On January 2, 2014 the award-winning journalist John Pilger presented a segment on the BBC Radio 4 Today program entitled “Is Media Just Another Word for Control?” He succinctly articulated two familiar analyses of the media: first, that media institutions serve the powerful by assuming consensus and by producing “censorship by omission” (“we in Britain have been misled by those whose job is to keep the record straight”); second, that media forms and technologies distract us from what is actually happening in the world, not just through their content but through the affective relationship we have with them, particularly our smartphones, which we “caress … like rosary beads” (Pilger 2014).

The reaction to the program by right-wing British newspapers was rapid and hostile. In articles based almost entirely on harvesting selected “tweets” from the social media platform Twitter, they were quick to claim there was a consensus among listeners that the program was unbalanced, biased, and “unfairly left-wing” (Chorley and Robinson 2014; Marsden 2014). Pilger argued that the media are “hijacked” rather than inherently and inevitably repressive, and the press reaction suggests that control is not impenetrable or infallible, that this program was a rupture in the fabric, something that needed to be quickly contained and disarmed. The reaction was what Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky describe as “flak” – “a means of disciplining the media” – here, almost entirely contrived by the press (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 2).

As an illustration of Chomskian media theory, this argument and the reaction to it are almost perfect, but they also point to a new complexity when “media” refers to powerful corporations like the BBC, CNN, Reuters; the institutions of the press, television, and radio broadcasting; and also to Twitter and smartphones. “The media” are now providers of content to be consumed on different digital “platforms,” or media, via computers, smartphones, and tablets, as well as television, radio, and the press. This complex material and technical infrastructure does not leave content unchanged: as Seth Giddings puts it in this volume, “media are not simply conduits or channels … through which messages and meanings flow, more or less effectively” (Chapter 7).
In media studies, the recent revival of interest in the 1960s Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan and his maxim “The medium is the message” has been meant as a corrective to analyses that treat media technologies as mere platforms for content. Museum studies can also benefit from this shift toward an emphasis on the mode of communication. Like media, museums are powerful institutions involved in producing and keeping the historical record, establishing “what really happened” and communicating it to a public. While, as Wolfgang Ernst points out in Chapter 1, it makes sense to clearly distinguish museums from electronic media, since they are not technical devices, in museums and exhibitions the medium – including exhibition design, architecture, and atmosphere, as well as technical infrastructure – is all the more powerful because it addresses visitors in a bodily, felt way. These are the things that pull on our emotions, alter our behavior, influence the ways in which we socialize with one another.

McLuhan was interested in how the technical design and structure of the media imposes certain dispositions or orientation even before any specific content is encountered. In 1964 he stated: “the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan [1964] 2001, 8). This statement shows the influence of the political economist Harold Innis, who emphasized the material or technical “staples” that shape nations economically, politically, and culturally. In 1951 Innis wrote that the material basis of communication has a bias or orientation determined by its “relative emphasis on time or space” (Innis [1951] 2008, 33). Heavy, durable media disseminate knowledge across time; light, transportable media facilitate societies that need their communication to have a wide geographic reach. Understanding media bias, for Innis, means seeing different media as favoring different kinds of action and forms of social organization. Nancy Proctor gives an example in this volume: in museum tours, the shift from the tape-based audio tour to smartphones and interactives means a shift in museum and audience behaviors. The broadcast model is increasingly replaced by a distributed network model that connects people and “facilitate[s] conversations” (Proctor, Chapter 22). These technologies provide new opportunities for museums to engage with their audiences differently.

However, the smartphones that the majority of visitors carry are intimate, attention-seeking devices, which have arguably produced rapid and unanticipated changes in behavior that we are still seeking to understand. Pilger views people’s behavior with their smartphones as cementing the insidious power of the media; we are addicted, attached. A related argument is made by Sherry Turkle in her book *Alone Together* (2011). Turkle’s social-psychological research into people’s engagement with technology, from computational toys to smartphones and robots, is concerned with what these technologies do to our relationships with one another. Such arguments emphasize nonhuman agency – the ability of our technologies to act on us – but are pessimistic regarding the ability of media users and audiences to renegotiate or resist the behaviors hardwired into the technology. For them, the media bias is not facilitating conversation but closing it down.
This volume sets out to understand the uses of contemporary media in museum contexts, and also to understand the ways museums have taken shape in relation to different media and technologies. This means paying attention not only to technologies, forms, genres, and so on, but also to what we do with different media, how we engage with them, and what they do to us. Understanding people’s relationships with media technologies and display techniques in museum contexts requires research methodologies sensitive to both the nuances and diversity of display media and of visitor behaviors. One way in which museums researchers have attempted to understand visitor experience is through ethnographic studies, such as those carried out by Karin Harrasser and her colleagues, and described in Chapter 17 here. These complement a semiotic analysis of how museum narratives and “museum messages” are constructed and communicated, “encoded” within the museum and “decoded” by visitors (see Hooper-Greenhill 1995, 16–17; Hall [1973] 1980).4

Another approach is the method Erkki Huhtamo calls “exhibition anthropology,” an observational approach to the minute details of visitor activity within exhibitions, which involves treating the museum as “a kind of experience apparatus” (Huhtamo, Chapter 12). While Huhtamo observes visitor and museum behaviors, Giddings has proposed “microethology” as a more intimate and participative methodology, which attends to both human and nonhuman agency in “everyday technoculture.” Microethology uses participant observation to investigate “the everyday and habitual coming-together of human bodies and technologies” (Giddings 2009). For Harrasser, these encounters need to be understood in terms of performance: contemporary immersive exhibitions and interactive science centers “offer beautiful and effective ‘stages’ for both the training and transgression of culturally coded identities” (Harrasser, Chapter 17).

Where does this leave a politics of media and of museums? Pilger’s central (and most controversial) point on the Today program was that the British media had misrepresented and underrepresented the Iraq war, leaving the British public largely ignorant of the scale of civilian deaths. Similar critiques have been directed at museums and this is what is generally understood as a political critique within museum studies – one which focuses on the museum’s role in power and governance, its constructions of canons and dominant narratives.

It might seem, therefore, like a depoliticizing move to pay close attention, as this volume does, to the formal and technical aspects of exhibition practice (and to a lesser extent the collection, research, and conservation practices of museums), since (to some extent) it brackets off questions of representation, relationships to stakeholder communities, and institutional politics. However, just as there is another politics of media, there is another politics of museums, and there is a different political urgency to attending to museum media. This is related to, for example, questions of the transformation of history and memory by new media; the ways in which media habits and expectations are imported into museums; and the insertion of museums into a wider commercial and corporate landscape.
The present volume is divided into four parts. Part I, “The Museum as Medium,” focuses primarily on the question of how museums draw on other media, and also introduces some key approaches from media studies (such as media archaeology). Part II, “Mediation and Immersion,” centers around the pervasive and often intangible ways in which exhibitions mediate visitor experience, and also around the question of how material objects in particular are experienced and encountered. Part III, “Design and Curating in the Media Age,” looks at museums and media primarily from the perspective of the designer and curator, and at new kinds of relationships with visitors. Part IV, “Extending the Museum,” is particularly concerned with how media enable the museum to go beyond its walls and spill out into the world.

