

**Potent-Tate/Impotent-Tate?**  
*The Tate Modern and the dilemma of the modern museum*

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On the face of things, there can be no doubt that the new Tate Modern is a runaway success. Moreover, after the dismal performance of the Millennium Dome, and the shaky future of the first batch of Lottery –funded museums out of the starting gate, the dizzying success of the Tate Modern comes as a welcome and much-needed tonic.

Of course the Tate is only the latest in an ever-longer string of new museums born of the conviction that new buildings make new museums. For at least twenty years, the remedy for urban neglect and flagging tourist interest has been to build – bravely, expansively, and often at great cost. Meier's masterpiece on the Main was conceived in this heady spirit, as were the Centre Pompidou, newMetropolis, and the Guggenheim Bilbao. Despite the sheer audacity of his projects for Bilbao and New York, Thomas Krens is a relative newcomer to the clan of believers in growth for growth's sake; new buildings dressed in the guise of sustainable urban redevelopment. For the time being, however, the 'Bilbao Effect' which Nicholas Serota so wants to enjoy still means ever-growing visitor numbers, packed galleries, and litres of ink gushing out of the popular press. Perhaps a better analogy to the Tate's ambitions would be the Centre Pompidou. Surely in both the sweep of its architecture and the scope of its mission the Tate Modern is aiming at 'l'effet Pompidou', London style.

How realistic is this ambition? On the face of it, there are some serious obstacles preventing the Tate Modern from making the same impact as the Pompidou. First of all, although it is in the centre of London, it is in no way as central as the Pompidou to the mercantile and touristic pulse of London. Despite the motion simulation bridge across the Thames, visiting the Tate Modern feels more like visiting La Villette than the Beaubourg. This impression is not gainsaid by the architecture, which despite the sensitivity of the intervention, still feels like what it is – a monstrous barn of a power station. The inhuman scale of the space dwarfs the visitor, somewhat like the architecture former slaughterhouse dwarfs the visitor at the Cité des Sciences. And in contrast to the forecourt at the Pompidou, which is alive with street performers and spooning couples, the holding area at the Tate Modern is sullen and uninviting, and the streams of visitors rarely linger, but flow listlessly into the maw of the building.

Nor does the collection hold up well in comparison to that of the Pompidou. For all its numerous highlights, the collection overall is extremely uneven, and even its redistribution into thematic zones cannot mask the fact that the collection itself is riddled with holes. Organising the collection by theme rather than chronology – even putting unlikely objects in unlikely and sometimes awkward juxtapositions – still cannot distract the attentive visitor from the fact that the collection just doesn't hold a candle to the extensive collections of the Pompidou and the MOMA. The one real museological innovation – the public attribution of the authorship of the interpretive texts – is overshadowed by the fact that the curatorial voice veers towards the professorial, colourless, and pedantic.

Every new building – if well-designed and well-publicised – will draw the public for an initial honeymoon period, how long depending largely on the extent of the pool of one-time visitors, which in the Tate Modern's case is mercifully large. This pattern – known as the 'S-curve' – is a characteristic feature of all new museums. It is also the pattern we can expect of the Tate Modern, unless by some lucky chance it is adopted by the public as London's flagship for contemporary art, which will depend in large measure on how its Director Nicolas Serota develops the programmes for the coming three years. Happily Serota's skills and experience warrant a cautious optimism in

this regard. Nevertheless, one unfortunate casualty of the Tate Modern's media success can already be seen – the sharp decrease in attendance at the Tate Britain (the former home of its collections) – which if not remedied may make the decision to create the Tate Modern an inadvertent fratricide.

Goéry Delacôte, Director of the San Francisco Exploratorium, once admonished his colleagues 'don't make the mistake of confusing growth with change'. The past twenty years has shown that governments, boards, and directors have all too often assumed that the growth brought about in the short term by new building would automatically be sustainable – something quite demonstrably not the case, at least not all the time. On the contrary, new buildings often bring higher costs – in terms of maintenance, staffing, and programmes – which in turn expose the museum to greater risks when the attraction of the building (predictably) fades and attendance and revenue once again droop. What then? Build another building? And another?

