Juxtaposition and the Liminal Exhibit—Inevitable and Surprising, at the Same Time

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Chapter 2
Juxtaposition and the Liminal Exhibit—Inevitable and Surprising, at the Same Time

Johan Liedgren, Andrea Gaggioli, and Pieter M. A. Desmet

I had to take the world of Paterson into a new dimension if I wanted to give it imaginative validity.
William Carlos Williams,
Paterson. New Directions, 1946

Abstract By exploring the potential of liminal design for museums and exhibitions through the intentional juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar, we offer perspectives to ignite visitors' imagination. The theoretical framework connecting liminality, transformative experiences, and juxtaposition anchors a practical three-step model that showcases how museums can offer liminal experiences with narrative engagement, optimal abstraction, and suspension of disbelief. Concepts are illustrated with examples, including the Seattle Asian Art Museum, Victoria and Albert, Brera, and the Louvre Abu Dhabi. The specific dynamics of interactive technology, immersive exhibits, and multimedia are discussed as additional thresholds and juxtapositions creating liminality that can offer deeper and more meaningful visitor experiences.

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2.1 Introduction

Aristotle suggested that all good stories need to be both inevitable and surprising—at the same time (Aristotle, Poetics 1452a). The same is arguably true for liminality: it is the unknown, infinite space, and tension suspended in-between two intentionally juxtaposed notions—between what is, and what might be—that tickles and tempts our imagination to fuel deeper liminal experiences. Practitioners of museum design and exhibit curation confront decisions around this very same balance.

Museums are already textbook examples of a liminal space. Liminal spaces are distinctly and deliberately separate from our ordinary reality, akin to cinemas, nightclubs, places of worship, a good book, or a sports arena. All of them are real spaces holding a fictional promise—some offering only a short thrill, others setting up for deep personal transformation. When we enter such a space, we voluntarily leave our ordinary reality behind to participate more fully in another suggested one. Different rules apply. Our attention and attitude are expected to be different. At a museum with objects on display—often long and far removed from their original condition and purpose—practical considerations are removed, and the artifacts are brought in to juxtapose the ordinary and be experienced as abstract examples of a much bigger idea. When participating in such a hypothetical space, we expect, in return, an experience that is freed from ordinary consequences, risks, and restrictions—a safe place to participate in with our imagination for profound and memorable experiences that cannot be held in the transactional nature of ordinary day-to-day life.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

If we want such liminality to come alive during a museum visit, we need to activate the visitor's imagination with disruptions to their established flow of thinking and ordinary use of metaphors (Lima 1995): each part of the museum needs to challenge the expectations a visitor arrives with by suggesting another seemingly contradictory perspective and metaphor. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur distinguishes conventional metaphors, or images that have become clichés, from alive metaphors ("métaphores vives") requiring imaginative work. Only the latter expose the person to some radical newness, which demands the simultaneous experience of both a "logical moment" and a "sensual moment" (Ricoeur 1975).

It is this in-between intentional juxtaposition of different notions—of what is, and what might be—that creates an active liminal space. When the visitor feels safe to explore something unknown, and sees enough promise in the new suggested perspective to warrant sensemaking of the contradictory notions, imagination will play out new possible ways to broker the paradox. This creates a new perspective in making personal sense of it all, and enables a transition back to the ordinary world, still holding some of the liminal insight in place (Stenner 2017; Zittoun and Stenner 2021). Some degree of transformation has taken place.

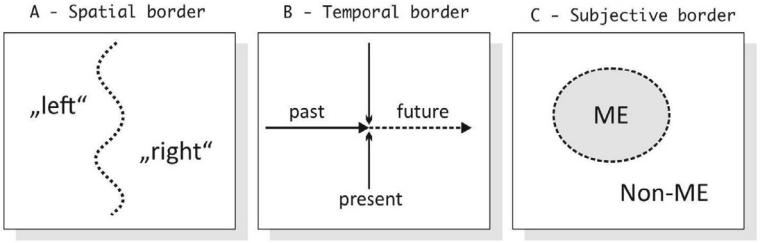


Fig. 2.1 Three semiotic thresholds. Image adapted from De Luca Picione and Valsiner (2017)

If visitors can take in the exhibit without challenging their pre-existing perspective—if no paradox, question, conflict, or juxtaposition between what is and what might be is sensed—no curiosity is required. No imagination is necessary. Consequently, no deeper positive experience is had (Antón et al. 2018). What is left is a simple transaction: a predictable barter between what we came for and what we unsurprisingly got. Our perspective on the world and ourselves is unchanged. Transactionality is antithetical to liminality.

The word liminality stems from Latin's limen, meaning threshold or border. Distinctions are how we make sense of the world: what is me and not me, what is past and what is future, etc. (Fig. 2.1). In routine tasks and transactions, such distinct thresholds need to be clear and fixed to perform the expected efficiently. In a liminal space on the other hand, the threshold itself is a space to be explored. A liminal experience is born by two contrasting notions held in the same context, suggesting a possible synthesis and new meaning. We are presented with an intentional juxtaposition challenging our ordinary thresholds, self and worldview.

The relevant psychological aspect highlighted through these distinctions is that a border is an arbitrary semiotic device which is required for both maintaining stability in our world and—in the liminal space—to be in defiance of status quo, inducing transformation by concurrently posing other possibilities (De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017). The object world has not changed. But our way of seeing it does, and so does its meaning. Aristotle's suggestion that all good stories need to be both inevitable and surprising, is very much taken to heart.

Intentional juxtapositions propose new semiotic thresholds. The expected object or notion has suddenly been placed inside an unexpected context, challenging our ordinary understanding. Suspended in between these two juxtaposed notions—a very real artifact or painting on one side, and its new proposed context on the other—a liminal space opens up to be explored, suggesting a different perspective and novel meaning. When effective, encountering such juxtaposition can be both tantalizing and destabilizing, triggering curiosity and a desire to explore further.

