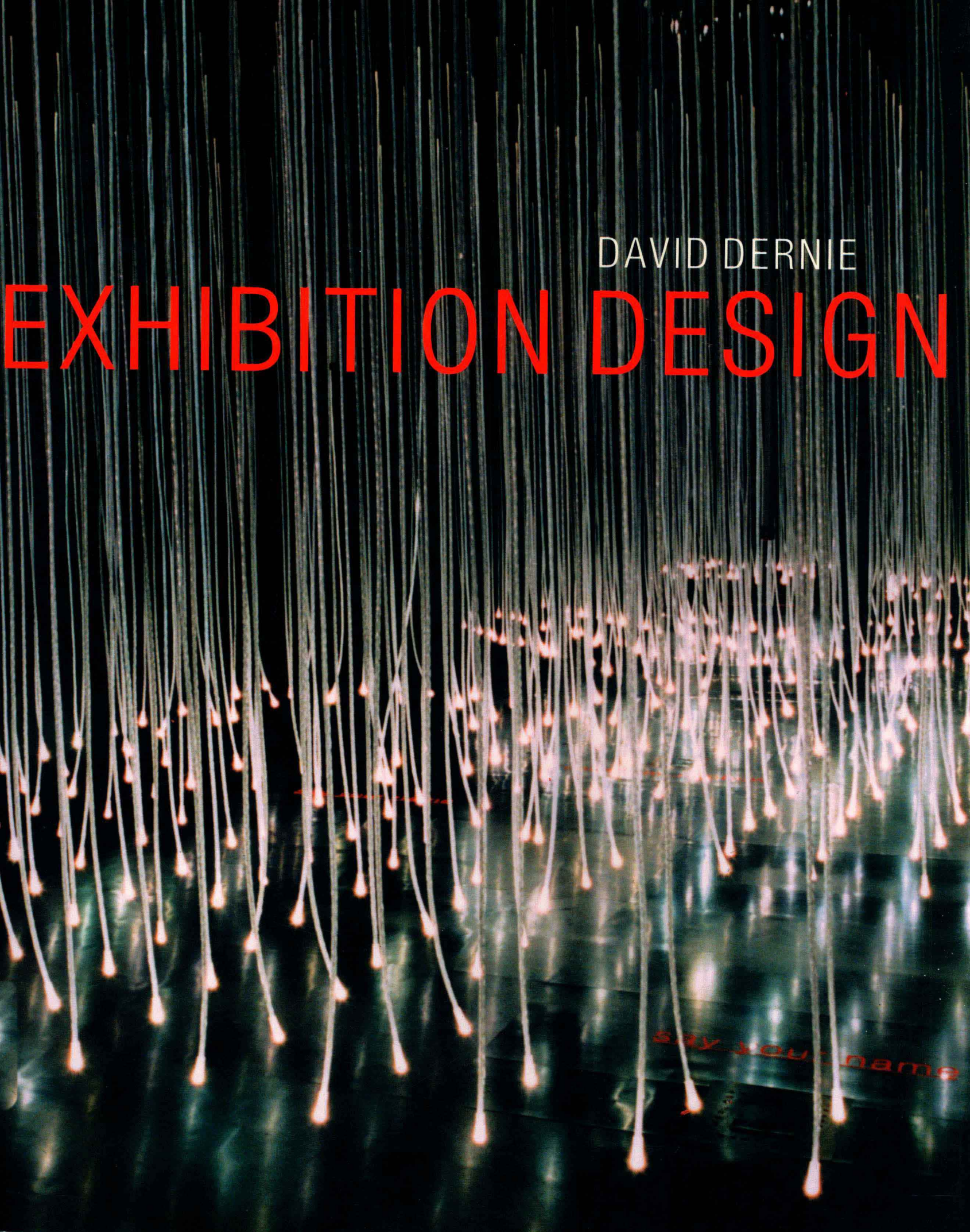
DAVID DERNIE

EXHIBITION DESIGN



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PART 2 TECHNIQUES

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PART 1 APPROACHES

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Exhibition: to hold out, to offer
Manifestation (Fr): to render manifest
Exposition: to put completely on the outside
The terms are juridical, rhetorical, political and philosophical.
Jean-François Lyotard

