

“It is Capturing the Important Innovative Moments for the Nation, But It Is Also Some Intellectual Space to Think about Science and Technology”¹

Or How to Explore the Nation within Europe through National Museums as Museums for Contemporary Issues

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This essay explores how the findings about current strategies of exhibiting and communicating Science and technology at five Western European Science and technology museums could be used as a starting point in order to think about National Museums within Europe. It is based on the assumption that insights in one specific field (exhibiting Science and technology at Museums) could be used and adapted very fruitfully in other, similar fields (National Museums) if this is done very carefully and thoughtfully.

The three basic questions of “Exhibiting what?”, “Exhibiting how?” and “The museum: what sort of public place?” are illustrated and discussed by some of the most essential findings of the interview results and are then developed further in the form of some more specific fundamental questions as a starting point for exhibiting (Science and technology) at the museum today.

1 Quote taken from the interview with R. H.: 15.

In many European countries Science and Technology Museums have been perceived as National Museums when it comes to collecting and exhibiting the achievements of Science and technology since the end of the 19th century (e.g. Boswell/Evans 1999). Science and technology has been exhibited in regard to its important role within progress and as the expression of national prosperity and of national pride. Or later, at the end of the industrial age in the 80s, as the important memory of an industrial past that has lead to today's achievements. However, today, as Science and technology has become an international phenomenon in a global world, there are also alternative concepts to describe the role of Science and technology for different cultures and their future development. There are many other places than national Science and Technology Museums that exhibit Science and technology today, like Science Centers, commercial fairs, Industrial Museums or Company Museums. Thus, it is not surprising that today, the role of Science and Technology Museums is very contested and in transition.

Science and technology as an integral part of our everyday life and as an important field of social and economic development challenges museums to be public places that enable people to be informed and knowledgeable about current scientific and technological questions, issues and debates. As a consequence, today, museum professionals seek to put Science and technology exhibits in new frames of reference for their visitors. Science and Technology Museums are no longer seen only as treasure vault and showcase for national scientific achievements, but more like places of knowledge, reflection and debate for people when it comes to Science and technology in society.

As a consequence, today, there is a lot of effort put into exploring new ways of communicating (about) Science and technology at museums by the use of new media, but also by experimenting with different forms of communicating. All these efforts have changed the work related to exhibiting at Science and technology Museums and the expectations towards Science and Technology museums' role within society considerably. Thus, currently, there are also a lot of efforts and thoughts put into questions of how do deal with the numerous challenges and the fostered experiences of change and development.

This situation and how it is dealt with by museum professionals working at Museums exhibiting Science and technology could be a good starting point when thinking about the current role of National Museums and about new ways of exhibiting at National Museums.

My contribution starts from these current developments at Museums exhibiting Science and technology (MeST) and it aims to investigate how they could offer new insights for current thinking about new developments for National Museums. It is based on research done in relation to my comparative PhD-research-project, in which I explore different ways of exhibiting Science and technology at five museums in four European countries.²

As I depart from the assumption of exhibiting Science and technology as a historically and culturally situated practice (Sharon Macdonald 2002, 2006), I have developed a methodological approach based on ethnological research methods that would help me to gain more insight into the diversity of practices and intentions which lead the very complex process of exhibiting Science and technology today³: The main focus of my research is on

2 I am using the overall term of „Museums exhibiting Science and technology“ in order to be able to include various kinds of museums, that is, the major Science and technology museum, but also museums exhibiting Science and technology with more socio-historical or socio-cultural approaches into the sample: Science Museum, London: “ingenious” (2005), “energy 2000” (2005); Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester: “Manchester Science” (2004); Deutsches Museum, München: “Verkehrszentrum” (2004, 2006), “Leben mit Ersatzteilen” (2004); Technisches Museum, Wien: “medien.welten” (2004), “Alltag – eine Gebrauchsanweisung” (2006); Museum für Kommunikation, Bern: “Abenteuer Kommunikation” (2003).

