

## **Review: The Museographic Language. A Brief Introductory Manual to the Knowledge and Use of 21st Century Language.** **Author: Guillermo Fernández**

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### **Abstract**

The second self-published book by Guillermo Fernández, this work provides a very interesting view on museography understood as a language. The author rightly defends the communicative value of museography, which forces us to be very careful when using it to write the stories we want to tell with our exhibitions. Museographic language is endemic to museums, and it has a potential that, according to the author, has not yet been well explored nor exploited. This book, which can be either purchased on paper or consulted online, is a good attempt to systematize the constituent elements of museographic language and its use both inside and outside museums.

This is a curious book because of its subject matter, the way it is explored, and its extension. Far from being an erudite essay, the author wrote it with the goal of helping any institution—museum or not—that wants to develop exhibitions with a communicative will and not just as a design product. The book’s subtitle states it very clearly: “A Brief Introductory Manual to the Knowledge and Use of 21st Century Language.”

It may seem paradoxical that, being a phenomenon that is more than two hundred years old, the author speaks of museographic language as the language of the 21st century. This is rightly justified by the fact that too often the development of museum exhibitions is left in the hands of architectural or design studios, without any actual research into the ways in which the messages that they want to transmit can be communicated.

Herein lies the key to the whole book: just like the author did in his first book—[“El museo de ciencia transformador”](#) (2019)—this one starts from a consideration that museums are a means of communication, and as such they have their own language, which in turn has great potential yet to be developed. Museums have gone from being an end—with the aim of conserving heritage—to being a means for social transformation through education. To do so, they use—or should—the museographic language of their exhibitions as a product, just as films use the language of cinema. This is a risky but very suggestive bet, as it revolves around how a subject has been treated so far in the various manuals on museography.

Like the author’s previous book, this one is also accessible online for free, which is not uncommon in the publishing world. However, if one prefers to read with paper in hand, it can be [purchased for a price of 12 euros](#) too. It is structured in twelve short chapters with a total of 128 pages, and includes a prologue by Ferran Adrià, with whom

the author collaborated in Adrià's project [Elbulli1846](#). This is proof of the author's spirit for research on innovation, which he highlights and that defends in chapter 8, where he discusses the challenges of the future.

In the introduction, the author explains that he came up with this book from the conclusions he obtained as a result of the comments that readers made to him regarding what his previous book had suggested to them, where he developed the concept of museographic language in a general and somewhat theoretical way. He explains that he wanted to make this one purposely short to make it more attractive, which doesn't mean that it should be less rigorous.

The first five chapters are devoted to developing the idea of museographic language, which is based on two key thoughts: tangibility and conversation. The simultaneity in time and the coexistence in space of objects and phenomena—attention to the latter—with visitors is what generates an intense, social, and shared museographic experience. This is the great value of the museographic language claimed by the author. He insists on the fact that other languages—audiovisual, literary, graphic or else—must always be complementary.

In museums, developing the full potential of museographic language will not detract from the value of the collections, but will enhance them so that they are put at the service of their educational purpose. “The museum goes from being a *place* to being above all the stage for a social *function*” (p. 32). The problem denounced in this work is that, just as a corpus of knowledge relating to conservation, cataloging and exhibition has been developed, no emphasis has been placed on the new educational and social functions of museum, although these have been vindicated for many years and explicitly considered in the definition of museum.

But the foundation on which the book is centered begins in chapter 6, where the resources of museographic language are described, categorized and classified—a careful classification and description based on the two basic assets we mentioned earlier: the object and the phenomenon. This is the great contribution of Guillermo Fernández, which he already explained in several [articles](#): the consideration of the phenomenon—museographic innovation of the wrongly so-called interactive science museums—as a basic asset of museographic language. He wrote about this in his first book too, but now he expands on it. Thus, while the object *is*, the phenomenon *happens*, and this gives museography an incredible potential. Actually, many non-science museums have already adopted them in their exhibitions. So, what is new?—The fact that the author does not consider the phenomenon as an expository complement, but as a whole category of resource.

From there, he develops these two basic assets based on their communicative application. If the object or phenomenon represents itself, if we make a literal use of them, then we can speak of pieces (object) and demonstrations (phenomenon). If what they do is represent other objects or phenomena, that is, if we use them metaphorically, then we can talk about models (object) and analogies (phenomenon). Therefore, we obtain what the author calls the four communicative resources of the museographic language: the piece and the model for the objects, and the demonstration and the analogy for the phenomenon. The table on page 53 is a good summary of this.

