory framework was updated in 2014 by the Ministry of Culture, with the establishment of the Tous photographes charter. This charter calls for a paradigm shift: faced with conventional arguments (artwork security, visitor comfort, copyright, etc.) which aim to corral the public into a contemplative, distanced visit around the displays, this charter offers an alternative set of values shaping new ways of visiting. Article 3 of the Tous photographes charter is particularly interesting to analyze for this reason. It includes a graphic representation, in the form of a black camera overlayed with a pink @ symbol.

Figure 1

Symbol from Article 3 of the Tous photographes charter.
Ministry of Culture, 2014.

14 This Internet symbol seems to link the camera to the Web, allowing for shared content (in the depicted directional arrows). The phrasing of Article 3, moreover, suggests the same: “Visitors may share and disseminate their photos and videos, especially on the Internet and social networks, within the framework of the legislation in effect.” Through photography, the visitor is offered a chance to participate, based on an injunctive approach directly linked to the Web and social media platforms.

**Participation, a criterion for evaluating institutional modernity**

15 The call for public participation within exhibitions is not, however, new. In fact, since the 1960s, French “social museums” and “new museology” have made participation an essential part of their mission, specifically providing opportunities to citizens for political involvement in the life of the institution. If the use of museum participation seems to be more frequent than before, it is notably because these participatory initiatives have been designed in direct relation to institutions’ digital communication strategy.

16 The dissemination of digital facilitation devices within museums also results in the projection of digital imaginaries, stemming from participatory fan culture and what has been called the “Web 2.0.” In both cases, these imaginaries promote user activity,
the ability to create content, and circulate it online. From this perspective, photographic practices align several outcomes: they offer an activity to the public, and potentially stimulate participation through sharing on social media platforms. Furthermore, it is interesting to note with Gustavo Gomez-Mejia that a contemporary semantic shift has occurred, moving from the taking of photographs to an injunction to share them – a “softly spoken command (every Internet user must know how to ‘share’).”

This participatory reconfiguration takes place specifically in the context of a managerial turn and communicational turn in museums. As a result of this double turn, new injunctions are emerging and spreading, contributing to the metamorphosis and modernization of cultural institutions. By injunction, I mean “varying degrees of accompaniment—from the smallest suggestion to the most imperative command—and suggestions meant to stimulate and elicit practices,” which can be analyzed as a composite (Le Marec, 2002) through the tangible (exhibition, devices) and the intangible (discourse, representations, the shaping of practices).

It was amid this context—that of cultural institutions’ changing relationship to photographic practices and participation—that my fieldwork at the RMN – Grand Palais unfolded.

**Supervising participation, stimulating photograph sharing**

**The Galeries Nationales: opening the Grand Palais to major exhibitions**

The Réunion des Musées Nationaux – Grand Palais is a public institution created in 2011 through the merger of two state cultural institutes: the RMN (1895) and the Grand Palais (1900). The Grand Palais is located in Paris’s 8th arrondissement, perpendicular to the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, near Les Invalides and the Place de la Concorde. This highly symbolic site was built for the 1900 Paris World Fair, and some of its spaces were reconfigured into the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais (GNGP, 1962-1964) on the initiative of André Malraux. Through the GNGP, Malraux’s conception of cultural democratizing policies could be applied. For the Minister of Cultural Affairs, it was indeed important to “foster a direct relationship between the public and the artwork.”

Thus, the GNGP do not have permanent collections, unlike most museums. Rather, the galleries operate according to a calendar of temporary exhibitions, with guest curators and partner institutions. This particularity entails a constant renewal of expographic, museographic, and scenographic discourses.

With this context in mind, it seems there has been a shift in perspective regarding participation and photographic practices, starting with the exhibition *Dynamo* in 2013.
Dynamo, a prototype of the “participatory” exhibition

22 In 2014, based on a study of sixty-seven mobile applications from cultural institutions, Émilie Flon, Gaëlle Lesaffre and Anne Watremez identified the major trends and “facilitation forms” that characterize them. These software tools were then grouped into families of functionality: “Display,” “Audioguide,” and “On-site facilitation.” Within this study set, only two mobile applications seemed to draw on “innovative” technologies in an experimental way: BlinksterCP (Musée National d’Art Moderne) and Dynamo.

