The Accessibility of Cultural Heritage. A New Perspective Between Relational Gaze and the Philosophy of Gesture

Fabio FERRUCCI[a,1]
[a] *University of Molise*

Abstract. The Italian museum system made significant progress in terms of accessibility. Despite the considerable increase in the number of people with functional limitations who visit museums, the percentage of those who do not visit museums is still very high, whatever the presence of limitations. Based on this empirical evidence, a new approach to the problem of accessibility becomes necessary. The paper argues in favor of a performative conception of accessibility. More specifically, it will be shown how the approach of relational sociology and the philosophy of gesture allow for elaborating a broader notion of accessibility than the prescriptive one that currently inspires most interventions. By redefining accessibility in terms of a social relationship that combines the adaptive dimension with the transmission of meanings, new possibilities emerge to make a museum visit an attractive and engaging experience. This guiding idea started to be implemented through the experimental project Smart Cultural Heritage 4 All realized at the Museo Sannitico of Campobasso (Italy).

Keywords. cultural heritage, accessibility, social relations, philosophy of gesture, Smart Cultural Heritage 4All

1. Introduction

In this paper we will analyze the data currently available on the diffusion of services aimed at facilitating the fruition of museums by people with disabilities and the frequency with which they have visited them in recent years. This overview shows that the Italian museum system has made significant progress in implementing measures to increase accessibility through lower fees, a range of services aimed at people with functional limitations, and technological innovations. However, at the present moment, there is not sufficient evidence to assume the considerable increase in the number of people with functional limitations who have visited museums in recent years as an outcome of accessibility policies. The pool of people who do not visit museums is still vast, regardless of the presence or absence of limitations. This empirical evidence suggests the need to reformulate the problem of accessibility differently than in the past.

After having redefined the issue of accessibility by resorting to sociological categories, we will try to show how the approach of relational sociology and the philosophy of gesture make it possible to elaborate a broader conception of accessibility than that which currently inspires most interventions. Our opinion is that redefining accessibility as a social relationship that combines the adaptive dimension with the transmission of meanings opens up new possibilities to make the museum visit an

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[1] Fabio Ferrucci, Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, University of Molise, F. De Sanctis, Campobasso, Italy, ferrucci@unimol.it

attractive and engaging experience. This guiding idea started to be implemented through the experimental project Smart Cultural Heritage 4 All realized at the Museo Sannitico of Campobasso, which we will illustrate in its essential elements.

2. The state of the art of museum accessibility in Italy

In Italy, an intense debate has arisen on the social function of museums, the enlargement of the audience of visitors, and the ways to make cultural heritage accessible [1] [2]. Within ICOM Italy, a special thematic commission on museum accessibility has been created to provide knowledge and useful operational tools to draw the attention of professionals to this issue. At the same time, the Ministry for Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism (MiBACT) has adopted several measures concerning the management, protection, conservation, and valorization of heritage and the improvement of services for visitors that, in a more or less explicit way, refer to the issue of accessibility.

The National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) recently returned to conducting census surveys on museums and similar institutions [3]. However, it is worth noticing that the diversity of the items focused on in the surveys and their irregular periodicity allow only to provide a partial and unsystematic overview for the time being.

In 2019, Italy had 4,880 cultural institutions open (or partially open) to the public, including 3,928 museums, galleries, or collections (80.5%), 327 archaeological areas and parks (6.7%), and 625 monuments and monumental complexes (12.8%). Approximately two-thirds of all cultural institutions are public, while about one-third are private.

