The View toward the Information Exhibition

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Yasuyuki Kurita
National Museum of Ethnology

3.1.1 What is Exhibition in the 21st Century?

The year of 1993 was the year when the National Museum of Ethnology (MINPAKU) mainly discussed Research Department reform. In the process of the discussion, many staff members indicated they were aware of the necessity in the future to study the ethnology problems existing today. Concurrently, their opinions showed museums of ethnology as research museums were supposed to exhibit the problems existing today in ethnology. In a survey, we found some visitors responded they were not quite sure what exactly ethnic groups were nor what exactly a culture was. Accordingly, we came up with an idea that we should exhibit on the problems currently existing. These opinions were in the book "The Current Condition and Problems of the National Museum of Ethnology –Aiming to be a Research Museum for the Twenty-first Century" published by MINPAKU (1995). In the same year, a fund was established and we made a project to build a new exhibition hall (the Seventh Hall).

In April 1994, the multimedia liaison office was organized and in May the information exhibition department was organized into a special committee of the new exhibition hall. The Director General at that time, Dr. Sasaki, directed the information exhibition project team in the short term, and the multimedia liaison office in the long term to take a lead and promote the project. The information exhibition project team was organized under the supervision of the information exhibition department. The leader of the information exhibition project team reports to the information exhibition department. In June, discussion began amongst the project team on the information systematization of the exhibition hall. Actually, as most of the members were serving in both the multimedia liaison office and the information exhibition project, these two teams held meetings concurrently. Regarding ideas for the information exhibition, I am going to introduce the ideas presented at those meetings as well as the proposal I have always had in mind.

8.1.2 Looking for new Exhibitions

In these meetings, we started the discussions with the theme of what people want from museums of ethnology. The first theme was the idea that museums should serve not to

amuse people but to interest them. We started the discussions with how museums can intellectually attract people. An idea mainly discussed in the United States, that museums should shift their status of simply being places to exhibit the inherited treasures of human beings to places for forums where people have opportunities to have discussions over exhibitions, was also introduced. Thus, the use of multimedia with information devices is inevitable in order to reform museums into such places to stimulate intellectual curiosity.

One of the ideal museums is the realization of participation-style museums. The National Museum of Ethnology is already equipped with exhibitions that visitors are allowed to touch. How we should exhibit such exhibitions was another issue on the table. Around that, a gathering relating to exhibition was held as the curator's advisory body. A member, who had a career related to TV, said that, "a concept cannot be exhibited." Referring to that remark at a meeting, some members responded with a question as to whether the idea was true. It is no exaggeration that the members of the committee were rather driven by the remark. It might be, in a sense, true that we cannot objectively show a concept but we have hope that it will be multimedia that enables us to realize the exhibiting concept.

8.1.3 Ideology relating to Information Exhibition

In response to the argument for new museums, the intention to change "object oriented" museums into "information oriented" museums developed among ethnological museums under the new project. This perception was also proposed by the first Director General of MINPAKU, Dr. Umesao, during his service. At the newly constructed Seventh Hall, it was decided that the information exhibition was to be carried out under the new project. The phrase "information exhibition" may sound unfamiliar. It is defined, according to our definition, as an exhibition that is conducted by means of sound and motion picture projected by information devices. Data should hopefully be digitalized. We regard such information exhibition as an approach to compare cultures, and it is believed to bring about a major impact. In other words, it is our thought that the concepts of family, death, and marriage, which ethnological museums have never dealt with and used to be impossible to express, can be exhibited. Although the framework has been established, we still have not had any specified image in terms of exhibitions.

8.1.4 Design for the "Materiatheque"

After consideration, we came up with the idea of the "Materiatheque." The details of how this plan has thrived in its realization have already been stated in the official periodical of MINPAKU, "Minpaku Tsushin" volume 75 (1997). Various forms of

devices for information search are available today and most of them apply keyboards or track balls for commands, but to many visitors keyboards are quite troublesome. We wanted to get rid of the typical image of computers that "information search equals keyboards and keyboards equal white symbols and letters on a light blue screen." Observing children carefully, we saw they often ask adults what something is when there is something they do not know. Then, we came up with an idea to assist such a natural act of asking, and for that a device called "Dr. Minpaku" was developed. Children take an article put on a table and bring it to Dr. Minpaku, and then Dr. Minpaku identifies it and tells the children, "What you have is a vessel used by the Masai tribe in Africa." The trick is, each article has an output computer chip in its body to send out a signal when it enters a certain magnetic field and Dr. Minpaku detects the signal to identify the article and sends it back to the article. As another function, Dr. Minpaku is capable of reading stories written in foreign languages. We hope that we will make an environment similar to one of adults reading stories for children sitting around. As a result, we have developed software for Dr. Minpaku that reads stories for children upon their presenting foreign books. The device has made information search available without using either keyboards or track balls.

