

## Museum in Context

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### **Abstract**

In using the critical term museality in aesthetics of religion, it is our aim in this article to reveal the socio-cultural embeddedness of museums in Western societies and beyond. To do this we draw on two distinct cultural and sociological models of society, dispositive theory and Luhmann's communicational systems theory. Dispositive theory allows us to include non-discursive practices and materialisations in the aesthetic analysis of religious identification strategies mediated through museums and exhibitions. The boundaries, environment and self-referentiality of the system museum are discussed with a view to the shifting place and visibility of religious and secular messages in museum contexts. The focus on museality leads beyond museums to discover object wanderings, religious re-interpretations and museum displays in a number of other socio-cultural fields.

**Keywords**

museum, museality, aesthetics of religion, systems theory, discourse theory, dispositive, identity, media

**1. Introduction**

A museum is an institution as well as a—sometimes just virtual—place. It is part of a historical and social self-identifying process, serving as a means of power and self-representation for a society, or particular groups within a society, and determined by its relations with and distinction from other institutions, systems, and discursive fields in the same cultural space. Museums emerged and were formed as institutions in modern European societies and spread to non-European societies beginning in the late eighteenth century, but particularly from the early twentieth century onwards. This article, accordingly, takes its point of departure in the Paris Louvre, the British Museum, and the Glyptothek in Munich, i.e., the museum in its public exhibitional form, rather than in the sense of a general activity of collecting and exhibiting that can be traced further back in time.<sup>1</sup>

However, it is important to distinguish the critical term ‘museality’ from the historical institution of the museum and the discourse that accumulates around this institution. As explained in the introductory outline of this special issue, museality is understood as a construction of imagined space starting with the institutionalised museum and with particular attention given to its material realisation (e.g. locality, architecture, interior realisation, media, style of exhibiting, and implemented strategies of guiding the visitor). Whereas the critical term serves to question a specific display of cultural beliefs and practices as detailed below, the historically grown institution is a variously materialising infrastructure that spread to other places outside central Europe, and partly even floated back in unseen forms, sometimes taking detours into different parts of society or other territories. In using the term museality, it is our aim to reveal the socio-cultural embeddedness of museums in Western societies and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> Hildegard Viereg, *Geschichte des Museums: Eine Einführung* (Munich: Fink, 2008); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum, History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); on collecting as the starting point of museums, see Krzysztof Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums: Vom Sammeln* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1988).

Museality as a topic in the aesthetic study of religion brings into focus the manipulation, steering, and altering of sensory and embodied agents and of explicit, as well as implicit, standards of the senses, the arts, climate, and social geographic contexts which are found in and through museum displays, as well as in cultural spaces related to museums through various forms of sensual knowing.

In order to describe these complex issues, we draw on two distinct cultural and sociological models of society, dispositive theory and Luhmann's communicational systems theory. From systems theory we adopt the emphasis paid to the boundary between (sub)systems and their systemic environments generated operationally by continually observing and making reductive, binary distinctions in an infinitely complex or 'chaotic' world. Thus, distinguishing between the different systems museum, religion, economy, pedagogy, politics, and others, all potentially operating within any specific museum, is possible by following their distinctive binary reductions. This helps to clearly differentiate the implicated logics in the complex interactions that take place in and around this museum. This perspective will be combined with a discourse perspective to grasp the diversity of powerful and often exclusive actions around the museum. Of particular importance for our analysis is the theoretical model of the dispositive, which allows us to reconstruct the network of discourses and discursive strategies, such as identity construction and religious missions through aesthetic practices that become abundantly apparent when studying socio-religious dynamics from the perspective of museality. Both approaches are capable of analysing decisions about values which are an outstanding feature of the museum.

We will begin with a short overview of the most important functions of the institution museum in societal political economy. The potential of dispositive analysis is then shown with regard to the *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei where aesthetic, economic, pedagogical, and identification strategies can be clearly traced in the museum display and its institutional history. By analysing museality, the subtlety of discursive strategies of identity formation through sensual media centred in museums but reflecting and influencing dialogically wider cultural spaces becomes apparent. The systemic and physical boundaries of museums will be discussed in order to reveal the dynamic shifts and fluctuations between secular and religious, civil and political uses made of buildings and exhibitions under the influence of wider societal and cultural reform movements. Finally, museality as a critical term leads beyond the institution museum into cultural patterns

of collecting and display that emigrated to lifestyle as a cultural form of action influenced by the aesthetics and the de-contextualised knowledge of foreign material cultures derived from classical museum displays.

## 2. The Regime of Societal Power at the Museum

In his historical analysis of the role of museums in the development of modern civic society in the nineteenth century, sociologist Tony Bennett highlights a function of museums in respect of society as a whole: the formation of a bourgeois class, its civil code of conduct, and the 'gentle' comportment of the bourgeois body through social and gendered mimicry in the museum halls. Museums were frequented in after-work hours and especially on Sundays as a mix of education, entertainment, and the requisite dominical airing of the family among the bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup> Together with public schools, public parks, arcades, department stores, international exhibitions, hospitals, prisons, and many other newly founded institutions, museums provided a set of aesthetical instruments teaching refined behaviour, intellectual skills, and bourgeois values, and thus permitting a new type of 'democratic' governance of the masses.<sup>3</sup>

A functional shift in the role of the museum since its establishment in the nineteenth century becomes apparent when looking at material objects in museums. An important duty of national, archaeological, technical, or ethnographical museums lies in collecting objects in order to document and preserve them for future generations. Lately, the presentation of objects associated with an educational duty and purpose has gained so much in importance that museums are regarded more and more as offering a special way of education by confronting visitors with objects in an intensive cognitive and sensual way.<sup>4</sup> Newly founded museums, typically also museums

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<sup>2</sup>) Peter Bräunlein, "Zurück zu den Sachen!—Religionswissenschaft vor dem Objekt," in: Peter Bräunlein (ed.): *Religion und Museum: Zur visuellen Repräsentation von Religion/en im öffentlichen Raum* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2004), 7–53.

<sup>3</sup>) Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*.