The structure of the volume is intended to highlight some connections between the chapters. However, the following discussion offers some other ways of thinking about the thematic connections between chapters, linking them to a wider literature. I explore questions of temporality, museums’ relationships to various media and genres, attachment to objects, atmospheric and immersive exhibition design, the reinvention of the exhibition medium, the rise of scenography, new roles for audiences and for museum makers, and, finally, the collection and display of media objects.

Changing times

As Wolfgang Ernst explains, in the interview that opens Part I, our cultural objects are increasingly “digitally born” and the dominance of time-based, pervasive digital media means that material experience is neglected or underplayed. In contemporary culture, the emphasis on liveness and high-speed transmission poses a challenge to the traditional collection-based museum (Chapter 1). Andrew Hoskins and Amy Holdsworth use the term “post-scarcity culture” to describe the massive and simultaneous availability of images, footage, text, and data. This new media environment appears to be transforming cultural memory and crushing historical distance by making the past available on demand, producing a “smooth and smothering immediacy” (Chapter 2). This is something museums are forced to engage with because it is reconfiguring their role. How museums engage with this media environment, whether they embrace it, attempt to reconfigure or shape it, or solidly continue to pursue their own goals regardless, are politicized issues.

In the past, museums have been criticized for their irrelevance to the present. In my own chapter, I give the example of a 1920s dispute in which museum director Alexander Dornor advocated facsimiles as a means of bringing museums into “the stream of contemporary life” (Dorner, cited in Chapter 25). The way in which museums construct the past has also come under critical scrutiny: the myth of history as progress is reinforced and naturalized by linear evolutionary arrangements that marshal objects into an “encyclopedic overview” (Habsburg-Lothringen,
Chapter 15). The chronological display that invites the visitor to walk through
time naturalizes the timeline, creating the sense that this is actually how history
unravels (Lubar 2013). Meanwhile, the contemporary art world, now dominated
by large private contemporary art galleries, has been characterized as locked in a
kind of “presentism” in which fashion and the market rule (Bishop 2013, 12–23).
Art historian Claire Bishop suggests that “the permanent collection can be a mu­
seum’s greatest weapon in breaking the stasis of presentism,” to create new forms
of historical awareness, new ways of mobilizing the past in the present, in displays
that go far beyond the chronological (Bishop 2013, 24, 61–62).

In the present volume, several contributors see museums as able to provide
alternatives to the historical flattening produced by digital networked media. New
approaches in display design, open storage, and collection management can pro­
vide counterstrategies to a dominant understanding of history (Ernst, Chapter 1).
Some museums seem to fully embrace the new digital immediacy, opening them­
selves up to the onslaught of images in a new, networked culture. Others try to
reveal the discontinuities and gaps in both traditional narratives of smooth pro­
gress and the contemporary sense of complete and simultaneous availability of
history (Hoskins and Holdsworth, Chapter 2). This is not so far removed from the
aims of 1980s museum designers and curators such as Gottfried Korff. Bettina
Habsburg-Lothringen, head of the Museumsakademie Joanneum in Graz, writes
in Chapter 15 of the ways Korff wanted to challenge the sense of an accessible,
unmediated historical past that folk museum reconstructions and period rooms
seemed to promote.

Arguably, these changes in the cultural relationship to the past began as early as
the mid-nineteenth century when photographic, telegraphic, and phonographic
media made it possible to see and hear the faces and voices of the dead. As writers
such as John Durham Peters have shown, this was especially poignant in wartime
and in an era of high child mortality (Peters 1999). In 1936 Walter Benjamin wrote
about an increasing inability in the modern period to make experiences – the
things that happen to us – into experience, in the sense of a deeply embedded and
practical understanding. He connected this to media via the example of the news­
paper, with its fragmented and disconnected articles, but also more widely to
modernity, an era of rapid and accelerating social and technological change in
which an onslaught of stimuli combines with the absence of any stable, unchang­
ing position from which to view the world (Benjamin [1936] 2002, 146). Swiss cura­
tor Beat Hächler, in Chapter 16, considers this decay of experience as offering a
new remit to museums to transform themselves into spaces that enable people to
experience and reflect on their collective present.

One way in which stable and coherent historical accounts have traditionally
been ensured is via a strict separation between individual memory (understood as
unreliable, narrowly specific, and subjective) and official history (underpinned by
documentary evidence and the authority of academic expertise and research). In
Chapter 4, Steffi de Jong argues that the video testimonies now commonly used in
historical museums overturn this old hierarchy of historical transmission and memory. Personal, individual memory is now an acceptable part of the historical narrative and a museum object. Indeed, the medium of video has been a key tool in prioritizing individual memory and personal experience. In the 1980s video enabled home movies to move out of the living room and innovative television makers used the video camcorder to make first-person experiences a part of broadcast television through genres such as “video diaries” (Rose 1994–95; Dovey [1995] 2004). De Jong sees the rise of video testimonies as symptomatic of the “era of the witness” (Wieviorka 2006). In this context, remembering is not simply a matter of reporting but of bearing witness, giving testimony. The media coverage of the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the first televised trials, boosted the visibility of the witness to history. Television enabled testimony to be made public; video enabled it to be gathered and stored en masse.

**Mediazation and transmediation**

De Jong’s account shows how video testimonies have developed a specific aesthetic: framing, location, and lighting prioritize emotional, extra-verbal expression and create the impression of direct eye contact between interviewee and viewer, an illusion of conversational directness. At the same time, these aesthetic conventions reinforce the museum’s traditional role: to transmit historical information and moral messages, to produce a self-disciplining form of citizenship (Bennett 1995; de Jong, Chapter 4). Video testimony is a powerful tool for this purpose, because it is affective (communicating feeling via facial expression and nonverbal signals) yet its aesthetic and methodology imply objectivity, neutrality, and a documentary status.

The potential of media to bring new kinds of authority and new forms of audience address make them attractive to museums and galleries, which not only incorporate different media in their exhibition spaces, but frequently invoke or engage with other media by adapting and quoting media genres and formats. One issue discussed in Chapter 1 is how museums tend to mirror the media of their time, emulating cinema, for example, through displays such as the period room or the diorama. In fact, it is hard to imagine a museum remaining unchanged by media: my own chapter (25) relates how photography has dramatically altered the ways in which museum visitors see and understand art, so that the art museum, without even rehanging its collections, is subjected to altered modes of attention. Haidee Wasson’s chapter shows that American museums became closely involved with media as technologies and institutions from a very early date: museums’ “early experiments with television” began almost as soon as television was launched at the 1939 New York World’s Fair (Wasson, Chapter 26).

Sometimes museums and exhibitions explicitly use media formats in order to comment critically on them or to reflect on the museum as institution.
For instance, in her chapter in Part I, Maeve Connolly discusses how contemporary art exhibitions that explore television as a cultural form have used design techniques to evoke television studios and the living room as a television viewing space. Design elements such as the choice of monitor, seating, and lighting have been used to evoke different relationships to television, the social and pedagogic role of the medium, and TV’s changing status. TV formats are also used to reflect on the art institution and art market itself, from the use of reality TV references and modes, to close collaborations with broadcasters (Connolly, Chapter 6).

