Deux ou trois choses que je sais des musées

One or two things I’ve come to know about museums

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ONE OR TWO THINGS I’VE COME TO KNOW ABOUT MUSEUMS

MARC-OLIVIER GONSETH*

Translated from French by Margaret Whyte

Abstract

Museums are builders of images and cognitive maps. In this capacity, they also give prominence to techniques like photography and film that lend themselves to the representation and framing of concepts; indeed, museums make frequent use of both media in staging their productions. I draw on my own museum experience built up since the 1980s to examine the current tendency to rely on artistic expression and information and communications technologies (ICTs), in reference to six major museum-driven “obsessions” explored in a recent reflexive exhibition entitled Hors-champs (2012-2013): Evocation of the past, Representation of reality, Creation of an aesthetic, Production of movement, Classification into categories, Creation of cognitive shock. Although finding that ICTs tend to repeat patterns extensively used in traditional museum landscapes, I argue nonetheless for their considered use, as long as this means they serve to re-centre attention or ensure clearer links with the themes of an exhibition.

And while I consider the growing use of different forms of artistic expression to be a trend of the moment, I recognize even so that artistic expression has a potential for challenging established frontiers. This characteristic, often woefully lacking in the purely academic approaches generally adopted by museum design teams – beyond a manifestly cautious use of such forms of expression or their adoption for purely instrumental purposes – is something I believe merits wider application. I contend that we need a better articulation of the connections between these different approaches and recognition that they perform complementary rather than competing functions in the production of a critically-framed perspective on how contemporary societies operate.

Keywords: reflexivity; framing; ICT; art and ethnography; museology

When I began my university studies, I was not particularly interested in museums. Not that I felt any real aversion to them, I was simply not interested in heritage as an element of culture. I was just a little young to have been mixed up in the events of May 1968 and, like so many students of my time, all I wanted was to let the sun shine in – not the usual technique for the preservation of museum collections!

So it was that I in fact came into museology by the back door, from that breeding ground of challenges to traditional ideas about heritage that emerged on the Colline Saint-Nicholas in the 1980s, the Musée d’ethnographie de Neuchâtel (MEN)², which itself had become a recognized relay point for studies on heritage carried out by its European neighbours (Dagognet 1985; Guillaume 1980; Hainard 1985; Nicolas 1985). Uncomfortable from the outset with how changes might occur as museums entered a new period of transformation, sparking an explosion of interest and the inevitable problems this was going to create, Neuchâtel museologists adopted a hardline position where they proposed a radical departure

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from usual museum practices under which items of a similar nature like statues or spoons were exhibited together, arguing instead for associating all kinds of different objects which together would tell the stories that might best help people understand the realities of contemporary societies. “Objects are now our slaves” was the credo proclaimed by my predecessor and friend, Jacques Hainard; it is a concept I have never either fully understood or wholly adopted, but which I so enjoy hearing articulated when I see the squirms and shudders it inevitably produces in any gathering of sometimes utterly, sometimes only somewhat horrified museum curators.

Clearly, this period of criticism and doubt had beneficial effects. It led a number of museum professionals to free themselves from the excesses of their profession, at the same time giving currency to the idea that knowing how to choose and what to destroy was also fundamental to their mission. It resulted in the explicit recognition of the central role of exhibitions in museum practice and introduced a considerable number of new features into museum exhibitry, including critical reflection, emotion, performance and interactivity.

Museums one could walk through almost without meeting a single soul apart from the usual floor staff have become the exception rather than the rule, with the hushed atmosphere created by close proximity with outmoded facilities ceding pride of place to increasingly activist visitor management strategies, often involving an immersion experience. The former educational presentations traditionally associated with museums have now been extended to include Science Cafés, concerts inspired by all kinds of music genres, theatre performances, film screenings, craft workshops, discovery brunches or awareness-raising events.

It can be argued that the downside of this new emphasis on performance by museums has led to the erosion of their heritage conservation role. Certainly, no-one will deny that it is far from simple today to develop major projects focusing simply on safeguarding collections; while conservation standards have never before been so demanding, many institutions find that do-it-yourself approaches based on “doing the best you can with whatever means are available” are often the only way to comply with the new requirements for preventive and curative conservation.

