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Characteristics of exhibitions

Considering the exhibition reviews as published in newspapers, art journals as well as professional museum journals, there is an obvious need of a structured, i.e. analytical approach to the exhibition phenomenon. The present article aims to develop a general theoretical framework for such an analytical approach. The underlying assumption is that such framework cannot be developed from the perspective of the subject matter disciplines only. The model as presented hereafter is an attempt to develop an alternative point of view, i.e. a museological framework for analysis and cross-disciplinary comparison. The validity of the model as a tool to facilitate the description and analysis of historical development has yet to be proven.

0 Introduction

In their *The museum experience* John Falk and Lynn Dierking have proposed to analyse museum communication, i.e. the museum experience, from the visitor's perspective (Falk & Dierking 1992).¹ Their 'Interactive Experience Model' is based on the interaction among three (visitor-constructed) contexts: personal context, social context and physical context. The personal context incorporates a variety of experiences and knowledge of the individual visitor. It includes the visitor's interest, motivations, and concerns. Every visitor's perspective is strongly influenced by social context. Most people visit museums in a group, and those who visit alone invariably come into contact with other visitors and museum staff. The physical context includes the architecture and 'feel' of the building, as well as the exhibits contained within. Following analysis intends to elaborate the physical context, i.e. the structural identity of the exhibition, as expression of the intentions of the maker, or, in other words, its ontological character and structure (Swiecimski 1987). Whereas the 'Interactive Experience Model' intends to map out the exhibition as *perceived* object, the present model studies exhibitions as *conceived* objects.²

1.0 Materialised 'dreamlands'

As manifestation of a concept, an exhibition is a materialised 'dreamland' in which 'objects' play a key role (Prince 1985). This 'dreamland' is the result of a process of selection and manipulation of the information emitted by museum items. During this process the curator consciously or unconsciously encodes the museum objects with messages. This does not remove the information contained within the object, but the selection and manipulation intends to offer the visitor a strictly guided choice. In this respect Eisner and Dobbs (1988) distinguish between implicit and explicit 'dreamlands'. Especially among art museums the view is expressed that museums ought to be 'sacred groves', quiet places for the

¹ In their new book *Learning from museums* (2000) Falk & Dierking refer to this model as 'Contextual Model of Learning'.

² Distinction should be made between exhibits and exhibitions, even though this distinction is difficult to define. An exhibition is a structured group of exhibits. In its simplest form an exhibit is an interpreted object on display.

cognoscente to enjoy profound objects without interventions, assistance, and above all, discursive language. The interpretative role of museums is alleged to be minimal (implicit). However, some museums emphasise their educational role. To be educational the presentation has to be completed with additional materials. In this way an explicit 'dreamland' is created.

In general, an exhibition creates an almost totally closed information-communication system (Maroevic 1983); it destroys ambiguity (Dagognet 1984). Like the church or the temple of the past, the museum plays a unique ideological role (Duncan & Wallach 1978). By means of a careful selection of objects, placed in a well designed context, the museum transforms ideology in the abstract into living belief. The visitor has no choice than to accept the judgments and interpretations that constitute the 'dreamland' (s)he is visiting, because there is always the museum as a medium that defines the meaning of the object. This special situation can be described as the basic paradox of the museological situation: the object which, in its present reality, is considered as authentic evidence of a former reality, is, in museological terms, not the same object as it was in that other reality. The actual physical and conceptual context 'creates in the presented object features which are novel to it and which have purely phenomenal (and at the same time, ephemeral) character' (Swiecimski 1987). Therefore, as Swiecimski points out, in accordance with the concept of 'museological object', the object as exhibit cannot be identified with the physical thing (the so-called constant features) only. What counts is its 'appearance' conditioned by the context ('objective') and the act of perception ('subjective').³

A similar approach is reflected in Martin Schärer's distinction between 'wirkliche Realität', 'erdachte Realität' and 'persönliche Realität' (Schärer 1991). The first dimension refers to the primary context, the second refers to the exhibition context in which the object is shown, and the third dimension refers to the museum visitor. In fact this distinction boils down to the basic triad in communication: sender, message/medium, receiver. In this interaction meaning is produced. Meaning is produced in the material practice of reasoning in the present, which is, of course, in no way identical with the past.