<sup>4</sup>) Hannelore Kunz-Ott, Gabriele Kindler, Ute Lefarth & Ralph Stephan, "Zum Bildungsauftrag der Museen. Stellungnahme des Bundesverbandes Museumspädagogik e. V." in: *Museumsblatt: Mitteilungen aus dem Museumswesen Baden-Württembergs*, 38 (Tübingen: Gulde-Druck, 2005) pp. 46–47.

of religion, often do not have their own collections any more.<sup>5</sup> Instead, they place their emphasis on the message to be communicated and either borrow objects from museums with collections, invite gifts from religious persons or communities, or leave out objects completely while shifting entirely to multimedia installations. An idea can be materialised and communicated through building a religious environment such as a shrine or creating room installations which do not exist in the original religious fields.

The *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei, for instance, makes use of this device. Material artefacts are replaced by modern media such as video shows (Fig. 1). Artefacts and performances are projected into the museum space via the screen and enjoy a virtual presence without actually being there. What is shown or not shown on the screen will necessarily require



**Fig. 1.** The Hall of Life's Journey, media installations in the *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei. (Source: Museum of World Religions)

<sup>5</sup>) Branković stresses this point for the cultural institution Stapferhaus in Lenzburg, Switzerland, which houses regularly changing exhibitions, including "A Matter of Faith. An Exhibition for Believers and Non-Believers" (Carina Branković, "Eine religionswissenschaftliche Untersuchung der Ausstellung *Glaubenssache. Eine Ausstellung für Gläubige und Ungläubige* (2006/07) des Stapferhauses Lenzburg (CH)," unpublished Magister thesis, Department of the Study of Religion, University of Heidelberg, 2009). The *St. Mungo Museum* also has no collection of its own, nor does the *Museum of World Religions*. The *Religionskundliche Sammlung* in Marburg, on the other hand, does have its own collection as the name already indicates.

a different form of arrangement and presentation than traditional exhibitions of artefacts. Thus, current museums of the participatory type may present an extreme case of mediality.

Before the era of public museums, objects were collected because of their unique qualities in private *Wunderkammern* (curiosity cabinets). This changed with the inception of the educational function of museums for the public. National, natural and art history, as a story of progressing civilisation, formed the framework of the exhibitions, and objects served solely as illustrations of this principle.<sup>6</sup> Exhibitions of religious objects are no different, inasmuch as they illustrate the religious ideals of the maker: the search for the all-pervading numinous of Rudolf Otto in the Marburg *Religionskundliche Sammlung*, the quest for spirituality, love, and common humanity in the Buddhist *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei, the evolutionary and anti-creationist view of human life and nature in museums of natural science, or the political stand for religious pluralism by the makers of the *St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art* in the strongly sectarian Scottish city of Glasgow. Objects are chosen to demonstrate ideal values on several levels. Collective values may be demonstrated or exhibited, but also personal values, as in the case of the exhibition *Glaubenssache* in Switzerland, for which people were asked to contribute items of personal religious value. Applying the Foucauldian analysis of Bennett to current exhibitions, it could be argued that modern values of participatory democracy are cultivated in these exhibitions, both through the choice of exhibits and through the enforced participation of visitors in certain aspects of the display.

### 3. Museality as Dispositive

The analysis of dispositives is a method in continuation of discourse theory. It examines discursive formations as the interplay of several elements.<sup>7</sup> Following Jürgen Link, the historical formation of a discourse can be reconstructed as a dispositive consisting of the interaction of the elementary discourse in question with its inter-discourses and special discourses.<sup>8</sup>

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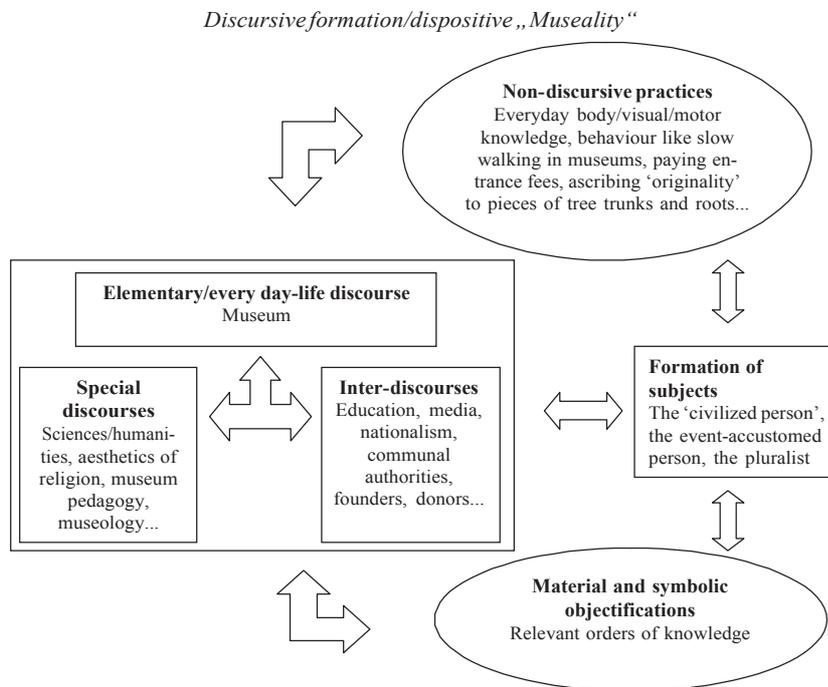
<sup>6</sup>) Bennett, *Birth*.

<sup>7</sup>) Andrea D. Bührmann & Werner Schneider, *Vom Diskurs zum Dispositiv: Eine Einführung in die Dispositivanalyse* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008).

<sup>8</sup>) Jürgen Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus: Wie Normalität produziert wird* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).

This triangle makes up the museum. Habitualised non-discursive practices of the discursive triangle can be analysed in this way. Together with a wide array of more specific productions of material and symbolic objectifications, the museum is also relevant for the formation of modern subjectivity. This last category is of utmost interest in Michel Foucault's studies, as well as in the above-mentioned studies on the birth of the museum by Tony Bennett. We will comment on the elements of Fig. 2 as a tool box for describing museality, before going into more detail of some specific strategies and exchange relations and more illustrating examples.

