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Theatre of the World: The Docile Museum versus the Museum of Enchantments

Today the extent of human knowledge is such that nobody can master it; the notion of the “Renaissance man” is obsolete. The sciences have become so complex that no one can encompass even a single one. We are reduced to grasping at scraps of knowledge or trusting to the specialists. This resignation of individual judgement and free will to the “men in white coats” is one of the great dangers of our time. A proportion of the population has abdicated the use of reason and judgement in relation to a wide variety of problems and can make only magical connections between various disciplines of thought. Though no one can take in the full extent of knowledge, the internet has modified our habits by giving us instant access to this knowledge. One might hope that, freed of the burden of memorisation, the mind could concentrate on reflection. This would be one way of restoring our ability to elaborate a synthetic overview of human knowledge.

When questions concerning the possibility of universal knowledge were raised during the Renaissance, the renowned intellectual Giulio Camillo (1480–1544) believed that he had found a solution. During the 1530s, he began to construct for the French king François I a “theatre of memory”, now known to us only through a text that he is said to have dictated towards the end of his life. His method was based on the technique widely practised by Roman orators and lawyers—“the art of memory”—which consisted in allocating an image to each of the different elements of a speech and distributing these among the rooms of a house. The orator could then move through the house in his imagination, recovering the images and putting each component into its place in the speech represented. The theatre of memory was much more complex and was kept secret because, in the eyes of the king, it constituted an instrument of power. In similar fashion, the invention of writing was confined to a dominant class intent on communicating without being understood by the rest of the population. The theatre took the form of an amphitheatre opposite which stood the throne of the king, who was thus able to scan the entire device. Camillo gave the title “Idea” to the text in which he describes “a model of his machine”. Thought and knowledge are represented in it by words or images. He aspired to “assemble every human concept

and every thing that exists in the entire world”. Concepts—images of ideas—were classified and placed in a hierarchy of columns and floors according to a network of metaphors borrowed from classical mythology. Camillo’s system was fundamentally analogical and was intended to use associations to make it possible to memorise an analytic vision of human activity and the surrounding world. No doubt the failure of Camillo’s enterprise can be explained by the difficulty of creating such a system of relations.

The term “theatre of the world” was also used of the “cabinets of wonders” in which scholars brought together books and objects exhibited as evidence for their interpretations and theories. The present exhibition attempts to revive this pragmatic form of thinking—a practical philosophy taking material form in objects. As a counterpoint to the abstraction of language, we are attempting an interpretation of the world as an experiential whole founded on sensorial perception. We are offering a voyage of initiation that moves from the symbolic to the rational and from the factual to the poetic. It leads us through the labyrinthine fears and sufferings of humanity and examines its pleasures too—the pleasures of beauty—but is not confined to the artistic since art does not offer an exhaustive account of our sensations.

Over the last century, art history has sought to classify artworks and has therefore striven to create categories. This positivist taxonomy has produced historical and geographical categories to which are added technique, authorship and function. Most museums have adopted this approach to give a scientific underpinning to their activities and thus escape the fluctuating tastes of collectors and their “subjectivity”. These are the docile museums. They place their work on a “scientific” pedestal—note that this use of the word “scientific” is most unusual in the Anglo-Saxon world. “Science” here refers exclusively to the material characteristics of the works in the museum’s keeping and the historical and geographical data relating to those works. Anything beyond that is a matter of judgement and interpretation and thus congruent with the “soft” human sciences in being much less exact than the “hard” sciences. Additional classifications have been introduced; they derive from specialities such as archaeology, anthropology, iconography and aesthetics, with particular reference to quality of execution. But though there are many museums of instruments and accessories such as shoes, knives and hats, and numerous single-artist museums, there

are no museum categories dictated by iconography: no museums devoted just to landscape painting or still life. This would tend to suggest that institutions specialising in Western art have prioritised artists over the subjects represented.

Museums born of the philosophy of the Enlightenment have extracted works from their original context (that of churches, castles and so on) and made them into objects of study or aesthetic pleasure accessible to everyone. In this way many princely collections were dismantled. Plants, animals and minerals endowed with important magical or symbolic functions were allocated to museums of natural history, paintings and sculptures to museums of fine arts, armour and armament to military museums and textiles and crockery to museums of decorative arts. In Copenhagen, on the basis of seventeenth-century inventories, an attempt has been made to reconstitute in print the entire contents of the royal “chamber of wonders”, which might reasonably aspire to the title of “theatre of the world”.