Tom Hennes captures this idea well as it pertains to museum curation (Hennes 2010, p. 24): "This element of destabilization … is an exciting and important challenge that is essential to creating exhibitions that affect their visitors. While it may at first feel unnerving to museum practitioners to envision their work in this way, it has strong roots in constructivist learning, foreshadowed by Dewey's conception of

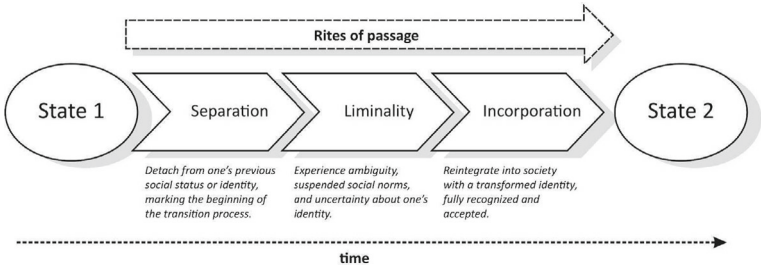


Fig. 2.2 Three distinct phases of separation, liminality and incorporation when moving from one social status to another by Van Gennep (1960). Image adapted from Soderlund and Borg (2018)

experience as beginning with a "perplexing situation" … and progressing through stages of inquiry and reflection."

The same idea aligns with Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopias (Foucault 1986), which he identifies as distinct spaces that disrupt our normal experience of the world. Foucault sets heterotopias apart from utopias, the latter being non-real spaces that propose an idealized society. In contrast, heterotopias are concrete and intrinsic to the societal structure. They are "other" spaces, embodying both presence and absence, representation and challenge, order and disruption. These spaces exist as pockets within the fabric of society, reflecting it, subverting it, and offering a different perspective on what is considered the norm.

Psychologically, a similar relationship to liminality is presented in anthropologist Victor Turner's model of personal transformation (Turner 1974). This transformation requires a temporary suspension of social norms and roles, allowing individuals to experiment with new identities and ways of being. Turner emphasizes the importance of ritual experiences in facilitating personal transformation, building on the seminal work of Van Gennep (1960), who identified three distinct stages that individuals go through to transition from one social status to another (Fig. 2.2).

Once we are through the liminal stage and have incorporated our liminal experience, it becomes, in part, our new reality. Both Van Gennep and Turner stress the importance of ritual and ceremonial practices in facilitating personal transformation during liminality. Turner's process of transformation and temporal limitation is relevant in terms of a museum visit's ability to be memorable and stay relevant after it is over, as well as the implicit need to keep imagination alive throughout the whole visit by continually re-challenging the visitor with the idea of a new proposed perspective. If the juxtaposition has been resolved or is repetitive, our imagination will fade for lack of interest and the rest of the visit will likely turn transactional.

> We shall not cease from
> exploration.
> And the end of all our exploring.
> Will be to arrive where we
> started.

And know the place for the first time.
—T. S. Eliot, Wasteland

2.3 Abstraction, Juxtaposition, and Metaphor

Our view on liminality holds that juxtaposition—meaningful contradiction and paradox—is central to both creating and having meaningful liminal experiences. Three beliefs ground this assumption:

1. That experiences play out over time and are therefore narrative in nature with a beginning, middle, and end (Peirce 1877). A narrative without conflicts, surprises, or relevant unknowns (juxtapositions), simply isn't worth sharing, retelling, or paying attention to.
2. We also suggest that the active imagination stemming from encountered paradoxes are grounded in evolution (Stenner 2017). As life evolved to more complex states, with more mobility and social cooperation, simply reacting to external stimuli and relying on hardcoded biological functions to respond was no longer sufficient for survival. We were forced to predict and make meaning of what is both the bodily us (hunger), and what is outside of us (food), to proactively navigate our environment as well as the intentions and emotions of those around us. Or put another way, to broker the paradox of what is us and simultaneously infer what is not us cannot be fully known (Cangià 2020).
3. Lastly, that a positive disruptive or destabilizing encounter that activates our imagination (as opposed to automatic fight or flight responses) only happens when we, in response, re-imagine an existing notion from a new perspective and thereby are motivated to contemplate the unknown (Zittoun and Cerchia 2013). In this new perspective, far from being opposed to reality, imagination plays a vital role in effecting real-world changes and our adaptation to it.

Humans have in part evolved consciousness to broker these paradoxes: the ability to imagine and play out in our minds scenarios involving the unknown, and then to memorize these hypotheticals as good or bad by inferring emotion to each outcome (Stenner 2017). This is how fictional events can be linked to very real emotions and experiences (Frijda 1986). Consequently, our social well-being also depends on sharing what is unique only to us and thus cannot be fully shared: we combine symbols and abstractions to represent specific unknowns (another paradox) in what then for others will be intentional paradoxes presented to be experienced.

An abstraction by itself is not liminality: the word "snowflake" is simply a direct abstraction pointing to a specific ice crystal. But by suggesting a juxtaposed relationship between two previously unrelated abstractions (relational abstraction) their common structure is rendered more salient (a child is like a snowflake) (Gentner and Hoyos 2017). It is the allegorical use of abstractions that creates a metaphor (What a snowflake!). When a museum juxtaposes a specific collection of artworks with a non-intuitive theme, it works in a related way—and in offering a safe space

optimized for contemplating this new and peculiar metaphor in interesting ways, we create a liminal space to experience and explore a novel idea.

The centrality of juxtapositions in creating new and interesting metaphors to support deep and meaningful experiences is further applied in the next section on intentional design.

