

# THE EXHIBITION AS THEATRE – ON THE STAGING OF MUSEUM OBJECTS

*Marc Maure*

*I would like to examine the role of the setting in exhibitions as it is seen in relation to the stage set in the theatre. Museographers have a great deal to learn from the techniques of stage setting in the theatre. Furthermore, many of the concepts and models which characterize a «theatrical» or «dramatic» approach to cultural phenomena can be useful at a theoretical level in order to arrive at a better understanding of the exhibition.*

## THE NATURE OF THE EXHIBITION

The shaping of an exhibition is a creative process which consists of communicating a message through objects and other material elements. But what exactly is an exhibition and why do we exhibit objects? In other words, what is the nature or character of the exhibition?

This is a difficult question to answer for a number of reasons. To us who create the exhibitions, it seems somewhat unnecessary to try to put into words what is best expressed through the exhibition itself. We can describe how we put up our exhibitions. We can express our opinions as to whether or not we like or dislike certain exhibitions. But it is much more difficult to try to see the process of shaping an exhibition from the outside and say something objective about our reasons for doing it in any particular way.

It is problematic to discuss exhibiting in a general and theoretical way, regardless of whether or not one works in the field, as one lacks concepts and a terminology to do it in a satisfactory way. In spite of the growing interest in the exhibition as a medium, it is nevertheless a neglected field of study. Other visual expressions and media such as pictures, films, television and theatre on the other hand have been the subject of comprehensive studies and critical analyses.

It is remarkable and in fact paradoxical that the exhibition as cultural phenomenon has aroused so little attention at the theoretical level. Exhibitions are a familiar sight in everyday life and play an important part in social communication. Cultural institutions, museums and galleries present exhibitions. In our daily lives too, in shops, homes, on the street in the countryside etc. we are constantly the

156 creators or users of exhibitions. Animals are also involved in exhibitions of sorts as an integral part of their mating rituals.

I am using the term exhibition here in its widest possible sense. I am not limiting the exhibition phenomenon to any particular institution but am trying to look at it in all its breadth and manifestations. Nor am I reducing it to include only decor or trimmings. I see the exhibition as a mode or system of communication which people use in certain situations to express themselves in their encounters with others.

Having said this, however, I must add that my primary purpose here is to discuss the museum exhibition which is a special type of exhibition. It can illustrate the same themes and use the same objects and means as exhibitions in everyday life such as in the home or in the shops. However, it differs in that museums offer a distinctive context for exhibitions. Museums are institutions that have definite cultural goals and functions. They form contexts for communicating ideas and for social behaviour which are set apart from everyday life. They arrange exhibitions using objects which have a special symbolic value.

#### A TENTATIVE DEFINITION

At the outset of my analysis I would suggest the following definition of an exhibition: *an exhibition is a system of communication which consists of setting objects in space.*

This definition is sufficiently general to be applicable to all types of exhibitions. Let us specify the meaning of the various elements of the definition in relation to our subject.

#### *System of Communication*

The exhibition is not a random juxtaposition of objects or other elements, but consists of their arrangement according to a given set of rules. The exhibition's main function is to supply a cultural information link between the various members of a society. Whether or not one can define it as a language is a question which will not be discussed here. Suffice it to say that the exhibition is a system of communication which resembles a language.

#### *Space*

In contrast to other visual media the exhibition is a three-dimensional medium. The main signifiers in the language of exhibitions are terms such as depth, distance, location, proportion, direction and so on, in space. These elements appear and acquire meaning as the viewer moves through the room. The room is a multi-sensory world which consists of visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory as well as kinetic (the body's movements) dimensions.

Space as a concept has various meanings. Space is a *volume* limited by various physical elements. Space is also a *place*, with a definite character and quality. Finally, space is the *stage* where behaviour and social activities unfold.

#### *Object*

Presenting an exhibition means by definition showing objects, broadly defined here as three-dimensional visual elements. The main purpose of museum exhibitions is to show the museum's collection of objects. A museum's objects, man-made or natural products, have a special character. They are original, authentic objects. They are chosen and collected according to definite



criteria, – esthetic, scientific, symbolic or other. They are to be preserved for posterity. Objects which the museum collects and exhibits have, and/or are attributed with, another signification and higher symbolic value than objects which are otherwise to be found in everyday life.

### *Setting*

This concept alludes to the stage set in the theatre, that is, to the use of physical means and effects which are characteristic of a three-dimensional medium. The set plays a central part in theatrical presentations and museum exhibitions.