The hierarchal order thus imposed on museums and academic institutions has not gone unquestioned. Aby Warburg and Ernst Gombrich focused on images and signs as a language transcending spatio-temporal differences; today there is growing interest in their approach with new and stimulating interpretations emerging. They sought evidence for this semiological language both in Western art and outside it. Warburg visited the Hopis in Arizona and compared their snake ritual with similar representations dating from the Renaissance. For the purposes of his research, he created panels with many images deriving from different contexts pinned up where he could survey and compare them. The full import of these tableaux (which he took care to photograph) can now be understood; the visual process from which they derive is shared by many artists and entirely alien to the descriptive and discursive conception of art history. André Malraux’s “imaginary museum” was another attempt to make inter-cultural comparisons independent of any established contacts between the cultures. He was criticised for the “poetic” component in these comparisons and for evincing the “subjectivity” that many art historians seek to eliminate in their effort to create timeless descriptions and evaluations.

There are undoubtedly many other examples in the literature but it seems more important to seek out this vein in exhibitions. Art history tends to confine itself to

textual reference whereas many significant curators and exhibition organisers prefer to trust their visual instincts. Their memories are marked by exhibitions that they have seen, works that have strongly impressed them (“in the flesh” rather than in reproduction) and juxtapositions that transformed their perspectives. This form of transmission is difficult to talk about because it works in different ways from one generation to the next. It has been little studied or catalogued. It rests on oral testimony and photographs of the ways in which an exhibition was hung—such photographs are beginning to be studied in their own right. This is a domain akin to the history of performance in the theatre; it concerns the way in which works are interpreted and its dynamic is therefore one of constant renewal.

Exhibitions and the “hang” of a museum are ephemeral and leave little trace. Though art history has sometimes focused on the impact of exhibitions on particular artists, such research has, for the most part, drawn on a simplistic and mechanical model of influence. A curator expresses her interpretation of art in the way in which the collection of her museum is hung. Comparisons and juxtapositions can be revelatory and the prevailing chronological structure can never be rigorously followed. A great deal has been written about Alfred H. Barr Jr’s original conception of the New York Museum of Modern Art. Such analysis has been facilitated by the design that he left and is justified by the prescriptive role played by MoMA. But many other museums visited by professionals and artists have played an important part in elaborating our conception of art. It is of course all too easy to defer to surviving texts in the areas where they are available rather than attempting to understand how visual thought is developed and transmitted. Compilations of critical opinions about a given work have tended to replace observation to such an extent that the “critical fortunes” of a work have become a scholarly genre. Philology replaces visual attention.

True, an old text can sometimes illuminate the meaning of a subject that we find obscure by restoring its contextual sense. But subjecting insipid and endlessly repeated critical observations to further exegesis is a way of avoiding thinking about or researching works of art. If we put aside contextual interpretation, which has no monopoly, contemporary interpretation—which too often relies on the unsaid—is primarily concerned with communicating the work of art to a largely non-specialist public. In their effort to avoid the kind of delirious exaggeration that tells us more

about the author than the work, many art historians confine themselves to a very bookish approach; they sometimes refuse to acknowledge the most evident signs where these do not match the norms and paradigms of the profession. The kind of double image of which Dalí is the most virtuosic exponent has always existed but its ambiguous character has been an obstacle to scholars, who were deterred by the requirement to offer a single clear explanation.

Alongside the orderly world of the museums is the disorderly world of collectors. Though disconcerting and uncomfortable for the dogmatic art historian, it often generates revelatory connections. One famous example is the studio of André Breton. The objects it contained were heterogeneous, not to say completely disparate: ancient and modern works and outsider and popular art hung alongside quotidian objects, stuffed animals and so on. The wall of his studio reconstituted at the Pompidou Centre in Paris gives only a feeble notion of the two rooms of his apartment, whose walls were similarly covered from floor to ceiling. Breton's talent was undeniable and his installation famous in his own day but it is not exceptional. Its fame owes a great deal to Breton's own notoriety as the ringmaster of Surrealism and as a collector but many other collectors little known to the public have or have had in their homes this sort of organised chaos, which sometimes encompasses a multitude of categories. This was amply demonstrated in the inaugural exhibition showcasing private collections at the Maison Rouge in Paris, *L'Intime* (2004). Daniel Cordier, gallery-owner and dealer to Dubuffet, continued to collect contemporary art with notable liberty: outsider art, "primitive" art but also found objects such as pieces of wood of extraordinary and evocative shapes. A part of his collection is shown at the Musée des Abattoirs in Toulouse and was exhibited at the Pompidou Centre in 2008–9.

