Fluxus art amusement and the museum of gags

Objectification and bafflement, encounter and engagement at the museum

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Abstract: *When museums are mentioned in connection with art that as a critical strategy generates primary bodily experience, it is usually to claim that they are incompatible. However, both museums and artists have developed new strategies to deal with the changing times. This article seeks to re-evaluate the claim that museums will always treat works as objects by comparing Fluxus works and their staging by Fluxus organiser George Maciunas to examples of newer work that seeks a similar kind of interaction with the viewer. The solution they suggest is documentation of the way a primary audience interacted with the work in order to make it available to the (secondary) museum audience. Current models of museum viewing tend to be oriented towards experience or data retrieval. The alternative, it is argued, is a museum that draws attention to the historicity, specificity and authoredness of the viewing situation. A museum that no longer distinguishes between artwork and mise-en-scène, but wants to document both. A museum that bridges the gap between the professional roles it performs and uses all the physical and communicative spaces at its disposal to make available the type of communication that the artwork originally sought to establish to a contemporary audience.*

Keywords: Fluxus, museums, bodily knowledge, experience, George Brecht, Tim Etchells, George Maciunas, Carsten Höller, Henry Flynt, experience economy, web 2.0.

Fluxus was one of many movements to emerge during the sixties that looked to primary bodily experience to avoid commercialisation. Fluxus' characteristic shape is the event, a simple everyday occurrence framed ever so slightly as art by means of an instruction or suggestion to the reader or performer. Fluxus

was mostly performed live or sold in the shape of cheap multiples, but not displayed in the shape of a precious and unique art object. Now it has ended up in the museum, often displayed in ways that, as German art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann puts it, effect "a return to the very conventions that had originally been

negated, the material object and the fact that it remains throughout history” (Hantelmann 2010:12). Art that was conceived as key to an event is preserved and displayed as an object. But what can museums and exhibition venues do about this? Conservation considerations render it impossible to make the material available for handling, as it was originally intended to.

The Dutch art historian Vivian van Saaze, in her book *Installation Art and the Museum* (2013) agrees with von Hantelmann on the undesirability of “freezing” the work. She argues that artworks do not *have* an identity, but *acquire* one during the course of what she calls their “career”, both before and after their acquisition. The museum professionals who engage with the work all create their own version of it: as an object for display or for keeping, as a document or as starting point for a verbal explication. That a work is nevertheless perceived as a single, unique object is due to the fact that their versions are compatible (Saaze 2013:100). Only if it circulates in incompatible versions is the object perceived as multiple. As long as everyone involved creates it as an original and authentic work, no multiplicity will be experienced (Saaze 2013:101).

Van Saaze does not mention the audience, even though the visitor is a stakeholder in this game of identities as well. Ever since museums’ embrace of constructivist learning strategies, it is understood that different visitors will understand a work differently. As the Australian educator Jane Deeth writes in an article called “Engaging Strangeness in the Art Museum” (2012), they often find modern and contemporary art baffling, if for different reasons. The usual solution is to add text, but that, Deeth points out, brings neither the work itself nor the visitor’s experience into play. Discursive explication needs the work

as a point of departure but does not require it to be present in order to produce learning. In fact, because aesthetic judgement can never be instrumental and interpretation is always instrumental, experience and interpretation must be seen as mutually exclusive (Deeth 2012:1–2).

Deeth’s solution is experience-based mediation that explicitly addresses the visitor’s questions and uncertainties, but visitors never arrive as blank slates. Their viewing habits and expectations are conditioned by a whole range of socially and historically determined values and conventions. During the sixties, art museums presented themselves as “White Cubes”. Fluxus was a critique of the values underlying the White Cube: the unique work of art, the artist-genius, the artwork as the perfect embodiment of the author’s intentions, passive contemplation as the only correct viewing mode. But the museum has changed beyond recognition, now mirroring itself in the experience economy or Web 2.0. If the museum could pass itself off as an ivory tower back then, no matter how ideological this claim was later shown to be, it now competes with other providers of experience-as-commodity or emulates the way the internet provides information; and either way, it is a provider on a market it has little possibility to steer.

