

The museum as catalyst

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As museums look to the future they are redefining their relationship to their past. New models of citizenship, changes in knowledge formations, and competing media environments have challenged museums to rethink both what they are as a medium and their role in society. I will explore three approaches to these issues:

- First, some museums attempt to forget their past as a museum and start a fresh page as a new kind of institution. In the process, they may search for a different genealogy and find a past in world's fairs that is better suited to how they envision themselves as a medium. After considering two cases—the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington and the American Museum of Natural History in New York—I explore paradigmatic shifts that have redefined the relationship of information to experience, knowing to feeling, and things to stories, consistent with a more theatrical approach to the museum experience.
- Second, some view the museum as a distinctive medium and historical formation in its own right. Museums such as the Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia and the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen embrace the museum's past, reflect on it, and discover unrealized possibilities in older often outmoded or repudiated practices.
- Third, contemporary art has blurred the distinction between artist and curator, treated the museum as an art practice in its own right, and developed concepts and models such as the project and the social sculpture. Prime examples are *The Gun Sculpture*, which was part of the Canada Pavilion at Expo 2000 in Hanover, and *Difficult Matters: Objects and Narratives that Disturb and Affect*,

which was organized by Riksställningar, Swedish Travelling Exhibitions and SAMDOK.

I. *The Expo Model*

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Why would a museum flee from its past? New models of citizenship prompted New Zealand to create a new national museum, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, by amalgamating two institutions, the National Museum and the National Gallery.¹ In abandoning two historic buildings prominently situated on a hill overlooking the city and forming a new entity in a new building in a new location, the new national museum also jettisoned the history of compartmentalization that those buildings represented. The National Museum had housed natural history and the culture of indigenous peoples. The art of European settlers was in the National Gallery. Museums in New Zealand have been forced to reconceptualize and restructure themselves in response to the Maori renaissance, the development of a policy of biculturalism, and more recent shift to new right economics forced.

From a New Zealand perspective there was no way to reform old museums. A revolution, not an evolution, was called for and Te Papa rejected its past as a museum. Entering a new pavilion-style building on landfill along the waterfront of Wellington, visitors find not a trace of Te Papa's earlier incarnation as the National Museum and National Gallery. Instead, an exhibition entitled *Exhibiting Ourselves* locates the new national museum with a history of New Zealand's appearances at world's fairs, from the Crystal Palace in 1851 to Seville in 1992. *Exhibiting Ourselves* carried the implicit message that Te Papa was New Zealand's most recent pavilion by tracing a distinguished genealogy for Te Papa and using it as a mandate for Te Papa's expo style. It is after all at world's fairs, more than in museums, that New Zealand has historically performed its national self-image, one of the purposes of Te Papa.

Moreover, world's fairs are more like what museums are increasingly being asked to become: "customer focused" and "commercially positive," with exhibitions driving the agenda and exciting installations a priority. While this is particularly true in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, museums in Continental Europe, which have historically enjoyed greater state sponsorship, are gradually moving in this direction as well. Committed to attracting visitors who have never visited a museum before, but who do understand shopping malls and amusement parks, Te Papa promises the richly embodied experiences associated with such settings. One of its brochures promises to shake you, transport you, soak you, rock and roll you, blast you, move you, and feed you. Before entering any of the museum's exhibitions, visitors pass the gift shop,

destination restaurant, and Time Warp, "the entertainment heart" of the museum, which features two motion simulation rides. *Blastback* "jolts you back millions of years in a rock 'n' roll ride to witness the formation of our land" and *Future Rush* launches you into the year 2055 in Wellington. There are also a coin-operated virtual bungee jump and sheep shearing competition.²

Te Papa is but the most recent phase in a long and entangled history of world's fairs and museums. Despite the decision to reject its past as a museum and embrace its heritage as an expo, Te Papa did not deny that it was still a museum. Rather it claimed to be redefining the word museum and repositioning itself within the museum genre. As the national museum and with state funding, it was expected to make good on a new model of civil society based on the concept of biculturalism. It was to be a model of biculturalism in all respects, from its name and its two directors (one Maori and the other of European descent) to the stories it would tell and the way it would handle Maori treasures. Consistent with its civic mission, the centrepiece of this museum is the Treaty of Waitangi, which was signed by Maori chiefs and representatives of the British crown in 1840. The Treaty of Waitangi is the charter document for the formation of New Zealand as a political entity and, since its 150th anniversary in 1990, it has become the touchstone for an intensified commitment to biculturalism.

American Museum of Natural History. If new models of citizenship and new forms of national self-understanding made old museum arrangements untenable, new knowledge formations have made museums custodians of the outmoded disciplines materialized in their collections. The American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan has addressed this issue by transforming its geology gallery, which once featured systematic collections of rocks, into the spectacular Gottesman Hall of Planet Earth and making the Hayden Planetarium into the dazzling digital centrepiece of the new Rose Center for Earth and Space, a transparent glass extension to the museum.