It is striking that among the categories most frequently juxtaposed are modern and "primitive" arts. No doubt the magical or sacred burden of the latter is expected to infect and impregnate the former. African fetish objects were invariably found alongside avant-garde works in the homes of the collectors of the first half of the twentieth century. From Albert Barnes to Walter Arensberg and from André Lefèvre to Jacques Doucet, almost all the collectors who set out to support modern art put primitive objects alongside avant-garde paintings and sculptures. The phenomenon was so widespread that it would be more interesting to list the exceptions. That both

categories were uncompromisingly anti-mimetic is something of a commonplace. But the combination was also intended to valorise the avant-garde works. The financial value of the modern works was then notably inferior to their current worth but was even then far from negligible. The African masks and fetishes had, by contrast, been bought at flea markets for minimal sums. Yet these ritual objects were invested with considerable magical prestige; they were power objects charged with the energy of the beliefs they represented and in this contrasted with the modern works which were attempting to assert a new language in the teeth of tradition at a time when this new language was understood by only a small group of art lovers. Belief in the transcendence of small artistic movements was thus placed alongside objects expressing the traditional faith of entire communities. The formal resemblances were supposed to enhance the spiritual prestige of modern works that were stumblingly reciting their new artistic alphabet. The so-called primitive art thus acted as both foil and spiritual tutor to modern art. The generally agnostic intellectuals who collected them found in their primitive works the “naive faith” that Gauguin sought in Brittany and Tahiti.

Artists, like collectors, admit no constraints in the connections that they make with the past. One of the most beautiful collections ever made, both for the variety of domains that it covers and the quality of individual works, is that of Antoni Tapiès. It is arranged over the several stories of his house and quickly works its magic on the visitor as the very diverse works converse among themselves in a register of eloquence and discreet concision of form.

When artists cannot collect, they content themselves with displaying in their studios reproductions of pieces that have a referential value in their eyes. These works act as a kind of a reminder and often have no formal relation with the artist's oeuvre but offer solutions to certain questions exercising the artist and her contemporaries. They often belong to unexpected registers. They are not generally the kind of masterpiece evacuated by its own diffusion. Bertrand Lavier calls them “short circuits” on account of their paradoxical semantic concentration and synthetic value. The shortcut produces the spark. This is specific to the eye: a single glance can be enough to store up a multiplicity of complex and sometimes contradictory data. In many artists' collections, the notion of authenticity is notable by its absence; what counts is the

formal solution contributed by an idea or the powerful symbolism revealed by the work in relation to the issues of the moment.

The cult of the original signed work has corrupted our vision of art. The museums of plaster casts that once existed throughout Europe supplied a repertory of models affording formal solutions to questions raised by the times. The studio of a famous artist would often supply several versions of a single work according to demand. The obsessive quest for the hand of the master in earlier European painting has reached absurd extremes; today works such as photos, videos and installations are easily duplicated and no longer imply a unique original, so there is some hope that this trend will be reversed.

At a time when mechanical reproduction was still rudimentary, painted copies were frequently found in artists' collections. This was notably true of Ingres; Gustave Moreau instead collected engravings and his imaginary museum was therefore in black and white. It is more surprising to find in the collections of living artists African sculptures that they know were produced for sale to Europeans but whose revelatory formal qualities they nevertheless admire. Not enough has been made of this kind of visual thinking, which has been the preserve of artists and a few curators by whom it is transmitted. Such transmission can be highly efficient since it does not require long pages of discourse. It has long been affirmed that in order to identify a form one must be able to name it but this is not true. Signs can be anonymously transmitted from one artist to another and one culture to another. Indeed they sometimes acquire a new meaning in this process. In Papua New Guinea, when an artist is carving a legendary story in wood in the middle of a village, it sometimes happens that the villagers comment on the work in progress by naming a particular character or divinity and in this way influence the meaning that the work acquires. In the same way, representation in archaic societies is not dictated by retinal mimesis. The human body is often represented in geometrical form, for example, by a few sticks for the torso and limbs or by two triangles meeting at their points. Thus there exists a form of representation based on signs shared within a particular culture that can enable communication by image. These semiotic vocabularies are not universal but, unlike languages lacking our Latin roots, are often easy to decrypt. Repertoires of forms and

images retained in the memory serve all kinds of comparisons that transcend the categories of art history and deserve greater attention and consideration.