23 From April to July in 2013, the Dynamo exhibition allowed for experimentation through new digital media devices, provided by the telecom service provider Orange and the RMN – Grand Palais’s digital department. The Dynamo exhibition made it possible to “develop a classic example of a participative application to be used before, during, and after the visit.” (Multimedia Project Manager, RMN – Grand Palais). In the press kit for the mobile application, it is stated that “this application, consistent with the artists’ approach, invites the visitor to get involved with their creations, allowing for an enriched and participatory experience with key works in the exhibition.”

24 Two technological solutions were tested within Dynamo in relation to this mobile visitor application. One is structured around NFC museum tags that allow for the transmission of content (audio, text, images, videos) when a visitor passes his smartphone near the work. The other centers on photographic, written, and auditory participation.

25 As illustrated on the screen-page below (fig. 2), the accompanying institutional text – “découvrez postez mémorisez partagez” (discover post memorize share) – is structured around four injunctions to action, two of which involve circulating and sharing the photographs taken. Moreover, the discourse establishes a strong link between sharing and memory. On this same screen-page, an interactive play button is accompanied by the caption: “Votre carnet de visite” (your visitor’s guide). This tool is able to count the number of works recorded in the guide and those that have been shared in photographic form with other exhibition visitors. On a second screen-page (fig. 3), the injunction to share photographs materializes as hyperlinks. Thus, this screen-page’s editorial enunciation activates the semiotic “interpretants” of users familiar with social media platforms and injunctions on expressiveness.
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26 The visitors’ photographic contributions are then mediatized and displayed on a “contribution wall.” This impressive device, located on the exit wall of the exhibition, allows visitors to (data)visualize submitted contributions.

27 Since 2013, Dynamo has become the prototype for a new aesthetic art experience, shaping the types of roles that public photographic practices can have. The Dynamo application’s editorial enunciation structures the exhibition visit around four key elements: memory; photography; perspective; participation. Within the software, the application designers encoded the hypothesis that a visitor can use photography to
construct a subjective relationship, a new text, and an interpretation around the artwork.

**Online and on-site participation: the same injunction to share photographs**

In light of the analyses and prototype features that emerged through Dynamo, new questions arise: why are designers (both digital project managers from service providers and the RMN – Grand Palais staff) shaping a model participatory public figure? What are the commercial interests, professional pretensions, and social representations driving this modeling? To answer these questions, I analyzed the designers’ social representations of the public, in the interviewees’ social discourse, in the analyzed exhibitions, and in material gathered from digital writings.

Following Dynamo, other mobile applications designed by the RMN – Grand Palais explicitly encouraged the public to share photographs. Several factors corroborate this. First, interface design: multiple mobile applications (Jean-Paul Gaultier, 2015; Hergé, 2016; Joyaux, 2017) included the presence of injunctive screen pages which encouraged sharing on social media platforms. Second, respondents’ discourse: in these, the injunction to participate through photographic sharing circulated widely. In the following statement, the head of the digital division at the RMN – Grand Palais closely associates photography practice, the use of the participative module Photo bullée (the Hergé application), and the sharing of these photos on the Web and on social media:

Concerning photography, through our application the public will be able to insert speech bubbles from famous comic books into their photos and bubble in, or “cartoonize” their photos, before sharing them. This same set of ideas is echoed by a colleague running the Education division, who believes visiting a cultural site should be a shared prescriptive opportunity:

> When I go to a cultural place, it’s rewarding. And I want to share it, to say to others, “come and experience what I did, it was great,” or, on the contrary, “I didn’t like it so much, so come and see it too, and then you can tell me what you thought of it” (Head of the Education team at RMN – Grand Palais).

This incentive to share photographs also arises in the exhibition. In fact, some devices (photo booths, flat screens displaying visitor participation, etc.) are found in the Galeries Nationales.

