

Exhibition as Mass Communication

Critical studies of multi-modal communicative environments

Working paper

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Exhibition and the mass media

Generally, the literature on mass communication research ignores exhibition; that is, it does not investigate and provide any theories about the communicative function of trade show exhibits, museum exhibitions, and international expositions, particularly in their most advanced forms as multimedia spatial formations.¹ It focusses on television, film, radio, the internet and the recorded media. Why this is so may seem obvious. They all target mass audiences—generally, though not always, *diffuse* mass audiences—through a limited number of channels that distance the ‘sender’ from the ‘receivers’, and have the option of emphasizing one-way communication through delaying and re-channelling feedback. But exhibition, in its classic forms—trade fair stand, museum gallery, Expo’ pavilion—also satisfies these criteria.

Exhibitions are created to communicate to mass audiences. In three or four days a trade fair exhibit will receive perhaps 20,000 visitors, in its lifetime a typical museum gallery over a million visitors, and in six months a pavilion at an international exposition 10 million visitors. Such figures compare to the audiences for a radio show, subscription to popular a magazine, and the weekly audience of a television soap opera. Although many types of exhibition are settings for performance, in the sense that human actors in the guise of company representatives, interpreters or docents play out routine acts of communication, to a large extent the information content carried by an exhibition is mediated by non-human means. It is predetermined at the planning stage and programmed into the structure, form and media apparatus of exhibits to be activated largely automatically and at a distance from its authors. Although exhibition, like radio, television, and the print media, has become increasingly ‘interactive’ it still embraces a range of technologies and practices that display objects and information independently of their being attended to by an audience. Display is essentially dumb and does not permit a conversation to be entered into directly with its authors; feedback as such must use other channels, usually separated in time and/or space from the display and from its authors. Consequently feedback is often as much of a monologue as is the original display communication.

Exhibitions, like other mass-communication media, attract very large, usually segmented, audiences and engage with a variety of commercial and

¹ The title of this paper emerged out of an observation on the scope of research methods and their applications outlined in Hansen, A. et al (1998) *Mass Communication Research Methods*, Basingstoke: Palgrave. This lacuna is apparent in the English language literature; I am not qualified to comment on whether the same is true in other languages. I am aware that in Sweden, Linköping University’s department of Media, Culture and Society does include exhibition as one of four major media sectors embraced by the curriculum.

cultural interests that give them depth, value and influence. This makes them problematic and worthy of independent academic study and yet attention is very unevenly focussed. There is a sizable literature on museum, heritage interpretation and educational exhibition. Critical studies are spread through an interdisciplinary range of books and academic journals—museology, visual anthropology, material culture, art and design history, education, visual arts, historiography, etc. World's fairs and international expositions are moderately well covered in a theorized literature. Most of it addresses issues of national identity, cultural expression and political economy and, for practical reasons, takes a historical perspective—such events only happen every two or three years. Spatiotemporal consideration of Expo sites attracts some critical attention but the micro-scale consideration of the content and programming of pavilions and associated events attracts very little. Professional critique of Expo architecture very often is dismissive of exhibition. Many architectural critics (and architects), particularly those adhering to a modernist ideology, regard exhibition as a form of visual pollution or as mere decoration.² Commercial exhibitions—trade fairs, consumer shows, and agricultural shows—are generally covered uncritically in the literature. Most books on commercial exhibition simply showcase 'good' design or describe accepted practice, and it is rare to find critical research published in academic journals.

It has to be said that, for the commercial exhibition industry, a great deal of instrumental research is produced for representative industrial bodies, for major corporations, and for the trade associations directly concerned with the exhibition industry itself—venues, organizers and contractors. This research is conducted by market research companies that specialize in satisfying business requirements for intelligence, and it is owned by the commissioning clients; it is not, at least initially, intended for public consumption. Indeed, little reaches the public domain; it tends to remain in private hands even after any commercial sensitivity has evaporated. Its prime purpose is rarely, if ever, to question and improve understanding of exhibition in broader cultural, political and artistic terms as a medium of mass communication. Almost invariably it is to fulfil the limited commercial and policy interests of the client or the industry itself.

Critical issues

In all of this, historical, cultural and philosophical perspectives, and hence a properly critical approach to interpretation, are generally missing. As has been observed in relation to research into the professional culture of news media:

The application of independent criteria as to the definition of news in this, as in other areas of the profession, is not welcome because it challenges professional values and routines.³

But no-one appears to be taking this independent critical approach to *exhibition*, which, in the commercial sector, is equally bound by unquestioned professional beliefs and behaviours.

² Nicholas Grimshaw, the architect of the British Pavilion at Expo '92, Seville, for example, would not allow anything to be attached to the interior walls of the building, feeling, probably correctly, that this would detract from the clear expression of the building as an ingenious machine.

³ Hansen, *et al*, *Mass Communication Research Methods*, p. 20.

In 2000 Neal Potter posed a serious question regarding the future of exhibition: is the exhibition essentially a Victorian invention which has now had its day?⁴ I have seen no serious attempt to answer this question. The exhibitions industry continues to plough the same furrow. International Expo authorities and national organizing bodies continue to trot out the same economic development arguments relating to globalization and international understanding that have become, over the past forty years or so, *de rigueur*. The commercial exhibitions industry seems bound by this same discourse. In half a century, has nothing changed? We have ideology and convenient mythologies, but few alternative narratives based on radical critique, and, therefore, few prospects of moving on culturally and politically from an outdated and potentially damaging frame of reference.