A standard historical reference for the combination of heterogeneous works is the “cabinet of curiosities”. The *Wunderkammer* left a double legacy: museums and private collections. Its spirit survived principally in the latter since such cabinets were created in relatively small spaces and under no other constraint than the imagination of their authors. By contrast, museums have expanded the quantity of their samples of material culture and have therefore grown in size, organising themselves in accordance with the categories cited above. Some, faithful to their calling as thesauri of all knowledge, still exhibit the Renaissance categories of *naturalia* and *artificialia* (natural history and art), though in separate spaces—to the joy of artists asked to intervene in museums of this kind and create admixtures of the two genres. Annette Messager was the only artist to take part in the exhibition “Ils collectionnent (They Collect)” at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1974 but artists’ collections have subsequently featured in a number of exhibitions and studies, for example that of the Lambert collection at Avignon in 2001.

No less interesting is the way in which artists have intervened in museums, either by reorganising the collections—as Andy Warhol did at Rice University Museum Houston in 1969 and Peter Greenaway in his “100 Objects to Represent the World” in Vienna in 1992—or by designing temporary exhibitions as Daniel Spoerri has done and more recently Jean-Jacques Lebel with the exhibition “Soulèvements (Uprisings)” at the Maison Rouge.

Daniel Spoerri organised a series of exhibitions entitled “Musées sentimentaux (Sentimental Museums)”, the first at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1977 and subsequently at Cologne, Berlin and Basel. The principal criterion of selection was sentimental value: the objects all evoked resonant historical moments. Feeling thus took priority over aesthetics. The exhibits were not formally outstanding but played on memories still vibrating in the collective imagination.

Contextualisation long remained the untouchable paradigm of museum organisation: all works in a museum “should” be shown surrounded by others of the same period

and origin. The objective was twofold: to create a harmonious ambience enabling the visitor to experience the atmosphere and sensibility of a particular period and to show that every masterpiece is partially determined by the context from which it emerged. A worthy but vain aspiration: it is impossible to revive the mental and psychic atmosphere of a remote culture or period. That is beyond our means. We can reconstitute the decorative framework but this remains an empty shell, however seductive. No effort of the imagination can bring the distant past back to life. The less cultivated the spectator, the greater the requirement for explanation and the longer the accompanying texts. The fact is that a museum is a receptacle for objects extracted from their context; the only exceptions to this rule are arts contemporary with the museum movement of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The museum therefore created its own context: its own architecture, decor and furniture. Re-contextualisation is delusive. It is significant that the more geographically remote the culture, the greater the quantity of explanation required. Only a specialist can reconstruct the context in which a mediaeval European work was created but the demand for explanation is reduced because European spectators have a sense of the work belonging to their own culture. Behind this paradox there lies a form of education prioritising rational discourse and inducing lethargy of the visual imagination.

The museum is the home of the work of art; there it should be able to live and flourish through diverse presentations and successive and contradictory interpretations. Each work of art is a lexical item from which new sentences, constructions and discourses can be constructed. Poetic combinations of these semiophoric objects are infinitely richer than their chronological alignment.

Public museums are astounding receptacles of objects gradually accumulated under the impulse of fashion, conviction and scholarship. They underpin the memories of communities and cultures and ensure that they are solidly anchored in history, a form of historical consciousness that has underpinned humanism since the advent of museums in the nineteenth century. The collections of regional museums aspiring to encyclopaedic range necessarily comprise zones of oblivion—to the great delight of the neophyte who can restore to life such hidden treasures as the marvellous collection of tapa cloths in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. This exhibition

