

# SCENOGRAPHY AS NEW IDEOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY CURATING

AND THE NOTION OF  
STAGING IN EXHIBITIONS

Margaret Choi Kwan Lam



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## **Foreword - by Professor Pamela Howard OBE**

### **Scenography as Museology**

The influential Czech scenographer Josef Svoboda (1920 - 2002) lit the way in using his own invented lighting, film and stage techniques, to lead a seated audience on a journey through a text, by revealing the subtle context of the drama rather than designing reproduction locations. Svoboda's background was that of an architect and engineer, and his innovative theatrical work was always interdisciplinary. Ultimately he had to create his own theatre space – the '*Laterna Magika*'<sup>1</sup> (now Nova Scena - part of the National Theatre Prague) to house his innovative equipment, and direct his productions as he pushed the boundaries of conventional stage design further and further towards a new meaning of scenography.

Audiences' expectations are continually increasing as the age of the 'blockbuster' exhibition has dawned. Exhibitions by and large are rarely simply pictures hung on walls, but are thematic and often immersive experiences demonstrating a curatorial vision, not unlike that of a theatre director. The great difference is that a theatre audience is captive sitting in paid for seats in a space they go TO, and take part in a shared experience. The creators are in control. In a museum exhibition the space is one that visitors go THROUGH at their own pace, often listening through headphones to explanation in a one to one experience. The

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<sup>1</sup> Laterna Magika, 'History of Laterna Magika', *National Theatre*, (2014), <<http://www.narodni-divadlo.cz/en/laterna-magika/history>> [accessed 09/03/14]

creators are not in control. The scenographic world created by the visual artists in both disciplines becomes the primary point of entry for the spectator/visitor, and in this way scenography and museology have become brothers and sisters in space .

Contemporary design practice aimed at telling the backstory or context, has long been used in Fine Art installations. These three dimensional interactive exhibits explore the fundamentals of artistic practice. Composition with a framework and selection of meaningful objects carefully chosen and placed as can be seen and experienced in the work of the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles. His famous installation *Red Shift 1967-84*<sup>2</sup> is a series of white walled rooms, with black floors that visitors walk through on a pre-determined path. Selected everyday objects all in carefully graded tones of Vermillion Red invite and seduce the viewer to make associations for themselves on the meaning of Red. Meireles comments: *'I always thought more about the physical and poetic elements than the political component, although I admit that there may be political readings of it.'*<sup>3</sup> The spectator is propelled through the rooms embarking on a mythical and fascinating journey that needs no audio explanation. It is received and understood visually.

The worlds of scenography and museology merged perfectly in the 2010

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<sup>2</sup> Cildo Meireles, 'Desvio para o Vermelho, 1967-84' in Guy Brett (ed.), *Cildo Meireles*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), p.122

<sup>3</sup> Cildo Meireles, 'Desvio para o Vermelho, 1967-84' in Guy Brett (ed.), *Cildo Meireles*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), p.122

exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London '*Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909 -1929*'<sup>4</sup>. The spectator's route through the installations mapped six important aspects of The Ballets Russes during these years. The curatorial text was imagined and interpreted by scenographer Tim Hatley who, rather than illustrating the sections, allowed the spectator to imagine the world in which the ballets were created, through the judicious and often surprising use of objects, light and space. It demonstrated, as in theatre, the importance of good collaboration and synchronicity of art forms. In addition to this exceptionally well attended event, Diaghilev's '*astonishing legacy of music, dance, and art*'<sup>5</sup> gave rise to a series of related events highlighting music, dance, fashion, textiles, design, scenography, art, cities of the period and an extensive programme for young people and families.

From these examples it can be seen that the inclusion of staging in exhibitions, especially when the scenographer or visual artist is the author of the event, or an equal collaborator with the curator is a democratizing development for museums and galleries. Public enthusiasm for the new 'blockbuster' exhibitions has increased beyond all imagination as the need for a timed ticket entrance system proves. Museums have become

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<sup>4</sup> Jane Pritchard (ed.), *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909 -1929*, (London: V&A Publishing, 2010)

<sup>5</sup> V&A, 'Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes', V&A, (2010), <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/d/diaghilev-and-the-ballets-russes/>> [accessed 09/03/14]

free and open family friendly spaces, where visitors can walk through at their own pace, and see as little or as much as they fancy. They receive a new form of 'theatrical' experience, which is not text based but visually based, and this has given rise to the relatively new practice of Museology. An academic interrogation and critical evaluation of this '*New Ideology*' is well timed, as practitioners start to assess the cultural impact of this relatively new form.