The first to work out a systematic approach to exhibitions as communication system was Duncan Cameron. His article, published in 1968, heralded a growing literature on museum semiotics. Cameron uses language as metaphor comparing museum objects (i.e. primary museum material) with nouns, the relationships between objects with verbs, and the supplementary media (i.e. secondary museum material) together with the design of the object environment with adjectives and adverbs (Cameron 1971).

For one part, the actual functional identity of the object as exhibit (i.e. the 'signified' or 'referent' of the object as sign) is strongly dependent on the exhibition as context. Following analysis is based upon the distinction between three aspects of the physical identity of exhibitions: *structure*, *style*, and *technique*. Structure (= strategy in Hall 1987: 25) involves the organisation of the material; style refers to the general atmosphere in which the communica-

³ Swiecimski uses the term 'Ansicht', a concept derived from phenomenological philosophy. The conditioning of the 'image' of the object by its context is a key concept in what he calls 'the notion of the exhibit' (Swiecimski 1987). In an unpublished manuscript 'The theory of the museum exhibition' Swiecimski introduced the concepts of *total relativity* and *existential basis* ('Seinsfundament'). "In the case of the exhibit, the 'existential basis' is constituted not only by the physical thing which is put on display, but by this thing taken together with its environment".

tion process takes place; the term technique comprises the practical technique of information transfer.⁴

1.1 Structure

Structure involves the organisation of the exhibition material, in particular the primary museum material, i.e. the “musealia”. On this aspect, Hall (1987: 25) mentions two basic approaches ('strategies'): the taxonomic and the thematic approach. According to the taxonomic approach, material is displayed by classification alone. This classification is based on instrumental rationality. It consists of objects organised according to their similarity and their 'genetic' relationship to each other (Burcaw 1975: 121). Verhaar & Meeter (1988: 5) make the basic distinction between object-oriented and concept-oriented exhibitions, the former defined as exhibitions in which the objects constitute the central elements, the latter defined as exhibitions in which attention is focused primarily on the 'story' and in which objects play a subordinate role. Their wording suggests a similarity with Hall's distinction between two strategies, but as their approach combines structure and style, their distinction appears to be less precise.

Hall's taxonomic strategy agrees more or less with Burcaw's systematic display type (Burcaw 1975) and the approach, which has been called 'objective' by Shanks & Tilley (1987)⁵. As opposite approach Shanks & Tilley mention the anti-rationalism of aestheticized objectivity (aesthetic display). However, a pure aesthetic display form is seldom found. Usually aestheticized objectivity is found as style (see below) within the context of an objective display. In more general terms the aesthetic display type as meant by Shanks & Tilley is one possibility in a range of possible approaches that can be called *anti-rationalistic* or *subjective*. This approach is based on individual decisions rather than formalised rational principles.

Hall confronts the taxonomic approach with the thematic one. The thematic approach involves telling a story. This type is described by Shanks & Tilley as 'narrative display' (also in Swiecimski 1987: 212). The visitor is guided to make connections and to follow the development of the thesis as it evolves in the exhibition. This might be realised through a simple linear approach, following a book- or film-like sequentiality or through a mosaic type of presentation consisting of many separate displays offering random information from which the visitor is expected to pursue his/her own route.

As a third option, Shank & Tilley mention a type of display based on spatial and functional interrelationships, which they refer to as 'situational display'. This agrees with Burcaw's

⁴ In this respect Swiecimski (1979: 14) distinguishes between *theoretical programme* (here: purpose and structure) and *design* (here: style and technique). In an earlier publication (Swiecimski 1974: 12) distinction is made between *designing programme* (comparable to structure, partly style and technique), *function* (purpose), and *stylistic shape* (aesthetic style). Desvallées (1989) distinguishes between *forme* as concept (purpose, i.e. functional identity) and *type* as expression (structure, i.e. structural identity). In their critique of archaeological exhibitions Shanks & Tilley (1987) use the term *aesthetic* for the combination of structure, style and technique.

