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Museums as Theater: What about Musical Instruments?

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In the model we inherited from the nineteenth century, museums are devoted to the study and conservation of objects, presented for the silent contemplation of reverential visitors. For at least two decades, however, awareness has grown among many "general" museums (of art, but also of science or history) of the theatricality inherent to the very concept of exhibition. This follows from a greater emphasis on the visitor rather than on the collections. The social role of the museum has evolved greatly, and the curator's responsibility today is no longer limited to scientific dimensions of knowledge and preservation of objects. The new role includes transmission to the public through verbal text and, increasingly, through various technological devices. It also includes a "staging" of objects and a call for participation by the visitor. In retrospect, one realizes that even the classical model of the museum, born in the eighteenth century and consolidated in the nineteenth, already had a strong dimension of theatricality, for instance for the Altes Museum in Berlin designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel:

> Schinkel's sketch of the Altes interior demonstrates his intention to orchestrate the museum space as theatrical. He depicts the grand architectural institution as one which dignifies the passage of the museum viewer.[42]
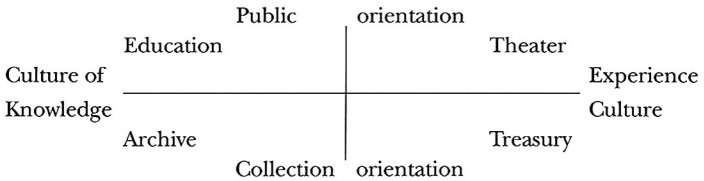
And not only the architecture refers to a classical model going back to antiquity. Within the museum itself, staging has much deeper roots in religious practices, as Preziosi and Farago remarked:

> Crudely stated, aesthetic discourse was a general extension and transformation of activities rooted in sensory experience that had long been associated in both theory and practice with the devotional function of religious images. In its European context, the transformation of long standing religious routines into (allegedly) secular set of practices revolved around subjective experiences with art as such.[43]

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42. Valerie Casey, "Staging Meaning: Performance in the Modern Museum," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 3 (2005): 82.

43. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004): 5.

The modern museum can be defined through a paradigmatic model proposed by the Swedish researcher Magdalena Hillström, which precisely integrates the theatrical aspect as one of the fundamentals of the museum. Two oppositions govern this scheme, between collections and public on one axis, and between educational and experiential functions on the other axis. Thereby, four museological identities are proposed, which I translate freely as Education, Theater, Archive, and Treasury.[44]

	Public	orientation	
	Education		Theater
Culture of			Experience
Knowledge			Culture
	Archive		Treasury
	Collection	orientation	

These functions are not mutually exclusive, and the accent can be placed anywhere in the square, reflecting the relative weight of one of the functions without excluding the others. This approach shows that collections can be presented either in an archival context (addressed for instance to a more specialized audience) or staged in the form of a "treasury," close then to the theatrical function. Similarly, highlighting the audience allows for a wide variety of approaches, from the didactic program to the entertainment aspect. Any museum evolves somewhere in between these poles, and understanding these functions should improve its positioning and relevance within society. A similar idea is expressed by Preziosi and Farago:

> For the museum is not only a cultural artifact made up of other cultural artifacts; museums serve as theater, encyclopedia, and laboratory for simulating (demonstrating) all manner of causal, historical and (surreptitiously) teleological relationships. As such, museums are "performances"—pedagogical and political in nature.[45]

44. Magdalena Hillström, "Arvtagarna: minnen och museipolitik vid Nordiska museet och Skansen kring 1902," in *Kulturarvens dynamik: det institutionaliserade kulturarvets förändringar,* ed. Peter Aronsson and Magdalena Hillström (Norrköping: Linköpings universitet, 2005): 98–110, at 105. The exact terms used by Hillström are "Folkhögskolan" (Folk High School), "Teatern," "Arkivet" and "Skattkammaren," and the two horizontal poles are "Lärdomskultur" and "Upplevelsekultur," I am grateful to Madeleine Modin from the Department of Culture and Aesthetics (Stockholm University) for pointing out to me this interesting article.

