

Landmark Exhibitions Issue***Les Immatériaux* Revisited: Innovation in Innovations****Nathalie Heinich**

Thinking about the 1985 exhibition *Les Immatériaux* after more than twenty years allows me to rekindle the feeling of excitement I felt at being involved with the Centre Georges Pompidou and the radical event that was *Les Immatériaux*. For both the exhibition and the institution embraced innovation in ways which have rarely been seen since. It is within this dual context of innovation that I was lucky enough to conduct a survey, the findings of which I summarise below.

The Museum

The Centre Pompidou (known to most Parisians simply as 'Beaubourg') was immediately perceived as innovative when it opened in 1977. Its architecture – designed by the then almost unknown team formed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers – was unabashedly modern, if not quite postmodern. The very concept of the institution was multi-functional, combining the Musée national d'art moderne (the MNAM) with an impressive public reference library (the Bibliothèque publique d'information, or BPI), an architecture and design centre (the Centre de création industrielle, known as the CCI), a laboratory for contemporary music (the IRCAM), spaces for contemporary art exhibitions, debates, film screenings, theatre and dance performances, as well as a bookstore, and several coffee shops and restaurants. Its open-plan interior embodied the concept of a pluralistic, democratic institution, where museum visitors could mingle with students and older people on their way to the library, avant-garde music enthusiasts met self-taught practitioners, the upper class rubbed shoulders with the working class – all united by a shared interest in the newest forms of art and culture. This, of course, was the utopia. But the very fact that so many people believed in it contributed to make it, if not real, then approachable, at least in its first decade.¹

The most innovative exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou were the so-called *grandes expositions* located on its fifth and highest floor. As reflections of the building's multi-functional vocation, and as the fruit of close collaborations between the various sections of the institution (MNAM, BPI, CCI, sometimes even IRCAM), these major interdisciplinary events – such as the series *Paris-Berlin*, *Paris-New York*, *Paris-Moscou* and *Paris-Paris* – were hugely popular, not only in Paris but across Europe, their impressive catalogues quickly becoming prized collectors' items. Because of their interdisciplinary nature, these events were no longer merely art exhibitions (in the traditional sense of fine-art museums), nor scientific displays of a collection of samples (as can be found in science museums). Instead, they were documentary exhibitions within a cultural frame, involving not only aesthetics but also history, philosophy, economics, science and technology.

Such exhibitions encouraged a shift in the visitors' focus: visitors and staff began to see not only the exhibited art works but also the exhibition itself as a kind of discourse, which we perceived and discussed as if it were an essay in the form of a collection of objects and documents.² This new understanding of exhibitions went hand in hand with another phenomenon that first appeared in those years: the greater recognition, and hence visibility, of the curator. Exhibition curators (*commissaires d'exposition*) began to act and be treated not only as museum *conservateurs*, but as 'authors' in their own right of the exhibitions they organised. I first became aware of this shift in status at the end of the 1970s, when visiting the Centre culturel du Marais, a small private space where curators Jacqueline and Maurice Guillaud held a series of striking art exhibitions, with

scenography that drew on theatre set design. I noticed the same phenomenon in the *Kafka* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, curated in 1984 by the freelance curator Yasha David, as well as in the monumental *Vienna* exhibition in 1986, curated by the already famous museum *conservateur* and art critic Jean Clair. After having written a sociological paper on this new trend – where I compare it to the emergence of the ‘author’ in the history of cinema³ – I decided to interview Harald Szeemann, whom I visited in his office on the Monte Verità, in Ticino, in 1988.⁴

Needless to say that in 1985, when *Les Immatériaux* happened, I was still only vaguely aware of this rapid transformation from curator to author, which was, so to speak, happening ‘in real time’ and of which, of course, Lyotard’s exhibition offered a dramatic illustration.