shows a major selection of 130 painted tapa (barkcloth). The range of motifs runs from the strictly geometrical to free drawing and includes a true rarity: an anthropomorphic representation from Vanuatu based on circles. The contrasts in the black-and-white geometrical tapa from Fiji are extraordinarily effective. The emphases of the black lines and circles of the Samoan tapa create an ingenious syncopated rhythm. Modern artists have of course reacted to these original creations. The large dimensions of the tapa cloths are impressive but have served them ill since they were consequently little exhibited. François Morellet, one of the leading European exponents of geometrical art, recalls that during his formative years he preferred the Musée de l'Homme to the Louvre because he loved the former's collection of tapa cloths. Though certain tapa serve a particular function (as clothing or screen), all have an important symbolic function. They are exchanged between communities or for marriages and serve as decorative backdrops for ceremonies. Because of these exchanges between insular cultures, it can be difficult to establish their origin.

My object here is not to describe the exhibition, which is made for the eye. This catalogue in any case provides a rich photographic documentation that might be said to memorialise it. At the heart of it are the tapa cloths. The two different spaces in which they are displayed reflect two different perspectives. In the first and largest room, which is more than twenty meters long, all four walls are covered in tapa of variable dimensions. They are categorised by culture of origin. The only other consideration governing their hanging has been to cover the walls as one might in a men's house. By contrast the second room shows a small number of tapa cloths alternating with geometrical contemporary paintings. Here paintings and tapa are centred, hung at eye level and carefully separated from their neighbours. Like Western pictures, they are allowed space in which to breathe. Some tapa cloths have been reinterpreted by the French artist Claude Rutault, who has borrowed their motifs and expanded them onto the surrounding wall. Yet this is not a contrast of ancient and modern; it is the meeting of two forms of modernity. The collection of tapa cloths began in the nineteenth century, continuing till very recently, and is therefore synchronous with modern art. It would not be sensible at this stage to say more about the rest of the exhibition since final choices will be made only as the exhibition is

hung. Certain associations spring to mind only in the presence of the objects themselves and cannot be anticipated on the basis of photographs or virtual images. Rather than attempting to revive the past, we might consider all museum objects as contemporary to just the extent that they are encompassed by our own gaze. This is the sense of Duchamp's famous remark, borrowed from Odilon Redon: "The spectator makes the picture". Directors are well aware of this. They work hard to show the maximum number of pieces knowing that what remains in the reserves cannot be brought back to life by the spectator's gaze. In this respect the excessive caution recently shown in the name of conservation seems to me counterproductive. The survival of certain works is insured only by removing them from the public gaze. Would it not be better to accept that objects too have a life and a death?

The equality bestowed by the spectator's gaze, reviving exhibits as it lights on them, suggests possibilities of juxtaposition that have hitherto been proscribed. Chronology is no longer a criterion of separation; new kinds of association can be established. Art history validated only comparisons between works from the same context or, at a push, those where contact between individuals or cultures could be specified. The kind of formal comparison that everyone constantly makes, when one work reminds us of another, was therefore outlawed as fantastical, subjective and futile. Rational arguments and historical logic have dominated art history to the detriment of the kind of analogical thinking that prevailed during the Renaissance before it gave way to rationalism. These forms of analogical thought again returned to the spotlight in the work of Lévi-Strauss, whose studies of societies without writing in *La pensée sauvage* boosted their prestige.

In analogical thinking, the three realms (animal, vegetable and mineral) are replaced by the four elements. Thus fish, boats and underwater plants will come under the same heading: water. Under the auspices of Neptune, Camillo places water and the aquatic world (everything that lives in water), fording, washing, bathing, and drinking (water-based actions), and aqueducts, fountains, bridges, fishing and the arts of ship-handling and navigation (water-related arts). Reasoning from cause to effect, an awareness of world history and the introduction of measurement brought an end to this form of taxonomy and paved the way for modern science. Analogical thought was then exiled to poetry and art but there is nothing absurd about it. In the modern

era it has reasserted itself with ever greater strength. From a universal perspective, the classic period of Western mimetic representation is an exception and all but unique. The links forged between modern art and archaic cultures were essentially on the level of analogical thinking.

Analogical associations often guide artists in their creative processes. Aesthetic judgement can only be elaborated through comparison—and it is much more exciting to compare heterogeneous than homogenous objects. The pedagogy of a docile museum is conformist; the museum of enchantments seeks to seduce and bewitch. In the latter, the juxtaposition of two heterogeneous objects can illuminate their meaning or function by visual means alone. It can also suggest a third idea that was not inherent in either. The relations now established may call for new clarifications. Such interpretations require a degree of liberty in which humour may come to play a distancing role.

