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A Brief Journey through Definitions of Contemporary Exhibition Design

From Display to Narrative and Back

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A Brief Journey through Definitions of Contemporary Exhibition Design: From Display to Narrative and Back

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Abstract: Contemporary exhibition design is a fascinating and innovative project discipline that constitutes an ideal place of confluence of multiple knowledge bases and as many ways of expressing culture. Its task is "to expose knowledge," and this article investigates its current state of the art, looking at its possible research field definitions, deepening above all its "narrative" nature. The latter, in fact, represents its current state of conceptual and executive evolution, in a continuous round trip between tale evocation and displaying objects. The thematic focus of this article is to attempt to gather and intersect the different aspects and disciplines involved in contemporary exhibition design. Its aim is based on the acknowledgment of a selection of the existing literature. Due to the complex topic, as highlighted by the title, the result is a "brief journey" through definitions of contemporary exhibition design. This journey is made by the choice of many "voices" that are representative of the different professional figures who contribute to the construction of possible reasoning on the evolution of contemporary exhibition design: architects, exhibition designers, artists, curators, and art and architecture critics.

Keywords: Exhibition Design, Spatial and Environmental Design, Narrative Environment

Introduction

In recent decades, the proposal of temporary and permanent exhibitions has become, on a global level, increasingly broad and diversified, and it involves every aspect of human activities, offering to the public multiple interpretations and different perspectives of investigation. From blockbuster events planned to be presented on an international scale and to attract huge masses of spectators, to the more circumscribed occasions, closely linked to local areas of interest and with more limited media impact, the number of exhibition spaces—museums, art galleries, *kunsthalle*, cultural foundations, associations, etc.—is growing and the same happens to the subjects of the events they organize, dealing with the most varied themes.

This complex and varied scenario of proposals corresponds to a radical and substantial mutation of the paradigms of "how to display," an action that today must be considered as the set of design choices through which a subject (the content) and a place (the container) are shaped and equipped to achieve the best conditions of habitability and communicability between what it is place on display and the public.

The paradigm shift in this design discipline has become the subject of critical discussion over the last twenty years, in search of a new and more appropriate field definition of the of the idea itself of exhibiting. However, immediately after the Second World War, some designers already understood the relevance of exhibition design as a useful tool for the reconstruction of the cultural life of nations affected by the vision of the war devastation, and, above all, its potential capacity to become a real expressive system to support new aesthetic paradigms to reconnect past, present, and future, after the destruction of all early twentieth-century social and cultural certainty. The thoughts of those designers not only anticipate with great foresight themes that are still relevant today, but even propose some concepts that will be resumed only at the beginning of the new millennium, such as overcoming the principle of exhibition design as a

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neutral, expressively absent tool and its replacement with new canons open to mediation, interaction, thematic deepening, and information.

The exhibition project, in fact, no longer represents, as in the past, the answer to the research of a specialized system whose only mission is to make possible the vision of "something," like an art work or an historical document, an archaeological artifact, a product of nature, etc., in an exclusively instrumental way. The exhibition project can no longer be interpreted as a necessary but purely accessory perimeter structure, formally and communicatively silent and "absent." Contemporary exhibition design is a fascinating and innovative project discipline that constitutes an ideal place of confluence of multiple knowledge bases and as many ways of expressing culture. Its task is "to expose knowledge" and this article investigates its current state of the art, looking at its possible research field definitions, deepening above all its "narrative" nature. The latter, in fact, represents its current state of conceptual and executive evolution, in a continuous round trip between tale evocation and displaying objects.

The main questions addressed in this article are:

- What is the definition of contemporary exhibition design?
- What are the fundamental conceptual principles that can be found in the expression of an exhibition design today?