According to the 2019 data, 53% of Italian museums or similar institutions declared possessing equipment to ensure spaces accessibility and collection enjoyment by visitors with disabilities [Figure 1]. But in the same year, only 12.6% of surveyed museums were equipped with specific devices and solutions for people with sensory disabilities (visually impaired and blind).
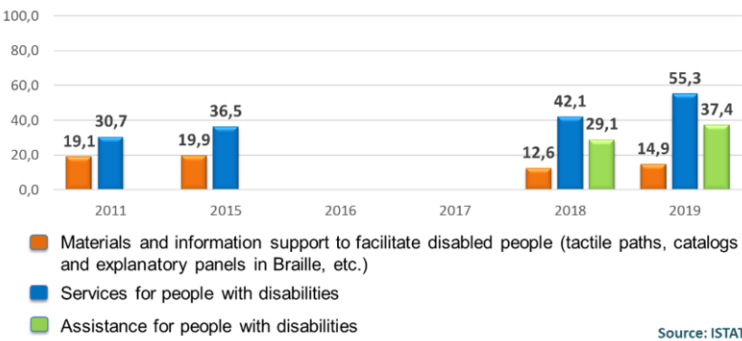

Figure 1. Supports and services for the accessibility of cultural institutions (Percentage of total institutions)

Nevertheless, between 2011 and 2019, services aimed at visitors with disabilities significantly grew: while in 2011, 30.7% of museums offered these services, in 2019, the percentage jumped to 55.3%. The most recent surveys verified the presence of assistance services for people with disabilities. The percentage of museums that offer them has also

increased from 29.1% in 2018 to 37.4% in 2019. At the same time, the share of museums equipped with materials and information supports that could facilitate their enjoyment by people with disabilities after reaching 19.9% in recent years drops to about 15%. This decrease could result from the ever more frequent use of new technologies in museums which, in the case of sensory limitations, offer alternative solutions to traditional information materials.

Not only has accessibility entered the agenda of cultural institutions, but "accessibility is one of the primary conditions that a museum must strive to ensure, as an organism destined to contribute to the growth of the (entire) community" [4]. The presence of devices and services that should promote accessibility does not allow us to conclude about their effectiveness in promoting the enjoyment of museums by people with disabilities.

Let us now consider the demand side. As mentioned above, at least in Italy, museum visitors and, more generally, their audiences are still poorly analyzed. The museums and similar facilities survey only considers the number of visitors, without further distinctions. A valuable information source to learn about how many people with disabilities visit museums, archaeological sites or monuments is the Multiscope survey on families devoted to everyday life aspects. Using this survey, we can notice how the percentage of people aged 14 and older without limitations, with mild or severe limitations, who visited museums and exhibitions at least once in the last 12 months varies between 2013 and 2020 [Figure 2].
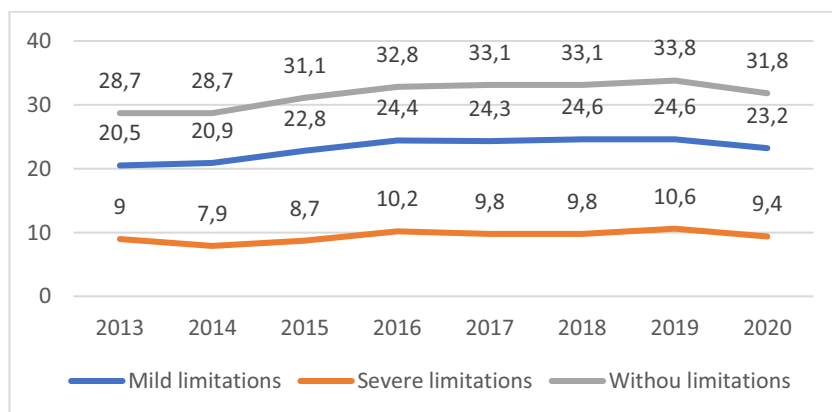

Figure 2. Percentage of people aged 14 and over with mild, severe, and without limitations who visited museums and exhibitions in the past 12 months
(Percentage out of 100 people aged 14 and over in the same condition)

The substantial decline in visitor rates in 2020 is the effect of the closures and restrictions imposed on museums because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Until then, visitor rates gradually increased for all three categories. Between 2013 and 2019, the increase was most pronounced for people without limitations (+5.1 percentage points) and people with mild limitations (+4.3 percentage points), while almost negligible for people with severe limitations (+0.1 percentage points). The share of visitors with mild limitations increased but did not bridge the gap between them and visitors without limitations. This divide has widened, especially for people with severe limitations, from 19.7 percentage points in 2013 to 23.2 in 2019.