This chapter goes on to break down the classification of the two basic assets (object and phenomenon) according to other criteria such as their availability (single or multiple), structural complexity (single-layer or multi-layer), or physical location (contextualized or not). And it rounds up the classification of the four resources (piece, model, demonstration, and analogy) according to other criteria such as their natural or human origin for the pieces and metaphors, or who they represent for the models and analogies. It is worth mentioning that the author of this review found it difficult to agree on certain concepts used, such as single/multiple, especially in the case of pieces. But as the author himself explains later, it is very rare to find pieces that strictly respond to a single category: “This is a classification which, like the reality in which it is inspired, cannot be subject to a strict cataloging, and therefore will always admit overlaps and mixed spaces” (p. 80). All this classification can be found summarized in the table on page 83, which may be thick, but it is very well resolved.

Throughout the text, some ideas are developed that arise from this consideration of museums as a means of communication and their intrinsic language, which is the museographic language. One is the definition of objects and phenomena as “semiophores,” a term coined by the philosopher and historian Krzysztof Pomian, which refers to objects that carry meaning but are not exceptional. Thus, as a semiophore, a book is a physical object and at the

same time a literary work.

Another idea aligned with the current accelerated trend following the pandemic—we'll see how long it lasts—considers that museums need to become more social, to work *with* and *for* the community. The author states that traditional museums developed in a retrospective communicative context, while contemporary museums—which does not mean new, but current—have a prospective communicative purpose. That is the idea of a *transformative museum* that wants to get socially involved in the transformation and knows how to do so.

Finally, I would like to point out that the author identifies the assets of museographic language (objects and phenomena) with the *signs* of a language, making one of his analogies that he enjoys so much. He uses linguistic terminology to state that, if the potential of museographic language is taken seriously, it opens the door to studying its grammar, and especially its syntax and morphology.

In chapters 7 and 8, the author offers a proposal on how to use museographic language and on which are the challenges for the future in his opinion. In this last chapter, he insists on some ideas that he already announced in [his previous book](#) (2019). I would like to highlight the need to avoid over-mediation in the field of exhibitions, making the most of all the potential of museographic language. The aim is to avoid turning exhibitions into an amalgam of resources from other languages, which should only be used as auxiliaries. On the other hand, he rightly states that if an exhibition requires the educators' *crutch* to explain itself, it must be because it is not museographically well resolved. The role of educators is crucial in enhancing the interactive relationship of visitors with each other and with the elements of the exhibition, but never as an auxiliary resource for clarifying a dark narrative. However, in order to avoid this, educators must play an increasingly important role in the development of exhibitions both during their creation and during their preparation and evaluation as experts in the use of the resources of museographic language. I cannot agree more.

Chapter 9 is dedicated to providing a glossary of terms used throughout the book or that take part in the development of exhibitions and help us define some of the aspects of museography. I want to highlight the term *beneficiary*, which the author contrasts with the term *visitor*. He does so because he believes that a museum provides significant personal growth, whether planned or not, whether one is a visitor or not. Museums, for those people that they address repeatedly, are organizations of social, educational and transformative action. Nonetheless, I miss the definition of the term *narrative*, or *story* or discourse, as you like. While the book discusses the narrative implicit in the script of an exhibition, to me it is the factor that will guarantee the success or the failure in its embodiment. If we are clear about the story we want to tell, which goes far beyond defining key concepts and allows us to *seduce* the beneficiary—I will take the liberty to use this term—we will have solved many of the problems involved in its development. From an early age, we have been overwhelmed by oral, visual, or written stories. If there is not a well-knit story, there is no exhibition—only a bunch of objects and phenomena that overwhelm rather than explain.

So that the book does not remain as a mere theoretical approach—which it is not!—, the result of a personal reflection, in chapter 10 it also provides us with tools for the basic procedure of developing and managing an exhibition. It does so on the premise that an exhibition is nothing more than the “result of articulating a concrete communicative purpose through the resources of museographic language” (p. 109). To do so, on page 110 the author proposes an outline of the phases involved in the development and management of an exhibition, emphasizing another one of the ideas that the author expressed on multiple occasions—the need to know how to clearly distinguish *strategic management* and *executive management*, which are often mixed up. He states that he has collaborated in many exhibitions and knows what he is talking about. The sheet on page 113 to develop the different areas of an exhibition based on its script is a clear example of this.

Given the diversity of formulas that museums apply for the development and management of exhibitions, the author claims the figure of *exhibition management*, a professional profile not yet recognized which is very different from that of a coordinator or a commissioner, as the former should lead the executive management of an exhibition project. This person lists the functions that an exhibition director should have, a role currently assumed by curators, designers or coordinators, who should perform other functions. Along the same lines, the author also proposes a structure for the credits of an exhibition in chapter 11.

This is an easy-to-read book that is short, concise, and clear. It lacks citations, which does not mean a lack of bibliographic rigor, which can be checked in the chapter of resources—why isn't this entitled as “bibliographic references”?—with a long list of monographs and articles.

A book that, above and beyond the consensus that may generate with its classification and description of the resources, leads to the consideration of what an exhibition is and, above all, to how museums and other institutions that carry out exhibitions must reflect deeply on what they are, and the resources involved in their activity if they are to achieve their goals—which, by the way, are not always well defined.



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