If building can be said to be an Imperial vice, it is time to step back and ask whether or not the Emperor is really that well dressed after all. First of all, what do we expect from our museums, whom are they for, and what purpose do they serve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Second, what are the factors that justify the decision to build, and how can the unwanted consequences of building be avoided? Third, what other options are available to museum to attract attention, attendance, and revenue? These questions are not trivial – and the answers to them have extremely important consequences when it comes to deciding the appropriate strategy for our cultural institutions. Not a few museums are currently facing falling visitor numbers, falling revenues, A critical press, and dispirited staff – but is the best course just to close your eyes, stump up the millions, and build, build, build?

The word museum is often used to describe three quite different aspects of the same thing: the institution, the collection, or the building itself. As institutions, our museums are, and must continue to be, what Sherman Lee once described as 'a permanent storage battery'. The museum, by definition, is an informal learning environment. Its unique character is that it is the home of the real - real objects, real phenomena, real people. One of its foremost goals is to provide users with sufficient

interpretive tools to decode the world in which they live – to make sense of the real. According to Nelson Goodman 'the museum has to function as an institution for the prevention of blindness in order to make works work. And making works work is the museum's major mission. Works work when, by stimulating inquisitive looking, sharpening perception, raising visual intelligence, widening perspectives, and marking off neglected significant kinds, they participate in the organisation and reorganisation of experience, in the making and re-making of our worlds'. In a world that is rapidly being transformed by the introduction of new communication technologies, museums must now be both the compass – and the motor – of a learning society.

Growth should be driven by change. What kinds of change justify growth – and what kinds of growth justify new building? Two kinds of change drive museums – external changes, and internal changes. External changes include shifts in the political landscape (a new government with new priorities, a Board with a strong vision), changes to the financial landscape (changes to tax laws, increased dependence on earned revenue), changes in technology (the increased use of the Internet), and changes to the public's expectations. Internal changes include the realignment of departments, new funding sources, and new management. Change – and the growth it often entails – is not without risk. Change can unlock formidable energies – and tensions – within an organisation. Change must therefore be based on a clear analysis of internal requirements as well as external opportunities – and articulated in terms of a sustainable vision. This vision must be compelling – it must convince staff internally, and capture the public's imagination externally. Only once a vision is in place that puts growth in the context of changing demands from outside, and changing requirements inside, can a museum truly determine whether the answer to sustainable growth is to build.

The internal factor that most often prompts calls for new building is the perceived shortage of space for collections. Shortage of space is endemic in the museum world. An institution that collects must invariably confront the limits of its capacities to store, conserve, study, and display its collections. But even when it comes to outgrown depots, new building is not the only solution available. Several museums have experimented with open storage with notable success. Others have built small

publicly accessible depots outside the city centre for use by specialists. A museum with several collections loosely stitched together for historical reasons may find it prudent to consider re-housing one or another collection elsewhere, in the interests of greater coherence and public comprehensibility. Given the ease with which the Internet makes working at a distance, certain functions – even whole departments – can be profitably relocated or consolidated away from the main exhibition spaces. The appropriate strategy can only come from a clearly formulated vision, an articulation of this vision both inside and outside the institution, and a thorough programmatic analysis of the museum's needs. Even when the need for extra space is undeniable, it just doesn't do to design a building first, then try to imagine what to do with it.

This is not to say categorically that governments shouldn't build museums. Of course they should – but only for sound reasons, and with a clearly articulated strategy for the sustainability of the institution in the medium and long term. Growth must be driven by clearly understood internal pressures, and building should be seen as only one of many strategies that can be brought to bear on the problems of growing collections, falling attendance, reduced revenues, or lack of morale.

If we want our museums to become new 'piazze', à la Pompidou, not merely media-hyped, event-driven stadia, we must carefully consider the options we have for creating sustainable and engaged use of our cultural institutions. Only when our museums attract, engage, and most importantly, foster a pattern of repeat use – not just one-time visits – will our museums be able to deliver on the promise they hold in a learning society. Only then can we be confident that public money is not just being poured into a bottomless sump to create a quagmire for future generations and future governments. Is the Tate Modern a symbol for a potent new generation of museums? Or is it the last in a series of misconceived building projects that confuse populism with popularity, and attendance with attention. Only time will tell – unfortunately not much time at that.

