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# Writing and the Exhibition: The Structures of Museum Revolutions

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Article abstract

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# Writing and the Exhibition : The Structures of Museum Revolutions

Serge Chaumier

Translated by Nicholas Chare

**La muséologie a connu des stades dans son développement qui correspondent à de véritables paradigmes. La muséologie participative, fort en vogue actuellement, n'est pas sans fondements, elle succède à des approches plus classiques qui ont néanmoins favorisé les conditions de son apparition. Les publics n'y ont pas les mêmes rôles et les mêmes implications. La muséologie d'objets, d'idées, de point de vue, la muséologie participative, toutes ces formes déterminent des conditions d'accès différentes. Dès lors, chaque muséologie crée des cibles de publics. Toutefois, si de nouvelles façons et de nouvelles raisons de faire des expositions apparaissent, pour autant les approches plus anciennes ne disparaissent pas. Chacune d'entre elles dessine des sensibilisations différentes, visant des publics plus ou moins élargis et permettant ou non de véritables conditions d'appropriation. Les médiations qui y sont déployées diffèrent. Nous nous intéresserons à ces stades de la muséographie et à ce qu'ils impliquent comme conséquences pour les publics.**

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## Translator's Introduction: The Paradigms in Question

Serge Chaumier is one of France's leading thinkers in the field of museum studies.[1] A former museum director, he now works as an academic teaching museology at the Université d'Artois. In his writings, he draws upon a practical knowledge of curating and museum management combined with an in-depth understanding of contemporary theories of museology and exhibition practice. In this previously unpublished essay, Chaumier traces the changing nature of exhibition practices across a variety of museum contexts (art, industry, science) in France and more broadly. He summarizes, synthesizes and builds upon French critical thinking relating to what is often termed the new museology. The essay outlines four museum paradigms centred upon objects, ideas, experiences and participation. Many of the examples used to illustrate each paradigm derive from francophone contexts. The history of museum studies in France and some of the concepts and terms that are associated with it may be less familiar to some working in an anglophone context and are therefore briefly outlined here.

The ideas explored by Chaumier regarding the social role of museums (including public participation in museum governance and exhibition policy) draw upon debates initiated by museologists such as Georges Henri Rivière, André Desvallées and Hugues de Varine. The trio are associated with conceptual innovations and revitalising practices that rethink the relationship between museums and their publics.[2] They have sought to counter the idea of the museum as a "mausoleum of culture," a place in which objects are removed from social life, reduced to what Griselda Pollock has referred to as "material husks," things deprived of their local vitality and significance.[3] Disconnected from the communities and contexts in which they were generated and understood, objects in mausoleum-like museums become touchstones of taste and learning for educated and, frequently, wealthy elites.[4] In this context, the emergence of the *ecomusée* or ecomuseum in France has been a key development.[5]

The ecomuseum, with its emphasis on community involvement, aims at a more democratic museum experience. Its advent exemplifies a broader shift in French museum culture away from what Chaumier calls the "museum of objects" and toward the "museum of ideas." Chaumier only mentions ecomuseums briefly in his essay but ongoing arguments over their form and function support his contention that several museum paradigms can co-exist

1. I am grateful to *RACAR*'s anonymous reviewer and editorial team for their helpful comments. I also want to thank Michelle Gewurtz for generously sharing her insights concerning contemporary theories and approaches to museum access.

simultaneously. Desvallées described the ecomuseum as born of a marriage of two differing museum visions, Rivière's open air museum and Varine's community museum, with an additional ecological dimension to give the idea added "spice."[6] Varine considers the ecomuseum as key to preserving a living cultural heritage through fostering the participation of local communities.[7] For Rivière, similarly, the ecomuseum aims to ensure the culture of a given community is maintained and studied, and its future deliberated.[8]

During an interview with Octave Debary, Varine identified a key difference between himself and Rivière as being that Rivière's only interest was in objects, not in people.[9] Object-centrism in museums involves privileging tangible over intangible heritage. It also entails using objects to tell stories about people to people, with the latter rendered passive consumers. Jacques Hainard (as noted by Chaumier) has played a major role in critiquing object-driven thinking.[10] Through their emphasis on community involvement, ecomuseums focus on people and not objects. For Varine, however, objects (in their obdurate materiality) remain important as they offer an antidote to the society of the spectacle, to the superficial and ephemeral as pervasive contemporary cultural experiences.[11] They also potentially retain value in storytelling but as prompts and glosses rather than endpoints, punctuating narratives rather than forming their subject. Now that ecomuseums are not usually bound and defined by the objects they hold in their collections, Desvallées sees them as flexible and continually evolutive entities that are capable of responding to and intervening in pressing social and political concerns in ways traditional museums cannot.[12] Debates about the role of objects, discourse, and participation in the ecomuseum can be seen to index broader changes (paradigm shifts) in how the museum's boundaries and procedures are understood.

If present in ecomuseums, objects serve whatever discourse a given exhibition seeks to advance and promote. The discourse governs the object rather than being governed by it. This shift in how objects are conceived and perceived accompanies increased recognition of the role of writing in museum practice. Hainard has suggested that objects should be viewed as akin to words and used to advance ideas, employed in the service of telling a particular story.[13] What Desvallées has termed expography [*expographie*], is important in this context. Expography, with its etymological link to writing or *graphos*, foregrounds how the exhibition itself communicates a message: it is more than the sum of its parts. Duncan Cameron famously explored how the curator or "exhibitor" employs objects or "real things" to convey intended messages.[14] Cameron's ideas about museum communication form a crucial part of the prehistory of expography as a named concept.[15] The use of objects as communicants, as things that impart information, forms an example of what Chaumier refers to as non-verbal, implicit discourse. The museum writer [*museographe*], the person or persons responsible for curating an exhibition, engages in actions that can be understood as akin to authorship even if they do not use words but rather objects or other media.