3 Cf. (Sharon Macdonald 2002) and (Andrea Witcomb 2003) with two major research projects that also use ethnological methods.

conversations and eventually one longer taped interview with European museum professionals who had been in charge of a major exhibition at their respective museum. The interviews were lead by an open-questionnaire and should enable the interviewees to express their personal experiences and strategies when “exhibiting Science and technology” today. I hoped that the analysis of the interviews would allow me first, an overall and general view over problems and difficulties of the practice of exhibiting Science and technology today and second, would also allow to consider different practices of exhibiting Science and technology as situated processes; that is, in very specific cultural settings and institutional frames of reference.

At the moment, after having done the interview analysis and being about to finish writing about my findings for my PhD, I can say, that this ethnological approach has shown itself as a very fruitful methodological approach. First, it has allowed me to pin-point current difficulties and challenges of exhibiting Science and technology based on practical experiences. Second, it has also given me a more differentiated insight into various experiences and strategies of museum professionals. And third, it has also enabled me to think further, that is, to take up and to combine some of their ideas and experiences in order to define some important points of departure for future developments of exhibiting Science and technology at the museum (cf. Barbara Wenk 2006, 2007). Some of these findings and further thoughts are also relevant when thinking about National Museums in a comparative and in a European context.

In the following, I will therefore put forward some of those findings and will relate them to the issues and questions raised for the first NaMu meeting at Norrköping. Doing so, I start from the assumption that insights in one specific field (exhibiting Science and technology at Museums) could be used and adapted very fruitfully in other, similar fields (National Museums) if this is done very carefully and thoughtfully. Thus, it is important to me that the following is considered as an input of “unfinished suggestions” and as a basis for further discussions and for debate.

As the results of the interviews have also shown, that current challenges in many points don’t differ that greatly in different cultural and cultural-political contexts, but that it is rather how they are perceived and what kind of “new” strategies are developed in order to deal with them, which makes the difference. Thus, presenting this in a very international field, with people from very different cultural backgrounds and who are therefore used to very different interpretations of “museum culture”, I am aware that for some of you some of the following statements might be common sense (as it is done in your country very habitually) or for some of you the same statements might be very new (especially the ones stated in the interviews as “new” and people “only just experimenting” on them). However, I don’t consider this as a problem, but on the contrary as a good opportunity to reconsider practices we take for granted within the museum context each of us is used to and to make good use of the chance to think about different practices at museums in different European countries (I will come back to this later).

As this is an input for the first NaMu workshop, I would like to start from some overall and principle questions that can be derived from the statements in my interviews and won’t go into specific details. In the following, I will therefore start from the following three major and important questions for exhibiting (Science and technology) today and will then see in how far these or similar, adapted questions are relevant for National Museums today:

Exhibiting WHAT?

- “Science and technology”: which and what kind of phenomas, topics, issues?

- “Science and technology”: which and what kind of knowledges, experiences?

Exhibiting HOW?

- Conceptualization process as team work, as work in cooperation with externals:
- the importance of communication and mediation skills
- Communicating and visitors:
- Shift from “how to communicate?” to “how to communicate with?”

The MUSEUM: What Sort of Public Place?

- How to deal with the relations between past – present – future?
- How to deal with different “modes of exhibiting”:
- e.g.: “showing, explaining”, “communicating and interacting”, ...

1a) The “Phenomena, Topic or Issue to Exhibit”

Today, museum professionals at Science and technology Museums agree, that “Science and technology” should be exhibited **“in context”**, mainly because they (start to) perceive “Science and technology” as a phenomenon that should be discussed as a complex and socially and culturally situated phenomenon (e.g. Science and technology as Culture: Hengartner/ Rolshoven 1998).

One shouldn’t exhibit “Science and technology”, but topics and issues that are related to Science and technology and that are of relevance for people today, this is what should be exhibited. These (topics and issues) will then also find an audience. People are surrounded by technology, however they hardly ever are offered the opportunity, to find a reflective approach towards their relation and use of Science and technology. (Interview with M.T.: 13)

However, it is interesting, that it is then crucial to see whether “exhibiting Science and technology as a socially and culturally situated phenomenon” just changes the ways “Science and technology” is dealt with on the **“thematic or theoretical level”**, that is **as a topic** in regard to chosen themes and perspectives or theoretical approaches, or whether it implies a more fundamental change that **“converts presenting topics into raising issues”**, that is, that relates topics to specific contexts by **starting from specific contemporary issues**. (And thus objects are presented by “related and specifically situated issues” rather than by “contextualizing topics”).

