



Pablo Bronstein, *Historical Dances in an Antique Setting*, Tate Britain, 2016

OASE #111

Staging the Museum

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Museums have always been more than simply places of careful preservation and interpretation. They are also places where the encounter of visitors and objects, and stories, are staged visually and spatially. Individual objects are put on display and entire collections are presented in meaningful constellations. But museums are traditionally also places where **a visit is staged**, where civilising rituals are performed.¹ Such staged visits are not limited to a stroll through the showrooms, but basically cover the entire publicly accessible side of museums, including hallways and lobbies, corridors and courtyards, auditoriums, museum bars and other ‘ancillary spaces’. Architecture stages museum visits, no matter how formal or informal.

In this regard, the building is not only a framework that allows art or other objects to be shown, but also a framework for specific social events. This includes locally applicable codes of conduct and supervision. For Paul Valéry, this disciplining spoils his pleasure: ‘At the first step towards the beautiful things, a hand takes away my walking stick, and an inscription forbids me to smoke.’² Perhaps today smartphones are the indispensable prostheses for a museum visit. Unlike artists’ sketchbooks in museum rooms in the past, they not only ‘copy’ what can be seen in the rooms, but record the entire visit.

In nineteenth-century monumental art museums, the **transition** from city to interior was largely dominated by a dramatic crossing of the museum framework, and by the build-up of the contemplative gaze that was expected there. When climbing the stairs of Schinkel’s Altes Museum, or crossing the pergola along the ponds at Berlage’s Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, the visitor is guided away from the everyday world, to make a mental transition to a place ‘outside the world’, to a state of receptivity, aesthetic contemplation and introspection. The post-war ideal of democratisation, however, rather favoured the museum without (symbolical) ‘thresholds’, with squares and streets inside and outside that seem to want to abolish the museum-city border. More and more museums are bringing spaces with content into the freely accessible reception area with lobbies, bookshops and restaurants – the boundary between freely accessible space and paid entrance becomes a boundary within the building, which may or may not be marked with architecture.

¹ Carol Duncan, *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995).

² Paul Valéry. ‘Le problème des musées [1923]’, in: *Œuvres - tome II: Pièces sur l’art* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 1290.

At the same time, other **internal borders** are being reviewed, those **between front and backstage**: storage areas are being made accessible, visitors can look inside restoration workshops and even residency studios.

This development ties in with a paradigm shift that, especially, but not only, art museums have seen in recent decades, and which Boris Groys has called the ‘theatricalisation of the museum’: ‘More and more, contemporary museums are being transformed from spaces for permanent collections into **stages for temporary curatorial projects**.’³ Showing exhibition projects takes the place of displaying individual works/collection pieces or permanent collections. Exhibitions do not just bring varying content or new narratives, they also change the nature of their host institution and of the museum’s staging. ‘Today, the museum ceases to be a space of contemplation but rather becomes a place where things happen.’⁴ And these events are exhibitions that are keen to involve their visitors as actors, but also programmed lectures, conferences, readings, screenings, concerts, educational workshops, etcetera. This ephemeral activity is documented, often digitally broadcasted, and archived in the new ‘meta-collections’ of museums and sometimes shown in ‘meta-displays’ about museums’ histories and operations.

This theatricalisation is in line with the logics of the entertainment industry, but cannot be reduced to this: after all, it concerns changes that involve fundamental museum aspects around the construction of meaning and memory, and the spatial mediation between visitor and content.

Call for Abstracts

For this issue of *OASE* we are seeking contributions that examine aspects of the architectural staging of museum visits and museum activity. In this way, the issue aims to break away from the recent critical discussion on museum architecture, which has focused mainly on the architecture of exhibition spaces, or on the urban role of iconic museum buildings.

We are interested in focused discussions of relevant contemporary or historical museum buildings, renovations and furnishings, as well as discussions of ideas, general developments and exceptions.

They develop questions such as:

- **How exactly does architecture stage visits to museums?**
Is it a matter of architectural motifs and symbolic thresholds, of routing and sequence, of distributions of functions, of furnishing and refurbishment, of character and atmosphere?
- **How does the ‘museum décor’ *outside* the galleries interact with the changing curatorial and scenographic displays *inside* the galleries?**
Does the acceleration of alternating presentations just make the design of fixed stairs, lobbies, corridors, bars and belvederes outdated, or all the more important?
- **Can the museum also be cleared of staging?**
Do visible depots and other examples of ‘exposure’ of backstage activities disrupt the staged museum, or are they just an extension of it? And what is the importance of the aesthetics and rhetoric of gutted, ‘stripped down’ museum buildings in this regard?

Abstracts of maximally 500 words (for texts of c. 2,000 words) must be submitted in Dutch or in English no later than 10 January 2021 (18:00 Central European Time) via info@oasejournal.nl, together with the author’s name(s), e-mail address, professional affiliation and a short bio (150 words maximum).

³ Boris Groys, *In the Flow* (London: Verso, 2016), 19; Jens Hoffmann, *Theater of Exhibitions* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2015).

⁴ Groys, 18.