The challenge here is how to convey theories, concepts (red giants, white dwarfs, black holes, big bangs, dark energy, invisible galaxies, cosmic time and space), and discoveries of astrophysics and astronomy, which are very difficult to fathom under the best of conditions, and how to do so in the absence of conventional museum artifacts. One of the few artifacts is the Willamette Meteorite, which weighs more than fifteen tons. Acquired by the museum in 1906, it is in dispute. The museum recently signed an agreement with the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon, which considers the meteorite as its patrimony. The agreement stipulates that in exchange for the Tribe's dropping the repatriation claim, the

museum would display the meteorite with a label explaining what it means to the Clackamas, who call it "Tomanowos."³

While the meteorite is a tangible fragment of the solar system and a spectacular object, it does not in itself tell the larger story that is the organizing principle for the major exhibits in the Rose Center. Those exhibits attempt to convey the timeline of the universe and its scale by having visitors walk down a spiral ramp. The ramp is punctuated by computer terminals and lined with a cosmic tape measure. Planets hang in the space as points of scalar reference. Manhattan is visible through the floor to ceiling glass curtain walls. Multimedia installations and films at the base of the ramp-- and a digital dome in the state-of-the-art Space Theatre--attempt to convey such basic concepts as stars, planets, and galaxies and theories of the beginnings of space and time, the edges of the universe as we know it, the evolution of the universe, and our own origins in the hearts of stars. The museum has become a new kind of information space, one that puts information into space and into a relationship with the visitor's body.

II. *Paradigmatic Shifts*

Te Papa and the American Museum of Natural History exemplify several principles of what might be called the expo mode of the new generation museum. This mode is by its very nature theatrical. Consistent with a theatrical approach, this mode marks new relationships between:

- information and experience
- display and *mise-en-scène*
- things and stories
- thinking and feeling
- hard mastery and soft mastery
- identity and identification
- visitor and customer

Information and experience. The information space of the museum has historically taken the form of taxonomic displays of specimens, developmental series of artifacts, and chronological and national arrangements of art. Replicas, facsimiles, models, and diagrams, whether as alternatives or supplements to original artifacts, give priority to information over aura, though models, as they become artifacts in their own right, can come to have aura in their own right.

New information technologies, including digitized collections, electronic databases, and online access, provide greater information in a more accessible format than exhibitions. Museum galleries cannot compete with them on that ground, even by incorporating new information media into the gallery itself.

Since electronic information can be accessed from anywhere, why waste precious exhibition real estate and visitor attention on computers in the gallery? Screens, whether for accessing databases or projecting images, are now common in exhibitions although their effectiveness has yet to be properly assessed. Museums need to provide an experience in high contrast to clicking on a screen if visitors are to be drawn away from their computers and into the galleries.

Display and mise-en-scène. In contrast with taxonomic displays and electronic databases, habitat displays are prime examples of museum theatre and draw on such theatrical practices as scenography, *mise-en-scène*, and tableau. The histories of theatre, cinema, museums, and world's fairs converge in habitat displays.⁴ As they have become historical and acquired an aura of their own, some museums have retained them even though they are actually quite limited in the information they can convey and may even represent ideas that have come under considerable criticism.⁵ They continue to be popular with children and adults alike.

Museum theatre, understood as the theatrical nature of the entire situation (and not only particular techniques like the habitat group), has become a dominant mode in the expo style of the new generation museum. This mode gives precedence to drama (narrative and emotional engagement) and *mise-en-scène* (installation). Objects are selected for their iconic value as props to support the story. This is a special kind of theatre and its point is not information but "experience," a term that is at once ubiquitous and undertheorized. "Experience" indexes the sensory, somatic, and emotional engagement that we associate with theatre, world's fairs, amusement parks, and tourism. Museums such as Te Papa and the American Museum draw upon their techniques, even as popular entertainment draws upon the museum, to note only the linking of casinos and museums (and the incorporation of museums into Disney's Epcot).⁶

It is no accident that at the Hanover 2000 Exposition, those who create the exhibitions are called scenographers and some of the theme pavilions were curated by artists and museum professionals.⁷ They do not display objects. They create a *mise-en-scène*, a situation, a scenario--a total environment. Such environments, whether the glass cube of the Rose Center or the black box of the Gottesman Hall of Planet Earth, are immersive, absorbing, and affecting. Quite apart from the concepts and information they set out to convey, such installations are stimulating in their own right. This is a first principle in the work of leading exhibition designer Ralph Appelbaum, who strives for "the greatest possible fusion of the exhibition subject and the design environment in which it is presented. Through architectural metaphor and all environmental means at our disposal, we seek to go beyond the presentation of artifacts,

specimens, and information to create atmospheres of intrigue, inspiration, and beauty that immerse visitors in some of the less tangible qualities of an exhibition's subject."⁸ To that end, Appelbaum uses explicitly theatrical techniques. Describing his approach to the permanent installation at the United States Holocaust Museum, he said, "the exhibition itself was designed theatrically in three acts."⁹

Things and stories. In addition to exhibiting collections, which has historically been their role, museums create exhibitions for which there are few artifacts. Exhibitions driven by a concept or story, a legacy of expos, refuse to limit themselves to what is in a collection. They may, as a matter of principle, refuse to form collections or exhibit real things or, consistent with Appelbaum's approach, they may use things as props to support a story.