As the interviews show, there are considerable differences of how this question is dealt with: rather between different nations/cultures than between different museums or exhibition projects; that is also why I consider it as an important and interesting question for thinking about National Museums:

- How do National Museums deal with phenomena to be exhibited?
- Is it “topics” or is it “issues” they aspire to exhibit?
- If it is the later, how can this be done?

1b) The Question of Dealing with Different Kinds of Knowledge

- and with different kinds of experiences in regard to
- “Science and technology in context”

Museum professionals find it increasingly difficult to define the knowledge to communicate in their exhibitions, because dealing with knowledge for exhibitions has become so difficult: **the sheer amount and diversity of knowledge**, of experiences, of opinions, of perspectives and of expert views... available makes it difficult to choose, to define and to vouch for (cf. also the idea of “social robust knowledge”, Helga Nowotny 2005).

There is a feeling that there are more questions than answers, that there is a lot of contradicting and fast changing information, but no fix or universal answers or statements (which seems to be very the antipode for the idea of the museum per se). Thus, it is first more about defining one’s own views as a starting point and to find certain criteria to work with in order to deal with knowledge during the conceptualization process. And it is about **thinking of new ways of exhibiting that allow for more flexibility and for more variety**. Exhibitions try to be more **discursive** and **interactive** and use more **communicative** and **participative** formats.

“Well, it means you need to keep evolving new forms and it means, that you can’t think about something lasting for forty years. You have to think about five to ten years live spans for exhibitions. Because, you know, if you are dealing with contemporary Science..., even if you are dealing with history, we are all more aware than ever – it is all postmodern (ironic tone) – we are aware that history is being reviewed. There are different lenses, you know, culture is consumed and spat out and refigured much more rapidly than ever before. And that has an impact on how we do things.” (Interview with R.H.: 13)

However, again departing from that situation, there are considerable differences in ideas, what role a museum (exhibiting Science and technology) as a place where knowledge is dealt with and communicated could be today. Some museum professionals stated that, today, they are more considerate about what kind of knowledge or experiences they take into account for their work and about how they deal with different kinds of knowledge and experiences in order to make them meaningful and relevant for the museum audience. This also means, that they differ less between expert knowledge, practical knowledge and lay knowledge anymore, or at least try to engage more diverse people from outside the museum in public discussions or in participative procedures during the conceptualisation process. As some interviewees describe in their answers, today it is less about passing on “knowledge” or “information”, but it is more about discussing about different horizons of interpretation or even more about deciding which horizon of interpretation should be the relevant one in a given situation.⁴ If indeed museums are experimenting with new, participatory forms of communication, then the discussion of different horizons of interpretation, that is arguing one’s own horizon of interpretation and finding out about other’s horizons of interpretation becomes essential; mostly also the decision of which horizon of interpretation should be the relevant one in the given situation. What happens if visitors have free, but assisted access to the collections with their own questions in mind?⁵ What happens if visitors are asked to tell their own knowledge

4 Cf. The understanding of communication put forward by Heinrich Rombach: he differs between the three different levels of “information”, “horizon of interpretation” and “the debate about which horizon of interpretation is the decisive one in a specific situation”. Cf. Heinrich Rombach, (1977), pp. 24-29.

5 Collections Center, Museum of Science and Industry Manchester.

and experiences about certain objects in order to inform exhibition content?⁶ What happens if there are open forum-talks and debates organized in the context of the exhibition?⁷

I think, these experiments with new, more communicative and more participative formats could be very interesting for National Museums today in regard to how they want to deal with knowledge and experiences in relation to their visitors.

- How do National Museums deal with different kinds of knowledge and with different experiences?
- How do National Museums make sure that they deal with knowledge and experiences in ways that make sure that it is relevant for their audience?