Chaumier understands writing [*écriture*] in a broad sense of the term and looks beyond words to kinds of communication that are implicit in exhibitions, embodied both in modes of display and their reception. Exhibitions make sense as narratives, for example, through the choice of objects that are

2. For a discussion of Rivière's connection to new museology, see Chapter 10 of Raymond de la Rocha Mille, *Museums without Walls; The Museology of Georges Henri Rivière*, PhD diss., City University, London, 2011.

3. Griselda Pollock, "Un-Framing the Modern: Critical Space/Public Possibility," in *Museums after Modernism: Strategies of Engagement*, eds. Griselda Pollock and Joyce Zemans (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 1–39; 16. For an exploration of the museum as mausoleum, see Christine Bernier, *L'art au musée: De l'œuvre à l'institution* (Paris:L'Harmattan, 2002), 30.

4. For an outline of the museum's traditional tendency to buttress the dominant social order see Didier Maleuvre's *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

5. Hugues de Varine is credited with inventing the term in 1971. See Maura Coughlin, "Representing Heritage and Loss on the Brittany Coast," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 18, no. 4 (2012): 369–384; 374.

6. André Desvallées, "Un entretien avec André Desvallées," *Publics & Musées* 17–18 (2000): 232–240; 233.

7. Serge Chaumier's "Pratiques de l'écomuseologie" provides a good sense of his own understanding of Hugues de Varine's significance and outlook. Chaumier, "Pratiques de l'écomuseologie," *La Lettre de l'OCIM* 174 (2017): 40–41.

8. See Georges Henri Rivière, "The Ecomuseum—An Evolutive Definition," *Museum International* 37, no. 4 (1985): 182–183.

9. See Hugues de Varine, "Un entretien avec Hugues de Varine," *Publics & Musées* 17–18 (2000): 203–210; 206. Raymond de la Rocha Mille has linked Rivière's attentiveness to objects and the preservation of local material cultures with his interest in ethnography. See Chapter 2 of De la Rocha Mille's *Museums without Walls*.

10. Jacques Hainard describes his views on museum objects and the kinds of questions that should be asked of them in "La musée: Cette obsession...," *Terrain* 4 (1985): 106–110.

11. Hugues de Varine, "Le musée moderne: Conditions et problèmes d'une renovation," *Museum International* 28, no. 3 (1976): 127–140; 130. Varine fails to address the risk accompanying the modicum of solace he takes in an object's material reality. He ends up denigrating quotidian experience. The very people he seeks to include

displayed, the backdrop against which they are displayed (acoustics, décor, lighting and so forth) and their ordering. There are multiple narratives in operation in any given exhibition but these coalesce into the singular narrative that is a specific visitor's reading of it. The visitor provides the ending to whatever stories the exhibition partially tells.[16] The backdrop to these stories, the mise-en-scène of the exhibition, is the concern not of the museum writer but of the scenographer. The term scenography (*la scénographie*) refers to the form an exhibition takes, to how a discourse is formulated rather than to what its content is. The museum writer and the scenographer operate in tandem in many contemporary contexts.[17] Scenography is not concerned with aesthetics but with clarity of expression. The scenographer draws on display aids (such as lighting and colour schemes) and technologies (including cases, picture rails, digital projections) to achieve this aim.[18]

Linked with writing and scenography is the idea of mediation [*médiation*].[19] A visitor's experience of an exhibition is mediated by messages about the material on display, these can take the form of technical mediation (such as audio-guides) and personal mediation (when people from a local community in a folk museum, for instance, provide an interpretation of the display). Chaumier also links mediation to the way a space is organized, to the circulation route [*parcours*] that a visitor is encouraged to follow (although they may, of course, deviate from that path wilfully or by accident). Additionally, the mode of address that is adopted towards the public (which may be, for instance, affective, didactic, kinaesthetic, sensorial or ludic) forms an important dimension of mediation.[20] The advent of new technologies is changing the nature and possibilities of cultural mediation.

For Chaumier, the success of museums today is tied to their ability to understand the public, the better to make them aware of pressing social issues and concerns.[21] The meaning of the museum derives from the significance it holds for those who visit it. Its mission is to "raise awareness, enlighten, draw attention to new ways of seeing, so that everyone may better fulfil their potential."[22] In this understanding, cultural activities intersect with civic activism. Recent noteworthy efforts by museums to raise citizen awareness have often occurred outside a European context. The reopening of Brazil's *Queermuseu* [Queer Museum] at a public park in Rio de Janeiro in 2018 after conservative groups forced its closure the previous year (when it was displayed in premises owned by the bank Santander) provides a good example. The change in location, from a private to a public exhibition space, fostered a sense of social belonging among visitors and encouraged public debate regarding the censorship of art and the societal censure of some sexualities.

Varine has openly stated that France is no longer a world leader in terms of practical museum innovations, suggesting that much important contemporary work in the field is being undertaken in South, Central and North America, in Brazil, Mexico, and the United States respectively. Chaumier also looks beyond France for noteworthy contemporary museum initiatives discussing, for example, the international phenomenon that is Museomix. Museomix forms an example of the collaborative model as an approach to museum exhibition, the latest mode of innovation linked with Chaumier's fourth paradigm, the participative museum. Chaumier's own work demonstrates that

in the museum become sidelined, their senses, ostensibly, dulled by the opiate of the spectacle. For a subtle exploration of how the drive to democratization in museums may itself inadvertently promote consumerism see Bernier, *L'art au musée*, 26. For a specific critique of ecomuseums, one which foregrounds their tendency to promote cultural and political assimilation, see Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, 110–111.