Comparison of two objects of the same shape and function is quickly exhausted. The stimulating aspect of comparison is the quest for similarity in difference and vice-versa. It is therefore desirable to go beyond binary relationships and render the play of association more complex by comparing three or more objects.

Our era owes a huge debt to Surrealism, which initiated the process of re-enchantment. By crediting thought with transcendence, it opened up a vast domain of interaction. By seeking analogies between its own creations and those of the past, it contributed to a substantial shift in taste, stimulating research into neglected artists. It gave overt priority to the modern gaze, which it freed from the fetters of chronology. Under the impact of Surrealism, Arcimboldo was transformed from minor master to a great artist known to the wider public. The association in this exhibition of an owl and an owl butterfly (*Caligo eurilochus brasiliensis*), the latter mimicking the eyes of the former, can be found in the hall of the Dalí House in Port-Lligat. Dictionaries of Surrealism and the new taxonomy published in *Documents* by dissidents gathered around Georges Bataille testified to this determination to escape historiography. The work of Jurgis Baltrušaitis was more or less simultaneous and belongs to the same current of thought. These studies once seemed curious or marginal but have assumed ever greater importance on the backdrop of today's globalisation.

The scenography of enchantment should enhance this tendency by promoting the movement from two to three dimensions. Public enemy number one is the glass case that screens the object from the spectator and prevents direct visual contact. The installation—or hanging (though we are not talking only about painting)—must take into account differences of size, technique and material. The less conventional the exhibition, the more difficult this becomes; it must reflect both a particular taste and an overall decorative harmony while stimulating the mind and eye by setting up surprising and contrapuntal encounters.

Displays must be contrived within the two extremes: the presentation of homogeneous works of so satisfying a decorative effect that it lulls the spectator to sleep and the confrontation of works so heterogeneous that one jibs at the collocations. One must be able to meet aesthetic requirements while leaving room for surprises that focus attention. To this end, the works must all be chosen for their intrinsic visual impact. Groupings and sequences should derive not from a pre-stated concept but from impromptu encounters of and with the works. Some may be cool and geometrical, others hot and expressionistic. Dramatic tension may alternate with humour. Curators should avoid “interesting” works to which they particularly incline since these tend to bridge the gaps in the progress of the exhibition and thus justify curatorial discourse. Accumulations of works of one and the same kind are too familiar to be informative. If one in a series of similar objects is particularly relevant, best exhibit it on its own; better attract an attentive than an absent-minded glance. Each item must be seen as an original marvel. To avoid self-enclosed thematic gatherings, sequences should sometimes be arranged such that each piece derives from the previous one and announces the next. (Note that curators often set up relationships between works widely distributed in space, often forgetting that, if the exhibition is successful, the crowds of visitors will render these relationships invisible.)

Exhibition subjects too would benefit from de-compartmentalisation. The Réunion des musées nationaux, which produces prestigious exhibitions at the Grand Palais in Paris, used to swear by monographic exhibitions. Thematic exhibitions were rare because they were said to limit attendance. But even if thematic exhibitions are not blockbusters, they continue to attract the public and score respectable visitor numbers.

With thematic exhibitions, however, the danger is tedium. The visitor to a large exhibition on the *Vanitas* theme in art may be put off by successive roomfuls of skulls. The challenge today is to find ideas for bringing works together that offer sufficiently diversified exhibits or make it possible to encompass different periods and cultures. It is also desirable that any given theme relate to a major social issue. For the museum of enchantments, the failings of art history are opportunities; it can mount quite unprecedented exhibitions. There have been innumerable exhibitions on still life, no doubt because the requirements of interwar taste were perfectly met by these inanimate stage-sets. But there has never been an exhibition on “animal life” (animal painting since the Renaissance)—no doubt because it was never acknowledged as an autonomous genre by the French Academy of Painting. Today, the relationship between humans and animals is an urgent topic and an exhibition of this kind would have considerable resonance. Sexuality, long absent from art-historical discourse despite the innumerable nudes hanging in every museum, has finally been acknowledged as one of the most powerful motors of artistic creation. Feminism has transformed our appreciation of the art of women and has finally gained attention in its own right. The signs and attitudes associated with death, which in our society have been assiduously concealed, have made a dazzling return in the field of art. These themes are present in the current exhibition, as are the fears elicited by the blind slaughter of terrorism, the fantasies of animal metamorphosis in shamanism, and the infinitely varied representation of the human face.