2.4 Designing for Liminal Spaces

In the practical design of liminal spaces, three distinct aspects are useful to highlight when orchestrating its intentional manifestation, as proposed in our "Liminal Design Framework" (Fig. 2.3; Liedgren et al. 2023). These three facets also map to what activates the imaginative experience for the visitor, from the very beginning—sometimes long before we enter the museum—through to the very end, and potentially long after that; see Fig. 2.4 for real-life examples.

Firstly, **Narrative Desire**: what question or curiosity does the liminal space evoke in order to inspire and motivate visitors to explore something deeply and with curiosity? This question can be considered the new suggested perspective that sets up the juxtaposition to the ordinary or expected that inspires a desire to explore further. The chosen Narrative Desire of course needs to be relevant to the specific exhibit, yet still suggest a new one—otherwise we simply write it off as random. Aristotle's suggestion that all good stories need to be both inevitable and surprising (a paradox!), at the same time, again shows itself as a foundational premise. The depth of our experience will not be greater than the depth of the juxtaposition and the unknown that it holds in its suspension.

For museums, the Narrative Desire can generally be thought of as the theme or the publicly articulated idea of the exhibit. It is this suggested concept that brings a collection of works or samples together as context through a single abstract idea.

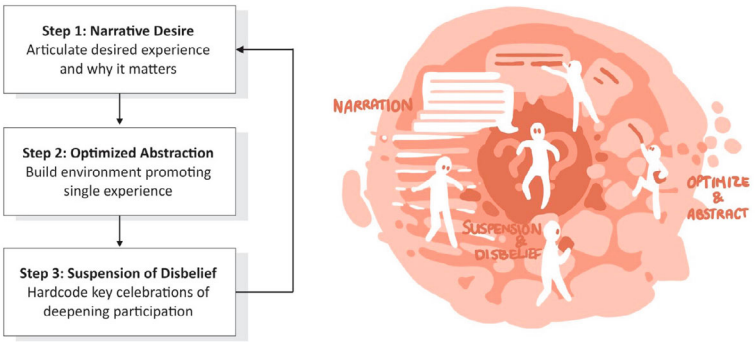
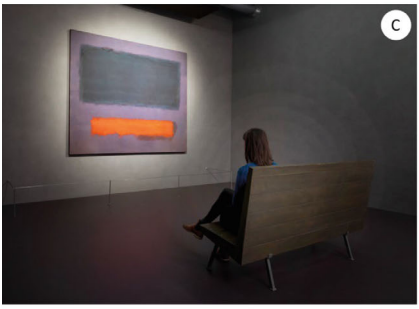


Fig. 2.3 Liminal design framework: a conceptual framework and three-step approach for developing technology that delivers transcendence and deeper experiences. Image adapted from Liedgren et al. (2023), drawing created by Charlotte Peeters Weem

A vivid illustration of **Narrative Desire** can be found in the "Giacometti versus Picasso" exhibition at the Voorlinden museum in 2021. This unique showcase juxtaposed the creations of these two revered artists, who, despite their mutual admiration, never engaged in collaboration or developed a friendship. The exhibition sparks a desire to explore the influence they had on each other's art, with the newly discovered professional intimacy of the distant admirers. Visitors are naturally compelled to delve deeper into the nature of this revealed dialogue, exploring the reciprocal influences that shaped each artist's distinctive style.



A very direct example of **Optimized Abstraction** was *Rothko & Me* at the Stedelijk Museum in 2020. One separate room offered visitors the opportunity to leave the standard shared and sometimes busy museum experience to spend time alone with a single Rothko painting (Grey, Orange on Maroon, No 8, 1960). The 10-minute solitude and undistracted focus - not even cellphones are allowed - nicely juxtaposed the usual crowded and shared experience of the famed artist's work and instead aimed to find a new and private meditative intimacy with the painting. It was an abstraction from the ordinary, neatly optimised to focus our attention on the stated narrative desire.

In the case of **Suspension of Disbelief**, we can look to the Verbeke Foundation. This extraordinary museum includes a diverse array of settings, from lush greenhouses to rugged natural landscapes and weathered industrial structures. Within this eclectic environment, visitors encounter a blend of finalised artworks, deteriorating structures, and ongoing projects, blurring the boundaries between art, context, and artistic practices, each part tying into the overarching theme of transformation. As visitors navigate these dynamic spaces, they stay immersed and interested, and thereby prompted to suspend their disbelief and embrace the ambiguity inherent in the museum's immersive experience.

Fig. 2.4 Examples for the three steps to activate an imaginative experience, **a** Alberto Giacometti, Homme qui marche II (1960), **b** Pablo Picasso, L'Ombre (1953), **c** Mark Rothko, Gray, Orange on Maroon, No. 8 (1960), **d** Peter De Cupere, Earthcar (2007). Photo in **c** by Lotte Stekelenburg, courtesy Depot Boijmans van Beuningen; photo in **d** by G. de Schepper. Other photos sourced from copyright-free online repositories

The novel concept challenges our existing world view and thus the meaning of the artifacts presented and presents the museum collection through the lens of this novel overarching idea to entice visitor's deeper exploration.

Setting goals for the liminal experience should not be seen as a top-down prescriptive ambition to control the visitors' feelings or responses throughout the exhibit. We

must always leave narrative room for imagination. Avoid the temptation to simply state what the liminal juxtaposition should mean; doing so robs the experience of its unknown hiding in the juxtaposition, and risks turning the visit limp and transactional. If each step is prescribed, no imagination would be required. In choosing a narrative desire, an intriguing question will always trump the prescriptive answer.