Any exhibition that wants to do justice to Fluxus has to have primary bodily experience and the questioning of conventions in focus. As Fluxus scholar Hannah Higgins writes, Fluxus aimed to “generate primary knowledge and multisensory experience through exploration of prosaic things and experiences” within the context of an event that generates a temporary subject/object out of the act of handling something and thus “situates people radically within their corporal, sensory worlds” (Higgins 2002:67). In the new constellation, it is difficult

to have a truly primary experience because that territory is progressively colonised by the experience economy, while at the same time it becomes ever harder to see how Fluxus questioned conventions because they are no longer *our* conventions; and what makes it doubly difficult to experience the breach of conventions in a primary, physical manner is the barrier that is created between the work and the visitor by the new stress on experience.

So how can museums and exhibition venues best help their audience to navigate between instrumentalised experience and out-of-date critique? The solution chosen here is to seek help with artworks created after the 1960s that attempt something similar. This article is neither an in-depth reading of a limited number of artworks nor an exhaustive survey of all the ways in which primary bodily experience has been dealt with by artists and curators, but an argument that is helped along by a limited number of hand-picked works and strategies. Extending Hal Foster's argument from *The Return of the Real* (1996), that the post-war neo-avant-gardes used different means than the pre-war avant-gardes to the same ends or the same means to different ends, to the post-war period, it is here assumed that artists who (often implicitly) inherited Fluxus' goals and means have used them differently in response to changing circumstances. What makes their work especially relevant is that art has moved ever further into the domain of the curator and the mediator, thus highlighting the curatorial and educational dimension.

As the subject of a gallery display, Fluxus is, at the same time, a corpus of (original) works, a set of criteria for their selection, a way of mediating them that is significant in itself and an idea that motivates the selection and the mediation. The name refers to event-based works by a more or less defined group of artists

who were active from the late 1950s until the present, to a body of works selected by Fluxus' namer and organiser George Maciunas, to Maciunas' way of staging and producing Fluxus works and to his and other Fluxus organisers' reasons for selecting particular works for Fluxus and staging or producing them in a particular way. These aspects are reflected in the sections that this article consists of. The first section deals with a single work, the second with a curatorial format and the third with significant use of the gallery space. Fluxus works and activities are coupled with things as different as a work for cellphone, an exhibition in a suitcase and an exhibition of funfair attractions. The examples are not chosen because of a direct connection with Fluxus, but because they shed light on aspects of museum work which are relevant for displays of Fluxus in the present. A final section discusses them in the light of current ideas about the nature of the museum, its relationship with the object and its communication with the audience. It ends with a description of the museum restyled as a space of encounter, not just with works, but with viewing habits and expectations, both then and now.

THE ARTWORK AS A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In 1961, George Brecht, an artist whose name is intimately connected with Fluxus, sent out letters containing what he called "events". One of them was *Lucifer Event*, a matchbook with the event title printed on it. One of the recipients, the dancer and choreographer James Waring, wrote back: "Thank you for Lucifer event. It happened very beautifully" (Robinson 2008:272). Brecht describes his event works as "very private little enlightenments" that he simply "waited to notice occurring" (Brecht

1970:n.p.). The letter was a suitable vehicle for this type of work because the envelope ensures a private, one-on-one experience and the intimacy of the situation forces the receiver to make a personal choice, to keep it or to use it. Waring chose to do the latter, but either way, it would have been an enlightenment.

One has to know the context to understand the work, but the context for Brecht's work is easier to describe in writing than to illustrate visually. Museums are supposed to collect art, preserve it for future generations and introduce their visitors to the various guises that art has appeared in throughout the years. Brecht's language-based, instruction-based works are important to show because they stand right at the beginning of a tendency within the arts to embrace language and to include the viewer in the creative process. However, while a museum can show an envelope and its contents, conservational concerns make it impossible to let an audience handle it. The obvious solution is to add text, but as stated earlier, text only needs the work as a starting point and excludes experience. A turn to more recent art suggests an alternative solution.

The mail is rapidly disappearing as a means of communication. Today's equivalent would be the e-mail or the text message, which addresses the receiver in a similar way. The British artist Tim Etchells' *Surrender Control* (2001) does exactly that. People brave enough to text "SURRENDER" to an anonymous telephone number received 75 messages within the space of five days, all of them short instructions to do or consider something. The first one, sent on day one at 11.22 a.m., reads "Put your fingers in your mouth", the last one, sent five days later at midnight, "Forget the instructions you have received and the things you have done because of them. Forget everything, forget it completely and never speak of it to a soul" (Etchells 2001).

