

Museum of the Future

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OBJECT

Is a museum only a display of objects? It also has to curate the objects and unless the narrative of the curation is present the objects, as a collection by themselves, do not make much sense. So there are two basic questions about objects that we need to begin with: should the focus of the museum be objects as unified entities? Or should it be processes in which these objects participate, belong to or arose from?

Objects do not become objects by themselves. Every object is prepared in various ways to appear as objects. This could be by being named, for example. When an object is prepared or created, and is shown as such, then we can see the reasons why the object came into being. Objects, particularly museum objects, don't fall off trees. They are cultivated and prepared, are historical and have a biography.

Thus, a museum of the future cannot be restricted to showing just the object without exhibiting its **biography**. How is this biography of an object to be recorded and exhibited? That is the creative challenge and there are many ways to do it, including using the digital technology that is available now.

So when a person encounters an object, she will not do it as if that object is a clearly defined, unambiguous entity but will only see it as an object-in-formation, an object that can be seen to be different. Museums tend to present objects as if there was something necessary about their value and status. Exhibiting the biography of these objects will remind the viewer that these objects and values are contingent and sometimes also merely an accident.

Two simple ways of exhibiting these biographies can be as follows: one is purely visual and the object is placed within other objects which go to create the museum object. This exhibits the network through which objects of museum value are created. Once it is set up like this, very soon the other objects (which would not find their way to a museum on their own) will begin to get value. Thus, every object is presented as a **network of objects**.

Another way to exhibit the biography of objects is textual and in a museum of the future can be digital texts which can be read in conjunction with seeing the object.

Another way to exhibit the museum object is through the idea of **dissection**. In biology classes, dissection of creatures like frogs exhibited the insides of the creature. Although seen as an educational tool, dissection has various other implications and assumptions behind it. I want to use this idea of dissection to suggest that another way to engage with objects in a museum is always as dissected bodies. Dissection makes visible the insides of an object; museums very often only present the outside of the objects. How to make the inner world of objects visible in museums? Dissection is a powerful way to do this. Through this act two important things can be achieved: one to show the object not only in its external manifestation (external form, for example) but also to exhibit the insides which give any notion of solidity and function to the object. Secondly, through this act, we highlight the importance of **process**.

The distinction between process and object has had a major influence on the way we perceive the world. An object can be seen as the final product, the presentation of the end. But this end had not only a beginning but also a temporal journey before it became an end product/object. How does one exhibit process? I want to invoke dissection as a metaphoric term to also show processes and not just stable, unified objects.

Thus, **biography** and **dissection** should be the modes of presentation of any object in the museum of the future. There are different ways of realizing these modes and that will depend on the imagination of the curator and others involved in the museum.

DISPLAY/VIEWERSHIP

Museums create **value** by exhibiting an object. The object may have had some value that makes the museum acquire it but by placing it in the museum, this value either gets reinforced or even magnified. So one of the central roles of a museum is this capacity to give value to something through its presentation in the museum. But this value and the process of the creation of the value is always hidden. This is part of the politics of focussing on objects. The museum of the future should expose **its own insides** – the insides that create value for objects – as much as it displays the valued objects.

This calls for a rethink on the idea of the nature of viewing a museum. There are two parts to this rethink: one is the exhibition of the process of value creation of the object which finally

makes it to the museum to be exhibited. The other is to remove the focus from the objects in a museum and instead relook at the viewer and her **forms of viewing**.

The exhibition of the process of creating value can be done in different ways, including through the use of digital archives and so on. The main aim in doing this is for the viewer to realize why that particular object is an object in the museum.

Consider a person shopping for a thing on the streets of Delhi. This person might have some idea of the value of the thing she wants to buy and through it has the capacity to indulge in bargain or discussion on the value of the object with the seller. In museums, we realize that there is some great value attached to the objects there but do not know how to engage with that, do not know how to strike a conversation about it. We look at the object's value largely in ignorance. It doesn't make much sense to hear that a painting costs a million without knowing how to evaluate that value in our terms. So the museum of the future must find ways to exhibit the insides of the process of valuation so that a viewer really understands the meaning of the objects that she encounters in a museum.

The second point is about changing the way the viewer views the museum. Most often, displays are about displays of objects – how to light them, present them and so on. The museum of the future which I envision will have the spotlight on the viewer and her perceptual capabilities. This museum for me will do one primary task: focus on **how** we see things and not **what** we see. Museums have become about the what of seeing. We are so busily running from seeing one object to another that we don't stop and ask about the process of our seeing itself. How does the museum show me how I see and not what I see? The **act of perception** is itself the **first object** in my museum of the future. How one curates and exhibits this is a matter of detail.

PUBLIC/SPACE

Earlier museums had a very important function. They gave **access to the public** to things they wouldn't have had access to. It allowed those who could not afford to buy and see great works of art to actually see them. In science museums, it gave an opportunity to people who had no access to certain institutional spaces, including education, to actually learn about things they could not have learnt otherwise. Enormous number of interested citizens could see and learn about the space missions, for example, although they would never have been

able to enter the organizations of space in the country. Museums were always an important space for **learning**, especially for those who were denied access to this learning.

However, things have changed today. An individual can access material on the web quite easily and this has changed the nature of teaching/learning. This also affects this particular function of the museum. And so much of the artefacts of the museum are available on the web, that physical museums are slowly becoming places of 'material nostalgia'.

But there is a way out to recapture the importance of the **egalitarian possibility** in a museum, to retain the possibility of having the museum as a place where we can access things which we cannot access otherwise. Most importantly, to access things which are also not available on the web!

The museum of the future should show things which are hidden from the public in every form, whether as material objects or even as digital files. And there are enormous number of things that are hidden from the public. Ironically, in a growing digital age, there are more number of items that are hidden. **Inaccessibility** is the **value of the future** and is a value that is worthy of being placed in museums.

What is hidden and inaccessible? Secrets. Countless secrets of the government, defence, corporate sector and so on. Secrets that also have enormous power. I am reminded of the seminal work done by the artist, Trevor Paglen, who photographed spy satellites and found evidence of secret defence establishments. His work brings to the public gaze things which certain power groups wanted to hide. Politics has a lot to hide too and so does big business.

So, I think that a variation of the wikileaks model will be the model for one type of the museum of future. Such a museum will educate, will enlighten and will genuinely work towards a democratic spirit in our societies.

By doing this, the **space** of the future museum will function as a **shelter** – a shelter for the future. It will continue to remain a **protected space** for access, a space that allows the ordinary citizen to access things which she could not otherwise. Also a space for education – primarily political education because other modes of education will be subsumed by the individualized digital technologies, and through this a space that creates shared communities.