

## Dortmund January 2007

A lecture within the framework of the colloquium „Time-Space-Space-Time“

### Avatars

#### Storing away exhibitions

People want to save all sorts of things. In the first place themselves, their cars, their bicycles, their suitcases and the members of their family. So, people want to keep and throw away. People often start having regrets after throwing something away, although there are exceptions. And gradually you start missing the one who has been thrown out of your life. You start collecting things. A photo, a hairpin that has been left behind, two boots that were never picked up. Notes that you read carelessly at the time are now read word by word. You save, you save and you save. If you are lucky, or if you are actually not, it becomes a full day's work. You go so far in saving things, that you start copying what has been thrown away, you start creating. The moment you start wondering if it should be saved, it is already too late. Just as it is in love. At that moment you have already thrown it away. There is nothing left to be saved.<sup>1</sup>

We often attach a personal, emotional value to objects. In the case of historical objects this value can be collective, which makes it worthwhile to exhibit the object. And then it appears that a lot of people want to admire these treasures from the past. Not so much because they want to learn about the past, but especially because old things emanate a historical sensation.



*In the town of Heusden we made an object from other objects that the inhabitants brought in for storage and exhibiting.*

Starting with the private property collections, as a kind of collection of curiosities that could only be visited at the invitation of the owner, many collections passed into public property in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the objects had a serious, scientific and educational purpose, and they were classified into academic sectors such as art, history, geology, biology and anthropology. In the exhibition, the objects were provided with an explanatory text with the title, the year or the description of the external characteristics. The general public still perceives museums with an image of scientific integrity. Museums are considered among the most reliable sources when it comes to providing historical information. The mere exhibiting of objects was not enough and we, the exhibition designers made our appearance. We started putting together objects that fitted in with a specific theme, and we started looking for anecdotal tales to make the objects gear better to the perception of the public. Soon the theme of the exhibition itself became the central point and we used the objects as illustrations with the tale. For instance, we gave our view on history, on nature or on technique and technology, and we tried to get that across to the visitor in a way that was as lively as possible. In addition, not only did we ensure a visually attractive atmosphere, but we also provided the visitor with stimulating information and details about the objects. And where the presentations were still not appealing enough, the introduction of electronic and audiovisual media offered new possibilities to get knowledge across.

However, in the last decades the focus in museums has shifted from the objects themselves to the way they are presented, how they are perceived by the public and how the public experiences the museum and the objects. Formerly, the objects were important, in most museums these days the central focus is on reflection and interpretation. However, the truth knows many versions. Knowledge is time-bound, context dependent and situated in the subjectivity of the connoisseur. On top of that, every visitor has their own background and perception. Furthermore, in the museums we have only stored the masterpieces and only the exceptional things and events have been laid down. It did not seem worthwhile to lay down the ordinary life, which disappeared into obscurity. Also, every museum constantly distinguishes between what is worth showing and what is not. The mere fact that some parts of the collection are never elected means that a proper portrait of the era is not given. Until recently I thought that, if we used objects from the depot and returned these after the end of the exhibition, nothing had happened. Just now I realize that the vision and the temporary context in which we place objects can strongly influence the perception of the past and of the future of the visitors. Since we place the objects in a room in a certain order and this way tell a story, we change the interpretation of the objects in the course of time, and we produce a permanent added value to the identity of the objects. Once experiences have been gained they can never be undone. Their reality and the way in which they have moved us are things we carry with us forever.



*'The Secrets of the Celts', Limburgs Museum Venlo*

Set-ups in museums that relate about the past tell us perhaps more about the situation now than of the past itself. Would it in the future therefore not be logical to store objects in their context, for instance by saving a virtual mirror image of the exhibition? This way, a museum should systematically build up an intellectual collection next to a material collection. All documents of a museum should be gathered, both images and the records of the collection, such as the exhibition texts. The intellectual collection should be a rich source collection that is just as scientifically sound as the physical collection. What's more, nowadays the physical and the intellectual collection cannot exist without one another. Mind you, this plea is not meant to receive more recognition as an exhibition designer and producer.

