

## **Ethnography of exhibitions / Ethnography in exhibitions. Methodology, problems and stakes of research in museums**

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Although researchers in social sciences are increasingly interested in museographic institutions for their research, they only rarely reveal their working conditions or explicitly present the difficulties involved with research in a museum. Over a period of several weeks we conducted a study at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, on the exhibition “*C’étaient des enfants*”, at the Cotemporary History Museum, on the exhibition “*Affiche-Action*”, and at the National Library of France (BNF) on the exhibition “*Été 14*”. We studied the visitors and the exhibitions using a primarily qualitative methodology (individual and collective interviews, informal discussions, observation of visitors). Alongside this data, questionnaires were also collected in order to have information at a broader level about the public visiting the exhibitions and their impressions of their visit. These ethnographic situations provoked questions that will be dealt with here and which will be the opportunity for further reflexion regarding the conditions, constraints and stakes of conducting research in museums.

### ***Accessing and researching in museums***

Gaining access to an institutional field site is not always straight forward and the researcher must often negotiate entry by presenting their research project and its approach in a way that is accessible and useful for non-specialists. It is often necessary to reformulate, or even “translate” the key questions, but sometimes they must also incorporate questions that come from the institution itself. This is a return favour that facilitates the research relationship but also a requirement of the ethnographic approach that means we ask not only *our own* questions but also those posed by the actors working in the field. Often there is a disparity between the concerns of the researchers and those of the institution, more concerned with concrete objectives (increasing visitor numbers, evaluating satisfaction, improving services provided etc.). The surveys of the public conducted by the museums themselves therefore constitute useful documents for identifying the expectations of the institutions and to a certain extent readjusting the initial problem questions.

There are practical implications involved as well. Although an exhibition space is conducive to ethnographic observation, it may not be conducive to interviewing. How can interviews be conducted without disturbing the relative calm of the space? The organisation of the rooms does not always make it possible to dedicate a specific space for the study, so the researchers must demonstrate adaptability and creativity. A corridor or a stairwell might be an appropriate place for a discussion and questionnaires can be left on the corner of a table, next to the visitor’s book!

***“Is this the way in?” The researcher and the visitors***

The presence of a researcher in the exhibition may lead to misunderstandings among visitors. At the BNF many of them mistook us for museum staff. Like the exhibition and security staff we wore badges and were posted for several hours at the exit of the exhibition where we appeared to “supervise” the movements of the public. Frequently visitors approached us for information: “is this the way in?” or “can I come out and go back in?” Others, particularly when we explained that we were there to conduct a “study on the exhibition and its visitors” addressed us as though we were responsible for the content of the exhibition: “It’s very good, what you’ve done here!” or “Perhaps you should have addressed...” Some visitors, who had understood that we did not work for the BNF (our badges had the CNRS research logo reflecting our outsider status), saw us in an intermediary role, as a kind of correspondent: one woman sent us her father’s war correspondence in the hope that we might help her “do something with it”.