

# Authenticities and their conflicts

## The genuine challenges of museology

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Authenticity is often regarded as a central value in matters cultural – and it has, by the same token, also been regarded with suspicion: once authenticity seems to be there, it is easily faked or ascribed to cases where its presence is dubious. Authenticity, then, poses a constant challenge to all sorts of cultural – and natural – expressions.

The root of the word is Ancient Greek *authentikos* (from *authentēs*, maker, master; in turn combined from *autos*, self, and *-hentes*, worker maker) meaning having the authority of the original creator. In Latin and Old French the corresponding words meant “authoritative”; only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the meaning “genuine” seems to have been established. Today, it is used in a bundle of related meanings: *original, principal, real, essential, pure, noble, honest, truthful, with integrity, genuine, sincere, uncommercial, stable* – referring both to things, expressions, intentions, and persons.

The existence of the basic experience of authenticity can hardly be doubted. It refers to experiencing things directly, without error, distortion, misrepresentation, etc. – and it is thus a basic phenomenological quality referring both to the direct givenness in experience of things or of other subjects and their intentions. Given these basic and ubiquitous qualities, it might surprise that the notion, at the same time, calls for suspicion. Authenticity being such a crucial experience, the insistence of authenticity is often duplicated by the strive in certain expressions, persons, and institutions, to merely *appear* authentic. The semiotics of authenticity – which signs and arguments should be used in order to convince about authenticity – is easily reproduced, simulated, or faked, giving rise to a whole aesthetics of authenticity.

While mid-20-century existentialism could thus value authenticity, “Eigentlichkeit”, in a life based on radical, personal decision (Heidegger, Sartre, etc.), it could just the same be ridiculed – and rightly so – for being mere verbiage or charade, in Adorno’s words just a “Jargon der Eigentlichkeit”, a rhetoric of authenticity. In cultural studies of recent years, this suspicion has almost become the norm so that authenticity is rarely seen as something really inhering in things or persons, but only as something which is ascribed to things or persons by observing persons or groups, that

is, as social constructions merely. Thus, in this tendency, the aesthetics of authenticity tends to consume the very phenomenon itself. Most often, however, such sceptical movements only displaces authenticity from one locus to another: if authenticity is no longer “out there”, as it were, it is only moved to the eyes of the beholder or the beholding group, and it may reappear as the “culture” or “identity” of a group or a community, possessing its own norms for authenticity which it then ascribes to certain things and not others. Being authentic may then be the same thing as conforming to the authenticity standards of a group to which you are supposed to belong or whose culture you are supposed to share – but then we are, full circle, back to Heidegger where authenticity would also be the privilege of certain persons or groups over others. So even the skepticism against authenticity just pushes authenticity from objects to groups.

Here, we shall rely upon the basic phenomenon of authenticity as more fundamental than its powderization into different, competing and relativist group standards, based on the claim that the individual and its abilities are never exhausted by the standards and values of any of the groups to which it may more or less belong. At the end, we shall return to some of the many paradoxes of the aesthetics of authenticity. But underlying those remains the very phenomenon itself.

### Authenticity aspects

In the many forms of authenticity lies a more basic source for confusion and error than in the struggle between different group standards. The Polish-French scholar Krzysztof Pomian has pointed to the basic fact that exhibition objects function as “semiophores”, carriers of meaning. Authenticity forms an important aspect of this meaning. But authenticity may refer to many different dimensions of the authentic presentation of a phenomenon. Authenticity may here refer to a bundle of different aspects of the object: authenticity as material identity, authenticity as material quality, authenticity as original intention, authenticity as original function, authenticity as original use, authenticity as original production, authenticity as original appearance, authenticity as original location, authenticity as original time (of the day, of the year), authenticity as original context, or whole. Let us take these authenticity aspects one by one.

**Authenticity of material identity.** This basic type of authenticity refers to the genuine, material existence of the object in question: the fact, e.g., that the displayed stone axe head is actually the very same object as was once crafted by a stone age artisan with the purpose of timber, hunt, war,

display, or cult and put to use in some of these contexts. It is a type of indexical authenticity – materially directly connecting the displayed artifact with an original context far from later exhibition or research contexts.

**Authenticity of material.** This type of authenticity refers to the identity of material type, as contrast to the numerical material identity above. This is when, for instance, we supply the stone axe head with a wooden shaft to replace the vanished original shaft - taking care that this new model shaft is shaped from a tree species which the stone age culture in question actually had access to and is known to have put to that use.