The exhibition entitled *Bruits* mounted by the MEN in 2010 to examine the related question of intangible cultural heritage introduced a further peculiarity of cultural landscapes today when a heritage submarine was put to use in combination with a festival site, so that performance became a means for siphoning off, using, transforming or re-engineering the contents of the fuel holds of the grounded submersible (Gonseth et al. 2011). This approach enabled us to illustrate the complementary roles played by two manifestations of culture that seem to clash with each other but are in fact closely interconnected: on the one hand, an apparently inward-looking heritage culture that, in reality, carries with it very high value-added potential and, on the other hand, a performance-based culture that seems to thrive on the present moment, while in fact exploiting, prolonging and recycling a significant amount of the content in question. It is worth noting in this context that the heritage section of the exhibition was more than ready to work with the performance section, with the latter working toward increasing systematization, developing its own archives and other data bases, so as to ensure the sustainability of the entire initiative.

Stemming from this all-too-brief historical overview, from which we had to omit the economic ramifications (Tobelem 2005), there are two particular aspects of this new museum paradigm that particularly merit closer consideration. First, the growing use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to liven up the atmosphere both inside and outside museums – almost as if this has become the latest response formula to make up for all the failed expectations stemming from their analog counterparts – and secondly, the increasingly widespread and frequent use of contemporary artists by every imaginable type of museum, as if artistic involvement has become a kind of quick-setting cement for the success of any kind of exhibition whatsoever.
The group of associates formed to establish the framework and content of the MEN’s latest project drew on both these contemporary museum approaches in mounting the exhibition entitled *Hors-champs*.

The subtopics examined below explain the pivotal interrelations identified, then refer readers to the websites of specific sections of the exhibition to illustrate how the Museum went about addressing certain concepts.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE HORS-CHAMPS EXHIBITION**

(November 2, 2012 – October 20, 2013)

We identified six major cluster areas under which images in a museum could be brought together to establish a cognitive map for most exhibition projects: evocation of the past (through memory and history), representation of reality (through mimesis and reality effects), creation of an esthetic (through coherence and incoherence in the choice of objects and structuring of discourse), effective production of movement (a skill rarely found in museums), classification into categories (an almost obsessive approach to discriminating between different kinds of objects or types of living things) and creation of situations where people can experience cognitive shock (through associations of ideas, poetics and the construction of meaning). Although we make no claim to this being an exhaustive review of the field, we are in fact providing here a fairly comprehensive overview of museum “obsessions” by breaking them down in each case into three fundamental angles or approaches employed in communicating concepts: (1) use of analog representation for examining historical or functional elements in exhibits; (2) use of digital representation to convey how ICTs have evolved; (3) the reflexive use of art and ethnography to encourage critical reflection about the representation of different elements and a blurring of boundaries between concepts. This seemingly rigid structure, symbolized in the exhibition by an ice cube tray, was transformed into a flexible and particularly effective means of creating associations, leaving visitors the freedom they needed for discovery and reflection (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. The framework of the exhibition, presented as an ice-cube tray. Photograph: Alain Germond © Musée d’ethnographie de Neuchâtel](image-url)
EVOCATION OF THE PAST

For museums, the challenge of keeping memory alive generally requires the adoption of a plan that draws on analog representation to create a potentially effective and emotion-generating exhibit based on the use of historical relics, portraits with historical associations, personal accounts and archival excerpts (particularly in the case of museums dealing with the major tragedies of human history). There may be a dialogical dimension involved when those affected talk about their daily lives, or, conversely, a reflexive dimension when they look more closely at how they or their peers acted in certain situations, taking the occasion to reflect simultaneously on what lies behind our remembering certain things over others. The Hors-champs exhibition adopted this traditional approach (the one employed by institutions seeking to keep memory alive) to explore the work of the renowned French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=0, then select the EYE image and press CONTINUE).