Like Brecht's events, Etchells' project addresses participants "in real time as they go about their lives and work [...] in a 'place' most commonly occupied by friends, family or lovers" (Etchells n.d.: n.p.). The 75th instruction even explicitly secures the privacy of the experience. Nevertheless, Etchells is willing to consider the possibility of representation. As text messages received by an individual, the instructions cause the work to unfold itself, but printed on cards together with the time and date of their sending, he writes, they document it. Documentation is an acceptable solution so long as it allows people to "consider the entire frame of the piece and to imagine what it might have been like to receive messages of that kind at the times specified" (Etchells 2014: n.p.).

Etchells' solution is to show the work as part of its own documentation. This is also seen as a way forward in conservational and curatorial circles. Tate conservator Pip Laurenson, for example, holds that in some cases it is more important to preserve a work's "identity" than its "state". The word "state" refers to an art object's intrinsic, objective and impersonal properties. Identity, by contrast, is a "cluster of work-defining properties which will include the artist's instructions, artist approved installations intended to act as models, an understanding of the context in which they were made and the willingness and ability of those acting as custodians of the work to be sensitive in the realisation of a good installation" (Laurenson 2006:11). A work's state is what it is, its identity what it does. Preserving it means documenting how the artist meant to show it and what the museum can do to reproduce those conditions. Etchells' proposal does exactly that.

Identity materialises itself at the meeting point of artistic intentions, expert knowledge and institutional resources and attitudes. The idea also features under the name of

“behaviour”, for example in the contexts of the *Variable Media Initiative* (1999–2004) and the *Inside Installations* programme (2004–2007)¹ or in British media scholar Beryl Graham and curator Sarah Cook’s book *Rethinking Curating* (2010). Following the latter’s misleadingly simple definition as “the ways in which the processes behind the production and the distribution of the artwork function” (Graham & Cook 2010:5), the behaviour of Brecht’s and Etchells’ works is their ability to transport a suggestion directly to the receiver, on a one-on-one basis, within his or her own environment. In order to preserve and show it, documentary material is essential, even if this goes against the artist’s wishes or intentions. The approach means rethinking it in terms of performance and performance documentation; rethinking Brecht’s work as an offer of communication that is not embodied in the matchbook but only takes it as its point of departure and as a work with a career that involves both a primary audience of participants and a secondary one of spectators.

CURATING EXPERIENCE

Brecht’s and Etchells’ works are art, but with a clear curatorial dimension. They do not depend on convention to tell the audience what to see and do, but actively try to orchestrate their behaviour. However, their works have been curated as well. Curators create meaningful frameworks for the works to appear in, and since the 1960s they increasingly do so in collaboration or competition with the artist. *Surrender Control* was commissioned by curator Matt Locke of The Media Centre in Huddersfield (UK), and he had his own practical and curatorial reasons to engage with the text messaging as medium. On the one hand, he noticed that locals hardly visited his

facility devoted to the promotion of digital art, but used text messaging all the time. On the other hand, he became intrigued by the idea of not knowing beforehand where and when a work would be experienced (Locke 2014:n.p.). Such contextual information is vital for the understanding of Etchells’ work, but the same can be said about Fluxus.

It is impossible to speak of Fluxus without mentioning George Maciunas (1931–1978), the Lithuanian-American designer, architect, artist and all-round organiser who coined the name, organised most Fluxus festivals and edited and produced most Fluxus publications and multiples. As the German curator and art historian Dorothee Richter points out, Maciunas’ organisational activities resembled those of a curator. Acting as a “meta-artist”, he produced meaning and exercised power as a contemporary curator might (Richter 2013:52–53). He developed presentational strategies for Fluxus that had meaning in themselves, included artists and works he found to embody the idea of Fluxus and excluded people he saw as a threat to the project.

However, he never developed a Fluxus exhibition format. What comes closest are Maciunas’ *Fluxkits*, suitcases containing Fluxus publications and multiples, or *Fluxboxes* (fig. 1). His decision to mass-produce Fluxus works, to collect them in Fluxkits and to make them available by mail-order was a curatorial one. In a well-known manifesto from 1965 he wrote: “Fluxus art amusement must be simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificances, require no skill or countless rehearsals, have no commodity or institutional value. The value of art-amusement must be lowered by making it unlimited, mass produced, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all” (Hendricks 1981:260). In an all-out revolt against the art world and

Fig. 1. Larry Miller, Orifice Flux Plugs, 1974. Fluxbox with plugs in various sizes, 22.2 × 33.3 × 6.5 cm. Ken Friedman Fluxus Collection, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

its conventions, Maciunas advocated a form that could no longer be produced, sold and consumed as art, but existed as a daily necessity or a leisure-time activity. In the extended use of the notion of the curatorial as employed by Richter, this is, indeed, a form of curation. It presents the museum with the challenge of finding a way to exhibit an exhibition.