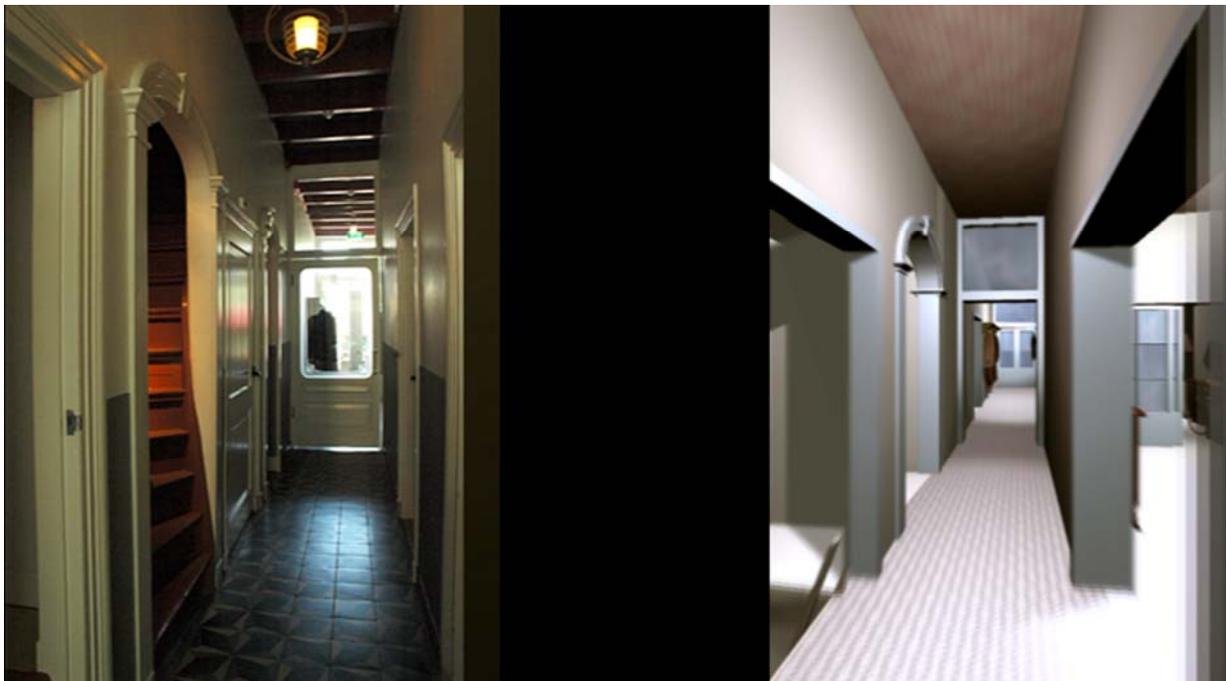


*We have started to place film clips of our exhibitions on our website.*

### **Mona**

If we look at the technological developments of the past century, we initially see an agricultural development that is followed by an industrial development accompanied by the rise of the chemical industry. In the last few decades, the latter development has been caught up by the development of electronics and software. The speed of this development still seems to double every year. What particularly interests me is the next course of developments. A course that we do not know yet. If we extrapolate the foregoing, I could imagine that we start developing our own emotional capacities in the future. We already possess these latently, but we are hardly aware of this. Would it not be effective to get across an emotion within a second, instead of having to read through a large contract that still does not exclude everything? Increasingly more advanced new techniques will have to make that possible for us. For instance Emotiv Systems is already experimenting with Epoc, which makes it possible to play a game with the aid of your thoughts and in which you can give emotions to a character. The computer is already becoming more invisible all the time, as is the case with Ubiquitous Computing. The possibility to transfer emotions will definitely have a large influence on the role of museums. The moment you can have the complete emotion that you would have if you were standing in front of the Mona Lisa, you could say that exhibiting the original is no longer strictly necessary.

Before we've reached that point we keep focussing on imitating and improving reality in the best possible way. In addition, virtuality and reality will be increasingly mixed up, just as we know it from films. We have already stopped fussing about whether an army coming down a mountain is made up of extras, or if it has been realized on a computer. Only our perception counts. In our daily lives as well this development will go ahead when virtual solutions can be realized in a cheaper way than physical solutions. Whether we want this or not. If it is important to us that in our house, as opposed to outside, it is warmer, drier and safer, it might no longer matter to us if a wall that separates inside and outside is real or not. This wall will become virtual and it will preserve its experiential characteristics. Only our perception counts. Just as it is in film. We will partially start living in a virtually constructed environment. An environment that initially is still an imitation of the physical world, and one that will form its own identity later on.



