

# The “reflexive museum” – opening the door to behind the scenes

In the course of his doctoral research, **Philipp Schorch** has been thinking deeply about how exhibitions are generated. To highlight his conceptualisation of exhibitions as ‘processes’, here he considers examples from German museums, which deliberately aim to advance the public understanding of scholarly research.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I argue for a shift in conceptualising exhibitions: from *products* to be presented to *processes* to be revealed. I will explore how museum theory and practice are inextricably intertwined and can be brought into fruitful dialogue within an exhibition setting. By revealing the processes leading to the definition of categories and the interpretation of identities, and by giving ‘faces’ to decisions made, the ‘reflexive museum’ can become an embodiment of democracy, which does not silence controversies but gives diversity public voices. The ‘reflexive museum’ as I envisage it, by referring to Beck and Bonss’ ‘reflexive modernity’ (2001), is not only self-aware, but confronts, critiques, questions and ultimately transforms itself and invites the visitor to democratically participate in this process.

First, I sketch out recent academic musings on museological approaches. Then I present some examples of exhibitions in Germany in which these theories have been put into practice. I conclude by arguing for a symbiotic relationship between museum theory and practice, enabling the museum to realise its unique potential as a dynamic ‘playground’ located between scholarly thinking and the public.

## MUSEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Global realities, such as the looming environmental collapse, inter-religious, inter-racial and inter-ethnic conflicts, and the shattered capitalist system, highlight the fact that no single perspective or truth can be established or maintained. And yet, it seems that museums perceive this inevitable holistic outlook as a threat to their authority, rather than a terrain they are well equipped to explore. Mason (2006) argues that, ‘museums contribute to our understanding of these theoretical points by enabling us to see the processes in practice’ (p. 22). It is therefore somewhat surprising that there has been no museological attempt to thematise the current financial and economic meltdown, already regarded as a major recession. It is equally remarkable that we can survey a myriad of war memorials embodying patriotic sentiments without uncovering a museum exhibition dealing fully with the topic of ‘war’ itself in all its nuances.

Various scholars have called for a museological shift from pedagogic to ‘performative’ forms of democracy (Cameron, 2006; Chakrapathy, 2002; Gregory & Witcomb, 2007). In other words, museums are required to move from a one-sided education of their visitors to a multidimensional engagement with the public. Bal (as cited in Mason, 2006) moves another step forward by stating that, “museums would do well to foreground their own histories and contexts within the space of their displays,” which she calls the ‘metamuseal function’ (p. 28). Message (2006) supports such assertion, and by referring to Te Papa, she argues that, “making a display of its own story in order to tell the interaction between institution and community would offer an extremely effective embodiment of biculturalism” (p.183).

Many examples around the world reveal the different approaches which harmonise museum practice with such theoretical arguments, by developing from ‘self-representation’ to ‘reflexive representation’ (Pieterse, 1997) and from an ‘informing museology’ to a ‘performing museology’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006). Macdonald and Basu (2007) provide an overview of contemporary ‘exhibition experiments’, insisting that any exhibitionary practice generates, rather than reproduces, knowledge and experience. I will now present some examples of exhibitions in Germany in which such theoretical foundation has been put into practice.

## THE CENTRE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES AT THE DEUTSCHES MUSEUM, MUNICH

The modern subjection to an omniscient science has been proven illusory. In other words, science constantly produces more questions rather than providing ultimate answers. Furthermore, the isolated nature of scientific research is questioned and unsustainable if we consider the multi-faceted repercussions of breakthroughs simultaneously celebrated and feared, such as nuclear energy or genetic engineering. Science itself has become a controversy.

Recent museological trends address this complexity by democratising and opening up the sciences through programmes such as 'the public understanding of research'. Science itself is presented as an ongoing and unfinished process closely linked to other spheres of society and never free of political and ethical controversy. Dialogical and multi-perspective forms of exhibitionary representation and communication facilitate the dialogue between research and the public, by moving from facts to processes and opinions.

The Centre of New Technologies at the Deutsches Museum in Munich is one example of utilising the medium of the 'museum' to generate such dialogue. The Centre is designed as a flexible platform focussing on up-to-date interdisciplinary themes and controversies. Diverse programmes linking exhibitions, presentations, discussions and live video conferences explore the ambiguous character of science and its political, social and cultural ramifications. New media are applied in 'dialogue stations' to actively involve visitors and their opinions. The latest project, 'scientific transparency', incorporates a laboratory and working scientists within the exhibition setting, providing insights into the processes of scientific research (Hauser, 2005).

## TRAVELLING AND DISCOVERING: FROM THE SEPIK TO THE MAIN, MUSEUM OF WORLD CULTURES, FRANKFURT-AM-MAIN

The exhibition *Travelling and discovering: From the Sepik to the Main* at Frankfurt's Museum of World Cultures – Museum der Weltkulturen – is an ethnographic example of conceptualising exhibitions as *processes* on a more modest scale. I personally visited the Museum which has the following introduction posted on its website:

Visitors are invited to enter the flow of time and undertake a journey in the company of the exhibits. We'll start on the Sepik River at the beginning of the 1960s to gain a view into male and female spheres of life and an understanding of the institution of the men's house. Continuing our way we will gain impressions of the collecting activities of the researchers in the field. A series of photos will introduce us to the transport of the collection from the Sepik River to the Main. As an exemplary mode of the presentation of ethnographic objects in a museum the style of the 1960s is reconstructed: considered as scientific evidence objects are staged in the form of dioramas with photos and text panels. At the end of the journey all objects have become 'pure' works of art and have arrived in the gallery of the present. In a replicated museum's storeroom visitors will have the opportunity to get more information on the exhibits. An explorer's handbook will help children to find the way to their own research station where they can touch things themselves.

