
The Human Image seen through the History of Exhibiting

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Imagine a small sculpture. For example one from the Greek Archaic period, representing a female figure, most probably connected to religious practices. If it is placed among many other similar works in a densely arranged exhibition vitrine, it may easily skip our attention. At the same time, if it is in the middle of a large exhibition hall, placed on an elegant pedestal that the sculpture is occupying alone, it will presumably get all the attention it deserves, despite the work's small size. Hence the same object – let it be a work of art or design, a religious object or an everyday tool – can have completely different aspects and appearances, and it can trigger various interests and emotions simply through the special modes of exhibiting it. To illustrate it better, let me have two further examples:

A curator from the Imperial War Museum once recounted a curious disinterestedness or unawareness of the visitors in one of their pieces: in the exhibition one can find a bomb, that is exactly the same as the “Little Boy, the one having destroyed Hiroshima. However, according to the curator's experience, most of the visitors do not pay any attention to it, only because its placing, since it is in the middle of a densely filled room, and is simply lost among the other exhibited objects. Therefore its tragic importance is not highlighted with some kind of space or emptiness around it that would help the focus. (*This recount is from a few years ago, perhaps since then the exhibition was re-arranged.*)

Another, definitely more cheerful, though from our current perspective and questions just as important instance I would like to refer to is the so-called “glasses-prank.”¹ In 2016, the 17-year old T. J. Khayatan, during a school visit to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art decided to play a prank on the other visitors by leaving a pair of glasses on the floor, testing if the fellow museum-goers could be fooled to think it was a ready-made artwork and part of the exhibition. Perhaps not surprisingly they could, i.e. – according to the reports documented on social media and retweeted

1. Henri Neuendorf, “Teens Prank Museum-Goers by Leaving Glasses on Floor of SFMOME,” *artnet news*, May 26, 2016, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/teens-prank-art-glasses-sfmoma-505583?utm_campaign=artnetnews&utm_source=052716daily&utm_medium=email&utm_term=artnet%20News%20Daily%20Newsletter; last accessed September 15, 2018.

and liked over 50.000 times – soon after “placing the object on the floor, interested art lovers started to gather around, looking at it and even taking photographs. Naturally, the basis for the deceit of the visitors was the context itself, being used to the fact that in museums we find works that have certain importance and significance. In fact, the episode could also be a great illustration to Miguel Tamen’s interpretation of the museum, formulated in his book titled *Friends of interpretable objects*: “Museums are indeed places where the use of exhibited objects is inseparable from the basic assumption that objects therein «have been made in order to signify something other than what the eye sees: museums are places where bits of matter are reduced to meaning and subsequently defined as «art»”.²

Already from these examples we can see that when discussing the phenomenon on exhibiting, the object is never alone-standing, i.e. never shown and never to be analysed in itself. The context of the presented object, the modes of exhibiting it, the features of the space as well as the intellectual framework and motivation of the curators are all crucial both in the efficient working and in the intellectually and aesthetically fruitful perception of the piece.³ And this efficiency interests us in our present argument with regards to the Human image and humanities too.

Confronting ourselves with objects in the context of an exhibition – let them be pieces of art or everyday objects having particular significance for their rarity, age or other historical value – is a common way of learning about ourselves. Therefore, our self-interpretation or attempts of self-understanding is largely depending on what and how we see and what and how we show about ourselves to ourselves. Each display of tools, art objects, artefacts and design products conveys not only and purely the information of and about that object, but also the importance the very object plays for the society and for the particular time when it is shown. And since public display of objects is not a new phenomenon at all, the changing aspects and focuses of the exhibiting can provide us with invaluable information about how people had shown and encountered such objects. This examination of the numerous aspects in the phenomenon of exhibiting will then contribute to the better understanding of some of the current challenges of both humanity and of the humanities.⁴

Artworks – or, better to say, objects that we today generally consider as artworks – were exhibited in public spaces already from the early Antiquity, both in peaceful settings, or as a result of bellicose activities, as well as in commercial contexts. In ancient Greece sculptures of gods, heroes and winners of important sports events adorned communal spaces; votive-sculptures were offered for the help of gods around the temples. On the other hand, victorious military leaders and

2. Miguel Tamen, *Friends of interpretable objects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts – London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 59.

3. See more on these questions, as well as on how this influences museum designs and displays, in an earlier paper of mine: Zoltán Somhegyi, “Design and the Audience. On the Questions of Presentation in Contemporary Museums,” in *A New Affair: Design History and Digital Design Museum*, ed. Tevfik Balcıoğlu and Gülsüm Baydar (Izmir: 5T-Yaşar University, 2014), 42-49.

4. On some questions about the “public”-ness of art and exhibitions, see also: Zoltán Somhegyi, “From the public nature of art to the nature of public art. Considerations on the changing spaces and modes of exhibiting,” *Serbian Architectural Journal* Vol. 9. (2017/2): 191-200.