*In museum Markt 12 we offer the authentic rooms with little information and virtual rooms with in-depth information side by side.*

We already live in a world in which simulations and imitations of reality have become more realistic than reality itself. This way we are familiar with a large range of strawberry flavoured products. To such an extent, that the worldwide production of strawberries can never be sufficient to meet the demand. In a test, two kinds of strawberry flavour were put in front of children. The children pointed out the synthetic strawberry flavour as the only right flavour. The real strawberry flavour was not recognized as such. They thought it was nasty. Therefore, it is no longer useful to keep distinguishing between real and fake. As our media become more realistic, our living environment becomes more unrealistic. During an exiting film you sometimes forget the (cinema) seat you are sitting in. That is when you are absorbed in the film. If my phone rings, I will physically stay in the same location, but socially I transport myself mentally to the person I am speaking to, who might

be far away. More and more frequently you travel to end up in a place you really already know. We live in different realities. When I was playing a game with my son on our home network he asked me: "What world are you in now?" Fantasy and second-class reality occur simultaneously and many among us already spend a large part of our time in the virtual worlds of the 'on-line role-playing games'. In these games friends are made and hearts are broken, but lucrative trading goes on as well. The players of 'Second Life' enter the world with their 'Avatar', an idealized character that enables the player to build up a second life in the game. New media alter our idea of time and space.

### **Authenticity**

In an interview I was asked which exhibitions had impressed me most. It turned out to be an unexpectedly difficult question. After I went through all the presentations I am familiar with in my mind, I drew the conclusion that they were those exhibitions that carried the force and the mysticism of authenticity. "Here, at the spot where I am standing now, is where it happened" or "This is the original that he himself held in his hands, imagine the effect it must have had." In spite of all our professional efforts, a proper transfer of information is not able to match authenticity.



*In Domein Bokrijk we let actors animate the historical image.*

To make the presentation of objects in a museum more authentic, data about the original context of the objects are needed, which are hardly ever available. In the open-air museum Bokrijk in Belgium the objects are not only shown as much as possible including their environment, but we even use theatrical images and historically dressed actors in order to create a historical representation and animate the theme for the visitors. The difficulty of this is that the public interprets the presentation as if it were real. Instead of 'visible storage', the scientific exhibiting of as many objects as possible, we have changed over to 'historico-cultural arranging', the reconstructing of the context with all kinds of related objects. Museums often attempt to exhibit the object in such a way that its authentic meaning becomes clear. In the United States a difference is made between a period room and a period setting. The period room concerns an 'authentic' reconstruction that can also be made up of objects from various sources and even imitations. In the period setting more attention is paid to the general stylistic features, an authentic arrangement of elements and the sociological aspects of living.<sup>2</sup> Do objects actually have a fixed authentic meaning? I cannot give an unequivocal answer to this, because an object can have different authentic meanings. I would like to shed more light on one of those:

### **Conceptual authenticity**

When people speak about more authenticity they usually refer to material authenticity. The object is still 'original', nothing has been changed about it. However, objects always change; the original material can fall into decay, discolour or change. The actual identity of the object contrasts sharply with the actual identity. Is a boat of which every board replaced still the same boat? But if not a single board of that boat is replaced and every original board has rotten away, is it still the same boat? In that case, is it not just a ruin? Therefore, the materials of our relics from the past are rarely authentic. In the Drenthe Museum in Assen, an "authentic copy" of the canoe from Pesse has been constructed. This oldest boat in the world was imitated by scientists in five days' time by constructing a copy made out of a Scots pine in the 'original' way. The result was considered completely representative of the original copy, so that reliable canoeing experiments could be conducted. The idea behind this is that when the intention of the maker is clear, the technical execution can basically be carried out by other people as well. This may be a good excuse for the construction of copies. However, the technical execution often also forms part of the conceptual authenticity, since the idea of the maker was always limited by the available means.<sup>3</sup>