Secondly, **Optimized Abstraction**: At the most rudimentary level, part of the liminal design task is to focus our attention on the Narrative Desire. How do we know we are in a space separate from the ordinary? How do we keep distractions at bay? Museums in part already do this by abstracting exhibited objects, far removed from their original and intended place and use—showcased on pedestals with spot-lighting for easy viewing in a quiet and uncluttered environment.

But the task of Optimized Abstraction gets more complex as we consider its true potential as a language designed to manifest the chosen Narrative Desire. It is the unexpected and the friction of an experience that we remember, not its ease of use.

In what order do we place artifacts? How much space do we give to one piece over another? Which artworks are grouped together, and which are kept apart? What is included, and what is deliberately left out? These decisions shape the balance between the expected and the unexpected, defining the overall experience.

Gilles Deleuze captures this aspect of Optimized Abstraction as the becoming of liminal language: when the language (or abstraction) is "toppled or pushed to a limit" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), we see past the words and can grasp the essence and idea hiding behind the printed text. This is the experiential difference between a cardiology report and poetry depicting a broken heart. Similarly, the presentational language of museums is established. To create purposeful friction—directing focus on, framing, and placing the objects on display as part of the bigger theme—the expected exhibit language needs to be pushed to create a new temporary language uniquely suited in conveying its bigger idea. Optimized Abstraction is the physical manifestation of both the Narrative Desire, and the third and final aspect of liminal design discussed next: Suspension of Disbelief.

Suspension of Disbelief: How might the liminal space continue to hold the attention of the visitor until the experience is fully concluded? Established perspectives can be found in Erika Fischer-Lichte's work, exploring the transformative potential of theatrical and performative acts. Central to her theory is the concept of "heightened attention," opening up the possibility for catharsis and self-reflection. Fischer-Lichte and Jain (2008) points to the immersive focus and participatory nature in the performance as distinct from day to day, arguing that it offers a unique and intentionally separate space for the audience to confront and transcend societal constraints.

Outside the mechanical task of keeping unrelated and mundane distractions out, the more complex challenge in sustaining the audience's interest and focus on the overarching idea, is a dramatic one: enough disbelief to protect the liminal experience from ordinary constraints. In other words, how do we keep one thematic idea interesting for the entirety of the exhibit? We can consider at least two fundamental aspects:

1. How objects on display differ throughout the exhibit within a single context (Object Switch), providing variety and novel juxtapositions to illustrate a singular thematic exhibit idea.
2. How similar objects are presented in progressively different contexts (Context Switch), each offering a related but novel juxtaposition and suggested meaning to keep the visitor engaged and the thematic questions present.

In both these cases, the juxtaposition itself is "stretched" to make the proposed combination of context and object less obvious as the exhibit progresses. This task is inherently narrative: challenging the visitor's curiosity as the visit progresses, while contextually mining the very same Narrative Desire. This is part of the art of creating liminality, not unrelated to that of gradually raising the stakes to keep a reader captivated during hundreds of book pages during a single story told. The concepts of Object Switch and Context Switch are further explored with real-world examples below.

2.5 The Liminal Exhibit

Can a single piece of art be liminal just by itself? Most definitely. No museum is required for that. We might stumble upon a piece of art in someone's home that moves us to tears. The frame naturally creates a threshold, and the artistic work held inside it provides enough abstraction and juxtaposition to the real world to deliver a version of liminality. Or we might look out over the old city of Rome and experience an overwhelming sense of beauty and history in the moment. And we can fall deeply in love without much help from any institution. Or marvel in awe at our place in the universe while looking out over the billion-year-old rock exposed throughout the Grand Canyon, untouched by any intentional human design or frame. All of these are real liminal experiences, sometimes small and fleeting, and at times profound. But since museums are significant and deliberate enterprises, they are, by definition, defined by their own intentions. And we need to design exhibitions accordingly.

Given this chapter's foundation of intentional juxtapositions, one simplified way to analyze and construct an exhibit is to explore the relationship between the object reality—what we can see on display and its usual presuppositions—and, on the other hand, the articulated intent and reasons for the display proposed as an abstract idea or theme. If there is no interesting distance between the visitor's expectations of the objects on display and the proposed theme, there is no conflict, nor juxtaposition—and no liminality is created.

One very explicit example of a rich and intriguing juxtaposition was Seattle's Asian Art Museum's exhibit of Renegade Edo and Paris: Edo prints juxtaposed alongside vintage posters by Toulouse-Lautrec. The formal exhibit introduction explicitly asked: What do late eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Edo (present-day Tokyo) and late nineteenth-century Paris have in common? With each wall bringing together art from different sides of the world and eras—placed together for viewing side

by side—the exhibit invited visitors to experience the formal and thematic parallels between these two collections. It highlighted the shared social impulses behind their burgeoning and more widespread art production. As both featured cities faced profound changes from a rising middle class, how subversive impulses gave rise to vibrant cultures of theater-going, gratuitous pleasure-seeking, and new forms of visual art. Both the art from Edo and Toulouse-Lautrec's debaucherous Moulin Rouge are well-known, but the exhibit asked us to re-see what we already knew—to invite deeper meaning and universality through direct non-obvious comparison and juxtaposition.

If we instead look at the more traditional exhibit structure, it is often sequenced primarily in chronological order. At times, a text description might add quick notes on art history or symbolism for a single work of art—but such exhibits lack the ambition to offer anything thematically challenging or new.