The concept also alludes to the actual process of creating meaning. To set the stage means to present, visualize and dramatize. The exhibition's way of giving meaning is through placing objects in a setting in space and arranging them in relation to one another, in relation to other elements, in relation to the movements of the viewer, etc.

### *OBJECT AND CONTEXT*

Let us look at an object (Fig. 1). This is actually only a picture of an object, but let us say that we have a real object before us.

We see a form, a volume, a substance, a colour. The object shows signs of use. Someone, perhaps an artist, has inscribed his name on it. What does this object tell us? Without any particular difficulty, we can identify it and give it a name: «*mask*». We know that a mask is «an object which is carried in front of the face to protect it or conceal it or to express something». This is the dictionary definition. The object can have other meanings as well,

depending on other cultural or personal factors in the viewer.

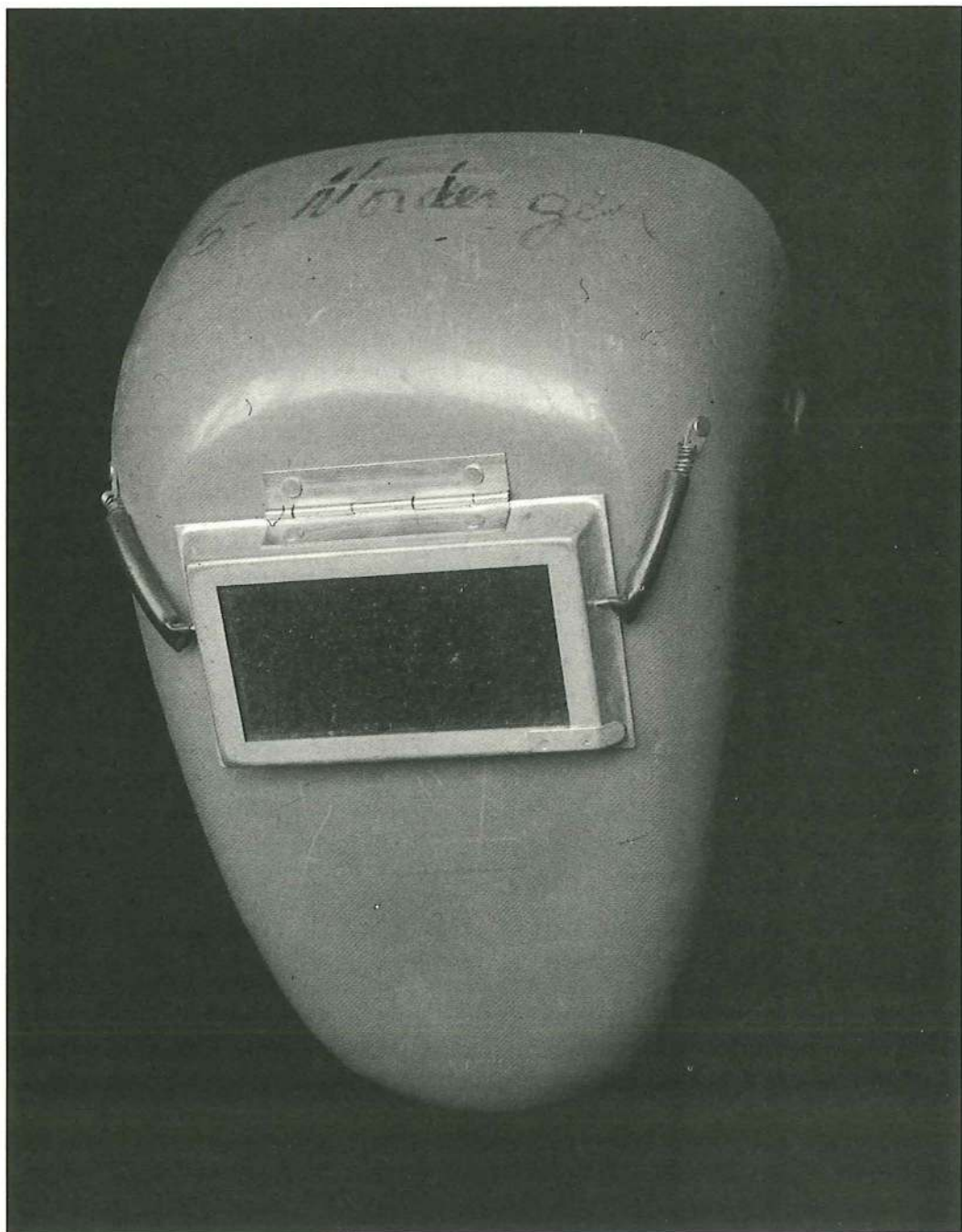
An object has a multitude of meanings. That an object does not have a definite, precise and limited meaning can be experienced as problematic and give rise to doubts about its value as a communicator. Museum people often ask themselves whether it is really possible to present objective and meaningful information with the help of objects.