**Authenticity of shape.** This forms another type of indexical authenticity. In certain fossils, the original animal is decayed completely, giving rise only to a hollow shape which has then gradually become filled with a different material, now taking the shape of the animal. Here, the shape as a 3-D imprint now forms an authentic image of the original organism – even if no material authenticity is present. Certain cultural objects, such as bodies or wooden objects preserved in in the sour water of bogs, quickly decay when removed from the water and requires conservation processes which replace most if not all of the original material with stabilizing agents – here, shape considerations become central. Plaster castings of marble and bronze sculptures earlier (and to some extent even today) represented a major access to such artworks – granted by the authenticity of shape.

**Authenticity of non-interference.** Authentic is, according to this criterion, that which is uncontaminated by later interference. Natural landscapes not subjected to human use, cultural practices uncontaminated by modernity, amateur art unspoiled by professionalization, spontaneous subcultures unexploited by commercialization, objects unaffected by conservation. As is evident, the interfering enemy here covers a range from human beings as such and to modernity and very specific agents. This standard of authenticity, of course, is a natural enemy of authenticity standards which require human intervention. For the same reason, it has a complex relation to all sorts of conservation or protection measures intended to preserve other authenticity aspects.

**Authenticity of original intention.** This authenticity type refers to the preservation of an original intention behind an object. This is what we refer to when displaying an object so that the original intention becomes apparent, showing e.g. how the stone axe crushes the skull of an enemy. A difficulty here is that the original intention may be plural – the axe may have been for war as well as for ceremonial use (and maybe more) alike. A further difficulty is that the original intention may, in many cases, be very hard, if

not impossible, to establish. This especially goes for large objects having been developed over time, e.g. a house which may have served many different intentions during its lifetime and which may have been changed, new wings added, walls taken down, new facilities introduced, coloring changed etc. The simple indication of one origin is, in such cases, impossible, and the selection of the preservation of certain stages of the object may be made from other authenticity criteria.

**Authenticity of original function.** Displaying, e.g. the discovery of the vacuum by means of a experimental display version of the Magdeburg hemispheres (air is pumped out of the sphere constructed by two hemispheres with mating rims, and the two are now hard to separate) requires that the same functional relationship holds between the parts of the display as in the original case – even if there need not be any material or other identity with that case.

**Authenticity of use.** The use of an object needs not coincide with the original intention. Maybe the original intention was not realized and the object put to use in a different way – using a coin to put under the leg of a closet to prevent it from toppling. Or, to take an art example, Nam June Paik's using a tv to display only one line on the screen as a zen version of television. In cultural exhibitions, the basic use of most objects, of course, is display, that is, they are used in a different way than their original intention. The use of an object may be plural and change over time – so, just like intentions, a choice must be made so as to which use should be preferred in the conservation and display of the object. In some cases, use aspects may be reenacted, like when open-air-museums keep original shops open for sale, or when you may use original or replica exhibits for (parts of) their original use: letting the audience try to cleave a piece of wood with a stone axe. Thus, the authenticity of use may refer both to actions undertaken by personnel hired by the institution, or by the direct involvement of the observer into use aspects.

**Authenticity of production.** In restoring or replicating complex objects, it may be decided that only original tools, procedures, techniques, materials, etc. be involved – e.g. by the production of paper, colours, and printing devices for old tapestries. This requires, of course, the cultivation of rare, maybe extinct, artisan skills and the education of persons to practice these skills. In some cases, the very production process may be part of, or even the main feature of an exhibit. For accidental reasons, I happened to know one of the last “tækkemænd”, thatchers, in Danish Himmerland, Gustav Nielsen. For some years, he was invited to participate in the annual Rebild Festival to display his craft – figuring as a sort of living exhibit.

**Authenticity of original appearance.** An immediate idea may be that the original appearance of an object is the most authentic – and that it should be, if possible, be preferred in the conservation and exhibition of it. This is, however, in many cases more intricate than it may immediately sound. Should we leave traces of ageing on the object, or should we restore it to look as if new? We will remove the dirt from the surface of the dugout bronze figure, but we would hardly remove the beautiful green layer of corrosion patina on its surface. Even if we now know with certainty that Greek sculpture was lively painted and the whiteness of ancient sculpture is only the result of the deterioration of paint, we do not repaint these figures with original paint. Even the famous Elgin Marbles, the Parthenon Frieze, has recently been shown to have been painted.

**Authenticity of ageing.** This authenticity goes directly against the former type – placing an emphasis on the fact that it can actually be seen in the object that it has the age it has, bearing traces of age, dirt, corrosion, destruction attempts, later use, etc.

