

MARTOR



Title: *Inge Daniels, What Are Exhibitions For? An Anthropological Approach, London and Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 256 p.*

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How to cite this article:

Nicolescu, Gabriela. 2019. "Inge Daniels, *What Are Exhibitions For? An Anthropological Approach*, London and Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 256 p." *Martor* 24: 216-220.

Published by: Editura MARTOR (MARTOR Publishing House), Muzeul Național al Țăranului Român (National Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-24-2019/>

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Martor is indexed by:

CEEOL, EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Anthropological Index Online (AIO), MLA International Bibliography.

This issue of *Martor* has been published with the financial support of the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN Romania).

Inge Daniels, *What Are Exhibitions For? An Anthropological Approach*, London and Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 256 p.

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What are exhibitions for? is the recent book of anthropologist and curator Inge Daniels. The book is about the making of the At Home in Japan exhibition at the Geffrye Museum of the Home in London in 2012, curated by Inge Daniels. This book challenges some deep rooted assumptions in Western museography by drawing on the making of this exhibition and by integrating visitors' experience into the research itself.

The book talks about the importance of everyday objects in museum displays, multisensory exhibitions, theatricality, using photography not as object, but as context and as a facilitator of creating atmosphere, and last but not least, about objects which end up not in museum's stores, but in visitors' homes.

More recently, increasing numbers of anthropologists have conducted anthropological research in museums and heritage institutions (Macdonald 2002; Sansi-Roca 2007; Butler 2007; Harris 2012; Joy 2012) and collaborated in the actual making of exhibitions.¹ Their position as anthropologists involved in making displays allows them to not only show the "behind the scenes" view of public engagement, but also provide insight into the actual outcomes of the impact and dissemination of anthropological knowledge taking place in various types of museums. The dual role of participant academic means that the relationship between theory and practice, and the ways they inform and reinforce each other, has become an important concern, discussed in

recent publications (Nicolescu 2016). From this perspective, the book of Inge Daniels is fresh and innovatory. The author tells the story of how the idea of the exhibition took shape, how she started to receive donations of every day Japanese items for the exhibition, integrates analysis and research conducted with the visitors in the museum space and in their homes, following the closing down of the exhibition and the dissemination of most of the items on display.

Adding to and sometimes challenging some recent publications on the future of ethnographic museums (Thomas 2016), Inge Daniels offers us a fascinating account of the usefulness of exhibitions by questioning the general trends subtly. The author allows us to see that in the present as well as in the past there have been other ways of constructing exhibitions, making use of literature about past and contemporary innovative displays from a variety of unconventional angles of perception and conceptualisation. This review discusses five fields in which Inge Daniels' book explains how the exhibition she curated at the Geffrye Museum innovated in the field of ethnographic museum displays.

According to this review, Inge Daniels' exhibition and book on the exhibition she curated elaborates on five such myth breakers: 1) What is a valuable object on display; 2) How photography is to be used in an exhibition space; 3) Label writing; 4) Performance and enjoyment; 5) Conducting research with the visitors.

1) Emma Tarlo was the main curator of *Hair. Human Stories* (2018) at the Library Space in London. Mark Johnson and Deirdre McKay experimented with exhibition making for *Beyond Myself* exhibition in London, Hong Kong and Manila – as part of the project *Curating Development* (2017-2018). Rebecca Empson participated in the *Assembling Bodies: Art, Science and Imagination* (2009-2010) at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and Daniel Miller was involved in *The Power of Making* (2011), which was very well received at the V&A Museum.

1. *What is a valuable object on display?*

How many of you are familiar with the way a Japanese house looks like? How do contemporary Japanese people sleep, eat, cook, organise the space of their home? As part of *At Home in Japan* exhibition at the Geffrye Museum in London, visitors could learn about Japanese homes by practically entering into a reconstruction of one. They were allowed to enter the exhibition space, as you would a house, through a hallway where they could leave their own shoes and put on some of the slippers there, they could stroll and look into some other rooms, sleep on the tatami mats, use cutlery, sit on the sofa, wear kimonos. This use of the everyday items on display made one wonder, what is more valuable in a museum display: the object with an aura—that very often in most museum displays is not possible to be touched—or the object bought from a shop, like slippers, cockroach poison, cutlery, kimonos, tatami mats?

