Świat i Słowo
filologia | nauki społeczne | filozofia | teologia
1(30)/2018

STUDIA I SZKICE

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2562720

Maria Popczyk
Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach
maria.popczyk@us.edu.pl

Museum of Art – Double Cod(ing) of Aesthetics

In theoretical studies the difference between high and popular art, including entertainment, is frequently given prominence in order to either demonstrate how disparate their bases are or, on the contrary, to prove that they have practically merged to become hardly distinguishable. Both the essentialist perspective, which highlights the distinction between the two fields, and such approaches as neopragmatism, which downplay their autonomies, tend to disregard the context of exhibition, which seems to play a crucial role in determining to what extent entertainment becomes a component of the reception of an artwork. I focus on the museum of art, since it constitutes the space of negotiations between exhibition, art and entertainment, while at the same time it provides the space where aesthetic theories can be put into practice. Major museums in their permanent exhibitions use the arrangement of the works as well as the sensual parameters of an exhibition environment in order to communicate aesthetic theories in physical space. I examine museum exhibition from the perspective of an aesthetician rather than a museologist, for whom it is more important that a museum functions, in Goodman's words[1]. However, if we look on an exhibition as the space putting an aesthetic theory into practice, the link between art and entertainment can be seen in new light.

[1] N. Goodman, *Art and Ideas. The End of the Museum?*, [w:] *Of Mind and Other Matters*, Cambridge 1984, s. 172–178.

The museum is a specific environment in which neither artworks nor aesthetic theories are autonomous, but deeply involved in a number of explicit and implicit relations with the museum's other objectives, such as economy, politics, prestige or education. That is why the museum of art is often the subject of heated debates and disputes as a place within which hierarchies of values are established, a national and cultural identity is forged and viewpoints concerning the past, knowledge and education are formed. Aesthetics has a prominent place in these disputes, both in the form of the theory of art and in its expanded formula encompassing an exhibition regarded as a work of art – an artefact. It comprises the message conveyed by the architecture as well as the interiors, which in a coherent way determine sensual conditions for the reception of artworks. Apart from legitimizing the works on display aesthetic theories employed by museums help to achieve their other goals, like reinforcing a national identity or the authority of the museum itself as an institution. With three models of the museum – the first galleries and cabinets of curiosities of the Renaissance, the modernist museum, whose dominant feature was disinterested contemplation and reflection, and the pluralistic museums of the late twentieth century, which follow the ideal of an open and global museum – we can see three distinct configurations formed by an exhibition and artworks, aesthetic theories and entertainment. In each of them entertainment assumes different senses and forms, as each of them represents a different approach to entertainment. Therefore, my aim is not to determine the extent to which art (whether traditional or popular) is linked with entertainment, but to demonstrate how the application of aesthetics within an exhibition of artworks alters the attitude towards entertainment. It has to be noted at this point that what I propose is a model situation, which works with regard to national museums attaching great importance to their prestige and standing as well as political objectives. I am not concerned with theme parks or ecomuseums, where entertainment constitues an integral component.

1.

It seems appropriate to start with the Renaissance forms of collecting, not only because it is where the origins of museums can be traced, as large collections became museums, like the Louvre, but, more importantly, the museums of the late twentieth century are often compared to those very first ones. Victoria Newhouse in her discussion on the shift in the museum

architecture, among a wide range of new museums, mentions the museum as entertainment and argues that

> to think of art in terms of entertainment is simply a return to the astonishment and delight associated with the first private Renaissance museum: a sensuous, thought provoking discovery quite different from the dutiful didacticism of most large contemporary institution[2].

Newhouse understands pleasure and entertainment as a multisensory experience of art with reflection being less important than the experience itself.