A pioneer in developing the story museum is the late Jeshajahu Weinberg, founding director of Beth Hatefutsoth and director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Weinberg insisted that the story come first and there be no restriction on the means used to convey it. Beth Hatefutsoth made it a cardinal principle to not collect and not to exhibit original objects, opting instead for dioramas, scale models, facsimiles, media, and didactic installations of various kinds. While there are some original artifacts (and castings from original artifacts) in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, they tend to be iconic and they are relatively few in number. This museum is more evidentiary and televisual than artifactual and uses environments such as the Tower of Faces, the footbridges and train, and the casting of a crematorium to balance information with emotional engagement. As Appelbaum explained, "Artifacts, documents, photographs, and film are treated with great straightforwardness and literalness, like evidence in a court of law. But the environments everywhere support an emotional connection, a visceral grasp of this or that aspect of what it was like to be caught in the net of the fascist state."¹⁰

In the absence of collections, what then is a museum? I posed this question to Weinberg, who answered, "A museum is a story in three-dimensional space." Not surprisingly, the same could be said of theatre, but with this critical difference. In theatre, the audience is stationary and the show moves. In the museum, the show is stationary and the visitor moves. Mode of locomotion is defining of the museum experience. Not only is a story told in three-dimensional space, but the visitor walks the plot. Not surprisingly, Weinberg was a theatre director, before he became a museum curator. Like Weinberg, Appelbaum has made narrative a hallmark of his approach to exhibition design. As Appelbaum explains, "I use the word narrative broadly, to mean not just the interpretive text associated with collections, but also the ways in which a whole environment and sequence of events, in the

museum can be used to communicate a culture's history."¹¹ This principle links narrative to *mise-en-scène*, which is fundamental to the museum as a genre of theatre.

Thinking and feeling. An emphasis on emotional engagement is not only a pedagogical principle but also consistent with a scenographic and narrative approach to installation. A first principle in the work of Appelbaum is the notion that "learning is inseparable from emotional engagement."¹² This principle has been deeply influenced by his approach. For example, Ken Gorbey, who played an instrumental role in the creation of Te Papa and is familiar with Appelbaum's work, recently directed the creation of the permanent exhibition at the new Jewish Museum in Berlin.¹³ For Gorbey, "a good museum is like a good film, a good TV program, a good piece of theatre: it is a paced experience where you have fortissimos and pianissimos. So, that is one of the things we have been looking at: where are the people going to get an adrenaline rush; where are they going to be surprised and happy; where are they going to be rather subdued and contemplative?"¹⁴ When Gorbey refers to "adrenaline rush" and to the visitor's moods (surprise, happiness, subdued, contemplative), he is indexing an important shift in exhibition philosophy from the visual and cognitive to the somatic and affective.

An historical formation, the museum tends to be conserving and conservative institution, subject to the catalyzing effects of avant-garde artists that engage and attempt to destabilize its very premises on the premises, so to speak, and to pressures (financial and otherwise) to appeal to a wider public. That public, particularly younger generations, comes to the museum with a new sensorium, one that has been shaped not only by radio, television, video, and cinema, but also the digital technologies that are a more pervasive part of their lives than is any other medium. Their capacities for multi-tasking and their thresholds for arousal are high. Not only can they respond quickly and do several things at the same time, but also their arousal threshold rises as the media that they consume deliver ever more stimulating effects. A prime site of the adrenalin rush are intense somatic experiences like "extreme rides" and "extreme adventures," which offset the cerebral manipulations of code and disembodiment of life on the screen.

What can museums, by their very nature a slow medium paced in footsteps, an orderly place of quiet contemplation and focused attention, offer a generation that Peter LaBier, an art student at Vassar College characterized as follows: "There's just this urge with kids my age to derange your senses."¹⁵ If the museum has always been a school for the senses, clearly the curriculum has changed, as have the museum's epistemology and pedagogy.

Hard and soft mastery. These developments are consistent with new approaches to interface design. Sherri Turkle, Professor of the Sociology of Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, traces two important shifts in the learning styles of software developers and the conception of interface. First, there is the shift from hard mastery to soft mastery. Second, there is the shift from a cognitive to an affective concept of interface.

Hard mastery characterizes pedagogies that proceed systematically from rules, the way that foreign languages, mathematics, and the sciences are taught. Start with the fundamentals and build from simple to complex, in an hierarchical fashion. The learning process is carefully scripted. Soft mastery, in contrast, is playful, improvisatory, exploratory, speculative, intuitive, and associative. It is more lateral than hierarchical. It proceeds by tinkering and by trial and error, more like noodling around than reading manuals and following rules. It is more like the way artists work--more like bricolage.

In an era of scientific uncertainty, the apparent "confusion" of early cabinets of curiosities was a prime site of soft mastery. With the development of systematic taxonomies and the arrangement of specimens according to them, the physical space of the museum became one of hard mastery, everything in its place within a hierarchical scheme. More recently, museums have taken a variety of approaches, from highly controlled narrative that prescribe the path visitors will take through an exhibition to more fluid and flexible arrangements that encourage visitors to follow their own interests and create their own paths through the installation.