Clearly, the use of digital technology for safeguarding memory (a handy term for the IT context!) is rapidly expanding today. Let me give as an example a travelling exhibit that we could have incorporated into the exhibition we were planning. Created by the Humem Association in Lausanne, it had as its goals the establishment of an audiovisual archive of Swiss humanitarian activities and the mounting of a travelling exhibition, De l’autre côté du monde, based on the material collected. While personal testimonies filmed by people working on behalf of the humanitarian agencies remain very much front and centre to the exhibition, its visible face today is in the form of an interactive installation where the public can move around in a branching structure built to reflect certain themes, with the program able to respond to choices made by visitors via a remote control. For the Hors-champs exhibition, we decided to create a kind of confessional for intangible cultural heritage, a closed-in space where it was possible to record and listen to accounts of experiences on different topics that reflect this concept (click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=1, then select the EYE image and press CONTINUE).

With regard to emotional and reflexive associations made between art and the social sciences and the theme of memory, I think first and foremost of Christian Boltanski whose work the MEN paid tribute to in the exhibition entitled Remise en boîtes (Gonseth, Hainard and Kaehr 2005a, b). The artist did not hesitate to tackle head on the theme of how we remember people who have died or how we look back on traumatic events. His reflections were further enriched with the presentation of Bastocalypse by artists M.S. Bastian and Isabelle L. in the exhibition What are you doing after the apocalypse? (Gonseth and al. 2012). But it was to filmmakers Vervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi that we turned, when mounting the Hors-champs exhibition, for a film originating from the Duke of the Abruzzi’s 1898 Arctic expedition on the ship “Stella Polare”, a film these specialists in film editing and in sound and colour effects agreed to make available to the Museum. They had tracked down a VHS cassette on which traces still survived of images of sea birds and sea lions, this being the earliest polar film footage ever shot, some of which rescue teams had found with the bodies of the members of the expedition. We felt that the very tenuousness of the thread linking us to these images perfectly epitomized the fragility of the memory process – and of what will inevitably spill over from it (click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=2, then select the EYE image and press CONTINUE).

REPRESENTATION OF REALITY

Finding ways to represent reality and create reality effects has long been standard museum practice. Throughout the 19th century, period rooms designed to represent a given period in a given culture (Aynsley 2006) were juxtaposed with dioramas and panoramas that would expose visitors to a particular historical ambiance and social context. Reconstitutions of this kind (Arnoldi 1999; Beuvier 1999) were given additional significance in the 20th century with the widespread emphasis on the integrated systems concept represented by eco-museums and their utopian goal of achieving a harmonious coexistence between reality and the representation of that same reality (Chaumier 2010; Debarry 2002). All sorts of
modelling exercises were conducted in contexts of entertainment, to attempt to create for the public that delicious feeling of entering a parallel world that does not necessarily owe its existence to meticulous replication (Chaumier 2011). As a way to convey as closely as possible this pleasure in a somewhat fantasized representation of reality, we decided to present in Hors-champs a diorama of a diorama, confining ourselves to reproducing not the external reality of an old-style igloo, but rather part of an igloo reconstructed in 1976 by Jean Gabus, a past director of the MEN (1945-1978), for the exhibition entitled Les Esquimaux hier… aujourd’hui. In an environment such as this, designed to focus attention on different degrees of imitation, we displayed models, miniatures and a variety of ways reality can be represented, including a headdress from Silversterchlausen, shown in the museum where it had been conserved – clear proof that practices we now call “traditional” do not necessarily lack for qualities such as innovativity, humour and reflexivity as can be seen in Urnäsch, Appenzell Rhodes-Extérieures (click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=0, then select the TWO-PAGE image and press CONTINUE).

Immersion in realities that can be close at hand or far away from us is a major issue posed by Internet technology. While Google Earth allows us to range all over the planet at an unbelievable rate, skimming over innumerable places more genuinely travelled (since, after all, virtual reality is never better explored than by starting with memories left behind after true journeys), Google Street View makes it possible for us to walk along busy and less busy streets and roads and Google Art actually takes us inside manufactured landscapes that expose us to art of every form imaginable. For the Hors-champs exhibition, we set up a program we called “Google Arte Povera” (three mini cameras set up on a mobile platform by our filmmaker colleague Grégoire Mayor) that gives visitors a behind-the-scenes tour of the Museum (stockroom, kitchen, exhibition workroom, offices...). But the Museum team also played around with Google itself, that undisputed champion in the field of identical copies. We mounted an example of the all-seeing Google eye in both a storeroom and an exhibition display so as to show visitors what was not in fact a copy of current reality but rather the archival representation of an era already well past, due to the total transformation of the areas concerned (to see how “Poor Man’s Google Art” works for the Museum kitchen, click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=1, then select the TWO-PAGE image and press CONTINUE. To see Google Art at the MEN, go to the Museum on the map of Neuchâtel or use the drop-down menu on the Museum website at www.men.ch)