45. Preziosi and Farago, *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum,* 5.

Museums have thus become aware of the performativity inherent in the exhibition process. This is implicit in the architecture of the space and the exhibition design, but also in the works themselves, which are considered not as static objects but as the result of a process. To use the words of a contemporary artist, Rafael Lozano Hammer:

> Art is not just an object, it's a process, it's an event, it's a performance. . . . I want museums to understand that the visual arts are performing arts, that painting and sculpture are closer to theatre, closer to performance art, closer to music than unfortunately they were designed to present.[46]

Contemporary visual arts have shown a strong shift towards more immaterial and time-based forms: video art, sound art, installations and performances. The museum has incorporated all these new forms of art and has had therefore to integrate exhibition dimensions not considered until now: sound, time, the ephemeral character of works, and the ambiguous status of the documentation of the work which sometimes merges with the work itself. Museums of contemporary art, in a perpetual recycling of the past, have looked for ways to revive these performances, usually created in the ephemeral contexts of lofts or galleries of the 1960s, in the form of "re-enactments."[47] These reconstructions distinguish themselves from theatrical or musical interpretations because they are not merely the re-presentation of an existing score, but are seen as a true recreation aimed at reviving—almost in the religious sense of the term and in a somewhat illusory way—the unpredictability and uniqueness of the moment of the birth of the work. They highlight a very strange relation to the audience (as participant? as witness?) and to the past: "Not quite live, not quite dead, these re-enactments have introduced a zombie time into these institutions . . . the events seem both real and unreal, documentary and fictive."[48]

The Museum as Performance Art

Not purely visual, nor theater in the traditional sense, these performances demonstrate that the distinction between the arts has become

46. Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual-Leone, eds., *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space* (Langham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014): 349, 343.

47. Such as Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces,* which presented performances from several conceptual artists from the sixties in 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

48. Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London: Verso, 2015): 127.

more opaque, certainly the case since the Futurists, Dada, and all the avant-gardes of the twentieth century. As a consequence, museums have been looking at new models governing their activity. And curiously enough, it is a musical concept, invented by a composer, that seems to adhere best to museums' present goals:

> If we ask ourselves what institutional form the classical avant-garde proposed as an alternative for the traditional museum, the answer is clear: it is the Gesamtkunstwerk. . . . Wagner understands the Gesamtkunstwerk precisely as a way of resynchronizing the finiteness of human existence with its cultural representation—which, in turn, also becomes finite.[49]

Besides the acknowledgment of the finite nature of artworks—which in the classical conception were considered as eternal and immutable, the Gesamtkunstwerk idea is in line with the most recent museological trends of the "multi-sensory museum." The aim of this concept is to gradually free the museum from the pre-eminence of the visual sense, which until now was considered as the only means capable of conveying the true meaning of the artwork. If Heraclitus said that "the eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears," this tradition has evidently been pursued until now, as noted by the contemporary art curator Germano Celant:

> Displays and exhibitions rely almost totally on the primacy of seeing and observing, of walking and exploring, as if the only source of understanding were observation of the image accompanied at times by writing, since both—by ancient and philosophical tradition—are more dependable on the plane of reason and thought.[50]

New approaches are emerging today, describing the museum as a holistic and global experience, where the senses together contribute to a richer and more engaging feeling for the visitor: "The acoustic and sensory information provokes an amplified awareness of the tonal qualities of places and bodies, and therefore of the world."[51]

This is the whole meaning of immersive works or installations, sometimes conceived as works themselves (in the case of museums of contemporary art), sometimes as devices for conveying external contents

49. Boris Groys, "Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk," *E-Fluxjournal* (blog), accessed May 15, 2017, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59974/entering-the-flow-museum-between-archive-and-gesamtkunstwerk/.

50. Germano Celant, "Art or Sound: From the Multilingual to the Multisensory," in *Art or Sound Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Germano Celant (Venice: Fondazione Prada, 2014): 18.

51. Celant, 21.

(as many museums of history and science do and, increasingly, art museums too).