⁵ = 'das systematisierende Grundsystem' (Gluzinski 1981: 32); 'présentation systématique' (Rivière, in Desvallées 1989). Using linguistic concepts to analyse museums ('the poetics of the museum') Bann applies the concept of metonymy to describe this structure (Bann 1984, Chapter 4).

ecological display type (Burcaw 1975)⁶. Ecological organisation requires that the objects be in a spatial and living relationship to each other. This exhibition type is considered a style rather than a strategy by Hall. However, as the ecological approach involves a distinct use of objects based on scientific knowledge which is different from the knowledge involved in the other approaches, the situational type of display should be considered as separate strategy.

Combining the typologies provided by Hall, Burcaw and Shanks & Tilley, and mixing their terminology, I propose to make distinction between four basic display types to describe the different approaches in museum exhibitions and the role of objects as data carriers: subjective, systematic, ecological, and narrative.⁷

1.2 Style

Besides different approaches as to structure, there are also different approaches as to style⁸. Style relates to the effects sought⁹. Style relates to “scenographie”, i.e. the “gestalterische Mittel” used to clarify and emphasize the intended message, or, in other words, the “Dramaturgie der Räume”¹⁰ As Miles (in Miles et al. 1982) has pointed out, all exhibitions by their very nature invariably have some educational content as they almost always try to tell visitors things that they are unlikely to have known before. However, the method used may aim at different effects. In this respect Arpin (1992: 45-46) distinguishes between contemplative, cognitive and affective exhibitions.

Comparable is Swiecinski's distinction between three cognitive 'styles': the typological framing, the perceptual isolation, and the morphological reduction¹¹. The first approach emphasises the object as representative of a type. As such it suppresses the individuality of the object. It has the nature of being 'objective' or at least 'intersubjectively verifiable'. The second and third approaches attempt to reduce the influence of the context to a minimum by emphasising the object's individuality on the level of its structural identity¹². These two approaches reflect Rivière's principle of aesthetic exhibits described as 'la neutralisation de l'environnement' (in Desvallées 1989: 362).

Burcaw (1975) and Hall (1987) give alternative typologies. Burcaw mentions aesthetic or entertaining, factual and conceptual exhibitions, while Hall distinguishes between evocative,

⁶ = 'das kulturgeschichtliche Grundsystem' (Gluzinski 1981: 32); 'présentation écologique' (Rivière, in Desvallées 1989). This exhibition type relates to Bann's synecdochic structure (Bann 1984).

⁷ Apart from subjective, the same subdivision is given in Swiecinski 1987 and Rabinowitz 1991.

⁸ These two dimensions are used in a three dimensional analyzing matrix in Hendon 1979 (fig. 7.1). The third dimension relates to the degree of interpretation (i.e. 'uninterpretive' vs. overinterpretive').

⁹ = 'didaktische Strategie' (Rohmeder 1977: 48).

¹⁰ “Scenographie is, einfach formuliert, das Handwerk, dreidimensionale Räume so zu inszenieren, so einzurichten, dass Inhalte verstärkt durch gestalterische Mittel deutlicher und prägnanter in ihrer Wirkung und damit in der intendierten Aussage werden” (Roth 2001).

¹¹ In an unpublished manuscript 'The theory of the museum exhibition'. The terminology used is not Swiecinski's.

¹² Swiecinski uses the terms 'construction' and 'internal core'.

aesthetic, and didactic displays. Burcaw and Hall agree on the aesthetic type of display in which each object is shown in a way to emphasise its aesthetic qualities. Supporting texts and display mechanisms complement but are subordinate. As separate display type it is also mentioned by Gluzinski (1981), Shanks & Tilley (1987), Verhaar & Meeter (1988), and Rivière (in Desvallées 1989).