Nonetheless, it is still important to remain aware of the artifices used and the impression they create of an uninterrupted stream of images. Here it is the work of the “framers” of images, whether they are painters, photographers or filmmakers, that is given pride of place insofar as they are willing to comply with the apparent constraint of focusing on a small fraction of reality, condensing it down in concrete ways and, by the same token, accepting the risk that they might lose the essence of the subject, or, in more abstract terms, creating a kind of black hole that needs to be explored differently (Lambert 2013). In the Google world, one artist has gradually woven his own web and laid down his own references: Jon Rafman suspends Google images at improbable moments, finding strange or suggestive fragments of representations (Figure 2). By reframing the subject and recreating a point of view, he offers viewers of his “suspended images” an opportunity to return to the thread of an inner narrative (click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=2, then select the TWO-PAGE image and press CONTINUE).
CREATION OF AN AESTHETIC

The concept of aestheticization is virtually always contentious, because it is driven by conflicting goals for establishing relationships between objects and the way they are “staged”. When the object of the process is to produce high quality works, the form of theatricalization adopted will focus primarily on objects that the choices made in their staging will attempt to set off to their best advantage, in terms of their intrinsic beauty, sometimes even at the expense of a certain degree of decorum. When the object of the process is instead the production of ideas, the form of theatricalization adopted will focus primarily on a discourse that the choices made in its staging are designed to call attention to, independently of the formal qualities of the objects chosen. At the same time, the overall presentation will necessarily have an aesthetic dimension that strives ideally toward a different kind of formal perfection. In addition to a Yupik shaman mask donated to the Museum by Jean Gabus in 1976, Hors-champs exhibited three master works chosen from among the MEN’s photographic archives (photographs by Felice Beato, Thilly Weissenhorn and Charles Emile Thiébaud), as well as a moving pencil sketch by Wetalltok of three scenes from the first film shoots by Robert Flaherty in Hudson Bay, a drawing on loan from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. For the discourse dimension of the exhibit, the MEN displayed a wooden box holding a film that put a particularly strong emphasis on the aesthetics of Neuchâtel-style bowling recently recognized as being an element of Neuchâtel tradition to be included in the intangible cultural heritage of Switzerland, and then, a little more ironically, presented the plethora of experts who had supported this recognition (click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=0, then select the LIPSTICK TUBE image and press CONTINUE).
This aesthetic approach, when applied in virtual worlds, now reveals the increasing perfection that can be attained in the evolution of the photographic representation of objects, due primarily to the use of gigapixel imaging systems and 3D recording technology. At a recent conference in Rome, my colleagues from the Musée d’ethnographie de Genève (Geneva Museum of Ethnography) showed attendees examples of photographs of objects that achieved such a stunning degree of perfection that they found it almost more instructive to examine those same photographs than the items they had set out to represent. Observations of this nature are eloquent proof of the argument put forward by Jean Baudrillard (1995) on the dissolution of reality, when he went so far as to challenge the previously-held belief that it was impossible for the world and its double to coexist. There is clearly an increasing tendency in the virtual environment toward duplication of the world—and the process is still in its infancy! As to the future that awaits the world when its copy becomes better than the original, we will just have to wait and see…

(to take a shamanic trip inside a mask, click on [link], then select the LIPSTICK TUBE image and press CONTINUE).