INTRODUCTION

Making exhibitions is increasingly recognized as a significant form of creative expression. The installation is a crucial component of any exhibition, yet the 'discipline of exhibiting', a phrase coined by the art critic Germano Celant, is only beginning to be understood. It is multi-disciplinary and its boundaries are complex. To 'exhibit' is to hold out, to offer, to display objects or works: to expose. Fundamentally, exhibition-making is focused on the content of the works to be displayed and concerns the ordering of these works as a sequence, to be understood in relation to each other and in dialogue with the conditions of the viewing environment. Today, exhibition design overlaps with artistic movements such as environment art, performance and installation art, it is closely related to interior architecture, graphic design and lighting and is increasingly engaged with film, fashion, advertising and new forms of media.

Above all, an exhibition design considers the simple dialogue between the object(s) to be exhibited and the space in which they are presented: where the objects are, and how they are arranged will determine the nature of the message they communicate. Several artists have been particularly sensitive to this question. Constantin Brancusi, for example, was deeply engaged in the question of the interrelationship between his work and studio space. His own photographs, where he carefully depicts the sculptural resonance between the spatiality of his work and that of its enclosure, depict light conditions and material surfaces: 'Brancusi's singular sensitivity to the placing of works of art in changing environments has had a profound impact on the course of sculpture and on the display of art in the twentieth century.'[1] In this observation Tate Director Nicholas Serota refers to later generations of artists who take more decisive steps using artwork to structure the space of a studio or gallery (as an extended studio).

At the heart of any exhibition is the notion of communication, and the focus of the designer is to articulate the intended messages. Through a clear sequence of spatial relationships the designer articulates the content of the work and its intended didactic interpretation. The exhibition designer formats a process of discovery, an uncovering of the world of the museum or brand image. Through an exhibition, artefacts are interpreted afresh, translated, as it were, through their new context. Scale, colour, materials, lighting, sounds and graphics will all affect the way in which the display communicates to the visitor: the reading of the exhibited object will change according to its context and presentation.

Exhibitions are traditionally divided between cultural and commercial subjects, can be either permanent or temporary, and can range from visitor centres, trade shows, brand experiences, launch events and consumer pavilions to museums of all kinds – from art galleries to science museums. Boundaries between these exhibition types are increasingly blurred, and techniques and images are now regularly transferred across all exhibition and display typologies: a retail display, for instance, will often have the appearance of a commercial gallery, while the new museum interior will be branded like any other part of the leisure industry.

Apart from formal exhibitions there are all kinds of exhibition-making going on. Exhibition-making is an innate activity: everyone's home is an exhibit in some way, and people display objects to inform themselves and others about their lives and needs. People are instinctively adept at public display: arrangements of personal possessions, clothes and gestures constantly declare a set of values, attitudes and aspirations. A market stall or street trader's cart is habitually organized to communicate vividly in order simply to make a living. Here decisions about structure, placement, colour and light are not designed as such, but are rather learned as part of a trade. These are casual exhibitions which happen as part of the textures of every day life. In contrast, what museums do is highly constructed: they clear space and make comments on objects – which all of a sudden take on a new value because of this 'construct' – because of how they are contextualized. Winston Churchill's teaspoon, for example, is just a dumb object when placed casually, but when reconstructed it can become an emotionally engaging fragment of history.

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1. Orange Imaginarium, Bristol, Imagination, 2001. A computer rendering illustrates the way in which fiber optics are used to create a visually compelling interactive exhibit that communicates wire-free technology to children.

2. Holocaust Tower, Jewish Museum, Berlin, Daniel Libeskind, 1999. The dramatic spatial topography of the architecture itself offers visitors a powerful sequence of thematic experiences.

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The nature of appropriate display for new art or museum objects will of course depend on the nature and content of the collection, and the character of the institution. A comparison between the very different approaches to display of the Italian architect Carlo Scarpa in his 1960s restoration of the Castelvecchio in Verona with the recent modifications to the 1930s Palais de Tokyo in Paris is illuminating, since the approach to display is radically different, yet in each case appropriate to the works. Scarpa's painstaking study of spatial scale, lighting conditions, colour, surface material and display apparatus for each object seems perfectly to express the relationship between the given fabric and the precious heritage of the town. On the other hand, the casual aesthetic of the Palais de Tokyo (see page 102), its lack of refined detail (in the conventional sense) and the sense of it being an extension of the street, seems to anticipate the nature of its contemporary, changing shows. Just as Scarpa's attention to enclosure expressed the value of this civic collection, so the blurring of boundaries between street and gallery at the Palais de Tokyo convincingly grounds the contemporary art in the field of its production.