12. André Desvallées, "L'écomusée: musée degré zéro ou musée hors les murs?" *Terrain: Anthropologie et Sciences humaines* 5 (1985): 1–4; 3.

13. See Serge Chaumier, *Traité d'expologie: Les écritures de l'exposition* (Paris: La documentation française, 2012), 24.

14. Duncan F. Cameron, "A Viewpoint: The Museum as a Communications System and Implications for Museum Education," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 11, no. 1 (1968): 33–40.

15. For an examination of the influence of Cameron on expography see François Mairesse, "Un demi-siècle d'expographie," *Cultures & Musées* 16 (2010): 219-229.

16. Chaumier, *Traité d'expologie*, 104.

17. For a helpful summary of expography, museum writing and scenography as concepts, see Jean Davallon, "L'écriture de l'exposition: expographie, muséographie, scénographie," *Cultures & Musées* 16 (2010): 229–238.

18. Gob and Drouguet, *La muséologie*, 16.

19. Serge Chaumier and François Mairesse identify five kinds of mediation. See Chapter 4 of Chaumier and Mairesse, *La médiation culturelle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013; 2nd Edition, 2017).

20. Ibid., 254–256.

21. Serge Chaumier, "Preface," in André Gob and Noémie Drouguet, *La muséologie: histoire, développements, enjeux actuels* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 7–10, 10.

22. Ibid., 8. My translation.

while many exciting practice-based museum initiatives are located outside France, French museum studies is still intellectually at the forefront of efforts to think through issues such as access, inclusivity and how museums can meaningfully address urgent social and political concerns of today. ¶

Nicholas Chare

## Writing and the Exhibition: The Structures of Museum Revolutions

The discovery of new modes of writing has led to transformations in exhibition practices.[23] For a long time, the raison d'être of the museum exhibition was to display objects. Sometimes these objects were accompanied by very specific knowledge. At others, only by general observations that contextualised them. If museums employed techniques to showcase the objects or, based on some vague pedagogical need, to explain them, this was always to better enable their understanding because the object was always ultimately the endpoint. Obviously, exhibitions have changed, they have greatly increased their aims to the point of showcasing knowledge for its own sake, as happens, for example, in science museums. Elsewhere, exhibitions seek to attest to a given heritage or a history, or to assume a commemorative role. The museum exhibition's raison d'être has proliferated, each expansion spurred by the need to construct an argument that is valued in itself and which needs to be communicated to a public. By entering the realm of communications, the exhibition has signalled that what is to be said is of greater importance than what is to be seen.[24] Demonstrating is now asserted over simply showing. Even if what is to be said employs visual forms, calls upon the visually appealing, the concept or concepts that structure the exhibition are what is paramount. Any objects are just carriers. To enable this, a highly considered approach has emerged regarding the ways and means of display. Since the time of the Enlightenment, from the beginnings of the museum up to the most recent contextualizing, there has been ongoing reflection. The designer, who ensured a space that was welcoming, has been succeeded by the scenographer, who genuinely contributes a mise-en-scène to a project. This change manifests itself through the medium of the black box or the white cube which signals the desire to do away with all forms of interference or, by contrast, through efforts to control context and situation through changing forms of mise-en-scène, from the diorama to today's virtual reality re-enactments.

Nathalie Heinich borrows Thomas Kuhn's idea of the paradigm to understand shifts in the world of art and, doing likewise, we can identify four forms of exhibiting which structure different phases of the museum. Kuhn, it should be remembered, explains how Aristotelian physics, Newtonian physics and Quantum relativity mark different phases of understanding the world. Each of these paradigms function as structuring matrices for accounts of phenomena; they are phases that are not effaced but continue to operate on different levels, appearing successively without overthrowing each other.[25] In similar fashion to the three paradigm shifts, which punctuate the history of physics, Heinich believes the art world is structured around three paradigms: the classical, modern and contemporary.[26] The three are, similarly, not mutually

23. See Serge Chaumier, *Traité d'expologie: Les écritures de l'exposition* (Paris: La Documentation française, 2012).

24. Jean Davallon, *L'Exposition à l'oeuvre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999).

25. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

26. Nathalie Heinich, *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain: Structures d'une révolution artistique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2014).

exclusive but provide distinct kinds of approaches. Often misunderstandings arise because people make judgements using criteria linked to one paradigm to appraise works which answer to the rules of another. The supporters of classicism and of academic rules are offended by approaches from modern art, which are primarily centred on self-expression and the personality of the artist. In the same way, adherents of the modern have difficulty understanding the self-referential conceptual and intellectual logics of contemporary art. I mention these notable developments because I believe a comparable situation exists in museums where three paradigms are also in operation and a fourth is dawning. These are the structures of museum revolution.