8.1.5 Design for the "Audio-visual Gallery"

Visitors also point out that, despite the fact that there are many researchers at MINPAKU, visitors do not see any researchers around at exhibition halls. In response to this, each researcher presents what he or she studies or the current topics on ethnology in a talk show-style session lasting roughly three minutes. In the session, researchers are making efforts to present themes they are currently studying or issues each ethnic group is facing by explaining in detail. Some researchers actually appear in the programs and others only conduct narration. What we are afraid is the issues currently existing will remain as current issues probably only two years. It is inevitable for us to constantly make data up-to-date. We are anxious about whether we will be able to bear such a load.

8.1.6 Article Exhibition has its Limits

We have been working on creating a new style of information exhibition based on the idea stated earlier. On the other hand, we have also directed our focus on permanent exhibition. Considering exhibition in the future, the message we would like to tell through exhibition is that exhibiting articles is not enough or that we felt that exhibition in the future may need to go beyond article exhibition. Most of all, what frustrates us is that article exhibition does not represent what is behind the articles. Article exhibition is not capable of delivering information such as what the people who use the tool dress like or whether it is used by males or females. Analyzing this

matter, we felt that article exhibition has its limits in making people understand different cultures. In order to remove these limits, it may lead to success to positively promote exhibition by information devices. However, there are some opinions that information exhibition is nothing but a virtual experience and it is impossible to replay the actual feeling sensed when one is actually at the site. It is also questioned to what extent the virtual world helps the understanding of different cultures. To what extent is virtual experience created by computer successful? In such a discussion, one person said the case in which people shed tears when they watch sad movies is a virtual experience and that means virtual exhibition is successful. I myself thought that might be true. Information exhibition surely provides the visitor with a virtual experience rather than exhibiting still objects. I also expect the introduction of multimedia to exhibition might give the exhibited items new meaning. It is expected the exhibited items will become means to stimulate the intellectual curiosity of visitors and the exhibited items will serve as a menu to generate various questions.

Museum exhibition is not completed only with exhibition. The meaning an exhibited item has is clarified only when the meaning is explained. That is the fundamental difference between art museums where people watch and feel that exhibited art works are beautiful without any explanation and the museum I have discussed in this thesis. From our experience, the best way to make museum visiting interesting is to have special guidance by a specialist. We suggested realizing such guidance using electric devices and developing the mobile terminal called "Minpaku Digital Guide System." Visitors carry the device with them and stand in front of the exhibited items. Then the explanation appears on the device as text information, still images, motion pictures or sound.

8.1.7 Measures for foreign Languages

There is another expectation of the system. The one task MINPAKU has left untouched is explaining exhibitions in foreign languages. The first Director General of MINPAKU, Dr. Umesao, said English should not be the only available language if MINPAKU introduces explanation devices in foreign languages. The majority of foreign residents in Japan are of either Korean or North Korean origin and we must have explanations in Korean available in order to embrace them. The languages most spoken in the world are Chinese and Spanish. Taking this fact into account, explanation in English is not enough. He also pointed out that MINPAKU should include the official languages specified by the United Nations (English, French, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish), the sub-official languages of Arabian and German, spoken by many in European countries, and Korean, as it is the language spoken in the nearest countries. Because this is so true, we have decided to apply these eight languages as much as possible on occasions when it is necessary to have explanation in foreign languages. However, applying all these languages on the explanation boards

would mean you would find the boards all over the walls. We came to the conclusion that we need the assistance of electric devices as countermeasures and that caused us to introduce information supply in foreign languages using the Minpaku Digital Guide System.

Information has a personal address. Information has an interesting characteristic. Information is information to those who need it, but it is just an annoying sound to those who do not need it. That means information should be directed to an individual who needs it. This idea also directed us to develop the Minpaku Digital Guide System, which sends out information directly to the individual.

8.1.8 The Relation with the "Videotheque"

MINPAKU has been equipped with the information supply device of a TV -on-demand method called "Videotheque" since its opening. The images of approximately four hundred titles for ethnic cultures from all over the world were edited into fifteen-minute long video programs, and the Videotheque projects a program on demand to a booth. Videotheque is quite popular and gets about one hundred twenty thousand requests annually. Now we have to think of how we should allocate the functions of the Minpaku Digital Guide System, which we are planning to develop, and the currently available Videotheque. The allocation of the functions should be as follows. There are steps we take when we have a question. First, a question comes up in our mind and then we look it up in books or encyclopedias. The information Minpaku Digital Guide System sends out can be regarded as an article in an encyclopedia. On the other hand, Videotheque is designed for those who want to acquire knowledge in more detail, for example a new edition of a book. Furthermore, MINPAKU has a collection of long movies available for those who want to acquire further knowledge, and that can be regarded as an independent volume of a book. If anyone wants more information in detail, they can expand their knowledge at a study booth. The Minpaku Digital Guide System, developed based on such ideas, will be in service starting in May 1999.