A museum can be described as being situated at the interface of the elementary discourse museum, the inter-discourses of education, nationalism, communal authorities, donors and the like, and relevant special discourses in the sciences and humanities, like museology, aesthetics of religion, and museum pedagogy (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Museality as dispositive (figure according to Bührmann & Schneider, *Dispositiv*, 94). The arrows indicate exchange relations that can have intentional or unintentional effects.

The elementary discourse museum is constituted by the local field of discursive events: these include the museum's policy-producing agents and visitors, each with their own modes of production and reception of beauty, everyday life, fascination, etc., communal or municipal support and limitations of the museum, its architecture and its interactions with other museums. Special discourses in the humanities alter pedagogical approaches, the understanding of representationalism, cultural domains, and the role of museums. Museums in interaction with relevant inter-discourses in society, for example religious institutions, the educational system, national or ethnic interests, economic and work conditions, media etc. can be illuminated along a historical line (also related to religion): the de-sanctification of churches or temples which are turned into museums, the othering of different religions by exhibiting them and creating exoticism, the spreading of beliefs through agendas of dialogue and tolerance, the creating of collective identity (e.g., nationalism) on the basis of a national or civil religion and educational programmes. Another inter-discourse in which museums of religion take part is the academic approach to studying and representing religions in the humanities. The pluralist values of the *St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art* in Glasgow are influenced by the phenomenological approach of Ninian Smart, professor of religious studies and academic advisor of the museum. The whole concept of the museum owes much to Smart's well-grounded academic knowledge of all the religious practices presented, as well as to his ideals of interreligious dialogue and harmonious co-existence.

The *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei reflects the complex and rival discursive interests of market economy, the founder's message, museum design, sponsors' expectations, and material location. Instead of being located in the founder's monastery on the mountain (as originally planned), the museum is situated in a modern multi-storey shopping centre in Taipei which presents the museum space deliberately as a market of religions and as a type of religious Disneyland, i.e., as a place where experience is invoked by multimedia displays and costly special arrangements (artistic installations and newly created symbols, soundscapes, plays of light, artistic videos, new rituals for visitor involvement, etc.).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>) Annette Wilke & Esther-Maria Guggenmos, *Im Netz des Indra: Das Museum of World Religions, sein buddhistisches Dialogkonzept und die neue Disziplin Religionsästhetik* (Zurich & Münster: Lit, 2008).

This aesthetically and financially highly ambitious project was ‘invented’ through the joint venture of a Taiwanese Buddhist master and an American architect, and financed by followers of the Buddhist founder. The intention of both the founder and the architect was to incite the visitor to become a ‘pilgrim’ travelling through the world of religions so as to share the values of tolerance, peace and love and to ‘feel’ the Avatamsaka Buddhist message “all in one, one in all” (Fig. 3). The arrangement seeks to communicate the ‘common core’ of all religions and to create an imaginary space to relate to, where visitors can act and react. The ritual suggestions and multimedia installations are highly symbolic and sophisticated, with almost no explanation of the symbols’ meaning. The Buddhist founder’s hope was to contribute to interreligious understanding by speaking directly to the “heart” and the senses. The sponsors, however, did not appreciate the sophisticated design and the US architect’s minimalist abstract symbolism. They were disappointed not to find more of their own traditions (Buddhism and Taiwanese popular religions) and familiar things to relate to. A new director therefore popularised the museum by changing some of the original design and making it more ‘museum-like’, in order to fulfil



Fig. 3. Avatamsaka World in the *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei. (Source: Museum of World Religions)

Taiwanese expectations.<sup>10</sup> Some ways of doing so, for instance, were to introduce an animated cartoon with a clear message, replacing an artistic, but cryptic video on creation; to fill the empty space (which was expected to inspire visitors to sit in silence and marvel at the multiple tapestry of sounds and artefacts of the world's great religions) with miniatures of sacred buildings featuring built-in cameras that allow the visitor to enter virtually and inform himself about the inside of sacred buildings; and to establish a new children's exhibition where children find symbols which they are used to (Fig. 4). These changes severely detracted from the perfect museum design, but at the same time they helped to make the museum a space of education and shared collectivity.

This example on the one hand illustrates the high degree to which social environment and economy play a significant role within museal discourses.



**Fig. 4. Kids' Land in the *Museum of World Religions*. (Source: Museum of World Religions)**

<sup>10</sup> For public Taiwanese expectations in respect of the *Museum of World Religions*, see the article "Agency and the senses" in this special issue.

On the other hand, it illustrates the vital role of aesthetics and the kind of aesthetics chosen. Through their arrangement and display, museums will invariably invoke imaginary spaces. The designs have great power to communicate messages to the mind, the body, and the senses. This communication will only work, however, if there is sufficient common ground and a shared sense of aesthetics. The new design in Taipei, for instance, made use of the Taiwanese love of cartoon films. With the aesthetic transformation, the museum contributed to a plan for national religious education that was hitherto lacking. The original design, on the other hand, presupposed a knowledge of religious cultures and addressed a form of modern subjectivity which is more typical of contemporary religion in the Western world than in Taiwan. The message of the founder must have seemed all the more ‘modern’ and ‘strange’ to the locals when one considers that Taiwanese religious politics has a deep influence on Taiwan in many ways, not only inspiring atheist and religious critical views, but also the growth of Buddhist monasteries in recent decades, together with large lay communities that patronise them and spend their free time there. It is such ‘new-born’ Buddhists who are the sponsors of the museum in Taiwan.

Socio-political settings and cultural know-how, as well as knowledge and mastery of the media, of aesthetic resources and habitus, are relevant discursive and non-discursive practices. All embodied, sensory and aesthetic discursive practices must be taken into account within this context. From the perspective of aesthetics of religion, those religious discourses, and non-religious inter-discourses, are of importance in which practices powerfully influence agents through their embodied presence. The low temperatures in nineteenth century museum buildings is body knowledge that leads to the wearing of warm clothing; walking around at a slow pace signals an earnest atmosphere and demonstrative austerity, distinguishing the civilised citizen from the ‘mob’. The architecture and visitors’ guides in other museum buildings may force the visitor to kneel down in order to enter a small funnel, as in some of the rooms in the new *Jewish Museum* in Berlin built by the architect Daniel Libeskind.<sup>11</sup> This altered practice indicates an altered subjectivity that is used to grasp the world through bodily participation instead of cognition, reading, or just gazing. It is modern subjectivity that inspires the theatre-like staging of the museum as a

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<sup>11</sup>) Sabine Offe, “Museen. Tempel. Opfer.” in: Bräunlein (ed.), *Religion und Museum*, 119–138, at pp. 130–136.

happening. Equally relevant are discourses that influence society by defining the value of art, physicality, beauty, emotions (desire, revulsion, etc.) and the like.