Elsewhere, museums’ attempts to embrace contemporary media are not intended to produce commentary or reflection on either institution, but rather to reinvent the museum as medium. In Chapter 3, Nils Lindahl Elliot describes Wildwalk in Bristol, UK (a futuristic attraction that closed only seven years after opening), as an attempt to “transmediate” the wildlife documentary in the form of a museum/zoo. Zoos had already attempted to transmediate wildlife television – giving visitors the sense that they were visiting animals in their habitats – and attempting to make the whole experience more cinematic. Using C. S. Peirce’s semeiotics (as distinguished from the more familiar post-Saussurean “semiotics”), Lindahl Elliot shows the complex and contradictory character of transmediation and “mediazation” (Thompson 1990, 11). He concludes that while transmediation can happen between museums and media genres, the effects can be unforeseen and problematic, producing inadvertent pedagogic effects.

Seth Giddings’s chapter also touches on the ways in which museums’ incorporation of other media forms can contradict or give a very different message from that intended. He acknowledges the limitations of certain museum videogames, in which what is learnt is mainly “knowledge of the game itself, its structures and puzzles” (Giddings, Chapter 7). Rather than see this as a consequence of transmediation, Giddings sees it as related to expectations of “what kinds of knowledge – or knowledge of what kind of object” museum games and interactives might produce. He argues that simulations produce knowledge not of objects but of systems, also using an example from Wildwalk, where artificial life (Alife) flocking simulations were used to produce the experience of walking through water among schools of fish. For Giddings, “attention to the machinery of display” is not necessarily at odds with processes of learning and the generating of knowledges, while even the simulation designer cannot always constrain the possibilities opened up by a playful simulation.

Part of the problem for Wildwalk, Lindahl Elliot argues, was that genres “involve not just techniques and technologies of communication, but also a horizon of expectation shared by the audience” (Chapter 3). Such horizons of expectation may remain invisible and unspoken, but they determine the form of visitors engagement with displays. In Chapter 5, Jenny Chamarette starts from the premise that the museum itself does a similar disappearing act. Yet, by bringing cinema into the museum, Chamarette argues, the museum (as well as cinema) is put on display. This idea, that cinema can work critically to make the museum’s framing visible,
recalls a point made by Alexander Horwath, director of the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna, that the detachment of artists’ film from both commercial cinema and the art museum enables it to reflect critically on both institutions (Sperlinger and White 2008, 119). Chamarette focuses on the Pompidou Center in Paris, where, she suggests, filmmakers have challenged the status of the museum as the protector of cultural heritage or patrimony. She gives the example of Roberto Rossellini’s 1977 film *Le Centre Georges Pompidou* which, she argues, subtly critiqued the ideas of high culture and democratization that underpinned the new museum, as did the sociological analysis of the center, undertaken at the same time under the direction of Pierre Bourdieu (Fabiani and Menger 1979; Heinich 2003).

For Horwath, the film museum is the in-between space that artists’ film can occupy (and has occupied in the past), an institution closely related to cinémathèques and film libraries, and one that has marginal status compared to the art museum (Sperlinger and White 2008, 120). The Pompidou both collects and shows moving image work within an art museum context. But, according to Chamarette, the meeting of cinema and museum at the Pompidou is not a tale of the incorporation of one by the other but of a clash of spaces, conventions, and expectations; a relationship of mutual suspicion as well as interdependence. That this is not always the case is suggested by Wasson’s account of the “harmonious and mutually interdependent” historical relationship between the two institutions in the United States (Chapter 26). Even at the Pompidou, Chamarette suggests, the relationship has ultimately been productive: faced with the resistance and challenges of film, the Pompidou Center has been able to renegotiate itself and to challenge what a museum can be and do (Chapter 5).

“Mediazation” can involve a closer relationship with commercial environments than some public museums are used to. Maeve Connolly discusses how, initially, experimental art projects in television were made possible by television broadcasters themselves, but these declined with the development of a deregulated neoliberal and commercialized media environment. New “participatory and discursive activities” have flourished, and art projects continue to reflect critically on both television and art institutions and practices. However, some museums and galleries adopt broadcast formats or collaborate with broadcasters, not in order to reflect on these, but simply to try to engage a broader public, and in the process become full participants in a “celebrity-driven cultural economy” (Connolly, Chapter 6).

### Bringing things to life

In Chapter 1, Ernst suggests that museums need to focus on their own specificity, particularly the strengths that result from the presence of the material object. In my own chapter, I recount how museums have a history of being hospitable to reproductions and facsimiles, and argue that the value attached to direct experiences of authentic, original artifacts is associated with the notion that they are
under threat from mediation (Henning, Chapter 25). The physical, material qualities of museum artworks became all the more vivid when they could be used to set the art object apart from the media object or photographic facsimile. While mediation in the form of information, context, and framing is necessary to make objects meaningful, it also appears to put a distance between visitors and the artifact, to diminish the potential for wonder, to “kill” the object.

The rhetoric of “bringing objects to life” is commonly used, even though most Western museums subscribe to the Western scientific view that the objects in their collections do not have life in any real sense. In her chapter, Fiona Candlin addresses this notion, asking “why museum exhibits are commonly perceived to be in need of resuscitation” (Chapter 13). She sees the use of the terms “live” and “dead” to describe museum objects as metaphoric (except where talking about living animals or animal and human remains). The dead object is one where “the practices and responses associated with its former functions have been sidelined and … scholarly and aesthetic responses dominate.” A live object, by contrast, continues to elicit responses related to its previous role. Candlin is using a distinction derived from the early nineteenth century argument of Quatremère de Quincy, who saw museums as destroying artworks by removing them from their previous contexts and uses. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in her writing on anthropological displays, suggests that the question of how much context is brought with an object into the display is really a question of where to make the “cut” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; see also Henning, Chapter 25). This cut not only produces the object as object by severing it from the world of which it was a part, but also destroys its use value.

The metaphoric sense of animate, lively things predominates in the anthropological concept of the “social life of things,” and in actor network theory where “nonhumans” (often, but not exclusively, technical objects) are understood as “actants” able to take on “delegated” human actions and capacities as if alive (Appadurai 1986; Latour 1992). However, Ivan Gaskell argues in his chapter that “to use a thing as though it were alive is not the same ontologically as for it to be alive” (Chapter 8). Some societies and cultures do hold certain objects to be sacred, numinous, or alive: and many such objects reside in museum collections. As Gaskell explains, both “life” and “things” are unstable concepts that are not settled even within a Western philosophical or scientific framework. Yet, many Western museums assume that the things in their collection are not alive in any meaningful sense. Gaskell argues that museums that hold objects in their collections that are sacred objects of veneration, or considered as living by their originating communities, need to begin from the premise that the Western biological sense of life is not the only valid one. He concludes that we need to consider “variable worlds” in which the quality that is “life” itself varies, and to understand museums as the mediators between these worlds (Chapter 8). Museums that facilitate acts of veneration such as smudging with smoke and touching, enable sacred objects to be returned to communities for rituals, or participate in reciprocal exchange carry out this
mediating role more equitably than those “encyclopedic museums” that claim to be cosmopolitan yet refuse to countenance such exchanges.