In contrast, the display methodology of the earliest museums, such as the British Museum or the Louvre, resulted in dark, cluttered interiors and arrangements of paintings where the entire gallery wall was covered, with larger paintings 'skied' and tilted to maintain the viewer's plane. These would later be organized chronologically and according to schools, but the legacy from these early museums is the prevalence of three important display types: cabinet rooms, progressive galleries and period rooms. The cabinet is used in part because of the obvious practical need to remove objects from the visitor's reach, but it also reflects a display type well established in the tradition of private curiosity cabinets and, later, in the way in which new products came to displayed in early department stores. The spatial format of enfilade rooms was of course derived from earlier architectural types (and adopted buildings, such as former palaces). The enfilade enabled clear progress through the exhibition, provided a visual link between related rooms and sufficient spatial coherence in each room to house clusters of objects sensibly. Finally, the period room was an assemblage of various elements (paintings, architectural fragments and furniture, for example) from a particular historical time frame which contextualized a given set of objects. With the innovative use of this approach by Wilhelm Bode

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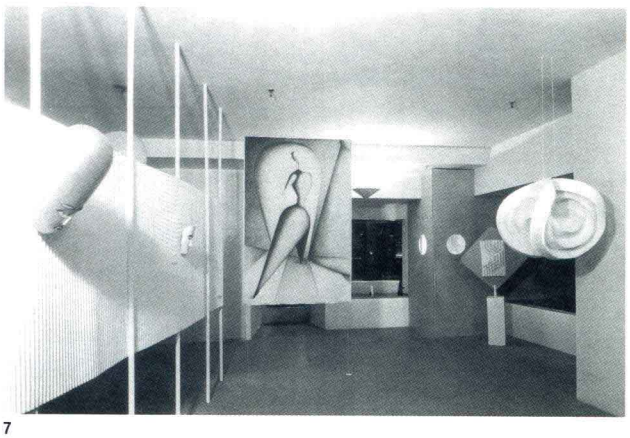
3–4. Castelvecchio Museum, Verona, Carlo Scarpa, 1958–64. In this project painstaking restoration was complemented by an acute sensitivity to light, scale, texture and colour to create a series of specific settings for the exhibited artefacts.

5. Early exhibitions, such as this example at Somerset House, London, in 1808, featured densely packed walls, with the larger paintings tilted downward to allow them to be seen by viewers below.

6. View of the Grand Galerie du Louvre, Paris, by Hubert Robert, 1796. An early example of the classic arrangement of enfilade, top-lit galleries.

7–8. *Bauhaus: 1919–1928*, 1938 (top right) and *Machine Art*, 1934 (right), both at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Exhibitions designed under the direction of Alfred Barr were typified by a willingness to experiment that is rare in the gallery displays of today's mainstream institutions.



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at the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum (now Bodemuseum) in Berlin (opened 1904), an alternative to the mainstream taxonomic displays of the nineteenth century finally emerged.

The development of abstract art during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engendered a new aesthetic, which in turn gave impetus for the art show to be part of that experience. Early modernist exhibition space was to have a 'resonance with the work' – rather than be a place for its cataloguing: the taxonometric procedures for display of the nineteenth century were usurped by individual aesthetic judgement on the part of the curator and designer. The aesthetic, first set out by art historian and Director Alfred Barr in the early years of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, has come to represent *the* conventional and marketable display environment. The white-walled space is familiar and can be relied upon. Its autonomy and dominant minimalist details accordingly determine much of contemporary installation practice, creating a kind of aesthetic chamber, a place which 'seeks to transcend specificity of time and location'.[2] For many of us the 'designed' air of the modern art gallery or museum space still represents a kind of elitism, 'designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self image of the upper middle classes'.[3] The carefully tuned details of the inward-looking gallery interior – wooden floors (mostly polished), minimal surfaces, single blocks of colour (predominantly shades of white, or lately, black) and shadow gaps, are now endlessly mirrored in up-market retail spaces. The commonality of the language communicates a shared ground: art is turned into goods, consumer products are displayed with the allure of a rare art object.