The thematic focus of this article is to attempt to gather and intersect the different aspects and disciplines involved in contemporary exhibition design. Its aim is based on the acknowledgment of a selection of the existing literature. Due to the complex topic, as highlighted by the title, the result is a "brief journey" through definitions of contemporary exhibition design. This journey is made by the choice of many "voices" that are here quoted, and this could be considered as a critical work in itself, representing a new contribution to the exploration of the topic. These voices are representative of the different professional figures who contribute to the construction of possible reasoning on the evolution of contemporary exhibition design: architects, exhibition designers, artists, curators, and art and architecture critics.

The selection of the different alternative approaches is based on the following topics:

- Contemporary exhibition design involves different aspects and disciplines: it is made by a multidisciplinary, multimodal, and steadily innovative design process.
- Contemporary exhibition design is definitely a matter of narrative.
- The narrative propensity it is not recent idea, but finds its conceptual roots in the first postwar period of the Second World War.
- The narrative propensity does not imply to forget objects or place them in the background, but rather to valorize them, exploring in depth their meaning beyond the appearance.

Overcoming the Paradigm of Neutrality: A Historical Premise

In 1952, the Italian architect Ernesto N. Rogers, co-founder of the *BBPR Studio* and also well-known theoretician and critic of architecture, in an article commenting on two exhibition designs by Franco Albini, wrote: "the exhibition should no longer be thought as a show of objects to be observed on a neutral background, but as an environment to go through, and as such to establish, …with the visitor…a direct and concrete relationship of presence" (in Rogers 1952, 20–21). His words anticipate and identify, with exceptional clarity, some issues that will soon become fundamental in the exhibition design scenario: the urgency of overcoming the

paradigm of neutrality, the need to look at the set-up spaces as "habitable" places, and the necessity of a solid relational reciprocity relationship between object and visitor.

Looking at the work of Franco Albini, who later will be recognized as one of the great masters of Italian exhibition design of the post Second World War period, Rogers understands the active role that the tools useful for the very act of exhibiting must assume. In fact, these tools interact with the objects on display and with the viewer thanks to their arrangement in space, their formal and material nature, and, above all, the reciprocity they establish with the objects on display. They represent, therefore, a real design value: they generate privileged conditions of proximity, identification, and comparison able to best express the potential of the exhibited work and they mediate their inevitable physical and temporal dislocation (almost always the displayed objects comes from a different place and time, compared to the one in which the public experiences them). Inevitably, then, the illusory ideal of neutrality must give way to a "grammar of relationship." From here, the path toward the narrative evolution of the exhibition design is traced.

The paradigm of neutrality refers to an exhibition mode that is still privileged for exhibiting art. As a result of the activity of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and its first director Alfred Barr,[2] this model became so paradigmatic that it appeared, in the 1950s, to be irreplaceable in museums and art galleries. Twenty years later, the artist Brian O'Doherty was to identify it with the successful expression "white cube,"[3] formulating an explicit criticism and starting the process of overcoming it—"the apparent neutrality of the white wall is an illusion" (O'Doherty 1999, 79).

The other two paradigms identified by Rogers prefigure how to implement this overcoming process, shifting the role of the exhibition design into a developing strategic system of redefining the spatial relationships in place between the environments, the collections, and the people, which could be achievable by identifying the tools of use for generating and supporting narrative practices. These practices should reveal, in a more or less evident way, the inherent messages in the object of the exhibition.

But what do we mean, seventy years after Rogers' words, when we talk about exhibition design? Here we will try to take a brief (and of course non-exhaustive) journey through the possible definitions of contemporary exhibition design, referring to the studies of the main scholars in this field of research and also the experience of the designers. Here, we will make a brief survey on the state of the art, following a trajectory that, mainly, wants to highlight how, in the last decades, the idea of exhibition design has shifted from the principle of "display" to the paradigm of "telling." Because of this conceptual moving point, instead of "exhibiting space," we better talk about a space that acquires "meaning by exhibiting."