Indeed the key factor leading to the establishment of private collections was curiosity. Medieval theology condemned curiosity in the name of salvation, but the Renaissance elevated its status and allowing people to become curious it gave rise to modern science[3]. At the same time, curiosity could also be a source of pleasure derived from a sensual contact with the past given in the material form as well as with nature in artefactual form. People of the time were convinced that the objects they had collected gave them access to the mysteries of the natural world as well as proud of the prestige accorded to them by a valuable and precious collection in their possession. Daston points out that the curiosity resulting in the desire to observe and study new things became a sort of consumerist behaviour and its dynamics reflects the dynamics of the trade in luxury goods[4]. Finally, the world of collectors constituted a community, where viewing objects, reflecting on them and trading them took place in a relaxed sociable atmosphere provided by private residences of upper-class society.

However, this type of entertainment and pleasure was seen as distinct from carnal pleasures and from thesaurus-like collecting which involved storing valuable objects, the distinction which corresponds to the one between the pleasures of people with taste and the pleasures of common people. This is the time when, according to Greenblatt, a special kind of disinterested viewing emerged within the Mediterranean culture, which enabled the viewer to admire objects which were no longer in use, no

[2] V. Newhouse, *Toward a New Museum*, New York 1998, s. 190.

[3] O. Marquard, *Wegwerfgeschaft und Bewahrungskultur*, [w:] *Macrocosmos in Microcosmo. Die Welt in der Stube. Zur Geschichte des Sammelns 1450 bis 1800*, red. A. Grote, Opladen 1994, s. 909–920.

[4] L. Daston, *Neugierde als Empfindung und Epistemologie in der frühmodernen Wissenschaft*, [w:]*Macrocosmos in Microcosmo. Die Welt in der Stube. Zur Geschichte des Sammelns 1450 bis 1800*, red. A. Grote, Opladen 1994, s. 43.

longer part of everyday life. Greenblatt cites Dürer's admiration of the objects brought from the New World[5].

With a well-developed ability to view objects in a disinterested and inquisitive manner a person can easily distinguish between a court collection and a scholar's study, to differentiate viewing from touching. Sovereigns, people of the court displayed works of art with particular care to the aesthetic, that is visual, contact with exhibits, while scholars touched objects, medals or natural specimens, in order to write treatises on history or natural history. Michel Foucault writes about the principles underlying the sixteenth century collections:

> The universe was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars, and plants holding within their stems the secrets that were of use to man. Painting imitated space. And representation – whether in the service of pleasure or of knowledge – was posited as a form of repetition: the theatre of life, or the mirror of nature...[6]

The flexibility of rules governing private exhibitions results from the qualities of art itself and from the specially designed architectural setting, but individual tastes of a collector has also left their imprint on such exhibitions, which form a part of the history of a family. Although various cabinets existed, each of them combined the desire to learn with viewpoints on beauty. In cabinets of curiosities the viewer had access to the cosmos in its entirety, as the representation of components of the world epitomized the whole universe. Sensual experience constituted a vehicle transporting the viewer towards the metaphysical beauty of the natural world as a whole. From the time of the first cabinet established by the Medici we can see how the aesthetics of *claritas* was accomplished[7]. In the galleries where the artefacts of the Antiquity were displayed, viewers admired and studied the ideals of classical proportions considered to be perfect. The desire to learn, from which modern science originated, the contemplation of metaphysical beauty as well as activities which could be seen as entertainment coexisted on an equal basis rather than a hierarchical one. Arcimbold's portraits illustrate this close link of art and learning through building a collection, since, as Umberto Eco claims, they are collections, they are catalogues, but at the same time this collection assumes an artistic form.

---

[5] S. Greenblatt, *Resonance and Wonder*, in: *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, New York 1992, s. 177.

[6] M. Foucault, *The Order of the Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Oxon - New York 2002 s. 19.

[7] E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London 1992, s. 34–38.

2.

Wolfgang Goethe left us the first description of the interior of the Dresden Gallery, which aptly illustrates the shifts in attitudes towards art and its museum surroundings. He marvels at well-waxed parquetry, gilded picture frames and ample space where one could admire "objects of adoration in that place consecrated to the holy ends of art"[8].