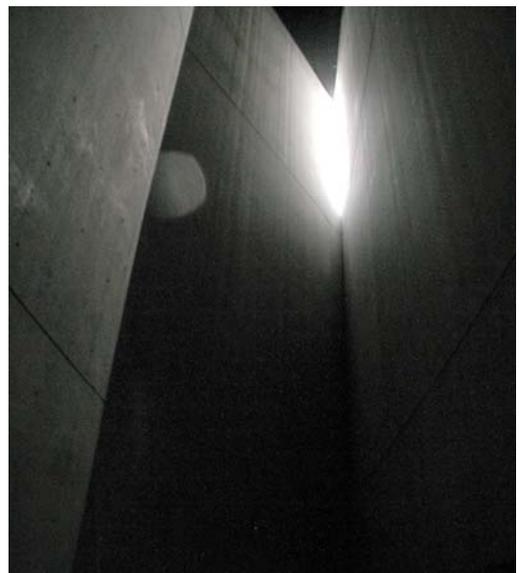


*The barrack in the National Monument Kamp Vught (concentration camp).*

### **Barrack**

An example of this is a project from our own practice: the National Monument Kamp Vught, located near the site of a former SS concentration camp. It is a site that has so much authentic power that the visitors walk through the exhibition room and crematorium respectfully and in silence. One of the barracks has been reconstructed on the site. It is entirely new and that is why some visitors have difficulties with it. However, surviving prisoners experience this barrack as exactly right: „That smell of fresh wood, yes that is exactly how it was!“

So, a newly designed room can be powerful to the extent that it needs no further contextualization. For instance, the Jewish Museum in Berlin designed by Daniel Libes-kind is very strong as a concept. When the building was completed, still without exhibitions, it was briefly opened to the public. The power of the building made a profound impression on the visitors. The experience I had when I stayed in the closed, empty, high tower with only a small crack of light at the top moved me when I came out. The later arrangement with exhibitions could not enhance the experience and even threatened to break the tension of the building.



*A room in the Jewish Museum of Berlin.*



*An application of Augmented Reality.*

### **Augmented Reality**

Therefore, the search should be geared to the preservation of the experience of authenticity of the room, so that it is not disturbed but actually enhanced. If we could make exhibitions virtual and real at the same time, just like it is done in films, it would be possible to keep the authenticity of the physical space and yet add information and images to it in a virtual way. For the multiple assignment C-Mine Experience, which concerned a mining site in Genk (Belgium) we had an underground air shaft at our disposal. During the first visit we already realized that power and tension of the authenticity would be disturbed if we would set up an exhibition in this shaft. However, the wish to get across stories and images from the past, present and future to the visitors remained. We looked for a way to add information without affecting the room, which we found in a technique that is called 'Augmented Reality', which literally means 'increased reality'. It is a way to expand the image that an observer has of his environment with additional information. With the image received from a camera, certain visual features of a room can be recognized. This way you can determine where you are in a room. By combining the images of the environment with images of parallel virtual environment, a mix of real and virtual comes into being. In the virtual layer we can subsequently add extra information to the existing reality. We can now let the visitors of the underground shaft look through the walls to the past of the mining process; they can meet historical figures and experience three-dimensional objects. These are additions with respect to content which not a single visitor will confuse with reality. Authenticity and information have been split up.

### **The manifestation of an object**

Everyone agrees about one thing: the collection is the heart of a museum. The objects are crucial. Presentation and interpretation relies increasing more on the type of media employed. An exhibition has become an environment that contains much more than just a collection of objects. All kinds of 'artificial' elements have more or less become a part of a museum experience. Anyone who tries to create a virtual museum experience on a website should not only focus on the objects, but also on the other factors of the visit to the museum.<sup>4</sup>

The authentic objects in the meantime have acquired numerous interpretations, varying educational information and contexts from various periods. Perceiving an object has become a relative rather than an absolute matter. Visual means can only tell a limited part of the story. Therefore, choices will always have to be made in presentations. The exhibition designer can show a part of the historical life of the object, but by doing so ignores other parts. Storage used to take place in the name of humanity, the nation-state or the art community, while presentation was aimed at the general public. The two museum functions that used to complement each other - preserving and showing to the public at large - can now be partially separated from one another. The objects themselves have retained their respect and are exhibited in a responsible manner. There, we can simply enjoy the beautiful images and the power of authenticity. The contexts have become autonomous and I refer to them as Avatars. These are the various manifestations of the object in its secondary virtual life. They will become increasingly numerous and will lead their own life without the physical presence of an object. The avatars become the virtual part of the museum, which is accessible from any place in the world, and which offers a platform for opinion and education. They will lead a life of their own in our collective memory, the global brain that includes all contexts originating from different times that say something about those times. Time will tell when an object needs to be present in order to create a historical sensation and a museum experience. The time machine we used to dream of will become different from what we thought and our space will become partly virtual. Time and space are no longer unequivocal.

Marcel Wouters

<sup>1</sup> From a column by Arnon Grunberg

<sup>2 3</sup> Sanne van Galen, Universiteit Utrecht: "Verhaal of voorwerp?"

<sup>4</sup> Saskia Waterman, Universiteit Utrecht: "De grenzen van het museum".