# EXHIBITION DESIGN IN THE AGE OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA

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Exhibition Design could be defined as an apparatus that organizes the perception of an object, or a series of objects (artworks, industrial products, historic artifacts, etc.) by a viewing public in a defined context. To do so, it articulates the relationships among:

— A specific space that contains the exhibit.

— A limited amount of time for its perception.

— A support system that arranges the displayed work in a certain position with respect to the public.

— The environmental conditions that allow an appropriate vision (in particular light, natural and artificial).

The manipulation of these variables does not merely respond to functional or ergonomic considerations but speaks of a cultural program and the representation it proposes. This is even more evident when the display aims at establishing a set of relations among the parts of the exhibit. In this case, the arrangement of the intervals between a piece and the other becomes not only a visual connection but a linguistic one that constructs a text offering a certain reading of the displayed work. The exhibition setting is then not only a mere backdrop but a fundamental *horizon* that dialogues with the objects in view and gives them a meaning.

The arrangement of the displayed material changes following cultural transformation. During the twentieth century, exhibition design has shifted from the creation of a totality where all the objects were co-existing on the same level (think of the Pre-Impressionist Salons or the 1920s avant-garde environments), to linear sequences with chronological or historical links (typical of positivist culture and still the prevailing display method) up to hierarchical arrangements that highlight individual works as unique pieces. All these episodes can however be synthesized by two opposite attitudes in correlating display, setting and public.

One tendency positions the displayed objects in an abstract space not related to the surrounding world where they can be experienced as "pure" form. This is the prototypical modernist "white cube," an autonomous realm preceding the works and the public, indifferent to the nature of specific displays and still constituting the canon for many galleries and museums. By neutralizing the ties between objects, space and public, this approach has had the function of supporting the perception of works of art as unbound commodities that travel through designated "temples of culture" and exist separated from the everyday public realm.

The second tendency, instead, abolishes the thresholds between objects, space and public. It is a narrative and participatory position where the nature of the display explodes to affect the whole surrounding environment and responds to the presence of the public (it ultimately leads towards performance). This celebration of the individual event is however subject to the risk of theatricality and manipulation. Everything is staged— objects, setting, people—so, where is reality if everything becomes a representation? The public, very often, cannot choose its mode of experience and is relegated to a passive role with the risk of reducing exhibition design to a commercial selling technique.

We can notice that exhibition design, pushed to these extremes, is situated in an ambiguous territory between architecture, art and communication media. It partakes some of their characteristics but rejects some other fundamental ones. With respect to architecture, exhibition design deals with issues of space and representation but is little concerned with inhabitation and permanence. It is tied to the conditions that a specific art form imposes for its perception but is not the exhibited artifact itself. It needs to recognize how communication techniques work nowadays but is not immaterial nor ubiquitous and is still tied to a specific place.

The rise of new information media poses a set of new dilemmas for space design. With reproduction techniques there is no more an "original" object but serial pieces, transportable and ubiquitous. With the development of "immaterial" representation in TV, Film and Computer there are no more physical objects but images, *ghosts.* These are scale-less, moving continuously from creation to dissolution, free from physical viewing conditions (space, light support) and indifferent to the context where they are experienced.

With respect to this rootless representation, which criteria does exhibition design have to adopt in front of these immaterial forms of communication? And when these new forms coexist with physical works? There is nowadays a large development of video art, computer art and so called "interactive" shows using electronics apparatuses. Is the arrangement of physical conditions for the reception of these works able to respond to the displacement produced by these media or is architecture receding to an opaque "hardware" that just shelters the display? A possible way to tackle the problem is to consider immaterial information media not as complete "ready made" languages that are just given to the architectural setting but to analyze their characteristics and isolate similarities with the production techniques of physical space. The ultimate goal is to formulate strategies that critically reveal the structures of information media and architecture as non-indifferent to each other. Not therefore a mutual imitation of the two fields but discovery of their precise limits and dialectical connections to create "disturbances" that unveil their underlying procedures.