In considering the origin of exhibitions, I don't want to go as far back as the display of relics, of fetishes, of the dead, even if the sacredness that attached itself to these objects, their fetishization, persists to this day. The first exhibition paradigm, the one most common in museums, is characterised by a focus on objects, on the collections that form the basis of exhibitions. This **first paradigm** is the well-known one characterised by the display of artefacts or goods and also, later, artworks, by all those things which we can call exhibits [*expôts*].[27] This paradigm is usually referred to as *the museum of objects* [*la muséologie d'objets*]. Typical of the nineteenth-century museum with its objects in series, its aim is to encourage the study and understanding of a variety of forms, which are themselves determined by a given classificatory system. It also involves showcasing human genius, praising "great men" through admiring their achievements. To begin with, this may have simply entailed displaying a series of objects with no other aim than to exhibit them. We often think of this kind of exhibition as old-fashioned and as one that no longer speaks to us and to contemporary concerns, yet this type of exhibition endures in many small provincial museums, notably in those supported by benefactors who proudly display their status by way of the number of artefacts they possess. Fetishization is never far from cases such as this. It is, however, too readily forgotten that the methods employed by many contemporary museums and art galleries are not so very different. Their power is derived from the exceptional works they possess rather than from the discourses that surround them. Despite this, it has gradually become accepted that exhibits need to be supplemented by some kind of mediating discourse [*médiation*], a complex notion that I will return to. Even if discourse seems to be absent from the museum of objects, this is often a subterfuge. In reality, there is always discourse, albeit of a kind that is sometimes unconscious, non-verbalised, unexpressed, underground, implicit… Every exhibition gives an object lesson. It carries a message, a vision and a conception of the world. Thus what we call mediation also exists in a wordless way in the arrangement of objects: ideas are expressed through the ordering which is settled upon, the organizational choices and so forth. It need not be stressed that as a means of dividing them conceptually, artworks are often classed by artist, by school, by period, by subject and/or by medium. Discourse remains subjacent, with ideas emerging through the way that the works are hung. Mediating discourse is introduced through the organization of the space, by way of the path through it.[28]

The **second paradigm** centres upon discourse, upon ideas and interpretations, and calls the first paradigm of the museum of objects into question. It

27. [Translator's note] As Chaumier explains in a note to his article "Les écritures de l'exposition," the term "expôt," which I have translated as "exhibit," is useful as it encompasses something exhibited irrespective of its form or nature. See Serge Chaumier, "Les écritures de l'exposition," *Hermès* 61, no. 3 (2011): 45n1.

28. Serge Chaumier and François Mairesse, *La Médiation culturelle*.

rose to prominence alongside the new museology, the interpretative museology that began in the 1980s. What I will call the *museum of ideas* therefore forms the second paradigm. Jean Davallon has identified it as marking a communicational turn in museums. It aims to do more than create exhibitions based on pre-established ideas, rather it strives to make these ideas explicit while the museum of objects kept them implicit. It would take too long here to adequately explore the varied ways in which the need for a museum of ideas came to assert itself but we can briefly recall some of them. Firstly, there is the critique of the museum as a dead space, a dry, cloistered sanctum opposed to living art, which was put forward by artists and theorists. Such criticisms led to a rethink by museums. Secondly, the use of space changed, with museums no longer serving as spaces for artists to learn their trade. In the twentieth century, with its artistic divisions and aesthetic revolutions, the museum came to no longer be seen as a place where a trade could be learnt. Copyists became rare in fine art museums, ethnographers in museums of ethnography, and learned apprentices uncommon in museums in general. Thirdly, after the Second World War, under the auspices of UNESCO, a change in public priorities came about with the rise in importance of public education: a trend which, as I will explain, led to increased mediation, with a need to guide those who were being addressed. Changes in classical methods of education also need to be noted. The educational system was transformed by the drive to standardization in the 1960s as well as the reforms to religious education accompanying Vatican II. Humanist and classical culture was no longer taught in the same way (including to elites) as it had been before. The museum had to collectivise classical culture, something not previously in its remit. This led to considerable confusion regarding learning [*instruction*] and teaching [*education*], which became synonymous whereas before they had been distinct and complementary. Think of André Malraux, for example, who averred that we are taught the classics at school but learn to love them through the theatre or museum… Finally, the transformation of culture which accompanied these changes should also be mentioned.[29] Intellectual culture tended to fade away and culture more broadly had to become open to cultural diversity. Since 1968, popular cultures have been recuperated and there has been an openness towards the democratization of culture, towards the right for all cultures to be treated equally, towards cultural rights… These many developments also brought the museum into question.

In the 1970s, changes occurred that originated from art. The narrative exhibition, as it might be called, emerged. Narrative exhibitions, which seek to establish an overall picture, involve a premise signed by the author, the artist curator, even though the works of other artists are displayed. This development caused exhibitions to become ends in themselves. For a long time the works had been the principal object but now a new era saw the exhibition become the objective. It was undoubtedly the famed exhibition by Harald Szeemann, When Attitudes Become Form, displayed at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, which pioneered this development.[30] This kind of exhibition is conceived less in terms of the works displayed and more in relation to the act of exhibiting. It is about displaying a collection of artworks, with the exhibition itself as the oeuvre. The exhibition becomes the key experience for the visitor

29. See Serge Chaumier, *L'Inculture pour tous : La nouvelle utopie des politiques culturelles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010).

30. Harald Szeemann, *Écrire les expositions* (Bruxelles: La Lettre volée, 1996).

rather than the contemplation of works considered in isolation and each in turn. This kind of exhibition caused unrest even among artists who would be thought of as avant-garde, such as Daniel Buren! What is most of interest in the context of paradigm shifts is this move to an explicit claiming of the exhibition by writing.

In the same period, in other kinds of museums, different trends emerged. Following on from public and community museum initiatives and from questions surrounding the intended audiences for museum activities, the public was placed at the heart of the new museum. Under the joint influence of the sociology of culture and of debates surrounding cultural activities, what became known as new museology asked a number of interrelated questions. The first of these related to the need to place the public at the centre of museum activities and to how best to achieve this. A museum's publics can best be understood through studying reception and developing forms of mediation adapted to these. The second question was linked to the need to rehabilitate holistic rather than solely intellectual understanding. It spurred sensory approaches and the importance of what we will call scenography.