One stand-out exception in elevating a traditional structure is Brera in Milan. Its vast and sprawling collection of priceless art gathered from Napoleon's expansive war territories is mainly offered up for chronological display. But at the very end of the museum, we are offered Hayez's famous The Kiss (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Kiss_(Hayez)), a painting portraying two young lovers braving a scandalous unmarried kiss in a show of patriotism—the young man just about to leave for war. One love is sacrificed for another. The painting is brilliantly juxtaposed and surrounded by two thematically similar but very different artistic takes on the same complex patriotism: A Great Sacrifice (https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/collezione-online/opere/il-grande-sacrificio/) paints a more mundane image of a mother sending her son to war—the same composition but here depicted as a motherly embrace. And then hung on the other side: Doleful Premonition (https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/collezione-online/opere/triste-presentimento/) depicting a young woman reading a letter alone in bed, contemplating an image of her beloved patriot (with a small replica of The Kiss placed on the wall behind her!), perhaps longing for his return, or mourning his permanent absence (see Fig. 2.5).

From a liminal point of view, we can imagine a thematic context set and maintained from the very beginning of the Brera visit: to have this tender end cap of Napoleon's conquered treasures conclude with an even more poignant and bittersweet kiss goodbye—speaking not just to one or three paintings, but Brera's entire collection through the lens of both the long lasting beauty of its art treasures (and the hard restoration work required, also on display), then juxtaposed by the horrors of war that brought it together.

What we will discuss next is the core of this exhibit design challenge: how to maintain meaningful surprise—and sustain active liminality—throughout the complete visitor experience.

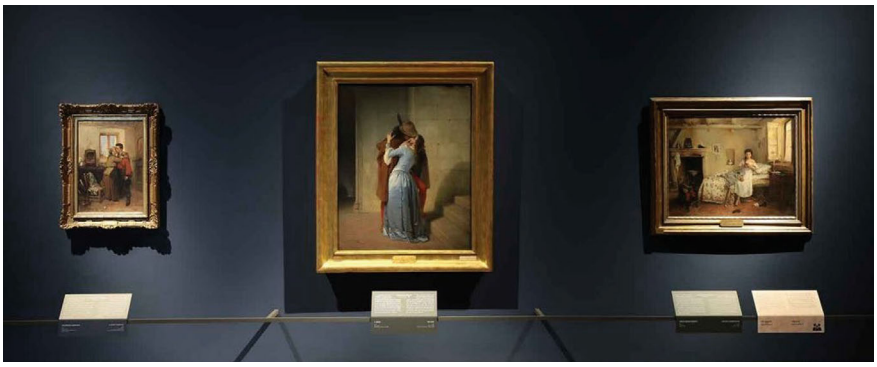


Fig. 2.5 The Brera in Milan. Left: Girolamo Induno, A Great Sacrifice (1860). Middle: Francesco Hayez, The Kiss (1859). Right: Girolamo Induno, Doleful Premonition (1862). Photo sourced from copyright-free repository

2.6 Suspension of Disbelief

Like Brera, most museums and exhibits are more than a single piece of art, and it is common to offer homogeneous or related collections placed together in distinct sections. A museum visit can be as long as a feature film and share some of its narrative challenges to keep the audience fully engaged for the duration of the visit. No matter how well we handle technical immersion, if the narrative experience doesn't raise the stakes gradually and maintain the promise of meaningful surprise, the visitors' focus and engagement will soon wear thin (Bitgood 2009). All lifeforms stop responding to external stimuli if it is repetitive.

As mentioned above, there are at least two principal ways we can approach this dramatic task of maintaining suspension of disbelief in the context of juxtapositions. If we maintain a singular theme for the whole museum visit, we can change the artifacts that speak to the theme in interesting ways. This would continually challenge and deepen the thematic meaning as exemplified by the objects and escalate the surprise of what the theme can include: this is Object Switch (Fig. 2.7).

Or, another approach: if the museum offers only similar or homogeneous collections, we can instead choose to offer several new juxtaposed perspectives on the same type of artifacts: this is Context Switch (Fig. 2.9). Let's look at examples of both approaches.

2.6.1 Object Switch

The maiden exhibit in 2019 at the then just completed 1.3 billion dollar hyper modern structure of the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, presented 55 rooms sequenced into 12 "chapters" holding over 600 widely different pieces of priceless art and artifacts from all

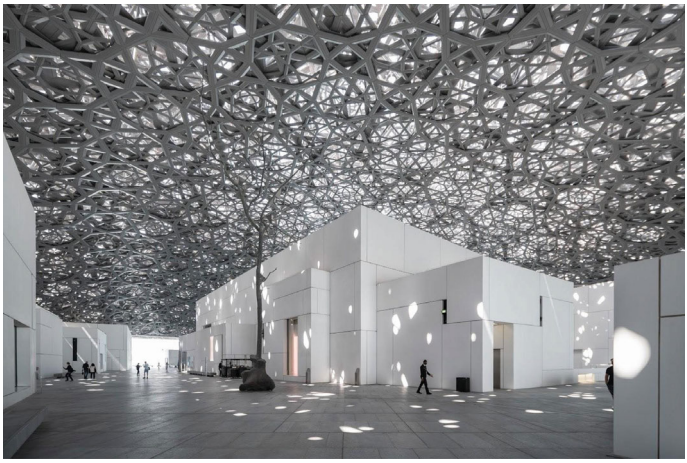


Fig. 2.6 Interior of the Abu Dhabi Louvre Museum, showing reflections of the "Rain of Light" dome. Architect Jean Nouvel. Photo by Nattakit Jeerapatmaitree (Shutterstock)

corners of history and the world (Fig. 2.6). The single overarching theme for all was "Humanity," and stayed persistently consistent throughout the entire museum.

The show opens with "First Villages;" incredible ancient artifacts from every continent, placed side by side to remind us of our shared past and the objects' striking similarities. Next up: "The First Great Powers" and "Great Empires": early trade routes and universal religions that lay the foundation for civilization as we know it, perhaps correctly assumed forgotten in a more Western view of history—and likely a reminder that we are far from Paris. And so the visit moves, from room to room, from one type of artifacts collected from around the world to the next, each collection indirectly juxtaposing a more myopic Western views of both art, history, and museums with its place in the exhibit's larger theme: Humanity—a direct example of Object Switch.