The shift from a cognitive to an affective concept of interface reflects a significant change in how software designers understand their medium. Instead of thinking in terms of artificial intelligence and "smart" technologies, they are conceiving of machines with personality. The presumption is that interfaces will work better if they provide well-developed characters with whom users can interact. It is not enough for a machine to recognize your words and carry out your instructions. Human computer interaction will be enhanced if an agent with human attributes can actually *communicate* with humans. For "embodied conversational agents" or "realistic avatars" to be believable and effective, they need, first, to have a personality, "give the illusion of communicative *intent*" through gesture, and not only generate emotional responses but also recognize emotional responses in a human user.¹⁶ The presumption is that a human interface is the best interface (I will return to this point below in the discussion of *Difficult Matters*).

Identity and identification. Older museum regimes, as spaces of hard mastery, encouraged an attitude of detachment in the spirit of

objectivity and the museum's claim to authoritative knowledge. Responding to modes of citizenship informed by diversity policies such as multiculturalism or biculturalism, museums become instruments of identity politics and sites of redress. There has emerged a new category, "museums of conscience," for museums that deal with such subjects as genocide, slavery, apartheid, civil rights, and crimes against humanity. Some have been created by, or at the urging of, victims of injustice. Others, like *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941-1944*, which was created by the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, are part of a larger effort to confront a shameful national past.¹⁷ Others reflect the maturing of museums, according to Appelbaum, who sees "the museum in its entirety as a moral artifact—a summation not of our biological, or technical, or even artistic progress, but of our slowly evolving humanity." Museums can no longer simply celebrate history. "A new honesty" has encouraged museums to "open up for public interpretation the darker side of human society" and to do so more reflexively and self-critically.¹⁸ In this spirit, all museums could become museums of conscience in relation to their own histories, collections, and audiences. Such developments separate museums of the late twentieth century from the nineteenth-century ones that Tony Bennett characterizes as a sphere of regulation for the production of disciplined subjects.¹⁹

Thus, Te Papa proceeds from the idea that visitors come to the museum to find themselves. It follows that the museum plays an important role in affirming the cultural identities of visitors. For exhibitions to be effective, Te Papa assumes that the visitor must identify with what is shown. The visitor must feel connected or personally involved. Exhibitions based on narrative, iconic artifacts, emotional engagement, and personal relevance are well suited to the questions of individual and collective identity.

Identity operates in the sphere of cultural production not simply as a psychological category but as a way of mobilizing political claims. The National Museum of the American Indian has addressed these issues in creative ways to make the point that although their collections were predicated on the disappearance of Native Americans, Native Americans did not disappear. The meaning those collections hold for Native Americans today and the role of the museum in the survival of Native American communities are the museum's highest priorities. Their survival depends on their ability to make authoritative identity claims and on that basis to secure rights to sovereignty, land, fishing, and the proceeds from lucrative casinos, among others.

Identity questions are thus closely linked to issues of rights and redress—to conscience—and entail the kinds of institutional changes exemplified by Te Papa, which must put forward a national identity that is by definition heterogeneous. Those

changes involve representation in two senses. The issue is not only about being in the picture--the representation—but also being represented in the institution's infrastructure, on its staff, and in its audience.

Visitor and customer. When New Zealand's social welfare government gave way to new right economics, the model for the citizen became the customer and the model for the state became the market. Taxpaying citizens were customers with every right to expect services for their money. In Australia and New Zealand, following the United Kingdom model, museums such as Te Papa came to define their mission as "customer focused" and "commercially positive." I had never thought of myself as a customer in a museum and was somewhat taken aback to read in a pamphlet for the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney that I, the customer, would receive excellent service.

This language signals the museum's commitment to a business model, including the appointment of museum directors with business experience, use of management theories derived from corporate culture, and application of such marketing techniques as branding. These developments parallel what is happening in the political sphere. The most recent president of the United States brings an MBA and a career in business to the position and there are indications that the forging of national identity is becoming a matter of branding. Tony Blair declared, shortly after coming into office, that he would rebrand the United Kingdom. Heritage, the current brand, might be a great place to visit, but it was not a great place to live. As the millenium approached, the United Kingdom needed to be identified with youthful enterprise if it was to attract investment.

Customers are expected to pay, visitors are not, and having paid, customers expect value for their money. The commercially positive museum is expected to meet standards of excellence not only as regards its core mission but also as a business that provides a service. To that end, museums are undertaking such extensive market and visitor research that some of them may well know more about their visitors than about their collections. This knowledge is as important to marketing the museum as it is to the museum's educational mission.

*From an informing to a performing museology.*²⁰ As knowledge formations change and research moves into the university, museums have been left with collections that materialized outmoded knowledge, epistemologies, and pedagogies. Unless they changed, they would become doubly historical. They would become museums of themselves. Some, like Te Papa and the National Museum of the American Indian, shunned this possibility, while others embraced it.

What happens when museums embrace their history rather than work against it? Whether because of inertia, neglect, or lack of funds or because of foresight or thanks to a bequest to ensure that nothing would change, some museums have discovered that their greatest value is as an historical artifact. Among the finest examples are the Sir John Soane's Museum in London, the Tylers Museum in Haarlem, Hallwylska Palatset in Stockholm, and the Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. They have escaped obsolescence by becoming metamuseums. Each in their own way produces an utterly contemporary historicity.