Although contemporary art offered numerous examples of the curator becoming the artist who "signed" the exhibition, a sort of meta-artist who overshadowed the other exhibited artists, this scenario extended beyond the context of the art museum.[31] It occurred in all fields. Ultimately, it was the originality of the idea conceived by the designer that stood out, the distinct appearance and discourse prevailing over the artefacts or artworks being displayed. The exhibition found its true calling by affirming this independence—the exhibition for exhibition's sake—rather than whatever ends it served. The exhibition thus changed its character: it was henceforth visited for the sensations, ideas and experiences it offered more than for what it suggested by way of its assembled exhibits. These were now simply ways and means. This was as true, for example, of exhibitions at La Maison Rouge, at the Musée d'Ethnographie de Neuchâtel or of visiting the exhibition of spiders at the Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris. From that moment, the importance of what was said and of the scenography used to say it were key to the museum visitor's experience.

There were two schools of thinking at work behind the scenes here. Firstly, what might be called the old school, which thought of the exhibition primarily as operating in the service of exhibits and which minimised its autonomy. This school still characterised most curators of state museums. There was, however, another school, which believed that the exhibition is a whole that eclipses its constituent parts. In the latter, the exhibits functioned to support a meta-discourse, that of the exhibition, which had its own rules, logics and uses. What mattered was less the elements that made up the exhibition, be they works of art or other objects, than the ideas and the experiences that the exhibition gave life to. This approach gave birth to *expography* [*expographie*], namely the autonomy of the exhibition vis-à-vis its content. The exhibition, as we've already explored, became more than the sum of its parts, and it was this additional function that sparked the modern age of the exhibition. In this context, the role of the curator or museum writer [*muséographe*], became crucial because they held the status of an author, admittedly usually a collective author but an

31. See Jérôme Glicenstein, *L'art: Une histoire d'exposition* (Paris: PUF, 2009).

32. For a nuanced exploration of the forms this authorship can take, see the volume I co-edited with Isabelle Roussel-Gillet, *Pratiques de commissariat d'exposition : Récits d'expériences pour une réflexion incarnée* (Paris: Éditions Complicités, 2017).

author nevertheless.[32] This act of going beyond the elements that made up an exhibition in favour of an added dimension involving senses and experiences, involving soul, really characterised the expographic era. It is what eluded those who believed that the history of art was the only and unique credo. Thus people were needed who were not only experts in the subjects being tackled but who were also really able to think about the exhibition experience.

It was now time to develop this aspect of the museum exhibition by making it explicit, through detailing it as precisely as possible in the form of what I'll call a *museum writing project* [un *programme muséographique*] comprising a scenario for an exhibition. The job of museum writers is to produce scenarios. It should be noted in passing that what had until now been done by the same person, museum writing as inclusive of both content and the mode in which that content is presented—it remained true of the work of George Henri Rivière, for example—became characterized as two separate occupations (and, today, as many more).[33] Henceforth, the museum writer concerned themselves with content, with the project of museum writing, while the scenographer set that project to music, which is to say, in space, but also set the scene, the lighting, the materials and so on. This division is clear today to those working in most museums of science and industry but remains hazy and confused to many curators in art galleries. It's easy to understand the reason for this, namely that in the latter scenario, the message being communicated often remains relatively impoverished. As soon as the scenario goes beyond the artist's monograph or a chronological approach, as soon as there's meat on the bones, ideas and arguments being developed, the difference with traditional art historical approaches asserts itself and the complementarity of museum writing and scenography becomes more apparent. For contemporary art museums, it's a little different, because often the artist themselves has a hand in decisions about how to display the works and plays a role in the scenography. In short, the message, the argument, becomes central in this second paradigm. It involves telling a story to the visitor. The approach adopted in Québec has become emblematic of this.

Two approaches used in the 1980s became the enabling template for new forms of exhibition writing. Firstly, there was *the interpretative approach*, which originated in Québec. This approach involved embracing interpretation centres in a way that became emblematic and spread throughout the new museology. The primary aim of the interpretative approach was to be understood, to be open to audience appropriation and therefore to address everyone. To that end, methods of assessing and understanding audiences were developed. The communicative practices [*logique communicationnelle*] described by Jean Davallon express this kind of undertaking. It was an approach that diametrically reversed how the exhibition was written. If the classical vision, still predominant among curators, involved beginning from a collection in order to write the exhibition through classifying, organizing and hierarchizing it as a means to make sense of it, the new interpretative approach involved a method that was the reverse in terms of how it conceived the exhibition: the content was written beforehand and the designer then went and chose exhibits (from their collection or those of another, until eventually in extreme cases they no longer resorted to any artefacts from any collection) to support

33. [Translator's note] George Henri Rivière (1897–1985) was a French museologist. He is most renowned for his thinking regarding the "ecomuseum." For a discussion of the phenomenon, see Peter Davis, *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place*, 2nd Edition (London: Continuum, 2011); Dominique Poulot, "Identity as Self-Discovery: The Ecomuseum in France," in *Museum Cultures: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, eds. Irit Rogoff and Daniel J. Sherman (London: Routledge, 2004), 66–84.

a pre-existing discourse.[34] This was, for instance, the approach adopted by Daoulas Abbey. The abbey did not possess collections but chose a theme for an exhibition, conceived a content, and then went and asked for objects to put on display. The advantage of this approach is that the content is stronger, more composed, more explicit and therefore more coherent. This method is the one adopted, for example, by most science museums.