In brief, museums have recently shown increased attractiveness, gaining new visitors from the vast pool of non-audience and potential audience, and only to a limited extent from the occasional or regular audience. This attractiveness has also proven effective among people with mild functional limitations. However, we do not have studies documenting whether and in what proportion this attractiveness is attributable to accessibility policies. It is a fact that, over the last few years, more and more Italians have chosen to visit museums and exhibitions, among the various options for spending their free time (a similar trend applies to archaeological sites and monuments). Nonetheless, the percentage of people who never visited a museum remains high, both among people without limitations (about 2 Italians out of 3) and among people with mild limitations (about 75%) and severe limitations (90%).

A 2011 ISTAT survey on social inclusion of people with functional limitations showed that a large portion of this population was not interested in visiting museums (76.6%). Most of them were aged people (85.2% aged 65 and over). Instead, 5.3% of respondents said they visited museums, exhibitions, and archaeological sites less often than they wished. An additional 10.3%, although not attending museums, would have liked to do it. These data prove the existence of a demand for the enjoyment of cultural heritage that was left unmet.

Given such a widespread lack of interest, even if museums and related facilities were made logistically accessible, the enjoyment of cultural heritage would not make significant progress. Legislative measures and their implementation would only create "potential accessibility" conditions. But to make them effective, we believe it is necessary to rethink the problem of accessibility from a different perspective.

3. Accessibility as an entry point to experience

Accessibility legislation initiated a change in the relationship between museums and their visitors, including those with functional limitations. Even though we agree with those who consider it necessary to shift the focus from the objects exhibited in a museum to the relationship that visitors establish with them, we believe that it could prove inadequate if we still understand accessibility in purely prescriptive terms. It is not possible to separate how cultural heritage is made accessible from the purpose for which it is made accessible. Considering the ultimate goal is to guarantee the right to participate in cultural life, the relationship established with a museum's exhibition itineraries has a specific situated purpose: the transmission of meanings. The principle of accessibility should ensure compliance with standards that create the conditions for people with disabilities to establish a relationship with the exhibited items in a museum and ensure that this relationship is meaningful for them, in other words, that it intentionally carries meanings.

As part of the experimental project Smart Cultural Heritage 4All, realized at the Museo Sannitico in Campobasso, we tried to develop a performative conception of accessibility to "give sense to culture." The word "sense" means both the enhancement of all perceptual channels through which the person enters into a relationship with reality (sight, hearing, touch, etc.) and the meanings associated with tangible and intangible evidence of human creativity exposed in a museum. In other words, the accessibility of a work of art, or an item exhibited in a museum, will remain an incomplete gesture if, in addition to the sensitive enjoyment of the artifact, it does not convey meanings to the

recipient. Likewise, any accessible communication of meanings is an incomplete gesture if it disregards the sensitive experience of the artifact that "carries" those meanings.

For some time now, visitor studies have abandoned the idea of the museum as a mere exhibition space to consider it an experiential context. Experience stems "from the dialogical relationship between the thinking and feeling of the visitor and the knowledge orchestrated by the museum." [6]

To illustrate how the Smart Cultural Heritage 4 All project reshaped the problem of accessibility in terms of a meaningful experience, we will draw on the "cultural diamond," a conceptual tool developed by American sociologist Wendy Griswold to analyze cultural phenomena from a sociological perspective [7]. The cultural diamond consists of four elements (the cultural object, the creators, the receivers, and the social world) and six relationships that connect these elements [Figures 3]. By cultural object, Griswold means "a shared meaning embedded in a form." [7]. Griswold further specifies the concept, stating that a cultural object:

- it is a meaningful expression that is audible, or visible, or tangible, or that can be articulated;
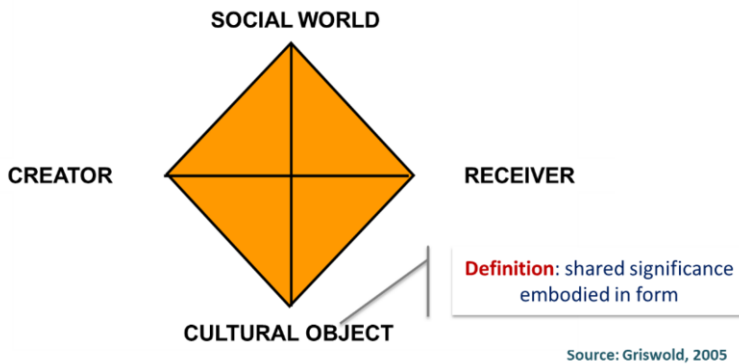- it tells a story, which can be sung, recited, sculpted, published, or painted on the body.