## **Brand Old**

*An Ace Caff with a silly exhibition attached*

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In a consumer society, brands are a fact of life. Long gone are the days when a brand name merely identified the product's producer – brands now convey a product's position in a vast constellation of lifestyle choices. Stars endorse products as part of campaigns to convince the consumer that she too will shine in the firmament of those blessed by attention and showered by riches. In recent years the brand itself has become the focus of critical and professional attention. Charlotte Beers, former head of Ogilvy & Mather made her career (and turned O&M around) by making the brand the centre of her strategy, conducting 'brand surveys' for leading companies.

For several years, the V&A has been struggling to brand itself without success, so it comes as no great surprise that it has chosen branding as the subject for a major temporary exhibition. Perhaps the V&A had hoped that it would discover the key to successful branding by developing the exhibition? Whatever the museum's motivation, I visited the exhibition with high expectations.

Here was a chance to really explore the way in which companies created and consolidated their identities. The exhibition could look critically at the ways in which a brand's claims and a brand's performance coincided or collided. Universal peace

heralded by singing whilst drinking Coke, the Marlborough man laid low in the saddle by throat cancer. It could look at the painstaking work of building a brand, and of implementing the brand in the marketplace. It could let visitors compare their own understanding of a brand's claims with those hoped for by the advertiser. It could look at the need for product differentiation, even when the products are all produced by the same parent company, such as Proctor & Gamble, or at the frictions caused by recent mergers, which in the case of LVMH brought champagne and suitcases together under a single roof. The possibilities were endless and exciting.

Despite the chorus of praise that greeted the exhibition, ultimately it was a disappointment, both in its form, which was gratuitous, and in its content, which was superficial.

The first sign that the exhibition placed a disproportionate emphasis on form over content was the introduction, which led the visitor through an undulating field of business cards, each bearing a logo. The space given over to this idea was easily in excess of 300 square feet – a rather promiscuous use of space for the feeble one-liner 'there are lots of brands'. This throwaway was followed by a presentation of the history of brands – straightforward, didactic, top-down in the best V&A tradition. A not uninteresting story, illustrated by an eclectic collection of objects. Despite its attempts to redefine itself, the V&A still seems to like teaching best of all, and its temporary exhibitions of the past years – regardless of their content – have all placed a premium on a rather school-matronly approach to texts. Rarely a question asked, or a visitor's opinion solicited. Visitors are here to learn their object lessons.

The next section of the exhibition recalled stalls in a Nairobi street market – a long row of cubicles packed with an overwhelming array of brightly-lighted products. Presumably to make the experience more interactive (swarms of locusts not being amongst the pestilences currently being visited upon the V&A), the visitor had to enter the spaces by pushing through hanging transparent plastic strips. Each stall was identified by a quality, such as reliability, and the products within all were felt by someone to embody this quality. Unfortunately, it wasn't at all clear why Nokia should be presented as more reliable than friendly, or Apple more innovative than

comfortable. Someone knew – the designer presumably – the visitors weren't consulted, and it is unlikely the producers were. The next room featured a collection of lollipop-shaped sculptures adorned with videos, around which visitors moved listlessly, trying to make sense out of unintelligible images.

The last room was the exhibition's low point. Meant to alert us to the ways in which products and their brands were hijacked to create new meanings, fakes, or products with other-than -intended branding, were displayed on the wall in plastic bubbles designed as over-sized blister packs. But why blister packs? What brand on earth has used the blister pack as part of its branding? Why are blister packs particularly appropriate for the display of T-shirts? The thought process used by the designer eludes me completely. Packaging is part of branding, the blister pack is a kind of packaging, therefore blister packs (meant to contain small, identical products) are the right way to display large, very different objects. Perhaps I have been too long away from the profession for which I was originally trained, but surely you can forgive me for being confused.