A hashtag is provided for each exhibition, using the model #ExhibitionName (#ExpoRodin). This hashtag aggregates digital content published by visitors on social media platforms, according to a logic that originally stemmed from folksonomy. Then, an injunctive rhetoric is implemented in the exhibition to invite sharing of this same content: “Share #ExpoRodin.” This discourse is accompanied by Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter logos. Lastly, for some exhibitions, these injunctions to share are complemented by permanently installed flat screens, allowing visitors to view Internet user participation in real time.

This device combines a production grammar with exemplification through a visual trace. The following photograph of the flat screens from Empires (Monumenta 2016) is one concrete example. It features the following accompanying words: “Suivez et partagez votre expérience de visite #Monumenta2016 #HuangYongPing Share your
experience of your visit #Monumenta2016 #HuangYongPing.” The first flat screen allows visitors to view digital media content proposed by the RMN – Grand Palais. The second screen allows visitors to view the exhibition’s themed Twitter livestream, and any potential contribution they may have made using the hashtag.

Figure 4

Flat screens for viewing Twitter participation, Empires, Monumenta 2016.
RMN – Grand Palais, 2016, Sébastien Appiotti ©.

One last type of device completes the visitor’s incentive to photographic participation. These are so-called “immersive” scenographic items inviting visitors to put themselves into the scene, then take their picture (or have it taken), and finally to share their picture on digital social networks. During my fieldwork, this strategy was used four times in the GNGP:

– In the Seydou Keïta exhibition (2016), with an immersive wax exit passage inviting photographic sharing on Instagram;

– In the Hergé exhibition (2016), with a wall of human-sized characters from the Tintin comic book. In the exhibition brochure, this apparatus is presented as: “THE WALL OF SELFIES. Photograph yourself in front of a wall of Hergé’s characters and share your images on social networks. #ExpoHergé.”

– In the Mexique exhibition (2016-2017), audiences were given a cubic space called Tiny Room, to use for photographic practices.

– Lastly, in the exhibition Rouge. Art et utopie au pays des Soviets (2019), the RMN’s digital division chose to integrate a series of twenty exhibition-themed GIF-stickers into Instagram, allowing audiences to decorate their photographs in line with the exhibition’s theme. These digital stickers were accompanied by a wall at the end of the
exhibition, repeating the graphic and aesthetic codes of a propaganda poster. Thus, one could read both “Proletarians of all countries, unite!” in Cyrillic, and, nearby, an injunction to be creative on Instagram, then choose to share a message in an Instagram story.

Figure 5a

Figure 5b

Participation traces, an important attentional issue

Participatory mobile applications, flat screens displaying social media streams, hashtags, social media creation tools, immersive scenographies: how can we explain
the shift in the last few years from prohibition of visitor photography to a strong,
multifaceted incitement?

41 In a previous article, I demonstrated how the RMN – Grand Palais wished to be
identified as a specialist in cultural engineering, technological innovation, and cultural
participation.44 To do this, the RMN – Grand Palais notably makes its exhibitions
available as incubation grounds for so-called “innovative” digital devices, and
organizes fairs around the convergence of art, culture, and new technologies (Salon
Art#Connexion in 2018). In doing so, the RMN – Grand Palais is seeking to reposition its
institutional image around movement, modernity, and the intersection of arts and
industry. In this context, public photographic participation takes on an importance
greater than the attempt to engage visitors through activity.

42 For Yves Jeanneret, this institutional repositioning is part of an “inversion in the
relationship between media and museums […] [aimed at] shifting mass-market
facilitation tools first sought out by the museum as tactical media into the position of
strategic devices.”45 Similarly, the devices framing public participation are part of this
inversion, not only reinforcing the exhibition’s mediatization, but also changing the
cultural institution’s social role. This latter effect turns the institution into a
playground of experimentation around content “likely to intensify uses, flow, and
traces.”46