The didactic exhibition aims primarily at imparting knowledge, using some model of learning (Gluzinski 1981, Verhaar & Meeter 1988). It is the same type of exhibition which Arpin refers to as cognitive. Burcaw's factual and conceptual exhibitions seem to be two forms of this didactic type. Factual exhibits focus on conveying information, conceptual exhibits present ideas.

Some authors use a twofold division of didactic vs. aesthetic (Gluzinski, Verhaar & Meeter) or didactic vs. 'emotive' (Belcher 1991). Arpin and Hall, however, divide emotive into aesthetic (= affective) and evocative (= contemplative). In both cases the intention of the exhibition is to have an effect on the emotions of the viewer. In an evocative exhibition an atmosphere of an era, a country, a particular art style, or a scene is created in a theatrical way.

Following Arpin and Hall, and using the latter's terminology, I propose to make distinction between three basic exhibition 'styles': aesthetic, evocative, didactic.¹³

1.3 Technique

Finally, distinction can be made as to technique of communication. Hall, focusing on the degree of interaction, distinguishes between interactive and passive displays. Miles elaborated a more precise typology of display techniques ('modes of use') based on the number of physical states an exhibit can take, and the mechanism by which a change of state is brought about (Miles et al. 1982: 81). The main distinction, made by Miles, is between *static exhibits* (those which do not change state) and *dynamic exhibits* (which change in order to illustrate two or more different states). The latter type comprises *automaton dynamic exhibits* (those which run continuously, e.g. a film loop), *operand dynamic exhibits* (those which can be activated by the visitor), and *interactive dynamic exhibits* (those which involve the visitor in some sort of dialogue). A further subdivision of the interactive mode involves tutorial and simulation modes. The difference between these is that in the simulation mode the outcome is open-ended, whereas in the tutorial mode it is predetermined to a considerable extent.¹⁴

Using Miles' typology, I propose a threefold subdivision as to the technique of an exhibition: static, dynamic and interactive.

2.0 Typology of structures

¹³ A similar threefold division is given by Shettel (1973) who speaks of exhibits which are intrinsically interesting (*emotive*), exhibits which have primarily an aesthetic appeal (*aesthetic*), and exhibits which appear to have an instructional or educational role to play (*didactic*).

¹⁴ In the second edition of their work (1988) Miles et al. make a clearer distinction between medium and mode. The medium is defined as 'the vehicle that carries the information the designer wishes to communicate to the visitor'. The mode is defined as 'the way in which the medium is used' (p.78). Technique in the present paper refers to mode rather than medium.

The three aspects of the physical identity of an exhibition need further elaboration, especially to systematise the confusing diversity of terms and concepts. As an example how the model presented here can be used to analyse some tendencies in the museum field, we will focus on the aspect of structure.

2.1 Pre- en proto-systematic exhibitions

Early museums were based on a hermetic and metaphoric image of the world which assumed that every object was coded with a larger, more universal significance (Findlen 1989: 67). Applied to the passion for collecting, hermeticism postulated that the museum would be a visually coded presentation of occult knowledge. The world itself was a tangled web of meanings; it remained only for the collector to penetrate its layers through the comparative, taxonomic, and ultimately encyclopaedic nature of his project. On the other hand, the natural philosopher arranged his collection according to the metaphoric relationships of objects, thus re-creating cosmic schemes.

As subjective, usually a-historic, exhibition the personal reflective approach is recently challenging the strong emphasis on rational structures of the modernist museum. The “dramaturgie de la postmodernité” favours “pas d’histoire, pas de héros, mais un dédale de ‘sites’ dans lesquels le visiteur sera saisi ...” (Jean-François Lyotard, quoted in Gorgus 2002).

2.2 Systematic exhibitions

At the end of the 18th century a systematic (largely chronological) structure was introduced in art museums. Following Winckelmann works of art were organised cyclically according to periods of rise, flourishing and decline. From the beginning of the 19th century taxonomic and chronological exhibitions are organised linearly. Such design accent determinism and/or progression. Events or cultures seem to follow inevitably upon one another. Visitors walk through a history that appears to have no 'roads not taken' (Rabinowitz 1991: 38). The visitor was expected to 'celebrate progress' (Horne in Boylan ed. 1992: 69). Objects stand solitary, isolated from their social contexts, but firmly fit in a rigid linearly structure¹⁵. Their meaning lies in their abstract objectivity. As such, the objects are formally equivalent (Shanks & Tilley 1987: 69-70). There is no role for ambiguity, for the unexpected.