In 2004, the Chinese artists Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong, Jin Feng sr. and jr., Tang Maohong, Huang Kui, Shao Yi and Yu Li, in collaboration with BizArt in Shanghai, organised *Dial 62761232*, also known as *Kuaidi* (“Delivery”). *Dial 62761232* was another exhibition in a suitcase, although in this case it was ordered by telephone and delivered by fifteen specially

trained couriers. Art journalist Chen Xhingyu describes the reaction of one caller: “David Chitayat, who works in a sourcing company, was curious about such an exhibition but was skeptical about calling, as were most of his colleagues. But in the end everyone in his office enjoyed it; he believes it was the experience rather than the art itself that people were really keen on” (Chen 2014:n.p.). For the organisers, the project was an answer to the problem signalled at the start of this article, that contemporary art tends to be seen as “inaccessible and obscure, something for scholars to analyse and institutions to revere”. To judge by Chitayat’s reaction, they succeeded. However, the project was more than that. It

Fig. 2. DIAL 62761232. A Document On A Contemporary Art Event, ShanghART, October 2010–June 2011. Installation view. Photo: ShanghART.

was also intended to make people “walk away thinking that there are alternative ways to present art aside from exhibiting in museums or galleries” (Chen:n.p.). Although much less radical than Maciunas’ project, *Dial 62761232* embodied reflection about the conventions of art mediation and consumption.

In contrast to Fluxus, exhibition was always a possibility for *Dial 62761232*.² Displays featured one of the fifteen suitcases and its contents, all laid out in glass cases, accompanied by photographs that documented the performance of the couriers and the reactions of the audience (fig. 2). This is exactly what British media art scholar Beryl Graham, in an article on behaviour and curation, offers as a way of capturing the performativity of the

work’s setting. Installation shots tend not to show any visitors, so Graham urges museums to document their audience’s interaction with the works on display and even to employ crowd-sourced documentation in order to capture the behaviour of the work and its installation (Graham 2013:253). Once again, documentation is seen as an answer to the problem of objectification. Confronting a secondary audience of viewers with images of a primary audience of participants is a documentary gesture, but one in which Graham sees further potential. The question is whether such documentation differs significantly from a wall panel; whether it is capable of overcoming the divide between experience and interpretation.

EXPERIENCE AND FACILITIES

Apart from documentation, Graham also speaks of the possibility of making more active use of museum facilities that display the same behaviour as the work. The interactivity of a museum's educational activities, for example, matches that of much new media art. The computers employed by both form an obvious link, but as a comparison between a *Flux-Labyrinth* designed by Maciunas and a number of works by Belgian artist Carsten Höller that employ funfair attractions will show, there are other ways in which museum facilities can be engaged to support artworks.

Fluxus artist Larry Miller, who helped to build the *Flux-Labyrinth* at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 1976, has described it as "a walk-in Fluxbox funhouse" (Williams & Noël 1997:252–253). It contained doors that had to be opened in various ways, rubber bands at knee height that the visitor had to step over, a smell room, an inverted room, foam steps, shoe steps and much, much more. Unimpeded progress from work to work is essential to support the creation of the visitor as the disembodied eye of White Cube viewing, but the *Flux-Labyrinth* turns the very act of propelling oneself through space into an experience. It functions as an extra corridor that offers the experience of walking corridors as an event in itself.

Reflecting on the project, Maciunas said in 1977 that Fluxus objects and activities were generally meant to be "funny things". "Usually kids like our thing", he added, "or just people that don't expect art". He held this to be essential for Fluxus: the Fluxshop never sold a thing, he said, but visitors always had a lot of fun. Museums never bought Fluxus, but "[i]f there was a museum of gags, then we would probably be represented". No doubt he spoke against the background of his own anti-

institutional agenda, but his statements also illustrate the kind of behaviour he meant to build into Fluxus: a directness of address that is alien to the cerebral world of the museum but inherent in games and gags. His proposed and realised environments illustrate equally clearly how this was to be brought about: by letting Fluxus hitch a ride with an everyday act that is disqualified as art and/or hidden from sight at the art institution.