Figure 3. The cultural diamond

Museums house cultural objects, i.e., visible human expressions (e.g., an art gallery or an archaeological site). Although they are tangible, visitors cannot perceive them by touch for reasons of preservation and conservation, except under certain conditions. Creators (individuals or groups of people) are those who make cultural objects. To become cultural objects, they must have receivers: "people who receive them, hear them, read them, understand them, think about them, publish them, participate in them, remember them." [7] Both creators and receivers anchor to a particular context, a social world characterized by economic, political, social, and cultural needs that change over time. The social world of those who create the cultural object is not necessarily the same as the receivers. The social world that hosts the cultural objects them is no longer the same as when they were created. Therefore, the same cultural object can take on different meanings — be it a work of art or an artifact. The original meaning attributed by its creator adds to those attributed by museum operators and visitors. Exhibitions themselves are "cultural objects" in that they are forms that incorporate meanings.

The accessibility of cultural heritage implies other dimensions besides the logistic one, including the cognitive dimension. Without effectively sharing the meanings embedded in the objects exposed, museum fruition loses its appeal. [4] [5]. Accessibility is not limited to the single component that we have defined as "adaptive," which can take different forms depending on the type of functional limitation.

The guiding idea of the Smart Cultural Heritage 4All project is that considering accessibility as a social relationship is a more appropriate approach to it, one that preserves its multidimensional character. More specifically, it is a relation situated at the level of the practical order of reality, the one in which we relate to objects or situations. The referents of these relations are objects that encompass the "representation of actions previously performed by human beings, and thus incorporate a relational message." [8]. To observe object relations, we need "a kind of relational 'dialogue' with the objects and not just a physical relationship." [8]. The non-accessibility of cultural goods depends on the absence of this "dialogue."

The sharing of meanings often fails because the exhibition itineraries incorporate self-referential meanings, understandable only to experts. Only the restricted social world of museum operators and curators of exhibitions share these meanings without stimulating visitors' interest because they represent the actions of "experts." The sense of "cultural inadequacy" is one of the reasons that large groups of individuals who make up the so-called "non-public" often use to explain why they do not visit the museum." [4]

We can more accurately reformulate the problem of museum accessibility as a problem of receiving meanings inherent to the relationship between cultural objects and their receivers. We cannot adequately understand this relationship from the point of view of the museum operators who work to make the exhibition spaces accessible or from the visitors' point of view. We need a "third" perspective that can also observe the relation of reception as such. Museum operators need to be capable of relational reflexivity: "the reflexivity that an agent exercises not on herself about the context, or on what the Other thinks or does, but on the relationship with the Other." [8].

Cultural object accessibility thus implies a problem of communication of meanings. The traditional paradigm is that the communication of a cultural object is designed for the normally able people and then extended, through functional systems, to people with disabilities or other visitors with special needs. However, the situation is slightly different. Concerning cultural heritage, most people are, in many cases, "disabled," left to their own devices along exhibition paths that they cannot decipher or interpret. This lack of accessibility largely explains the lack of interest in museums widespread among people with disabilities and people with normal abilities. The stories told by the objects that visitors come across along the exhibition are hardly accessible to a broader public.

The reason is that museums are the result of an analytical conception of knowledge. An expert (archaeologist, historian, geographer, musicologist, anthropologist, etc.) finds the cultural good; another expert takes care of its preservation; a third arranges its exhibition; and finally, we have communication, which often amounts to mere marketing for the public.

The development of museum culture and new technologies entails a different conception of epistemology before communication. There is a profound continuity between objects, retrievals, conservation, curatorship, exhibition, and communication. No part of this process is analytically separate from the others. Therefore, all of these dimensions must be thought of together in a synthetic way.