About Exhibiting and Displaying

In his essay *The Exhibition and the Display*,[4] the Austrian artist Martin Beck, whose research interweaves architecture, design, and exhibition design, questions the meaning of the words "exhibition" and "display," noting how different the meanings of two terms are, generating a possible interpretation to understanding the very idea of "exhibition":

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[2] See also: Abigail Cain, 2017, "How the White Cube Came to Dominate the Art World." *Artsy 1*, January 23, 2017. https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-white-cube-dominate-art.

[3] For a definition of "white cube" see Tate Gallery of London "Art Term." https://www.tate.org.uk/art-terms/w/white-cube. Accessed March 25, 2019. "White cube. Refers to a certain gallery aesthetic characterized by its square or oblong shape, white walls and a light source usually from the ceiling."

[4] *The Exhibition and The Display* unpublished lecture first presented as "Display: Eine Begriffsklärung' at the symposium 'Forms of Exhibitions' (2009, Kunstverein, Hamburg). The complete text of the lecture was later published in *Exhibitions*, edited by Lucy Steeds, 27–33. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 27–33.

> When discussing "the exhibition," I presume that most of us have a certain idea of what constitutes an exhibition. The same might be true of the term 'display'. But I am quite convinced that ideas of what display refers to vary much more than those about exhibition. I will try to address this discrepancy by taking a closer look at the terms themselves, specifically at their evolution in the post-war period, when the exhibition was a key medium for mass communication. Today, exhibition—and even more so, display—have become not only art-world but household terms. (Beck 2014, 27)

Focusing on some paradigmatic texts published in the post-war period, Beck states that exhibition design was the main medium for mass communication (in the next paragraph we will see how the idea of medium plays a fundamental role in the evolution of critical thinking about exhibition design), and he presents two different approaches to this topic. On the one hand, Beck presents a European-Swiss vision based on the "the complex relationship between the exhibition and the audience, one that is negotiated through judgement and manipulation" according to which, he says, "modern exhibitions tried to inform and persuade, to enlighten and direct; they were liberating and selling at the same time" (Beck 2014, 30). On the other hand, Beck underlines the American point of view, inspired by the principle of display as an explicit act of seduction: "an active operation rooted in biological behaviorism" (Beck 2014, 32).

Regardless of the complex problem of lexical nuances that distinguish the terms "exhibit" and "display," it appears more interesting to focus on some salient passages. Richard Paul Lohse, Swiss artist and graphic designer, in his *New Design in Exhibition*, written just one year after the aforementioned Rogers article, affirms the social and cultural role of the exhibition, seen as an apparatus that acts as a mediator between the values expressed by the collection as subject and the public as its receiver: "in their essence, exhibitions are…pioneers for a coming evolution. exhibiting means evaluating. ...An exhibition is an ideal medium for influencing the public" (Lohse, in Beck 2014, 29).

According to Lohse, therefore, exhibiting represents always an opportunity to address social and cultural aspects. He explicitly speaks about the "art of exhibiting" and finds the deepest and sincerest meaning of this art in its being an instrument for the realization of a collective and educational idea. Through the exhibited objects must emerge and be made available to the public, above all, a conceptual and objective view of the world, in which these objects participate.

In the same year, the American designer George Nelson, in his book entitled *Display* (1953), instead focuses on the "trading" potential of exhibitions, describing them, almost with a hint of regret, as a real device designed to influence the desires of the public, precisely as a result of their engaging and emotional communicative ability:

> The word *display* comes from a Latin root which means to unfold or to spread out. As used by us, in a variety of situations, it always conveys the idea of calling someone's attention to something by showing it in a conspicuous way…the purposes of display are many, although the essential procedures always involve attracting attention. The object of display may be to attract a member of the opposite sex; to establish identity …to indicate social position…to convey information…and to attract customers. (Nelson, in Beck 2014, 32)

Beck ends his brief excursus through these publications with a passage taken from the book *Conceptions of International Exhibitions,* edited by another Swiss artist and designer, Hans Neuburg, who, in 1969, highlighted a simple fixed point in the debate: exhibiting is a design practice aimed at making something understandable and its nature is instructive.