The atmosphere of the museum interior sacralizes art, distances viewers from the trivial business of everyday life and directs them towards disinterested contemplation, but also towards learning. In the modernist museum one can observe the effects of the rationalization of both art and nature; here the conviction that reality, including art, could be arranged in order acquires a material form. The exhibition space became divided with natural history specimens separated from works of art. The museum as the temple of science and the museum as the temple of art were established. It was also when learning and education became radically set apart from entertainment. In the space of the city, museums represented the areas of order, while world fairs became the places of entertainment[9].; in both cases the achievements in the spheres of science and technology were displayed in the form of exhibitions, but what determined the character of a given place was the arrangement of its context. The museum exhibition isolates art from its surroundings through architecture and the arrangement of a display, it creates a place of concentration, silence and solemnity, whereas world fairs create no distance from everyday affairs[10], they are places full of distraction, noise and playfulness.

The modernist exhibition atomizes a work by means of the organization of the sensual and emotive environment: the architecture of the museum, the formal and ideological message which it conveys, constitutes *parergon* for exhibition space, which in turn embodies the hegemony of sight, prevailing until the mid-twentieth century. It enacts the ideals of the Cartesian space, which Jean-François Lyotard[11] called timeless and disembodied. The exhibition builds the proscenium-like distance relying on spatial and light qualities, minimizes the need for movement, eliminates touch and hearing, and in doing this it establishes an unequivocal position for the viewer who

[8] W. Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, quoted in Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age*, tłum. J. van Nuis Cahill, New York 1967, s. 160.

[9] T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory and Politics*, London - New York 1995, s.18–21.

[10] P. Greenhalgh, *Education, Entertainment and Politics: Lessons from the Great International Exhibitions*, [w:] *The New Museology*, red. P. Vergo, London 1989, s. 82–87.

[11] J.-F. Lyotard, *Les immatériaux*, „Arta and Text" April 17, 8–10, s. 47–54.

is reduced to the organ of sight[12]. Goethe's admiration is the admiration for the atmosphere of the interior, which gives one the impression of being in an exceptional place. The environment is purposely designed in such a manner as to deprive the works of the intimate air of private space and, in exchange, to accord them an institutional context underpinned by the achievements of the new research spheres: aesthetics and the history of art. Works of art are components of a historical narrative, they give testimony to the historical character of art and its progress and, at the same time, they have value in their own right and they attract attention to themselves[13]. Although they are hardly autonomous from the pre-imposed idea behind the exhibition, they can also be contemplated as self-contained conduits of beauty[14]. This dual reference which a work of art acquires in the museum strictly determines two types of the reception of a work as well as two distinct types of aesthetics in which it participates, the situation which I call double coding. I have altered the meaning of Charles Jencks's term: each and every work of art exhibited in the modernist museum as well as after the 1970s is subject to double coding. By no means limited to visual features of the interior, double coding goes deeper, it is intrinsic to the very structure of the device, or perhaps the machinery, that an exhibition is. A work of art, an artefact, belongs to two realities. It forms a whole with its surroundings, the exhibition, to whose aesthetical principles it is subordinated. At the same time, however, it points to its own value, independent, as it were, from the exhibition. Thus it belongs to two types of aesthetics: the aesthetics of an exhibition where it is subservient to the overriding principle which determines its place in the structure of the narrative and to the aesthetics focused on an attempt to grasp the essence of a work in its autonomy.

In the case of the nineteenth century museum the historical arrangement of works is grounded in Hegel's aesthetics, while individual

[12] B. O'Doherty, *Notes on the Gallery Space, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, San Monica, San Francisco 1986, s. 12–13, 17. Donald Preziosi claims that the museum is one of the optical inventions of the nineteenth century and sees it as an instrument for concentration (D. Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Museum and the Flaming of Modernity*, [w:] *The Rhetoric of the Frame. Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, red. P. Duro, Cambridge 1996, s. 107).