While Gaskell is interested in the treatment by museums of sacred or numinous objects, Candlin is interested in the ways in which small, informal museums avoid the sense of deadened or impotent objects by not separating objects from the originating community, by being situated in an environment “broadly consonant with its interests” and by mediating its objects in such a way that they seem more immediate and “alive” (Chapter 13). The notion of liveness as something that is produced through display practices also resonates in anthropologist Petra Tjitske Kalshoven’s chapter. She writes about living history and re-enactment practices that animate museum objects, bringing them to life through replication and performance in ways that “both defy and celebrate the sanctity of the museum space” (Chapter 24). She sees this in terms of play, which, following Johan Huizinga’s famous study *Homo Ludens* ([1950] 1967), she describes in terms of the construction of temporary “worlds apart.” In Kalshoven’s account, museum objects are given back their usefulness, but as replicas, miniatures, and in the context of the intense experience of historical re-enactment. For her, the liveliness of objects comes in their integration into play, or via the careful staging of objects in exhibition giving them the opportunity to “perform.”

Fiona Candlin’s account gives the sense that it can be a certain carelessness of staging that enlivens objects, producing a powerful sense of the “having been there” of past occupants, through used objects that metonymically suggest their presence: shoes “molded to the shape” of the owner’s feet, “half-used” soap, doors “stained with the grease of repeated touch” (Chapter 13). A more chaotic, unregulated appearance might actually add to a sense of unmediated presence. Yet legibility depends on staging: as Caroline Morris has said about Charles Darwin’s study at Down House, the visitor’s ability to read the room as narrating the presence of Darwin and his activities within the study is enhanced by the careful placing of objects: “the cluttered table and carefully positioned stool narrate the chair’s use” (Morris 2013).

Ivan Gaskell argues that museums mediate not only through exhibitions, but also in their other practices, in laboratories and storage rooms. He shows how mediation occurs through conservation practices, and through prohibitions and rules: such as those preventing the touching of objects and the application of other substances such as incense or smoke, which are part of acts of veneration. Rules against handling of collections not only prevent “ritual interactions” but sometimes “appear to protect the power privileges of museum staff rather than serve demonstrable utilitarian purposes.” Even the most practical regulations can also operate symbolically, as “a way of establishing, enforcing, or contesting power hierarchies” (Chapter 8).

Touch prohibitions arrived both with the development of the museum as a disciplinary institution and as an imperial institution. According to Erkki Huhtamo, prohibitions on touching in art museums arrived with the nineteenth-century public museum. Visitors to early museums expected to be able to touch artworks. However, the new déclassé audiences of the public museum were not trusted to behave appropriately (Chapter 12). Today, Huhtamo suggests, museums can no longer rely on
shared ideas about acceptable behavior in a museum context, and it is increasingly
difficult to enforce touch prohibitions. He attributes this to a combination of the
juxtaposition of touchable and untouchable works in the same spaces, and the
growing tactility of a society acculturated to touch screens and push buttons.
This notion – that visitors import into the museum behaviors and ways of seeing
that are associated with other media or other exhibitions contexts – has had a long
circulation: for instance, Sue Perks, in her chapter later in the volume, refers to 1970s
discussions in which museum professionals diagnosed a new kind of inattentiveness
in visitors, attributing this to the negative influence of television (Chapter 18).

Atmospheres of display

In many museums, intangible qualities, such as light, smell, sound, and climate, are
very carefully controlled. Museums and galleries mediate objects through environ­
mental technologies. Systems necessary for preservation purposes also affect visitor
experience: displaying the watercolors of William Blake in a dimly lit room prevents
them from fading, but it can also produce a sense of intimacy and add to the dream­
like, almost hallucinatory, quality of the pictures, reinforcing the narrative of Blake as
a visionary. Light is a particularly powerful mediating tool because, while it renders
things visible, it often passes unnoticed. Alice Barnaby’s chapter shows how light has
a role in producing certain kinds of valued aesthetic experiences, by charting changes
in exhibition lighting in Britain over a 100 year period, from 1750 to 1850 (Chapter 9).

The idea of lighting as a media technology is not new. McLuhan used the example
of the electric light bulb to explain the concept that “the medium is the mes­
sage” in his book Understanding Media ([1964] 2001). For McLuhan the light bulb is
a medium without any content, which nevertheless makes possible certain kinds
of social practice and experiences. By contrast, Alice Barnaby sees light as having
a symbolic content that is closely tied to its technical form. In 1961 the exhibition
designer Herbert Bayer listed light among the “combined means of visual com­
munication” that made exhibition design “an intensified and new language”
(quoted in Staniszewski 1998, 3). In fact, Barnaby shows that this language was
already being developed by means of new lighting technologies in the early nine­
teenth century, when light was used for “the staging of statements about wealth,
power, and taste” (Chapter 9). Cultural trends in art gallery lighting were linked to
ideas about who should have access to public art collections, and what they ought
to get from the experience, with different lighting styles seeming to produce
“civilizing effects” associated with rationality and civic virtue or producing a
sensuality and poetic quality that confirmed an aristocratic sensibility.

Barnaby’s discussion of the nuances of different approaches to lighting in this
period provides a different perspective from accounts of museums as “hegemonic
disciplinary structures,” instead making vivid the “multiple and seemingly con­
tradictory agendas” which produced and popularized a wide range of different
lighting practices (Chapter 9). Nevertheless, Barnaby shares with these accounts an emphasis on the visual and visibility. Rupert Cox’s chapter challenges this emphasis, offering sound and aurality as a means to rethink social relations in art museum and gallery contexts. He suggests we think of museum space in terms of acoustics and address “listening as part of the sensorium through which museum visitors engage with artworks” (Chapter 10). The materials used in new museum interiors are chosen with acoustics in mind: to dampen or muffle the sound of footsteps or of visitors talking, for instance. At the same time, there are various uncontrolled sounds – air conditioning and heating systems – or sounds from nearby displays. Inviting visitors to attend to such sounds means inviting them to think differently about the museum space. This attentiveness to sound is something that has been encouraged by the sound art installations and projects Cox discusses.

Cox argues that sound can be experienced by visitors as ambiguous and dispersed, bodily felt rather than cerebrally interpreted (Chapter 10). While he discusses sound art in terms of “affective space” – with “the absence of a fixed viewing perspective,” Brigitte Biehl-Missal and Dirk vom Lehn point to how atmosphere in general is experienced bodily as “indeterminate, a spatially extended quality of feeling” (Chapter 11). The construction of atmospheres in museums and retail environments involves architecture, lighting, color, sound, electronic media, and even the behavior and speech of staff. Biehl-Missal and vom Lehn see atmospherics as a means of ideological manipulation because it includes intangible aspects which nevertheless impact on the museum experience. Designed or manufactured atmospheres appear to bypass symbolic communication altogether, working directly on feelings – Bettina Habsburg-Lothringen refers to the discipline of constructing atmosphere as “emotional design” (Chapter 15).