In essence, the whole exhibition was a triumph of packaging over content, of form over function. In a sense, it was a profoundly and disturbingly cynical exhibition. If the medium is indeed the message, the exhibition betrayed a belief that simple messages, dressed up in gratuitously designed installations, are more important, than intelligent, critical, thought-provoking exhibitions that respect the visitors intelligence and make room for their views. It also presented a cynic's view of branding – all that matters is the wrapping.

In the marketplace, as well as the museum, the cynic's view can never prevail for long. It is a truism of the advertising world that you can sell anything once – but what matters in the long run is that the product delivers on its promises. This belief is the heart of branding. Branding is not just a 'look' that you add to a product – it is the sum of the promises a product makes, and has to keep. The same is true with museums. We have proven amply that we can attract visitors to museums with blockbuster shows or trendy designer installations – once. The key to the health of our museums, however, is to create institutions to which people return again and



again, for the pleasure of engaging with their world intelligently. David Ogilvy, founder of Ogilvy & Mather, often said ‘don’t underestimate the intelligence of the consumer – it’s your wife’, and the same could be said for museums. Museums must clearly welcome visitors from a wide range of backgrounds – but we must assume every visitor to be intelligent.

The V&A has just appointed a new Director, Mark Jones, to consolidate the V&A’s fragmented public image after a decade of rudderless meandering. As Director of the National Museums of Scotland, Jones created a stir – and a strikingly intelligent exhibition – by asking the people of Scotland to select objects for the new 20<sup>th</sup> century galleries. His approach, in which the exhibition’s content informed and shaped the design of exhibition, would have served the designers of the Branding exhibition well – let’s hope that Jones’s courage doesn’t fail him when it comes to branding the V&A.

## **Paradox Regained**

*The new British Galleries at the V&A answer some old questions  
and raise some new ones*

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### INTRODUCTION

The opening of the new British Galleries at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001 after more than five years of effort is grounds for celebration. Under the direction of the V&A's Head of Education, David Anderson, and the American Dr. Christopher Wilk, the new Galleries mark the next (and perhaps an alternative) step in the museum's strategy of renewal since the Daniel Libeskind 'Spiral' was proposed. The new galleries are extensive, covering 3500 square metres and a time period that spans 1500-1900. The new galleries were also expensive – costing well over £31 million – and represent the largest investment in renewal since the museum was opened. The investment was certainly long overdue. For the past decade the V&A has staggered from crisis to crisis, losing along the way much of its reputation as one of the world's greatest museums. In fact, each new attempt to define a coherent identity seemed to result in even greater fragmentation and public confusion about what the V&A really stands for.

The design approach to the new British Galleries is unabashedly educational, and it is no coincidence that the project leader is an American expatriate. The Americans have always been sceptical about museums and culture serving any but utilitarian needs. The Founding Fathers tended to consider art in general as a sign of decadence, and

saw the importance of art as a function of its utility. Benjamin Franklin wrote “one schoolmaster is worth a dozen poets, and the invention of a machine or the improvement of an implement is of more importance than a masterpiece of Raphaël.” Due to their democratic and revolutionary traditions, the Americans were among the first to pioneer using the museum primarily as an educational resource, the first to conduct visitor studies, the first to stress the importance of a storyline. The American World’s Fairs of 1933, 1939, 1960 and 1964 gave us the graphic panel, interactive exhibits and multimedia. As a consequence of political pressure to make collections available to the broadest possible public, the Americans have been in the forefront of museum education for the better part of the last half-century.

Consonant with the emphasis on education, each period is grouped under four headings: *Style*, *Who led taste*, *Fashionable living*, and *What was new?* These four themes provide a ‘red thread’ to the installation, and give the promenade through room after room of exquisite objects a welcome rhythm. The attention paid to the texts provides another welcome relief from another common museum frustration. The majority of the texts (alas there are a considerable number of sometimes annoying exceptions) are readable, well lighted, printed in a large typeface, and placed at a height that most readers can enjoy without excessive bending or stooping. Taken together, the chronological layout of the British Galleries and the four themes go a long way to helping the visitor make sense out of a potentially overwhelming mix of information and objects.