Increasingly, the discipline of exhibition design is expanding beyond the design of a show or display in single media. The designer's approach tends now to consider a strategy to meet the broader development or promotional intentions of the client. When a museum is planning an exhibition, a whole set of products are created – books, merchandise, films, compact disks, clothing – and an exhibition designer might think strategically in terms of events or launches to communicate a branded message. Making the physical exhibition is only one part of a more complex, coordinated event. The strategy will inevitably involve a Web presence and other forms of media. The number of visitors to the physical exhibition will be far outnumbered by the number of hits on the website or those reached by broadcast. At the same time, the expenditure on the physical display can be justified in terms of the

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Designing exhibitions – in practice – requires genuinely engaging with artworks and materials, with authors, with curators, with institutions, with spaces, and with respective audiences, as well as with sets of relations between these in order to find tailored solutions. This keeps the process fresh…'[4]
Julie Ault

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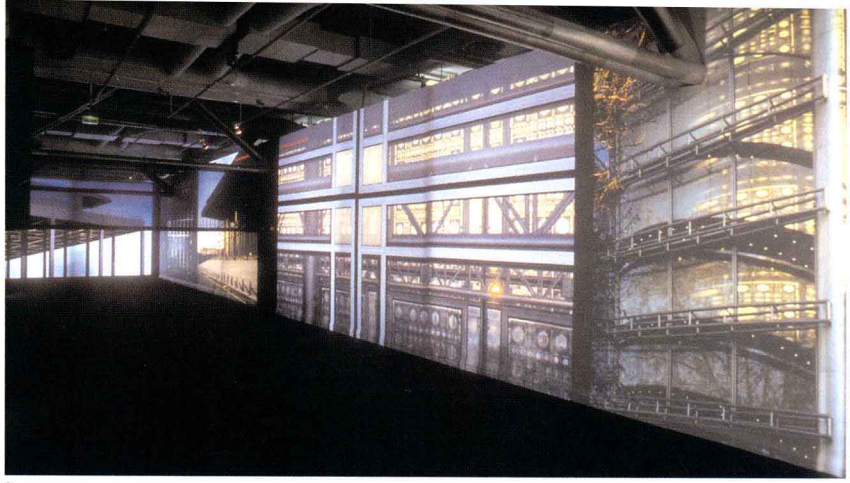
9. *Jean Nouvel*, Pompidou Centre, Paris, 2001–2002. Nouvel's work was displayed in an almost cinematic fashion, using projections that engaged with the scale of the museum's architecture.

10. *Modern Art in Your Life*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1949. An opening allows a view through to a display beyond, and establishes a dialogue between the pictures in the foreground – a device typical of exhibitions mounted during the directorship of René D'Harnoncourt.

11. *Lucio Fontana*, Hayward Gallery, 1999, Claudio Silvestrin. Here the layering of space allows a kind of visual comparison between similar works of different colours.

12. *Ahistorical Sounds*, Bojmans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam, 1988. Exhibition designer Harald Szeemann explored the potency of space between disparate objects as a means of establishing analogies between them.



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value of creating 'experience' and the memory of brand immersion that inevitably promotes the product subsequently.

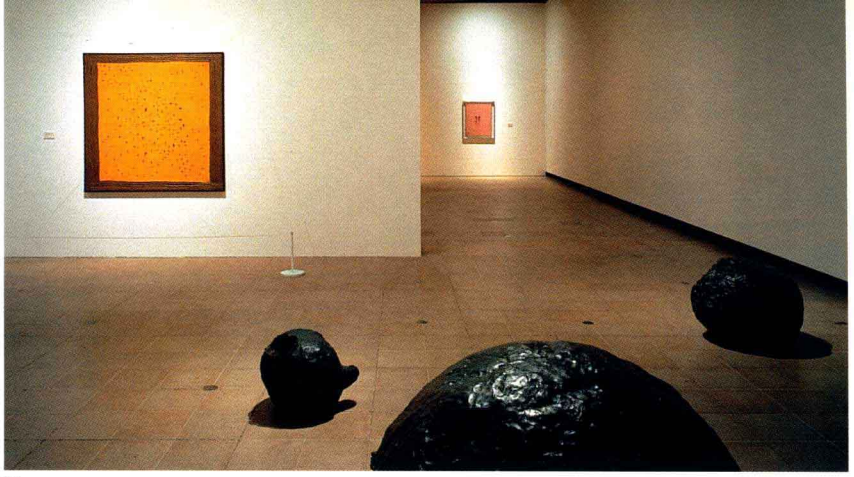
Audiences now perceive art, fashion, film, architecture and design as a much more connected world of imagery. Technologies now transfer between film and theatre and display environments. Techniques of digital and media projection or large-scale, specialized screens are commonly used in contemporary exhibition and retail environments as a means to connect with a public in a way that is familiar. Projections and screenings (as long as the associated sound interference can be dealt with) can transform an interior, since the body of the space itself is thrown into darkness. A simulated or fictive environment can be created with a controlled use of light colour, sound and moving images. The drama of such an effect was felt in Jean Nouvel's installation at the Pompidou Centre of his own work in 2001–2002 (see page 84). Here banks of smaller screens played against other vast projects to create an immersive environment of colour and form, quite remote from the familiar interior of the Pompidou itself.