Secondly, there is what can best be called *the museum of rupture*, which developed at the same time but with a slightly different outlook, one less motivated by the desire to be understood by audiences and by anxieties about reception and more by a wish to make a strong statement, to express an argument. This approach was conceived, conceptualised, and developed by Jacques Hainard, Roland Khaer and Mark Olivier Gonseth at the Musée d'Ethnographie de Neuchâtel (MEN).[35] Instead of taking the object or the visitor as a point of departure, the starting point was the argument that was to be made. Beginning with the object had always led to projects that were ultimately, to a greater or lesser extent, unsound because collections always have their gaps and the meaning that is given to the object is open to debate. Things became even more problematic if the curator was caught in a positivist notion of the objectivity of the object and the truth of an intrinsic message and therefore by concerns about instrumentalizing the object. On the contrary, as Jacques Hainard stated: "The object is the truth of nothing." This outlook involved a total break with the ideas of George Henri Rivière and also with the fetishism of many curators. By affirming the pre-eminence of discourse, museums became liberated from fetishisms and restraints, and museology entered fully into the age of discursive creations. This way of thinking asserted that objects were, first and foremost, words and that these words were used to make sentences, ultimately the exhibition served to sustain a thinking that unfolded in space. The visitor understood the importance of the concept which structured both the museum writing's agenda and the idea behind the scenography (when talent was present on both sides!). What was offered to the visitor was a mille-feuille exhibition [*exposition millefeuilles*] composed of multiple layers of sense for them to explore. This vision was certainly more elitist, the visitor was not spoon-fed (as could be said to happen in Québec museums), but was invited to develop their critical faculties and to decipher the exhibition as a brainteaser, to look upon it as if it was a philosophical essay. These were the first exhibitions that we say were authored, signed, thesis-like, by those working at MEN but also in very different styles by Jean Clair, Jean-Hubert Martin and Régis Michel among others.

This *museum writing* has led to the emergence of new roles involving strong communication skills geared towards writing as mediation. Guided by the theme, museum writing selects and then hierarchizes information, composes a manifesto, and starting from the content, sets to work using exhibits in the expanded sense of the term including artworks or objects, models, artefacts, multimedia, audiovisuals, sounds, colours, smells and so forth. This approach is currently quite widespread even if the variety of museums employing it means that it sometimes remains vague. An in-between [*entre-deux*], between the fetishization of collections, the exhibition of the object for

34. On this subject, see Serge Chaumier and Daniel Jacoby, eds., *Exposer des idées : Du musée au centre d'interprétation* (Paris: Éditions Complicités, 2009).

35. Jacques Hainard, Roland Kaehr and Marc-Olivier Gonseth, *Cent ans d'ethnographie sur la colline de Saint-Nicolas*, 1904–2004 (Neuchâtel: MEN, 2005).

itself, and the willingness to believe in a pre-existing content, still underpins much institutional thinking.

Remember that the museum of ideas became accepted by placing the audience front and centre. This was achieved by listening to them, by studying an exhibition's reception and eliciting feedback as a means to better effect communication: *it's often said that what's important is not what you want to say through an exhibition but what the visitor is willing to hear and understand*. In short, the exhibition passed from a rationale conceived by specialists with specialists in mind, to one that was produced by mediating communicators who privileged accessibility in order to speak to Jane and Joe Public. If the exhibition uses a specialist discourse, who is it ultimately speaking to? Is it therefore the best medium to employ? Aren't publications like exhibition catalogues more suited to the role of addressing the public? The question of "who is speaking?" remains in ideas-driven museology. Must communication always be that of the specialist, the professional, the museum writer who is an expert in communication strategies?

The **third paradigm**, which has been the prevailing paradigm since the 1990s, is less concerned with objects or discourses, the ideas to be communicated, and more focused on the visitors and their experiences. There has been a move from the second communicational paradigm to the *experiential* paradigm. If Jeremy Rifkin is to be believed, experience has become the buzzword for a new manifestation of capitalism; so much so that this fourth sector takes precedence over the economy.[36] Everything is geared to experience and it is less the service that matters than the singular experience we have of it. Culture, as Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre have also shown, is the spearhead of an enrichment which arrives by way of the symbolic value accorded to the experience a person has of heritage of some kind.[37] We can therefore understand how culture and, more specifically, exhibitions play a central role in this. The brains behind a given exhibition propose expressive frameworks, which are invested in and realized by visitors or, alternatively, refused by them. The commonplace notion that no visitors means no exhibition assumes its full weight here. If visitors do not perform their assigned role, which is that of playing the game of investing and experiencing, the exhibition has no sense and does not come alive.

As such, a number of arguments relating to contemporary art have foregrounded a relational experience, an experimental art where the artist expects the addressee to act and react.[38] In science exhibitions this is quasi-systematic as interactivity and calls to action are, in a sense, the watchword. Other exhibitions invite artists to propose a setting in which visitors can express their creativity. This was the case with Michel Gondry's exhibition *L'Usine des films amateurs*, which was, above all, a stage set, a movie set, but also a set of procedures ensuring that the visitor directed their own experiments by way of their experience of producing the exhibition. In this example, every visitor, every group of visitors, lived a singular experience, all the more so as the exhibition was not the finished article but intentionally incomplete, a matrix for generating experiences, serving as a framework for everyone's self-realisation. The exhibition was virtual, it was materially realized only to the extent that a visitor invested in it.

36. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000). [Translator's note] Rifkin describes a fourth sector of the economy which he terms the "informal economy." The first sector of the economy relates to raw materials, the second to manufacturing, and the third, which Rifkin links with culture, to intangible goods and services.

37. Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement: Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

38. See, for example, the conceptualisation of art proposed by Nicolas Bourriard in *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2001), 10. See also Paul Ardenne, *Un art contextuel: création artistique en milieu urbain, en situation, d'intervention, de participation* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009).

