INVISIBLE MUSEUM
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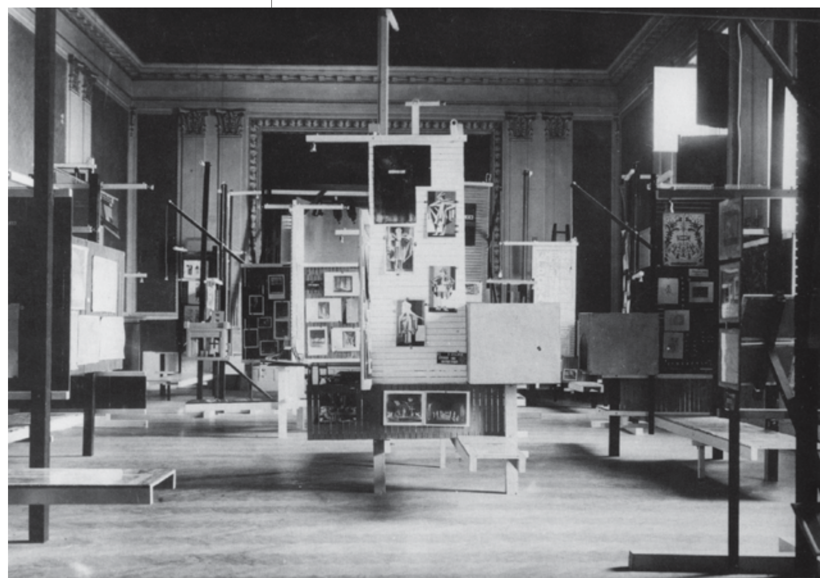
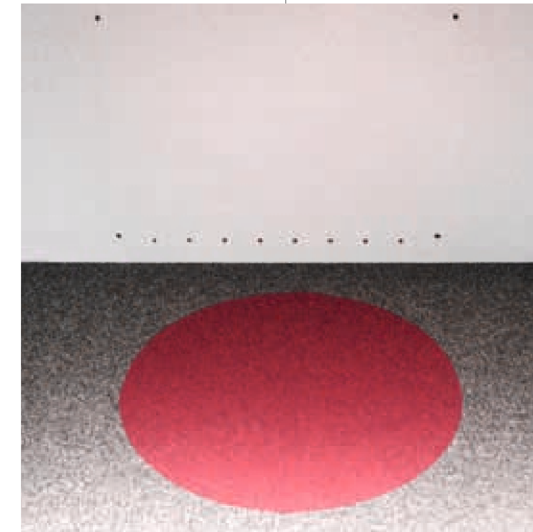
The Musée d'art et d'archéologie in Périgueux is in many ways a typical French regional museum: a reasonably grand, late 19th-century building housing an eclectic collection of art, archaeological remains, ethnographic objects, natural specimens and documentation of nearby prehistoric sites. But as prospective visitors climb the steps to the neoclassical entrance and make their way into a brightly-lit foyer, the first thing they encounter is not, as one might expect, a selection of antique figurative sculptures, displays sampling the treasures, or a formal marble counter laden with brochures, but a museum assistant sitting in a large transparent sphere. Retrao-modern in feel (there's a whiff of *Barbarella* or 1960s Courrèges), around six feet in diameter, made of clear and coloured acrylic and held a little off the ground as if ready to roll away if its occupant were to make any sudden move, to all intents and purposes what it resembles most is a giant hamster ball. Transparency, mobility, modernity: something has happened to museums in the last half century that gives their historical – historicizing – mission a distinct set of complications born of the modernity they must somehow both shadow and pretend to ignore.



The relationship of the museum to modernity is more complex than we might expect. On the one hand the very *raison d'être* of the museum is usually to preserve, select, frame and communicate something about the past, indeed arguably to *construct* a stable notion of what that past might consist of. But on the other, this construction is always of the moment – or at least, given that most museums tend to change and develop in slow motion, of the moment before last, which is why so many of them appear deliciously out-dated to the point of kitsch – and these days must forever re-justify itself to the latest, youngest audiences. After all, our past has always been someone else's modernity, making the museum nothing but a collection of redundant present moments. As a rule, only the smallest of provincial museums can escape this logic (or lacks the funds to aspire to it). It's a commonplace to notice that, as predominantly nineteenth-century institutions, so few of today's museums have retained their original Victorian displays, even though a significant minority of visitors will always prefer the 'collection in aspic' feel of, say, the Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford or the Galeries d'Anatomie comparée et de Paléontologie, Paris to their forever updated cousins (for whom the cabinet of curiosities must always stand as their repressed Other).