With advances in medical science and changes in how doctors were trained, the Mütter Museum became obsolete and a source of embarrassment to the College of Physicians. It was no longer effective as an *informing* museology, by which I mean that it had ceased to function as a neutral vehicle for the transmission of useful information in the training of doctors. To survive it needed to devise a *performing* museology, that is, it needed to take a reflexive approach to itself in order to reveal the historical role of the museum in the teaching of medicine. This approach is a performing museology because it does not treat the museum as neutral conduit for the transmission of information but rather it makes the museum itself, as a technology and as a medium in its own right, the subject. Think of the museum, not as a place to which one brings technology, but as a technology in its own right-- a set of skills, techniques, and methods. Think of the museum as a distinctive medium, not as an empty vessel for all kinds of musealia. Consider it as a medium in its own right. A performing museology makes that medium transparent? A performing museology makes the museum perform itself by making the museum qua museum visible to the visitor. Museums do this in various ways. The Mütter Museum is one example.

The Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum is another. A museum of contemporary art that opened in 1902 as the Folkwang Museum in Hagen, KEOM has devised its own way to deal with its troubled past.²¹ After Osthaus's death in 1921, his heirs sold the collection, which contained works by Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse, van Gogh, Manet, Renoir, and others. The memory of this phantom collection haunts the work of the museum today. Under the inspired directorship of Michael Fehr, KEOM's history informs everything the museum does, but the museum does not attempt in a literal way to restore or recreate what was. Instead, KEOM thematizes the very idea of the museum through a process of self-reflection. Fehr characterizes the museum as an autopoietic system, which means that however much the museum presents what is brought into it, the museum is finally a self-referential system. This does not mean that the museum is isolated or separated from society. Rather, Fehr believes that focusing on the specificity of the museum, rather than making it conform to other media, can produce new possibilities and distinctive experiences. Treating the

museum as an art practice is one way of understanding the museum as a medium.

III. *The Project*

The project, as we know it from contemporary public art, is particularly well suited to this approach, which is closer to social sculpture than to conventional museum practice. Because everything follows from the organizing concept, form and content emerge from process. Exhibition may well not be the end, but only a phase in a process. Process is often more important than the exhibition itself. Often collaborative, projects can set new benchmarks for participation and "interactivity."

What would happen if we stopped thinking about visitors or customers, which suggests consumers, learners, absorbers, or receivers of that which has been created for them? We would then need to think about them as producers. What if exhibitions were regarded as an interface or agent or catalyst? An exhibition, if indeed the project produces an exhibition, could then be anything, but not an end in itself. Two projects--*The Gun Sculpture* and *Difficult Matters: Objects and Narratives that Disturb and Affect*--exemplify the promise of a project model.²²

The Gun Sculpture. As I was about to exit the Canadian pavilion at Expo 2000 in Hanover, I detected the smell of machine oil and followed my nose to a startling installation, *The Gun Sculpture*. I had been disappointed with Canada's pavilion, which attempted to match the sensation Canada had created with IMAX at Expo '70 in Osaka. For Canada's pavilion in Hanover, which was one of the largest at the Expo 2000, the government allocated \$25 million, ninety percent of which was for "multi-media and other installations." They included a "virtual river," a multimedia tour of Canadian subjects, involving hundreds of screens on the floor reflecting the changing seasons," a "360-degree 'multi-sensorial' theatre," where audiences were "caressed by more astonishing sound and visual effects," a "40 foot-diameter overhead screen, and eight circular screens each eight feet in diameter," and a "cyber-lounge, where 12 computer terminals are set up."²³ The result was an unimpressive high tech show with little substance.

The Gun Sculpture was a stunning exception. It is exemplary of what I mean by a project. The installation grows out of a process and is itself an agent in that process. In 1995, Sandra Bromley and Wallis Kendal, artists living and working in Edmonton, Alberta, founded the *i human 2000 Peace Initiative*, a millennium collaboration whose goal is to end violence.²⁴ They engaged youth in the project, not only in Edmonton, but also in many other countries, to contribute their experiences, writing, and images to a journal. They put out a call for weapons and documentation. More

than 45 countries responded. Using the tools of the sculptor's trade, they deactivated more than 7000 guns, grenades, land mines, knives, and artillery shells weapons. While technically scrap metal, these decommissioned weapons retained "the mystique and myth of the firearm."²⁵ The artists had to create a secure place for storing the weapons and take great care in presenting objects that are at once seductive and repellent. They welded more than five tons of deactivated weapons into a crypt in the exact proportions of a prison cell.