2a) Looking at the Conceptualizing Process

Which Practices and Skills for Exhibiting?

Looking at current practices for the conceptualization process, there is a big change towards teamwork, towards “interdisciplinary”⁸ work. Exhibiting has become such a complex process that the combination and the mediation of different knowledges and skills is needed. The subjects specialists knowledge might to a certain extend still be in-house, however and cooperations with current researchers from different subject backgrounds and with people working in the practical field are becoming more and more essential in order to keep up-to-date with current developments and changes (this is for collecting, exhibiting and communicating). Working in a Thus, museum professionals find themselves more and more in a mediating position: this is for developing content, for finding appropriate ways of communication in the exhibition, and for actually organising the building and setting up of the exhibition.

I would describe it,... particularly the role I had in (X) as being about going out there with quite a free reign, to find out everything that I possibly could about the topic that we were invited to do an exhibition about. And bring that back and make sure that it really was high quality information. That I had gone through, you know, a really wide range of resources and everything, bring the information back, share it with other expert colleagues at the museum and together work with them to turn it... And then my role becomes actually delivering that solution, so the writing of the words, often, the explaining and keeping hold on the integrity of the Science to computer game makers, who are going to make some of our interactive games. Working with all these non-scientific people and making sure none of those people lose sight of the information that we first had decided trying to communicate. And keeping an eye on that all the way through till the opening day, so you make sure that things don't get lost. (Interview with S.E.: 3).

As today, working on an exhibition isn't about “???” (“Verwerten von Bekanntem”), but more about “continous learning of new things” (“Lernen von Neuem”)⁹ and being knowledgable in a specific academic field for most museum professionals has become less important in their everyday work and **other competences are of much more importance: communication skills, interpersonal and social skills, team skills, management skills... .**

6 “ingenious”-exhibition, Science Museum London.

7 Cf. Dana Center, Science Museum London or the Forum at the Verkehrszentrum, Deutsches Museum München or special events at the Museum für Kommunikation at Berne.

8 “Interdisciplinary” at the museum means not only that there are different scholarly disciplines, but there are inter-relations also between other different fields like theoretical-and practical work.

9 Cf. Thomas Diener (2007), S. 57.

Different jobs and the required competences have been defined more specifically in order to make teamwork during the conceptualizing process more transcendent and more manageable. And there were new jobs created like “project manager”, “content manager”, “interpreter”, “community officer”... . For museums exhibiting Science and technology, communicating with their audiences has become so paramount, that many new jobs have been created in this field (e.g. Science Communicators, audience’s advocate).

As can be seen in the interviews very clearly, museum professionals react very differently to these new challenges: Some take additional training, others take over a different role in the museum, many younger people who have been trained in specific new skills might find it difficult to bring them in working with older and more practically experienced staff. Many interviewees also find it a pity that there aren’t more opportunities for the exchange of experiences, be it within the museum or be it with people from other museums.

In the context of thinking about National Museums, I think it is very important also to think about different ways of professionalization for museum staff, because if National Museums should become relevant museums, there has to be some kind of professional training specifically for museum staff and for current competencies needed at the museum today (which again could be profitable for all museums within the nation).

- What skills and expertise is necessary for people working at National Museums, so that National Museums can fulfil their social role?
- How do National Museums ensure appropriate training and professional exchange opportunities for their professional staff?
- In how far should this be done by museums, in how far by other institutions?

2b) Looking at Different Ways of Communicating

Shift from “How to Communicate?” To “How to Communicate With?”

Talking about different ways of relating to visitors, museum professionals are much aware of different ways of interpreting and communicating their collections today. They aspire to engage and to involve visitors more directly and personally during their museum visit. In order to do so, they make good use of new exhibition design and of new media in order to communicate Science and technology.