At first glance (a long glance, as the Galleries are vast and richly textured) the new installation appears to be a catalogue of every innovation in museum education proposed over the course of the past twenty years. Nothing seems to have been left out. There is a healthy juxtaposition of applied and fine art (as exemplified by the installation of such exhibitions as *L’âme au corps* and historic precedents such as the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin and the Wallace Collection, London, and more recently by collections such as the Barnes outside Philadelphia). There is hands-on interaction (pioneered by the Science Museum, London in the 1930s and a staple of science centres since the runaway success of the Exploratorium, San Francisco and the Boston Children’s Museum in the late 1960s). There are discovery rooms (first

developed by Caryl Marsh at the Natural History Museum in Washington D.C. in the early 1970s, since then a feature of many American museums, most recently re-incarnated as the 'Art Interpretation Rooms' at the new Getty Museum in Santa Monica). There is open storage (first employed at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, designed by Arthur Erickson). There are interactive computers, both throughout the galleries and in special study rooms (by now a relatively common feature on the museum landscape). There are issues such as fakes (a subject explored in several excellent exhibitions, notably '*Fake: the art of deception*' at the British Museum in 1990, curated by Mark Jones). There are cutaways and explanations of techniques (used in most technical museums). There are period rooms (almost ubiquitous in American decorative arts and historical museums, best exemplified by the Winterthur Museum in Delaware). There are explanatory videos (used to excellent effect at the newly renovated Musée des arts et métiers in Paris). The new Galleries are an encyclopædia of museum education in the best sense. The approaches are intelligently applied, obviously well tested and judiciously used to enhance the experience of the objects on display. While, on the one hand, there is little real innovation, on the other, everything is perfectly and properly implemented. Here at least, it seems that money was no object.

The key word in the educational approach seems to be 'interactivity' – the visitor is encouraged, nay, expected, to get actively involved with the material. This interactivity takes many forms. There is interactive text, which exhorts the reader to take up an Elizabethan gauntlet, for example, and asks "Is it as heavy as you imagined?" Another text asks the visitor to identify the woods used in a chest of drawers, and warns of the potentially misleading evidence of varnishes. There is physical interactivity, whereby the visitor can compare shards of different materials or undertake complicated manual tasks such as assembling a chair or tying a cravat. If this is too difficult, the visitor can dress up in period costume, or try on a ruff. There is screen mediated interactivity whereby the visitor can construct a personal coat of arms on a touch screen, or just browse the V&A's excellent and extensive website, which invites visitors to contribute their own views on material culture. The objects are installed theatrically, dramatically lit from odd angles, casting deep and dramatic shadows over the most delicate detail (albeit often with the unfortunate consequence

of making it difficult to appreciate the object displayed). The objects themselves are luscious; the best of the V&A's extensive collections. Only the best, it seems, was good enough to display in the new British Galleries. In particular, the textiles are displayed intelligently and extensively, for the first time in the museum's history.

To their credit, Anderson, Wilk and the educational staff at the V&A have realised – with relentless industry – the ideal described by George Brown Goode over a century ago. In his words, “An efficient educational museum may be described as a collection of labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen.” To have achieved at last what so many have attempted – and in such a magisterial manner – is to be applauded. Seen from this viewpoint, the new British Galleries can only be called an unqualified success.

The British Galleries are the first step towards rebuilding the V&A's chaotic and tattered image since Mark Jones took over as Director in 2001, but it is unlikely that he has had much real influence over this project, as the construction phase was well advanced when Jones arrived. However, it is fair to ask whether the new Galleries are consonant with his vision for the V&A. If we can judge by his earlier work, the 20<sup>th</sup> century gallery at the Museums of Scotland, or the exhibition on fakes for example, the new British Galleries would seem to raise the following fundamental questions about the role of the museum in general, and the V&A in particular.