Left page: Ticket booth, Musée d'art et d'archéologie, Périgueux. Frederick Kiesler, *International Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques*, Vienna, 1924. This page: Floor and cabinet display elements, Norwich Castle Museum

A complex network of shifting curatorial strategies has overseen the move from glazed wooden cabinets stuffed with poorly-labelled artefacts to the elegant Perspex plinth and its two or three exquisite but lonely objects, overseen by ranks of text panel chaperones or the ubiquitous touch-screen, drenched in context. From the perspective of design, this change might be seen as echoing, at several decades' delay, the parallel move in shop window design away from 'stocky', intricate shop displays laden with goods typical of the first part of the twentieth century to the Deco-led, elegant and pared-down theatrics of key selected objects that gradually became the standard over the 1920s. The presentation of consumer objects now seemed closer to stage design than to commerce, accompanied by the idea that display was henceforth the job of specialists rather than shopkeepers. As much as the museum strives to distance itself from

the coarse logic of the shop (which nevertheless lies in wait to catch each visitor like an invoice for a bar tab), now the museum too needs designers as much as curators. As Peter Vergo noted in his essay 'The Reticent Object' (1997),

> It is the design of the exhibition, just as much as the actual selection of objects, which 'tell the story', and this 'story-telling' role carries through into the smallest details: the choice of display lettering, of materials and colours for wall-coverings, the design of the catalogue, of the poster, of related advertisements and publicity material.

The Commonwealth Institute, Kensington, 1962; contemporary postcard.

Since design modernism is a perfect visual ideology to calm the 'noise' of the Victorian museum, to give it a coherent and consistent language and frame the chaos of the past, it's no surprise that the inter-war avant-garde was at the forefront of this convergence of theatre, display and design. Austrian architect, designer and artist Frederick Kiesler, for example, curated and constructed an *International Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques* in the recent but still formal and opulent interior of the Konzerthaus Vienna, 1924, looking for all the world as if De Stijl had enacted a workers' occupation of a palace. Keisler's *L + T* display system consisted of simple demountable architectonic elements: uprights and crossbeams, C-profile struts, plain boards of differing sizes hovering against each other, each bearing a surprisingly rich quantity of unframed drawings and photographs. Documentation of the exhibition gives the impression to today's viewer that what Keisler is really trying to design, with a *bricoleur's* premonition, is a website. And there are some curious tensions here that look awfully contemporary: between plethora and restraint, between construction and the vision of a virtual, provisional and endlessly reconfigurable network. With Keisler, the museum could be everywhere and nowhere, could float and overwhelm at the same time.

The gradual infiltration of avant-garde design strategies into Western museum display in the post-war era – the felt-covered Bauhaus-style building block displays in colours that seem always (perhaps it's the dust) turned down just a couple of shades from the primary, the rule of horizontal-vertical-radical diagonal, the 'stand here' circles cut into

linoleum, the fifth column of *sans serif* fonts – have to wrestle with a problem that the new 'de-stocked' museum interiors hadn't quite anticipated. The fewer and more precious the objects, the more visible and significant their framing, and the more obsessively perfect the display materials must be, as though they were Platonic solids bearing the weight of classical philosophy as much as the spoils of archaeology or colonial trophies. What is more, early twentieth-century design modernism demands a minimal, supremely unobtrusive aesthetic (for which the allegedly 'neutral' contemporary white cube gallery is the gold standard). The design of modern museum display, rooted in avant-garde constructivist aesthetics and ethics, is forever trapped in a cycle of visibility against reticence, of the dusty fingerprints of scholarship against the hygiene of perfection. Since the artefacts on display must, by definition, remain the same in perpetuity, the mounting of these objects must not simply to show them off to their best, quasi-sacred advantage but at the same time also take part in the clinical process that strives to preserve and embalm them.

In amongst this ethical function of avant-garde survivals in the staging of the museum, however, is at least an echo of a utopian, constructive ambition that wants each of these apparently minimal display elements – plinths and supports whose function is to withdraw as far as possible into the background behind the wonder of the museum artefact – to also be the building blocks of a new system of being. By 1925 Kiesler's *L + T* system had morphed into a project for a *City in Space* at the Exhibition of Decorative Arts, Paris (the same design festival at which Le Corbusier presented his *Pavillon de l'Esprit nouveau* that also now looks like a blueprint for institutional display). Something that might hover between a show and a system is the 1920s avant-garde's dream for the museum of the future (or even the Museum of the Future), and it is this utopian vision of knowledge as network, where each precious object only has meaning as a bead on a necklace of ideas, that gives the emerging notion of the museum the qualities of evanescent invisibility. Occupying every place and no place, endlessly available and as intricate, delicate, robust and organic as a frond of coral.