[13] Bennett, following Foucault's thinking, underlines the political character of the sight-centred exhibition. Rather than with aesthetics he is concerned with the political education aimed at developing civic seeing and resulting in imposing an unequivocal observational position, regulated in an authoritative way according to hierarchical principles (T. Bennett, *Civic Seeing: Museum and the Organization of Vision*, [w:] *A Companion to Museum Studies*, red. Sh. Macdonald, Chichester 2011, s. 267–278).

[14] Jacques Rancière discusses the autonomous and non-autonomous status of a work of art in the space of an exhibition from the perspective of forming a community (J. Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, tłum. S. Corcoran, Cambridge, Malden, 2009, s. 26–28).

aesthetic experience corresponds to Immanuel Kant's aesthetics of disinterestedness. Two distinct types of aesthetics, incomparable from the philosophical standpoint, when employed as tools to arrange an exhibition, and applied in practice in the form of physical parameters of exhibition space, become a decisive factor in the aesthetic evaluation of both the exhibition and the works. Thus Hegel's historiosophy provided philosophical grounds for transforming a multitude of various histories which works gathered in various places (temples, palaces) refer to into one rational and teleological history. Aesthetical sensibility was to be directed towards "freedom to enjoy and recognize great works of art which have long been available, whether those of the modern world or the Middle Ages, or even of wholly foreign peoples in the past"[15]. Reflection was given priority over experience as such, while the moment when one grasped the inner life of art as beauty manifesting itself over the ages became the culminating point of experiencing art. The exhibition as a whole was to offer the panoramic view of history like a kind of viewing platform from which one could observe the progress of art.

A work, however, could also become the sole focus of attention. Its historical context put aside, it was to be viewed not through some notion or idea but in a disinterested manner, as Kant prescribed. All types of aesthetics sharing the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, as exemplified by Roman Ingarden's phenomenological theory of a work of art, have considered a work as autonomous, always and without exception, regardless of the place where it is displayed, with the viewer granted access to its immanent value. Such a belief is expressly stated in Clemens Greenberg's thought.

The critics of the modernist museum have likened it to a temple, a school, a graveyard or a prison[16]. They have interpreted the space of highly-organized viewing as a way to discipline the viewing public, which does not alter the fact that people use this space in their own ways. Research has shown that that it is impossible to determine to what extend the public actually follow the ideas behind an exhibition or grasp a message intended by a curator. The spaces of a museum initiate an art world community, who fill them with their own activities: amateur copyists, art lovers sharing their opinions and those who just enjoy spending time in a museum, they all can find place for themselves there, as we can see on Moors's painting (Samuel Morse, Gallery of The Louvre, 1831-1833). They all derive pleasure from just being in a museum.

[15] G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lecture for fine art. Volume I*, tłum. T. Knox, New York 1975, s. 42 (https://monoskop.org/images/0/05/Hegel_GWF_Aesthetics_Lectures_on_Fine_Art_Vol_1_1975.pdf [dostęp 12.05.2017]).

[16] P. Valéry, *Le problem des musées*, [w:] *Œuvres II, Édition établie et annotée par Jean Hytier*, Paris 1960, s. 1290.

And although the museum certainly is an institution, museums function most successfully when, as Joseph Margolis points out, their functions remain somewhat vague, undefined[17], which means that none of them should be absolutized and art and its various aesthetics become elements of practice.

3.

Since the second half of the twentieth century museums have been undergoing deep transformations. Museums have opened their space to the public (educational programmes, nights of museums), commercial enterprises (fashion shows) have been allowed inside their walls, new media have been introduced and new architecture created. Various events (interventions, ballet or acrobatic performances) are occasionally held in museum rooms and museums have gained new commercial spaces (cafes, bookshops).