> We do not need to lose many words explaining what an exhibition is and the function which it exercises. To exhibit means to expose, to show, demonstrate, inform, offer. In either an enclosed or open space some topic is shown or objects are presented in such a way that their specific qualities can be comprehended. It is, of course, clear that this should be done as instructively as possible. (Neuburg, in Beck 2014, 30)

Despite the different shades of meanings from all of the authors Beck quoted, the awareness of the condition of "non-neutrality" of the exhibiting act emerges distinctly, which, precisely through its planning mode, arranges active devices in the space, and whose role is to circumscribe and physically stabilize the objects in the space (whatever the nature of the exhibit collection), which is only a technical aspect of a wider mandate of being a means to generate a scenario also intended to represent the contents and of meanings of the objects themselves. Beck ends his essay by declaring that "the exhibition is, despite its ephemeral and potentially itinerant status, a static format. In contrast, display emerges from the admittedly behaviorist definition as an operation that can consequently be understood as a method; a method used to generate form within the exhibition" (Beck 2014, 32).

There are two elements of extreme interest in Beck's critical work: the affirmation of the "static format" of the exhibition and the identification of displaying as a "method that generates form." On the one hand, therefore, the temporal nature of the exhibition is only a collateral outcome of a complex action which, in selecting, repositioning and giving meaning to objects (the collection on display), relaunches the permanence of "a superstructural interpretative and revealing system": the exhibition statically fixes in time and space a deep and unique vision of the objects on display, activating their ability to empathize with the visitor. On the other hand, the evocative power necessary to define this system finds in the syntax of the exhibition design its formal expression. Therefore, the critical focus on the deeper and current meaning of exhibition design moves on to be established as a true aesthetic medium as well as a methodological process that contributes to defining behavioral attitudes.

An Aesthetic Medium

In 1998, Mary Anne Staniszewski, in the "Introduction" of her fundamental book *The Power of Display*, describes her work as "an investigation of exhibition installations as representations," based on the principle of "installation design as an aesthetic medium and historical category. ... Exhibitions…represent what can be described as conscious and unconscious subject, issues, and ideological agenda" (Staniszewski 1998, XXI-XXII).

Staniszewski's work is fundamental because it is one of the first critical works of exploration and analysis of the cultural value of a museum institution elaborated no longer in terms of artistic collection and political-institutional representativeness, but, rather, in terms of exhibition methods. The history traced by Staniszewski about the exhibitions organized by MoMa, one of the most important and culturally influential museums in the world, reveals how the exhibition design has been a very strong communication tool, adopted to give shape and meaning to new aesthetic canons. In fact, it is used, modelled, experimented by museum's directors and curators, together with the designers, to visually and perceptively transpose the changes, real or potential, in the civil and cultural parameters of society.

Staniszewski, therefore, explicitly attributes the status of a medium to exhibition design, thus releasing it from the role of simple equipment subordinated to the object to be exhibited—that it, simply, must be able to support physically—to recognize its role as a design language used to achieve a representation of the contents of what is shown in the exhibition itself. So, the act of exhibiting has in itself an aesthetic value which, we could say, works alongside the aesthetic value of what is exhibited, to better express it and make it understandable. One principle that, fifteen years later, is well identified by Leslie Bedford in his *The Art of Museum*

Exhibition (2014): is that "exhibitions also have a language that helps us understand them as a medium…the medium's potential [is] to transform how visitors understand a particular set of ideas, themselves and the world" (Bedford 2014, 14).