The museum is a locality where production, distribution, and reception of messages are interwoven via aesthetic forms of display. Thus, developments in relevant inter-discourses of the society and special discourses from the museum's world of curators, pedagogues, art directors, donators, and supporting associations are translated into the concrete arrangements of specific exhibitions (see Fig. 2). Social meaning is inscribed into the materiality of the exhibits through their singular material value, their serial mass production, their preciousness and rarity, or their authenticity. Such external discursive developments are also translated through innumerable options of sensory manipulation and intensification. These include alienation, intertextuality, analogy, contrast, completion of figures (in the sense of *gestalt* psychology, meaning cognitive/perceptual patterns or rhetorical topics), emotional presentations, impressions of colossality, increased acoustic volume, and combinations of stimuli, series, and repetitions. These arrangements and manipulations may be used to present specific worlds of experience and to create feelings of identity, ethnic and religious belonging (always with the danger of ethnicising, or, on the contrary, of abstracting too much from concrete religious and social settings), according to the wishes of the exhibition makers.

#### **4. Discursive Strategies for Negotiating Competing Religious Identities**

Museality as an analytical perspective allows us to understand how and in what way museums take part in the construction of cultural identity. The museum as elementary discourse is founded upon material realisations of exhibitions, its contingent resources and the specific public space it occupies. Analysed within a dispositive, it highlights the continual distinctions made and perceived by the makers of the exhibitions and their visitors. When various religions are exhibited simultaneously in a museum, they create a synchronicity and homogenisation that is otherwise missing in reality, where people do not perceive a constant multiplicity of religions. Competing identities are often explicitly discussed in the museums' mission statements, including global and local, pluralist and sectarian identities, as well as the contrast of 'self' and 'other' in the biased opposition of

'primitive' or 'primeval' and 'civilised'. Some examples of exhibitions of religion and their aesthetic strategies may serve as illustrations of the discursive negotiations between various agents and the potential ambivalence of the matters under discussion.

Through its physical situation, the *St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art* in Glasgow, Scotland, deliberately takes part in the discourse on local Glaswegian identity. The museum is at the heart of historical Glaswegian demonstrations of protestant reformed faith and economic success, beside the Cathedral of St. Mungo and below the famous Necropolis, a graveyard on a hill covered in monumental gravestones and mausoleums of the newly-rich industrial magnates of Glasgow of the nineteenth century. But the museum adds aspects of present-day life in a city that is both sectarian and multicultural to the discourse on modern local identity. This development was politically wanted and locally supported. Glasgow's religious history is deeply sectarian, with Catholics and Protestants continuously fighting for local dominance. Thus, the pluralist mission statement of the museum addresses both the competing historical identities of the city, as well as the multinational identities produced by immigration.

The museum consists of three galleries: the Art Gallery, the Religious Life Gallery, and the Gallery of Religion in the West of Scotland. The Religious Life Gallery and the Gallery of Religion in the West of Scotland complement each other. The first introduces world religions, including Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christianity, through ritual objects, audio texts, and additional written explanations showing the life cycle of believers. The references to the life cycle immediately builds a bridge to the unfamiliar rituals and explicitly promote a feeling of commonality between different faiths and denominations. The Scottish gallery starts out with the history of the Scottish reformed churches, but also includes examples of religious pluralism ranging from Catholicism to Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism among various minority populations in Scotland. Thus, the educational policy of religious tolerance is reflected in an exhibition that includes unfamiliar religions—unfamiliar to the average Scottish visitor—within a very Scottish, and in particular Glaswegian, identity.

The aesthetic dimensions within the dispositive of a multi-cultural and multi-denominational society highlight discourses surrounding the public display of religious symbols in temples, processions, and burial ceremonies. The contrast between reformed austereness and Hindu colourfulness,

for example, is given much room in the museum by showing the differences in burial practices. Non-discursive practices add to the dispositive surrounding the museum. Among these is the presentation of ritual objects in such a way that they emphasise the physicalness of the body that experiences various rituals during the life cycle. Recordings by believers dwell on these experiences, rather than on theological issues. The Zen garden at the back of the museum invites visitors to perambulate in it, thus experiencing the garden bodily, rather than through reading and looking alone.

In contrast to the *St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art* which ostensibly brings together Glaswegian religious history and current striving for multi-religious harmony, the *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei prefers to communicate religious identity according to Western ideals of late modern subjectivity and spirituality. The “Pilgrims’ Way” neglects concrete pilgrimages in the history of religions, which exist for purposes of this-worldly help, re-enactment of religious events, physical encounters with a godhead, thanksgiving, or simple enjoyment in a group of like-minded people, to name just a few reasons. Instead, it references Western existential philosophy and socio-cultural values reflected in the trend towards ‘self-discovery’ by asking questions such as “Who am I?”, “Who is god?”, “Why do we fear death?” (Fig. 5). But, as discussed above, the museum is a case where the deficiency of links to local discourses on religion and religious identity necessitated a revision of the exhibition concept. This example demonstrates the need for a museum to take part in local discourses on cultural and religious identity, rather than international discourses on interreligious dialogue and spirituality. It must reference locally relevant religious practices and educational policies for primary schools, rather than ideas circulating in higher education, global museum culture, or elite monastic religiosity.