The **fourth paradigm**, which is emerging before our eyes, accompanies the expansion of Web 2.0 and extends the paradigm discussed above. It derives from the desire to highlight investment in collaborative, participatory enterprises of co-construction with audiences who are transformed into partners—users. One paradigm, however, does not chase away another and all of them continue to operate in parallel, their emphasis based on circumstances and the needs and preferences of those who undertake the production of exhibitions. This fourth paradigm, the *participative museum* or what others call the *museum of actions* [*muséologie de l'acte*], has emerged for a variety of reasons.[39] It needs to be understood that it is not a passing fad but is a response to deep, underlying occurrences and is led by them. It is, in part, a response to the rediscovery of what preceded the new museology and had informed community-based museums. This was the method adopted by ecomuseums at their inception: encouraging representatives of the local population to participate in exhibitions, including at the level of their conception. This approach was founded on a wish for the democratization of culture, a desire for culture to be the culture of those from the region concerned. If that was the case then the people could be made agents in the process of cultural production and therefore more aware of what was at stake (enabling them to escape their alienation). This trend therefore forms part of the lineage of popular education and cultural policies of the 1970s before they were co-opted by consumer culture in the turn to marketing of the 1990s–2000s and became produced by professionals and intended for clients. The professionalization of the cultural sector during the 1980s and 1990s caused the gulf between the population and the museum to widen to the extent that a cultural crisis, repeatedly announced and denounced, has gestated for thirty years. Need the cultural inequities and the striking social and economic disparities in these institutions be noted? We do not have to remind ourselves that the public are supposed to have a stake in these institutions, including those from humble backgrounds, the labourers and the clerks. A contradiction exists which has become unsustainable.

The issue of participation is therefore not a fashion driven by the Web 2.0 template. On the contrary, the internet assumes the role of a matrix of regeneration for culture as a whole. In the same way as Jeremy Rifkin has spoken of a Communications Internet, an Energy Internet and a Logistics Internet collectively as an Internet of Things, we can think of an Intellectual Internet.[40] It has profoundly transformed our ways of thinking, our understandings of the world, our way of perceiving organisational hierarchies, and, above all these, our conception of science and of its production and dissemination. In short, an epistemological revolution has been initiated. This cannot but have an impact on exhibition writing because it is no longer a case of writing for the people but with the people. Some powerful, caustic words of Nelson Mandela are apposite in this context: "What is made for us without us is against us."[41] Shouldn't this phrase be inscribed on the façade of cultural institutions?

Rooted in this dilemma is the difficult question: "How do you write with people?" The issue can be grasped by way of three models: the contributive, the participative and the collaborative. These models refer to more or less involved forms of association.

39. [Translator's note] For an early exploration of this idea, see Emmanuelle Lambert, "Musées, multi médias et dispositifs d'interaction à l'œuvre: La médiation en actes," PhD diss., Université Toulouse-Le-Mirail, 2006.

40. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons and the Eclipse of Capitalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014). [Translator's note] See Chapter 1 for an outline of the three Interlocking Internets that make up the Internet of Things.

41. [Translator's note] The dictum is sometimes also rendered in English as, "Anything for us, without us, is against us."

The *contributive model*, which involves compiling contributions, is the standard form and has been practiced for a longer time than the others. For example, in the exhibition *J'aimerais tant voir Syracuse* [I would so like to see Syracuse], which was held at the Musée départemental de l'Arles antique, the curator made an appeal to the local population for family photographs. This approach, which echoed that of participatory science, of citizen science, was initiated in advance of the exhibition and influenced its conception and the knowledge that was produced by it. From an epistemological perspective, it's a radical approach because it calls into question the curator's relation to the scholarly rigour of the output [*la production scientifique*], to the legitimacy of the message, and so on. It's also a means of revolutionizing mediation because it nurtures intellectual analysis. Think, for instance, of the pioneering example of the Monarch butterfly initiative at the Montreal Insectarium.[42] Contributions intended to support the exhibition once it is in place are rarer but are now seeing the light of day, most notably in the new Learning Centre of the Halles aux sucres in Dunkirk where an exhibition on the town and its sustainable development includes contributions from visitors who are also residents.

The *participative model* aims for even greater integration. It involves working with people, becoming members of a partnership or similar. In this context, participatory stocktaking can be mentioned: the Muséum de Toulouse inventoried its collection in this way; other examples include photographs relating to World War II. For the planning of exhibitions, organisers can be involved at different levels.[43] This way of proceeding was adopted by Jean-Claude Duclos at the Musée dauphinois and is currently employed by Olivier Cogne.[44] One of the most recent examples is the exhibition *Tziganes* [Roma and Sinti]. Nonetheless, the final say on an exhibition is still left with the leader of the project. Think also of practices employed by the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington in order to try to be more inclusive.

The *collaborative model*, which involves museums working with external groups and institutions, is the most uncommon and the most challenging model. It is more risky to put into practice as it involves deciding everything together, from formulating an idea to its practical and technical realization. This ideal, one that ecomuseums aspire to, is rarely achieved in practice. Some efforts come close, such as the Musées d'Art et d'Histoire de La Rochelle, where the curator Annick Notter invites organisations to select works and to put on exhibitions. More modest cultural initiatives occur with greater frequency, like that at La Grande Borne in Grigny where the organisation has invited Parisian institutions to execute a fresco about time and so on. Recently, the National Museum, Warsaw, publicized an exhibition organized by children.

Without going into too much detail about these exhibition practices, practices I've already examined in depth in earlier work, the contemporary context in which these models are often used in a confused way, in combination, needs mentioning. The fourth paradigm is still provisional but there are many indications that there is a desire to see it develop in the future. It is not insignificant that the report headed by Jacqueline Eidelman on museums in the twenty-first century lauds participatory initiatives, sometimes to the detriment of other ideas which were supposed to have been discussed in the workshops that were held.[45] There is a significant desire for participatory projects

42. Johanne Landry, "À la recherche du développement durable à l'Insectarium de Montréal," *La lettre de l'OCIM* 80 (2002): 14–22. [Translator's note] This ongoing initiative, a butterfly breeding program named Monarque sans frontière [Monarch without borders] and a research project called Mission monarque [Mission Monarch] which records population locations and densities of the endangered Monarch butterfly (Danaus plexippus), has a strong public education component.