**VISITORS OR USERS?** The museum, since its earliest origins as a public institution, has always had an instrumental function – it was meant to be used. In the case of the Louvre (the Musée français) this meant that the collections, organised by school, were to be used as a resource for French painters to imitate. In the case of the Musée des arts et métiers, this meant inviting French apprentices to the Museum to learn from working models of English industrial machinery. Later museums were seen as resources to be used by scientists, scholars and freethinkers, and the museum's collections displayed as reference libraries of objects. Even the V&A under Cole was seen as an instrument for educating the labouring classes to produce better products, albeit with very limited success (his display of the principles of good design was withdrawn soon after it opened). In the modern museum, the practice of use has

largely given way to the practice of visiting. Temporary exhibitions are conceived as one-time ‘experiences’, and their success measured in the number of one-time visitors they attract. This is particularly pronounced in the case of the so-called ‘blockbuster’ exhibition. Expensive, lavish, usually highly narrative, blockbuster exhibitions are meant to bring in the crowds. No one is expected to go a second time.

The new British Galleries at the V&A are clearly a response to the perceived inadequacies of the blockbuster exhibition. The designers of the Galleries have brought all the skills of the exhibition designer to bear on the permanent galleries, almost as if they were an extended temporary exhibition. The installations are intelligent, interactive, and intended to awaken the eyes to a full range of material culture in its proper context. They are conceived as an educational instrument, very much in the early tradition of Henry Cole and the V&A. The Galleries cry out for users, for visitors who will return and return again to the Museum in order to sharpen their wits and hone their skills. But despite the time, money and effort invested in the installations, the designers have opted for a range of interactivity that is still exhausted by a single use – how many times can one design a coat of arms, heft a gauntlet, compare shards of pottery? It is an installation designed to be visited, not used. In fact, by stripping the installation of all but the best objects the Museum robs the user of one of the great rewards of the older museum displays, the fleamarket joy of rooting about, comparing the run-of-the-mill with the exceptional and finding unexpected treasures. In the new installation, the treasures have all been identified, proclaimed, and interpreted long before the visitor arrives. By way of contrast, Mark Jones’s exhibition *‘Fake: the art of deception’*, organised by the British Museum while he was an Assistant Keeper there, actively encouraged visitors to revisit the British Museum. By making the real work of the museum curator visible, the exhibition provided visitors with another framework in which to address the interpretation (and even the attribution) of works in the museum’s collections.

ENCYCLOPÆDIA OR DOCUMENTARY? The new British Galleries are a tour de force in every respect, and the placement of every exhibit and every object has been carefully – one could say obsessively – considered. The installation, however, is a perfect example of a trend in museum design that goes back some decades. This trend

comes from the gradual emergence of the exhibition designer as a professional whose work is independent of that of the curator. Whereas curators have traditionally seen their work as the aesthetic arrangement of objects in space to meet the demands of scholarship, exhibition designers see their work as that of public communication. Pedagogically, objects are used to illustrate a story, and the installation is seen as a form of narrative. This approach was pioneered by Cummings in the 1940s, as a consequence of his research into the 1939 World's Fair held in New York. In his paper he formulated a maxim for the museum world: 'Every Museum and Every Exhibit Must Tell a Story'. Cummings proposed the notion of the 'storyline' as the guiding principle of exhibition design. Over the course of the ensuing decades, this linear approach has become the credo of exhibition designers around the world, and has influenced the thinking of museums everywhere. Exhibition design has become largely 'cinematographic', characterised by dramatic episodes, short 'sound bites' (or in the case of the museum, short texts) and a linear narrative. Some museum directors have gone as far as to say that a museum must no longer be an encyclopædia, but a documentary, giving new meaning to the term 'museum director'.

The cinematographic approach can be seen full-blown in the new British Galleries at the V&A. The storyline is clear – it is a chronology, change over time, rendered coherent by means of the four thematic headings. The objects displayed are completely subservient to the documentary structure of the storyline. The overall effect is one of walking through a three-dimensional BBC television documentary – albeit of the highest quality – the only difference being the degree to which the objects can be (in theory for some, in practice for others) touched. The visitor, despite the enormous emphasis on interactivity in all its forms, is reduced to being an all but passive player in a vast three-dimensional narrative to which her individual forward motion lends the impetus. As one visitor commented rather wryly on observing the lack of respect in which individual objects were held by the exhibition's designer, 'the object is subordinated to the message, and the message is subordinated to the medium.' By way of comparison, the new 20<sup>th</sup> century galleries at the Museums of Scotland are not dominated by an over-arching narrative structure, and thereby allow the visitor much greater flexibility in choosing what to see and in what combination.