If the *Flux-Labyrinth* constituted a world of its own, Carsten Höller's slides, such as the five that comprised the exhibition *Test Site* at Tate Modern in 2006, adopt an altogether more hybrid position, sometimes cutting through the walls, floors and ceilings of exhibition spaces, playing havoc with their internal organisation, mixing exhibition spaces and service areas and confusing the spaces of art and daily life. Visitors who had climbed the staircases, walked the corridors and rooms and filed past the art on display, were sent corkscrewing down, whooping and screaming, by an entirely different and much faster route. Höller described the experience of sliding by means of a phrase by the French author Roger Caillois as a "voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind" (Caillois 2006:77).

The *Flux-Labyrinth* tried to speak via experience alone, but Höller supplemented the experience of sliding with another typical museum product: a catalogue. In two volumes, it adds new incarnations to the work that was physically present at the Tate. The first features a short history of the slide, a feasibility study by General Public Agency for the installation of slides in the area of London where the 2012 Summer Olympics were due to take place and a plan for a hypothetical slide house by Foreign Office Architects. The second, a collection of literary, philosophical and scientific texts selected by Höller, emulates the experience of

sliding in words. They contextualise the pure experience of sliding by means of documents that invite introspection and reflection. The measured pace of the museum visit is broken by the exhilaration of the slide, which in turn is broken by the measured pace of reflection – all within the museum repertoire, but in a way that sheds a new and unexpected light on museum viewing.

Two years later, Höller exhibited a number of slowed-down funfair rides at the exhibition *Carroussel* at Kunsthaus Bregenz. Under the pseudonym Carl Roitmeister, he contributed two articles to the catalogue in which he reflects on his means and aims.³ He starts by describing the rides as mere rotating devices and the experience on offer as so slight that it does not justify the effort of installing and de-installing them (Roitmeister 2008:15), but this objective critique is followed by an argument in favour of subjective assessment of “desirability”. The first step towards this is to eliminate the undesirable. The resulting maybe-desirables, ranging from leisure activities with a clear social function to “pure research”, is then assessed by addressing the memory of one’s personal engagement with them (Roitmeister 2008:45). As a third step, one can survey the desirables that remain by taking into account both desirability and engagement. Höller underlines the importance of subjective assessment and its event character by adding a DVD insert in the catalogue that, contrary to conventional practice, shows visitors interacting with the various works.

Compared to Höller’s constructivist appreciation scheme that distinguishes between the known and the sensed, the experienced and the remembered, Maciunas’ concept of “fun” sounds decidedly essentialist. Based on artist/philosopher Henry Flynt’s concept of the “just-liked”, it covers all activities that in the words

of the latter are “not biologically or socially necessary, do not have cognitive value and have no sophistication-proving significance” (Flynt 1963:n.p.). The just-liked comes close to what Höller calls “pure research”, but whereas Maciunas saw it as the opposite of that particular socially productive leisure activity that is art appreciation, Höller places them on the same scale.

The crucial difference is that Höller does not offer the experience for its own sake, but as a thing to be remembered and assessed, and that he supports this by drawing text and images into the sphere of the work. To him, aesthetics and interpretation are not as mutually exclusive as Deeth claims they are, experience being only worthwhile if it is followed by reflection. As generators of experience, his slides and funfair rides are not worth the effort of installing and de-installing, but as generators of an experience that is then analysed and contextualised, they are. As he said about *Test Site*, “you read [the experience] according to who you are”. However, he acknowledges the effect of museum performativity as well, stating that understanding is context-dependent and that in a museum, understanding of work as sculpture should also be possible (Zahm 2013:n.p.). He provides footage of people interacting with his works to point out that the material components are invitations to interact, just as he provides supplementary texts to identify other possible contexts. Photographs and text no longer serve as documentation, but as essential elements of the work itself, co-productive of its behaviour.