However, today, some museum professionals are also much more interested in using these means or to develop new methods in order to **find more inclusive and discursive ways to communicate WITH their visitors**. Currently, this is done mainly through more interactive “offers of communication” in the exhibition (feedback-stations, discursive guided tours, additional programmes like public debates), but newly also through more opportunities for visitors to inform the conceptualizing process (front-end studies; regular trials or collaborative projects). This allows visitors to get more actively involved during their visit to the museum and to more actively bring in their interests and knowledge in, too. There are more opportunities for personal interaction with museum professionals, they are encouraged for more interaction with other people visiting the museum or there are even public debates organised. The idea is to involve visitors more with the museum and encourage them to make good use of the museum as public place and as a place “for them”.

However, as one can also see, that the museum professionals find it sometimes difficult to deal practically with the idea of “how to communicate with” and to experiment with formats and offers for communication that are more open and more interactive. I think this is because **the settings during the conceptualization process and later in the exhibitions for these kinds of formats or “offers for communication” are complicated and also less predictable**, thus one still has to experiment with them.

Still, I find it very interesting to differ between looking for different methods and formats for “communicating something” in an exhibition” and looking for different formats and methods for “communicating WITH visitors about something” (also figuratively speaking, as an attitude) in order to think about different possible ways of communicating at the museum in general. I also think that this might be a very interesting starting point when thinking about communication and learning at National Museums.

- How do National Museums want to communicate with their visitors?
- Which methods from different theoretical fields or different fields of practice do they use in order to develop new ways of communicating at the museum? (learning, arts&design, communication, multi-media...)

3a) Museums as Public Places to Raise Contemporary Issues?

Museum professionals are looking also for new ways to relate their collections to their visitors in meaningful ways. What they describe as difficult today, is **to establish a link between past – present – future that makes sense to their visitors**. It is about finding relevant current issues that can be raised by the use of the historically grown collections.

Often this is done by contextualization of objects, that is by using additional means like pictures, TV footage, documentary material or other additional media like AV-stations or the internet for contextualization. Some museums have also started to exhibit “cutting-edge” and future Science and technology and thus started new collections for current exhibitions. However they try to establish this link between past – present – future, the major difference doesn’t lie in different ways of presenting and contextualizing objects, but more **in the overall aim of the museum as a public place and how the museum and its role is imagined between past – present – future**:

- Is it to exhibit objects, so the present can be explained by past developments?
- Or is it more about remembering the past in order to think about the present?
- Or is it about seeing how current issues were handled in the past?
- Or is it about looking at the present in order to imagine the future?

What is interesting, most museum professionals, when talking about the museum as public place and how it should use its collections today, tend to **start very much from the present and would like to be a place as forum where important contemporary issues can be raised** that are discussed in public anyway. (cf. The idea of the exhibition space as a place/forum for contemporary issues by the Co-Director of “The Stapferhaus Lenzburg” (CH), Beat Hächler 2006, 2007).

I think that is back to what I was saying about being a place for reflection and debate and information. I think that IS the role to be a space where questions can be raised and to be one of the leading organisations that raises some of the most important questions. That people come, you know, not only for answers and that we can give any answers we can, but we reach a point where people feel comfortable asking questions. (Interview with R. H.: 16)

What is difficult here though, is that often “we haven’t necessarily got the right objects collected” that would allow us to do so. Or there are clashes with the traditional role of the museum that was more focused on the past and remembering the past. However, it is interesting to see that at some museums **there are deliberately specific places created where contemporary issues can be exhibited or discussed** (Wellcome Wing with the

“Antenna” area at the Science Museum London or the “Zentrum Neue Technologien” at the Deutsches Museum Munich). May be these kind spaces and the experiences with them could be a starting point to think about museums generally as places for contemporary issues?

Thus, for any discussion of today’s role of National Museum, I think it essential to reflect in how far they want to start from “now” and whether they want to be places to raise contemporary issues; that is also, to reconsider how National museums want to relate past – present – future.

- What sort of public places do National Museums want to be within today’s society?
- How do they want relate to past – present – future?

3b) Museums as Places for “Showing and Explaining” or as Places for “Debating and Interacting”?

Looking at the interviews, it is interesting to see how museum professionals think of the museum as a place by describing what they would like their visitors to do in their exhibitions and at the museum. Different ways of “learning” and “of enjoying themselves” are essential, however there is a difference in modes to do so: some describe it more “rationally” as “looking”, “reading” and “inform themselves”, and there are others who would like to have much more “active and self-directed” visitors “searching”, “getting involved”, “interacting” and “debating”.