We see that museological activities are portrayed as ambiguous and dynamic *processes* rather than unequivocal *products*. The exhibition functions as a medium to open the door to 'behind the scenes', to both museum discourse and museum agency. Visitors are invited to engage with the *processes* leading to the definition and re-definition of object categories and the interpretation and re-interpretation of objects - the journey from scientific specimen to 'pure' art. The roles of anthropologist and curator are humanised by providing insights into their respective professions and the encounter between researcher and researched is explored and substantiated. The exhibition fulfils Bal's 'metamuseal function'. It embodies the museum's own history and the contexts of its collections within the displays. By leaving these processes open-ended, a 'reflexive representation' and a 'performing museology' are enacted.

## SPECTACLE OF POWER: RITUALS IN OLD EUROPE 800- 1800, MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY, MAGDEBURG

The last example I want to refer to, which I have also visited personally, epitomises the unique position of museums at the interface between the academic world and the public. The exhibition *Spectacle of Power: Rituals in Old Europe 800-1800* represents an intriguing approach to exploit the 'exhibition' medium to open the doors of academe to the public, another step leading towards the 'public understanding of research'. The following introduction is posted on the website of the Museum of Cultural History – Kulturhistorisches Museum:

No matter whether a head of state is sworn in or a Pope elected, a party congress opened or an anniversary celebrated – rituals of power can be seen everywhere in today's society. Contemporary critics might interpret them as mere media spectacles that reveal little about what politics is "really" all about. But are rituals really superfluous spectacles? Are they traditional relics of past times that we no longer need today? Or is there no power without such public spectacles, no political order without rituals? The importance of rituals can only be understood adequately in their historical context. A comparison with the medieval and early modern periods lets us see more clearly what rituals are, what effect they have and how they act, what has remained the same and what has changed over time.

For quite some time now the field of symbolic communication has furnished innovative subject matter for cultural research. Key ideas from this research have now for the first time provided the

substance for an exhibition, which represents a cooperative project of the Museum of Cultural History in Magdeburg and the Special Research Department 496 at the University of Münster. The basis for the project is an intensive cooperation between university and museum in all areas of the planning and execution of the exhibition.

It becomes apparent that the theme of the 'spectacle of power' is the point of departure for this exhibition. The introduction highlights the fact that this topic is both of tangible relevance to any modern citizen and an object of academic scrutiny. This example shows us how, in Mason's (2006) words, "museums contribute to our understanding of these theoretical points by enabling us to see the processes in practice" (p.22). The academic field of 'symbolic communication' is visualised and materialised within the spaces of the museum's display. This enables a theoretical concept to become tangible and relevant to the public, generating a public understanding of research. The subject matter is presented as an on-going and ever changing *processs*, and the historical chronology is linked to the contemporary significance of 'spectacle of power' in visitors' lives. The exhibition opens the door to academic activity and invites the visitor to enter this sphere. *Spectacle of power: Rituals in Old Europe 800-1800* highlights the central role of museums connecting

### WEBSITES:

Deutsches Museum, Munich

<http://www.deutsches-museum.de/en/information/>

Museum der Weltkulturen, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

<http://www.mdw-frankfurt.de/English/>

[http://www.mdw-frankfurt.de/English/Ausstellungen/Travelling\\_and\\_discovering\\_From\\_the\\_Sepik\\_to\\_the\\_Main/index.phtml](http://www.mdw-frankfurt.de/English/Ausstellungen/Travelling_and_discovering_From_the_Sepik_to_the_Main/index.phtml)

Museum of Cultural History Magdeburg

<http://www.khm-magdeburg.de/>

Exhibition page for Spectacle of Power: Rituals in Old Europe 800–1800

<http://www.spektakeldermacht.de/e/cover.html>

[http://www.spektakeldermacht.de/e/10\\_introduction.html](http://www.spektakeldermacht.de/e/10_introduction.html) (text)

academe and the public. It provides some insights into how this interface can be turned into a dynamic 'playground' engaging the various actors of society.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I set out to argue for a shift in conceptualising exhibitions: from *products to be presented* to *processes to be revealed*. Using example exhibitions, I explored how museum theory and practice are interlinked and mutually dependent. The museum was presented as a medium to enable the humanisation of theory and the academic world, to open the doors to behind the scenes and to facilitate a 'public understanding of research'. But despite scholarly attention to embodied experiences (Cameron, 2006; Gregory & Witcomb, 2007), exhibitions mainly communicate in a detached and impersonal mode, failing to give 'faces' to the people involved. They continue to reify culture and nature, academe and the public.

McCarthy (2007) shows in *Exhibiting Māori* that museological transformation has always taken place and has always been linked to wider societal change. The 'reflexive museum' lays these processes open,

not retrospectively but while they actually happen, and thus becomes a forum for democratic participation. According to Gorbey (2006), the museum is a place, "where scholarship is given public expression." The 'reflexive museum' goes further and acknowledges that scholarship's main function, as Latour (cited in Beck & Bonss, 2001) argues, is not to silence controversies but to give diversity of perspectives public voices and thus to facilitate democracy.

Originally from Germany, **Philipp Schorch** joined the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 2006 as Manager Te Papa Tours. He is currently working on a PhD study in partnership with Victoria University of Wellington and Te Papa and was awarded a Bright Future Enterprise Scholarship by the Tertiary Education Commission Te Amorangi Matauranga Matua.

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