The following are realms shared by architecture and

information media. Their analysis and interpretation can help to isolate points where the two fields can be critically related:

## PERCEPTION/VISION/SPACE

The new electronic media deny the Western tradition of perspectival projection. This was based on the presence of a viewer that oriented space through a frame located at an appropriate distance (the perspectival 'window') and a system of geometrical foreshortening that measured space converging to one or more vanishing points. These last could be seen as projecting on the representation plane the eye of the viewer which became simultaneously source and infinite boundary. This powerful representation system remained the canon for centuries and influenced even the new media of the earlier twentieth century: after all photography and cinema are still based on projection and the presence of the viewer either mechanically translated in the camera or frontally located during the perception of images. Electronic communication denies the gaze, human presence and physical distance as sources for the structuring of images. Gilles Deleuze, in his book "Cinema, the Time-Image," has compared the computer screen to a board where texts and clusters of information generate and dissolve from any point without the need of the human eye as a source of orientation. He has correctly denied any affiliation of this kind of imaging to that of film and video, still tied to the positioning of the camera in front of physical reality.

Many exhibition spaces still structure the display with criteria based on viewing distance (the public is always *outside* of the display and chooses its dominant position), frontal isolation of each object (the display is seen piece by piece, each one becoming a single vanishing point) and linear temporal sequences. If exhibition space wants to respond to the peculiar de-orientation of the electronic information table, it should first of all remove the public from the position of the viewer as source of imaging as it happens in the perspectival tradition. A possible way to achieve this end is to render objects and images co-present without the possibility of focusing and isolating one of them. This forced overlap recalls the montage and assemblage techniques adopted by such historic avant-garde movements as Dada and Surrealism: more than talking about the fourth dimension of time, they aimed to attack the traditional position of the spectator and projected him inside the chaos of modern information without allowing him or her to take a position of control. with this displacement, the public will be forced to deny its external control on the images. In exchange, though, it will gain the opportunity to become one of them, another piece of information that merges and intersects with the many that float in the electronic universe.

## PLACE/LOCATION

The new immaterial information can be located in any location and is able to represent many places at the same time. This dual combination of rootlessness and displaced translation dispenses with the relation of objects to specific contexts. In the field of exhibition design this aspect can be seen as an extension of the tradition of the "white cube" with the electronic space relating to the neutral environment of the modernist gallery where objects float unbound. Considering this reduction of images and displays to homeless commodities, the problem is not how to reconstruct a stable tie between place and display: this will just result in an attempt to resuscitate a traditional hierarchical relation between objects and their surroundings. The task is to take advantage of each specific opportunity to provoke a unique mutual interaction between physical displays, immaterial representation and the context where their encounter takes place. This radically empirical case-by-case approach ties the concept of place less to a stable physical location and more to temporal unique *events*. These cannot be but short lived opportunities where the usual relation of information to the public are turned upside down and, for a moment, the specific theme of the display and the audience dictate the coordinates of a sort of happening. The transitory nature of the *events* is a response to the accelerated rhythm of modern information and this introduces *Time* as an important factor in our analysis.

## TIME/EXPERIENCE

The choice of the experiential duration of traditional displays was ultimately left to the viewer; the time of electronic media is imposed on the public and is increasingly fast. *Speed* is the ultimate goal of contemporary communication and, according to Paul Virilio, information is more appreciated for its capacity of spreading and being recycled than for its content. The duration of communication is slow enough, though, to be, at a certain point, perceived by the general public and it is actually molded on the rhythm of the capitalist market. To work as such communication is divided in two phases: there is a functional phase of transferring of data, incredibly fast and unperceived. Complementary to this, there is a consumption phase, the unloading and appreciation of the data, that produces marketable images. If exhibition design wants to engage the new media in a dialectic relation and regain control over duration, it should expose the fundamental senselessness of speed and its role of hidden instrument behind the final packaged products.