EXPERIENCE, DATA AND ENCOUNTER

Discursive interpretation may need neither the object nor the experience of interacting with it, but the works discussed above suggest

that added text and documentation can speak to experience in a different manner. For Etchells, this is done by inviting a secondary audience to speculate about what it had been like to experience the actual work, for Höller by providing enjoyment under circumstances that underline the importance of reflection and by supplying a record of visitor interaction. Etchells' example rolls the work and the wall panel into one, Höller's activates the spaces of the museum in a different manner and makes the catalogue an integral part of the work. Moreover, the example of *Dial 62761232* suggests that such solutions do not have to be sanctioned by an artist/creator, but can also be purely curatorial.

Displaying work in this manner requires an awareness of the kind of communication that is on offer, of the intentions behind the work, of the behaviours inherent in the medium and of the implications of its choice. It requires an awareness of the identity of the sender (artist, curator or both) and the receiver (primary or secondary audience). It requires a shift of focus from what the work *is* to what it *does*. It requires knowledge of the work's career, of the guises it has appeared in and the circumstances that govern its manifestation in the present. It requires a willingness to see the unique art object transformed into an assemblage of material that can only refer to the work, authority no longer residing in the object but in research and documentation.

However, current viewing conditions play a role as well, and these require an entirely different form of professionalism. It is essential for museums to be aware of them, both because they are likely to be different from those implied in older works and because they condition the sort of experience the museum can offer; and to complicate things further, they are not entirely within the museum's control. In her

book *Museum Bodies* (2012), British gallery studies scholar Helen Rees Leahy argues that visitors, apart from following written and spoken instructions issued by the institution, are also governed by techniques that they have already mastered and conventions that they have already internalised (Rees Leahy 2012:9). Visitors not only react, but act as well.

At present, at least two basic sets of rules and conventions are in operation, relative to the experience economy and web 2.0. The first model was described in 2001 by James Cuno, president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, when he spoke of the "new and spectacular, bright and shiny, fun and exciting museums" that offer the "multiplex excitement" that the "new economy" demands (Cuno 2001:45). He equates the experience economy with the constructivist museum and its constructivist learning strategies that reduce complexity to "soundbite-sized explanations" (Cuno 2001:52). Therefore, he sees a new focus on authenticity and aesthetic appreciation as a way out, either by drawing attention to the material characteristics of the work or by creating intimate spaces containing only a few works (Cuno 2001:52–53).

The American economists Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, inventors of the term "experience economy", also see authenticity as the museum's most important asset, but for them, authenticity is discursive instead of work-intrinsic. Based on an opposition between "natural" and "man-made", they judge both art and the museum to be artificial and therefore inauthentic. Artworks, they say, are *rendered* authentic; authenticity is a performance, and its effectiveness depends upon museums' success in presenting themselves as coherent wholes and ensuring that everything they say and do fits what they say they are (Pine & Gilmore 2007:3–4).

Whether they adopt an essentialist or a constructivist attitude towards authenticity, both Cuno and Pine & Gilmore take the museum as their point of departure. In the catalogue of *Test Site*, Tate curator Jessica Morgan addresses the issue from the point of view of the audience. She points out that museums have always existed for their audiences and that huge crowds can therefore only be a good thing. Maybe they prevent contemplation, but “though we may occasionally lose one form of artistic experience, surely there is the potential for others” (Morgan 2006:12). Experience comes in many guises, and one is as good as the other. If people flock to the museum, the experience on offer must be a good one, even if we do not yet know what it is.

This view is contradicted by Rees Leahy, who claims that the Unilever series, of which *Test Site* was a part, has created “a flow of leisured, entertainment-seeking and self-conscious bodies” who “consume the Turbine Hall as playground and photo opportunity” (Rees Leahy 2012:111). What contemplation is replaced with is a focus on the self, either having fun or capturing it for sharing on the social media. Graham signals that more and more museums lift the ban on photography so that people can share their experiences on the social media and thinks positively about the development because it ensures that people’s way of interacting with the work is documented (Graham 2013:252). Following Rees Leahy, what is documented may well be the behaviour that belongs to the experience economy, not the behaviour that belongs to the work or its curation. She does not draw this conclusion herself, but a museum that turns itself over to the experience economy might, despite its best curatorial and educational efforts, do no more than put itself at the audience’s disposal to enjoy itself as it knows best.