The problem can be solved in various ways. One can reduce the object to its dictionary definition («*mask* = object to protect, conceal the face») and add factual information concerning the object's origin, function, etc. by using texts (Fig. 2), pictures, audio-visual means, providing guided tours, and so on. The result can be exhibitions where the object's function is reduced to an illustration of verbal descriptions.

Another alternative is to place the object in a naturalistic reconstruction of a period in an attempt to illustrate the object's original function and purpose. On the other hand one can choose to isolate the object by placing it in more neutral surroundings, in order to emphasize its more essential and lasting significance. One can even eliminate the object altogether and replace it with an audio-visual show or computer programme in order to present very specific information.

The exhibition, however, offers other possibilities as well. The fact that an object can be interpreted in many different ways need not be seen as a problem. In fact, this quality can be considered more as the major resource at one's disposal when trying to communicate with the help of objects. The goal is to use the

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On the left: Fig. 1:  
A mask



Fig. 2: Some examples of label texts which can be used for contextualizing the mask Fig. 1.

object as a symbol, as something which stands for, represents or means something (e.g. a welder's mask = protection, toil, heat, blindness, secrecy, safety, alienation, working class, etc.). The creator of the exhibition can consciously play on the object's power to arouse personal and cultural associations in the observer. But this implies that it is possible to organize and control these diverse associations, which

brings us to the prime function of the setting.

Our picture (Fig. 1) represents one object. In the real world, objects do not exist in isolation. An isolated object is a hypothetical construction. An object is never experienced in a vacuum, but always exists as a part of something. It always exists in relation to other objects and other elements in its environment. It is

160 always seen in relation to people, that is to say it is an integral part of its functional and social context. To isolate an object from any physical or social connection and ask what it means, is as meaningless or reductionist as isolating a word in a sentence, book or lecture and asking what it means. The point is that it is not the object in itself but its relationships with other objects and their surroundings, and between the object and the people who use it which have meaning. It is the object's context, both physical and social, which give it meaning.

In connection with exhibitions, it is therefore uninteresting to ask whether an object in itself can say anything. What is interesting is that one can say something with the help of objects. One creates meaning with an object by placing it in relation to something else, that is by contextualizing it. Creating an exhibition is a contextualizing process which consists of shaping a composition in space with the objects (Fig. 3). The exhibition also contextualizes the objects in the sense that it puts them in a particular social situation. The exhibition is the stage where the viewers meet the objects.

To use a simple analogy, we can say that the exhibition's presentation technique is based on the same principles as language. Relevant elements are chosen from a definite repertoire, organized into sequences with the help of given rules and codes, creating connotations by using metaphors and other rhetorical figures, etc. To carry the analogy even further, we can also say that the exhibition is a text which the viewer reads and interprets while moving through the room.

### *THE SETTING – EXHIBITION AND THEATRE*

The setting has become a central theme in exhibition debates. There is actually nothing new about discussing the setting with respect to exhibitions. Every exhibition of necessity makes use of a setting of some sort or other. A hundred years ago it was usual for museums to apply theatrical techniques in their exhibitions. Artur Hazelius, Bernhard Olsen and Anders Sandvig, Scandinavia's great folk museum innovators, were also expert set designers.