A qualitatively new exhibition environment has emerged. It is multisensory, with the sight combined with sound, touch, or smell, depending on the idea behind an exhibition, while the viewer has become an active participant of an exhibition, often responsible for making a work or even a part of the exhibition come to life. These transformations are directly linked to a new way of teaching: knowledge is no longer authoritatively presented in the form of the universal message but gradually built up from fragments; museologists stress the relationships between learning, education and entertainment[18]. Exhibits acquire their own individualized meanings, often linked to everyday life, to memory, recollections, oral tradition and a whole range of emotions. In place of the structure of homogenous and timeless space of the modernist museum viewing planes appear and the viewer is expected to move; we can see a myriad of various spaces and temporalities, more often than not brought about by new media (video, interactive installations, interactive guidebooks). Apart from the physical space the viewer, through scanning QC codes, is granted access to virtual space commenting on what he or she can see, alternative to the exhibition

[17] Margolis writes: *There is surely no way to answer the question,* „What is a museum" or „What is a museum **for**?" if one intends to get the answer right. Or, perhaps the best answer – the slyest – is that museum function best … if they preserve a certain indeterminacy of function at the same time they convey a sense of function or purpose. One may as well ask, "What is a living room for?" (J. Margolis, *The Idea of an Art Museum*, in: *The Idea of The Museum: Philosophical, Artistic and Political Questions*, red. L. Aagaard-Mogensen, [w:] *Problem in Contemporary Philosophy. 6*, New York 1988, s. 171).

[18] L. Kelly, *Visitors and Learning*, [w:] *Museum Revolution. How Museums Change and are Changed*, red. S.J. Knell, A. MacLeod, S. Watson, London - New York 2007, s. 282–284.

itself. The environment of an exhibition constitutes a dynamically fluid and mediatized sphere with interwoven threads. The image and sensuality are accorded greater importance while enabling the viewing public to be more active results in the change of the purpose of theatricalization: performative teaching emerges in place of the staging of a secular ritual[19].

Thus now the museum is likened to a supermarket of culture[20], which gives no room for attentive contemplation or reflection. Theoreticians argue that the Disneyfication of the museum called postmodern leads to its focussing on the postmodern corporatization and the notion of museum as ritual entertainment, "Consequently, we find the interesting situation of an audience expecting both value for its entertainment dollar and some form of sedated pleasure and spiritual nourishment"[21]. Kalin maintains that the museum of art has adopted the modes of participations from theme parks and employs them in its educational practices[22]. The notes of criticism and irony sounding in such comments are meant to discredit the position of the museum of art. A number of theoreticians, however, assert that major national museums of art have remained modernist institutions[23], and the initiatives they undertake in order to activate the public by no means undermine the authority of the museum, which, despite the Disneyfication, still expresses its position on the ideals of art, social identity and so forth, and is political in the sense of the term employed by Jacques Ranciére. The principle of double coding still holds, only aesthetic codes are changing: works of art partake in the code of contemplation as far as their own value is concerned and in the code of entertainment, where the Disneyfication comes into play. Nevertheless, not every exhibition of art meets the requirements for contemplation; in the museums where new media (video, interactive art) dominate, interaction has replaced contemplation, and, as a consequence, entertainment has also assumed a different character. Owing to the individualization and diversity of museums, the principle of double coding of various aesthetics, their manifestations and the degree of entertainment aesthetics contribution, must be examined separately in each individual case.

---

[19] J. Fraser, *Museum – Drama, Rytual and Power*, [w:] *Museum Revolution…*, s. 299–301.

[20] J. Clair, *Kryzys muzeów. Globalizacja kultury*, tłum. M. Kłoczowska, Gdańsk 2009, s. 7.

[21] K. Sayre, C. King, *Entertainment and Society: Influences, Impacts and Innovations*, New York - London 2010, s. 43.

[22] N. M. Kalin, *Disneyfied/ized Participation in the Art Museum*, [w:] *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, red. J.A. Sandlin, J. C. Garlen, New York 2016, s. 174.