In highly staged environments, meaning appears to emanate from the atmosphere itself. Atmospherics welds feeling and affect to the museum narrative. This can be understood as a variation of the “reality effect”: in literature, the way in which an accumulation of apparently insignificant details (details that don’t appear to be “signs” within the larger text) combine to produce a strong sense of realism (Barthes 1986). Hilde Hein sees immersive exhibitions as potentially creating “a public reality that passes for knowledge” (2000, 80). But this assumes that all exhibitions must be first and foremost factual representations. Yet, reality effects are part of the pleasures of fiction (which is never entirely invention), and in exhibition contexts they arguably help to construct temporary and playful worlds apart, rather than insidious substitutes for fact.

**Reinventing exhibition space**

Biehl-Missal and vom Lehm look at the development of atmospherics as a retail marketing tool in the context of the “experience economy” (Chapter 11). They suggest that the production of staged atmospheres is about the production of
value. In a time of corporate sponsorship and private–public partnerships, high-profile and often spectacular museums have become integral parts of new planned urban environments, alongside shopping centers, travel hubs, and other “cultural assets.” In his chapter, museum designer Peter Higgins lists some of the elements of increasingly vigorous attempts to market museums as destinations alongside other attractions and family days out: “including high-quality food and beverage, sophisticated retail, profitable temporary exhibitions, and corporate out-of-hours events” (Chapter 14).

The global spread of neoliberal economics and ideology is particularly evident in the contemporary art world; as Mark Rectanus points out, art museums are entangled with private agencies, large-scale commercial events, and global art markets. Rectanus gives the example of corporate museums such as the BMW complex in Munich, and the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, South Korea, which combine educational, consumption, and entertainment facilities to reshape, not just the museum, but the urban environment (Chapter 23). In the late 1980s the majority of commercial art galleries in London were to be found in Cork Street, Piccadilly, and had relatively small exhibition spaces. During the 1990s wealthy collectors and art patrons started to develop their own large exhibition spaces that could compete with museums (such as the Saatchi Gallery in St. John’s Wood). Today, London is full of museum-standard, huge white cube spaces which are privately owned and which sell contemporary art rather than collect it, such as the Gagosian, the Lisson Gallery, and Hauser & Wirth’s large Savile Row galleries. These private museums reconfigure social space more widely: in summer 2014 Hauser & Wirth opened another large-scale institution on a rural farm in the southwest of England with five galleries covering 2483 square meters, which will turn the small town in which it is situated into a key destination for contemporary art tourism (Shalam 2014).

Designing retail environments and designing museums involve different constraints and priorities: in the United Kingdom, Peter Higgins finds that National Lottery funding makes it difficult to adopt a holistic, integrated approach to the architecture and the interior, which is often “retro-fitted” into a spectacular but perhaps impractical building (Chapter 14). In the case of the contemporary art museum, the competition for iconic buildings has been understood as the “visual expression” of an increased privatization in which “a collection, a history, a position or a mission” are demoted in favor of “cool” and “photogenic” environments (Bishop 2013, 11–12). Concerns about illusionistic environments and manipulative atmosphere implicitly suggest that there might be such a thing as a neutral exhibition space. Yet, even the white cube art gallery is a designed space, intended to facilitate particular understandings of the autonomy of modern or contemporary art.

Exhibitions choreograph visitors; they produce a certain kind of social space. Herbert Bayer, quoted earlier, suggested that exhibitions were and are exciting to design because they could involve so many different media and materials in the production of new kinds of experience. Higgins, whose company, Land Design
Studio, has designed many major museums and exhibitions, calls his chapter (14) “Total Media” as an appeal for a more collaborative, holistic approach to museum-making, but also in recognition of the complex, multisensory, multimedia aspects of exhibition design involving the use of light, sound, and the “tactile and olfactory” alongside audiovisual and graphic elements.

Discussing the practices of the Stapferhaus in Lenzburg, Switzerland, Beat Hächler writes that space can be understood not as a container but as an arrangement of relationships, as a means of engineering certain performative possibilities. Indeed, since the 1920s, artists and designers have conceived of the exhibition space as an environment that changes as visitors move around it. It was a means of creating new experiences, new ways of seeing and exploring space, that corresponded with artistic practices aimed at transforming perception. Some of these exhibition experiments can be viewed today. For example, at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in Poland, Władysław Strzemiński’s Neoplastic Room has been restored. The gallery, which originally opened in June 1948, is both a container for various works of art by Strzemiński and his contemporaries, and an immersive abstract artwork itself. The paintings and sculptural constructions within it are not simply the subject of the exhibition but are part of the same field of practice: like many avant-garde artists, Strzemiński worked in design and architecture as well as painting (Szczerski 2012, 237).7

The Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in the Netherlands has made a point of collecting, or reconstructing, historically important exhibition spaces and multi-media installations such as Aleksandr Rodchenko’s Workers’ Reading Room of 1925; El Lissitzky’s Abstract Cabinet, originally commissioned in 1927 for the Landesmuseum in Hanover, Germany, by Alexander Dorner and destroyed in 1936; and Lászlo Moholy Nagy’s Room of Our Time (1930), which was never constructed in its entirety until its (re)construction in 2009 (see Elcott 2010). Haidee Wasson situates the avant-garde’s reinvention of exhibition space in relation to film and in the context of trying to “defy the static models that dominated in established museums” (Chapter 26). The artists themselves often expressed the aims of these innovative installations in more explicitly political terms, wanting to jolt the visitor from “passivity” into (implicitly revolutionary) “activity.”

This idea of using installation to reinvent visitor activity also informed British pop artist Richard Hamilton’s pioneering exhibitions from the 1950s. The Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London recently exhibited a reconstruction of an Exhibit (1957), the result of his collaboration with another artist, Victor Pasmore, and the critic Laurence Alloway. It consists of a room full of rectangular sheets of Perspex, suspended at different heights and angles and ranging in color and translucency from completely transparent to semitransparent coffee brown, dark red, yellow, and opaque black. Hamilton and his collaborators described an Exhibit as a game for the artists, who construct it improvisationally on site, according to predecided rules but without rehearsal: “Once the rules were settled, a high number of moves was possible … an Exhibit as it stands, records one set of possible moves.”
They suggest that, by entering the exhibit, visitors also participate in a game. Conceived in this way, the exhibition still has a structure, and its explicit content becomes something that is an implicit content of every exhibition: the moves and decisions of the visitors. This is the exhibition medium stripped down to its bare minimum. Nevertheless, visitors to the ICA in 2014 played a different game from visitors in 1957: armed with camera phones, many (including myself) photographed and videoed the installation.

Today, exhibition designers tend to think in terms of narrative as the key element that gives an exhibition coherence. For designer Frank den Oudsten, the spectator, the audience, “completes the narrative environment” (2012, 21). This emphasis on the exhibition narrative is connected to the influence of film and theater. Since the 1970s, exhibitions have increasingly used techniques from these fields. In his chapter here, Higgins refers to his own career trajectory, “shifting from architecture to work in TV, film and theater” before establishing himself as a designer of exhibitions (Chapter 14). However, he sees “limited crossover” both in the organization of the production and division of labor, and in the different and medium-specific qualities of exhibitions, film, and theater. Unlike in film and theater, the exhibition designer must plan for the “personalized sequence” visitor experience.