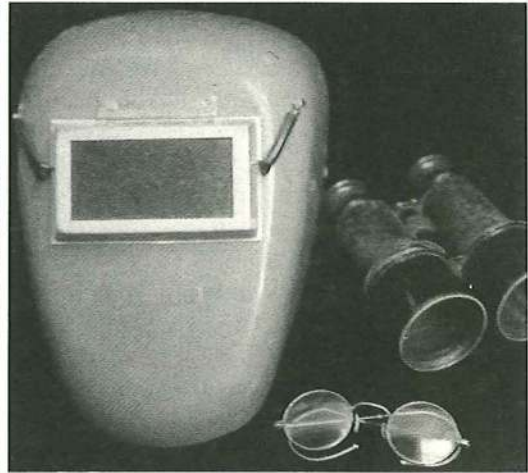
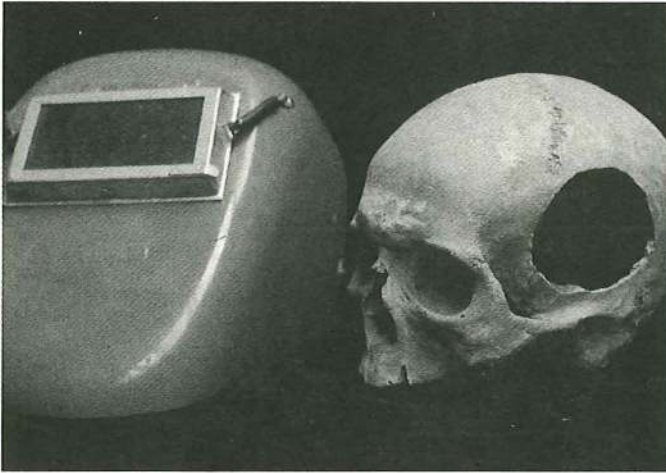
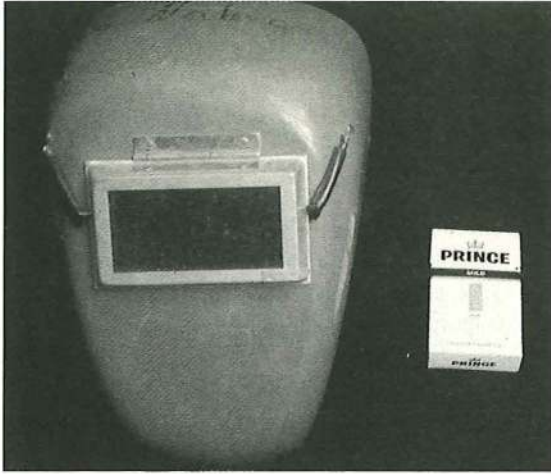
During the 1980's, many museums around the world experienced a renewed interest in sets. Stage-set designers working in the theatre and in the film industry have been associated with major exhibition projects. It appears that museums today, as part of the growing awareness of the nature of the medium of the exhibition and its possibilities, are in the process of rediscovering the concept of space and are seeking inspiration and expertise in the theatre world.

We use theatrical terms in connection with exhibitions. Theatre design and exhibition design have a great deal in common. Both use related techniques. But one can ask just how similar they really are. The question is: does the setting have the same function for an exhibition as it does in a theatre?

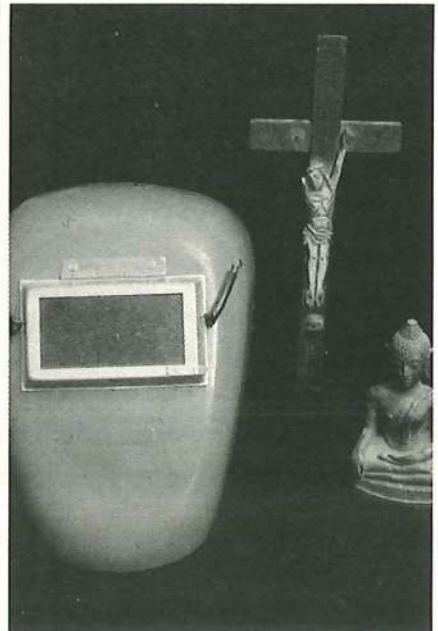
They both have the same main function, that is to set the scene, create an environment for the performance. The stage set in the theatre defines and structures the area of the performance for the actors. But when it comes down to the museums, who or what is the exhibition area for?

In both cases we deal in objects but the-





*Fig. 3: The exhibition's main procedure for creating meaning is by juxtaposing objects in space.*



162 se objects have different functions. In the theatre, the objects are only a part of the set and act as props on the stage. The set is a subordinate element to the actors' performance. In an exhibition however, the set is subordinated to the objects which play the leading role on the stage.

The exhibition is actually the scene where people long ago and in another society made or used the objects which are now exhibited. These people can be considered as the true actors. But as living beings they are now absent from the scene. They are either dead or in any case not in the museum. They only exist in the consciousness of the viewer, that is, their presence can only be intimated or imagined. The exhibition designer can only present these actors in effigy with the help of models, photographs, pictures etc. The only way they can be presented live, so to speak, would be through theatrical performances, such as by using actors (I am thinking here of museum presentations of historical dramas, craft demonstrations, guided tours in national costumes etc.).