**Authenticity as original location.** The keeping of an object at its original site (or close to it) is a basic aspect of authenticity – cf. the idea of keeping houses “on the root” as more authentic than moving them elsewhere (but houses have always been moved). For ordinary museum collections, most if not all objects are necessarily displaced so as to form part of the collection, so this authenticity in its precise sense basically pertains to larger objects, such as wall paintings, sculptures, architectural constructs, etc. Lots of problems remain, though. If the Elgin Marbles will actually at some point be returned to Greece just like the Greek state demands, they will not be reinstalled in their original place on the Parthenon – the remaining sculptures there having already been taken down to protect them against pollution. They will, rather, be displayed in an Athens museum, but this is no more the original location than is their present position at British Museum. This points to a broader and less demanding version of location authenticity: the idea that things should be displayed near to their origin or finding site or that they should belong to the state having sovereignty over that site. The international tendency to reclaim conquered, stolen, or displayed objects (one of the first cases being the return of Icelandic manuscripts, including the prose Edda, to Iceland from Copenhagen in the 60s), seems to rely upon this broader version of location authenticity. Different versions of this authenticity aspect may conflict: should an object go to the nearest province museum, or should it be sent to the National Museum of the capital?

**Authenticity as original time.** As time generally is irreversible, this only pertains to events related to time cycles. If an open-air museum

reenacts certain Christmas tradition of old, the authentic time for doing so will obviously be December rather than summer (even if December 25 itself will probably be precluded as most museums are not open that day). The same holds, of course, for the reenactment of daily, weekly or other cyclical events.

**Authenticity of context.** In some sense, this forms a sort of meta-level as compared to the former list of authenticity aspects. Any piecemeal authenticity aspect is surrounded in time and space by aspects, things, persons etc. which are comparatively non-authentic. How wide should the authenticity span of the exhibit be, before any authenticity claim is given up and we are back to normal, non-authentic present? The classic display of single, isolated objects in a *montre* represents a sort of lowest level of context inclusion – from here goes a continuum of context inclusion all the way up to open-air museums with invitees acting in roles as original persons, like persons spending their holiday acting as stone age inhabitants of open-air replicas of stone age villages – or, in imagination, further up to the idea of leaving a whole Norwegian county untouched by modernity so as to preserve intact the whole of the ways of the old peasant society (the example stems from Enzensberger's *Ach Europa*).

Museum authenticity is necessarily partial. Museums basically remove objects from their original site and context in order to resituate and handle them in institutions with a completely different purpose, that of research and exhibition. The basic words used in this context betray this fundamental displacement: objects are *ex-hibited*, *aus-gestellt*, *ud-stillet*. Even if museum institutions in the ordinary use of the word have an age of two or three centuries and have grown out of the Renaissance Wunderkammern, it would be an error to assume that the act of displaying is something exclusively modern. Rather, we are, as Per Højholt jokingly put it “museumsdannende pattedyr” - “musealizing mammals”. The removal of objects from ordinary use to put them on sacred display forms an integral part of most cultures, and the distinction between the profane and the sacred forms the basis for selecting certain objects among the former to be displayed among the latter. This is not to say museums are sacred, rather to realize that displaying and exhibiting are not a modern anomaly which removes us from lived spontaneity and which must hence be excused or explained. Rather, the museal displacement of objects is found in most cultures.

On the other hand, it is this displacement which necessitates, in the first place, the obsession with authenticity – some aspects of the original entity must be preserved in the new museal environment, others must be

given up. Much of the confusion of authenticity stems from the fact that these many different aspects of authenticity are not kept apart or are too quickly identified. The idea that authenticity is simple and may be reduced to one of the aspects here identified will, of course, immediately clash with the other aspects not embraced. Rather, all the authenticity types possess each their set of validity criteria and may be realized to different degrees. These criteria entering into conflict is thus the rule rather than the exception, you cannot let museum audience try out a fight (authenticity of use) with original bronze swords, because the exhibits would be destroyed (authenticity of shape), you cannot preserve original appearance and aged appearance at the same time, original form may conflict with original material, etc., etc. and etc. An example is from the 1990s where the National Art Museum in Copenhagen received the offer of being donated the German collector René Block's art collection. To a large degree, it consisted of artifacts stemming from the Fluxus Art movement in the early sixties. As is well known, Fluxus rebelled against the category of artwork, insisting instead of art being an aspect of the present now which should be approached through happenings, installations, and interventions of many sorts. Block's collection contained many objects which had served as parts of such events. This placed the museum in a dilemma. The placement of such objects in a collection indicated their status as artworks – as did several statements of old Fluxus practitioners. But this interpretation went against the old Fluxus doctrine according to which the artwork had been there at a certain moment in 1962 only to disappear soon after. A shoe used by George Maciunas in a 1962 happening – was it an artwork or rather a piece of archeological evidence, unsuitable for an art museum? Here, several authenticity criteria clashed: that of the original intention (according to which the objects were uninteresting), that of material identity (the artifacts as genuine parts of the original happening) and that of later use (the inclusion of the artworks in a collection). The museum decided not to accept the donation as a whole – regarding such objects to be the likes of theatre decorations left after the performance. The number of such possible authenticity conflicts are legion. Different exhibition traditions may value certain types of criteria over others – cf. the clashes between traditional museal emphasis on authenticity of material identity and the display of single, material objects on the one hand, and different trends in “new museology” emphasizing use, appearance, context, or other combinations of authenticities.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there is no single measure of authenticity on which these different types or their sum can be measured. The absence of such a measurement axis is probably what have lead skeptics to assume that