The Exhibition

Les Immatériaux broke new ground in a number of ways. First, its curator-author was not an art specialist but a philosopher. That is, for the first time a philosophical discourse was presented to a large audience not through printed matter or orally, but through images and artefacts. This initiative paved the way for other philosophers, such as Bruno Latour who, twenty years later, would curate *Iconoclash*, an exhibition about conflicting modes of representation, or Tzvetan Todorov with the exhibition *Les Lumières* at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 2006. A second innovation consisted in the exhibition’s theme – technical innovations, new materials and, consequently, the trend toward a kind of ‘immaterialisation’ of our relationship to the world and to each other – which demonstrated a desire to look to the near future, at what was still hardly perceived but would soon become our ‘everyday’. A third innovation, closely related to the last, consisted in the material components of the exhibition, the objects through which the theme was illustrated. Paintings and sculptures were still present, of course, but became part of a much larger set of information made up of signs, words, sounds and technical artefacts. Finally, the way in which the exhibition was organised – its governing structure – proved equally innovative. Instead of an imposed itinerary, visitors were invited to wander freely and choose their own trajectory, at the risk of never making it to the exhibition’s exit.

The Apparatus

For at least a generation, no exhibition in a public institution has been able to afford to do without an apparatus, or mediating structure, with which to help visitors appreciate or understand what they see. Here, too, *Les Immatériaux* innovated. Contrary to common practice, there were no guided tours through *Les Immatériaux*. Instead, group discussions were held outside of the exhibition space, after the visit, for those who wanted to discuss, with a guide, what they had seen, read and heard. This new type of mediation fostered a kind of intellectualisation of the visitor’s relationship to the exhibition.



Fig.1
Les Immatériaux, ‘Tous les auteurs’ site, with Nam June Paik’s *TV Buddha* in the background
Photograph © CCI/J.-C. Plancher 1985, scenography by Philippe Délis

Whereas catalogues are the most common element of mediation for exhibitions, *Les Immatériaux* had none, at least not in the traditional sense. What visitors could buy were two different publications: one was an album that contained, on one side, a sort of diary or ‘making of’ of the exhibition, and, on the other, loose cards listing the content of the various sites, thereby reproducing the deconstructed architecture of the exhibition itself (fig.1). The second publication displayed the results of an interactive experiment between a number of scholars (mainly philosophers) who had been invited to discuss themes provided by Lyotard and his co-curator, Thierry Chaput, with the help of something so new that it was difficult to describe or even name at

the time: what today we would call email. In 1985 this technology was far from user-friendly, so that a large part of the distinguished authors' contributions is dedicated to their difficulties in using the software. Re-reading the transcript of their exchanges today, I cannot help but find their complaints about the technical failures of the programme more instructive of what immaterialisation might mean than most of their attempts to elaborate on such 'intellectual' catchphrases as 'modernity', 'time' or 'networks' – catchphrases that date the catalogue as unmistakably as an old-fashioned suit.

In the absence of a guided tour, visitors to *Les Immatériaux* had to wear earphones, through which they could hear human speech. The voices streaming through the earphones did not provide any direct 'explanation' of what the visitor had in sight, but rather unidentified fragments of discourse indirectly related to what there were supposed to comment on, without requiring the visitor to press a button in front of each exhibit. Most visitors did not make the connection between the voices and their own movement through the exhibition, which inevitably led to some colourful misunderstandings, described in my survey of the exhibition. This uncertainty was only made worse by the fact that, given the cost of this advanced technology, access to the earphones was not free: every visitor had to queue and pay to use them. The fee was not high, but it went against the Pompidou's free-access policy for those who had paid for an annual membership. Thus the visitor's book was full of rants about these inadequate earphones, just as the philosophers railed in the catalogue against the software.

The Survey

I was particularly aware of these problems, as I was in charge of a survey of the visitors' reactions to the exhibition.⁵ I had proposed the idea to the Centre Pompidou, and had managed to obtain a modest grant through Expo-media, a small association attached to the popular education initiative 'Peuple et culture'. When I approached the Centre, sociology had begun to take a strong interest in culture, following the precedent set by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's famous analysis of museum attendance.⁶ At the same time, an increasing number of cultural institutions, with the support of the French ministry of Culture, systematically began to commission sociological surveys, in part for political reasons, as the idea that art had to become more 'democratic' was taking hold. From 1981, I had been responsible for the statistical surveys of the Centre Pompidou's audience, working with the Service des études et recherches of the BPI and the Service liaison-adhésion, which spearheaded efforts to reach and involve a wider audience.