Such cinematic presentation makes for engaging viewing, and even in a gallery environment the film room showing biographical material will invariably be one of the busiest spaces. Here the works and personality of the artist can be clearly communicated with ease: often a much more comfortable procedure than addressing the work itself. And here lies the problem with multimedia presentation: overly 'cinematic' presentation risks engaging a passive visitor, in effect watching television in public. While this might be popular, it will not create a rich experience and memory of the brand immersion or museum installation. Rather, media technology should be dropped into the story line when it is appropriate – it is much more effective when it brings about a specific response from the audience.

One of the most stimulating projection and film sequences of this kind is Imagination's *Life* at the Guinness Storehouse in Dublin (see page 38). Imagination produced a suite of films which were to purvey a sense of the *craic* – the spirit of the Irish. The films are projected onto the rear of three translucent walls forming a custom-built room situated at the head of a mezzanine promenade. Having been immersed in the extraordinary ground-floor hall of brewing equipment, quite unexpectedly, the visitor finds an intimate room surrounded by local sounds, conversations, stories, music and soundbytes taken from radio archives and combined with resonant graphic images. The films are at once extraordinarily rich in their power to evoke the qualities of the Irish, but unlike many promotional films, these sequences are primarily graphics. As such, the images evoked are incomplete and demand an active and creative engagement with the show. It is remarkable how long-lasting a memory these projections create.

The subtle boundary that is defined in Guinness's *Life* sequence announces a new approach to brand immersion. The days of the product dictating to the customer are over: increasingly the process is geared towards a more flexible and open delivery strategy that allows for a custom-built interaction. Elsewhere at Guinness Storehouse, Imagination explores a fluidity of brand experience, juxtaposing complex projections and simulated environments with very simple stories or familiar images; complex constructions with primitive found objects; compact sound-filled display areas with places to simply reflect. The visitor chooses an individual route through the fabric of the building. The selective and appropriate use of technology plays an important role in the design of this audience-focused experience: for instance the remarkable inclusion of a low-tech space for visitors to make a straightforward postcard was a risky but effective strategy, emphasizing the overall approach: the visitor was to make of the exhibition what they wanted. The new medium of brand experience is now people, not television.

Narrative has been central to exhibition design in recent times. It is quite literally about an approach to ordering objects in space in a way that tells a story. In that sense exhibition design is regularly defined *as* narration. More broadly, narrative space is concerned with the contextualization of a