In the course of the 19th century the massive growth of the collections prompted the introduction of the *bi-partite* museum model, i.e. the divisioning of the collections into a display collection and a reserve collection¹⁶. This division did involve selection and thus re-enforced the organisational structure of the presentation. Following this line of development, the museum exhibition presented a scientific system illustrated by well selected specimen, rather

¹⁵ "Could there not be some place where one could simply be in love with arts as with a woman, without always having to be reminded that after all she did descent from a hairy ape?" (Parr 1963: 30).

¹⁶ According to Bazin (1967: 263) Goethe was the first to advocate this concept (in 1821). In 1853 the bi-partite model was also discussed by Charles Eastlake, director of the National Gallery, London. The bi-partite museum was introduced in the United States by Louis Agassiz in 1860 in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Cambridge. It was first applied in Europe by Möbius in 1884 in the Zoologisches Museum, Berlin (Möbius 1898).

than a number of objects arranged according to some scientific principle¹⁷. In addition museums started to organise temporary exhibitions.

The introduction of the bi-partite museum model and the temporary exhibition idea liberated museums from the necessity to combine scientific and scholarly needs and educational aims (Parr 1963, Jahn 1979). Scientific and scholarly needs were satisfied through well-organised reserve collections. The exhibition became increasingly a means of communication with a less informed visitor.

Nevertheless, until the 1950s in most museums the organisational principle (structure) remained scientific (taxonomic, typological), while its function (purpose) was primarily educational. The style, however, was mainly aesthetic. In art museums the tiered hanging (double, triple-tiered, or even quadruple tiered hanging) was increasingly replaced by a 'single line' hanging in a neutral environment¹⁸. This new approach in exhibition style is called '*style hôpital*' or '*style clinique*' by Bazin (1976)¹⁹.

The most recent attempt to combine educational purpose and systematic structure is the development of the *tri-partite* museum model, i.e. the divisioning of the collections into three parts: exhibition, storage and the so-called *open storage* or *visible storage* (Pes 2002).

2.3 Narrative exhibitions

In connection with the educational function of the museum, a new strategy was introduced in exhibition design: the 'idea approach'. The idea exhibit emphasises concepts rather than objects, hence also *concept exhibition* (Peart 1984) or *conceptual exhibit* (Rabinowitz 1991) or *concept oriented exhibition* (Verhaar & Meeter 1988). Although the terms idea- and concept-exhibition are widely used, their precise meaning is not clear. This is mainly due to the different meanings of the terms. Does it refer to the conceptual identity of the object or that of the exhibition as a whole? Besides, 'even' systematic exhibitions are expressions of certain concepts. The term 'thematic' seems to be a good alternative as it refers to the concept of the exhibition rather than the idea(s) behind the object(s).

The idea approach has developed along two different lines, typified by the narrative and the ecological display type, the latter being a few decades older than the former. The twentieth century saw the perfection of both types of exhibitions through increased sophistication in *educational design* (in case of narrative displays) and *experience design* (in case of ecological displays). Educational design tends to emphasise the didactic approach in display style, while experience design focuses on the evocative approach.

Narrative exhibitions usually have a storyline as organising principle. In order to move away from systematic arrangements a book-like pattern was introduced. One of the first to develop this approach was George Brown Goode (see, for example, Brown Goode 1891). More recently important textbooks are published by Jürgen Rohmeder (1977) and Roger Miles (1982). The 'perfection' of the narrative exhibition eventually led to a serious operation

¹⁷ This principle was, for example, advocated by Georges Brown Goode (1895).

¹⁸ As was already advocated by John Ruskin.