Curiously, music museums and certainly most of the collections of musical instruments have remained at a distance from what Groys calls "the slow morphing of museums themselves into a stage." Such collections have not fully integrated the performative power of museums, even though they contain the perfect objects for this purpose. The question of playing the instruments obviously comes to mind, and on that level, most of our museums have done fairly substantial work on evaluating and preventing the risks inherent to these actions, according to museum ethics. And I do not dispute at all the limits posed by these ethics, which mark precisely the difference between museums' and musicians' instruments. But playing is but one device among others allowing one to grasp the object in its totality, in a process that fully engages the visitor. We frequently suffer the reproach that our instruments are static, inert, mute and therefore "dead." And it is probably true that we do not give the full measure of what the object conceals, through explanation or narrative, on the educational or the experiential side of instruments, to refer to Hillström's scheme. Indeed, we use audio-visual devices, sound contents (sometimes recorded on the instruments themselves or copies) and tactile tools, usually primarily for the visually impaired. Thanks to MIMO, MINIM, and our own databases, we have accomplished pioneering work on digital access to our collections, including not only descriptions of our instruments, but also photos, sound, and sometimes video. But to quote Boris Groys again, we have not fully considered all the consequences of this "digital museum," which gives access, at least virtually, to all our collections, without having to visit the museum building itself:

> The relationship between internet and museum radically changes if we begin to understand the museum not as a storage place for artworks, but rather as a stage for the flow of art events. Indeed, today the museum has ceased to be a space for contemplating non-moving things. Instead, the museum has become a place where things happen.[52]

The paradox is that among all museums objects, musical instruments are perhaps the most theatrical, precisely because of the physical engagement they imply. But our exhibition modes remain relatively conventional, sometimes more than for other works of art. Among these performative aspects that we ought to develop, there is the gestural, haptic

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52. Groys, "Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk."

relation, which is very important for a visitor confronted with a musical instrument: without gesture, there's (generally) no sound! How do we deal with this conundrum? Yes, we do have some models of piano or harpsichord mechanisms, but do we really relate this to sound and music, beyond the scientific description of the hardware? How about emotional aspects linked to gesture, and their relation to sound? A musical instrument can be intimidating, familiar, pleasurable, etc. Curiously, even science museums now start to consider these dimensions in rethinking the relation of the visitors to their objects.[53]

Revealing Hidden Contexts

Another issue is the "hidden" context of the work: we know that in essence the museum is not the natural place of any of the objects it contains, except perhaps for some modern or contemporary works conceived from the outset by artists for museums. We would probably all agree that introducing this original context provides a better understanding of the work itself. But this provides another argument for the recognition of the theatrical dimension of the museum:

> Often this original context included such aspects as sound, movement, audience involvement with the object, sometimes involving manipulation and a tactile sense, a sense of space or theatrical staging, a sense of timing, strategic lighting to effect the proper sensory reading, and important olfactory elements contributing to the understanding of the work. . . . Contextualization of the object in the art museum ought to address the entirety of the art form itself in all its integration and the history of the specific object from conception to material fact, and beyond, to ownership and audience.[54]

So, how can we make all these dimensions perceptibly attractive to the visitor without falling into heavy didacticism or into commercially driven entertainment? We can already envisage that three-dimensional digital visualization tools and virtual reality navigation processes could offer the visitor the possibility of manipulating almost all of our objects, or their "avatar" (rather than facsimile), to touch them, or even to play them virtually. Self-learning techniques and artificial intelligence should enable

53. As for instance, during a recent seminar at the London Science Museum's Research and Public History department, with the participation of Sam Alberti, Helen Graham and Simon Schaffer (May 10, 2017).

54. Frederic John Lamp, quoted in: Levent and Pascual-Leone, *The Multisensory Museum*, 356–57.

us to actually produce music, without having ever played the instrument. Similarly, augmented reality tools should allow us to locate the object in its context, from which the museum has necessarily extracted it, thus recreating another "staged experience." Starting from technologies that audiences are familiar with (like smartphones, headsets, projections, GPS-location, video games, and many others), museums should use the familiarity with these systems to guide their audiences to new content. For instance, why wouldn't the objects in storage be available through a complex discovery game? Why couldn't motion-capture systems be used to locate, seize, and exhibit objects, allowing the visitor to curate his/her own 3-D virtual exhibition, which could possibly be shared and physically displayed?

This requires resources, and it is certain that in many collections of instruments or museums these resources are lacking, or not a high priority. But for organological research, there is an urgent need to foster new collaborations, especially with other museums, universities, research centers, and private partners, including tech firms and software developers, not only to benefit from their know-how and resources, but also to gain from external views coming from professionals outside our intellectual universe.