In recognizing this new status, it is implicitly affirmed that exhibiting no longer serves a merely technical function, organizing the most suitable tools for "preserving" (action focused on the parameters of the safe condition of the collection) and for "disseminating" (an action aimed at disseminating the knowledge value expressed directly by the collection), but makes itself a participatory device, which generates understanding, also and above all through the implementation of personal experience processes which find their fundamental expressive key in the "narrative."
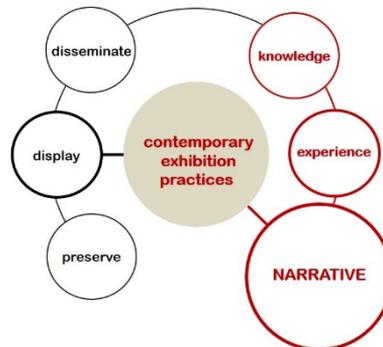

Figure 1: From Display to Narrative and Back
Source: Borsotti

So, in summation, we can affirm that exhibition design fulfils its task of "displaying," developing strategies aimed to pursue a more intense relationship with what is exhibited, in order to make a broader and deeper understanding possible. Exhibition design, as suggested by Ernesto N. Rogers, therefore, affirms itself as a tool to generate "experiences."

Generating Experience

In his essay *Resonance and Wonder*, which is still topical today, Stephen Greenblatt wrote: "the idea is not to find outside the work of art some rock onto which interpretation can be securely chained but rather to situate the work in relation to other representational practices operative in the culture at a given moment in both its history and our own" (Greenblatt 1995, 43), aligning exhibition design to a practice of representation aimed at enhancing the object displayed both by its objective value and its socio-cultural reason. In particular, Greenblatt identifies two implementation models: the "resonance"—the inherent capacity of the displayed object to evoke the cultural value that generated it—and the "wonder"—r the power of the object itself to attract the observer by communicating its own uniqueness to them.

Thirty years later we place these two models within a relational structure that is established between the set up and the objects of the collection in order to fulfil a narrative apparatus: a system in which the communicative power of the exposed object is revealed and/or enhanced through the evocation, visualization and interaction of some of the multiple circumstances which have made it so.

The clear definition of Greenblatt's two implementation models helps us to understand how much the exhibition design is a fundamental component of the creation of a participatory process aimed at "making culture." The exhibition design, in fact, operates in a parallel and synchronized way. On the one hand, it acts to identify and make readable to all visitors the power of the object itself to express its intrinsic value, establishing here a more nuanced

relationship of presence, technically focused on the presentation of the object as such. On the other hand, it develops in a coordinated set to define a reasoned weaving of an ever-denser relational interweaving between what is displayed and who is looking at, so as to generate in this last the stratification of new behaviors, discoveries, and reflections, a weaving that takes place in crossing thick places of evocative presences, in drawing out and sharpening the perceptive capacities of our senses, in chasing the plot of the story underlying the event that people are, thus, "inhabiting."

This new condition of contemporary exhibition design has developed over the last few decades as a conceptual renewal rather than a linguistic process, starting already around the 1960s, as confirmed by McLean's rereading of some critical contributions on the changes to museum exhibition modes on this theme that appeared in the first volume of the magazine *Curator*, published in 1958 (McLean 2007).

In fact, McLean (2007) notes that most of the critical contributions presented in the review focus on how to make the visit experience memorable. Katharina Beneker, for example, argued that the exhibition should "enrich and enlarge the life of the person…its value lies…in how much the visitor takes with them when they leave" (Beneker, in McLean 2007, 81), while Wallace Rosenbauer even highlighted that "interest must be concentered not on things but on the meaning of things to ordinary people with ordinary lives and backgrounds" (Rosenbauer, in McLean 2007, 81). McLean, however, concludes her essay by emphasizing how most of the exhibition projects still present traditional languages and provocatively she asks:

> As our visitors increasingly deal with the effects of religious and cultural conservatorism, war and power politics, the effects of global warming and species loss…will our exhibitions be enlightening, comforting or useful to them? As new communities emerge and evolve within the increasingly complex arenas created by new technologies, will our exhibitions have a place on the playing field?" (McLean 2007, 301)

Her answer refers to the actual capacity of exhibitions to implement some form of multidisciplinary collaboration, capable of triggering the imagination, a point of view that today, with different nuances, represents the basis of the work of many critics and designers in this field of research.

