

Experimental Museology: Institutions, Representations, Users

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Abstract

Worldwide, museums are striving to redefine their 'art of relevance' (Simon 2016). In public as well as professional debate, many of the challenges museums face are framed in terms of various dilemmas related to the tension between the traditional role of the museum as a beacon of public enlightenment and the urgency of attracting new audiences in an increasingly consumerist economy. In handling these dilemmas, museologists have recently called for 'post-critical' museologies (Dewdney, Dibosa & Walsh 2013) as well as proposed to strengthen critical positions (Shelton 2013; Bishop 2014). We contend that there is a need to take a constructive rather than just a critical or an analytical perspective to tackling current museum dilemmas. Hence, we call for an '*experimental museology*' in which museum professionals' actual practices and academic discourse are aligned so as to better handle the particular challenges, choices and solutions faced by museum professionals in balancing, for example, dimensions of enlightenment and experience. So, rather than asking disconnected questions about object representations or audience engagements across online and offline spaces, this volume addresses how museums experiment within wider design ecologies.

In doing so, we partly draw on earlier work on experimental approaches to exhibition design (McDonald and Basu 2003; Gunn, Otto and Smith 2013). However, we argue that museums' design practices and innovation must be studied, understood and advanced within their wider institutional and strategic contexts as well. This inclusive approach to museum design is of particular importance with respect to the impact of museum communication on actual and potential users and illuminating the concrete 'hows and whys' of the balance between 'enlightenment' and 'experience'. While the new museology of the 1990es (Vergo 1989; Hooper-Greenhill 1992) provided opportunities and tools for reflecting on the societal role played by museums as institutions and cultural producers we argue that we now need to hone in on conceptualizing and documenting the everyday challenges and choices facing museum, especially with respect to the specific solutions they reach, in handling wider social, political and economic ramifications that are often not of their own making, but which nevertheless figure as concrete dilemmas, as outlined above.

The edited volume we propose here, aims to document and discuss cutting-edge examples of how museums design, apply and assess new modes of audience engagement and participation. It does so by critically scrutinizing concrete cases of innovative endeavours to redefine museological practice within museums focusing on the redesign of institutions, representations and user relations. Each chapter will be based on a particular curatorial design proposed and performed in a collaboration between university-based academics and museum. Volume authors are all scholars experienced in practice-based museum design and they represent a range of theoretical and empirical traditions, thus providing both range of orientation and depth of insight to the field. Taken together, the volume chapters will illuminate results across a diversity of geographical contexts and fields - from science centres, cultural-historical museums and art galleries.

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