Everything was made out of these mutilated instruments of violence--the walls, inside and out, the floor, and the ceiling. Each weapon, still discernable and discernibly altered, exudes the pain of violence and the tragedy of death. Many of them come with a story. There is postal van bombing shrapnel from Belfast, a rubber bullet contributed by an anonymous Catholic priest from a border town in Northern Ireland, crime weapons from RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) Forensics Laboratory, and military firearms and land mines from the Canadian Department of National Defence, to mention but a few examples. There are also stories associated with the collecting of weapons. Law students in Brazil "took it upon themselves to get involved by going to the streets and collecting as many as 200 weapons. Then in a public event it was arranged for the military to drive tanks over the weapons, thereby deactivating them in a very ritualistic way."²⁶

The installation includes a videotape that documents the project, photographs of victims of violence, a guestbook, and a blackboard for visitor comments. The blackboard was photographed at intervals and then erased to make room for more comments. The total installation, including the smell of gun oil, mobilized intense feeling by making the violence of weapons so tangible and by linking them to photographs of victims and their stories. The project works as a catalyst to take concrete steps in stopping violence, starting with weapons, and as a space of witnessing, debate, reflection, and memory that is global in its reach. The collecting of weapons, creating of this particular sculpture, and the installation and exhibition of it are parts a larger process that mobilizes people all over the world. It is a prime case of what the artists call "the fine art of peacemaking."

Such projects engage their constituencies neither in the older museum mode of citizen as someone to be reformed nor in the newer one of customer expecting good service. Those who send in weapons, the youth who collaborate on the project, victims who submit their photographs and stories, and visitors who register their reactions are producers, not visitors.

*Difficult Matters: Objects and Narratives that Disturb and Affect.*²⁷ I had the opportunity to hear about *Difficult Matters* in the planning stage and was delighted to have the chance to see the

actual exhibition in Vadstena, one of its stops during the period December 1999 to September 2000. Installed in an enormous truck, the exhibition traveled throughout Sweden, making stops in the town squares. Local people going about their daily chores would pass by the truck without knowing quite what to expect, even if they had read announcements in the town paper. Their curiosity was piqued by the large stenciled letters, red and black, on each side of the white truck. With the words *SVÅRA SAKER / FARLIGA SAKER*, this clinically white box announced itself as a container of hazardous material. It was a mysterious presence in the well-preserved historic town square. It emanated a feeling of danger.

Difficult Matters, a project that includes not only the truck installation, but also seminars and publications, uses the idea of “dangerous things and difficult narratives” to animate a collaborative process. That process started with an invitation to curators to select an object from their collections and write about it. Fifty-four curators from fifty-four museums responded. Curators not only transmitted the stories that had traveled with the objects, but also conveyed their own difficulties with the material. Should some of these things even be in the museum’s collection? Even if they should be in the collection, is it proper to exhibit them? One curator sent the story but not the artifact, a skull. The place where the skull would have been displayed was empty. The curators’ dilemmas and responses became part of the object’s story.

The kinds of things that people and curators find difficult can also appeal to visitors for the wrong reasons and a powerful exhibition could become a house of horrors. How then to show a grenade, a spoon modified to cook drugs, an empty food container used by a homeless person, a tiny coffin for a dead fetus, or radioactive dirt without sensationalizing them on the one hand or provoking uncontrollable disturbance in visitors on the other? Even an object as apparently innocuous as a bottle of Evian water can be a sinister reminder of a traumatic event that contaminated the water supply. The texts, signed by those who authored them, conveyed the struggle of each curator to walk the line between his or her own professional and personal relationship to the object.

The process continued during the exhibition as some 300 visitors were inspired to bring difficult objects that were part of their own lives into the installation space. The curatorial process that began before the exhibition opened was now in the hands of visitors, who continued to produce the exhibition. This made *Difficult Matters* a truly interactive work of many authors and many voices. The fifty-four contributing curators were in a conversation not only with those who gave the objects and stories to the museum but also with those who visited the exhibition, recorded their reactions, and contributed their own objects and stories. Conceived as a “mobile

field station,” the installation was a work in progress. The exhibition was but one element, albeit an important one, in a larger process. It was a catalyst. It did not only display. It also made things happen.

This project performs much of the theory that interests me. It configures the relationship between information and experience, things and stories, thinking and feeling, and hard and soft mastery in ways that are consistent with a performing museology. In a kind of reverse engineering, it does not try to make a technological interface more personable, but rather it installs the curators within the exhibition and provides an actual human interface.

Working reflexively, *Difficult Matters* plumbs the possibilities of the museum as a distinctive medium. It too is museum theatre, but not in an expo mode. *Difficult Matters* is object performance in the sense that a thing is a slow event.²⁸ But, the exhibition is not a play in three acts. Visitors do not walk the plot. Objects are not props. They are not staged in a series of *mise-en-scènes* that carry a narrative through line. There is no orchestration of emotion between adrenaline rush and quiet contemplation. The total installation is nonetheless an expressive artifact, from the exterior of the truck that houses the exhibition down to every aspect of the installation within.²⁹

What I especially value in this exhibition is the relationship of what it does to what it is about. *Difficult Matters* is not only *in* the medium of the exhibition and *in* the medium of the museum. It is also *about* the medium of exhibition, it is also *about* the museum. It is at once museological and metamuseological. That is to say it reflects on the museum. It reflects on what it does. And, it encourages its visitors to do the same. It does this through the compression and intensity that comes from being so small and compact, so sharply conceived and focused. When the focus is so tight and clear, the scale so reduced, the pace so slow, the air so still and quiet, it is possible to pay close attention to detail.