Roman emperors were also in favour of showing the looted treasures what they collected during their successful battles, of which some sculptural representations survived on triumphal arches. We also know that auctions were organised already in ancient Rome.

In a similar way also Christian churches of the Middle Ages can be considered as public displays of objects of special importance, i.e. artworks and reliquaries. A Gothic cathedral is in a way the utmost collection of artworks and artefacts of the most various kinds. Another important instance where public display had an impact on art and architecture: the need of efficiently managing the large flow of pilgrims in a church having a reliquary had a significant influence on the development of the basilicas with ambulatories around the altar.

A major shift we can however trace from the Renaissance and the Early Modern Ages onwards that again has connections with the convoluted set of questions of the “value of artworks too. Parallel with the rise of the status of the artist in society, the financial value of the artwork started to get detached from the material value of the object itself. Or, we can say that the added value of the artist or creator of the piece started to count more and more, and this has naturally influenced both the collection and the display of works, as well as incentivised a rivalry between collectors and commissioners. Royal, aristocratic and a bit later bourgeois collections were established, however, these had not contained exclusively works of art. These “Kunst und Wunderkammern”, as their name indicates, had pieces that today we can find in museums of fine and applied arts or in museums of natural history. As we can learn from the influential research of Julius von Schlosser, especially in his 1908 book *Die Kunst und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance*, this drive of collecting paved the way for the modern concept of museums, many of which in the 18th century have partly grown out from these aristocratic collections, making the previously partly closed collections open to the public, or royal collections donated to the newly founded institutions.⁵ This is the classical form of museums that preserve objects, not only in the sense of keeping them as valuable treasures within their walls, but also to preserve them against the rages of time. As Boris Groys observed in a text originally presented as a lecture at Museo Reina Sophia in 2013, and then published in *e-flux journal*: “Traditionally, the main occupation of art was to resist the flow of time. Public art museum and big private art collections were created to select certain objects – the artworks – take them out of private and public use, and therefore immunize them against the destructive force of time.”⁶

Through this accumulation of objects that are aesthetically and/or (art) historically significant we find again an important instance of rivalry, this time however not between the commissioners

5. Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunst und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1908); see the digitalised version of the original edition on the website of the Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/schlosser1908>; last accessed September 8, 2018.

6. Boris Groys, “Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk,” *e-flux journal* 50 (December 2013): 1.; <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59974/entering-the-flow-museum-between-archive-and-gesamtkunstwerk/>; last accessed September 8, 2018. (The page number refers to the pdf version of the article.)

and collectors, but between the new nation-states. Important Antique archaeological findings were transported to Western museums, partly motivated by the consideration that the (new) nation hosting and displaying the origins of human culture is not only the legitimate inheritor of the actual objects, but also the culmination of human culture itself – where human culture, in the period, was seen from an accumulative and progressive historical viewpoint. On the other hand, we have to add that even if this approach to the relevance and importance of Antique findings is definitely motivated by the further building of national pride and glory, it has still – at least, indirectly – contributed to the diversification of scholarship and especially to a broader perception and as a consequence a more inclusive assessment of the values of some of the previously disregarded sub-periods of antiquity throughout the whole 19th century.⁷

In the later phase, we shall not forget to take into consideration the (further) rise of status of the artist in the Romanticism. The gradually secured independence of the Romantic artist liberated him from the formerly powerful commissioner, and at the same time made him, at least financially, dependent on the fluctuating market and taste. This has again influenced and triggered new modes of exhibiting, including the studio-exhibitions of artists and the travelling one-artwork shows in the 19th century. The late-19th century polarisation and fragmentation of the art world has naturally affected the exhibition landscape too. The rejection of rather progressive artists from the official Salons motivated them to find alternative exhibition places. This has naturally also opened up the possibilities for the numerous 20th century avant-garde movements to experiment with the ways of reaching their audience. We shall not forget either that one of the major issues at stake for these movements – especially those socially engaged ones like Russian Constructivists or even Bauhaus – was exactly to reach out to a new audience and thus to have a strong and actual impact on the building of (a new) society through the inclusion of new segments of the society.

This quick summary on some of the features of how in earlier times people had encountered works of art and how these changing aspects have influenced their perception and appreciation of the pieces can now guide us in mapping some of the current challenges.