[23] M. Bal, *Double Exposures. The Subject of Cultual Analysis*, New York - London 1996, s. 35–137.

In the case of the Upper Silesian Museum in Katowice the double coding is most evident in the division into the space of the painting exhibition and the exhibition of the history of Silesia. Whereas the aesthetics of contemplation dominates the former, the latter is ruled by the aesthetics of entertainment. The new building housing the Upper Silesian Museum, erected on the site of a disused mine, has adapted the post-industrial space for art. The Museum, situated on the hill, some distance from the city centre, makes up a closed-off building complex. The layout, combing light colour cubes and the buildings of the disused mine, arouses curiosity rather than deference. The entrance to the Museum from the car park resembles a supermarket entrance, which makes for the smooth passage from the world of everyday life to the world of art. The museum foyer, however, opens vast monumental space with ramps in front of the viewer, giving an impression of grandeur, a sort of visual persuasion to convince the public of the high standing of the place. The exhibition of Polish painting is meandering in its arrangement, and the passage from the display of traditional art to contemporary art culminates in the exhibition of the works of the amateur artists, miners from Silesia. In spite of spatial diversification of viewing planes, the freedom of movement and the images projected on the walls, the exhibition is governed by the code of contemplation due to the fact that works deprived of their original context encourage attentive perception and reflection. Nonetheless, the code is considerably weakened by the democratic ideals of art, which allow for the presentation of the amateur artists (who established their own artistic group) as equal alongside the works of academic art.

Going down to the lower level – the concept of floors descending underground refers to the practice of miners going down the mine – the viewer is transported to the territory of ludic activities. The exhibition dedicated to the history of Upper Silesia in particular resembles a stage production with viewers, with their perceptions, knowledge and emotions, constituting its integral part. Each room has its own dramatic sound landscape which corresponds to its setting. Contrary to the aesthetics of contemplation, which has its basis in classical aesthetic theories, the aesthetics of entertainment has no solid philosophical grounding and as such needs to be situated in a social, cultural as well as technological context. It can be seen as a multisensory experience augmented by new media applied in the space of an exhibition, as distraction, playfulness, a casual approach to an object, as a conviction that one is neither controlled nor disciplined. Jean Baudrillard calls the museum (with reference to the

Pompidou Centre) an entertainment machine, which sells art deprived of depth to the masses[24], but I am more inclined to agree with Mike Fatherstone, who argues that the museum is being transformed into the space of spectacles, impressions, illusions and montage under the supervision of the experts in symbols, who are investing new experiences and cultural signs with meaning and intellectual expression while at the same time preserving the superior status of culture[25].

Podwójny kod estetyki w muzea sztuki

W artykule śledzę związki rozrywki (przyjemność zmysłowa) i kontemplacji (przyjemność refleksyjna) w praktykach eksponowania dzieł sztuki w muzeum. Modernistyczne muzeum wciela w układzie dzieł estetykę Kanta i Hegla, zdecydowanie przeciwstawia rozrywkę kontemplacji. Natomiast muzeum końca XX wieku wprowadza elementy rozrywki, jednak wbrew krytykom tej praktyki, kontemplacja jest nadal możliwa. Obie estetyki rozrywki i kontemplacji tworzą podwójny kod estetyki realizowanej w muzeum najnowszym. Przekonuję o tym, biorąc pod uwagę modelowy typ muzeum, jakim jest Narodowe Muzeum Sztuki.

Keywords: museum of art, contemplation, pleasure, entertainment, aesthetic, double coding

Słowa kluczowe: muzeum sztuki, kontemplacja, przyjemność, rozrywka, estetyka, podwójne kodowanie

[24] J.Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, tłum. S.F. Glaser, Michigen 1994, s. 61.

[25] M. Featherstone, *Postmodernism and the Aestheticization of Everyday Life*, [w:] *Modernity and Identity*, red. S. Lash, J. Friedman, Oxford 1992, s. 267.