The exhibit's chapter "Challenging Modernism" performs a similar narrative maneuver: first establishing commonality by showing the same artistic trend of modernism from all around the world. Modernism, as a Westerner might remember it, has "just" three walls in one room containing an unprecedented and dizzying collection of major works by Manet, Monet, Caillebotte and Degas, Whistler, Van Gogh, and Cezanne. It's all there: three walls. With a few steps back, you can take it all in at once: potentially a new perspective on its relative size and place in world history. And again, making a point that speaks to the larger theme.

All in all, 600 artifacts, 55 rooms: from stone carvings and pottery from tens of thousands of years ago to early scientific instruments, orientalism in art (here taking on a different meaning), modernism, royal patronage, even including dissident art such as Ai Weiwei's crystal Monument to the Third International. Every single chapter and room challenge us to view the main theme from a new and

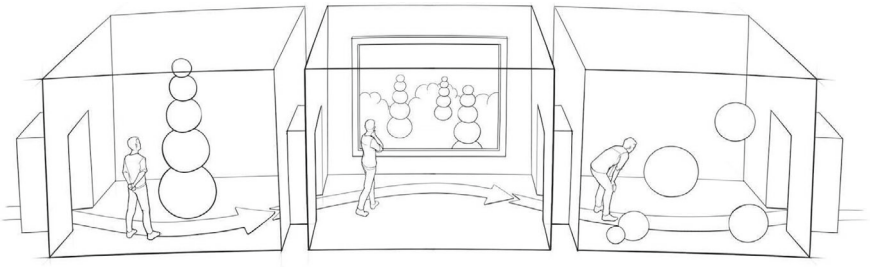


Fig. 2.7 Schematic representation of the "Object Switch" approach to liminal juxtapositioning. Change of the artifacts (from left to middle and right) to deepen the thematic meaning. Drawing by Jort Nijhuis

different angle—always laddering up to showcase the museum's curated version of universality: "Humanity." An ambitious and consistent example of Object Switching.

Furthermore, try to roam the museum, and a polite guard will ensure that you take in the rooms of the exhibit in the precise order that the overarching theme and narrative sequence demand. Although each room and chapter by themselves nicely ladder up to the main theme, the juxtapositions in this ambitious Object Switch are gradually stretched. Whereas the initial room "First Villages" presents straightforward juxtapositions of different artifacts that are both easy to see and grasp as related, the further into the chapters we venture, the juxtapositions reach beyond the obvious and require more imagination to be held in the same thematic context—escalating active participation to ensure sustained conceptual curiosity and suspension of disbelief (Fig. 2.7).

2.6.2 Context Switch

Instead of changing the objects on one side of the juxtaposition, Context Switching finds ways to offer new perspectives on objects that remain the same or at least similar. The Sonneveld House in Rotterdam explicitly sets out to do just this while showcasing the modern masterpiece from 1933 meticulously restored—books still on tables and towels in the bathrooms from the family who lived there once (Fig. 2.8). In this sense, the museum has only one "object" on display: the house.

For visitors, however, the house-turned-museum continually strives to create new points of view and discussions for its visitors. The general audio tour will not simply narrate the house's history but will offer several widely different stories of the house. At times the narrated focus is on how the house manifests new versions of the future as seen by the family when the house was built back in 1933. There are also in-depth discussions about modernist architecture, the perspective of a child who used to visit the house regularly and unveiled the mysterious qualities of the laundry elevator and other seemingly uninteresting functional spaces. There is the owner's

Fig. 2.8 Sonneveld house. Architecture by Brinkman en Van der Vlugt. Photos by Johanness Schwartz, courtesy Het Nieuwe Instituut

daughter sharing stories about how they enjoyed hosting parties with their modern pickup record player, and occasionally notes from the house cleaner offering a less than enthusiastic view of what it takes to clean modern design, especially the showers when serving a mistress who had the habit of making her redo the complete bathroom when she missed a single left dried-up water drop. All in all, one central object is continually challenged by suggesting new ways to take it in.

The Sonneveld House further extends this play by introducing contemporary dynamics as well. Mirrored floors installed by the Dutch interior designer Petra Blaisse in 2015 provided new and unexpected perspectives of the residence that one would normally not consider, giving new dimensions that also naturally change with light and climate. Het Nieuwe Instituut (the New Institute) that manages the Sonneveld House "… is developing new ways of exhibiting design, architecture and technology. Inviting artists and designers to install their work in 'house museums' like the Sonneveld is a proven means of encouraging more people to visit. But Ms. Blaisse has gone further by raising questions about the functions of such places and their presumed authenticity" (Rawsthorn 2015). These initiatives are a natural

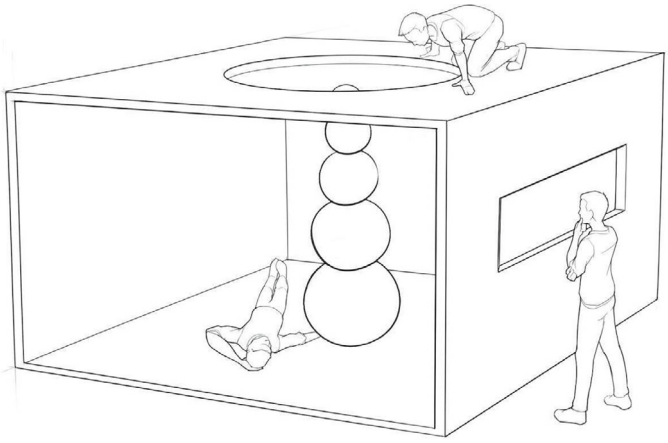


Fig. 2.9 Schematic representation of the "Context Switch" approach to liminal juxtapositioning. The same artifacts are seen from three different perspectives to deepen the thematic meaning. Drawing by Jort Nijhuis

extension of Context Switching—now not only including one visit, but continually creating new curiosity over time around objects that for good reasons remain the same (Fig. 2.9).

