

Her thesis examines the relationship between a cultural history museum exhibition and the objects on display. Specifically, it aims at shedding light on the formation of the meaning behind the exhibition. The main research questions are: How are meanings constructed for cultural history museums’ exhibition design? How are meanings represented as visual signs by the exhibition design? How does the relationship between exhibition design and museum objects, especially their visuality, affect interpretation?

The starting point for Turpeinen’s study, in her own words, is museum objects that are “classified, stored and displayed”. A museum object in this study means “a cultural history object, which originates from another time or place”. The topic of Turpeinen’s research shifts extensively, from the semiotics of the objects to the role of contemporary art in the museums of cultural history, from the history of the museum as an institution to the exhibition policies implemented by these museums. In addition, the work includes the analysis of three artistic installations in the form of small experimental exhibitions created by Turpeinen herself.

Turpeinen’s research is based on reading previous studies, visits to numerous museums and exhibitions both in Finland and abroad, producing her own artistic installations, and analyses of all of these. The research problem is dealt with in three chapters. Chapter 3 (“Museum as the interpreter of the world view”) examines museums in a historical perspective from the Middle Ages to the present day. It focuses on the question of how the way that museums wield power finds visual expression in their exhibitions. The research material for this chapter consists mainly of reading earlier research literature and site visits.

Chapter 4 (“The interaction between art and cultural history museums”) deals with the role of contemporary art in cultural history museums and discusses the development of cooperation between artists and these museums. The material used here consists of several installations and exhibitions created by both Finnish and foreign artists in collaboration with museums of cultural history. In Chapter 5 (“Installations as test spaces”), Turpeinen analyses three artistic installations that she created as part of the research process. These were exhibited in three museums of art in the Helsinki area between 2000 and 2003. Chapter 6 summarizes the discussions in the previous chapters.

Turpeinen herself developed the concept of “the critical visuality”, and clearly defines the theoretical terms that she uses. In spite of these credits, the theoretical part of the work she remains embryonic. The semiotic theory acts in the meta level, but it has been used very little as a tool for analysis. Turpeinen writes (on page 28): “Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s concept of sign functions as one of my underlying theoretical suppositions. Dividing the concept of sign into iconic, index and symbolic has clarified and structured my analysis.”
However, Turpeinen makes very little use of Peirce’s concept of sign while discussing the meanings of museum objects. More extensively, she employs Krzysztof Pomian’s concept of semiofora, but states that it is not very useful for her work. Peirce’s theory might have offered more potential in considering the meanings of the museum objects. In addition, the utilisation of Arjun Appadurai’s theory about the social life of things (in Chapter 3) might have increased the theoretical value of the work.

This research focuses on the relationship between museums and objects, especially the formation of meaning in cultural history exhibitions. The main question is how such meanings are created by the visual signs in these exhibitions. Turpeinen has answered this question by (inter alia) analysing the meaning of the display cases and by examining how visual details affect the sense of feeling present in exhibitions.

Outi Turpeinen has approached cultural history exhibitions from a fresh, new point of view. On the one hand she has succeeded in drawing attention to the details present in numerous exhibitions, such as display cases and colours. On the other hand, she has discussed extensive issues in connection with the history of the museum institution, its development and its role. Turpeinen’s ability to go into details and interpret them makes her work most interesting, and opens up new perspectives and discussions. Her own artistic work, in which she made exhibitions and studied the process of creating meaning in concrete terms, has significantly affected her research process.

In analysing museum exhibitions and her own installations, Turpeinen pays attention to objects, texts, lighting, display cases, colours and the sense of feeling, but she does not deal with the role of imagery in exhibition design. In addition to objects and texts, cultural history museums frequently make use of imagery such as photos, paintings, drawings, movies, etc. in their exhibitions. The role of such pictures and imagery in the exhibition design is so essential that they should have been included.

The credit of Turpeinen’s study lies in her own experimental work and extensive knowledge of a range of museums and their exhibitions, as well as relevant research literature, and her ability to synthesise these elements in her own analysis. This study profits from the processing way of working, where the gathering of materials, reading and her own creative work have interlocked. Turpeinen’s own artistic work and the other parts of the dissertation interact productively with each other. One can even argue that Turpeinen has developed artistic work into a research method.

In her doctoral thesis, Turpeinen highlights interesting matters concerning museum work and exhibitions, which all those involved in putting on exhibitions should take into consideration. I hope that Outi Turpeinen’s work will raise fruitful discussion about the role of cultural history museums and their exhibitions.

Eija-Maija Kotilainen, Docent and Director of the Museum of Cultures (Helsinki), was the opponent of the dissertation.

Address: Museum of Cultures, P.O.Box 913, FIN-00101 Helsinki, Finland
Tel. +358 9 4050 9811, fax +358 9 4050 9821.
Email: eija-maija.kotilainen@nba.fi