

Outi Turpeinen

School of Visual Culture
University of Art and Design, Helsinki, Finland
oturpein@uiah.fi
www.uiah.fi/~oturpein

Abstract

ARTEFACTS IN CONTEXT

The use of artistic representation practices in exhibition design

As a research target, museums have been examined from several viewpoints, including the pedagogical, the historical and the ideological. In terms of cultural history museums, these viewpoints do not usually concern the question of visibility. My own approach is different and formed from the basis of my background education as an artist and a designer. My material-based knowledge of glass and practices in the visual field strongly influence my interpretation of perception and experience. Therefore, my research concerns the visibility of exhibition design in cultural history museums. I am particularly interested in how meanings are built and created through visual elements in exhibition design.

For *The Museum: A World Forum 2006* -conference I would like to offer a paper, which is based on my nearly finished PhD research project (to be published in autumn 2005). In my research I question the objective approach adopted by modern museums, which assumes that the perception of knowledge is unified and transferable (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: p. 127). Typically, modern museums aim towards “truth” (Aurasmaa 2002: p. 28). In contrast, I am interested in an open subjective approach, where there are possibilities for multiple interpretations of the exhibited objects. Museum artefacts are not always exhibited in the same way; neither does their interpretation remain unchanged. Thus the associated meanings are connected to the context; time, place and culture. This interpretation process is semiotic in nature. This is why I have adopted philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s (1839-1914) concept of the sign as one theoretical starting point for my research. The concept of the sign is central to Peircean theory. The sign is seen as a triadic model, with the subtypes of symbols, indices and icons. From this semiotic point of view, interpretation is seen as a thought process where meanings are in constant movement – in other words, meanings are not fixed. When this is applied to field of exhibition design; museum visitors have the possibility to acknowledge the meaning construction, where the artifacts are always displayed in a particular context.

Making exhibition design is first of all about communication. The role of cultural history museums is connected to transferring experiences from history and other cultures to the present time and place. One operating model is to evoke atmospheres and memories in the museum’s visitors. But how are histories elicited to the exhibition visitors: as stories, text, sounds or maybe interactive workshops? Different ways of working can evoke different meanings, and exhibition designers need to be aware of this. My research approach is concerned with the process of constructing visual environments. In other words, I am researching on how to create meanings and communicate, through the construction of physical exhibition design. This kind of thinking differs from the way in which cultural history museums aim for the objective “truth”, whilst still changing the original meanings of objects by placing them in the museum environment.

The working methods of museums as institutions have undergone great changes in recent years. One of my main aims with this paper is to bring forth alternative ways of analyzing museum exhibitions. For example exhibitions where artistic and museological practices have intertwined have attracted increasing interest. Exhibitions like *The Museum as Muse. Artists Reflect* at MoMA, New York, 1999; *Give&Take* at the V&A, London, 2001; or afro-american artist’s Fred Wilson’s installation *Site Unseen: Dwellings of the Demons* at the Museum of World Cultures, Gothenburg, Sweden 2004 propose new

context for exhibited artefacts. Artistic practices in cultural history museums can create new meanings for the artefacts in a museum context. So, in my presentation I wish to show some examples of semiotic analysis on the use of artistic practices in cultural history museum exhibition design.

In addition, I have created and tested different surroundings for museum objects in my PhD research project. I have made concrete physical installations as part of the research process, where I actively take part in the object of my research rather than examining it from the outside. I made three fictive museum installations as part of my dissertation; they acted as test spaces for the interpretation of museum objects. These installations were “Imprisoned Setting” (2000) at the Design Museum, Helsinki, “Memories from a Curiosity Cabinet” (2001) at the Vantaa Art Museum and “A British Noblewoman’s Collection from 19th-Century India” (2003) at Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki. Through these test spaces I have been able to approach the questions of visual semantics in a concrete physical space and location. By simultaneously visiting existing cultural history museums, studying relevant literature and making my installations, I have built spaces which can be experienced as cultural history museum environments. That is to say, I have imitated the way in which authentic cultural history museums work and combined this with the effect of my own visual way of making art.

As my research interest lies in exhibiting the presentation, my role has been twofold; the observer and the maker. For the maker the most interesting aspect is to conceptualise and visualise meanings. It is a difficult and fascinating task to plan exhibition designs, finding places for the various details in the process. Prior to the opening of an exhibition, it is not completely clear where my experiments have led to. Despite all the planning, three-dimensional spaces are always surprises once complete. It is a one thing to experience a space in reality and another entirely to look at sketches or even a three-dimensional model of the space. After the opening of an exhibition, I leave its interpretation to the museum visitors. As an artist and a designer I only construct a visual environment for interpretation. As a observer I am interested in studying and analysing how meanings are constructed in a physical space. The emphasis is on authentic and subjective interpretation process, although it could be applied to other similar cases as well.

In any case, exhibition design contains several layers of meaning which exist simultaneously in a spatial construction. In textual research it is possible to separate them and analyse them as themes. As part of my analysis, I found that similar themes recurred in all three installations I created for test purposes. These visual themes, such as vitrines, stories, atmosphere or space, which affect the interpretation of artifact in a context, have arisen from practical work and its analysis. Practice-based research is connected to both process and communication (Biggs 2004: p. 18), and it is my aim to provide a brief insight into one example of it. Artistic practices can give new insight into the field of exhibition design and the practices of constructing meanings with visual elements.

REFERENCES

Aurasmaa, Anne: *Salomonin talo. Museon idea renessanssiajattelun valossa*. Yliopistopaino; Helsinki, 2002.

Biggs, Michael: “Learning from Experience. Approaches to the experimental component of practise-based research”, in Karlsson, Henrik (ed.): *Forskning. Reflektion. Utveckling. Högskolans konstnärliga institutioner och vägvalet inför framtiden. Rapport från ett seminarium i Sigtuna Maj 2004*. Swedish Research Council; Stockholm, 2004.

Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean: *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. Routledge; London, 2000.