Interaction in the museum: Observing, supporting, learning
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Citation for published version (APA):

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6. Postscript

Only days before finishing the final draft of this study, I had the opportunity to visit a major new exhibition held at the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam's Dam Square. The exhibition, entitled Het wonderbaarlijk alfabet, celebrates 200 years of the Royal Dutch Library. With the study fresh in my mind, I indulged myself, on a sunny afternoon, in 'testing' its claims, one more time, against a real exhibition.

Perhaps in response to the perception that books are among the least interesting and most difficult material with which to make a public exhibition, the designers had conceived an elaborate setting for the exhibition's collection of masterworks from the Royal Library. The collection was divided into clusters, each according to a letter of the alphabet, and each cluster was itself a setting related to the content of the material on display. The collection of natural history engravings, for instance, was displayed in a 'cage' recalling the Zoo – an impression enhanced by background sounds of zoo animals and birds. The clusters all radiated out from an enormous darkened central space – a space of which all four walls were made of books – a giant library. On one wall of the 'library' was projected a multimedia show about the Royal Library, along the edge of another were a dozen computers, linked to the Library's website. The overall impression was of a masterfully-executed stage set – quite different from a 'traditional' exhibition of books or paintings. A few text panels were scattered around the exhibition, but they were only in Dutch. As for the objects on display, they were only numbered – the labels were provided in a small book that could be consulted as the visitor roamed the collection from A to Z.

To all intents and purposes – given its scenography, its collection, its setting – it should be a great success. It isn't – at least not if one looks at the ways in which visitors use the exhibition. The visitors wander about in a desultory fashion, some of them leafing through their book of 'labels'. The scenography overwhelms and the soundtrack interferes with an appreciation of the material on display (for example, the books about chess are displayed in vitrines under the feet of the visitors). But this is not in itself the problem – in fact, the scenography and soundtrack in and of themselves are of a very high quality. The reason the exhibition falls flat is, in spite of the attention paid to the form, or 'style', of the exhibition, the user-language is primarily that of textual authority (the label booklet) which must be actively consulted to understand the exhibition. If the visitor does not want or choose to use the booklet, or does not understand that it is intended to be used – the only structuring in the exhibition is that of unsupported observation. Unsupported observation, with no aids to structuring the experience, has the effect of paralysing the visitor, who
wanders aimlessly from cluster to cluster, lingering for a short moment if the object appears interesting. Here we have vivid proof of the failure of the museum when the devices it uses are seen as merely 'style' or technique – and no explicit consideration is given to the user-language employed. All the multimedia presentations, videos, computers, and clever settings, do not support the visitor in engaging with the exhibition's content.

Maybe the content itself is boring, a reader may protest. Books, after all, aren't as gripping to look at as Renaissance portraits or Impressionist landscapes. This does not seem to fully explain the situation. Exhibitions of books can indeed sustain visitor engagement – and for long periods of time. For example, in an exhibition recently held at the new Getty Museum in Santa Monica, a rare book of medieval miniatures was unbound for digitisation, and the individual leaves displayed for a brief time in a small exhibition room. The exhibition explicitly employed the user-language of observation – and the organisers provided high-quality magnifying lenses to allow close inspection of the pages. The visitors, however, used the magnifying lenses to transform the user-language of the exhibition to that of problems – problems they defined and attempted to resolve. Often there was an hour wait to get one of the magnifiers – and the visitor behaviour in the exhibition was one of intense and thoughtful examination. Much like the example of the torchlight in the Musée des arts et métiers cited in the introduction, the instrument allowed the user to take control of his own questioning – and unlocked a whole new museum behaviour.

No, the problem with Het wonderbaarlijk alfabet lies elsewhere. It lies in not having understood the importance of a coherently implemented user-language, and in having unwittingly confused style with strategy. The user-language of the exhibition is still only the user-language of textual authority, to a small extent combined with that of observation – and the attractive packaging functions mainly aswindow-dressing.

By happy coincidence I had to return to newMetropolis that same evening – and the difference was astonishing. Visitors were playing, sitting, talking, discussing with each other. The exhibitions were full of people helping each other. Exhibitions carefully prototyped to employ the user-languages of problems and games were consistently supporting engaged, concentrated activity. The Trading Ring was in constant use, the Telecommunications circle crowded with players, the Distribution game was crawling with seven-year olds. Teenagers hunched over the computer games – and the Actua terminals. The place was alive, vibrant, and vital – a hive of
activity. Of course, you might argue, the exhibits are interactive, ‘hands-on’ – no dusty vitrines in newMetropolis. This is true, but not every science centre sustains this level of user-directed activity. The long path that led to newMetropolis and its exhibitions was begun as a response to the lack of engagement in interactive science centres – the resonant pendulum left swinging idly, or worse still, broken by frustrated visitors.

No, both experiences sent the same message, and led to the same conclusion: the explicit employment of particular user-languages, and a deeper understanding of what engages the user, makes the difference between a museum where visitors merely poke about the exhibitions, and a museum that supports its users by creating a world where they can exercise and develop new activities, a world where time can be concentrated.

We often hear that museum visitors are too stupid, or perhaps too lazy to undertake the intellectual effort of an exhibition that demands that they participate actively. I believe I have gone beyond this position. It does not matter whether people really are intelligent or stupid, or whatever other properties they have. We already know too well the exhibitions that come if we assume that the curator knows everything, or that the museum is the sacred grove for the chosen few. We can and must reject these assumptions as the basis for our work, and concentrate on helping our visitors create new properties, whereby our institutions of informal learning become effective support systems for the greatest variety of users.