At an exhibition, the public itself is on the stage. The public neither sits nor stands still but moves about the stage. This is a main difference between an exhibition and a theatrical performance. For the public, the exhibition is more like a movie than a theatre performance. The exhibition's narrative structure consists of a montage of various «images», which is the result of the viewers' movements in the room.

In order to illustrate the differences between the exhibition and the theatre I have emphasized the polarity between the two. However, they have much in common and the one often slides into the other. The exhibition space is actually a

stage for the typical performances which take place in the museum : guided tours, openings and other ceremonies and rituals. Furthermore, in the theatre world today, the separation between stage and auditorium is often eliminated. The proscenium stage is no longer the rule and there are stage sets today which have much in common with exhibitions. It is an interesting current development that the art museum often has been the scene for the shaping of new theatrical forms such as multi-media performances and happenings.

In concluding this comparison we can say that the theatre performance and the exhibition are two forms of expression which have something in common. They can be considered as variations on the same theme. Both are performances but of differing types.

### THE PERFORMANCE

In our everyday language we often use metaphors culled from the theatrical world. Expressions such as «to perform», «play a role», «to be on stage», «wear a mask», «to work backstage» etc.

Some sociologists have made systematic use of theatrical models and dramaturgy to study forms of social interaction (Goffman 1959). In our everyday lives we use theatrical behaviour in our meetings with others. We are, consciously or unconsciously, the director, set designer, actor and/or the audience. These performances take place on *stage* (the available area), but are prepared and controlled from the *wings* (hidden or from behind).

An important element in these performances is the *front* which consists of two



components: the *personal facade* (the actor's appearance, age, body language, clothes etc.) and the *setting* (furnishings, background items, decor, etc.). These elements form the *frame* around the performance, which defines the situation. This tells the actors what the performance is all about, and makes them adopt certain attitudes. To put it more concretely, we behave differently in different situations, depending on whether we are in the manager's office, talking with our colleagues in a coffee shop, at a neighbour's party, at the shops, at a museum, as we respond to the signals in our environment.

The actors who can define the situation, i.e. who can choose the scene and shape the setting, have control and power over the roles played and the action undertaken. This manipulation is an integral part of the process but takes place more or less consciously and is therefore *cynical* or unconsciously and so *sincere*.

One can see the exhibition as a performance with the museographer as the director. The museographer creates the scene he or she wishes the public to see. He or she stays in the background and controls the performance from the wings. The public meets only his or her representatives in the person of the guides, guards, receptionists etc.

The setting consists of many different elements: the museum's appearance and atmosphere, objects, showcases, pictures and texts, columns and dividers, lights, guards' uniforms etc. The setting puts the viewers in a particular mood and gets them to assume the role of the public. This role is characterized by a certain attitude towards the museum, the objects displayed and the other visitors.