The expressive capacity of how the object is set up reverberates in its display system, which acts as a real communicative apparatus, able to go "beyond" the physical substance of the object itself to reveal its conceptual essence, exploring it in different narrative dimensions. These different dimensions, indeed, are able to trigger new experiential practices, capable of involving different languages and disciplines in the exhibition project, pouring them into a coordinated scenario capable of involving the audience in innovative and alternative forms of knowledge. Basu and Macdonald underline this aspect when they refer to the contemporary exhibition practices as an experimental practice that start from the pre-existing knowledge, something that already existing and that we already know, with all the intentions to find and to offer new point of views, because exhibiting means putting objects at the service of a new theoretical subject, a superstructural viewpoint: "an exhibition is a place for generation, rather than for reproduction, of knowledge and experience" (Basu, Macdonald 2007, 2). Therefore, the exhibition design has a complex role that implies the capability to disrupt stereotypes, prepackaged intellectual visions, instead favoring critical actions able to propose deepened perspectives. The exhibition design is aimed at shaping new, actual experiences: according to Greenblatt (1991), its goal is an "intense moment of inner resonance."

So, displaying becomes a process of planning narrative strategies, and these strategies must be able to trigger all the human senses of visitors, involving them in a sequence of personal experiences that stimulate the search for a deeper relationship with the subject set up that is

explored as a convergent expression of multiple cognitive points of view. In this sense Ico Migliore, co-founder of Migliore+Servetto Associati, speaks about "open space" (Migliore 2015, 127), meaning that exhibition spaces are made to allow people to grasp the value of the relational dynamics and evolutionary capacity of the contents on display. The dynamics with which these experiences can be lived, greatly implement not only the range of possible exhibition strategies, but, above all, the potential of the latter to cross different temporal contexts, renewing and updating the codes of reading and understanding the exhibited subjects. Thus, objects generate their own renewed narrative; a narrative which is explanatory of a metamorphosis, activating new levels of attention, fascination and comprehensibility.

Contemporary exhibition design, therefore, organizes the different elements composing a collection according to the evolutionary trajectories (social, cultural, traditional, technical, etc.) that have contributed to giving them meaning and historical persistence, in an ever fuller relational interweaving between what is displayed and the one who looks, in order to give rise to the emotion—resonance and wonder—of new behaviors, discoveries, and reflections. That means a radical rethinking of the very idea of the act of displaying that involves the whole scenario of the exhibition, from the spatial container to the acting of the visitors, populating it with evocative presences, whose manifestation and narration requires the sharing of the perceptive capacities of our senses, aimed at chasing the thread of the narrative underlying the event. "It is precisely because of the power that exhibitions have in assigning or opening up meanings, in creating contexts and situating viewers, that standardized exhibition methods and formats as well as display conventions need to be critically rethought and potentially subverted" (Ault 2007, 24).

A Creative Philosophy

The contemporary exhibition design, therefore, has freed itself from a strictly instrumental dimension and a role of "neutral" presence, establishing as a multidisciplinary design language that is fundamental for revealing the meaning of the objects on display and to establishing evident relationships between them and visitors. The exhibition design is configured, then, as a true aesthetic medium whose main task is to generate cognitive experiences that explore the deepest sense of a cultural event, giving it communicative power.

Thinking about this new dimension of contemporary exhibition design, it is clearly understandable why if Bedford (2014) attributes the role of medium to it, Brückner goes further, speaking explicitly of "creative philosophy":

> Scenography is a creative philosophy that translates conceptional and material contents into three-dimensional, narrative themed spaces. It creates an overall composition which makes it possible to experience content with the senses, sets off objects, charge spaces with significance, choreographs them dramaturgically and finally involves the visitors and encourages them to draw associations and think ahead. (Atelier Bruckner 2011, 167)