Something similar can be said of the museum that mirrors itself in Web 2.0. According to American art historian, critic and theorist Mike Pepi, museums, fearful of being left behind by the information age, start to treat their collections as structured data sets or sets of relations among data (Pepi 2014:n.p.). While this may keep the crowds coming, it also means that the institution is converted into “a market-ready form” which can only establish a relationship with the visitor that is “entrepreneurial, self-directed and deterritorialised”. Collections and displays are thus reduced to “one’s personal toy box” and museums shift the focus of their professional engagement with art from contextualisation to “ordered, efficient, end-user retrieval”.

Pepi speaks of imitation, the Russian philosopher and art theorist Boris Groys of parallel evolution. What the internet, the artwork and the museum have in common, Groys argues in an article called “Entering the Flow” (2013), is that they are all spaces where the flow of time is enacted and experienced (Groys 2013:[7]). In modernist times, the museum and the artist embraced similar ideals of timelessness, the artist setting out to embody eternal ideals of beauty, the museum to select works with universal relevance and preserve them unchanged (Groys 2013:[1]). Artists’ embrace of change and eventness during the 1960s, a development that Fluxus is a prominent exponent of, initially led to conflict, but when the museum abandoned its dream of universality and eternal relevance, and even more so when the curated exhibition became the standard mode of display, the two were harmonised (Groys 2013:[3+6]). From a depot for immobilised things, the museum became a stage for the flow of art events.

The argument becomes particularly relevant when Groys turns to reproduction and

documentation. Authentic works of art, he argues, can be reproduced, but event-based works, and by extension curated exhibitions, can only be documented. The idea of artworks with universal relevance implies an absolute gaze, while an event-based artwork can only be observed in a fragmented, partial manner. This is automatically true of event-based works, but after the museum's embrace of historical time and space, older artworks are affected as well. In the museum-as-stage, all works become events, and therefore documentable rather than reproducible (Groys 2013:[11]). This, in turn has implications for the status of documentation. If reproduction destroys the authentic work's aura by duplicating it,

documentation gives the artwork a new aura, not derived from an opposition between original and unoriginal but between "now and here" and "then and there". The artwork-as-event and the museum-as-stage offer the possibility of assessing the temporality of art (Groys 2013:[11–12]).

Together, these positions can be used to draw a semiotic square in which the first position is the idea of the museum as created by the work, the second the idea of the museum as created by the visitor, the third the idea of the museum as created by its staff on the basis of their assessment of the audience's likes and dislikes and the fourth an as yet untouched-upon understanding of the institution as encounter

Fig. 3. Semiotic square indicating the relationship between four ideas of the nature of the museum in relation to its understanding of the objects on display and the expectations of the audience. Peter van der Meijden, 2016.

102 that follows logically from the other three (Fig. 3). The museum as created by the work comes first because it is the conventional view: work that claims eternal relevance creates a museum that collects on the same basis and aims to preserve for eternity. The model that is most directly opposed to it is the museum created by the visitor as a consumer of experiences. The third position, which is implied by the second but contradicts the first, is the museum created by museum professionals in order to accommodate the audience's wishes by making the works on display available for enjoyment or browsing. It contradicts a focus on the work, while being implied by audience behaviour. The fourth position has to be one that is implied by the first, the idea of the museum as shaped by the work, but contradicts the second and third, the museum as shaped by the audience or shaped by its staff purely on the basis of what it knows or expects that the audience wants.

A hint as to its identity is given by an example used by Rees Leahy. During an exhibition called "Art On the Line" at the Courtauld Institute in 2002, Canadian art historian David Solkin supplemented a recreation of a nineteenth-century academic hanging with a screen in an adjoining gallery that provided closed circuit video footage of the audience in the exhibition (Rees Leahy 2012:116–117). The intervention made an older mode of viewing visible to a contemporary audience and sensitised it by implication to its own. An expert's reconstruction of a historical set of expectations and their embodiment was confronted with the viewers' expectations in order to highlight both. The setup departs from a focus on the individual object as the default option and recreates the exhibition space as a stage, but does not give up the expert role in favour of an audience-oriented one.