¹⁹ Benoist (1971: 29) credits the Netherlands for this trend of '*purisme protestant intégral*'.

overload at the cost of the content. A shift from primary museum material to secondary museum material is followed by a shift from explanation (how to understand) towards instruction (how to use).

Some authors, however, focus on the alleged danger of reducing original artefacts to bit-parts in some larger theatre of meaning. Especially in art museums narrative strategies are controversial. When a certain motive has led to pictorial traditions a narrative approach might be justified, but when a contemporary issue is discussed on the basis of historical paintings the works of art tend to be used in a reductionist and anachronistic way.

2.4 Ecological exhibitions

The linear, sequential type of story line has been criticised many times. Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan advocated non-linear communication in museums already in 1967: "In order to create involvement, you have to take out story line. That was the great discovery of Edgar Allan Poe. In his poetry and stories he discovered that if he pulled out the connections he could get much higher involvement. The reader becomes co-producer, co-creator". In a similar way McLuhan suggested to make exhibitions without storyline and without labels, to obtain a high degree of participation of the visitor. Instead of linear, sequential story lines he emphasises simultaneity (combined with multi-sensory exposure). In this respect ecological exhibitions are the answer to narrative exhibitions.

Ecological exhibitions have a high degree of concreteness and a low degree of abstraction. Such exhibitions are referred to as *immersion setting* (Chadbourne 1991: 42) or *primary-experience exhibit* (Peart 1984). They function as time-machines, taking the visitor to another world. While a narrative display is a lecture, a ecological one is a way of storytelling, comparable to the 'docudrama'. Natural history museums are simulating all kinds of habitats in a naturalistic manner (diorama's and even "walk-through diorama's"). Science museums are creating exhibits that simulate the experience of travelling in outer space, circulating through the human heart, and other such experiences. One of the newest techniques, introduced in the late 1980s, is *virtual reality*. This technique provides a full sensory immersive experience of virtual, but dynamic and responsive landscapes. Immersion means that one or more of a user's sensors (eyes and ears generally) are isolated from the surrounding environment (by means of a Head Mounted Display device) and fed only information coming from the computer.

As exhibits historic houses, period rooms, etc. can be considered as objects *sensu lato*. As such ecological displays are subject to the same phenomenon of alienation as individual objects. They are a static instant, a disconnected moment. This disconnected temporality and discontinuity with the present creates the mystery. The transparency of the ecological exhibit(ion) is an illusion. The arrested temporality proposes that meaning is instantaneous, located in the disconnected moment, that visible facts convey the truth. The certainty of the existence, the facticity, the reality of the artefacts confirm this proposal. However, the ecological exhibit(ion) is not a facsimile but a 'simulacrum', an exact copy of an original which never existed (Shanks & Tilley 1987: 79). The past is transformed into its own image, an image which is axiological rather than ontological.

3.0 Diverging policies

All dreamlands are not the same. Art, science and historical exhibitions have distinct formal characteristics, connected with different attitudes towards individual objects. Each museum type is characterised by its own permutation of structure, style, and technique. Whereas, for example, for art historians each object is unique and has to be continuously re-examined with fresh eyes, zoologists deal with material that has for them a generic rather than a specific significance. According to Cannon-Brookes the traditional 'arm's length relationship' between the museum and its users echoes the pastoral role of the priest. New museum policies seem to favour the pedagogical role of the schoolteacher or perhaps the commercial role of the merchant (Cannon-Brookes 1990). Art collections have as yet remained the most resistant, whilst more and more natural history specimens and technological artefacts disappear into store to be replaced by manufactured didactic displays incorporating a minimum of original specimens and a maximum of interactive audiovisuals (educational design). Science centres show this development in extreme.

The new museum policy, i.e. the new museology of the post 1970s, is reflected in the work of François Dagognet (1984 and 1985). He describes new approaches for all three aspects of the exhibition's structural identity:

- 1 on the level of structure: "contextualiser les objets" (*Musée renversé*);
- 2 on the level of style: "problématiser l'observation" (*Musée problème*);
- 3 on the level of technique: "exploiter les informations" (*Musée interactif*).

