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Discourses Around Exhibitions: Anthropological Analysis of Experiences In Rock Art Diffusion

With the generous support of the Municipal Government of Montevideo, the Center for Rock Art Research of Uruguay (CIARU) mounted an exhibition "Prehistoric Art in Uruguay". Digitized photographs together with carefully prepared posters were used to introduce the visiting public to Uruguay's prehistory and to foster the appreciation for and conservation of Rock Art. It was decided to use the exhibition as an instrument to evaluate the methods and techniques employed to convey information and to control the level of factual comprehension of the written texts by the public. The answers given on the distributed questionnaires indicated clearly a split of opinion between what our own expectations are and those of the viewing public, and yet another divergence regarding the definition of "heritage" between the Government agencies on one hand and society-at-large on the other.

Our experience demonstrates a need for self-evaluation of propositions by researchers and educators who expect to represent the ideology of society. We found that researchers, educators, governmental agencies, and society each have their own viewpoint.

This research analyzes and evaluates the survey given to the people who attended the exhibition "Prehistoric Art in Uruguay" from 1997 to 1999) designed by the Center of Rock Art Research of Uruguay. Our main purpose was to establish a direct connection between researchers and the public, continuing the approaches of Herscher and McManamon (described in their comments of the Principle 4 of the Code of Ethics of the SAA) in which the archaeologist has the "obligation to educate" (idem, 1995: 42). Such a concept was enlarged because, "contributing to public education and outreach about archaeology should be a standard part of the professional activities of every archaeologist" (McManamon, 1998: 13).

In that vein, we want to establish viable and possible answers that could decrease the extensive delay that exists between the knowledge obtained by investigation and its diffusion to society. Dissemination should be made through texts that do not use technical or cryptic languages. In less developed countries the above mentioned delay can extend more than a dozen years after results are summarized. Uruguay is a prime example: there was only one archaeological publication (quite technical)

between 1978 and 1997. A condition that warrants more consideration.

The purpose of the survey was not a search for information to be used in planning activities by museum management. The exhibition did not intend to produce typical museum models established for cultural consumption habits, but rather to renovate the approaches utilized by the archaeological museums. These exhibitions, in our country (with happy sporadic exceptions), constitute a boring and non-stimulating bureaucratic ritual.

Antecedents

Why did we consider this form of direct communication was necessary in Uruguay? Because, this South American country is officially distinguished by its' peculiar characteristic of being free of natives. Consequently, it chooses the option of not having any relevant prehistory.

Surprisingly and ironically, the archaeological work done over the last years points out that there is at minimum 11,000 years of human presence in Uruguayan territory. But the facts, and most of the cultural material recovered in the excavations, are

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expressly ignored in formal education curricula and have almost no effect on society.

Conquerors' contacts with the natives (which started since 1515) were almost always confrontational. However, during the national independence wars, the squadrons of cavalry and infantry, composed primarily of natives, were the basic strength of the young national army. Then the first constitutional Presidents (starting in 1830) engaged in an ethnic cleansing campaign that achieved its goals in a few years.

Today it looks as if Uruguay is proud of not having indigenous people. The actual lack of an indigenous cultural presence is real, but not according to biological anthropological statistics on the population. We should add to this situation the disregard of the indigenous past that is carried out subliminally by museums. Museums mask this heritage behind modest labels placed next to the indigenous material, and emphasize foreign concepts through an educational system that is obsessed with the Old World and classical cultures.

It is within the previously described environment that we conceived the challenge of planning and presenting this exhibition.

The Exhibition

Display materials for the exhibition were obtained through our research of national museums, museums located abroad, and from private collections. We focused the thematic proposal on prehistoric art, with the purpose of awakening the curiosity and sensibility of the audience.

Through 25 posters with digitized images we presented texts that introduced different concepts, many of them opposed to the common knowledge possessed by the Uruguayan public. Upon conclusion of the visit to the exhibition, attendants were invited to express their opinions through a multiple-choice survey (although the more conceptual questions had provisions for the public to introduce their own ideas).

The exhibition revealed through graphics and texts a version of the prehistoric past that Uruguayans had previously ignored. A past composed of denied roots, unknown heritage, and archaeological sites subjected to incredible and unpunished looting and vandalism.

Survey results obtained exceeded the expectations of the investigators. During the design process changes were made to modify the original objectives. What began as a dialogue designed to include Rock Art as a part of the Uruguay's national heritage, finished with an excellent case for anthropological analysis.