For Higgins, the concept of scenography is very much associated with film and theater; in German-speaking countries, however, the term Szenographie has a wider meaning, although it has been applied to museums only since the millennium, according to Habsburg-Lothringen. Generally it tends to call to mind simulated, immersive environments along the lines of naturalistic film and theater sets – the highly atmospheric, immersive spaces described earlier. In Part III, Habsburg-Lothringen describes contemporary scenography in terms of the construction of “flexible, atmospherically dense, and interactive illusory spaces, in which the viewer is immersed temporarily” (Chapter 15).

Such “illusory spaces” might seem to be a logical, even inevitable, progression from displays such as dioramas and period rooms. However, Habsburg-Lothringen also discusses the 1980s rejection of this kind of naturalism or illusionism among German-speaking curators and designers of historical exhibitions who turned instead to a kind of Brechtian realism in which “alienating effects and distortions” disrupt the illusion of the exhibition and expose it as a construction (Chapter 15). A new critical and poetic approach to exhibition making led in the direction of more aesthetic, sensual, and atmospheric environments. From a present-day perspective, and in relation to the earlier discussion of atmosphérics, this is perhaps unexpected: it suggests that, far from always being a tool for the construction of illusions or for the manipulation of visitors/consumers, atmospheric media could be used to produce what Habsburg-Lothringen refers to as a “productive shock” in visitors. In the context of a historical exhibition, this shock serves to disrupt any assumption of an objectively knowable past, seamlessly connected to the present, and unfiltered by present values and understandings.
Introduction

For den Oudsten (2012), scenography doesn’t refer only to thematic, highly designed environments, but to a dramaturgy that takes place within a space between observer and observed. The idea that scenography does not have to describe only immersive exhibits is made clear in Beat Hächler’s chapter. Hächler refers to his practice at the Stapferhaus in Lenzburg as “social scenography,” a concept intended to capture “the performative aspect of exhibitions” (Chapter 16). In a social scenographic exhibition, the exhibition space is conceived of as a dynamic space, a space produced by action, by the activity of visitors. This requires rethinking the museum as “a space of the present,” which produces reflection in visitors because “what museum visitors are confronted with above all is themselves.”

Audience participation

New media curator and writer Beryl Graham notes that participation is challenging to some art curators, critics, and institutions because it is associated with a loss of curatorial control and with inciting disorderly audience behavior – notoriously in installations like Cyprien Gaillard’s The Recovery of Discovery (2011) discussed by Rectanus in Chapter 23, or Robert Morris’s 1971 Bodyspacemotionthings discussed by Graham in Chapter 20. Huhtamo characterizes visitor engagement with interactives as often chaotic, impulsive, and depthless: “momentary acts of punching and tapping, pushing and pulling” (Chapter 12). Yet, Luigina Ciolfi, who designs interactives for heritage sites, shows how the design process is increasingly rooted in a “rich view of human interaction and experience” and how point-and-click technologies are being replaced with multisensory forms of engagement, and site-specific designs (Chapter 19). For John Bell and Jon Ippolito, as for Ciolfi, digital technologies can actually enhance the sensual, emotional experience of place (Chapter 21).

Hands-on participatory exhibits have often led to accusations that the museum is treading too closely to other nonserious popular contexts such as the circus, the dime museum, and the fairground (see Goodman 1990, Giddings, Chapter 7). I have written elsewhere about how the pioneering exhibition Cybernetic Serendipity at London’s ICA attracted this kind of criticism (Henning 2006, 88). Sue Perks cites the critics of the Human Biology exhibition at the Natural History Museum, London, which opened in 1977: they referred to the exhibition variously as a “cheap disco,” a “lewd offal-shop nightmare,” “tasteless,” and like a “fairground ‘tunnel of love’” (Chapter 18). These are associated with fears about populism and “dumbing down”; anxieties about the working class are not far from the surface in this discourse. In this context, the most interesting (and, as Perks points out, “scathing”) critique came from Patrick Boylan who “considered Human Biology to be self-consciously ‘modern tasteful’ in style – ‘pure Middle Class “Habitat’”… reinforcing ‘fashionable, mildly liberal, educational and social theory and practice’” (quoted in Chapter 18). By associating the visual style of the exhibition with the homes of
middle-class liberals (who shopped at Terence Conran’s fashionable Habitat store), Boylan manages to imply that, far from making the museum more accessible, the Human Biology Hall was actually speaking to a narrow self-congratulatory elite.

Boylan was right to recognize that the Human Biology exhibits owed at least as much to liberal educational theory as they did to the inspiration of popular entertainment and commerce. In fact, while they are heavily associated with entertainment contexts, interactives actually developed in the context of the museum’s educational remit. Perks recounts how the Natural History Museum, in planning its innovative New Exhibition Scheme in the 1970s, drew on the influence of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, the work of the Open University, and the Isotype method of the 1920s and 1930s (Chapter 18). These shaped a new emphasis on visitor participation, well-defined learning objectives, and techniques to evaluate effectiveness. At the Exploratorium, interactives and hands-on exhibits were intended to communicate abstract scientific concepts in an enjoyable and accessible way, and to enable visitors to understand the workings of technologies that appeared to them in everyday life as mysterious “black boxes.” However, as interactives have become more widely used, their use has changed: in heritage contexts, for example, the priority is not an understanding of technology; rather, the technology is there to enhance a sense of place and to embody the kinds of interactions associated with the place (Ciolfi, Chapter 19). This is facilitated by technologies disguised as mock-historical artifacts, which record and respond to visitors’ locations, including motion sensors, GPS (satellite-based navigation), and geotagging (using geographical metadata attached to images, video, or objects).

Instead of increasing accessibility, Karin Harrasser argues, hands-on learning in museums can stand in the way of deeper learning and reproduce existing educational inequalities (Chapter 17). In their research on hands-on displays in children’s museums, Harrasser and her colleagues focused on observing children using them. Their research confirmed Pierre Bourdieu’s observations in the 1970s that “open learning” through interaction privileges the already privileged, while other children struggle, being “unfamiliar with the whole environment” and lacking a sense of entitlement. The irony (or tragedy) here is that the development of interaction and visitor participation in museums was a genuine attempt to expand the audience across social classes and to increase accessibility.

Other devices intended to enrich visitor experience can also have unintended effects. Biehl-Missal and vom Lehn find that information kiosks and handheld devices can mean that visitors spend more time with the technology than with the objects it is intended to support, and that groups either separate and take in the exhibition individually, or “become frustrated with the systems and abandon them” (Chapter 11). In other words, these media can have the same effect of individualization that has been observed with the older audio guides. Yet we should differentiate between these media and their effects: as Proctor suggests (quoting Laura Mann), the linear audio tour had an ability to immerse visitors in the experience that later interactive, or personalized, digital tours lost (Chapter 22). Reduced
lii Introduction

Sociability is not an inevitable effect of interactives: Higgins points to ways in which they can provide a social experience where “one person, the avatar, is able to operate the system on behalf of much larger user groups who may be engaged with the learning process” (Chapter 14). Similarly, Graham observes that the audience for one augmented reality-based artwork “even went so far as to loan that most intimate and covetable of devices, the mobile phone, to strangers without a camera, in order to pass on the experience” (Chapter 20).