Interestingly, many of these challenges, as well as threat of humanity and to humanities are connected to the question of *interest*, in a broad sense of the word. Let me mention here only three: *inattention*, *over-commercialisation* and the returning (or never-ending) tendency of *iconoclasm*. By *inattention* I mean the visual over-saturation of today's average potential visitor, who, being used to the quick flow of images in television and internet culture can often not have enough patience to enjoy traditional modes of exhibitions, especially when the perception and enjoyment of the exhibited objects would require thorough and peaceful immersion in the context of the show. The second difficulty that we can find in the current exhibition culture is *over-commercialisation*, of

7. See more about these questions in Zainab Bahrani-Zeynep Çelik-Edhem Eldem (eds), *Scramble for the Past. A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914* (Istanbul: SALT, 2011), especially the chapters: Zainab Bahrani, *Untold Tales of Mesopotamian Discovery* (125-157) and Philippe Jockey, *The Venus de Milo: Genesis of a Modern Myth* (237-257).

which one of the evident sign is the emergence of the “blockbuster shows, i.e. when cash-strapped museums try to revitalise their financial situation by organising shows with attractive titles like “Picasso and his friends, or “From Leonardo to Rembrandt, hoping that the big names attract record-breaking number of visitors. In worse cases, they exhibit perhaps a few works of lesser significance by a master and filling the rest of the space with forgettable works by other minor artists. To be clear, I do not claim that in an exhibition only the best works of the greatest masters should be exhibited – on the contrary, I am very much in favour of experimental exhibitions with research-based and innovative concepts shedding light on new aspects, but we shall take into consideration that in this case also the ways of showing the findings shall be carefully calibrated to be inspiring for both the professionals and for the non-specialised public, and this latter group should not come only because of the appealing title.

It might sound strange at the beginning, but the third threat I mentioned above, *iconoclasm* – both classical and contemporary forms of it – can, at least indirectly, be related to questions of interest and also of commercialisation. The destruction of earlier cultures’ or other nations’ and religions’ tangible elements of memory and cultural artefacts is not a new phenomenon, we can trace it again from Antiquity, from the Roman *damnatio memoriae* and from the Byzantine decades of Iconoclasm onwards. In present day destructions however this form of destroying – that we could also interpret as the countertendency of exhibiting – is motivated not only by the intention of erasing the enemy’s cultural heritage, but also to raise awareness to this destruction itself and to the showing of power of the destroyer. This exercise of power is exactly that connects modern day iconoclasm with its antique origins, including the aforementioned *damnatio memoriae*. As Jacques Le Goff argued in his book *History and Memory*: “The power to destroy memory is the counterweight to power achieved through the production of memory.”⁸ As an example for the exercise of this power, just think of the constant documentation and media-coverage of some of the recent ISIS-related destructions, e.g. that of Palmyra. It was so widely discussed and reproduced, that many started to analyse the question if this constant showing of these cultural atrocities would not turn into a sort of involuntary publicity and thus (at least indirectly) also commercial gain for the terrorist organisation. Especially because, as Jason Felch and Bastien Varoutsikos investigated in their article in the online edition of *The Art Newspaper*, the terrible effect of the destructions by ISIS was in fact increased through the conscious and professional propaganda campaign spreading over the Internet documenting the very destruction itself.⁹ Hence issues around interest again: it was in the interest of the terrorists to direct the world’s attention to their atrocities, and in this way potentially anyone posting, commenting, forwarding or retweeting the terrible images – naturally

8. Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York – Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1992) 68.

9. Jason Felch and Bastien Varoutsikos, “The lessons of Palmyra: Islamic state and iconoclasm in the era of clickbait”: *The Art Newspaper*, April 7, 2016; http://theartnewspaper.com/comment/comment/lessons-from-palmyra-where-islamic-state-combined-iconoclasm-and-clickbait/?utm_source=weekly_apr8_2016&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=email_weekly; last accessed December 3, 2016.

disagreeing with them – may still have involuntarily supported the aims of the terrorist organisation in spreading the cruel message.

These are just a few of the many aspects and areas the conscious and constant advising as well as collaboration between the professionals of a broad range of humanities disciplines are extremely necessary including the specialists of not only art and design history and aesthetics, but also social, political and economic history, cultural anthropology, philosophy, history of religion etc. in order to create exhibitions that can boldly and creatively analyse pressing questions and critical issues too. This complex curatorial work would then also result in successful attempts of re-interpretation of the museum. In the aforementioned article Boris Groys argues for the precedence of the “project over the “exhibition: “The curatorial project, rather than the exhibition, is then the Gesamtkunstwerk because it instrumentalizes all the exhibited artworks and makes them serve a common purpose that is formulated by the curator. At the same time, a curatorial or artistic installation is able to include all kinds of objects: time-based artworks or processes, everyday objects, documents, texts and so forth.¹⁰ Further developing this, Groys argues for the museum to be converted from a place where we merely contemplate objects to one where things happen (e.g. lectures, presentations, discussions, screenings etc.), hence an institute that keeps an intellectually fertile flow of events and activities. Although his argumentation was directed towards the analyses of the relationship between a museum’s collection and the Internet, still it is also useful for the concept and envisioning of the ideal function and functioning of a contemporary museum. Being aware of these various challenges and focusing on the interdisciplinary and innovative cooperation between numerous fields of humanities can thus help not only in our present understanding of humanity, but also in the shaping of the Human image to be shown in the future.

10. Groys, “Entering the Flow,” 6.