Contact With The Public

Experiences of diffusion, like the exhibition, create a new situation for researchers, by having them face the public directly and personally. This is an experience for which "not every archaeologist has the necessary skills and knowledge" (McManamon, 1998: 3). The researcher has to resolve the troublesome queries posed by the public, without the protection of an academic tribune, or of the height of a stage. The demands for answers are here and now. Researchers must devise answers, utilizing technical evidence that is not necessarily accepted by the public. This kind of communication is a great professional and personal challenge. Researchers have to participate in these discussions with the community, without the help of cryptic scientific explanations.

Answers From The Public

The surprising, unexpected, but positive answers of the interviewed subjects are evidence of an attitude from a population that receives appropriate information. They do not reflect the new knowledge acquired in the exhibition. Rather, the answers reflect the presence of emotional factors and an extreme sensitivity toward and interest in the proposed topic. This response by the public would by itself, justify the use of these communication techniques.

The analysis of these opinions introduced aspects that deserve anthropological resolution. They indicate without doubt, that not only there are several views, but also several types of conflict about the Uruguayan heritage. This happens, because an exhibition (all exhibitions) is only another educational form: a speech with carefully written text that should be considered in its content (Hood, 1992). The exhibition evaluations turned out to be exciting work, resulting from analysis of the discourses. According to the initial objectives of the project the evaluation should correspond to the texts of the exhibition.

The evaluations critically pointed out the diverse executors of the national heritage: researchers, educators and the official institutions that -by laws- are responsible for that patrimony. Also, comments were made about the stone quarrying industry, that in the last 20 years destroyed more than 20% of the known rock art sites.

Those interviewed criticized first, the investigators for their discontinuity in transmission of research and their lack of committed opposition to the massive vandalization of the rock art sites. They also criticized their reluctance in circulating information on the sites with indigenous paintings and engravings. However, they also recognize the current lack of the site preservation. They stated that they wanted to visit the sites, assuming that effective protection exists. They also demanded to receive relevant information about them.

That same public pointed out the suffocating weight that the educational structure has had in their current state of misinformation. And, therefore, they almost unanimously claimed, that education should modify the current vision of their past.

The public critics also wanted educational programs. They expressed their disapproval for the current ignorance of national prehistory and the participants. They proclaimed that their children should have the option of knowing it. They denounced how the current educational programs overlooked the past, limiting it only to the moment of the European invasion. That allowed them to ignore Uruguay's the extensive native prehistory.

We added that the textbooks are not limited to the exclusion of prehistory; they also disqualify the

How much did you know about rock art before this exhibition?

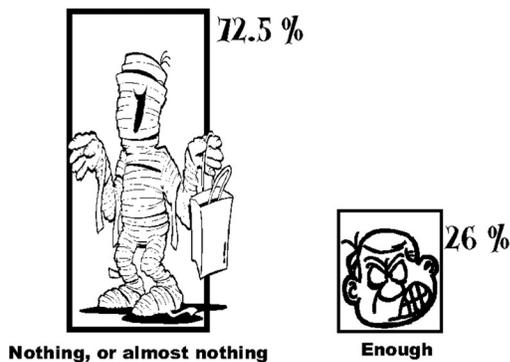


Figure 1: Public survey results.

Do you consider what you learned of National Prehistory during your formal education satisfactory?

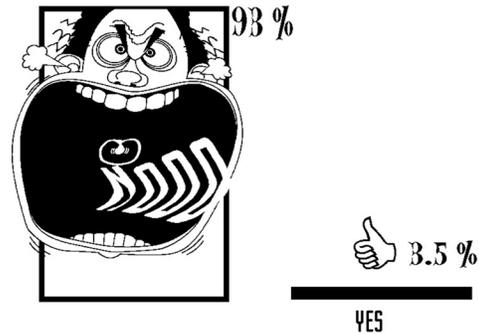


Figure 2: Public survey results.

natives who were its participants. The adjectives employed indicate an ethnic intolerance unusual in Uruguayan society (Consens and Bello, 1999).

Finally by different arguments, those interviewed rejected the "institutionalization" of the Uruguayan prehistory carried out by the official agencies. They reiterated (now with other participants) what we

In your opinion, is the knowledge of National Prehistory given at school satisfactory?