From the Latin verb "gero" (to bear, to carry on) comes the term "gesture," by which the philosophy of gesture defines this kind of communication [9]. The philosophy of gesture fits in here, claiming that for communication to be synthetic, it needs to be a relationship with a beginning and an end and carry meaning. What are the main characteristics of a gesture? First, from a phenomenological point of view, it must have an emotional and ideal dimension concerning meaning. Secondly, it must involve a physical experience. Finally, it must be replicable, to be a habit of action.

From the semiotic point of view, it must have iconic elements, i.e., elements related to the evocative resemblance of the signs with the object to be communicated; indicative elements, which fix references; symbolic elements, which involve an interpretation of meanings.

The accessibility of cultural heritage is fully realized when the visitor establishes a "physical" relationship with it that removes the obstacles that prevent the perception of the form and, at the same time, allows a "dialogue": that is, the sharing of meanings through forms of communication that have the characteristics of a gesture. Communication is not intended as a mere transmission of information but as a "ritual that brings people together in friendship and commonality." [10], even when meanings are divergent.

The prototype of the Blind Experience application created for the Museo Sannitico in Campobasso is a concrete realization of communication as a gesture. Safeguarding the phenomenological aspects means allowing the visit for blind people --and therefore also for non-disabled people who often see the museum without really seeing it-- to be an experience that involves physical elements: downloading the App, starting it up, walking while the earphones broadcast the story, following a path that progressively activated through beacons, touching an object reproduced three-dimensionally through 3D scanning and printing.

These are repeatable sensations, physical experiences, and habits of action. From the point of view of meaning, the story carries out meaning while blind people listen and walk. We have a dimension of narrative storytelling (symbolic) that engages the visitor in the story of a protagonist (indical element), making him/her feel his emotions through actor performance of the story and music (iconic elements). It is essential to underline that the symbolic aspect of storytelling must have a clear teleology: the story should illustrate a meaning (in this case, the meaning is that the Samnites were the historical-cultural alternative, and loser, to Rome). The story must have aesthetic features that make it plausible and, therefore, verified by consulting experts.

The communicative tool synthesizes the object and the knowledge into a gesture. And the visitor is asked to consent to it. In other words, by entering into a relationship with the objects exhibited, the visitor also participates in the meanings the experts know and want to communicate. Synthetic communication is meanings communication through a gesture, namely the sharing of the experience of the meaning that the museum expects to communicate and in which the visitor participates and cooperates by visiting. The more appropriate the gesture, the more the synthetic understanding is facilitated, and the museum enjoyment becomes a meaningful experience. Indeed, the Blind Experience application allows the visitors not only to expand their knowledge through the acquisition of new information – an effect for which an audio guide would have been sufficient. Most importantly, the visitors deepen their understanding because they can access one of the possible meanings the museum wishes to communicate. Most striking is that after experiencing the blind path, non-disabled visitors claim to have "seen the museum as they had never seen it" or "understood the museum."

5. Conclusions

According to the results we obtained so far, we believe that combining the philosophy of gesture and relational sociology opens a new perspective on cultural heritage accessibility. Digital technology, as such, does not make cultural heritage more accessible by mediating the relationship of visitors —whether they have functional limitations or not. Cultural heritage becomes accessible only if the technology is conceived and developed as a "complete gesture," i.e., one capable of transmitting possible meanings. In terms of relational sociology, this implies activating a different strategy to increase cultural institutions' accessibility. From the beginning, resorting to digital technologies should be made on new assumptions concerning the communication of meanings as the purpose of the cultural object's relationship with visitors. This goal is pursued by means chosen to meet performative and not merely prescriptive norms: namely, norms designed to increase both extensional and intensional dimensions of knowledge. In a nutshell, the guiding idea of the project we have outlined conceives accessibility as a social relationship: a social relationship that, by combining the adaptive dimension and that of reference to meanings, can make museum enjoyment a meaningful experience, that is to say – to use the words of the philosophy of gesture – a "complete gesture."

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