3.1 Concrete vs. abstract exhibits

Narrative exhibitions involve a considerable shift in perspective as to the role of the object. The emergence of this exhibition type is connected with a shift from 'visualising a collection of objects' to the discourse concerning social and scientific themes. The new strategy prompted Rivière to distinguish between '*musée-objet*' (elsewhere '*musée-collection*') and '*musée-discours*' (or '*musée-programme*') (Desvallées 1989: 350). This shift in perspective involves a critical analysis of the degree in which the object as such is able to convey messages. The object has a 'beschränkte Aussage-wert' and its 'informativische Defizit' should be compensated by additional methods (i.e. secondary museum material) (Schleussner 1984: 47). In the extreme form the idea approach may thus result in a textbook type of presentation primarily based on secondary museum material.

In this respect Peart (1984: 222) distinguishes between *concrete exhibits* (three-dimensional, with objects) and *abstract exhibits* (two-dimensional, lacking objects)²⁰. The subordinate role of primary museum material in conceptual exhibitions is illustrated by Tkac's typology of 'authenticum'. He subdivides primary museum material into 'illustrative authenticum', 'document authenticum' and 'complementary authenticum', emphasising the fact that the museum objects are no longer used in an unequivocal way (Tkac 1986). As Swiecinski has pointed out, this development involved a shift from subject matter discipline to museology,

²⁰ Rivière uses the terms 'image concrète' and 'image abstraite' in a slightly different way (Desvallées 1989: 283-284). Concrete exhibits are models and casts ('images tridimensionnelles') and photographs and maps ('images duodimensionnelles'). Abstract exhibits are graphs and diagrams.

since the exhibition design no longer followed directly from the organisational principles given by the subject matter discipline²¹.

The tendency to abstract exhibitions, in which the authentic object plays a subordinate, illustrative role is criticised by many authors from different backgrounds (Schueler 1983). One of the arguments is that these types of exhibitions are not 'museum specific'. Such exhibitions could easily be replaced by less expensive media, like books and television. On the other hand, abstract exhibitions lend themselves particularly for a wide range of themes that cannot be visualised through object-oriented exhibitions²².

3.2 *New museology*

Modern technology has been introduced to perfect the narrative and ecological display types. Interactive dynamic exhibits have become an indispensable technique in didactic exhibitions, while audio-animatronics has been introduced in the field of evocative exhibitions. The perfection of these two approaches, however, has led to a development in exhibition design in opposite direction. This development is sometimes referred to as 'new museology'. Characteristic of this approach is the introduction of political content into the displays. The public is shown how the past may be manipulated and misrepresented for present purposes. 'The reconstruction technique is an excellent tool to promote nostalgia, but it is not a basis for an understanding of the past' (Ruddel 1991). In a similar way Horne speaks of the potentially liberating role of museum in the future through the diversification of more pluralistic approaches to knowledge (Horne in Boylan ed. 1992).

Usually, the exhibition speaks out as 'a disembodied voice, responsible to no one and representing the views of no one identifiable individual' (Davis & Gibb 1988: 43). If we are to avoid this illusion, the name(s) of the person(s) responsible for the exhibition should be displayed at the beginning, along with a statement of way the subject was chosen (see also Horne in Boylan ed. 1992: 73; Leone 1983).

Exhibition design should emphasise authorship and changing perceptions of the artefactual past. In this approach ambiguity and uncertainty should play a role in museum exhibitions. 'Ambiguity might, in fact, be one of the few hopes for creating more open institutions, because if you operate and embrace ambiguity and ambivalence, you can ignore borders between one way of thinking and another' (Sims²³). These words echo the pervading of a new kind of open-ended questioning in museums. Museums are supposed to make their methods clear. 'One of the tasks of experts in museums is to discover and record all the information carried and emitted by a museum item. The visitor, meanwhile, must make an effort in line with his sensibility to accept and be receptive, to develop within himself a sensitivity towards the message which at a given moment appears useful and important' (Maroevic 1983: 240).

²¹ J.Swiecimski, The theory of the museum exhibition (unpublished manuscript).

