The poetics and prosaics of making exhibitions.
A personal reflection on the Centenary Gallery

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Abstract By selecting and describing different life-stages in the production of one particular exhibition - the permanent ethnographic displays in the Centenary Gallery of the Horniman Museum, London - this paper examines the dialogical nature of exhibition making. From curatorial conception, through design, to the Museum’s corporate modifications, the role of the curator as dominant producer is problematised and the differentiated languages of museum practice are interrogated. Attention is particularly focused on the intersections and interactions between and across these different professional languages which serve to constitute, transform and fix exhibitionary media.

Key words Museum ethnography; exhibitionary process; history of collecting; curatorship.

Resumo Por meio da selecção e descrição de diferentes momentos no ciclo de vida da produção de uma exposição – a exposição permanente da Centenary Gallery do Horniman Museum de Londres – o presente artigo analisa a natureza dialógica do processo de montagem de exposições. A análise dos processos de concepção, de design e de transformação da organização do museu, permitem problematizar o papel do curador e colocar em questão as linguagens diferenciadas da prática museológica. O debate é centrado nas intersecções e interacções entre as diferentes linguagens profissionais que servem para constituir, transformar e fixar os meios expositivos.

Palavras-chave Etnografia de museus; processo expositivo; história de colecções; curadoria.
“Museums are never just spaces for the playing out of wider social relationships: a museum is a process as well as a structure” (Macdonald, 1996: 4; original emphasis).

“The phenomenon of internal dialogism…is present to a greater or lesser extent in all the realms of the life of discourse … in literary prose, … dialogism energizes from within the very mode in which the discourse conceives of its object and its means of expressing it, transforming the semantics and the syntactical structure of the discourse. Here the dialogical reciprocal orientation becomes, so to speak, an event of discourse itself, animating it and dramatizing it from within” (Bakhtin in Todorov, 1984: 65; original emphasis).

The performative act of making or ‘writing’ exhibitions is a creative, prosaic, and political process. Whereas semiotic or post-structuralist approaches to interrogating the ‘exhibition/curator/visitor’ matrix as ‘text/author/reader’ can be innovative and insightful (Porter, 1996; Levell and Shelton, 1998); by concentrating on the end product, the exhibition, rather than the process of exhibiting they run “the risk of wishing to fix meaning to the exclusion of the ‘hidden history’ of production” (Lidchi, 1997: 199). Furthermore, by overlooking the issues of production and the identity of the producer/s, they have the propensity to fuel either the stereotype of the museum as an anonymous monologic authorial voice or that of the curator as the legitimate and singular, phallocentric author (Levell, 1996). Although curators are generally responsible for originating exhibitions, the actualisation of display – the concepts, exhibits, texts, images, and spatial aesthetics – is the product of a complex process of communication, translation, and negotiation between internal and external subjects and agencies. Hence authorship as applied to exhibitions and curatorial practice is a problematic term and progressive curators, reflecting on their own experiences, have opted to re-inscribe their practice: describing their role as ‘facilitators’ (Shelton, 1995) or ‘translators’ (Mack, 2001). Such designations open the space for exploring the ‘dialogism’ or, what Todorov (1984: 60) examining Bakhtin’s work terms, ‘intertextuality’ of praxis,1 that fashions the poetry and prose of exhibi-

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1 Todorov’s structuralist interpretation has been critiqued by Morson and Emerson for reducing the complexity of Bakhtin’s conceptual understanding of the term ‘dialogue’ (Morson and Emerson, 1990: 6).
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The Centenary Gallery is a 'permanent' exhibition, located in the Emslie Horniman Gallery of the Horniman Museum, London; it opened to the public on 14 June 2002. The exhibition is intended to offer a series of quasi-chronological 'glimpses' at the history of the institution’s ethnographic collections, collectors, systems of classification and display. The critical biography that follows examines some of the poignant material transformations or different life-stages of this exhibition: from its conceptualisation in the curatorial section of the Anthropology Collections and Research group; through its visual realisation by designers; to its final transformation, following its appropriation by public services, from a display orientated to the Museum’s anthropology collections to a generic gallery to mark the institution’s centenary. The first part of this biography presents a descriptive account of the context and processes involved in developing the thematic concepts of the exhibition. The second and third parts are oriented to illuminating and discussing some of the transformative or dialogical facets of the exhibitionary process as concepts, objects and texts were re-translated by designers into the poetic language of display, and further modified by public services into the prosaic language of the Museum Profession. Because the name of the exhibition was one of the ongoing points of dialogical divergence between curatorial and public service sections, as will be explained later, for the purpose of this exegesis, echoing Benjamin, I have chosen to refer to the exhibition as the Ur-Exhibition. Lastly, before entering the descriptive account, it should be

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2 First, I would like to thank Michael Cameron, who ensured that the actual process of making the Ur-Exhibition was deeply stimulating and challenging. I would also like to thank Maria Ragan of the Horniman Museum for generously and efficiently spending time to answer my numerous questions.

3 The prefix ‘Ur’ is utilised to denote original or primitive form. Benjamin adopted the term ‘ur-phenomenon’ to apply to images in which traces of the modern present could be discerned (Buck-Morss, 1989: 71-4). I have chosen to adopt the ‘Ur’ prefix and refer to
noted that the interrogation of the processes of consumption is a fundamental requisite of analyses that set out to investigate the dialogical nature of exhibitions, however such a line of enquiry falls beyond the remit of this particular paper.

The exhibitionary chronotope

For Mikhail Bakhtin every artistic form is organised and constituted by its own particular ‘chronotope’ (1981: 840). A specific field of interconnected time and space relations which are not so much “visibly present in activity as they are the ground for activity” (Morson and Emerson, 1990: 369; original emphasis). Although Bakhtin restricted his analysis of chronotopes to literary criticism, it can equally and usefully be extended to examine the spatial and temporal dynamics underscoring exhibitionary phenomena. With this in mind, in order to appreciate the character of the Ur-Exhibition chronotope, it is essential to historically position the exhibition in the wider Ethnographic Redisplay (ERD) Project and in so doing situate my role as curator.

The Horniman Museum has one of the largest public ethnographic collections in the United Kingdom, numbering in excess of 70,000 objects (Shelton, 2001b: 281). From the beginning of the twentieth century, these collections were displayed in the South Hall, a large, balconied and vaulted gallery. In the early 1990s, however, major structural faults necessitated the dismantling of the ethnographic displays and the closure of the South Hall for an extended period while extensive works were carried out to remedy, renovate and restore the gallery. This precipitated closure of display and gallery, in many ways marked a boundary or threshold in the institution’s history. It opened a creative space for reflection and action, for innovating exhibitions and transforming curatorial working patterns and practices (see Shelton, 2000a). With government funding, approximately £1.3 million (2.15 million euros), set aside for the redisplay, as

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the ‘Centenary Gallery’ as the Ur-Exhibition to distinguish the archetypical and conceptual exhibition from the end product.

* An exchange rate of 1.65 euro = 1 GBP has been adopted throughout this paper.