I mean the (X) example, I love the way you get to go there, you know and meet a plastic surgeon, or you hear what.... One of the last debates I saw, which was web-cast, was about pre-natal screening, and that is terribly significant for me at the current time of course... And it was brilliant to see those real people debating that stuff and not just, you know, be in the audience for a radio show, or something, but get to quiz them and question them and be there with them. I know the (X) is not the only group doing that kind of thing, but it is a role that we can have. (Interview with M. R.: 13)

They also wish the museum to be a much more livelier place that allows visitors to get more actively involved “and get something out of the place for them”. And some of them would like to consider the museum visit more deliberately as a social event and **to think about new offers towards the museum visit as a social event**. Not as entertainment, but rather by making good use of the fact that people usually come to museums in groups and that there are usually other people present (cf. The idea of the Social Lab by the director of “Dialogue in the Dark, Hamburg; Andreas Heinecke 2003)

Eventually, this comes to thinking about **new ways of interacting between visitors and objects, between visitors and museum professionals and among visitors themselves**. Is it a “show and explain” mode, is it a “debate and interact” mode or are there any other possible modes?

- What sort of public places do National Museums want to be for their visitors?
- How do they want their visitors to interact during their visit?

Some Summary Remarks

To summarize, looking for new ways of imagining the National Museum, it might be an inspiring observation that new and interesting thoughts were mentioned when the interviewees weren’t talking about “objects”, when they weren’t talking about “topics or content” and when they weren’t talking about “different ways of presenting objects or content”.

That is, the museums professionals' deliberations became most interesting when they talked about current practices: that is, about their work and how they relate it to their audience, when they talked about different ways of communicating with their audience and when they talked about different practices used at the museum that would hopefully make the museum a more livelier place and more a place for people.

For my research I have been travelling Europe a lot, also for conferences and for professional exchange. I also have lived abroad for fifteen months.

In the conversations and the discussions with colleagues I have found it very telling that discussing the museum, its contemporary role and current museum practices very often lead to misunderstandings or incomprehension, because people weren't paying enough attention to differences in current general cultural practices like:

- How do we acquire "knowledge" today?
- How do we discuss issues, how do we work out a solution or how do we settle on an agreement?
- How do we deal with individual and with collective current experiences?
- How do we reflect individual and collective everyday experiences?
- How do we learn?

These questions related to the museum and museum work and the fact, that they are answered very differently by people from different (European) cultures, were very often the underlying reasons why it was so difficult to discuss different ideas of the museum, its role as a place of knowledge and learning, and its role for society (in different cultural frameworks).

However, as I have said before, I don't consider this as a problem, but on the contrary as a good opportunity to reconsider practices we take for granted within the museum context each of us is used to and to make good use of the chance to think about different practices at museums in different European countries.

This is also the reason why I believe that, when thinking about National Museums, it is essential to aspire for different ideas of National Museums. This means to learn more about different strategies and ideas in different cultural contexts and then discuss in one's own context how some of the strategies or ideas heard of could be adapted accordingly. Thus, it might not be about finding one, unified definition or "recipe" for National Museums, but rather about working out and agreeing on some essential questions as a point of reference or as tools, which have to be dealt with and answered by each nation (or National Museum) in their own way, according to their culture and according to contemporary necessities.

This means, eventually, not to depart from the idea of "Nations made" and exhibiting them and their historical making at the National Museums, but rather departing from "Nations in transition" in the European context and raising contemporary issues for debate at the National Museum. In my opinion, this could be a suitable contribution of National Museums towards contemporary "state-building within Europe". This procedure would **not only concentrate on objects and products of Cultural Heritage, but would also integrate different cultural practices** (also relevant for practices at the museum) **as part of an Immaterial Cultural Heritage**. And, what is more, this procedure would hopefully lead to further reflections about current practices at museums in relation to current cultural practices of different Nations within Europe.

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