As Inge Daniels explains in her book, much of this free and new approach to using objects came from the fact that after the exhibition was closed down, the Geffrye Museum of the House in London was not interested in keeping the objects. Consequently, the organisers of the exhibition organised a raffle at the end and gave away most of the items on display. This allowed for new forms of experimentation with objects: letting visitors perform in the museum space, wear the objects, reflect on the use value of the objects, compare the objects in the museum with the objects they bought on their trips to Japan, and even take the exhibited objects at home, at the end of the display. As the curator put it herself, “(t)his display really fought with what some people call ‘the deadening effect’ of museums (Bouttiaux 2012: 35)—when the objects on display are static and primarily associated with the past” (Daniels 2019: 138). “This exhibition merged the shopping and the museum experience, by allowing visitors to handle mass-produced mundane objects (with the

manufacturer name and the price tags attached) that were displayed in interiors which simulated both the home and the store” (Daniels 2019: 156). By exhibiting objects with prices on them “(w)e cultivated rather than severed the connection between commodities and artefacts / art (...) by stressing the importance of consumption practices in the creation of value in people’s everyday lives” (Daniels 2019: 157).

2. *Experimenting with photography*

Elisabeth Edwards, a historian and anthropologist working in the field of visual anthropology, argues that very often in classic ethnographic displays photography is a complementary device to the object, and that photography very often is used in conventional boring ways: “Within ethnography museums (...) positivist and realist ideas of photography [are] applied uncritically to illustrate and explain” (Edwards 1997: 87).

According to Edwards, in very few cases, curators working in museums manage to get rid of this practice and exhibit images to create an atmosphere. One such case is that of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, where Horia Bernea² used framed photographs of nuns planting flowers.

An equally fresh way of using photographs was in Inge Daniels’ exhibition, where images from Japanese domestic spaces were exhibited as life-size photos. As Inge Daniels said, she did not want to “treat photographs as subordinate to objects” or to exhibit them as “objects” (2019: 64–67). In order to liberate images, Daniels chose to mount images on MDF boards (A2b) suspended on the wall and to use huge light-boxes for their display. I find this innovation extremely valuable for the field of museum exhibitions.

The visitor could feel the spatial dynamics, and the play between rooms made for getting in and other spaces created as visual illusions. The experimentation with the spatial perspective (both in the museum space and in photography) and the illumination worked perfectly well.

2) Horia Bernea (1938–2000) was a Romanian painter. Between 1990, and 2000, he was director of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, in Bucharest.



Figure 1: View onto a domestic garden in Nara, Japan. © Susan Andrews.

Working in collaboration with photographer Susan Andrew, Inge Daniels managed to gather in the exhibition space a series of very good takes of interiors of houses, like the bathroom space or the terrace in the image below (Figure 1). As Susan Andrews explains in the book, this *View onto a domestic garden in Nara, Japan* was taken after more than half an hour of sitting still with the camera and waiting for the composition to be proper: the girl looks towards the garden while the cat looks towards the viewer / camera. In front of this image, one could seat on the sofa and dream for hours. And in fact, this is exactly what happens in the exhibition space. (Figure 1)

The place where most of the visitors spend most of their time in the exhibition space is the sofa from where the visitor can see the image presented above. The explanation to this is given not only by the fact that the image is a wonderful composition, but because visitors like to find spaces where they can sit and think, dream, imagine. The living room contains also the living room table and the kitchen space with drawers,

where visitors can open the drawers and search for domestic items. As Daniels explains, “knowledge is formed also bodily” (Daniels 2019: 67)—museums transmit much more than what the label says.

3. Label writing

Deriving from the previous use of photography and of the space and objects on display, and the fact that for Daniels museums transmit much more than what the label says, the curator prompted to two important consequences: first consequence is that “labels were written in a less authoritative language – they were made for visitors to also contribute with their own understanding” (Daniels 2019: 140). The second consequence was shortness. As Daniels was not afraid to admit, “labels need to be short—allow for ambiguity” (2019: 42).