Given the opportunity to propose new ways of looking at reality and building relationships with our environment, some of our fascinating contemporaries are currently engaged in pushing back the boundaries of art and science. Among others, the Hors-champs exhibition chose to feature anthropologist Philippe Geslin (2013) and the nature photos where he uses a highly deliberate aesthetic approach to suggest new ways of interpreting his Far North environment—in a style that now brings invitations pouring in from across the photo gallery world (Figure 3). Another example is the Bern-based ethnologist, Regula Tschumi, whose modus operandi is fascinating at a number of levels. Her research in the dual fields of Ethnography and Fine Arts led her to study funeral rites in Ghana (Tschumi 2011) and then look more closely at the people involved in making the truly extraordinary Ghanaian coffins, with their depictions of heteroclite and highly colourful objects and living persons. An after-effect of this research was her introduction of false (because never-buried) coffins into the art market, in particular for the exhibitions Six Feet Under at the Bern Kunstmuseum (2006-2007, see Kunstmuseum 2006) and Anthologie de l’humour noir at the Pompidou Centre (2010-2011, see Afif, 2010). In particular, Regula Tschumi undertook with Ataa Oko, a master sculptor who had temporarily ceased his activities, to carry...
out a totally unique form of ethnographic research: she provided him with paper, and drawing and colouring pencils and asked him to begin by illustrating the subjects on his coffins, and then, by degrees, to move on to depicting the invisible beings associated with funerals. As a result of her long-standing research relationship with him, Tschumi launched the coffin artist into the field of *Art Brut*, with his work shown not only in the Bern Kunstmuseum during the above-mentioned exhibition but also in the Lausanne *Art Brut* Collection (Peiry 2010). This co-construction created by the social science researcher and the artist with the growing reputation was approached and documented with great care and intelligence in the exhibition *Histoires de voir*¹¹ at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, in 2012 (Price 2012; to discover the works of Philippe Geslin and Ataa Oko, click on [http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=2](http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=2), then select the LIPSTICK TUBE image and press CONTINUE).

PRODUCTION OF MOVEMENT

Creation of movement is a skill rarely found in museums. In most cases, their efforts are focused on giving the collections they display an appearance of mobility, through the use of drawings and still or moving images, or by means of increasingly sophisticated technology. But some movements are clearly better able to convey the essence of a field of activity than others. It is therefore no wonder that these are the forms of movement most often given prominence, thereby detracting from a whole series of less evocative movements. When incorporating the movements of a watchmaker into the reflections generated by the *Hors-champs* exhibition, we came to realize that most of the representation choices in this field were focused on a watch-repair procedure under which a person wearing a magnifying glass uses tweezers to adjust the sprung balance (Figure 4). Hence the first paradox (Munz 2013): this operation is generally carried out by specialized female workers who are less qualified and less well-paid than watchmakers. And then the second paradox: this almost classic movement becomes paradigmatic because it borders on complete immobility. When the movement is broken down by means of a mutoscope, a rudimentary device for replicating movement using a succession of images, visitors are left...
with the impression that they are still looking at the same photo image (to discover the section devoted to movement, click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=0, then select the PAIL image and press CONTINUE).

To make up for their widespread syndrome of immobility, museums have tended to develop features that draw on the kinetic potential of their visitors. Their earlier use of simple and repetitive movements like opening a drawer, lifting up a lid or pushing a button have now been replaced by directions for participation that have bought into the joystick or remote control craze and led museums to adopt a range of programs designed to appeal to the dexterity and playful spirit of the young and the young at heart. Using irony for a serious purpose, the Hors-champs exhibition invites visitors to test their ability to make a fondue in the traditional manner (based on the eight-step program), with a series of experts offering advice and critical opinions on how participants are proceeding. Needless to say, this basically ordinary activity is one of the star features of the exhibition and draws considerable crowds, particularly when family audiences predominate. This jewel of participative museography achieves considerable success with its combination of “kidultism”, “edutainment” and fun-filled irony (Figure 5, to learn how to make fondue with the team from the MEN, click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=1, then select the PAIL image and press CONTINUE).

The field of ethnography of techniques abounds with documentary films whose basic purpose is to show how know-how comes into play for specific actions that can range from lighting a fire without using matches to building a canoe, spinning and weaving or smithing. The cognitive significance of these documents is far from evident, particularly when the technique involved is still used today. The fundamental shortcoming of this documentary footage lies in the fact that it usually focuses overly much on the actions per se being carried out, rather than on the people doing those actions. In contrast to this ultimately fatal tendency – for both the actions and the people carrying them out – the Hors-champs exhibition presents an approximately 10-minute-long portrait of a mattress-maker, filmed by Alain Cavalier in 1988. The documentary makes no effort to hide the person of the filmmaker and the relationship he creates with his subject, showing the repetitive gestures of the person filmed and letting her share her memories, describing the marks her work has left on her hands and imprinted on her memory. In this fashion, the film becomes a vector, not only of the actions carried out by the person, but also of the relationship that exists between these actions and the broader context in which they take place. Here again, a particular form of artistic sensitivity can be seen to have contributed to the enrichment of an ethnographic practice, and, by the same token, to have created real renewal in that particular sphere of activity (see http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=2, then click on the screen).