The construction of religious identity is influenced by museum makers through the use of simple techniques of explanation that take previous and often implicit knowledge of the visitors for granted. The construction of identity, self-assurance, and even induced irritations are processes which are continually at work in exhibition spaces. They build up an imaginary sensory space that is playful, more or less convincing or ambivalent, alienating, or on the contrary materialising, thereby familiarising visitors with the object worlds. Peter Bräunlein points out that in Western cultures anything connected to ‘religion’ is mainly perceived in the categories of existence and transcendence, morality, death, and afterlife, because religion



Fig. 5. The “Pilgrims’ Way” in the *Museum of World Religions*, Taipei. It leads into the main exhibition area of the museum, thus inviting the visitor to conceptualise his visit in the museum as a pilgrimage towards religious enlightenment rather than a purely intellectual exercise. Light arrangements, rough and glazed floor stones, and audio-texts from the off medially enhance this participatory approach in the museum. (Wilke & Guggenmos, *Im Netz des Indra*, 32–41) (Source of image: Museum of World Religions)

generates an existential context.<sup>12</sup> From this it follows that religious objects, when placed behind glass in museum exhibitions, or arranged and put together in a necessarily new and artificial way which is abstracted from everyday religion (even when rebuilding an altar, for instance), are perceived differently, perhaps more emotionally, or more reverently, than everyday objects.

Besides the material aspect of exhibitions, which in itself introduces an element of ‘alienation,’ there will often be, especially in historical

<sup>12</sup> Peter Bräunlein, “Zurück zu den Sachen!”, 27.

museums, an ascription of certain fixed 'religious meanings' that are specific to Western culture, but not necessarily to other cultures. Thus, religious objects, especially those from non-Christian religions, might look more foreign, appear doubly 'different' and unfamiliar to the visitors. The aesthetic dimensions in this process of alienation and assimilation include sensory habits and emotional inclinations, as well as pictorial, figurative, spatial, historical and material knowledge. In addition to cognitive knowledge imparted through written texts in the museums, these dimensions help to explain the unfamiliar by comparing and contrasting it to the familiar. Cultural identity is generated in the process by accentuating the differences and guiding the appropriation of elements of local identity.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes this strategy is used in lectures and TV documentaries complementing museum exhibitions, as in the case of the documentary TV-series conceptualised by Dr. Claudius Müller, director of the *Völkerkundemuseum* in Munich, which presented a number of religious objects from the entire range of the museum.<sup>14</sup> In a more subtle way, this strategy was also followed by the curators of an exhibition centred on the "sky disc of Nebra" in Halle in 2005. The (re)constructed Bronze Age world-model is not only introduced by objects and texts, but the makers of the exhibition take also into account contemporary and popular common knowledge about images and objects. For example, the main object of the exhibition, the sky disc of Nebra itself, was presented in a showcase on top of an object strongly reminiscent of a Venetian gondola or an Egyptian funerary barque. This presentation provided a contextual background for visitors, encouraging them to endorse the interpretation of the golden application at the bottom of the disc as symbolising a boat—probably a boat that carried the sun in the belief of the Bronze Age people. The interpretation of the artefacts as being the remains of a religious deposition was reinforced by a composition on the first floor of the exhibition: an oversized set of scales, one scale being filled with bronze objects, while the other was illuminated (Fig. 6). This composition emblematised the interpretation of depots as offerings according to the *do-ut-des* principle. In this way, the visitor is

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<sup>13</sup> On ways of approaching the unfamiliar through comparison with the familiar, see Christiane Pantke, "Afroamerikanische Altäre. Vom rostigen Eisen zum 'Antlitz der Götter'?" In: Lanwerd (ed.): *Der Kanon und die Sinne: Religionsästhetik als akademische Disziplin* (Luxembourg: EurAssoc, 2003), 169–180, at p. 178.

<sup>14</sup> "Den Religionen auf der Spur", Bayerisches Fernsehen, 26 episodes, broadcast in 2009.



**Fig. 6.** Set of scales in the exhibition “Der geschmiedete Himmel” (“The Forged Sky”) in the Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte Sachsen-Anhalt in Halle, Germany, 15 October 2004—22 May 2005. This exhibition, which was centred on the sky disc of Nebra, used monumental visual imagery to transport the supposedly religious content of early Bronze Age findings concerned with the seasonal movements of the sun. The scales suggest that the bronze objects were offerings to the gods in return for life-giving sunlight. (Photograph by Petra Tillessen, with kind permission of the Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte Sachsen-Anhalt, Halle)

made familiar with the Bronze Age while being simultaneously assured of her/his different, that is modern and progressive, identity.

## 5. System, Environment, and Shifting Boundaries

Museums display reality through material and virtual objects in a very specific way and they do this for a number of different reasons. In the case of religions represented in museums, functional analysis lucidly differentiates between religious uses of objects and museal uses of the very same

objects, as well as between art and religion. According to Luhmann's systems theory,<sup>15</sup> the complexity of reality is reduced to a systemic binary code (*Leitunterscheidung*), creating an interior (the system) and an exterior (the systemic environment). The information selected and processed through the binary code critically upholds the identity and meaning (*Sinn*) of the system of any society, or subsystems such as law, the economy, politics, or religion, without any consideration of distinctions critical to a 'higher' system or to other subsystems in the environment of modern functionally differentiated societies.

As a specialized subsystem of society, the museum is thus differentiated from religion, though it may include originally religious objects; it mirrors the category of religion in its concepts and may be in various ways related to the subsystem of religion. The museum as a system purchases, selects, displays, and communicates objects as carriers of information, according to its own code, not according to the rules governing the system from which it takes the information (religion, art, natural sciences, etc.), and thus remains alien, maybe even antagonistic, to the other system. Religious values and the logics of the religious system—that is the binary distinction between immanence and transcendence according to Luhmann's terminology—are negated in favour of museum logics. As Luhmann does not discuss museums, we propose a binary code for the museum subsystem that covers not all functions, but an eminent function. A central question in the museum subsystem is which objects are worthy (and which are not worthy) of being selected for acquisition and exhibition in order to represent cultural and historical narratives regarded as worth telling; in other words, which stories should be told in an entertaining way to form cultural identity and mark the distinction between self and other. Historical, scientific, and cultural objects and values are abstracted and selected for collection and (re)presentation accordingly. So the museum is subject to the (usually implicit) decision as to what can be considered as an objectivation of what appears worthy of being acquired and exhibited, i.e., worthy of demonstration and of being remembered as a subject of public discourse. Collecting, preserving, researching, and presenting objects with material and immaterial values in museums thus always happens under the constraint of the selective binary code, no matter which type of museum or style of presentation is favoured by any particular museum.

