“Electronic participation theatre”:

a new approach to exhibitions

by Allon Schoener

Our world today is a new environment. New cities. New technology. New products. New sensations. New ideas. New people. Many changes are apparent in ways in which the arts function in society. Since the Renaissance it has been the material object which counted, now it is rather the process, and new values in relation to human beings, nature, science and technology. Once considered enough to allow people a direct experience of original works of art, now the accent is on providing opportunities to participate in creating an art experience has acquired a new and different meaning. Events are staged, audience involvement a major factor. New modes of presentation are being devised to reach new audiences.

This is the age of electronic communication. Like much else in our lives, revolutionizing museums, which are under increasing pressure to provide more information for growing populations. Twenty years ago, American museum directors were trying to get people into museums. They succeeded. Attendance figures increased from thousands to millions.

Saturation point is coming. Through communications, art museums will offer a new interactive experience instead, the distribution of information then has a more important function than the actual collection of works of art. Traditionally people have gone to museums to see. But the idea of the museum as a place of contemplation is vanishing. If it is to retain an active role, the museum must keep up with the contemporary world.

People are immersed in transmitted fact. Through radio, television, telegraph, telephone they can be instantaneously in contact with events as they happen where on this planet—and even in outer space. A didactic approach, based on the principle that there is a specific source of information and a specific recipient dominated our thinking for centuries. This is no longer valid. Everyone is a bewildering variety to choose from. No one is compelled to accept or rely on one source, but can, for his own purposes, make his own selection.

So far as art is concerned, each has his unique reactions, and he who responds to art is in this sense as important as the person who provides it. In other words, the audience itself becomes a creative force. Participation implies effective communication.

The trend now is to provide more information than an individual can cope with (“communications overload”), rather than a precise set of facts stated in order. Accordingly, a museum exhibition offers a mass of images and sounds which can convey unique and differentiated messages to different individuals within a given audience.

During the last three years, I have been responsible for three exhibitions, which we call “electronic participation theatre”: The Lower East Side: Portal to America (fig. 32-33), Erie Canal: 1817-1867 (fig. 36-38), and Harlem on My Mind: Capital of Black America (fig. 39-43).

The first of these was held in the Jewish Museum in New York in autumn. To millions of immigrants, New York’s Lower East Side was the first American home and most Jewish families in the United States have some association with it. During the mass immigration of East European Jews, it was their portal to America. Between 1870 and 1924, it gave birth to many well-known artists, entertainers, politicians and businessmen. The multi-media exhibition tried to show and interpret Lower East Side life and its creativity by means of paintings, drawings, photographs, films, literature, sounds, documents and memorabilia, bringing the Lower East Side to life again as it once was (fig. 32). Familiarity with the exhibition materials and maps could identify the places where they lived and worked—encouraged people to participate actively.
alk to one another (fig. 34), and the gallery became a place of daily reunion for
her East Siders and their families. The exhibition was enthusiastically welcomed
the New York community, and the attendance records for the Jewish Museum
shattered (fig. 31). Following an initial eight weeks in autumn, the exhibition
wandered, showing the following spring.

Erie Canal: 1817-1967 (sponsored by the New York State Council on the Arts,
commemorating the 150th anniversary of the year in which construction work
of the canal began) was set up in the Erie Maid, which visited canal communities
as far as Albany and Buffalo during the summer of 1967: a two-deck canal-workers’
denoise boat containing prints, drawings, maps, photographs, and featuring a
iope (a kind of steam organ), and slide views of the canal (fig. 36).

ural audiences usually have to travel considerable distances to visit exhibitions;
re time, the process was reversed. The arrival of the Erie Maid had the effect of
ating the local community into organizing its own festivals—band concerts,
ingsing, square dances, ice-cream socials, plays, arts and crafts sales (fig. 37),
—and, celebrating a link with the past, residents of New York State were
brating their own heritage. During its sixty-four-day tour of thirty communities,
visitors came aboard the Erie Maid.

Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America (fig. 39). This exhibition at
Metropolitan Museum of Art during the winter of 1969 recorded the struggle
establish urban black culture in 20th-century industrialized America. As a
inous sequence of images and sounds, it documented Harlem from 1900 to
8, showing its history in perspective and relating it to the present (fig. 40). There
six main sections: “1900-1919, From White to Black Harlem” (fig. 42); “1920-
9, An Urban Black Culture”; “1930-1939, Depression and Hard Times”; “1940-
9, War, Hope and Opportunity”; “1950-1959, Frustration and Ambivalence”; “
60-1968, Militance and Identity” (fig. 41).

The exhibition surveyed the changing character of Harlem during each decade,
continuing relevance of South-North problems, the major historical events, and
leading figures associated with Harlem, particularly in literature, the theatre,
tics, music, art and business. Planned as an artistic event to attract new urban
ences to an established art museum, the exhibition was transformed by tense
ions in New York City into an explosive political event. In thirteen weeks, 100,000
sons came to see it; many of them were black, more blacks than ever seen
ere at the Metropolitan Museum.

museums are undoubtedly changing. Some of the changes can be predicted; but,
example just mentioned shows, they will not all be without incident. Harlem
My Mind raised a basic question: are art museums concerned with art for art’s
, or art for people’s sake? People—not art objects—were its topic (fig. 43).
stance to change comes from many quarters; here, neither the sources of resist-
e, nor the form that it took, could have been anticipated.

he old art museum is yielding place to the new. Harlem on My Mind trained
i-media techniques—photographs, films, slides, television, music, voices,
ments—on a new subject: people. It is likely to prove a landmark that will
ence the future of museums.