Ways to represent multiple truth and the future role of museums
a visual lecture by Tjebbe van Tijen / Imaginary Museum Projects, Amsterdam

A museum - mostly - is a place where the heritage of a community, a region, city or nation is preserved, studied and shown; it can also be a place where non-localized or international phenomena and historical events are collected and presented. Museum presentations tend to be based on a ‘canon’: local or national, esthetic or political, always grounded in some form of agreement about the significance of objects on show and the historical events they are meant to represent. This consensus is not necessarily the opinion of the majority of citizens and other visitors of a museum, often it is more the reflection of ideas of a social or political interest group that has initiated or is supporting a specific museum institution. The rise of the modern museum - in general - is bound to the rise of the national state in the last two centuries; hence its search for unity, need of a ‘canon’, evading of multiple interpretations, and its presentation of a ‘singular truth’.

My presentation will try to look ahead at the supranational realities of the 21st century on the basis of two of my attempts to construct a museum as a place that shows ‘multiple truth’:

“The Imaginary Museum of Revolution”, 1989, a project commemorating the bicentennial of the French Revolution (pilot version realized):

“Unbombing the World” a museum installation planned for the centennial of the first aerial bombing of humans and their habitat in 1911.
Aristotle’s categories and predictables: a memorized singular logic ordering of the world ~ symbolic classicist 18th century vision of a universal library.

Philosophical debate was mostly oral; permanent writing materials were scarce; erasable information carriers like the wax tablet existed; the ability to memorize was still of great importance.

ONTOLOGICAL TREE DIAGRAM BY VIENNESE PHILOSOPHER FRANZ BRENTANO (1862) BASED ON ARISTOTLE’S TEN CATEGORIES: SUBSTANCE, QUANTITY, QUALITY, RELATION, PLACE, TIME, POSITION, STATE, ACTION, OR AFFECTION.

THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS, 1509, MURAL PAINTING BY SANZIO RAFFAELLO IN PALAZZI PONTIFICI IN THE VATICAN, ROME. A Depiction of Profaned Philosophy with Plato and Aristotle at the Center.

“THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS”, 1509, MURAL PAINTING BY SANZIO RAFFAELLO IN PALAZZI PONTIFICI IN THE VATICAN, ROME. A Depiction of Profaned Philosophy with Plato and Aristotle at the Center.

Detail Raffaello’s “School of Athens” with Plato (left) and Aristotle (right); Aristotle spreads out five fingers, pointing to his five predictables: definition, genus, differentia, property, accident.

ONTLOGICAL TREE DIAGRAM BY VIENNESE PHILOSOPHER FRANZ BRENTANO (1862) BASED ON ARISTOTLE’S TEN CATEGORIES: SUBSTANCE, QUANTITY, QUALITY, RELATION, PLACE, TIME, POSITION, STATE, ACTION, OR AFFECTION.

THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS, 1509, MURAL PAINTING BY SANZIO RAFFAELLO IN PALAZZI PONTIFICI IN THE VATICAN, ROME. A Depiction of Profaned Philosophy with Plato and Aristotle at the Center.

Detail Raffaello’s “School of Athens” with Plato (left) and Aristotle (right); Aristotle spreads out five fingers, pointing to his five predictables: definition, genus, differentia, property, accident.

Design for a national library of France by Étienne-Louis Boulée 1785; influenced by the encyclopedists and Raffaello’s painting “School of Athens” (based on Bramante’s classicist architecture).

Paper calculator from the “Ars Magna” by Ramon Llull (1305); one of three turning rings using letters as symbols for making all possible combinations to understand God and all created things.

Athanasius Kircher’s book “Arca Noë” (1675) combining advanced zoological insight with a study of the Sacred mission of Noah collecting all animals in the Arc, in fact the first museum “designed by God.”

Alchemist “Tabula Combinatoria” (combinatory table) of Kircher with all combinations of metals and nonmetals using the principles of “solutio” and “coagulation” a search for a “prima materia”.
Aristotle’s categories and predictables: a memorized singular logic ordering of the world ~ symbolic classicist 18th ...

the 17th century priest Kircher blends the biblical taxonomy of the Noah Arch with naturalist theories of his time ~ the ...

Statuette of Ramon Llull (1232-1315) born on Majorca island. He used logic to calculate from a set of basic truths all combinations representing Christian faith; a method intended to convert ‘infidels’.

16th century depiction of the “Tree of Science” of Ramon Llull (1295): roots, trunk, branches, leaves and flowers act as memory devices; combining the nine Divine, with the nine Logical principles.

Ceiling mosaic in the octagonal Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence: constructed during several decades from 1225 onward, displaying in an ordered way biblical themes from Genesis to the Last Judgment.

Marilyn Lavin’s. “The Place of Narrative: Mural Painting in Italian Churches, 431-1600 AD” (1990) reveals the narrative reading direction of this mosaic through computer aided research. (Piero Project).

Tommasso Campanella (1568-1639) born in Calabria; a priest developing sensorial empirist ideas that brought him in conflict with the church, most known for his utopian book “City of the Sun” (1623).

“It is Wisdom who causes the exterior and interior, the higher and lower walls of the city to be adorned with the finest pictures, and to have all the sciences painted upon them in an admirable manner.”

Encyclopédie of Diderot and d’Alembert (1751-1772) “Display system of Human Knowledge” organized by classes (memory, reason, imagination) and many categories, relating to 55,000 articles in 28 volumes.

A pun of Jonathan Swift on the craze of ‘combinatory art’s in his time in “Gulliver’s Travels” (1727): “a project for improving speculative knowledge by practical and mechanical operations.”