2.7 Whose Exhibit Is It Anyway?

The creative tension between exhibit themes and artifacts, between different art pieces in the same exhibit, or between the history of the museum and the current exhibit—all juxtapose expectations with a challenge to the same by intentionally presenting the two in the same context of an exhibit. Does it matter then in the juxtaposition, which counts as established expectation, and which is deemed the challenge? It does (Obrist and Raza 2014): the curator in charge of theme and art selection will have more agency in suggesting meaning, than any individual static piece of art, no matter how great or famed the artist. No meaningful juxtaposition can be constructed without intention, and it is this intention manifested as exhibition that takes the lead in suggesting meaning.

Whether Dan Brown's bestselling book The DaVinci Code is kitsch or simply an entertaining pageturner can be discussed, but the novel attention it brought to real-world historical sites provides a contemporary example of different contexts competing for ownership of the narrative. When the central location of the book's plot has tourists pile en masse into Paris's heritage site of the San Sulpice church to "study" clues mentioned in the very fictional book as they appear in the very real church, the fictional narrative stands in stark contrast to both the church's historical significance as well as the church's original religious purpose and historical value.

The landmark's heritage is suddenly competing with an American writer's made-up and highly secular narrative. One crafty priest at the church, tired of being asked to point out where the clues were located, taped up simple signs for jetlagged tourists as a make-shift guide to the things mentioned in the "American mystery" book. He also ceased the opportunity to guide his newfound visitors to one last sign written in English and hung over a stack of bibles to cleverly reclaim the narrative with another juxtaposition. The sign read: You've read the book, now read the Book.

2.8 Technology as a Liminal Threshold

Technology and media, such as educational films, computer screens, and interactional stations can play well inside the liminal design framework for museums. They can switch object reality within the liminal space, or suggest a new context for the same object reality. However, what can make multimedia support challenging is the move from say walking around artifacts from ancient Egypt, to moving into a separate dark room where a film about today's Egypt plays. Even if the film's narrative supports the overarching theme directly, the liminal space switch toward another media form will require the visitor to exit the first immersion and invest in a very different one. And once the film is done, and coming back out into the light—the visitor will yet again be required to re-enter the original liminality.

The film about today's Egypt could be placed at either the beginning or the end of the exhibit. We would treat it as a separate liminal space of the exhibit, not nested inside another. Or, when possible, we can try to reduce the liminal thresholds between the film space and the liminal space of objects on display in the main room by making them one and the same. The Royal BC Museum in Victoria Canada for example, in their anthropological section of tools, icons, and totems, offers photographs and film clips of what life was like for the people whose selected artifacts are on display right. There are also real recordings of native languages and singing coming from behind objects in their display cases. The new varied media combination serves as a rich texture and backdrop to each object. It is all part of the same overall exhibit design, and once the visitor has invested in that specific liminality and abstraction to explore, no further switching is required.

A journey through a museum with the often-used audio headset-guide has the same benefit: once this is an integrated part of the user's liminal experience, we don't try to switch the frame of the liminal space, and it might even help provide isolation and solitude to counter the noise and distraction of a public space. It can also be an effective way to support the theme, as it stays with the visitor through the entirety of the exhibit, framing up each part of the exhibit to support the overarching narrative—something that can be challenging to do oneself.

Other museums offer QR codes for the objects to provide more information. This is more challenging and potentially distracting, again, as it asks the visitor to repeatedly move in and out of different media types, and thus immersive contexts.

From a liminal perspective, we need to consider to what extent multimedia additions to an exhibit truly add depth and understanding to the artifacts and art—where additional technology is the only way to access such relevant and surprising perspectives—or, if it simply showcases technology in an attempt to compete for an audience already saturated by entertainment. This question becomes more poignant when analyzing the recent rise in "immersive exhibits" (see below).

2.9 Immersive Exhibits

Hopefully, all exhibits are immersive, although recent and ambitious media projects such as Monet's Lillies, The Klimt Immersive Experience, Refic Anadol's extravagant AI screen at MoMa's ground-floor atrium, MET's Un-framed virtual tour, Louvre's Beyond the Glass (Mona Lisa as virtual person), Live streaming Forbidden City (34 million peak views), or Emanuelle Moreaux' walk through work: Colors, Numbers (Tokyo 2023)—all hint at a growing trend that speaks to liminality in particular ways. With these examples, it is not hard to distinguish between the remotely mediated visits, offering a documentary view in real time of a traditional non-interactive exhibit, and then the art that is created as immersive or interactive but not referring to another artist. Then, there are the immersive exhibits that attempt to bring to life and illustrate well-known artists or works of art, such as that of Klimt and Monet with large screens surrounding the visitor. The question for the latter is to what extent they juxtapose a traditional view of a painting with new suggested meaning to enrich and challenge our understanding, or if they are simply borrowing from masters for spectacle and entertainment to cater to an audience more prone to visually exciting on-demand thrills.

Regardless, the liminal potential of immersive exhibits is real. These spaces can serve as transitional areas, acting as a boundary between reality and imagination. Visitors might be encouraged to interact with the artwork and explore its multiple meanings beyond what the canvas practically can do. They might offer a kaleidoscopic perceptual experience, incorporating signature elements such as color, form, and spatial arrangement to actively engage the visitor's senses and imagination in new ways but still relate to the artworks it plays off of. Such surroundings frequently strive to obscure the distinctions between the observer and the observed, resulting in a distinctive and potentially transforming encounter that complements the original art it derives from.