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<sup>15</sup> Luhmann's book *Social Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) provides a general overview of the points discussed here.

The boundary between the subsystems of religion, art, politics, and museum are of particular interest due to their differentiated use of the same material objects for a number of different functions in society. On a local level the environments to which a museum relates are very different from each other. Therefore, a museum as such does not exist as a fixed theoretical concept of predefined relations. Only in its historical and local appearance does it create an environment defined by several systems within it as its horizon of self-understanding. In this respect, specific museums manifest themselves as variable subsystems due to the differences in their surroundings. National or regional discourses in respect of media, habits, and expectations with regard to the role of the museum, urbanity, public space, landscape, architecture, 'world culture,' and 'world heritage' shape the museum as a local system and mark its frame of reference and distinction within its local environment.

However, national society, though the most important, is not the only environmental reference point for museums. A global, historically developed 'culture of museums' and possible international visitors link the museum as a system through globalisation to the wider reference system of a 'global society.' Sometimes this global context is reflected in globalised religious messages, such as that of the *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei, whose founder wanted to spread inter-religious harmony and intercultural friendship within the 'world family' of humanity via the museum. This draws our attention to the challenge of describing the interrelation between the global and the local level.

An important subsystem belonging to the environment of the museum is that of the economy. As a leading historian and museologist, Pomian points out that all collections, both private and public, take objects out of circulation in the economic system and provide them with new social value.<sup>16</sup> Economic influences on specific museums in their local setting, however, are also relevant in matters of funding, including both internal and external sources. Generating income through entrance fees for at least partial self-financing is an integral element of the museum system. Conversely, financial restrictions or demands of donors may influence decisions concerning the collection and presentation of objects, as well as the specific educational agenda of a museum.

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<sup>16</sup> Pomian, *Ursprung*, passim.

In the case of the *St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art* in Glasgow, the planned visitors' centre for the city cathedral of St. Mungo was enlarged to include a museum dedicated to fostering religious tolerance in the city. This was due to the fact that both financial possibilities and council interests demanded a multicultural museum instead of a visitors' centre dedicated only to the reformed cathedral itself.<sup>17</sup> Vice versa, the same kind of plan to establish a multicultural museum can collapse when the church, rather than the city council, is the major sponsor. The interests of church authorities may lie in rekindling lost knowledge of confessional Christianity in modern times by means of the museum, rather than in displaying other faith communities. In most cases, those who patronise the museum make decisions about its contents.

The museum system is strongly bound to a place and physical institution as the locality of collection and narrative display. Functional differences from its surroundings may correlate to physical boundaries, manifest in architecture, but sometimes just markers of display, such as a sign and demarcations at an excavation site. The place of a museum, for example at places of strategic visibility or in vistas, can also play a role in urban space. Conversely, physical places may be occupied by different systems over time, including museums, politics and religion. Former symbolically loaded places can be reoccupied, as in the case of the Forbidden City in Peking, which functions nowadays as a museum; however, the Mao portrait on the front wall of the main (Tian'an men) gate marks its re-sacralisation ('Mao cult') in a changed context. In the communist era in Leningrad/St. Petersburg a church building was de-sacralised on purpose to make place for a museum of religious artefacts, called the *Museum of Religious History and Atheism*. In the post-communist era, the church regained its original function as a place of worship, while the museum moved to another locality and changed its name and programme to become a culturally sensitive museum of religious pluralism.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, urban space may be sanctified by memorials or by the use of civic locations, such as warehouses, for a religious museum, as is the case in Taipei. The Acropolis in Athens is used only as an exhibition. The markers of

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<sup>17</sup> Julian Spalding, "Preface," In: Glasgow Museums (ed): *The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1993), 5–6.

<sup>18</sup> Anja Lüpken, *Religion(en) im Museum: Eine vergleichende Analyse der Religionsmuseen in Taipeh, Glasgow und St. Petersburg* (Münster: Lit, 2010).

difference in this case are the opening and closing hours, charging entrance fees, and so on.

The museum system's binary code, entrance regulations to specific museum buildings or sites, and rules for 'proper' behaviour within the museum, further distinguish museum use from, e.g., religious use of a site. These boundaries can be blurred when sites are visited simultaneously by sight-seers and churchgoers in the Christian West, or incense-offering pilgrims as in newly reopened temples in communist Mainland China. Furthermore, boundaries may be blurred deliberately when a museum is intended as a 'third space' between conventional religious institutions and conventional museums, promoting and channelling its own religious ideas and trying to reconcile both systemic logics and codes. This is the case of the *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei or the *Creation Museum*<sup>19</sup> of the "Answers in Genesis" apologetic ministry in Kentucky, USA.

Politics of space can become socially virulent when, for instance, regions with strong denominational ties become multi-religious and the local museum displaying Catholic or Protestant faith contemplates displaying all the faith communities in a multi-cultural museum. If lived present-day religion is to be exhibited, it is not enough to show the traditional religious traditions. New religions and modern forms of spirituality must be included, as was done recently in the exhibition "Glaubenssache. Eine Ausstellung für Gläubige und Ungläubige" ("A Matter of Faith: An Exhibition for Believers and Non-Believers") shown in the *Stapferhaus* in Lenzburg, Switzerland, in 2006/07.<sup>20</sup> Local council politicians may initiate an exhibition that brings unknown, peripheral, foreign, exotic, and even unwanted things to the centre of attention and renders them 'close' through a new locality. An example is the exhibition on Diaspora Hinduism in the town hall of Zurich,<sup>21</sup> in which a religion that is usually practised in a temple built in the industrial quarter on the periphery of the urban space was displayed in the city centre, thus influencing the construction of local religious perception and identity.

<sup>19</sup>) The *Creation Museum* is discussed in detail in Grieser, Hermann & Triplett, "Museality as a matrix of the production, reception, and circulation of knowledge concerning religion," this issue.

<sup>20</sup>) Branković, "Glaubenssache."