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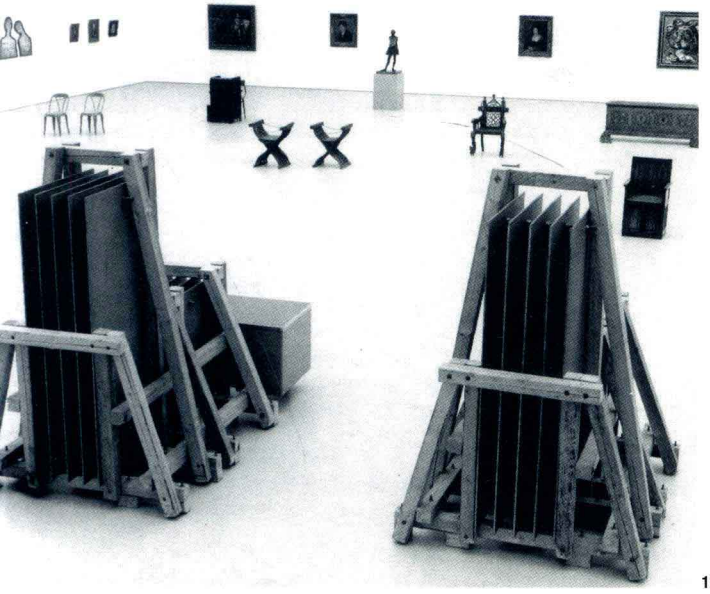
displayed object. Narrative space can be about a simple relationship between a single object and its setting in space, a question of light and shadow, reflections and material configuration which evoke visual correspondences and engagement. More often the making of narrative space involves readings between objects or the making of displays which build a background storyline to the objects on display. Recently, both in cultural and commercial displays, there is an emphasis on creating a storyline which evokes an emotional response as a key component of the experience. Clearly this is working from the psychology of advertising: colours, sounds and patterns of slow and fast movement play a key role to creating a memorable engagement with the object.

The question of the contextualization of a work of art or historical artefact in a contemporary museum is, of course, only in part a design issue, and the approach to the interpretation of content will invariably reflect the character of a the particular institution. At the same time, the way in which the exhibition installation is structured needs to facilitate the intended narrative or visual association determined by the curatorial team. The architecture of an exhibition can also open up new possibilities to the institution. Innovative spatial topographies, lighting and transparencies can build relationships difficult to envisage in traditional spatial arrangements.

New approaches to contextualization through 'visual comparison' or through 'empathy' (*Einfühlung*) between works were first emphasized by René D'Harnoncourt at MoMA in the 1940s and 1950s. D'Harnoncourt's approach to display recognized the power of visual dialogue: it was based on an acknowledgement that the field of vision of the visitor is not limited to the works that are in his or her immediate path and that at 'any given point vistas should be open to him into those sections of the exhibition that have affinities with the displays in the unit in which he stands'.[5] In effect, this process of exhibition-making acknowledges the experience of the visitor, structuring a walk-through collage where juxtapositions break barriers of time and place and narrate correlations and meanings, or theoretical 'affinities' between disparate objects.

D'Harnoncourt's method of 'visual comparison' avoided the explicit signage and didactic material of installations by his predecessor Alfred Barr, but at the same time its weakness lay in its attempt to reduce the meaning of ancient and modern works to stylistic or visual resemblance. This is an inevitable consequence of contextual interpretation of this kind. To its advantage, however, this approach structured a reading of artwork that departed from the on-going dogma of stylistic hanging. Similar examples of building a narrative in this way include the work of the Swiss exhibition designer, and designer of documenta 5 (Kassel, 1972), Harald Szeemann at the Bojmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam. His *Ahistorical Sounds* (1988), for instance, drew on the essential thematic of disparate groupings with an openness that drew particular attention to the space between the exhibits: 'the main room is the site of spiritual confusion, a vigorous appeal to human creativity, suffering and death': Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* (representing confusion) was presented with Joseph Beuys's installations of batteries and office furniture combined with older pieces of furniture (representing creativity) and Rubens' *Three Crosses* (representing suffering).[6]

Perhaps the most significant break with traditional display in terms of establishing contextual narratives for art exhibitions came of course with the early programmes at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. Despite the incoherence of the architectural strategy (both in terms of its external language and the inadequacy of its exhibition spaces, and in terms of its violent interruption of the Parisian landscape) the effect of the endeavour as a radical challenge to the aesthetic norms of modernist display was dramatic. The accent on openness, flexibility and movement was underpinned by a fundamental shift in curatorial practice. This favoured the interdisciplinary, and contextualization of artwork both in terms of its thematic interpretation and in terms of its international dimension. The success of the programme allowed a new diversity of approaches to museum and interpretative perspectives.