A perfect example of the use of short labels and the creation of ambiguity happened exactly at the entrance in the exhibition space, in the hallway. The label informed visitors that in many Japanese houses people

wore slippers. Indeed, at the entrance there were several pairs of slippers to use, also some disposable plastic shoe covers. But the use of slippers was not mandatory. Many visitors hesitated—to wear or not to wear slippers, and this ambiguity was productive for some. Some visitors feared their shoes are going to disappear, others knew they were not in an “authentic” Japanese house but in a recreation of one. At the opening of the exhibition, Jeremy Corbin entered the exhibition and, in the hallway, took off his shoes and wore slippers. As the curator explains, Jeremy Corbin lived for more than a year in Japan and he was familiar with the Japanese culture.

As the curator affirmed, by keeping texts to a minimum, “they reduced curatorial authority (...) people could do their own ‘creative’ connections” (Daniels 2019: 202).

4. *Performance and enjoyment*

The curator Inge Daniels introduces ideas of performance and enjoyment as part of the future of exhibitions, to demolish another myth that exhibitions cannot successfully combine scientific findings with spectacle and amusement. In order to show a functioning of these two faces of education, she talks about the usefulness of dressing up (in kimonos) exercises. She argues that dressing up and posing is not always controversial and should not always be seen from a post-colonial perspective. Some of the contemporary visitors are people who travel themselves and have authority over what happens to them in the space of the exhibition. Overprotecting visitors is in fact the effect of the post-colonial trauma and of the refusal to see that contemporary visitors are citizens of the world. In the same line of argumentation, Daniels argues that letting visitors take pictures in the exhibition space helps them to create a feeling of closeness.

Daniels explains these performative trends in museum experiments as part of larger artistic experiments where visitors are

invited to immerse themselves in the space of the exhibition. She gave the example of a famous artistic experiment such as Tate Sensorium at Tate Modern in London in 2015, where visitors were invited / allowed to sit on the pavement of the exhibition space and gaze at a huge plastic sun lit from inside. I particularly appreciated the accent she put on the everydayness of the museum visit and the many reasons that draw people in the museum space. For Daniels, art is not reified. I think more analysis on the use of artistic experiments still needs to be added. If in many displays, “(o)bjects are the stars of the show” (Daniels 2019: 134), Daniels points to the fact that we should try to operate with a new conceptualisation of authenticity, based not on the aura of the object but on creating an atmosphere, and on “mimesis,” as a faithful reconstruction of reality. In the contexts of ethnographic displays, Daniels’ suggestion to create exhibitions that transpose visitors in different spaces might prove resourceful. In the context of historical displays, this technique was criticised for the different types of manipulations of meanings and feelings that it can lead to (Rév 2005).

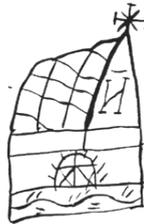
5. *Conducting research with the visitors*

Inside the book, the author inserts, in blue, fragments from the interviews with the visitors. The interviews cover aspects from the experience of the visitors inside the space of the exhibition, the time they have spent in different parts of the exhibitions, people’s personal interests, but also, outside of it, following the life of some of the objects visitors collected at the raffle at the end of the display. Inge Daniels uses the research conducted with visitors to prompt to other pieces of description or theoretical elaborations. One understands how certain preferences inside the exhibition space but also outside of it have to do with people’s personal lives, experiences, and education. However, the research conducted with visitors shows that despite the many differences between most of the vi-



sitors, many of them have been attracted by specific rooms and corners in the exhibition space. I found also interesting the fact that for many visitors objects that came from the exhibition space were used for personal needs. For example, the book shows how one visitor is asked if she would return some towels she used for personal hygiene, so that they can be used in a future exhibition. With no hesitation the visitor said yes. This shows that the limit between the display in the museum and the everyday life is loose, but also shows the potential of museum exhibitions to be used for projects which deal with more personal topics.

The book is very well documented, greatly illustrated with photography by Susan Andrews, Inge Daniels, and by visitors themselves. I believe all the findings presented here—in the form of five myth breakers—make so that Inge Daniels' book contributes to developing new ways in which contemporary social researchers and curators deal with contemporary displays about culture, civilisation, the world. This book indicates a need of the ethnographic museum to rethink the topics put on display and to choose more contemporary topics to be exhibited, making use of new affordable objects, photography and labels in fresh and innovative ways.



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