The idea of "creative philosophy" places the designer's action at the heart of the whole realization process of a cultural exhibition event. The designer acts as a professional who supports the creators and curators and participates actively in the development of the exhibition's contents, such as tools and environments. A person, therefore, able to interact within an extended team of multidisciplinary experts, whom they converse with in an equal manner, collaborating in the definition of the overall language of the exhibition, mediating between its more complex scientific and informative contents and the need for their "operational" translation that makes them truly available to a wider audience. This is also possible through the adoption of technical and technological solutions capable of generating

multiple levels of participation. Brückner calls it "a holistic, integrative, multidisciplinary and content-consistent design philosophy" (Atelier Brückner 2019, 154).

On the basis of the critical contributions presented so far, we can affirm that contemporary exhibition design implies that its author applies themselves to intercept different levels of interpretation of a cultural event, in order to obtain, finally, a synthesis capable of generating a narrative system that should be widely "understandable" to the visitors and whose "borders" turn out to be flexible and implementable, already in the act of the visit itself, by the free deepening of multiple suggestions. Today, the exhibition practices, in their different declinations, occupy a new centrality in the processes of transformation of the diffusion and understanding of culture, acting in terms of capacity to intercept new modes of communication and, in doing so, to determine an innovative and particular aesthetics of the space of displaying, between narrativity and spectacularization. The task is to "exhibit knowledge," acting as a destabilizing and revealing element. These practices offer a renewed idea of exhibiting in which the relationships between objects, messages and images disarticulate the traditional paradigms of "staging," toward a new perception of the space inhabited by them as an "open space," a space where visitors move within an offer that proposes to them a plurality of opportunities for an in-depth knowledge, interaction, and perceptual emphasis, as permanent features of the qualitative principles of space, predisposed to the renewability of "sensorial and emotional experiences."

About the latter, Appelbaum writes, referring to the museographic setting field: "the ambition of the new museums is to create sensory and emotional experiences. (…) The most successful experiences are those that go beyond reading and observing objects; they are the ones that immerse the viewer in exciting ideas" (Appelbaum 2018, 92). Therefore, we can affirm that the aim of an exhibition is to become a "three-dimensional writing operation" articulated according to narrative sequences deduced from the complexity of the objective and symbolic nature of what is displayed. These narrative sequences are transformed into a thoroughly prefigured and planned visit experience, in order to act as a tool for a different act of seeing. Not surprisingly Gröndahal proposes an interpretation of exhibitions as tools that facilitate "multiple perceptions", abandoning the role of support to "limited readings and understanding messages with limited readings and understandings." (Gröndahal, quoted in Lam 2014, 27).[5]

Exhibition design adopts an ever-increasing number of linguistic codes, exhibiting objects and of static and dynamic representation innovative modes, including multisensory, to shape articulated narrative-exhibition systems. These systems will always be based on full respect of the objective and symbolic nature the displayed collection, but they explain, enhance and translate it by activating new linguistic relations and temporal coincidences, suggested to the visitors by assonances or dissonances of forms, play of light and shadow, material and chromatic combinations as well as interactive and immersive tools. So we can affirm that the act of exhibiting is a three-dimensional narrative tactics design process, a process that has deeply assimilated those practices of knowledge transmission that the human being has always implemented and that today we call "storytelling":

> We can think about storytelling as a tool that translates and makes understandable the communicative vocation inherent into every cultural "artefact"; as choice to make explicit one or more of the infinite tales that the cultural assets represent; as staging of an "open story," that should not be complete when it offered to the visitor, but only at the moment of its re-interpretation. (Trocchianesi, 2012, 11)

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[5] Lam, Margaret Choi Kwan (2014), quoting Laura Gröndahal, *Scenographic strategies and communication*. Source: data from http://t7.uta.fi/drex/DREX/11_TextAndPublicationsEn_files/1_Grondahl.pdf. Accessed July 6, 2013

