

English Summary

A MEANINGFUL MUSEUM OBJECT

Critical visibility in cultural history museum exhibitions

The relationship between museum objects and exhibition design for cultural history museums seems to be problematic. There has not been much discussion regarding the elements of visibility in such museums. Rather, the discussions have been concerned (at least in Finland) with the experience, economics or usability of the museums.

This thesis examines the relationship between a cultural history museum exhibition and the objects on display. Specifically, it aims at shedding light on the formation of meaning of the exhibition. The main research questions are: How are meanings constructed for cultural history museums exhibition design? How are meanings represented as visual signs by the exhibition design? How does the relationship between exhibition design and museum objects, especially their visibility, affect interpretation?

The methods used in the thesis constitute a form of multi-disciplinary and experimental research. An openly subjective approach towards the research questions lies at the heart of the study. This approach has been formed by my background as a practicing artist and a designer. However, three different ways of collecting material and doing research have been decided upon during the research process as my methods[or “I used three different methods of collecting the material and carrying out the research for this study”?]: firstly, a literature survey (reading), secondly, visits to museum exhibitions (experiencing) and, thirdly, artistic productions (making).

The thesis consists of six chapters: an introduction (Chapter 1), a description of the methods employed (Chapter 2), three main chapters (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) and the conclusions (Chapter 6). Chapter 3 “Museum as the interpreter of the world view” concerns the museum institution as a producer of a world view. I analyse the visual elements in exhibitions, which seem to embody power constellations, for example, through selection and categorisation. One of the concrete means of selection and categorisation is the vitrine. A vitrine becomes a noteworthy symbol, which encloses a selection of museum artefacts. In the design process for cultural history museum exhibitions, certain objects are selected to act as examples, important representations and so on. The items are grouped in certain ways and put on display according to the theme or story of the exhibition and the designer’s conceptions. There are many kinds of vitrines. Hence, various interpretations of the vitrines are discussed from historical and artistic viewpoints.

Furthermore, Chapter 3 includes a case study of a museum object, a wè mask from the Ivory Coast in Africa. Different meanings are attached to the mask when it is presented in various contexts and visual surroundings. This example shows that a museum can introduce new associations to the viewer by making alternative meanings available in the visual exhibition design. An exhibition acts as a sign that produces meanings according to the current world view as seen from the museum’s perspective. A cultural history museum is thus an active

producer of meanings. It is, however, important to keep in mind that the interpretation process is not fixed in its nature, but rather is an active process of association.

In Chapter 4 “The interaction between art and cultural history museums”, I examine the relationship between the visual arts and cultural history museums’ exhibitions from two angles. Firstly, I analyse how artists (for example, Damien Hirst, Mark Dion, Barbara Bloom, Lauri Anttila, Annaleena Hakatie) have adopted visual elements, such as vitrines from museums, into their own art works. Secondly, I examine how artists have changed the exhibition design of a few cultural history museums and how this has brought new meanings to the museum objects. Many contemporary examples from the beginning of the 1990s are analysed with the help of comments by artists themselves, theories of art, semiotics and museology. I analyse, for example, Fred Wilson’s museum installation “Mining the Museum” at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore, USA, the “Give & Take” exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery and the V&A Museum in London, and the “Feelings” exhibition at the Helsinki City Museum. In addition, I reflect on the British museology researcher Eileen Hooper-Greenhill’s notion concerning the new concept of “post-museum”, where the museum concentrates on the use of museum objects, rather than further accumulation.¹ The approach in this thesis can be seen as supporting her view. There seems to be a clear functional use for conceptual artistic installations in cultural history museums, which can confer new associations and meanings on exhibition artefacts.

In Chapter 5 “Installations as test spaces”, I have analysed three artistic installations, which I created as part of the research. They were exhibited in three art museums in the Helsinki area. The installations functioned as test spaces, where I was able to experiment and develop my research themes further. The installations had multifaceted roles. They clarified and, at the same time, questioned the meanings of the research topic as actual three-dimensional spaces[or does this mean “They clarified and, at the same time, questioned their form as actual three-dimensional spaces”?]. Through the research process, certain themes emerged, which I analysed further: stories, the atmosphere, fictive and authentic museum objects, vitrines, spatial working, and showing the process of exhibition design to the audience. With these analyses, I was able to gain insight into the artistic thinking process of the research topic, a meaningful museum object.

An exhibition is always a spatial experience, which requires an embodied approach. For example, the spatial constructions I built in my installations showed metaphorically the subjective nature of cultural history museums. A museum exhibition is always mounted by someone with a particular worldview regardless of whether he/she is conscious of it or not. Meanings and mental impressions are created from comprehensive visuality, which is produced with visual elements such as light and colour in relation to space and place. A critical visual viewpoint focuses attention on the visuality and conceptual thinking regarding cultural history museum displays. This thesis proposes that visual exhibition design can also actively point out[or “actively reveal”] the ambiguous role of the museum instead of merely conveying a message of one single truth[or “This thesis proposes that visual exhibition design can also actively point out[or “actively reveal”] the ambiguous role of the museum, i.e. it is not a purveyor of just one truth”?].

¹ Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 152–153.

The thesis includes experimental visual research, also called practice-based research, in researching museum exhibition design. Besides the written analysis in this book, some research results can also be found in the actual installations and in the layout of the book. The interplay of artistic and research factors can provide critical knowledge about exhibition design and its visual interpretation. The methods I have used – reading, experiencing and making[or “creating”] – form an interdisciplinary approach. They also comprise a new way of analysing meanings in exhibition design. For example, I have gained knowledge and ideas from my museum visits and the theoretical literature survey to bring to my own artistic work, and vice versa, the theoretical discussion in the thesis has been influenced by my artistic work. Combining artistic working methods with qualitative research methods, a subjective approach can provide new knowledge about the research topic. The aim of this kind of research is not one singular and objective truth. Rather, the aim is to open up and analyse the process of meaning construction. Knowledge about this process can influence the decision making of exhibition design and add new insights into the process of creating a story for the exhibition. According to the thesis, it is important that a cultural history museum engages in art, increased play and experiment, thus keeping the museum exhibition alive.