CLASSIFICATION INTO CATEGORIES

Museums worship at the altar of categorization. Within their sphere of action, every item they deal with constitutes an opportunity for classifying into categories, based on its provenance, function, physical makeup, size or market value. And what is true for objects is equally true for the living creatures that centuries of taxonomic obsession have formatted in contrasting ways, depending on the period when the classification took place and the levels of knowledge of those doing the classifying. Hors-champs takes as an example a Neuchâtel scholar with close ties to the Museum of Ethnography and the
University of Neuchâtel. Arthur Dubied (1862-1928) compiled an impressive corpus of images taken from books, magazines, scientific journals or postcards that he subsequently organized on the basis of the predominant geographical, cultural or “racial” criteria of his day. The impression the collection leaves with us today is that tastes of the time lay with things extraordinary or forbidden, particularly as regards physical deformities and female nudity. One 20th century illustration of a similar obsession with breaking things down into categories can be seen in the product labels employed by chocolate-makers. An example today, in these early years of the 21st century, would be the many ethnic versions of the Barbie doll which persistently maintain the original physical characteristics of the doll, which is now made to wear dress styles in a range of extremely distorted and stereotypical forms that supposedly reflect differences and cultural specificities of women from all parts of the world (click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=0, then select the TWO-DRAWER DRESSER image and press CONTINUE).

We are all familiar with the (not-so-)subtle forms of web-based solicitation that start with the formula “First of all, please accept my apologies for this intrusion into your space”, then go on to propose an unbelievably profitable commercial deal or an Email exchange to develop a relationship for friendship or love. This type of electronic contact may reflect a venal streak, a need to communicate, a quest for sexual pleasure or simply a desire to communicate with fellow web users. As we are not duped by the underlying purpose of such messages, there is a side to them that can make us smile, while there is another side that bothers us. Even so, we find it difficult to grasp the true scope of these astonishing fishing expeditions. In spite of our levels of awareness, we still allow ourselves to become the consenting victims of highly efficient cyber trawlers like Amazon or Facebook that hijack the information we give on their sites, in order to turn us into marketing targets for specific kinds of products. The Hors-champs exhibition combines these two trends that so clearly exemplify this particular exercise in classification, by means of a game of mirrors where visitors believe they are choosing between Like/Don’t like while in fact they are being placed in categories predetermined by the program and designed to reveal to them just how it is they become consenting victims in a large number of computerized transactions (click on http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=1, then select the TWO-DRAWER DRESSER image and press CONTINUE).
For artists, the refusal to buy into the obsession with typology is expressed in increasingly diverse ways. For *Hors-champs*, we chose two photographers who work to create a blurring of categories normally considered to be mutually exclusive (Figure 6). Namsa Leuba drew on her dual Swiss and Guinean identities to spearhead in Guinea a highly unusual project under which human beings were to be transformed into fetish objects. This operation that was anything but self-evident in a context the artist approached far more through categories drawn from her training as an artist, than explained by her familiarity with the realities of life in Guinea or by expectations expressed by people she met in the field. Lisl Ponger adopted a very different approach to extracting something new from identity categories. She approached a number of Austrian-born individuals whose experience of having been exposed to other environments had led to significant changes in their personalities, and their way of life or appearance when living in Austria (click on [http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=2](http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=2), then select the TWO-DRAWER DRESSER image and press CONTINUE).