8.1.9 Storage for Multimedia

As you might have noticed, MINPAKU has introduced information exhibition in the exhibition halls and encountered the strange world of the multimedia era. However, we have some concerns and doubts. The motion pictures sent on the Internet are small, its movement is odd, and it is, frankly speaking, not clear. Even if we make motion pictures designed for the Internet, it is obvious that we have to remake the pictures when the quality and the technology of relevant devices advance in the future. 8-mm film was the first motion picture device for anthropological field work, and after that

came videotapes filmed by using quite large VHS cameras. Eventually, eight-millimeter video took over, later Hi-8 was developed, and now we have digital video cameras. It is expected that we will have higher quality fine image cameras in the future. The recording media will change its form from magnetic tapes to disks. We will need to convert the contents in the old recording media into the new one. It will also require us to film all over again if the contents recorded in the old media wear out or become poor in quality. We simply have to constantly repeat this conversion process in order to catch up with the changing recording media, and to follow the innovation of technology. What can we do about the endless game of the advancement of recording media? Some researchers have already started to make contents for multimedia. The work, though, is beyond our imagination. The making of multimedia can be a heavy burden for researchers unless they are at least able to use simple authoring tools such as word processors.

8.1.10 Academic Evaluation of Multimedia

My concern is researchers will not intend to make multimedia unless their work of multimedia contents is officially approved as an academic accomplishment. This is also true of exhibition. Unfortunately, researchers' accomplishments are evaluated based on the quantities of theses they write. The making of multimedia software is not counted as an academic accomplishment. It will not work out if researchers are forced to make multimedia contents from a sacrificing spirit. They will not see such content-making as interesting or attractive unless an evaluation system that takes multimedia contents as an academic accomplishment is established.

8.1.11 Issues Multimedia has left behind

The biggest hurdle to conquer in the process of making multimedia contents is the copyright. One time we thought of making multimedia contents using the pictures and the films MINPAKU has collected and looked into the copyright-related subjects. The result was disappointing. The films in the past were not made for taking multimedia into account, of course, and it is not approved by the copyright to use it. When we asked the department of legal affairs at a major company, they advised us to make contents from scratch. The copyright issue is becoming more complicated as the right of image belonging to those filmed or photographed should be considered. This issue should be resolved globally in order to further develop multimedia.

8.1.12 Collection of Information Materials

In the coming multimedia era, the fieldwork of researchers is to change as well. They

need to carry devices to record motion pictures of materials during fieldwork. That means they have to bring not only ordinary cameras but also digital video cameras with them. When I was in Assam, India for fieldwork, suddenly a white rhinoceros appeared. I taped him by video as well as taking pictures with a camera in another hand because it came to my mind that it is difficult to make slides from videotapes. Researchers are hoping for the arrival of a camera from which we can project images as sound, motion pictures, slides and regular pictures. Can the digital video camera realize this idea? It will require us to collect information more than ever in the future. A picture of an article used to be enough but in the future the motion picture taping a situation when it is actually used will be necessary. The information of the making of specimens and the use of information should be collected with still pictures and motion pictures as well. By doing all that, the specimen finally becomes material worth being used by multimedia to give explanation.

8.1.13 Need for an Information Cataloguer

In order to create multimedia, we need to have specially trained staff members called "cataloguers" or "indexers." What they do is to appoint codes to identify the specimen in order to link the specimen with other related information made in different media, which means by appointing codes we can easily associate the specimen and related information such as video images and books. Being expected to do this kind of coding, researchers will in no time see multimedia as a convoluted matter. Figuratively speaking, it is similar to having researchers put codes on books. In order to sustain researcher interest in multimedia, staff members specialized in multimedia are necessary, just as there are librarians at libraries.

8.1.14 The Goal is the World of Virtuality and Reality

In the process of considering museums' promoting information exhibitions, we had a question. It is the value of articles at museums. Should museums totally shift their focus of interest to collecting information? In the coming future, museums, which own a tremendous quantity of materials, will be a hub of the multimedia era. The strength of museums, in my opinion, is to have both exhibited materials in reality as well as information exhibition in virtuality. Museums are places where virtuality and reality can be experienced. It is museums that are able to make this come true. Moreover, if museums are places that provide both virtuality and reality, it is not the electric device that should play a key role. Its role should be strictly limited to be only supplemental for covering realia.

8.1.15 Does the Multimedia Era have bright Prospects?

Will the multimedia era have bright prospects? The future of museums is surely promising. However, it is a totally different story whether a museum, taking multimedia as one of the administrative tools, has a successful future. As I have already mentioned, it takes money and time to be in touch with multimedia. Can museums bear this hardship? After the Cold War, the defense expenditure was cut and how the surplus funds should be allocated was an important issue in the United States. Then, as a national project in the post Cold War, the project "Information Highway" was formulated, and the next national strategy was multimedia. Considering the history of multimedia, one scene always crosses my mind. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics invested a tremendous amount of money into the armament and space development projects as national projects, and as a result, it brought the nation to collapse. My concern is whether museums will also take the same steps the Soviet Union took by pouring a large amount of money into multimedia.

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