The installation itself is exquisite in its attention to detail, from the choice of materials and the red archival boxes to the efficiency of the space, which is as economical as a ship’s galley. With so few and such singular objects and nothing else but a single long text for each, visitors are drawn into the space and towards each thing. Such compression encourages absorption, intense focus, attention to detail, and deep emotional resonance. One has the feeling of being inside a studiolo, a cabinet, or a private study, where one’s thoughts and feelings are inspired by objects. This effect is created by the intimacy of the space, the beautifully crafted wooden cabinets, the precise arrangement of arresting and mysterious objects, the reading material, warm lighting, places to sit, and slow pace. Going against received museum wisdom, *Difficult Matters* provided visitors with long texts, but in a comfortable format.

Each text was in its own large folder. Visitors could hold the text, at a comfortable reading distance, while standing or sitting. The beauty of the museum medium is its slowness. New generation museums try to speed things up to keep pace with competing media. *Difficult Matters* took its time and so did those who visited it.

Consistent with its dedication to what is distinctive and powerful about the museum as a medium, *Difficult Matters* is low tech. There were two little tape recorders, but they did not play to the visitor. Rather, visitors were encouraged to record their reactions. Not only does this reverse the way media are usually used in museum exhibitions, but it highlights the specificity of the museum as a medium. At a time when museums worry that visitors will not find objects interesting and look to media to create more “exciting” exhibitions, which usually means more technology in the galleries, *Difficult Matters* took the opposite approach. It probed the museum medium even more deeply. It tapped museum collections, presented artifacts directly and simply, provided a lengthy text for each object, collected examples from visitors, accessioned and stored the material in red boxes by material, according to an old museum classification system, to underscore the museological point, and provided additional reading material.

By creating a richly artifactual space that is both exhibition and laboratory, *Difficult Matters* integrated collection, documentation, archiving, and exhibition, brought them out in the open and involved visitors collaboratively. As Eva Silvén explained to me, why should the entire process be hidden backstage and only the display, the final result, be on stage. *Difficult Matters* brought some of that back region into the front region so that visitors could not only see what curators do, but also participate in the curatorial process.

Even the curators were brought into the front region. They did their curatorial work right in the space of the exhibition. They traveled with the exhibition and interacted with visitors. However, their role was less didactic, than it was responsive. They were not there to give guided tours or talks. Their role was to respond to visitors and to interact with them, rather than to teach or lecture. They blurred the line between curator and educator, as they gently guided visitors through the rough emotional terrain of the exhibition. They watched for opportunities to engage visitors in conversation about the objects. They encouraged visitors to bring their own difficult things into the exhibition. Although they did not keep the objects, they did mount documentation of new material on the walls, logged each new entry on a computer, and filed the documentation away in the red boxes. Above all, they helped to establish and maintain the appropriate tone in this volatile situation. What they learned about visitors and their responses to

the exhibition is of greater value to the museum than many visitor surveys.

Considering the cost of producing high tech interfaces for exhibitions, whether in the gallery, online, or in the form of CD-ROMs, videos, and the like, dollar for dollar, the curators were better value. The human interface they provided was far more effective than the most sophisticated high tech interface—and in the spirit of the most recent thinking on interface, which is now being conceptualized as a machine with personality whose effectiveness has more to do with communication than information. The live presence of curators, the refusal to delegate their function to machines, and the insistence on nothing less than curators is a statement in itself. It is consistent with the entire concept of the project doing what it is about--*Difficult Matters* was not only in the medium of the museum, but also it was about the medium of the museum.

New technologies may do a much better job of providing certain kinds information than a museum exhibition can. The sheer volume of information and the way it is structured in databases makes it possible to find and relate more information more quickly than ever before. *Difficult Matters* demonstrated what museums are good at. It made the case for the affective presence of objects, for their effectivity as agents in the world in their own right, in all their materiality and tangibility. If anything, the very immateriality of digital technologies have made the material world harder to take for granted and more interesting and, as a consequence, carved out an important role for museums as a medium in their own right. The tangibility of *Difficult Matters* had very much to do with touch in both in the sense of objects that had touched (and been touched by) the people and events that made them so difficult, as well as in the sense that they were touching. They are more than signs, symbols, and indexes. They are tangible. They have the capacity to arouse by sheer dint of their material presence.

Projects like *The Gun Sculpture* and *Difficult Matters* have the quality of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. A challenge for large and expensive institutions with long histories is how to approximate the processual and collaborative character of such projects. The museum's past, reflexively engaged, is a rich resource for contemporary practice. So too are new technologies, which are not only integrated into installations, but also become exhibition spaces in their own right. Most promising are ways that conceptualizations of new media might illuminate the specificity of the museum as a medium, paradigmatic shifts in embodied experience, and the role of the museum in society.³⁰