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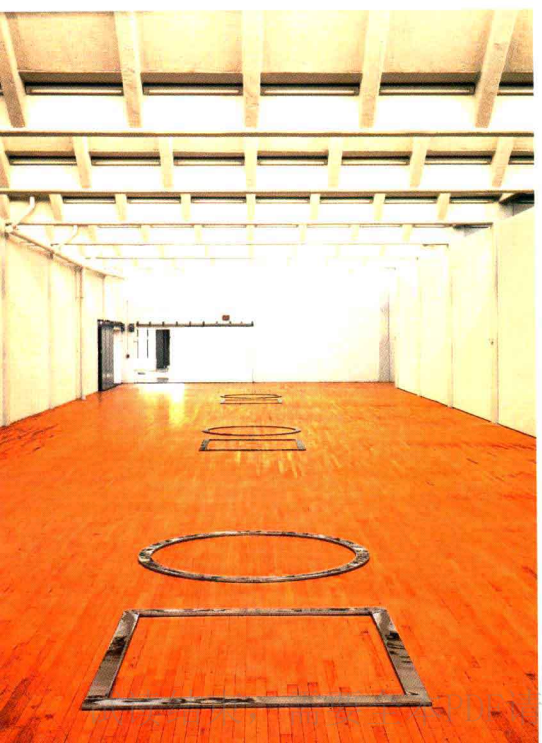
Mirroring growing tendencies by artists to work with context, this approach to contextual display concerns a collage-like narrative: arrangements of works where the 'dialogue' between them or between the body of work and its physical setting and its context opens up the horizon of the meaning of the work. Fred Wilson's 1992 project *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, illustrates how powerful a creative interpretation of this process of collage-narrative can be. Here the project is described by Martin Beck, one of New York's most perceptive artist/exhibition-makers: 'Setting out to investigate histories hidden within storage areas of the Historical Society, Wilson focused on historical inclusion and exclusion, repression and sublimation with regard to the representations of slavery... Wilson, for example, filled a vitrine with precious repoussé silver from the Historical Society's collection and labelled it "Metalwork 1793–1880". Inserted into this showcase of finely crafted silver, and labelled with the same identificatory devices, were slave shackles found in the Historical Society's storage rooms.'[17] Beck goes on to describe how the juxtaposition was able to 'point to the probability that the production of one object was made possible by the subjugation enforced by the other.'[18]

Recently this collage-narration has been developed in several ways. At Tate Modern, London, for instance, the collage of works is structured around four distinct themes (Landscape/Matter/Environment, Nude/Action/Body, History/Memory/Society, Still Life/Object/Real Life) which stress one reading of the content of the works grouped in this way to provide a guiding storyline. Exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la Terre,* organized by the Pompidou Centre at Parc de la Villette, Paris (1981), use a similar narrative structure in a very different way: living artists from around the world were invited to Paris to create a work. The thread which links the extremely diverse works produced for the show is born out of the creative drive of the work itself, not the visual judgement of the curator or designer, 'establishing relationships that could not have existed in the minds of the makers of these objects'.

The recently opened Dia:Beacon in New York state beautifully illustrates how different levels of this kind of narration can be overlaid to create a storyline which is both sensitive to the works, but which is also sufficiently directed to offer a situated reading. Works of each of the key artists are clustered in exquisitely appropriate locations around the building. Some are found places and others are specifically constructed, restored or lined. These diverse settings are at once sufficiently enclosed so as to allow contemplation of the work of a single artist without interference, but at the same time open across the space, giving onto the work of others. The difference of the spatial topography, the variety of presentation methods, and the sense of the dialogue between works being keyed to movement around the space is essential to the rich experience of the works. The understated narrative is like a subtly layered collage: very specific choices have been made concerning placements and relationships between materials, but the story is completed in the imagination of the visitor. The remarkable achievement of Dia:Beacon would seem to fulfil Nicholas Serota's commentary from 1987: 'the new museums of the future will… seek to promote different modes and levels of interpretation by subtle juxtapositions of experience. Some rooms and works will be fixed, the pole star around which others will turn. In this way we can expect to create a matrix of changing relationships to be explored by visitors according to their particular interests and sensibilities. In the new museum each of us, curators and viewers alike, will have to become more willing to chart our own path, redrawing the map of modern art, rather than following a single path laid down by a curator.'[19]

The problem of movement is most pronounced in the design of exhibitions for museums or fine-art galleries. As witness to the enlightened aesthetic opinions of the gallery or institution, the visitor experience is still reduced to one of slowly paced observation in a near silent context, removed from any reference to the outside world. Conversation is hushed and movement is reduced to that required to transfer one's gaze from one object to the next: the white gallery isolates the experience of art from the day to day movement and habitual behaviour that accompany communication. Such an institution



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