Graham suggests that new media art can offer “critical tools” for understanding audience participation and interaction with artworks, beyond the traditional model of aesthetic contemplation. Participation and interaction include the audience’s role in documenting and archiving the experience of the artwork: so for example, in the case of audience photography, museums have tended to move away from seeing it as a threat to copyright and ownership, to viewing it as (variously or simultaneously) documentation, publicity, and participation (Graham, Chapter 20; Henning, Chapter 25). Networked media also allow for “art projects which are distributed coproductions,” with the audience as coproducer, and for audiences to become involved in curating. This can include the online tagging and annotation of artworks and collections, as well as collaborative curating using live online chat and discussion boards (Graham, Chapter 20).

The audience role is diversifying. Rectanus argues that “museums increasingly position audiences in multiple roles as viewers, spectators, performers, and consumers” (Chapter 23). Networked audiences have different expectations, different ways of engaging with museums, and, according to Proctor, “the potential to transform the museum, the way it works, its structures of power, and even its mission” (Chapter 22). As Proctor describes in her chapter, mobile media used for interpretation “can capture data (metrics) and feedback from these visitors on where they go, what they do, and what questions they ask of the museum’s content and collections, events, and so on.” Museums increasingly “data-mine” social media, but must be wary that they do not “violate the public trust” (Proctor, Chapter 22). From an exhibition design perspective, the potential of new media seems very exciting, with “individual profiling” increasing the possibility of personalized content (Higgins, Chapter 14).* On a larger scale, violating trust is perhaps less of a concern than the ways in which institutions play an uncritical role in an increasingly standard practice of audiences voluntarily (and often unwittingly) supplying large amounts of data about themselves. This kind of audience participation has worrying political implications.

**New roles**

Graham claims that “the behaviors of new media affect how curators and other museum workers work in time and space, online and offline” (Chapter 20). She explains that the overlap and blurring of boundaries between new media art and
new media as interactives, as interpretation, as promotional tools for the museum, and as part of our everyday experience make new media art particularly difficult for museums and galleries to deal with. Proctor too sees mobile digital media as having a great deal of impact on museum professionals, who now have to take mobile access into account when planning, who have limited editorial control on the information being circulated about the museum, its events and exhibitions, and who are now responsible to people who may never actually visit the museum itself (Chapter 22).

In their chapter, John Bell and Jon Ippolito address ways in which new media art has challenged curatorial control, such as augmented reality projects that use the technology to invade and take over existing museum exhibitions – in ways that are perceivable only to those in the know and with the appropriate app on their mobile phone (Chapter 21). They understand this in terms of an expansion or “diffusion” of the museum into virtual space. They are interested in the ways in which museums have attempted to control and delimit the curatorial space, and set down boundary markers online. Bell and Ippolito concur with Graham when they say that “Even the brick-and-mortar museum has to accept that they are no longer singular authoritative voices on the artifacts they exhibit and that the voices of outside experts are at the fingertips of anyone with a smartphone.” Citing commentators who view the stretching of the term “curating” to include online curating as an insult to the profession, they celebrate this expansion of “vernacular curating.” In the attempt to restrict the title to “museum-appointed staff,” they perceive a certain anxiety about feminized, and consequently devalued, labor.

However, it is clear that neither the museum’s relationship with its audience nor the professional division of labor within museums and related institutions have been completely stable for a long time. Studies of audience attention in museums go back to the 1920s and 1930s. Wasson discusses how the use of Taylorist time-motion studies in that early period informed the exhibition strategies of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Pennsylvania in the United States, and also how “museum fatigue” became increasingly something museums attempted to address, or allay (Chapter 26). Perks’s study of the New Exhibition Scheme focuses on the collaborative relationship between scientists and designers at the Natural History Museum and the intermediary role of the “transformer,” invented in 1920s Vienna (Chapter 18). Her archival research shows how British Museum conferences in the early 1970s devoted much discussion to the difficult relationship between designers and curators, and the need for better communication with audiences. While designers tended to “neglect intellectual content,” scholarly curators seemed overly obsessed with it (Wade, quoted in Chapter 18).

Even today, the separation of curator and designer can be an inhibiting and problematic one: these are disciplines with their own discrete curricula, conferences, festivals, and professional bodies (den Oudsten 2012, 9). In addition, the field of exhibition design has opened up to include “representatives from the fields of art, film, comics, costume design, music, and dance” (Habsburg-Lothringen,
Chapter 15). While “transformers” as such have disappeared, a whole host of new roles have sprung up to cater for the expanded field of museum and curatorial practice – from the independent “critical” curator and the scenographer, to the citizen curator mentioned earlier, to what Bell and Ippolito call vernacular curators, to new media strategists and new media curators. While writers such as Harrasser (Chapter 17) and Huhtamo (Chapter 12) argue for the need to observe visitor interaction as part of a critical methodology for analyzing exhibitions, Luigina Ciolfi’s chapter shows that a similar methodology is in use in design processes. At Bunratty Folk Park in Ireland, Ciolfi’s research involved “documenting the visitors’ relationships to the place and how they experienced it in terms of physical accommodation, cultural understandings, social interaction, and personal and emotional connections” (Chapter 19). Ethnographic, observational, and interview techniques were used as a basis for developing “design scenarios” and ultimately prototype interactive artifacts, which were then piloted and tested with visitors.

The museum has recast itself as a commissioner and/or collaborator in new forms of social activism involved in “increasingly complex constellations of media use” and the “deterioralization of museum contents and programming” (Rectanus, Chapter 23). In many cases, museums have been quick to respond to new media environments and are not as wary of media as they are sometimes portrayed. Proctor observes that they were “early adopters of personal handheld devices” (Chapter 22) while Wasson writes of the wide range of ways in which museums have engaged with modern media over a long period, “effectively participating in a vast media ecology” (Chapter 26). The Metropolitan Museum, New York, had an early film program in the 1920s, that sent films out “like mobile, mechanical docents,” producing “satellite museums out of ad hoc, often impromptu, spaces” (Wasson, Chapter 26). Images traveled too: in my chapter, I discuss André Malraux’s notion of the “museum without walls”: a world of mass reproduction that was connected to, but not entirely controlled by, museums (Chapter 25). The new context for museum artworks is nicely evoked by Wasson when she talks of how reproductions “shared space with pictures of fashion contestants, bathing beauties, coronations, and presidential speeches” in the newspapers (Chapter 26). While Ernst sees museums’ media specificity as residing in the material object (Chapter 1), several contributors emphasize museums’ long-term engagement with media.

**Media objects**

This deep and historical involvement with different kinds of electronic media has involved museums reinventing themselves, no longer to be understood as “a permanent, unmoving, physical structure but as a kind of tentacular hub for a range of circulating things and ways of presenting those things” (Wasson, Chapter 26).
However, both electronic media and the museum as medium have a tendency to efface themselves, to conceal or naturalize their own technologies. For this reason, it is important to preserve older museum arrangements (such as dioramas or the avant-garde installations discussed earlier), and also to archive and collect media as objects.