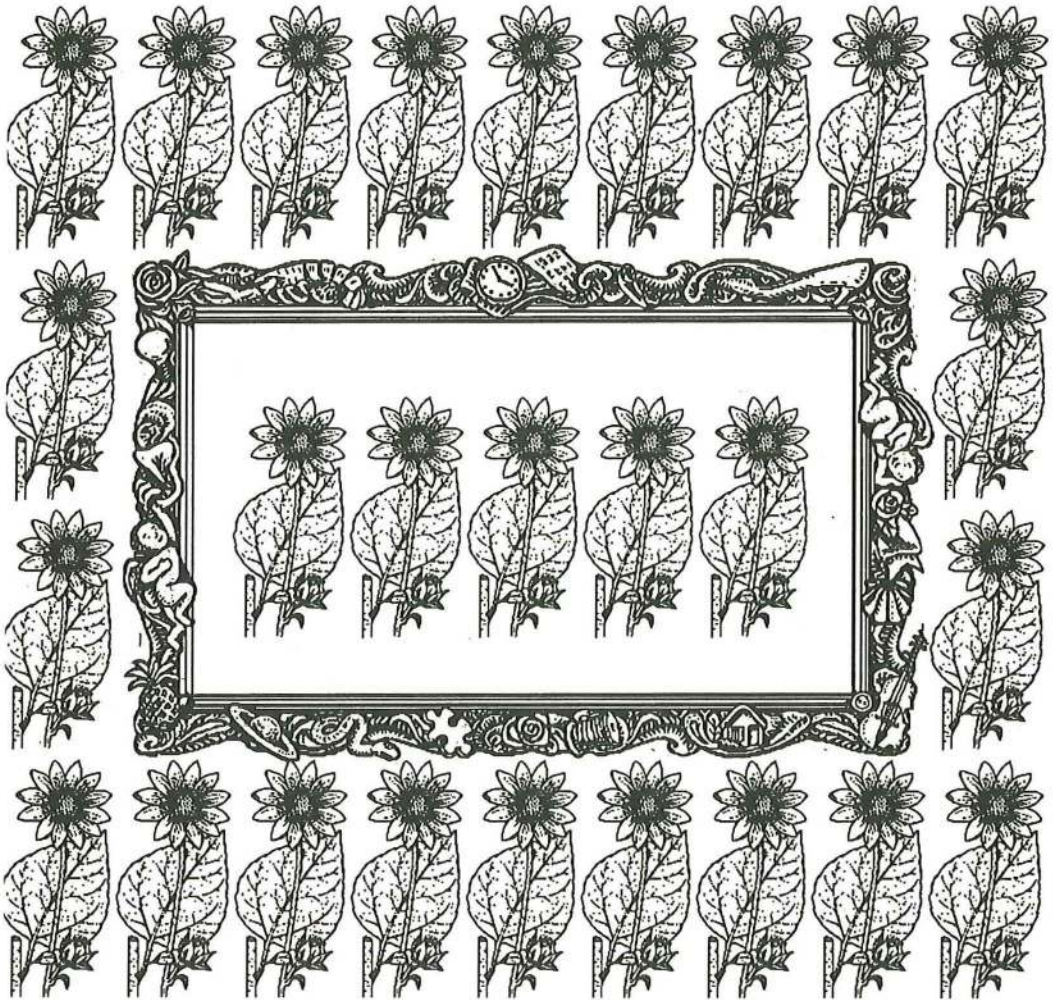
The museographers manipulate the public, *cynically* or *sincerely* depending on how much they are aware of the possibilities of the means at their disposal.

### THE FRAME

The stage of the exhibition is set apart from its surroundings by various elements that form a frame around it. This frame has two dimensions, one physical and one symbolic. The exhibition stage is a room that has a physical existence limited in relation to its material surroundings by set props (walls, screens, lighting, etc.). The exhibition stage is also a symbolic space, a place with special aspects which create a frame around the objects.

I see a picture hanging on the wall (Fig. 4) ... a flower picture in a suitable frame. The frame has a practical function. It protects the picture and makes it possible to hang it up on the wall. But the frame has a symbolic function as well. It acts as an interpreter... it emphasizes the picture ... it indicates a limit between what is within and what is without ... it makes me aware of the essential difference between the flower picture and the flower print on the wallpaper and that I must allow for different categories to interpret and experience them. The frame is also of a particular kind... it is elaborate, gilded and has a carved motif and decorations ... it is rather grand and valuable... it adds quality to the picture. This is a valuable picture, rare, antique, possibly a work of art.<sup>1</sup>

Let me express this idea more theoretically. The frame is composed of signals which are understood to be significant according to given conventions and codes in a given situation. The frame demarcates



*Fig. 4: A flower picture in a suitable frame.*

the line between two different worlds, in the sense of categories or groups of messages. It indicates that what is within the frame has another meaning than that what is outside it. The frame expresses a commentary on the framed, creates a message over and above the main message. It meta-communicates values and expresses a rela-

tionship to what is communicated. The frame gives us an idea of how we should understand the framed message. It initiates and organizes certain patterns of feelings, reasonings and behaviour.

But what does this mean in relation to the exhibition? The exhibition space consists of many different areas and contexts



which are inside or beside one another and which are framed in various ways. Of what do these frames consist, what sort of signals do they give, what is their significance and how do they affect the public? Let us follow the viewers in their wanderings through the exhibition environment.

Seen from the outside, the museum appears to be an enclosed space limited by walls which stands out from other city buildings due to its location in the urban landscape. It also stands out because of its architecture and proportions. Its facade presents itself to the potential public. Its monumental proportions and architectural style signal its special status.