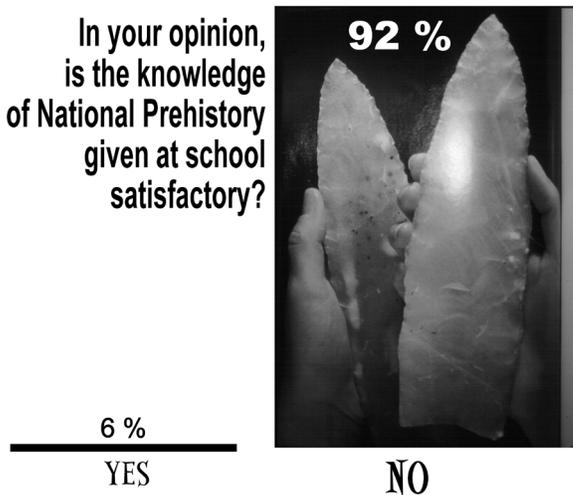


Figure 3: Public survey results.

supported years ago (Consens, 1985 & 1989; Consens et al., 1985, 1992a & b; Consens & Rodriguez, 1996 a & b).

Uruguayan society expressed its disagreement with those shady "official" evaluations. The appearance during the last decade, of non-governmental organizations that claim the existence of a prehistory

Should Uruguayans know more about our indigenous roots?

99%
YES of those
85% said it is
A MUST
14% were
just **complementary**

Figure 4: Public survey results.

in the material and the culture confirms it. But primarily, they request a dialogue. These applications have collided with an inflexible governmental silence that sometimes was transformed into overlapping opposition to these communities true interests. Sometimes this silence was achieved using entangling proceedings and sometimes by adopting obscure resolutions completed in the den of their government offices. Thus, these officials obtain the self-satisfaction of carrying out autarkical actions. That means, actions that generate mere satisfaction thru the operation of administrative state structures, but devoid of all socio-cultural content (Consens, 1999).

Those surveyed emphasized the indispensable need to participate fully in this dialogue. Society refuses to keep accepting that arrogance, ignorance and bureaucracy can establish National Heritage, which is intimately bound to national identity.

Our Comments

The deep contradictions of the speech of both the Heritage and the Archaeology Committees, with the

actions that they complete (and even those that they omit), are not acceptable anymore in a democratic society. In our opinion, the interventions of these committees have been negligent and null for the preservation of the rock art sites. They have tried to stop academic rock art research, violating elementary principles of scientific research.

Politicians have imposed demands in decisions that should be specifically technical. And so, they engendered and produced the rudest transgressions to intellectual property rights, and to recognition of basic academic professionals rules. They also have violated elementary ethical norms, approved of and applied by several national and international institutions.

The surveyed persons emphatically rejected such practices. In order to reinforce that posture the surveyed public offers to participate by accepting commitments and economic participation in the same sense as independent professionals did. The audience demands to share participation in the decisions that affect heritage -their heritage- as a social possession. They do not accept that National Heritage can be a product of secret and political party decisions that those Committees refuse to reconsider.

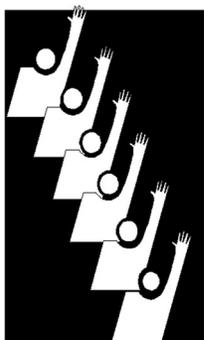
This last opinion confirms the dubious reputation and the exhaustion of those institutions that determine through imperial czarist "ukases" what belongs to us, and what should not be considered National Heritage. They also define where and how specialists should investigate, hindering research projects that are subject to open professional competition and the honesty of technical expert evaluations demanded by law.

Conclusions

This project allowed us to study this curious and anomalous situation of dialogues concerning the pre-history of Uruguay. It pointed out unequivocally the presence of a new participant in this new Babel's Tower: Society.

Our experience with exhibition feedback demonstrated the relevance and the necessity for the governmental institutions (created in order to look after heritage and to promote research), as well as educators and archaeologists, to include self-assessment plans in their proposals. They must be very careful when

From now on, would you volunteer to actively participate in caring for our Heritage?



YES 97 %



1 % NO

Figure 5: Public survey results.

presenting speeches in which they purport to represent the society, because society undoubtedly has its own opinions.

If the ideas that were obtained in these surveys were released by archaeologists, they would have been viewed as totally unreal, or a fantastic apology for the past. They would be considered a manipulation of public opinion.

What these people expressed made us consider that, fortunately, society was willing to assume its unquestionable protagonism in the integration of the national heritage. And, we hope this will lead to revising the current debates between protagonists. Finally, we understand that this kind of direct communication allows "instrumental to culture are democratic and political participants who consider the needs and demands of all sectors of society, as well as identify extra museum factors that influence negative or positively the institutional projects, that fundamentally work within the processes of socio-cultural changes that characterize the current world" (Cousillas et al:1999).

Uruguayan society criticizes the elitism of researchers, the arrogance of governmental institutions and the omissions of the educational system, which have controlled the topics of prehistory and heritage; ignoring them, in spite of this being their society, their natural legacy.

Collaborators

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