

The Social Lab

A New Approach for Science Centres

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Looking at the arts as a seismograph of social processes, one notices that the contents and forms of presentation at the big international art fairs and Biennales are changing. The artists are guided more and more by social processes and phenomena, opening strange and new realities for the viewer. Museums of Contemporary Art offering more and more a change of perspective and focusing on human and interhuman aspects.

This interest in social contexts can be found increasingly also in the technical and economic field. The number of publications as "Ethics in Economy" is increasing, definitely a consequence out of the crisis and crash in the economy. The European Branch of the MIT, the Media Lab Europe at Dublin recently published a development in order to set in motion an awareness of the correlation of product design and social consequence. Starting point was a micro chip to be implanted into a tooth as a mobile telephone.

These brief examples from the arts, economy and science show that we are dealing with a change of paradigms. The human factor acts in a social context with all its contradictions and mental jumps, evades logical or rational explanation. A product or a phenomenon can no longer be viewed in isolation, it can only be understood in total through its consequences for the user, the consumer or the viewer.

Furthermore we are citizens of a global village. We are part of a multi-cultural society. We witness mobility and migration and a global shift of values. Social frameworks with common values, like the family, clubs, unions or religious congregations are fast losing their meaning in the post industrial world. There is a need for an orientation and this gap can offer new opportunities for Science Centres.

Science Centres as social labs?

Frank Oppenheimer no doubt founded the first Science Centre with a view to show and explain scientific phenomena. Physics, with her subheadings like mechanics, optics, acoustics and kinetics all provide the fundamentals for an explanation, kindling our fascination for the wonders of this world. "He who has seen these wonders doesn't destroy them". 50 years later it's time to evaluate this statement and to integrate the current needs of the society.

The set up of a social lab, where the social implications are at the centre, becomes the future task. Not as a derivation of technical innovations, no, the subject here is the fundamental social challenge. How to deal with minorities, the dwindling of values, intercultural societies, individualisation, sociological and demographic changes, internationalisation and globalisation, fears and unemployment, to name but a few examples. Each of those topics, if illuminated, casts a long shadow, and every answer gives rise to new questions. But answering and explaining are not at the centre. What *is* at the centre is asking questions, pointing out contradictions, the openness to get involved in unknown things, to accept constant changes and to drop preconceived ideas in the face of changed perspectives.

The aim of the Social lab is to create new stimuli for spending our free time, and to give our young people new impulses through the encounter with the unknown, which can be carried over into everyday life. The long-term aim for our visitors is as follows:

- 1) Instilling respect
- 2) Overcoming of prejudices
- 3) Acceptance of difference and diversity
- 4) Advancing social creativity
- 5) Dealing with one's own fears
- 6) Identifying of one's own potentials and limits
- 7) Encounter with people of different backgrounds
- 8) Openness for a common learning process

In short: to dare, to share and to care.

This concept must be realised in a way that is cooperative rather than competitive. The programme of the social lab reinforces the social ties within a society and counterbalances individualisation and diffusion. As a variation to Oppenheimer: He who has experienced the miracle of human diversity does not destroy it, he respects the other man.

New museology

The starting point has to be ourselves, the human being with constantly changing connections, values and judgements; with our relationships, needs and contradictions; a multi-sensory being, experiencing the world through his whole body and mind.

From this we can extract the determinants which serve as guidelines for our contents:

- 1) At the Center: Man
- 2) On view: Social processes
- 3) The ruling factors: Cooperation and communication
- 4) The Exhibitions: platforms for encounter
- 5) Transfer into everyday life is ensured
- 6) Reflection: on values and judgements
- 7) Achievement: a mediation of divers cultures and social forms.

What museological methods can be employed to cover this content? Hands-on exhibits, computer animations, science demonstrations, AV media or text full of theory are definitely not the solution – they might even be part of the problem.

In an experimental set-up, based on experimental psychology and supported by theatre, role play, games and communication theory, people meet and solve problems together. Guidelines set a certain framework for the action. The principles are those of a game. The action is defined by the play area. People are developing a relationship with each other and working out strategies to achieve their goal. In the social lab the play area is the exhibit. The visitors are the “chessmen”. The science centre is the platform. The exhibition is the catalyst, getting the contents across.

Examples from the Social Lab

“Dialogue in the Dark”, developed 14 years ago, is a first model fulfilling the criteria of the Social lab. In this exhibition for the discovery of the invisible, blind persons guide the visitors through a totally dark environment. The blind person is the expert for non-visual perception and orientation. During their journey through darkness, the visitors “get a break from seeing” and experience themselves, their surroundings and all social encounters in a totally new way. In this highly emotional experience, social roles are re-written (a permanent exhibit is presented in Hamburg, Germany).

The **MEgames** involves the visitor in five areas: creativity and innovation, strategy and tactics, communication and interaction, crisis management, and teamwork and cooperation. In groups of two, three, or more, players can together discover their skills and abilities. A chance to get a new perspective on ourselves, in an environment which conveys the ambivalence of games: congenial yet competitive, active yet thoughtful... (Temporary exhibit at la Cité des Sciences et l’Industrie, April – November 2003)

Based on the experience of “Dialogue in the Dark”, **“Chat in Shadows”** was developed, an installation for non verbal communication. In this social experiment, deaf people encounter those who have been made “deaf” by means of soundproofing. Conversations are held by means of theatrical and museological elements, aided by gesturing, miming, phantasy, creativity and sign language. The visitors are hearing with their eyes and talking with their hands, and from the translation by deaf people experience a widening of the classic terms of language and communication.

“Me, you, us... and others” is a project for an interactive games platform for children. Through experiences, they will become more aware of their own identity and their relationships with others. They go back and forth from situations of self-awareness to situations of interacting with others: from being a detective searching for their particular traits and specificity to experiencing the feeling of being a minority. Kids can get different perspectives on one same event or are asked to guess what the dilemma-ridden hero feels... By experiencing empathy for others, stereotypes and preconceived ideas are shaken.

“Fact or Fiction”, a project for a city-wide workshop, plays with the perception of reality. In a part of the city stations are constructed which to an attentive viewer appear to be fictitious and unreal. A down-and-out sleeping in a shop window, bulky refuse arranged and draped to look like an apartment, elephant’s excrement in a pedestrian precinct, a cascade of ringing mobile phones, frenetic applause on passing through a passage, or four models in wheelchairs who can be viewed and classified as real or unreal, as social reality or artistic composition. The participants call in science centre or at a radio station, describing their perception of reality and getting a chance to debat.

All these examples, some of which have been tried out, some only thought out, have one factor in common, namely that they provide encounters which, within the existing framework, have to be newly defined. The common experience bears results which could never be achieved by the individual alone. Thought patterns change and perception becomes more acute, which serves to give a new sight of urban, cultural and social truths.

The Social lab, a collecting tank for social utopia? Perhaps this is slightly exaggerated. But surely it serves as an impulse for Science Centres to take into account social changes and present them to a wider public in new interdisciplinary presentations, free of theoretical ballast. Everybody can enter this platform, regardless of his or her age, sex, culture, religion or education, to explore their social creativity and rethink their thinking patterns.