Two strategies come to mind: one involves a drastic reduction of the speed of information up to an arresting stillness together with the multiplication of the same identical messages in the same location. This is what certain Minimalist and early Pop artists were able to achieve. The condition that emerges from these works and displays is a gradual blurring of differences achieved through repetition. The individual object loses its power to be consumed and becomes part of an hypnotic duration that, in its irritating lack of definition, exposes our desire for easy and replaceable messages.

A second strategy involves pushing on the forefront the functional phase behind the final information product. In the 1960s, the movies of Jean Luc Godard exposed elements of their own manufacturing, such as dissociation of sound and image as well as jump-editing to denounce the fundamental manipulation of Film. With this operation, Godard was able to focus our attention on the medium as a message instead than the final product. If an exhibition concept is able to expose speed and the processes behind the making of information, it will at least achieve a temporary control over time and will give back to the public the awareness (and therefore the choice) of perception.

## MATERIALITY/BODY

The twentieth century has been described as the era of vision, where images, divorced from bodies and matter, have

been infinitely rearranged. Procedures like montage, collage, creation of multiples and out of scale reduction or enlargement of representation speak of the fundamental antagonism of information versus the body and physicality. The computer, as mentioned above, by dispensing with traditional vision has brought the problem one step further. On the one side the total non-materiality of electronic imaging is the climax of the twentieth century autonomy of representation. On the other, the fact that computer information has acquired an almost autonomous status (remember Deleuze's information board) and does not depend on images and a viewer, opens up unpredictable consequences that can lead to the re-emergence of bodily presence.

If displays will be able to bring forward the non-visual characteristics of electronic media and tie them to forms of physical perception, such as tact, sound, sexual awareness and others, they could be able to define new communication forms. In the field of exhibitions we would be able to re-think elements such as the support of objects, the light and climate of an environment, scale and distance between public and display without the dictates of the traditional Modernist autonomy of image and form. This can happen, though, only at the expense of duration and completeness. So big is the alienation of the body in the twentieth century, that it will never regain a unity of matter, meaning and representation. The new physicality cannot be but fragmented and temporary, a fragile marriage of the primitive and the digital. More than expected, the body it is tied to the fleeting duration of the *events* described above.

## PRODUCTION/RECEPTION/PUBLIC INTERACTION

We have stressed the manipulative role of media with regard to the public and the necessity to expose their manufacturing procedures as a critical tool. This is not only a linguistic exercise but largely a political issue: in advanced capitalism the production of culture is distanced from its reception. With immaterial communication this divorce is even larger: the invasion of private space by tools such as Television, the Personal Computer and the Internet has so expanded our capacity of reaching any sort of information that we can comfortably communicate to the world from home. The messages we produce and receive are, though, filtered through the same few channels and allow us a limited interaction with other humans. Public space has retreated in a hyper-protected domestic realm and is producing a new generation of dispersed receivers.

Exhibition design should not try to compete with these home appliances and adopt them uncritically otherwise it can only become totally superfluous. Why go out to see a display if one can obtain the same information by turning on a home video? Exhibitions should be occasions for difference where the relations that communication media are imposing on us are suspended or reversed. This is why exhibitions should turn the procedures of electronic imaging against the public, this is why we need performances and *events*, this is why physicality and direct public interaction should be re-instated. Exhibition design should be the testing ground that translates into physical, public space procedures that are usually channeled in immaterial, individualistic formats. There should not be a direct dependence of exhibition design on electronic media and but a critical distance where the act of displaying becomes a reflection on culture. The power and efficiency of contemporary communication should be neither feared nor blindly imitated. Actually the resistance against media efficiency becomes nowadays more and more necessary and revealing. In this new scenario, the role of the exhibition designer should be reconsidered. In traditional displays, he or she had the privilege of defining the conditions for the perception of the exhibited work. Now that, with advanced media, the conditions are already present (and imposed on us), the designer becomes a saboteur that creates a gap between an accepted information and an unexpected public display.