²² A strong object-orientation in natural history museums has been mentioned as one of the main drawbacks in the introduction of topical issues like pollution and bio-engineering. See: Natuurbeschermingsraad, *Natuur- en milieueducatie in musea* (Utrecht 1990). See also, for example, Martin Schärer's account of an exhibition about hunger in the Alimenterium, Vevey (Schärer 1988). How to depict lack of food in a conventional way?

²³ In a discussion on 'Context and commitment', published in *Museum News* 69, 1990, (5).

In its policy document of 1980 the Maritiem Museum at Rotterdam adopted the same approach: 'The museum must make its own interpretations transparent and make clear the subjectivity of them. The visitor must be offered the opportunity to confront his own, perhaps differing, conclusions with the museum's views. (..) To be able to pursue such a discussion, the visitor must be 'armed' with a certain quantity of basic knowledge. Only then is it possible for him to test the reliability of the structure of opinions and conclusions which forms the basis of each exhibition'. In a similar way Nevling (1983) proposes 'orientation centres' in museums on the model of visitor centres in nature parks. The basic assumption is that before critical thinking can be introduced in history museums, visitors need some understanding of the historian's craft. In addition they should understand the 'museologist's craft'. Demonstrating the historical research process, as well as the museological choices through exhibits emphasising logic rather than objects and discoveries, enfranchises people with the means to see for themselves how pasts are composed, how their history has been shaped by the present to form, in fact, their own identity²⁴.

3.3 Redemptive aesthetics

Paradoxically the innovating impetus is expected from aesthetics: '... we sometimes forget that it is an art we are producing ... the synthesis of the entire exhibit is a single, composite creative act - a work of conceptual art' (Rabinowitz 1991). This means a new approach to exhibition design. The new approach has been referred to as *redemptive aesthetic* by Shanks and Tilley: 'We must retain heterogeneity and difference, the fragmentary and discontinuous reality of the past as a means of overcoming the ideological effects of a reified object world, past and present' (Shanks & Tilley 1987: 97). So, artefacts are broken from fixed chronological narrative and from their original contexts and reassembled with contemporary artefacts similarly decontextualised (Korff 1984; Shanks & Tilley 1987: 98). In his visionary essay on the future of museums, Eckhard Siepmann speaks of the museum as "Raumgefüge [based on] ding-generierter Assoziations-felder, interagierender Sphären, Montagen und Verfremdungen"²⁵. Exaggeration, irony, humour and absurdity are introduced as means of stripping the self-evident meaning of the artefact of its power²⁶.

A new museology emerges from this post-modernist thinking, and a new exhibition language becomes visible. 'Are museums still necessary?', asked Charles Watkins in *Curator* (Watkins 1994). His answer is: yes, but only when they function as 'true museums', which means restoring the 'centrality of objects'. 'Instruction through objects' as advocated by Watkins, should not follow the traditional lines of development as mentioned before. Museums should leave the "Gutenberg-Galaxy" (Siepmann) with its lineary and objectivistic methodologies. They should challenge and provoke visitors in a pleasurable and exciting way as an unique contribution to the moulding of the consciousness of the society by stimulating individual

²⁴ Leone 1983. See also Reque 1978. Reque describes the project 'Reading museum exhibits' (Field Museum of Natural History) in which the idea of critical analysis of exhibitions is implemented.

²⁵ E.Siepmann, 'Räume gegen die Beschleunigung. Zu einer Poetik des Museums', <http://www.icf.de/wba/poetik1.html>. Elsewhere Siepmann describes this "poetics of the museum" as "performative turn" (Siepmann 2001).

²⁶ Bann (1988) speaks of the *ironic museum* 'in which we oscillate between the different varieties of imaginative projection that are required'. This approach has also been described as 'deconstructivism' which aim it is to liberate the 'Gefühlsinhalt' of the object.

persons and communities within the society to link together past and present in the perspective of the future, and to identify themselves with indispensable structural changes and calling forth others appropriate to their particular socio-cultural context.

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