Research opportunities

There is accumulating evidence that the new media are having a transformative influence on exhibition⁵—as much as on broadcast and print media, and mass distributed recorded media—not replacing exhibition but hybridizing and mutating it into forms with altogether new genetic profiles, new relationships to human ecology, a new set of behaviours as social constructed phenomena and as shaping conditions on communication processes.⁶ But where are the new models of *exhibition* as communication media?

New models are required; those relating to other mass communication media, even in hybridized forms, can not simply be appropriated. Exhibition, unlike broadcast and print media, is intricately bound up with architectural formations in realizing its communicative possibilities. In exhibition the audience, not the medium, circulates through space and time. The localized manipulation of spatiotemporal conditions—enclosure, structure, form, light, etc. i.e. architecture—is of central interest in a way that it is not in broadcast and print media. Even in film, where one might expect a certain amount of interest in the effect of architecture on transmission and reception, on the construction of meaning, there is precious little interest in the physical conditions that frame individual mass communication events. They are regarded as marginal concerns at best, and by some as irrelevant to the central questions of mass communication research. Distanciation, for example, has an evolved conceptual framework in film studies deriving from Benjamin's formulation of an economy of vision.⁷ In Benjamin's terms *distance* refers to the irreducibility of objects of vision; they always carry with them a non-visual surplus, or *aura*, which conditions our gaze through the effects of the preceding succession of other's gazes to which the object has been subjected. Value and meaning, derived from the historical succession of gazes, distance us from our own visual experience. Ironically perhaps, given Benjamin's other theoretical concerns, this generally excludes architecture from the discourse. At

⁴ Potter, N. 'Article?' (*The Designer*, 2000) pp.xx-xx

⁵ Bullivant, L. (2006) *Responsive Environments*, London: V&A Publications

⁶ The Museums Association ran the 'Go Digital' one-day conference on 18 September 2009 which focussed on the 'practical challenges of using electronic media' in museum exhibitions and 'new ways to contextualize objects and liberate them from glass cases'. The Canadian Heritage Information Network held the 'Making connections: museums, visitors and new technologies' symposium 4-5 February 2010 <www.pro.rcip-chin.gc.ca>.

⁷ 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' *Illuminations*, London: Fontana (also the reworking of the question by (?) 'The work of art in the age of digital reproduction.'

the very least, the discourse diminishes the relevance of the spatiotemporal conditions of any specific moment of optical engagement.⁸

Lash considers postmodernism a cultural paradigm.⁹ He and Urry argue that it is characterized by processes of de-differentiation in contemporary culture: the reversal of modernism's drive for authenticity, and its differentiation of taxonomies and vocabularies into ever more complex hierarchical structures.¹⁰ Postmodernism is 'anti-auratic' and 'anti-hierarchical'.¹¹ This may also be expressed as a 'blurring of boundaries' and the hybridization of cultural (and technological) forms in general. Exhibition is no less capable of redefinition under the rubric of 'cultural paradigm'. In pre-modern terms exhibition equates to 'display', in modernism to an elaboration of display and the multiplication of technologies, and in postmodernism to the layering and merging of media in increasingly augmented and animated spatiotemporal formations. In postmodern formations 'pre-modern, realist and modern cultural elements' sit within and alongside hybridized contemporary elements.¹² The resulting tension is usually productive and often anaesthetic. This opens the field to critique on a number of levels.

First: the discourse of 'display' upon which much art museum criticism relies for its logic is clearly inadequate as a general theory of exhibition. Very few things speak for themselves. Most only begin to make sense when the spectator is provided with supporting information: some code, narrative or setting. Even then the cultural location of the exhibition as an event is crucial; the spectator must be competent to bridge between their own knowledge and experience and the content of the exhibition if effective communication is to be achieved. Depending upon context competence may derive from education, empathy, cultural values, or intellectual and sensory capacity. An 18th century salon painting isolated on the white wall of an art gallery presents the problem of interpreting its Enlightenment iconography; without some understanding of 18th century social manners and contemporary classical education, it can communicate little of significance. However, given the appropriate setting, a narrative context, perhaps a demonstration of the rules of conversation and gesture in public and in private, the painting will not only come alive as a period piece, the opportunity for critical reflection on the values and conventions of our own times is made possible.

Second: design is a problematized notion, especially in the context of making cultural exhibitions. There are three, until recently, quite distinct traditions of exhibition making, which derive from the practices of the artist, the museum curator, and the architect or designer.

Third: geographical context, once an essential element in the event of exhibition has been rendered problematic. The invasion of the architectural space of the exhibition by virtual media spaces represents an erosion of the site-specific and content-specific qualities of exhibition. The primacy of

⁸ A particularly emotional example of this is the result of the frequency with which opening titles of movies in the 1980s and 90s set in New York included skyline shots of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. When amateur footage of their destruction on 11 September 2001 by terrorists was broadcast across the globe on television, it communicated a shattering of the American image all the more profoundly because of their established symbolic value.

⁹ Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism*.

¹⁰ Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 83-7.

¹¹ *ibid*, 84-5.

¹² *ibid*, 86.

interacting with the ‘real thing,’ with artefacts, messages and performances presented in real time, has been undermined, or superseded by a new participative experience that engages all the possibilities for interacting with content at-a-distance in space and time—content that is simultaneously accessible on other sites. The exhibition—through its incorporation of new technologies, and its scale and complexity—has become the augmented reality environment *par excellence*.

Fourth: as an arena of cultural politics, exhibition is affected in a radical way by the advent of social media and the hybridization of social space. Exhibition has become a more general phenomenon. An increasing range of architectural settings are infused with an excess of communications—the shopping mall and the theme park—to the point where their design is made over as a media project dominated by the need to deliver corporate messages and brand values.

[to be continued]

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