However, because museum displays tend to center around visibility, media objects prove problematic to collect and display. Even visual electronic media such as television need to be operational to be understood as more than a piece of product design, and often the core similarities and differences between media as technological objects are not visible. Ernst indicates that electronic media raise all sorts of questions about how you display dynamic objects, operational machines, and software. Displaying media objects often requires the creative reinvention of exhibition space. The black-box space is an invention necessary for the increasing number of film and media projections, especially in art contexts. Chamarette (Chapter 5) and Graham (Chapter 20) mention some of the difficulties of engaging with such exhibits, from the “bleeding” of sound, to the problems of visitors’ time commitment.

Media also raise difficulties in terms of where to make the “cut.” Arguably, they are cultural phenomena that need to be understood in relation to an audience, to certain kinds of social spaces, professions, and practices. Do television and computers make sense when removed from their living room and office habitats; or the newspaper from the cafe or the train? Can film be understood without cinema, and do film collections need to also include the ephemera of cinema and cinema-going? There are also, inevitably, complex conservation and archival issues: for filmic culture to be preserved, the museum has to develop techniques to preserve its material, but Chamarette argues that there is a too common tendency in museums and museum studies to ignore film’s materiality and to treat it as a mode of transmission whose contents might therefore simply be translated across to magnetic tape or as digital data (Chapter 5). Cox, in Chapter 10, notes that scientific and anthropological recordings have a place in museums, but sound art proves difficult for art museums to conserve and classify. Indeed, sound art is often a live event and therefore poses problems for archivists and conservationists similar to those posed by performance art (on which see Clarke and Warren 2009). Similarly, Internet art has proved challenging for a number of reasons including the difficulties of classification and a lack of clarity over issues of conservation and display. New media curators have consequently found institutional support for the collection and display of Internet art to be somewhat shaky and variable (Vershooren 2010). In the face of poor institutional support and rapidly changing digital formats, many curators and scholars fear that early new media art and documentation is disappearing or already lost. An “international declaration” drawn up in 2011 called for sustainable funding structures and global collaboration to halt this process.  

Media collections are important because they offer the possibility for reflection and analysis of media worlds that otherwise appear to us as very natural and normal, since they are so integrated into our everyday lives. In this volume, Huhtamo
argues that the widespread use of interactivity, not just in the form of museum interactives but also in everyday life, contributes to a normalization or naturalization of it that makes it harder to ask questions about it, and that embeds it as involuntary reflex, mere habit (Chapter 12). Harrasser expresses concern that the close coupling of museum interactives and visitors’ wider media environment may not be a good thing, making rarer “the moment when the medium creeps into perception that triggers complex learning processes” (Chapter 17). Rectanus also warns that the audience’s deep and proliferating involvement in media production and use can eat away at the space for critical reflection, challenging museums to find ways to provide that reflective space in a media-saturated world (Chapter 23).

The museum as reflective space is a model that is frequently invoked, but it does not take account of the possibility that the tradition of silent, receptive, critical contemplation, especially in the art museum, is itself the product of a particular culture, social class, and set of priorities. In my chapter, I refer to play as the name for another kind of aesthetic experience (Chapter 25). Kalshoven sees play as a means to enable a deep engagement with historical objects (Chapter 24). And, while Huhtamo questions the impact of an increasingly tactile emphasis in museum contexts (Chapter 12), Ciolfi affirms the value of tangibility for keeping visitors focused on the site and on the material, sensual aspects of their experience (Chapter 19). I draw on Jacques Rancière’s notion of a “[re]distribution of the sensible,” arguing that the present all-pervasive image culture, the product of an increasingly mobile, networked digital photography, can offer new models of attention and aesthetic experience for art museums (Chapter 25). Rectanus refers to turning the museum “inside out,” to museums becoming increasingly flexible, mobile, and connected with a wider “commons,” both geographically and online (Chapter 23). Graham argues that the incorporation of new media art in the museum has involved a “rethinking of the role of the visitor, the artist, and the curator,” and leads us to the notion of the “open” participatory museum (Chapter 20; see also Simon 2010). Museums continue to “keep the record,” to enable people to reflect on and attend to their present as well as the past, but, as the diverse essays in this volume suggest, changes in media bring with them changed forms of attention that require new strategies for museum-making, and new kinds of research and analysis.

Notes

1 “We all live in an information age – or so we tell each other as we caress our smart phones like rosary beads, heads down, checking, monitoring, tweeting. We’re wired; we’re on message; and the dominant theme of the message is ourselves. Identity is the zeitgeist. A lifetime ago in ‘Brave New World,’ Aldous Huxley predicted this as the ultimate means of social control because it was voluntary, addictive and shrouded in illusions of personal freedom” (Pilger 2014).
2 In his introduction to the 1964 edition of Innis’s book *The Bias of Communication* (originally published in 1951), McLuhan wrote: “I am pleased to think of my own book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* as a footnote to the observations of Innis on the subject of the psychic and social consequences, first of writing then of printing” (McLuhan 2005, 8).

3 In his essay “The Bias of Communication” Innis argued that different historical technologies of communication (stone and hieroglyphics; clay and cuneiform script; papyrus and alphabet; paper and printed gothic script) favored or hindered different kinds of social organization – from centralized absolute monarchies to oligarchies, to complexly administered empires. In Innis’s terms, radio itself already carries a specific and undemocratic bias toward “centralization” and “a concern with continuity” (Innis [1951] 2008, 33).

4 The research conducted by Karin Harrasser and her colleagues makes use of Stuart Hall’s semiotic encoding–decoding model, but while Hall tended to view oppositional, or resistant, readings as empowering, Harrasser found that the process of negotiating such readings can actually be stressful and difficult (Harrasser, Chapter 17).

5 “Whether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the ‘content’ of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that ‘the medium is the message’ because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association” (McLuhan [1964] 2001, 23–24).


7 Like the natural history dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, it raises interesting questions about how an exhibition design can itself become an artifact, worthy of conservation. To recognize the dioramas as aesthetic objects worth preserving means acknowledging a change in function: these are no longer just preserved moments and spaces from nature, intended to educate and inspire visitors about the natural world; they are also time capsules of exhibition design, a specific moment in the history of the craft.

8 Visitors are asked “to inhabit, for the duration of the game, a real environment. The meaning of an Exhibit is now dependent on the decisions of the visitors, just as, at an earlier stage, it was dependent on the artists who were the players. It is a game, a maze, a ceremony completed by the participation of the visitors. Which routes will they take, will they move through narrow or wide spaces, where will they decide to stop and assess the whole” (poster for an Exhibit, displayed at the ICA, February 2014; emphasis original).

9 These are concerns heightened by early twenty-first-century scandals regarding data-gathering by both commercial organizations and security and surveillance agencies such as the National Security Agency (NSA) in the United States, and Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in the United Kingdom.

10 This international declaration can be found at http://www.mediaarthistory.org/ declaration (accessed July 17, 2014).
References


Fabiani, J. L., and P. M. Menger. 1979. “Études sur le Public du Centre.” *Archives of the Centre Pompidou*.


Introduction


Michelle Henning is Senior Lecturer in Photography and Visual Culture in the Media Department, School of Art, Design and Media at the University of Brighton. She is also a Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Digital Cultures Research Centre at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Prior to this she was Associate Professor of Media and Culture at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She is a practicing photographer and designer and has written widely on museums, media, and display techniques in her book Museums, Media and Cultural Theory (Open University Press, 2006), as well as in numerous collections.