<sup>21</sup>) "Hinduistisches Zürich: Eine Entdeckungsreise," 22 October 2004—26 February 2005. For a discussion of the exhibition by the curator see Johannes Beltz, "Hinduistisches Zürich: Eine Entdeckungsreise," *Internationales Asienforum* 36/3–4 (2005), 251–263.

Such exhibitions touch social and political interests by fostering participation, integration, and religious freedom. Museums of religion may play an eminent role as a local meeting point of inter-religious exchange; they may be places to discuss issues of conflict, as the *St. Mungo Museum* demonstrates; or they may fulfil national needs of religious education, such as the *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei.

## 6. Self-Referentiality in Museums of Religion

Beside its relatedness to other discourses and systems in its specific environment, the museum is a remarkably self-referential system. The indexical marker of the museum is its situation as an extraordinary space. Its self-reflection as an extraordinary space is established by rules and realised through special practices. It is achieved through special use of media systems—film, image, space, light, sound, body, senses, materiality and objectification of time—and through references to such categories as art, everyday life, history, and religion. This section will list some of the aesthetic and sensory strategies used in this context.

Susan Kamel points out that religious objects are primarily exhibited as a form of art and that only very recently have museums been created that focus on religion as a part of the cultural environment.<sup>22</sup> The *St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art* is one of them and it combines both traditional and modern approaches. Thus, it is very explicit in its self-referentiality as a museum of religious art *and* practice. The art gallery is given a sacred character through its lofty architecture and the insertion of stained glass windows from disused Glasgow churches. The museum visitors' leaflet states that the objects in the art gallery were "chosen to reflect the meaning of the religious traditions which inspired their creation." Some of these objects were created specifically for the museum, and some used to be ritual objects, but most of the objects represent art according to the subsystem art. The religious life gallery is much darker and closer, thus drawing attention away from the great representations of gods to the often very simple objects of average believers. The contrast is marked and intended to be so.

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Kamel, "Museen als Agenten Gottes oder '0:0 unentschieden'?", in: Bräunlein (ed.), *Religion und Museum*, 97–118, at p. 98. The second most common form of presenting religions is in ethnographic museums.

Thus, the two systems of art and everyday religious life are clearly differentiated by referencing two distinct museum traditions: on the one hand, essentialising and evocative exhibitions of art that create religious feelings in the visitor; and on the other hand, educational exhibitions on local history, culture, and everyday life. In addition, the museum makers present trashy objects alongside objects of great beauty because both are appreciated equally by various believers as meaningful religious art. With this strategy, common hierarchies in exhibitions of religious art, which set, for instance, the 'beauty' of Christian and Hindu art against the 'primitive' sculptures of African and Pacific indigenous religions, are overcome.

A different example of self-referencing is offered in the African department of the *Völkerkundemuseum* in Munich. Power figures from the Congo are traditionally carved from wood and then dressed in materials and smeared with ritual substances. Collectors of 'African art' discarded the materials and only presented the wooden figures to the museum makers in the West, thus completely re-contextualising the former ritual objects and turning them into objects of 'primitive' art. Now, the *Völkerkundemuseum* in Munich exhibits both the dressed power figures and the stripped wooden figures side by side, in order to exemplify the changing educational and aesthetic aims of ethnographical museums, progressing from exhibiting 'primitive' art and culture to explaining foreign cultures and religious practices.

The *Museum of World Religions* in Taipei breaks with the rules of distanced and reverential contemplation of exhibits, especially those of religious art, in the children's exhibition. Here, all the senses are engaged. Not only the visual and acoustic senses are activated through multi-media presentations as in the main exhibition, but also haptic and olfactory experiences are generated. In this way, the children can literally 'grasp' the meaning of the religious objects on display. According to Guggenmos, this interactive and educational exhibition is very popular among the school children of Taipei.<sup>23</sup> Moving through or around an exhibit is another form of physical encounter usually denied in traditional exhibitions but encouraged in the *Völkerkundemuseum* in Munich, where a Buddhist *stupa* invites circumambulation and in the Zen garden of the *St. Mungo Museum* which invites perambulation.

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<sup>23</sup>) Esther-Maria Guggenmos, "Erste Schritte – Zum Prozeß kulturpolitischer Verortung des *Museum of World Religions*", in: Wilke & Guggenmos, *Im Netz des Indra*, 165–175, at pp. 172–174.

An example of how self-reflexivity may interrelate with identity building processes is the exhibition “Glaubenssache”: here, visitors were required to choose between two possible entrances to the exhibition, labelled “believer” and “non-believer.” Thus, they were forced right from the beginning to reflect on their own position in the discourse of religious identity.<sup>24</sup>

## 7. Museality beyond Museums

A last example will demonstrate how the elementary discourse strategies elaborated above—including education, sensory habits, attitudes of display and museum-socialised agency—can be rediscovered in other domains of society and everyday life. Museality as a term covers this flow of experiences out of the classical institution of the museum, carried by different agents and institutions, into living rooms or classrooms, or to become political symbols. It can explain the intentional and unintended effects of these flows.

In our example we will consider some items on display in a lifestyle furnishing company. The ‘visitor’ to the shop is confronted by the shop arrangement with actions and styles of representing, assimilating, copying and mastering foreign cultures. How are these cultural techniques comparable to those we find in the institution of museums? At first glance, the shopper behaves like the visitor, walking around in the commercial exhibition and taking in elephant-leg stools, a table-height wooden globe that could have furnished the *Santa Maria*, lion skin trophies, monumental stone Buddha heads, varnished Asian cupboards, and colonial-style desks. In the show room of the furnishing house, the customer and citizen can thus imaginatively conquer the world by gazing at crocodile leather boxes and bookshelves constructed from boats’ bows. In a setting far away from the show room, such boats with their ornamental bows used to be a powerful instrument in subsidiary economics, transport and warfare, often protected by mighty spirits or ancestors and materializing the power of chiefs. The same holds true of masks, figurines and animal replicas. Some of them might have had or might still have otherworldly powers relevant to the

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<sup>24</sup> Anja Lüpken, “Kontraste – Ausstellungen über Religionen in Vergleich,” in: Wilke & Guggenmos, *Im Netz des Indra*, 147–164, at pp. 157–158.

group in question. Other objects do not represent 'authentic' or 'native' material cultures, but are derived from colonialist material culture.