In *Les Immatériaux*, I experimented with new methodologies, relying more on qualitative than statistical data. Such methods were of two kinds. With visitors, I used the traditional interview method, not only after the visit (to record their opinions on the exhibition), but also before (in order to take note of their expectations). I also made use of a more ethnographical method, based on silent observation, which I carried out in three ways: what I called the *suivi* consisted in following one or more visitors through the exhibition, recording their trajectory, how long they stayed in front of various exhibits or in the different spaces, and whether they read the available texts or not. If possible, a final interview would be conducted with visitors thus followed. The second technique (*parcours*) consisted in walking through the entire exhibition, noting how many people were standing in each site. Finally, the technique I called *posté* consisted in standing at a site and counting how many people went in and out. The collected data allowed me to represent statistically the 'performances' of the different items or sites, as well as other characteristics of the visitors' behaviour.⁷

Two general sociological issues emerged from this investigation. The first deals with what the sociologist Norbert Elias termed the degrees of 'involvement and detachment': before considering the content of an opinion, one has to take into account its intensity, that is, the degree of the person's involvement in what it is about.⁸ The opinions about *Les Immatériaux* were worth analysing when the visitors who held them demonstrated a certain amount of interest, excitement, or readiness to express themselves. Often, however, visitors had no opinion, and this was also, undoubtedly, worthy of consideration. The second general issue pertains to what the art historian Alan Bowness has defined as the 'four circles of recognition'.⁹ In the art world (as in the court environment studied by Elias¹⁰), hierarchy does not take the form of a scale, nor even of a pyramid, but instead of a series of concentric circles. If artists stand at the centre, the nearer to them you are, the higher in the scale you stand; in the second circle are the specialists who write on the artists' works or exhibit them; then, those who sell and buy the works; finally, the general public, which never, or hardly ever,

has any chance of proximity with the artists. The same hierarchy applies, I would argue, to the central position of exhibition curator or, rather, author.

Conclusion: 'l'effet Beaubourg'

About the exhibition itself, the main conclusion of my survey was the dramatic variety and instability of perceptions and reactions, from one visitor to another and even, sometimes, from one moment to another for the same visitor. (I found that the same phenomenon appeared in the journalists' reviews of the exhibition published in newspapers). This was not only the result of the misunderstandings I evoke above: it was mainly the result of a 'border effect', a consequence of innovation. The difficulty to formulate a firm opinion, to know 'what one should think about it', is particularly pronounced in front of something new. Consequently, and contrary to Bourdieu's model of taste-making, I found little equivalence at *Les Immatériaux* between opinions and social positions.¹¹

Based on the results of the survey, I also detected a kind of homology between the exhibition and the Centre Pompidou itself: both were seen by many visitors as a labyrinth, where they felt more or less at ease according to their *habitus*. Those who had the capacity to incorporate the clues necessary to wander without feeling lost – mostly owing to their higher level of education – felt 'at home' in *Les Immatériaux* as well as in the Centre Pompidou; those, on the other hand, who did not possess this self-assurance, who could not rely on the cryptic references provided to navigate the exhibition space, experienced a sense of unease, of loss, and occasionally felt threatened or even deceived. This is what might be called *l'effet Beaubourg*, with which Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* can be revised, and for which *Les Immatériaux* provided an impressive illustration.¹²

Notes

1. See Nathalie Heinich, 'The Pompidou Centre and its Public: The Limits of a Utopian Site', in Robert Lumley (ed.), *The Museum Time Machine*, London 1988.
2. See Jean Davallon (ed.), *Claquemurer, pour ainsi dire, tout l'univers. La Mise en exposition*, Paris 1993.
3. Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak, 'From Museum Curator to Exhibition Author', in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sally Nairne (eds.), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London 1996 (first published 1989).
4. See Nathalie Heinich, *Harald Szeemann, un cas singulier. Entretien*, Paris 1995.
5. See Nathalie Heinich, 'Un Événement culturel à Beaubourg', in *Les Immatériaux*, Paris, 1986.
6. See Pierre Bourdieu (ed.), *L'Amour de l'art. Les Musées européens et leur public*, Paris 1966, 1969.
7. A university teacher invited his students to participate in the survey, which significantly increased the number of recorded observations.
8. See Norbert Elias, 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol.II, n.3, September 1956.
9. See Alan Bowness, *The Conditions of Success. How the Modern Artist Rises to Fame*, London 1989.
10. See Norbert Elias, *La Société de cour*, Paris 1969, 1974.
11. See Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris 1979.
12. See Nathalie Heinich, *Pourquoi Bourdieu*, Paris 2007.

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