**COGNITIVE SHOCK**

Since the 1980s, the MEN has consistently worked to find perspectives on exhibition themes that produce cognitive shock (which I also like to describe as “poetic irony”) in visitors, by pairing opposing concepts, associating apparently dissimilar objects, creating collisions of the senses which visitors can draw on to make their own way inside the system of associations proposed by a particular exhibition. The 1990 exhibition, *Le trou*¹², contributed significantly to entrenching this approach in team practices at the Museum and popularizing it in the public mind (Figure 7). To show the importance the Museum attached to exploring the construction and overlapping of the imaginary, the exhibition leaflet began with these words: “The discovery route of the exhibition is your own history, the moments in your own life, as constructed by that amazing organ, your brain. It is your brain that creates associations, what might seem to be foolish associations, but nevertheless the kind of associations needed by each and every one of us to represent our own cultural environment. *Le trou* proposes ways of questioning existence using four exhibit spaces, a home, a city, a damaged aircraft cabin and a hotel, using metaphorical boundary lines”. In *Hors-champs*, this hallmark approach is recreated through a home appliance store in which a refrigerator door opens up into a space symbolically associated with the Far North. While itself serving as a pretext for exploring several related issues, this introductory display for the exhibit presents the
reverse image of an Inuit moving from the ice pack into a fully equipped kitchen, an idea that captivated our design team for the 1990 exhibition. In point of fact, refrigerators represent wonderful potential display cases, as long as only their lighting is retained. In our case, they were wonderfully conducive to creating instances of cognitive shock, including, among other things, through the conservation of unusual objects outside the normal limits of our collection, as compared with other equally unusual objects that have cleared this hurdle (Figure 8, see also [http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=0](http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=0), then select the REFRIGERATOR image and press CONTINUE).

Cognitive shock is a perfect example of an in-depth interaction with the public that can take place without the need for electronic gadgets. This probably explains why it is that the team at the MEN long resisted the siren song of mechanically- or digitally-based interactions with Museum, remaining convinced that genuine interactions with them needed to be emotional or intellective in nature. Museum displays characterized by a total absence of movement can, in our opinion, engage an intensive dialogue with visitors, when these latter understand what they are being asked to do and called upon to interpret. With this in mind, it becomes evident that ICTs are of additional benefit only in exhibition situations where their use has been carefully thought out and closely and critically assessed. After all, there really is no reason why use of a digital screen is more relevant than a space where visitors can become meaningfully immersed. Mechanical and digital interactive processes are simply alternative ways of enabling visitors to participate and engaging them in scenarios to which these processes are entirely secondary. Consequently, we should adopt them for our productions only when they represent the best way to achieve our storytelling and scenographic goals. In the present case, and contrary to what is done in the remainder of the Hors-champs exhibition, we communicated this interrogation about the best means to engage the public by offering visitors an interface for basic interaction where they themselves

Figure 9. Do it yourself: MEN-style participatory shock. Photograph: Alain Germond © Musée d’ethnographie de Neuchâtel
could create in a refrigerator a scenography for producing cognitive shock by combining contrasting elements (Figure 9, see also http://hors-champs.men-expo.ch/?lvl=1, then select the REFRIGERATOR image and press CONTINUE).

The kind of work the MEN team has been engaged in for the past several years stems from a particularly close relationship the Museum has maintained with a number of Swiss artists whose sensitivity and discourse have strongly pervaded our institution. Probably the most important among them is Jean-Pierre Zaugg, a scenographer at the Museum from the early 1980s to the first years of the new century. This pop art painter and sculptor became disillusioned with the environment where he was painting and creating different forms of provocative art, and decided to instead become an interior decorator. His creativity caught the attention of one of the members of the MEN team and led to his being offered the position of Museum scenographer when the previous incumbent left. So it was that, through its very close association with his artist’s sense for space, for storytelling and for creative ridicule, the Museum team was able to freely develop, in the more than 20 years of working with him, its experience in presenting what might be called “unsettling” exhibitions. One remarkable creation by Zaugg was a giant “Eskimo” presented in association with an Inuit body suit to represent the MEN in the 1999 exhibition L’art c’est l’art. That particular Eskimo was subsequently restored, catalogued and brought out again for the Hors-champs exhibition as a testament to the extremely close and long-standing ties that the MEN had maintained with this visual artist.