43 In her dissertation devoted to the professionalization of cultural institution community
managers, (2017), Noémie Couillard shows how, within the same period, both in France
and internationally, museums have developed photographic contests to accompany
and stimulate public participation, by investing in different digital platforms, such as
Flickr, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This evolution goes hand in hand with a
greater interest in the metrics and traces of participation than in the participation
itself, concerning the same institutions.47 According to Yves Citton, if the photographic
policy within institutions has shifted from prohibition to active encouragement, it is
also because institutions need these photographs to be taken, shared, and circulated. I
argue that this need for “attentional traces”48 contributes to designers’ socio-technical
representations of the visitors, whose reconfigured cultural practices push the
institution to offer picture-sharing tools on social media platforms. These
representations seem particularly applicable at the RMN – Grand Palais, even though
the data collected on this subject by its Research and Marketing Teams suggest the
opposite. Between 2013 and 2016, only 3% of GNGP visitors declared having used their
cell phones to share content (textual or visual) on social media platforms related to the
exhibitions they visited. Ideas that connect the museum visit to software-tools usage
and platform content-sharing thus remain rather rhetorical, aimed at convincing an
audience (the board of trustees, the media, etc.) of the institution’s repositioning
related to activity, modernity, and photographic sharing.

Conclusion

44 I have shown in various ways how the RMN – Grand Palais delivers a “pro-
photography” rhetoric to its public, a rhetoric whose injunctive modalities and
representations I have delineated by contextualizing characteristics of socio-technical
apparatuses (mobile applications, devices encouraging photography) conceived by this
institution, with scenography that endeavors to frame the practices. Visitor
photographic practices are indeed invested with a series of beliefs and hopes by social actors, notably linked to participation and sharing on social media platforms.

At the heart of this investigation, I identified a major concern in the institutional repositioning of the RMN – Grand Palais: the “re-actualization” of participation is here based on a “photographic shift” associating online circulation and sharing across social media platforms. This repositioning accompanies a proposed alternative aesthetic experience around cultural objects. But above all, it transforms the concern to stimulate public activity into a global injunction to participation. This injunction benefits the institution while directly supporting its digital communication strategy.

Furthermore, Serge Proulx describes the current expansion of participation as an illusion and a “semantic ruse,” to the extent that its rhetoric is currently exploited to benefit commercial interests. Indeed, the various analyzed exhibitions and devices, when put in relation with the interviewees’ social discourse, indicate the RMN’s high level of interest in photographic sharing. For Gustavo Gomez-Mejia, the repeated use of “sharing” as a value on the Web and social media platforms “euphemizes and adds hype to the production and distribution of content across networks.” Indeed, under the guise of celebrating the audience’s viewpoints and subjectivity, we should also ask if this injunction to share might encourage a particular form of digital labor within the exhibition. The role of exhibition audiences’ photographic sharing is an unexamined issue which begs the question: does the public participate in the exhibition’s outreach, communication, and even sponsorship, in the form of visual prescriptive micro-labor?

As the RMN – Grand Palais begins restoration work and a large-scale redevelopment through 2025, the injunctions to participate, found both in normative discourse, and in the design and materialization of devices, seem to be a promising critical approach to studying the making of and contemporary reconfiguration of participation. This approach appears to be equally effective for better understanding museum’s and exhibition’s contemporary representations and the imaginaries within the wider dynamics of cultural industrialization, commodification, and rationalization.

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NOTES


37. Near Field Communication (NFC) is a communication protocol allowing for the exchange of information between two devices within a very short distance of each other. Its market distribution is currently ensured by credit cards, electronic payment terminals, and smartphones equipped with NFC chips.


47. Noémie Couillard, Les Community managers des musées français. Identité professionnelle, stratégies numériques et politique des publics, doctoral dissertation, Avignon, Université d’Avignon-Pays de
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ABSTRACTS

Mobile applications, (data)vizualisation participation flat screens, so-called “immersive” scenographic units for visitor’s photographic staging: this article seeks to understand the interests of cultural institutions that underlie the multiplication of devices for encouraging photographic participation in recent years. Based on doctoral research carried out at the Galeries nationales du Grand Palais between 2013 and 2017, I will question the role of the injunction to public participation by showing that it seeks to support the digital communication strategy of an institution that favours the use of digital platforms.

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Keywords: participation, photographic sharing, Réunion des musées nationaux, Grand Palais, photographic practices, digital platforms, scenography

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