43. Serge Chaumier and Aude Porcedda (eds.), *Musées et développement durable* (Paris: La Documentation française, 2011).

44. Jean-Claude Duclos, "La Co-écriture au musée," in *La fabrique du musée de sciences et sociétés*, ed. Michel Côté (Paris: La Documentation française, 2011), 111–118.

45. Jacqueline Eidelman, ed., *Inventer des musées pour demain : Rapport de la mission musées du XXIe siècle* (Paris: La Documentation française, 2017). The report includes input from Claire Barbillon, François Mairesse, Sylvie Pflieger and Serge Chaumier. It can be downloaded from https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/174000177.pdf

because they are not simply a fad but the result of a sea change. The four exhibition paradigms coexist. Galleries such as the Grand Palais, for instance, still mount more traditional exhibitions, retrospectives of such and such an artist in which the artworks are fetishized to the highest possible degree, yet they are now also capable of staging exhibitions authored by Jean Clair or Jean-Hubert Martin which embody real disquisitions and in which the works form interpretative elements. There are also many exhibitions of contemporary art, for instance, which encourage an immersive experience and engagement with the arguments that are being advanced. For example, the exhibition by Yoko Ono, *Dream Come True*, invites the visitor to be active, even to produce the objects, to become a painter. Other exhibitions in the domains of science or industry invite volunteers to collaborate on the locale and to continue enriching it during the exhibition. We are therefore in a new paradigm, one which is still hesitant but which will continue to develop into the future. In order to appreciate its causes and to grasp its heuristic value, it is necessary to study its origins and practice and to analyze the reasons that have made it inevitable.

For the last twenty-odd years, new forms of exhibition, which can be called modes of meta-exhibition, have been establishing themselves. They are markedly different from anything that came before. The exhibition in its new incarnation is a recent invention. It has emerged to address a specific vision, one that looks beyond artworks and the knowledge they seem to hold. We can speculate about the changes that are occurring and which are still to come. What will the exhibitions of tomorrow be like?

Exhibitions are never divorced from their historical moment and we can even understand them as reflecting the world of which they are a part. The taxonomic exhibitions of the nineteenth century belonged to the science of classification; in the mid-twentieth century, the object-lessons of the highly pedagogically-oriented exhibitions belonged to exploratory science; at the beginning of the twenty-first century, doubts about the ethics and display of positivism and of scientific achievements led to the humanities and their interpretative frameworks being called upon.[46] The revamped Museon Arlaten [an ethnographic museum] has sought to describe ethnography's past, bearing witness to the histories of ethnographic museums. More than the subjects that are tackled, it is the means by which they are tackled which has evolved while the impact of new technologies also makes itself felt more and more in our everyday lives. New technologies and virtual exhibitions sow the seeds for new possibilities and often turn the museum into a space of innovation and of initiation into new technologies. They make the image offered by Épinal of the dusty museum the stuff of caricature. The space of the museum is increasingly polymorphous, expressing multiple tendencies, from the more restrained to the most astonishing. It is, by turns, the space of cold academic displays and of subtle, incredibly moving commemorative exhibitions. The exhibition as a spectacle invites the visitor to immerse themselves or transforms the visitor into a compulsive gambler. In a world in transformation, how does the exhibition attest to these ongoing changes?

What's interesting about these forms is that they provide a way of rethinking not just the way that an exhibition can be staged but also the meanings

46. Michel Côté, ed., *La fabrique du musée de sciences et sociétés* (Paris: La Documentation française, 2011).

47. [Translator's note] Agenda 21 is an action plan related to sustainable development which was agreed by the United Nations in 1992.

48. See Serge Chaumier's interview with Fernand Colin, "De la pédagogie du geste et de la pop-archaéologie," *La Lettre de l'OCIM* 170 (2017): 32–34. The full inter-

that we give to our cultural institutions. It is possible to reflect on what their place is, on the nature of cultural services, and to propose a new face for culture (in a way, a return to community education…). Clearly this means going beyond traditional forms of mediation and, perhaps, even abandoning the term mediator and replacing it with activator or developer or incubator? These approaches are in synch with the steps advocated by Agenda 21 and with new forms of governance.[47] Some museums implement them totally and thereby change their management structure. If museum cooperatives, forms of holacracy, for instance, are still relatively rare, some people are starting to examine them and experiment with them.[48] New forms of cultural production and, more broadly, of social transformation, have emerged. They seem all the more necessary at a time when the future appears bleak on so many levels: environmental, economic, social, political… Fresh models need to be introduced and new experiments need to be tried. Approaches like co-working and the Living-Lab and events such as Museomix attest to this need for change, which is manifesting itself in society but still too rarely in the domain of culture.[49] Museums need to reflect on what matters they should address and what political choices need to be made. What new significance should be accorded to cultural institutions? The method used to write exhibitions [*pour écrire les expositions*] impacts how we, in the museum, conceive and construct society and, by extension, how we represent it to our publics. ¶

view can be accessed at: http://doc.ocim.fr/opac_css/doc_num.php?explnum_id=1244 [Translator's note] A holacracy is an organizational form in which decision making is distributed through self-organizing groups rather than entrusted to a management hierarchy. It derives from theories of self-management. See Brian J. Roberston, *Holacracy: The Revolutionary Management System that Abolishes Hierarchy* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2015).

49. [Translator's note] A living lab invites community participation in research processes and fosters co-creation. For a nuanced exploration of the phenomenon, see Claudio Dell'Era and Paolo Landoni, "Living Lab: A Methodology between User-Centred Design and Participatory Design," *Creativity and Innovation Management* 23, no. 2 (2014): 137–154. Museomix is an annual event that brings museums and companies and people from different communities together to innovate in relation to museums. See https://www.museomix.org/en/