authenticity then does not exist at all – otherwise than as an ascribed or staged quality. But the problem of authenticity is rather that it has far too many aspects to be satisfied at one and the same time – the single exhibition authenticity case is rather that of a pragmatic weighting of different authenticity criteria, and the existence of several possible compromise solutions are the rule rather than the exception.

This conflict between authenticities lies at the root of many of the paradoxes of authenticity. When you conserve an object, should you conceal the conservation results so as to make the object seem unconserved? Or should you rather emphatically display what is reconstructed, so the viewer can himself judge what is what? The reconstruction of Koldinghus Slot, for instance, chose the latter, based on authenticity of material identity; earlier reconstructions most often have chosen the former referring to the authenticities of shape and appearance. Very often, reconstructions have even attempted to create a better past, trying to make the object satisfy the (imagined) highest stylistic criteria of the period (cf. the Swedish restaurator Helgo Zetterwall who in late 19C reshaped the churches of Southern Sweden after his own Gothic ideal). When preserving a piece of heath, should one leave it untouched (conforming to the authenticity criterion of non-interference), or should it be protected by a certain use (authenticity of use), letting sheep graze there, or protected to have a certain state (authenticity of appearance) by letting boy scout troops remove unwanted trees? When protecting an old building, should material identity be satisfied over use? Should introduction of electricity, running water and internet be allowed to grant further use (authenticity of use), or should it be restricted to preserve material, appearance, original intention?

On top of this comes the fact that the authenticity of exhibits and exhibition is far from the only criterion at stake in museums. Other important criteria which may impede authenticity include: conservation, accessibility, overview, visibility, collection, research, security, comfort. The **conservation** process necessarily changes the object and thus diminishes its authenticity. The 80s paintings made by Claus Carstensen using foam rubber and piss thus pose a challenge to conservators, necessarily compromising the authenticity of the paintings when attempting to slow down the inevitable decomposition process of the components of the work. The **accessibility** of visitors in many cases inflicts an inevitable wear on the object: staircases in old houses. The wish to provide an **overview** over a state-of-affairs may lead exhibitors to compactify more objects into a scene than could be naturally expected: to include all the important artifacts of a culture in one scenery,

even if they were never displayed at once. **Visibility** may also infringe on authenticity: the cut-through view of a model removes parts of an object to provide access to the interior. Light must be projected onto objects which slowly decompose as the result. The very act of **collecting** removes the object from its original site to include it into a systematic archive. **Research** will inflict wear on the object and may change or even destroy parts of an object: measuring age by means of a Carbon 14 test will inevitably destroy a (small) part of the object. **Security** often puts severe limits to authenticity: you can not have pigs and wild dogs running around in open-air museums even if that would enhance the authenticity of the scenery. **Comfort** plays a similar role: you cannot have guests pissing randomly in the corners of an open-air replica of a medieval town, even if that would in fact enhance the olfactory authenticity of the whole.

Thus, two fundamental reasons makes authenticity precarious already within the museum institution: the conflict between different authenticity aspects on the one hand and the conflict of authenticity with other necessary or possible museological purposes on the other. But on top of these two intra-museal set of problems comes the intersubjective aspects of authenticity. As mentioned in the introduction, the wish for authenticity has given rise to an aesthetics of authenticity – and, in turn, to a natural suspicion vis-a-vis alleged authenticities. This tension is unavoidable in all matters dealing with authenticity and lies at the roots of much of the precariousness surrounding authenticity. This lies in the fact that, intersubjectively speaking, authenticity is communicated (maybe unwillingly so) by one party to another. The museum exhibition is a piece of communication from the museum institution to its audience, from funds, politicians, critics, and to visiting laymen. This implies that the receiver's criteria, intelligent or not, become important. And they may be plural as well as conflicting. People may seek museums to be enlightened, entertained, to find peace, to look at the other guests, to “be forced to reconsider their basic assumptions” (rarely, though). And they may seek the support for a variety of preformed assumptions and ideas, depending on society, class, culture, gender, or individual speculations – with very different authenticity assumptions.

