Cultures of light: contemporary trends in museum exhibition

Katzberg, L.M.

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Deciding to write a doctoral dissertation about light was a decision that did not come about over night. In fact, it took half my lifetime to ripen. One of my earliest memories about lighting recounts a scene of receiving a book at age thirteen from my cousins Gilda and Wally, entitled *The Magic of Light: The Craft and Career of Jean Rosenthal*, which kindled my general fascination with theatrical lighting and more specifically, the phenomenon of light. It was the first time I read the phrase and understood what it meant to “trip […] the light fantastik” as Milton expresses it in *L’Allegro*. This early event was the catalyst for my lifelong fascination with the spectacle and conceptualization of physical light. The educational expedition I would undertake several decades later and which took place on two continents, coalesced while working an on-again-off-again theatrical engagement on a sunny resort island. My appearance in this extravaganza as Misha lasted nine years and took place on a far from deserted “sand bar” in the Great South Bay off the coast of Long Island, New York with the highly esteemed Fire Island producer, singer, and musical virtuoso Isaac Steven Vaughan. The supporting cast of thousands included Andy, Ariel, Bella, Ben, Bobby, Cathy, Chuck†, Dennis, Dennis, George, Jacque, Jerry, Jerry, Jim, Kevin, Mac, Nelson, Richard‡, Rick, Ricky, Robert and Sal.

At the fantastic speed of 300 kilometres per hour, the 1st class compartment on Thalys’ Amsterdam-Paris Express, in which I chose to write these appreciative remarks, seems a world away from New York where I first began my exploration of the technologies of light. At night I would work, lighting the dance clubs of New York’s trendy Meatpacking district while working my less glamorous day job at Universe Stage Lighting on West 47th Street at the heart of the theatre district in Manhattan. During the past twelve years of formal academic training, the world has become just a bit smaller to me and the time has now come to thank some of the people whom it was my pleasure to meet along the way.

It is therefore a great satisfaction to take this opportunity to thank at least a few of the extraordinary people who accompanied me along this journey of analysis and intellectual discovery. Firstly, I would like to thank my promoter Mieke Bal who has been a inspiring supervisor throughout the past six years. It was Mieke’s intriguing work which attracted me away from the University of Leicester where I had already been accepted as a PhD candidate. While studying for a Master’s degree in Museum Studies, I kept coming across captivating work by Mieke that I found intellectually stimulating. While commuting to Nottingham Castle for my MA internship, I

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engrossed myself in her work while completing Leicester’s demanding coursework. It was at this late stage when I mustered enough courage to send her a message asking if she was interested in supervising my project. After a few emails, she agreed to provisionally promote my project. It now approaches completion. I felt from the very beginning that, with Mieke as a supervisor, this would be a challenging intellectual experience. *And so it was.* Her critical remarks on my chapter drafts were so insightful; so in tune with my work, that no one else, I felt, could get closer to what I was struggling to articulate. Through the Theory Seminars she organized and directed, Mieke introduced me to new authors, theories and perspectives for which I am eternally grateful. Thank you for taking a chance on me and my endeavours.

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My parents Jane and Ron, whose loving, stable and nurturing tough-love approach gave me great confidence and encouragement throughout my life, deserve the lion’s share of the credit for influencing me to return to higher education and earn my academic credentials. This reminds me of the inscription they once had engraved on a piece of jewellery given to me many years ago. I have now proven to myself that – “I can do it”. Thank you both for all your lustrous pearly words of wisdom.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to express my dedication and appreciation to Paul, my partner, best friend and source of inspiration throughout the past five years. Without his patience, support, understanding, advice and humour this postgraduate experience would have surely been a solitary undertaking.

5 March 2009
(somewhere between) Amsterdam and Paris