Something similar is suggested in more general terms by Spanish anthropologist Roger Sansi in a discussion of the exhibition politics of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA), which under Manuel Borja-Villell (director 1998–2008) turned its focus to conceptual art, presenting its collection not as works, but as documents and developing itself into a space for public debate (Sansi 2012:220). The ephemeral remains that take pride of place in the museum's collection are not particularly interesting as images, but important as traces of past events. This demands another way of presenting them. Sansi quotes Borja as saying that "a true collection is not just the mere accumulation of souvenirs and 'dead materials', but it can constitute an immense reservoir of experiences and images, open and polymorphous" (Sansi 2012:223). While lacking in aesthetic appeal, a collection of documentary material has the potential to generate endless meanings and experiences. (Sansi 2012:224). This may sound like the museum as modelled on web 2.0, but in fact what Sansi defines is a position that allows museum professionals and other experts to continue to play a role. His solution is a fusion of the artwork as spectacle and the artwork as data that turns the museum into a "a good, cultural shopping mall"; not just another provider of experiences or data, but of archives transformed into a "lively experience" or spectacles supplemented with "encounters" (Sansi 2012:228).

The word "encounter" sums up much what is said here. It describes the difference between Brecht's *Lucifer Event* and a matchbook. The conventional idea of the work as a unique object may make it hard to see a matchbook as an initiator of encounters when presented on its own, but together with Waring's letter it creates an assemblage that facilitates such

a perception. Similarly, Etchells' instructions for *Surrender Control* may resemble a work too much to be able to illustrate the way in which they create an encounter in isolation, but combined with the dates and times of their sending, they can. Experientiality is not just something physical, but something imagined as well, and objects and documents on display can do much to engage the visitor's imagination.

Whether it is the artist, the curator or both who frame the encounter, the framework is essential for the way in which the work generates meaning and has to be mediated along with the work. Maciunas, to return to the starting point of this article, created Fluxus both as a dissemination platform that suits the work – his *Fluxkits* communicate in the same way as Brecht's postal works – and as a statement about the art world. The work meets its primary audience in a curated encounter that is essential for an understanding of both the work and Fluxus. Therefore, if a museum display is to do them justice, the curated encounter has to be part of the presentation. The secondary audience of viewers has to be confronted with the work and its curation, in a manner that represents the form of communication it invites to. It does not have to duplicate it, but it has to invite to speculation about what it was like to interact with the work and the framework for its meeting with its primary audience of participants.

In each of the examples discussed here, the art object is replaced with an ensemble of materials that point towards the work without presenting themselves as the work's single and unique embodiment. The work is made multiple and the viewer is invited to create an image of it as s/he considers each item in turn as if visiting an exhibition instead of viewing a work. The relationship between the items on

display is different from that between the art object and the wall panel. All of them are on display, so all of them partake of the work's authenticity. As with the holdings of MACBA, the material, artworks and examples of their use, becomes a reservoir of experiences and images. Encountering it invites visitors to engage with it in their own way; to imagine earlier encounters and compare them with their own response.

Displays built up along these lines cannot be reduced to the insights of art professionals or to the uses it is put to by an audience alone. The former will have to meet the latter, both in the museum's reconstruction of the artwork's past career and in its engagement with it in the present. This means that more material is needed to show fewer works. It also means that the museum professionals that create the work in multiple incarnations during the course of their professional engagement with them, have to collaborate. Ensembles consisting of works and documentation involve the curator and the conservator as well as the archivist, while the educator/mediator contributes knowledge about audience behaviour and expectations. Between them, they create a space where the visitor can experience the work and reflect on his/her experience in an encounter that necessarily involves both the insights of the expert and the lived reality of the museum visit; a visit to the museum in the widest possible sense, its display areas as well as its service areas, its physical as well as its discursive and digital spaces.

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NOTES

1. See their respective websites for more information: <http://variablemedia.net/e/index.html> and <http://www.inside-installations.org/home/index.php>.
2. Dial 6276 has been exhibited twice, once as on its own, under the title *DIAL 62761232, A Document On A Contemporary Art Event* (ShanghArt, Shanghai, October 2010–June 2011) and once as a part of the exhibition *Dai Hanzhi: 5 000 Artists at Witte de With Contemporary Art*, Rotterdam, 4 September 2014–4 January 2015.
3. That Roitmeister is in fact Höller is revealed in the article in a roundabout way. To start with, “Carl Roitmeister” writes about a classmate called Karl with a “K”. Next, he mentions Höller’s contribution to the exhibition *Wrong* at Galerie Klosterfelde in Berlin in 2006, which consisted of the artist spelling his name “Karsten”. Once the connection between Karl and Karsten is established, he begins mentioning them together in the same sentence. It is never Carl Roitmeister and Carsten Höller that are equated, but only their negatives, Karl and Karsten.

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