The strategy to use Art to understand the past better, in order to change the way we view the present is a bold step in museology, provided the scenographic conception is not drowned by an excess of verbal and audio information bombarding the visitor! As Josef Svoboda realized, materiality, objects, shapes and colours can poetically express the story behind the text. The theatre discipline where the text, libretto, or scenario are the starting point for the artist to realize the metaphoric world of the production are no different to the curatorial script. The task is then to sculpt the space to make it 'speak' to the audiences whether contracted by a ticket to sit in their seats, or at their own pace wander through a space challenging the creators to engage their interest. As in all creative work, there is no formula for success. Each project is a new creation and that is the excitement that communicates from the artist to the spectator, whatever the subject or discipline in that special and unique shared experience.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **About the Author**

Margaret Choi Kwan Lam is an art professional working in the interdisciplinary creative field, cutting through art curating, design exhibitions and branding activities. After furthering her studies in MA Curating Contemporary Design (graduating with Distinction) - Kingston University, in partnership with the Design Museum in London, Margaret has been working as an independent curator and contributing in art exhibition-making. She is particularly interested in interdisciplinary curatorial practices that involve scenography, experiential design, spatial narration and new interpretive approaches in exhibition spaces. Combining her artistic background and multi-faceted experience in creative industries, including professional work in advertising agencies and multi-media exhibition lab, she has developed overarching skills as substantial backup to pursue creative curating and exhibition-making.

Personal Website: <http://www.margaretlam.co.uk>

Linkedin: <http://uk.linkedin.com/in/margaretlamcurator>

## **Abstract**

In the frontier of the exhibition scene, a significant phenomenon is observed that a contemporary artistic staging practice, called scenography, has grown out from the theatre context and keeps expanding its influence in the exhibition context in recent time. Scenography has been acting as a transformative force to reform the traditional exhibitionary complex, and consequently, this has led to an unprecedented intersection where scenography meets contemporary curating, which further informs a radical ideological shift. This book aims to exploit a new land of discussion to look into this intersection between scenographic practice and contemporary curating, its emergence and the subsequent revolution it has caused. By seeing museums and exhibition spaces as metaphorical stages, it fundamentally reconfigures the infrastructure of curating practices, in terms of a shift in authorship, architectural embodiment of ideas, field of experience, layered narrative, dramaturgy and the hybrid expressions of new media. Three case studies will demonstrate scenography's wide-ranged capacities and various methodologies in dealing with contemporary issues. The whole discussion cuts through major discourses in the field, both responding to the increasing awareness of the notion of staging experiences in the rise of experience economy, and the expanding notion of curating, in parallel.

## Contents

	<b>Foreword - by Professor Pamela Howard OBE</b>	ii
	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	vi
	<b>About the Author</b>	vii
	<b>Abstract</b>	viii
	<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Section 1</b>	<b>Critical Analysis : The Deadlock of Conventional Exhibitionary Culture</b>	8
<b>Section 2</b>	<b>The Phenomenon of Expanding Scenography : Its Potentials to Reform Exhibition-making</b>	13
<b>Section 3</b>	<b>Scenography in Exhibition Context : The Intersection, Mergence and Reformation</b>	19
<b>Section 4</b>	<b>Scenography and Curating the Contemporary</b>	25
4.1	Scenographer as Author : Redefining Curatorial Strategies	25
4.2	Architectural Structure : Embodiment of Ideas	29
4.3	Field of Experience : Transformative Process	34
4.4	Layered Narrative : Multiple Viewpoints	39
4.5	Dramaturgy : Orchestration and Directing	44
4.6	New Media : Hybrid Expressions	49
<b>Section 5</b>	<b>Case Studies</b>	
5.1	Case Study 1 : BMW Museum (Reopened in 2008) Scenography as Brandscape	56
5.2	Case Study 2 : <i>Cultures of the World</i> (Opened in 2010) Scenography as a Site of Cultural Mediation	67
5.3	Case Study 3 : <i>Leonardo's Last Supper:</i> <i>A Vision by Peter Greenaway</i> (2008, 2010) Scenography as Interference and Discourse	79
	<b>Conclusion</b>	91
	Appendix - Image Sources	95
	Bibliography	100



## Introduction

The expanding notion of curating is under intense discussion in recent years. Not only that the field of contemporary curating has constantly reflected on the status of the exhibitionary culture, but also it has raised a critical awareness of a shift in the profession of curating itself. In 2011, a symposium entitled 'The Critical Edge of Curating'<sup>1</sup> was held in Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, highlighting the need for 'a broader theoretical and practical analysis of the field'<sup>2</sup>. One of the key pressing issues in the debate was about the 'curatorial agency in an expanded field of production'<sup>3</sup>, where the questions of authorship, capability, ideology and methodology of the contemporaneity were brought to the fore.

Such inquiries could be seen through by an inherent link between the new tendency of exhibition-making and the global transition towards the experience economy. As economists B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore asserted in *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* about the 'first principle of effective experience staging'<sup>4</sup>, they later clarified that this is 'prevalent in almost any industry [...]and]

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<sup>1</sup> Guggenheim, 'The Critical Edge of Curating', *Guggenheim*, (2011), <<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/calendar-and-events/2011/11/04/the-critical-edge-of-curating/989>> [accessed 12/08/13]

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*, (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 1999), p.27