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- ¹ The National Museum had been updated several times as seen in the change of name from Colonial Museum, which opened in 1865, to Dominion Museum (1907), National Museum (1972), and Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, which opened in 1998.
- ² See Te Papa's website, http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/for_your_dollar/time_warp.html.
- ³ See the museum's press release (22 June 2000), http://www.amnh.org/rose/meteorite_agreement.html.
- ⁴ See Karen Wonders, *Habitat dioramas: illusions of wilderness in museums of natural history*, Figura Nova Series, 25 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1993) and Angela Miller, "The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular," *Wide Angle* 18(2), 1996:34-69.
- ⁵ See Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-36," *Social Text* 11 (May 1984): 19-64.
- ⁶ See the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art in Las Vegas <http://www.bellagio.com/>, Mashantucket Pequot Museum & Research Center and Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut <http://www.mashantucket.com/>, the Apartheid Museum, a "social responsibility project" of the Gold Reef City Casino, just outside Johannesburg <http://www.apartheidmuseum.org.za/>, and Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz, "Wonder and Worth: Disney Museums in World Showcase," *Museum Anthropology* 17 (3) 1993:32-42.
- ⁷ Antony Miralda was responsible for the Nutrition Pavilion and Martin Roth of the Deutsches Hygiene Museum was in charge of the *Mensch* pavilion.
- ⁸ Ralph Appelbaum Associates Incorporated. <http://www.raany.com/capabilities2.html#Anchor-36445> (Consulted 10 January 2002).
- ⁹ Ralph Appelbaum Associates Incorporated. <http://www.raany.com/capabilities2.html#Anchor-36445> (Consulted 10 January 2002).
- ¹⁰ Ralph Appelbaum, "Designing for collective memory: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," *Design Management Journal* (Fall 1996): 21. In a similar vein, *New York Times* Page One Picture Editor Philip Gfelter said that words are cerebral, images visceral, when characterizing his approach to the use photographs in covering the events of September 11 and their aftermath at the panel "Confronting September 11 and Beyond" on October 30, 2001 at New York University.
- ¹¹ Ralph Appelbaum, "Anthropology, history, and the changing role of the museum," Lecture at the International Conference on Anthropology and the Museum, Taiwan Museum, Taipei, 1995. <http://www.raany.com/anthropologylecture.html>.
- ¹² Ralph Appelbaum Associates Incorporated. <http://www.raany.com/capabilities2.html#Anchor-36445> (Consulted 10 January 2002).
- ¹³ Ralph Appelbaum made an exhibition proposal to Te Papa, which was not accepted. While Appelbaum did not get the exhibition contract, his approach did inform Te Papa's installation style.
- ¹⁴ Alessandra Galizzi Kroegel, "The Jewish Museum in Berlin opens to the public on 9 September," *The Artnewspaper.com*. 3 September 2001. <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/article.asp?idart=7254> (Consulted 10 January 2002).
- ¹⁵ Paul Zielbauer, "New campus high: illicit prescription drugs," *New York Times*, 24 March 2000, A1.
- ¹⁶ According to Cassell, "Our models of emotion, of personality, of conversation are still rudimentary. And the number of conversational behaviors that we can realize in real time using animated bodies is still extremely limited."
- ¹⁷ See the responses to this exhibition on the H-German discussion list, "Discussion: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht/ Wehrmacht Exhibit 1995-2000" <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~german/discuss/other/wehrmacht.htm>.
- ¹⁸ Appelbaum, "Anthropology, history, and the changing role of the museum."
- ¹⁹ Bennett, Tony. *The birth of the museum* (London: Routledge; 1995).
- ²⁰ I take the distinction between informing and performing from Johannes Fabian Fabian, "...From informative to performative ethnography." *Power and performance: ethnographic explorations through proverbial wisdom and theater in Shaba, Zaire* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 3-20.
- ²¹ See the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum's website http://www.keom.de/home_e.html.
- ²² Other projects deserve mention in this context: Sigrid Sigurdsson's "In Face of The Silence" at the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum http://www.keom.de/kuenstler/texte/sigurdsson_e.html; *Here is New York*, a response to the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, <http://hereisnewyork.org/> (I have written briefly about *Here is New York* in "Our beautiful towers," *Samtid & museer* 3-4 (2001):4-7); and The Names Project (AIDS Memorial Quilt) <http://www.aidsquilt.org/>.
- ²³ Carmen Sylvain, Deputy Commissioner General for EXPO 2000, is quoted by Hilary McLaughlin, "Expo 2000 Canada's showcase," *Embassy Newspaper Online* 1, 1 (February 2000), http://www.germanembassyottawa.org/news/Perspectives/winter2000/expo_canada.html.

²⁴ See *i human 2000 Peace Initiative* <http://www.ihuman.org/index.htm>.

²⁵ Newsletter of *i human 2000 Peace Initiative*, 1,1 (December 1998), 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ I would like to thank curator Eva Silvéen and designer Mats Brunander, as well as Brita Johansson and Carolyn Östberg, the two curators who have lived, breathed, and traveled with this exhibition throughout Sweden. They have helped me to understand the process of creating the exhibition.

²⁸ The source of "An object is just a slow event" is Stanley Eveling, professor of existential philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. It was reported to me by Katharine Young, who studied with Eveling during the late sixties.

²⁹ Appelbaum has characterized the museum as an expressive artifact. See Appelbaum, "Anthropology, history, and the changing role of the museum."

³⁰ See, for example, *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* <http://www.artmuseum.net/w2vr/contents.html>, which inscribes multimedia within a history of art and performance from the Lascaux caves to Wagner and John Cage.