‘Stepped Reckoner’ calculation machine of Leibniz (1671); a machine that ultimately could discover new ideas through a combinatory art based on ‘universal characters’, an ‘algebra of thought’.

Herbarium of the Swiss scientist and poet Albrecht von Haller; he made sixty of such volumes in the period 1728-1769; real specimen to make illustrations for a printed edition: nature fixed in a book.

Table representing the linkages between all arts and sciences by Christophe de Savyne 1587; around the tableau is a circular ‘chain of knowledge’ in the tradition of the French humanist Petrus Ramus (1515-1572).

“Art cabinet of German diplomat and art dealer Philippe Hainhofer (1589-1647) with doors, drawers and compartments filled with classified natural and artificial objects: the Universe in an abridged form.”

modern classification systems ~ storage for study of naturialia and artificialia ~ knowledge mapped in system tables, calculators as generators of ideas
the artful display of objects in curiosity cabinets gives way to scientific arrangements made according to hierarchies: kingdom, phylum, genus, species — 

Domenico Remps (1620–1699) painting of a curiosity cabinet (all elements real size); classified as ‘trompe l’oeil’ (deceived eye), also interpreted as a depiction of “the ephemeral nature of existence.”

Artistically designed vitrine with geological stone specimens made in 1802 for the Teyler Museum in Haarlem, an art and science society inspired by the ideas of the enlightenment, founded in 1784.

Preparation of a child’s head (adorned with a lace cap) in a jar, from the anatomical collection of the Dutch physician Frederick Ruysch (1638–1731) who had his collection on public display in an anatomy room.

The Great Hall of Casts of the Pathological Museum of Saint-Louis Hospital in Paris, conceived by Alphonse Drevet in 1867; almost 5000 colored wax models of illnesses of the skin and syphilis.

Insect box of French pharmacist and entomologist Étienne-Louis Geoffroy (1727–1810) with Coleoptera (sheathed wing beetles) specimen from North America and Africa, basis for his classification system: nature pinned down.

A late 18th century gravure comparing the botanical classification systems of Tournefort (1656–1708) and Linnaeus (1707–1778): taxonomies based on reproductive characteristics instead of traditional naming.

German art historian Alfred Salomy’s use of photographs (1923) triggered the later idea (1947) of André Malraux for an “imaginary museum” with reproductions allowing comparisons of all civilizations.

Availability of duplicated imagery - in the 20’s - stimulates associative ‘tableaux’ of pictures, from personal scrapbooks with illustrated magazine clippings, to the “Mnemosyne Atlas” of art historian Aby Warburg.

Aby Warburg (1866–1929) son of a wealthy banker, founder of the ‘Cultural Scientific Library’ in Hamburg, attempting to map the psychological “interval” between images that are worlds apart.

Miniature demo-version of huge card file cupboards developed by Alphonse Bertillon (1853–1914) to facilitate his cross-reference classification system to retrieve anthropometric police photographs.

Paul Otlet (1868–1944) Belgian information science pioneer developed the international classified ‘documentation’ of the substance of books, using a unified card file system: a world “web (réseau) of knowledge”.

Diagram of the “paper software” system of Paul Otlet (1934): from the universe of ‘things’ and fragmentation of human ‘intelligence’ to the ordered cadre of science, books, libraries, and documentation.
overfilled eclectic art chambers are reordered into history and style promenades presented in special venues - photographic image capturing and other
duplicating techniques bring art objects from all times and places together, stimulating comparisons and associations - catalog systems - integration of logic, optics, mechanics and electronics produces a new combinatory art of memory

Painting by Willem van Haecht (1593-1637) of the private “Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest” a rich Antwerp merchant, depicting a partly real, partly virtual gathering of art connoisseurs, painters and paintings in a realistic setting.

Reorganization plan (1781) for the Austro-Hungarian imperial Belvedere Picture Gallery in Vienna, to present the painting collection according to artistic schools and styles, by Christian von Mechel (1737-1817).

Antiquarium in Munich, a Renaissance hall specially build (1568-71) to house the antique sculpture collection of Duke Albrecht V: an aristocratic private museum; it later became a ceremonial dining hall.

“Primitive Negro Art” exhibition at the Brooklyn Institute of Art and Sciences (New York 1923) curated by Stewart Culin (1858-1929): first time ethnological collections was shown as (desacralized) art objects.

“Grande Galerie” of the Louvre, first part of the royal palace; declared a National Museum during the French Revolution, envisaged as “a de pot of all human knowledge”, now only used for visual arts.

“For the first time in world history mechanical reproduction (photography) emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual ...” writes Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) in 1936.

Memex (memory extender) a device storing all books, records and communication of an individual, proposed in 1945 by Vannevar Bush (1890-1974); a microfilm based machine remembering “personal trails.”

Hollerith Pantograph: hand held machine for punching holes in census cards for mechanical sorting (1890); invented by Herman Hollerith (1860-1929), precursor of IBM electromechanical punch card system.

Boolean Logic diagram: the working of the mind expressed by organizing concepts in ‘sets’ controlled by operators: OR, AND, NOT; invented by George Boole (1815-1864); core principle of our digital age.

Computer ‘core memory’ (12 x 12 cm) - from half a century ago made of ferro-magnetic material, preceded by ‘rotating drum memory; nowadays integrated circuitry on silicon chips have millions of time more capacity.

Internet version of the Iconclass system of Henri van de Waal (1910-1972) originally a paper based classifying system for Western art; it still is a text driven system that does not allow any ‘interactive visualization’. Potentially the information system of the Internet is a medium for everyone, offering unlimited free association and reconfiguration of visuals, text and audio, to dynamically create all museums that may come to mind.