The museum appears as a closed, sacred and exclusive world. This impression affects the public in different ways and creates certain expectations. The building can appear friendly and stimulating and inviting to the visitor or it can do the opposite, appearing alien and forbidding, depending on the viewer's cultural awareness.

The visitor goes up the steps through the entrance door, acrosses the threshold, goes past the reception area towards the exhibits where the scene is set. This is a transitory phase. The visitor leaves the profane everyday life behind him and enters a closed and sacrosanct world of strange significance where the usual rules no longer apply. What is seen, said and done here must not be understood literally but rather within the inner logic of the museum: *«This is a museum, not the real world»*.

The visitor moves about the exhibition area. The objects displayed and the visitor himself are surrounded by and trapped in the net of signals from various sources.

The shifting light, the small labels, the uniforms of the guards, the gestures of the tour guide, the hard stone floor, the gilded frames, an illuminated video screen, some noisy children, a group of Japanese tourists, unfamiliar smells, the fire extinguishers, the high ceilings, the hushed voices and careful movements of the visitors...

The atmosphere of the place envelops the visitors and creates a mood. It imposes a certain condition, a mental attitude, a way of relating to reality which expresses itself in greater concentration, absorption, devotion, solemnity, gravity, respect, cautiousness, awe, stillness, silence. Some of the visitors behave «badly», they are loud, do not look at the right things, start at the wrong end, in other words misconstrue the situation revealing their lack of proficiency and consequently «lose face».

The glass case is the innermost recess within the exhibition's confines. The visitor can penetrate no further. He is stopped at the pane of glass which protects the unique and authentic object from wear, deterioration and eventual destruction. The object is so close one can almost touch it. But at the same time it is remote. The pane of glass creates distance, making it impossible to use one's sense of touch, that sense so vital for establishing close contact. The glass case has an enshrining effect. It makes the object remote, vulnerable, frightening, magical, valuable. The glass case is the museum in condensed form. It removes the object from its original context, isolates it from everyday life, protects it, accentuates it, places it in a timeless state and creates a special aura around it.

It is possible that my choice of examples is based on what is commonly called the

166 *traditional* museum. Much of museum work today is characterized by activities taking place outside the museum's walls. Travelling exhibitions reach people in more everyday environments and museum objects frequently remain in situ. Museum workers are involved in various projects which have the more or less explicit ideological purpose of secularizing the museum. But the point is that the concept of a museum or of the exhibition space should not be understood as merely a building or a given room, but as the scene or setting for specific activities and meetings. The museological performance is not dependant on the traditional museum building. It can take place just as well on a new stage defined and structured in other ways without losing its original sacred meaning.

#### *THE ART EXHIBITION AS THE EXTREME EXAMPLE*

The discussion so far has been about museum exhibitions in general. I have emphasized the traits they have in common regardless of type of museum or what type of objects they contain and exhibit. I would now like to turn to the art exhibition. This type of exhibition is especially interesting in that it represents the extreme example of museological performance. No other category of exhibition so clearly demonstrates the special characteristics of exhibitions and stretches their possibilities to the outmost limit.

The art museum is the holiest of holies in all museum contexts. It is there we find the most sacred atmosphere and the most marked ritualistic behaviour. In the art museum the object is totally isolated from

real life, liberated from any functionalist connection or socio-historic condition and raised to a new dimension. Here the object's nature, – its essential, universal and eternal nature, is revealed. In the art museum the object is transformed into a work of art (Fig. 5).