It would be foolish to make a rigid ideology of this trend toward de-compartmentalisation. Let it be one more component of cultural supply—which should be as diverse as possible. There is no case for its supplanting monographic exhibitions, which it should complement in its reflections and perspectives. The same holds for collections. Recently the tendency toward rotation has been very strong; one would like certain collections to remain static at least long enough for a material record to be made of them. It is legitimate and even desirable that great museums like the Louvre should preserve their traditional forms of presentation since the wealth of their collections allows them to demonstrate historical developments. By contrast, many more modestly endowed museums would do better with freer forms of presentation; their holdings afford such incomplete chronological coverage that the sequence is comprehensible only to those knowledgeable enough to identify the

missing links. The primary objective of the museum should not be to teach the history of art but to communicate visual thinking and a language of forms.

This exhibition is intended to create a dialogue between works of different origins historical and geographical. They all come from the two Hobart museums, the Tasmania Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) and The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA)—a constraint that is also a stimulus, requiring as it does reflection on a particular corpus. Ours is not the kind of concept that typically underpins contemporary exhibitions but a reflection whose terms are worked out in the process of encountering and selecting pieces. No abstract thinking orders matter here. During the Renaissance, “before the disenchantment”, art lovers collected a broad range of objects both natural and artificial in their cabinets; each was selected because it seemed to the collectors strange and marvellous in the sense of defying rational explanation. Each was taken to evidence myths ranging from the poetic to the magical. We should like to revive something akin to this innocence in the current exhibition, alongside our freedom of vision and interpretation.

Motivated by boredom with the chronological structure that in so many museums lines up the works in predictable succession, I have attempted several experiments in de-compartmentalisation.

In 2001, I asked two artists, Thomas Huber and Bogomir Ecker, to work with me on a new hanging of the ancient and modern art collection of the Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf. Traditional themes such as landscape, portrait and still life alternated with contemporary issues such as flight and the environment; this allowed meaningful connections between works of different periods.

In 2007 at the Museo Fortuny, the exhibition “Artempo”, organised by Tijs Visser, Axel Vervoordt and myself, created a considerable stir. Within an ancient Venetian palazzo, an ideal setting visibly layered with history, ancient and contemporary works were shown in visual dialogue. The objective was to give visual pleasure by emphasising the works’ physical propinquity. The collocations were not, of course, random; many of them generated significant and unexpected relationships.

The break in tradition represented by post-modernity has forced curators to take greater liberties. Providing an education in the history of art or science is no longer sufficient; there is a need to educate the senses and confirm visitors in the validity of their own judgements. Works of art are vehicles for dreams; they stimulate the imagination and inspire emotion. The pleasures of a museum should be like that of the concert-hall or theatre; visitors should not be subjected to long speeches reducing them to the status of pupils. One goes to a concert or play not to learn but to enjoy. It is the task of curators to present works so as to create meaningful and thought-provoking associations.

There have been demonstrable civilisational benefits from specialisation and division of labour but they also have their downsides. They can all too easily mask the pre-eminently human character of material culture and its role as a vector of communication.

The paradigmatic site of enchantments is the Sir John Soane's Museum in London. It is an obligatory staging post for all those who seek to counterpoise the ideology of the academic museum. In France the recent restoration of the Musée Joseph Denais in Beaufort en Vallée has demonstrated the renewal of public interest in collector's cabinets and encyclopaedic collections. Their attraction derives from the impression that they encompass knowledge as a whole. In the southern hemisphere, MONA has made an immediate impression, establishing itself as a new popular attraction and a point of reference for new paradigms of the museum.

The museum of enchantments is above all visual, it appeals to the visitor's sensibility and emotions. Scholarship and pedagogic language take second place here. They are replaced by visual poetry and a cultivation of the senses. The direction or tone of a theme is summarised by a phrase or word inscribed on a wall. The essential thing is to shape and express the kind of visual thinking that underpins artistic creation; the objective is not a nostalgic immersion in history but an insight into the desires, fears and hopes of humanity as these are transcribed in our material culture.