Paradoxically, by virtue of being less interactive, those galleries give the visitors a far greater role in creating their own view of the material culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

WHAT DO YOU DO FOR AN ENCORE? The visionary British architect Cedric Price was obsessed by the nature of change, and often confronted his students with the question “How will it grow?” The new British Galleries are, in their own way, almost perfect, and represent an enormous investment of time, effort, research and careful design – not to mention money. But this perfection also embodies a terrible danger. On 22 November 2001, the Galleries radiated this perfection, and will continue to do so as visitors stream in to admire the new installation. Like so many new things, the new British Galleries will be admired once by many. But what about the next time? What will have changed? What will the British Galleries look like on 22 November 2005, and 22 November 2010?

On the one hand, in a city as large as London it is reasonable to believe that the new British Galleries will be able to attract tourists for the foreseeable future. Perhaps the installation will attain to the status of an ‘icon’ that must be visited by each successive generation of first-time visitors to London, like the British Museum or the National Gallery. On the other hand, with entrance fees gone (and therefore not a source of earned revenue) the economic importance of the tourist visitor is somewhat diminished. On the other hand, given the extent of the public subsidy to the Museum, the British Galleries will increasingly need to justify their effectiveness in terms of service to the local and national community – especially to school groups. But it is very difficult to imagine the galleries being able to change often enough to avoid the yearly pilgrimage to the V&A becoming anything but a boring trudge through the same old interactive stuff after the novelty of the first visit has worn off. Worse still, with a price tag of £31 million, it is difficult to imagine being able to raise the funds to renew the new British Galleries – or even maintain them – for a long, long time. As Karl Kraus said ‘Old Vienna was new once’, so it may be with the British Galleries; in ten years, they will appear frozen in time, a perfectly embalmed example of turn of the century museography. By comparison, the new 20<sup>th</sup> century galleries at the Museums of Scotland are far lighter on their feet, and can be altered quickly and relatively inexpensively. Less ‘perfect’ in some respects (although neither perfection



nor completeness was their goal), they retain an openness to change, additions and deletions.

### A COMPELLING PARADOX

The questions raised above reveal a compelling paradox. Since the early 1960s museums have been obliged to appeal to increasingly large and more diverse audiences. This perceived need, prompted by legitimate political and social concerns, led nevertheless to the creation of a large and expensive infrastructure of new installations, blockbuster exhibitions, new buildings and new museums. This enlarged infrastructure made increased attendance not only a virtue, but an economic necessity. As a consequence, the emphasis in museums is now placed on generating new visitors as an economic – as well as a social – imperative. This imperative, however, has meant that the educational role of the museum has shifted dramatically towards the ‘remedial’, since many of the new visitors have had little exposure to the material the museum holds in trust. It is as if the library had become the institution in which people learn to read, and the mission of the library had become to teach a broad public the skills and delights of literacy. It is not that the museum has lost or found an educational purpose – it has always had one – it is just that the nature of the education goal has shifted dramatically. The new British Galleries are a striking example of an institution totally committed to the role of the museum as an instrument of remedial education – for teaching skills that could and probably should be acquired elsewhere – at the expense of being an instrument for the further education of those who are capable of using the museum’s collections unassisted.

To the extent to which this goal might be self-defeating, the new British Galleries may well turn out (like the Tate Modern) to be another Bilbao. The runaway success of the first few years may turn slowly with time into even deeper lethargy, as finding another £31 million to renew the Galleries again is unlikely in the foreseeable future, and the maintenance costs alone will prove a non-trivial burden. The new British Galleries may indeed be a new beginning, or the beginning of the end, not just of the V&A, but of this phase in the history of museums. Instead of being parks filled with the richness and diversity of our material culture past and present, the museum may be fated to

become just a dead Zoo. The paradox is that in saving the museum for the present, we may in fact be killing it, to be preserved in amber for the future.