When we engage with immersive exhibits that reinterpret the works of renowned artists such as Van Gogh or Monet, we enter a space where the original paintings are not physically present. It should be recognized that this immersive experience differs significantly from the original artwork encounter. The immersive exhibit's liminal character and potential lies in deviating from the conventional art experience—inviting visitors to contemplate not just the art itself, but the very act of experiencing art. In essence, it offers a meta-experience, one that revolves around reflecting upon the process of engaging with art and the boundaries of museums.

2.10 Practicalities as Thresholds

In 1988, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London ran ads suggesting it had an "Ace café' with quite a nice museum attached"—and perhaps their pastries are noteworthy. But without assigning the ad more sincerity than went into making it, this does beg the question of how we handle and position all the necessary parts of the museum that are not directly part of the exhibits. A museum is a public place and requires necessities like a coat check, ticket and membership counters, security, bathrooms, and gift shops. How do these practicalities play with the primary liminality and experiences that visitors came for? They are, after all, still thresholds of some kind.

We cannot hide these necessities completely. We can, however, actively exclude them—and in doing so, make them a proactive gesture to highlight what the narrative is, and what it isn't. Practicalities might be tucked away and offered as distinct transactions separate from the "real" museum exhibit. Suppose the threshold between the exhibit and the practicalities that support it are clear, a drink of water or the move from one building to the next, then these can be offered as intentional "palate cleansers" before the next exhibit immersion takes liminal place.

This doesn't mean we must leave the magic and immersive safety of the museum. For example, the Copenhagen National Museum joins several different buildings with expansive, uncluttered, and quiet spaces, all architecturally very different. They become new liminal zones to help us slow down and to help mark experiential thresholds to give each more importance.

Or, we can find ways to integrate the practicalities in the liminal experience. For example, the necessary museum entrance can be treated as a ritual start point: supporting the destabilization and separation from the ordinary reality—stripping the visitor of coat layers and baggage meant for the outside world, to then bring them to the exhibit more exposed and sensitive to what lies ahead. A good example is the coat rack at the museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (Rotterdam), aptly named Merry-Go-Round (Fig. 2.10), serving as a captivating centerpiece at the museum's entrance. Resembling a merry-go-round, it features a vibrant red and white rope pattern, and a unique mechanism made of pulley blocks and weights. Visitors hang their coats on cloth hangers and hoist them up with a rope, securing them with a small key to leave their jackets suspended, floating beneath the ceiling. This fusion of artistic expression and functional utility blurs the conventional boundaries between the two, offering visitors the first step into a liminal space.

Separation from the ordinary and anticipation for what might come next are the key ingredients in building a temporary attitude conducive to deeper engagement and liminality. Consequently, we might not want to have visitors leave on a transactional note by offering whatever will sell at the exit gift shop. More integrated approaches can be found at the Victoria and Albert museum in London, where the fashion galleries have their shop selling catalogs, clothes, and accessories inspired by each landmark exhibition. Or, Cairo's Grand Egyptian Museum—perhaps more to the point by its inaccessible exclusivity—with Nakhla, the standalone boutique of the eponymous jewelry brand, situated at the feet of the iconic statue of Ramesses

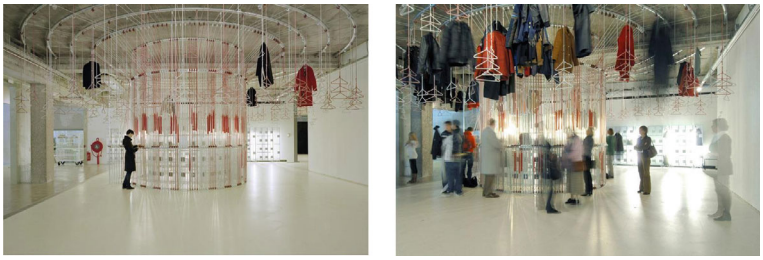


Fig. 2.10 Merry-go-round coat rack, Studio Wieki Somers. Photos by Elian Somers, courtesy Studio Wieki Somers

II, offering bold gold necklaces displayed around the necks of a series of obsidian Nefertiti busts, in and of themselves, pricey collector's items.

2.11 Conclusion

As with all narratives and stories—although each part of the experience cannot, and should not, hold the entire narrative—each part needs to serve the overarching theme. The adage that: "Not all parts of the boat should look like a boat" certainly holds true for liminal museum experiences as well. This, of course, is especially relevant when we consider the many interwoven narratives and the multitude of aspects that make up a museum: its mission, individual artworks, curator statements, and exhibits—all engaging in dialogue with each other through juxtaposition.

The organization of these nested thresholds offers a unique opportunity: we are largely incapable of experiencing more than one liminal space concurrently as each liminal space is narrative, finite and requires internal coherence to work (Schütz 1945 p. 554). Liminality is created when intentionally juxtaposing two opposites; nothing more, nothing less. Consequently, the user will confront liminal thresholds one at a time.

With that, we are back to the liminal design framework suggested initially: to consider the museum experience holistically as an Optimized Abstraction supporting the Narrative Desire: the very question that had the visitors arrive curious in the first place. Suspension of Disbelief is held through a carefully orchestrated sequence of juxtapositions and intentional contradictions, renewing and sustaining the visitors' interest as an escalating narrative.

And it is perhaps exactly this focus on liminality as a sequence of intriguing juxtapositions—each holding both the very real and the infinite possibilities of the profound, in a fragile balance of opposites—that makes our rewarding work with museums both inevitable and surprising at the same time.

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