A second artist who strongly influenced both Jacques Hainard and myself in the final years of this past century was Rémy Zaugg (no relation to Jean-Pierre). He embodied a completely different philosophical and artistic sensitivity marked by rigour, exigency, asceticism, a penetrating mind and razor-sharp discourse. Rémy Zaugg was the first outsider to join our group for a wide-reaching project to explore the inner workings of the art world; he contributed both intellectual support and artistic inspiration for the extremely unsettling process this undertaking led to, as illustrated by the tautological reflections featured in the L’art c’est l’art exhibition. He revisited for the exhibition a project entitled Le singe peintre (Zaugg and Widmer 2000), a painting he had previously worked on, with its close parallels to Chardin works. In it, a monkey in an artist’s smock wields his paintbrush, not to capture the reality that surrounds him but instead to paint the colour of the painting in front of him (Figure 10). For the concepts evoked here, we see the artist joining forces with the philosopher and the sociologist to convey at one and the same time the power of our outlook on things and the abysmal depths of our blindness.
THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

In spite of the fact that the main thrust of this present article is predicated on one particular exhibition, while deriving broader positions pertaining to museology in general, the approaches I advocate here would suggest that questions about the best visitor strategies for museums to adopt and the ultimate purpose of their efforts are issues many of our institutions are facing today. The increasing use of ICTs and art-based strategies are now a given in museum circles, but this in no way exempts museums from their responsibility to engage in in-depth reflection on their role in today’s world. Museums are not storage facilities for obsolete objects, nor are they infirmaries for responding to people suffering melancholy as a result of today’s complex world; they are not theme parks for light entertainment, with no demands for mental effort, nor are they prisons where collections are locked up and kept secret; they are not cemeteries to bridge the gap between memory and what will otherwise be forgotten, or schools for intensive learning and correctional education, nor are they or even cultural centres available for all forms of representation. Nevertheless, they are in some ways all of those things, to different degrees, in changing combinations, and always with high levels of potential.

The point of the exercise is not so much to find out how things work, as operating instructions (highly diverse) undergo regular updates; it is not even to understand what those things are supposed to achieve, as the answers (innumerable) to that question are subject to constantly evolving interpretation. What is truly important is the need to reinvent a new kind of museum space, untainted by the scourge of institutional and administrative madness, unaffected by political and right-thinking pressures, unconstrained by the exigencies of marketing or immediate profitability: a forum where the awkward questions can be asked and efforts made to examine them in greater depth and answer them through a free and open exchange of ideas. Such a forum would constitute a meeting point at the confluence of the various dimensions of museology: the material and the immaterial, science and the arts, research and pleasure, criticism and poetry – fertile ground for comprehensive analysis and the search for meaning.

NOTES

1 Title in English could be “Off-camera” (translator’s note).
2 Museum of Ethnography of Neuchâtel.
3 In essence, rather than being like words in a dictionary, objects in an exhibition are for me like actors to whom the expographer and the scenographer offer leading roles, secondary roles or bit parts in the hypertext, the image maps and the hyper-objects inspired by that exhibition (Gonseth 2005).
4 Noises off (our translation).
5 The exhibition content referred to in this article was developed in close cooperation with my exhibition design partners Bernard Knodel, Yann Laville and Grégoire Mayor, then produced in close collaboration with our exhibition production team Raphaël von Allmen, Patrick Burnier and Anna Jones.
6 Off-Camera (our translation).
7 From the Other Side of the World (our translation).
8 Back in the Box (our translation).
9 Eskimos of Yester-year… Today (our translation).
10 Anthology of Black Humour (our translation).
11 Ways of Seeing (our translation).
12 The Hole (our translation).
13 I had been invited to share my reflections on the subject of ICTs during the Summer School organized in June 2012 by the Centre interuniversitaire d’études sur les lettres, les arts et les traditions (CÉLAT) of the Université Laval and the Musées de la civilisation, and was expecting to cross swords on the subject with a specialist in the field who was to speak just before me and whom I expected would be utterly sold on their image of modernity. To my great surprise, he in fact adopted a critical stance very close to my own: the crucial element for both of us lies in the underlying content, not in the technology chosen for transmitting that content – and the technology used needs to be negotiated on a case by case basis, with the simplest solutions often turning out to be the best.
14 Somewhat like “Eskimo pies” in many parts of the English-speaking world, the ice popsicles sold in cinemas in France have been known as “esquimaux” ever since the film Nanook of the North (Nanook l’Esquimau, in French) came out in 1922.
15 Art is Art (our translation).
REFERENCES