The notion of a museum as a transparent, infinitely available constellation of objects, images and ideas would become a persuasive one in the post-war era. An often-reproduced photograph shows the French writer and politician André Malraux laying out illustrations for his 1947 book *Le Musée imaginaire* (translated as *The Voices of Silence*); seen from an elevated angle, Malraux stands in the middle of his office surveying perhaps 200 images of the world's art masterpieces, like some general commanding the troops of world culture. Part of the book's argument was that where once artworks were tied to specific places, particular functions, now contemporary media structures meant the possibility of a kind of infinite, all-encompassing museum in book form. This vision of the imaginary museum, a 'Museum without Walls', had the effect of collapsing time and space in a very contemporary way; in particular, Malraux noted photography's ability to bestow 'a quite startling, if spurious, modernism' on forms such as sculpture. Malraux's utopian cultural democracy is mitigated, nevertheless, by other factors. A prominent left-wing activist in the 1930s, by 1947 his journey to the right had been such that he had been ap-

pointed Minister for Information and later Minister for Cultural Affairs under the successive governments of General de Gaulle (a regime widely viewed by France's left-leaning intellectuals as to all intents a totalitarian authority). Malraux's own introduction to the world of connoisseurship and collecting seems to have come on his visit to Cambodia in 1923 during which time he developed firm anti-colonial positions yet was also censured for stealing Khmer temple treasures to sell to Western museums.

I can distinctly recall how my own early childhood induction into the prisms of institutional modernity was gained on repeated visits during the mid-1960s to three museums in Kensington (each within strolling distance of that hub of Polish expatriate culture, the restaurant Daquise). There was the Natural History Museum of course, all *Wunderkammer* cabinets of jewelled taxidermy hummingbirds or ranks of oak cases studded with rare stones; or across the street, the Science Museum: steam-age modernity, packed with beam engines, Van der Graaf generators, chrome levers that only sometimes activated some working model of Victorian ingenuity. And then, further west, something I already recognised as entirely new, quintessentially contemporary: the Commonwealth Institute. The same age as I was, the Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall and Partners-designed building had been built to inhabit the edge of Holland Park like some concrete tribal elders' hut. Few people seem to remember the Commonwealth Institute now, considering it only closed its doors for the last time in 2002 and had been open for four decades (and indeed my childish memory is of a pure space almost bereft of visitors); while its architectural value was acknowledged to the point of not only preserving the building, but transforming it into the new Design Museum currently nearing completion, what seems to have

Top: The Museum of Gas, Fakenham
Left: Louis Tussauds' House of Wax, Great Yarmouth

been poorly documented was the cool, playful and design-led staging of the Institute's exhibits, which themselves ranged from ambitious dioramas (telescoping global space from the four corners of the globe into the flattened perspectives of modernist staging) and scale models to objects, images and films documenting the culture, society, geography and industry of British Commonwealth nations. Looking more carefully, this omission now looks like a blind spot, a repressed memory: given that the Institute was the conspicuously modernised update of the Imperial Institute of 1887–1957, promoting a blatantly Empire-driven agenda – and a few of whose displays were transferred directly to the new building in 1962 – what the Commonwealth Institute resembles in retrospect is a museum of colonial power. The modernity of its staging now looks complicit in a game of screening its redundant political and ideological realities; but as a child, I saw it as the epitome of an exotic, globalised future.

The notion of a museum that might itself set off for the four corners of the globe, that could condense a whole world to the scale and capability of the human hand, had long before been given form in Marcel Duchamp's condensed one-man retrospective the *Boîte-en-valise* (first versions 1935–41). A suitcase full of images, documents and model facsimiles of a lifetime's artworks and projects, it's an attempt at a museum of half a lifetime that could travel across borders, or slide under a chest of drawers. And stretching this idea just a little, this idea of the museum as both shrunk down in size but opening up onto an apparently limitless set of enquiries also feeds into Duchamp's last work, Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage, made in secret over the last twenty years of his life. An approximate contemporary of the Commonwealth Institute and featuring some of the same concerns for collapsing geography into architecture, all the viewer sees at first in the corner of the Philadelphia Museum of Art is an old, battered door; peeping through its notches reveals a three-dimensional hidden scene behind it, an enigmatic and only partly visible nude supine in a landscape and holding a lighted lamp. Conjoining like a Möbius strip the modernity of the contemporary museum's ideologically-driven looking and display and the playful, outmoded stagings of the Victorian diorama and cabinet, here is a blueprint for a Museum of Gas, a Museum of Glances, a Museum of Desire, an Invisible Museum.