Experiences of such authenticities differ widely. Was Bob Dylan authentic while in his acoustic period before 1965 – folk music enthusiasts claim so. Or was he more authentic when going electric and using the instruments of his own time after 1965 as rock aficionados will claim? Is it authentic to represent one's culture – or is it rather authentic to go against and transgress one's own culture? The prevailing tendency in middle-class

West constituting the bulk of museum audiences seems to be to assume that people from other cultures are authentic when they identify with and strive to represent that culture – while the opposite is the case for the Western middle-class themselves; they are taken to be most authentic when they transgress and attack their own culture. This double standard seems to show there is no simple answer to the question of whether cultural preservation or the break with cultural tradition is the more authentic. But the problematic fact is that both these versions of authenticity may be faked, mimed, simulated, giving rise to enormous masses of culturalist kitsch just as well as transgression kitsch. The former was prevalent in Western nationalisms before WW2 which are now again raising their head: in the invention of nationalist traditions which also influenced many Western museums in the period. The former is also, nowadays, evident in the requirement that artworks or cultural expressions should be authentic expressions of the “culture” of the artist or the utterer and that collections should be representative for cultures, no matter whether being otherwise interesting or not – the artists are not seen as individuals but as representatives of his or her background and authenticity can then be measured on whether this representation is truthful. The latter, transgression kitsch, is seen in the routine art historian’s hymn in many art museums where the role of the artwork is seen as transgressing norms, confusing categories, and replacing clarity with insecurity – while the artworks accompanying these texts are often none of these things to any remarkable degree.

All such cases of kitsch of course threaten authenticity of any type or aspect. When an urban middle-class person acquires an old farmhouse and immediately baptizes it “Bondehuset”, “The Farm House”, it receives its name in the same moment as it leaves that function, and thus enters the sphere of simulation. When selling consumer goods for the urban middle class, a whole production, wrapping and marketing industry is ready to make it seem like the commodity in question is not, in fact, commercial, industrial, and intended for a mass market, but instead individual, handmade and designed for the rebel individual only: the unacknowledged conformity of non-conformists.

This constant tension and struggle between authenticity, simulation of authenticity, transgression of authenticity, the authenticity of transgression, in the trendsetting urban middle classes do not directly enter the museological discussions of authenticity. But it shapes the horizon of the privileged museum audience and its relations to authenticity. This audience will inevitably bring its own authenticity troubles with it when watching and interpreting museum exhibitions and judging their authenticity. The double

thirst for authenticity and skepticism against authenticity claims in its prime audience thus form the cultural horizon within which the authenticity compromises of the museum finds itself situated. This is not to say this audience is unanimous regarding authenticity – quite the opposite: it goes all the way from a thirst for authenticity and to the belief that any authenticity is but an effect of social constructions.

This is not to say that any easy museological conclusion follows from this fact. It rather forms a major challenge for museology to face this. It is rather to indicate that authenticity is situated in a three-front conflict. One is internal, between different aspects of authenticity. The other pertains to the museum institution – the tensions of authenticity to other purposes and ideals of museum research and exhibition. And the third is that of the audience's troubled relation to authenticity which inflicts on its experience of authenticity in the museum.

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, I visited the Natural History Museum in Brussels – which stood exactly as in the late 19 C– with long series of stuffed animals in dark wood montres, all within a fantastic Jules-Verne-like setting of cast iron and glass architecture. When I returned some years ago, most of it was gone, and standard new museology with some computers and planches had replaced most of it with a sad compromise as the result. Here, the tendency in museums to follow the same exhibition fashions tend to let too few of the authenticity criteria live at the same time. There are now few of the collections left which display all 400 stone axes in montres – because everybody has assumed the tendency of new museology to display only a few specimens surrounded by use explanations and computer effects. All American art museums have now cancelled their old neo-classic temple entrance halls preparing the viewer for a contemplative experience and substituted them for a discrete entrance from the parking lot so as to make art something everyday. Old sets of authenticity criteria are exchanged by others. But those old exhibition practices also had their interesting aspects which are lost when all museums simultaneously follow fashion and do the same thing.