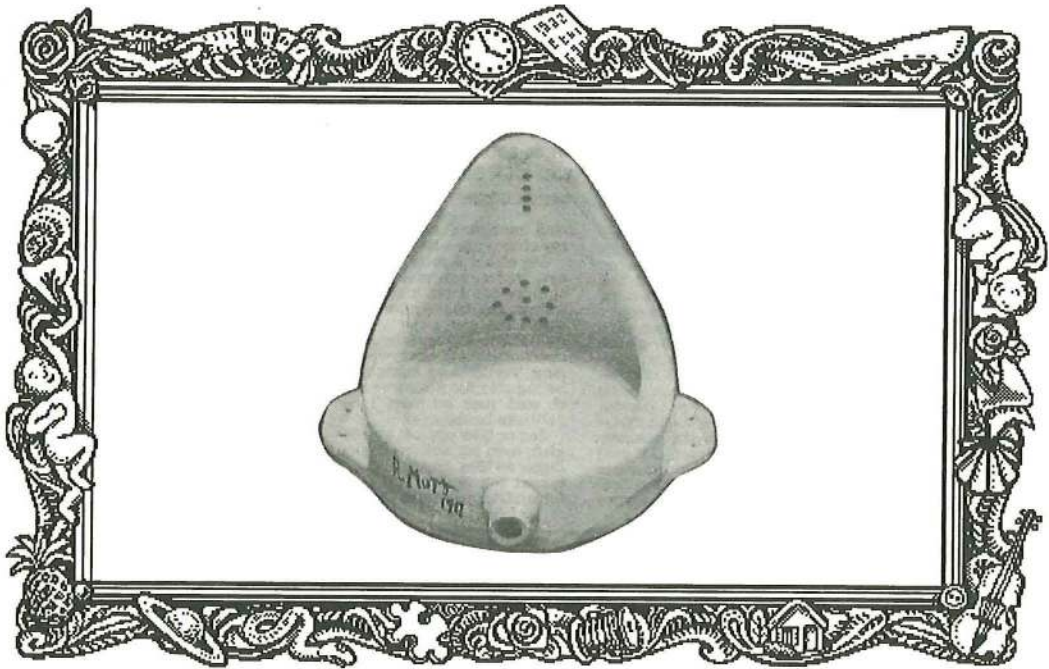
The art exhibition is the absolute exhibition. It is a direct dialogue between the isolated object and the isolated individual. It is a contemplative relationship which does not tolerate an intermediary or require special assistance. Going to an art exhibition is a sort of ascetic exercise. No other category of exhibition demands so much concentration, motivation and proficiency of the visitor.

It is in the exhibition of contemporary art that one finds the greatest and most systematic disposition to experiment. It functions as a laboratory for the development of new forms of setting. It opens new vistas and can be a source of inspiration for other categories of museum. This was certainly true in the case of the great surrealist exhibitions in the years between the wars. Today's installations and multimedia performances have a similar significance for contemporary exhibition designers.

#### *THE MUSEUM EXHIBITION – WHAT KIND OF PERFORMANCE?*

What kind of performances are shown on the museum stage? There are actually many different exhibits showing great variation of theme and modes of presentation. There is a wide diversity of museums and their exhibits vary greatly depending on their specific field of interest and cultural context. The museum exhibition is,





*Fig. 5: Since Marcel Duchamps devised his famous urinal, the power the art exhibition has of transforming any object into art, has been a central aspect in the development of fine art in our century.*

as we have already mentioned, a neglected field of study. Little has been done so far to identify the different categories of exhibitions.

It seems that museum exhibitions can be generally categorized, broadly speaking as near-religious spectacles. They have many characteristics in common with religious phenomena (Durkheim 1991). They occur in a place which is elevated and set apart from everyday life. They are imbued with a drama which gives the objects on exhibit a special power and value. Special rituals and behaviour are enacted there. The fact that its priesthood is not physically present somehow intensifies the hallowed atmosphere. In this sense the

museums can be seen as sacred places which have more in common with temples and cemeteries than with institutions of science, learning or entertainment.

But what are the exhibits about? The main message of the museum is the need to stop the march of time, prevent the natural process of decay and give endless life to the dead and forgotten. Our struggle with death is its main theme. It reflects our views and feelings about the metamorphoses which typify our modern society. Central myths on such as «the modern», «technical development and progress», «science and truth», etc. are presented. The museum expresses the views and ideologies of the establishment

168 on such topics as «the national community», «the others», «the use of nature», «meaning of life», «the true and the beautiful» and so on.

Museum exhibitions are serious performances. Comedy is a type of performance seldom found in the museum world. Even traces of humour or irony are hard to find. In the theatre or in other connections, it is possible to combine the serious with the humorous or ironic and still be taken seriously. But in church, in the cemetery and other holy places, it is blasphemous to laugh or even chuckle. This seems to apply to museums as well.

The museum exhibitions are about serious matters treated in a serious way. But it is a cold and unaffected mask of seriousness it presents. Where are the strong feelings and the dark side of life – the cruelty, lust, violence, despair, joy, madness, pain which characterize the social and historic processes which the museums seek to describe? Why are the exhibitions so rarely passionate, unpleasant or evil? Would this perhaps also be considered blasphemous?

*Translated by Yolande Fonne  
All illustrations by the author*

NOTE

1. I owe the idea for this description to Gregory Bateson's article «A Theory of Play and Fantasy» in his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York, 1972)

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