Often, colonial aesthetics, professed by government officials, missionaries, anthropologists, adventurers, and traders alike, defined the collector's evaluation of the objects and assimilated them into contemporary Western art (African masks, naïve art, etc.). In other cases, the referential system is that of the nature-retro-movement or nature spirituality, as when the bookshelves made from boat bows are combined with enormous sections of tree trunks and gigantic varnished tree roots in the show-room displays.

The histories, meanings, uses, and cultural values of such religious, ancestral, or soul-inhabited objects as boat bows and animal replicas have been scrutinized in anthropology, visual culture, and material culture studies for several decades. But by analysing them in the light of the critical term museality we can put forward new questions from an aesthetic perspective: Is the indexicality of these objects as being powerful still represented in the living room? How can it be that Asian goddesses end up de-contextualised in a shopping centre? Is this an external effect, is it due to popularisation of knowledge, or does it represent the assimilation or appreciation of Asian, Indonesian, and African cultural achievements? What is the role of other media such as blockbuster films on Africa? Are the images they paint of romantic nature in Africa more relevant to the consumers than the images of African art and material culture which ethnological museums do not tire of delivering? How relevant is the museum as an institution of special educational aims and political correctness for today's consumers when they stroll through furnishing house exhibitions? Are the objects still perceived as foreign objects at all? How do museum exhibition policies and aesthetics influence Western material culture and our perception of it?

Inversely, Western appropriation of 'authentically native' masks and boat bows affect the work of contemporary African artists, who combine a critique of the loss of African culture with a critique of mass consumer culture by fashioning such objects from scrap metal, junk, and plastic canisters. Is this to be seen as the post-colonial hybrid re-possession of material culture, while simultaneously catching the aesthetic spirit of the times as a very successful genre in the international art market?

The spread of habits from within the historical European institution of the museum to other fields or systems of society, such as art and the art market, popular culture, and the family home, and back again, is

**Fig. 7. “Croco-boxes” are a product of a colonial-lifestyle furnishing company that has shops worldwide from Amman, Cairo, Mumbai and Sharjah to Zagreb. After worldwide debates on wildlife protection, this display of crocodile skin (even when faked) is reminiscent of colonial times when it symbolised wealth, power and domination over dangerous animals. (Source: KARE Design GmbH, Zeppelinstrasse 16, D-85748 Garching Hochbrück, [www.kare-design.com](http://www.kare-design.com), accessed 20 July 2010)**

contained as a field of interest and research in the critical term museality. But museality also contains the spread of more general actions that we associate with museums: the cultural production of aesthetic codes of the other, of memory, of normative orders and of worldviews concerning ethnic or religious ‘facts’. Thus, we have to consider whether furnishing a private home with a boat bow bookshelf is an exhibition of taste, of class



**Fig. 8.** A “boat-bow bookshelf.” These bookshelves have been flooding European living rooms for some years and replace the comparatively harmless little bamboo variations of the colonial style. The bookshelf is advertised as being made of original Balinese boat bows. This is a typical secondary construction with a long past of transcultural flow during which museums have played a crucial role. Museality as a concept may grasp these pathways of circulation through societal domains. The crucial question is whether the powerfulness of this part of the boat is ‘forgotten’ or ‘lost’ or whether it is incorporated in the lifestyle culture – or framed more generally: what is the aim of displaying this object? (Source as Fig. 7)



**Fig. 9.** The Benin artist Romuald Hazoumé posing in front of a boat bow—a further fugitive symbolisation and display of a bow, this time with political as well as art implications. Hazoumé’s art work *Dream* consists of black oil cans and was shown at the international art exhibition Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany in 2007. His work is meant as a political statement on the endangerment and hopes of boat people emigrating from the African continent to Europe. In the background: a photo-wall with an African landscape. (Source: Documenta12blog. Der Blog über die Documenta, Url: <http://www.documenta12blog.de/?cat=8&paged=17>, accessed: 22.08.2010)

or of a specific self-understanding. And last but not least, the critical term museality puts clearly into focus forms of agency such as the urban furniture *flâneur*, the consumer, and the conqueror.

In contrast to the museum as an institution, the lifestyle furnishing house does not concentrate societal action in a culturally grown institution



**Fig. 10.** A plastic can-mask by Romuald Hazoumé. Rubbish is the material he chooses to realise African objects such as masks. This is an extreme example of the self-referentiality of object displays in the elementary discourse museum. The Munich Völkerkundemuseum also exhibits such masks by Hazoumé in its African collection. (Source as Fig. 9)

of education. Normative claims, assigned societal tasks, and economic relevance are usually located in a different discourse. But from the perspective of the term museality, the furnishing house events may be integrated into the description of modern religious subjectivity. With museality we can broach the issue of the sensorial handling of objects and of ways of moving in spaces dedicated to civilising bodies and displaying values. With this

term we can approach the ascription of meaning to objects, places, and goods. The details, interferences, and differences in this process render the project ‘museality’ interesting for research into modern religious spirituality, expressed, for example, by the shift from public to individual self-representations through the medium of consumer goods.

The aestheticisation of the culturally alien, of remembrance of the great days when our ancestors discovered new worlds, and the reshaping of our homes in the holiday-resort style of India—all these indicate a modern subjectivity that perceives itself as being globally minded. It is used to holiday long-distance transportation; it is open for new experiences and appreciative of culturally different achievements. Nevertheless, objects that are perceived as alien may already be Europeanised, that is, fashioned for the European taste of appropriating a diverse world. In this example, museality renders visible a specific kind of display of the other in the self–other relation and thereby speaks vividly of the displayed subjectivity itself.

As in our example of apolitical—and often very politically incorrect—furnishing trends, museality helps us to describe all sorts of forms of displaying objects chosen from a pool of (other) cultures or assumed worlds. Besides techniques of display, we have addressed strategies of civilising, educating, creating identity and othering in our article. Thus, theme parks, all kinds of goods, public events, urban planning, the expansion of habits and body styles can all be scrutinised through the lens of museality. The referential systems we have discussed, and the interactions in the discourses we have described, thus extend the scope of museality far beyond the museum itself.

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