The introduction of and experimentation in the ideational and realization process of the exhibition design of different storytelling techniques places the narrative definitively at the core of the reason something is displayed today. The exhibiting act is, therefore, the implementation of a systemic order between space, objects, and the public. This order is triggered, mediated, and supported by the multiple stories that can be told to visitors by the cultural testimony that the contents of the event exhibition itself represent. The contemporary exhibition design realizes the "narrative capital" that is inherent in every artefact; that means its intrinsic potential to express itself beyond its objective value, transferring these additional contents to the public, in order to implement broader and deeper interpretative strategies, intercepting different inclinations and sensibilities. In designing an exhibition system, adopting the storytelling as its outcome, means: to live a part, to be involved in a narration, to understand and adopt its own real and symbolic values, to be placed within a meaningful experience and therefore be "relocated," together with the objects of the collection on display, into a spatial condition where the very nature of the places and their equipment takes on the value of a "narrative environment" (Fontana 2015).

In this respect, contemporary exhibition design progressively hybridizes itself with techniques and languages coming from arts and new forms of aesthetics, while the performing aspect is rooted in its practices. Furthermore, precisely the performing aspect triggers a process of understanding and acquiring the meanings and contents directly implemented by the visitor and it offers as a true paradigm of cultural experience. Exhibition design is always a matter of "processing" information and expressive meanings about what comes from the displayed contents and cannot, therefore, definitively be seen as the simple final, merely technical-executive stage, of a curatorial principle.

According to Cerri (2005), exhibition design is a practice of control and management of the "shift of meaning" that any element displayed undergoes, for the very reason of being, precisely, "on display," exposed, brought to the forefront, and inserted in a different context, or, in other words, taken out of its original location. Contemporary exhibition design is a sort of expressive system that coordinates the different vocations of a cultural event, acting as an "intelligent" device that codifies and translates the contents of the exhibition, mediating between their capacity (or potential) to be iconic and the narrative structure—sometimes explicit and consolidated, often hidden and unexpected—that makes them so. "Display reflects the convergence of a set of choices informed by considerations of meaning, perception, critical reflection and judgement" (Cotter 2018, 59). However, it should be also noted that contemporary exhibition design does not act as a medium that transcends and rewrites reality. It does not aim to overwhelm and annihilate the content of ideas in the name of the primacy of images and visual preponderance of spectacularization, but rather adopts the widest repertoire of instruments capable of starting and supporting a narrative structure, precisely so that the latter gives rise to a wider and clearer awareness of what each single element displayed is called to represent, in the portion of human history in which it has taken on sense.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the main conditions of the contemporary exhibition design are:

- its consolidation as a real multi-layered discipline;
- the acquisition of its conceptual autonomy;
- the propensity to present itself as an engaging experience.

The conceptual principles of the exhibition design have shifted from a mainly architectural field of specialized equipment, towards a synergic system of several cultural areas, involving narration, communication, performance, interactivity, and digital supports, in the sign of a

"user-centered" design approach, that is, looking at the figure of the visitor, his privileged user, as an active and participatory component of the exhibition structure.

The act of exhibition design does not complete its mandate by finishing the complex task of the best technical solution of how to make the displayed contents safe and available, but it must also be a design process able to reveal what lies beyond the image, the object, the document.

Furthermore, it involves an act of conscious choice, aimed at integrating, organizing, and making legible some of the narrative meaning of the collection. The exhibition system is not the purpose: it is the compendium, the integration, the amplification, the explanation. It does not replace the object and its intrinsic value: it tells about it, keeping it firmly at the centre of the narration.

The exhibition design is a dialectical process: it establishes a design process where the instances defined by the contents of the collection and the curatorial intentions are coordinated with the adoption of multiple linguistic systems, capable of intercepting the public and offering them an overall scenario able to arousing emotions and facilitating understanding. For this reason, facing a research field that only in the last twenty years has begun to enrich and systematize its contributions, still developing an investigation to map possible definitions of contemporary exhibition design represents an important vehicle for exploring its state of the art and its possible future evolutions.

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