



# FROM VINCENT TO THE VISITOR

*A Rhetorical Analysis of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam  
(2014-present) Considering Audience Awareness in Establishing  
Effective Museum Communication*

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## Abstract

*This thesis analyzes the rhetoric of the Van Gogh Museum and exposes its communicative strategies holistically. An extensive and multi-faceted analysis on the persuasive character of the Rietveld building, the Kurokawa wing, and modern media shows that the communicative strength of the Van Gogh Museum is situated in its awareness of different audiences, their varying needs, and plural museum experiences. In a museum landscape where collection-oriented purposes are increasingly shared with public-oriented functions, the only way through which the museum is able to exert and preserve its expertise is by catering to its audiences. Revealing the rhetorical strategies behind the VGM's communication results in an awareness that the postmodern museum is capable of transforming its commercial activities into valuable dialogues, in which the visitor is treated as an equal, active, and indispensable participant. Commercial museological practices do not threaten the educative value of the museum but carry the potential to actively encourage inclusivity and accessibility. The VGM emits this message in all of its inherently communicative elements.*

Introduction. The Van Gogh Museum: A Communicator Par Excellence

In August of 2017, the Van Gogh Museum (VGM)<sup>1</sup> made an appearance in an internationally acclaimed study conducted by Erasmus University Rotterdam. Europeans voted the museum as the most appreciated museum in the world.<sup>2</sup> The Erasmus research asked visitors and non-visitors of the 18 best-visited museums across 10 countries to indicate to what extent they appreciated the museums on the list.<sup>3</sup> From this study, the VGM ranked as the second most appreciated museum globally and ranked first amongst European museumgoers. The study employs seven reputation drivers that determine the overall appreciation of museums (figure 1). According to the study, the appreciation of the VGM resides primarily in its display of heritage, its educative function, and its sound treatment of financial means. These factors are indeed determining factors in the overall status of the museum.<sup>4</sup> The collection of the VGM is incomparable in both size, content, and quality. Its educative programs are available to target groups of different ages, genders, ethnicities, social classes, and include a variety of minorities amongst which are the blind. Moreover, the VGM uses its income wisely by investing their revenues to safeguard the collection, renovate museum buildings, and conduct relevant research both into its collection as well as into its visitors.

In other respects, the high reputation of the VGM is more difficult to explain. While the museum is highly familiar with the public<sup>5</sup>, the museum is relatively young in comparison with the other high-ranking well-established museums on the list, such as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Louvre in Paris. Furthermore, most museums that rank high on the reputation list are museums of national (art) history.<sup>6</sup> The VGM, by contrast, is a single-artist museum focusing on late nineteenth century and twentieth century art. The study fails to explain the VGM's high ranking in the appreciation study, labeling its presence "remarkable".<sup>7</sup> The problem this thesis identifies is that the Erasmus study employs a methodological approach that values solely non-artistic argumentative means.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, the Van Gogh Museum will be referred to in the abbreviated form VGM.

<sup>2</sup> Van Riel and Heijndijk 15.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Van Limpt. "Europeanen vinden Van Gogh Museum beste ter wereld."

<sup>5</sup> Van Riel and Heijndijk 17. Out of the 18 museums selected for the research, the VGM ranks fifth globally in terms of familiarity with the public. The study claims the older a museum is the more people are familiar with a museum. The VGM in this respect stands out against for example the Rijksmuseum, a museum with a long history.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 21. The most appreciated museum is the Louvre in Paris, followed by the VGM in Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, and the British Museum in London.

<sup>7</sup> Van Riel and Heijndijk 21.

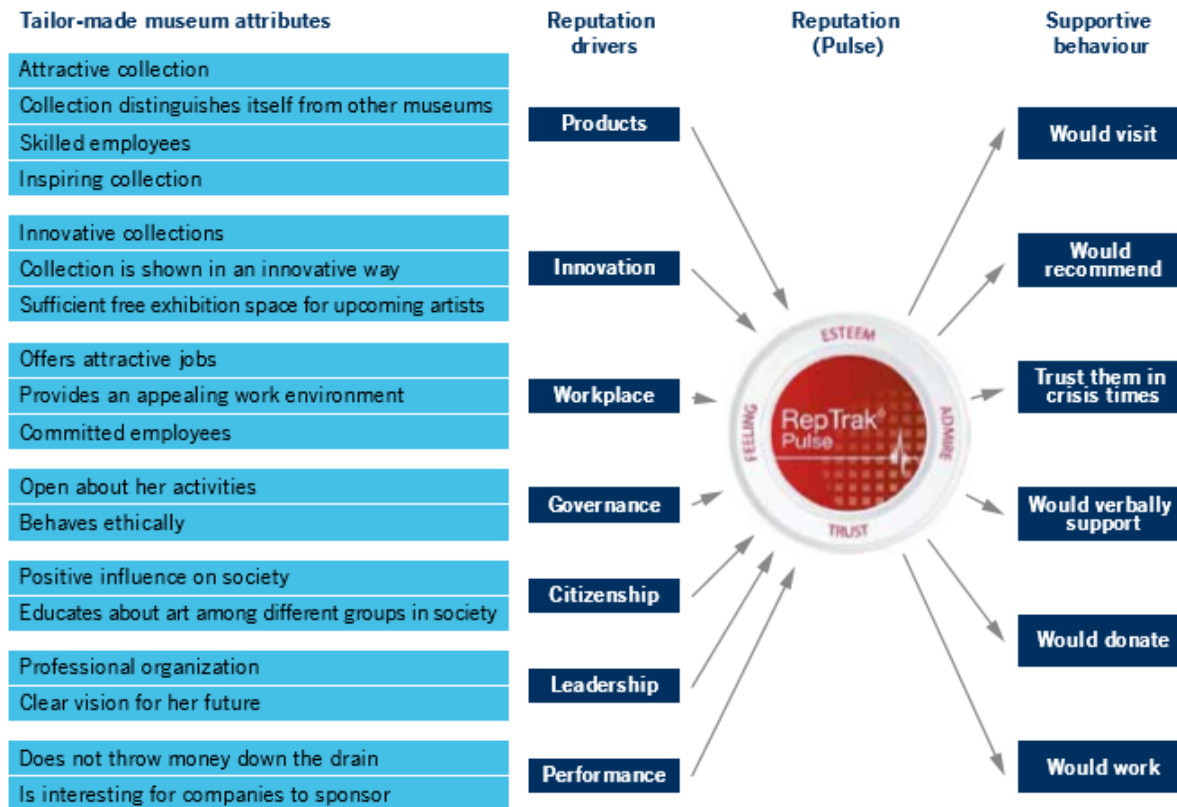


Figure 1. Professors of management Van Riel and Heijndijk's museum reputation model (RepTrak®) indicates seven reputation drives that contribute to audience appreciation. The ways in which the study acknowledges the subjectivity of the museum are connected mainly to finance and collections.

Such an approach assumes that collections and educative means determine the image of the museum as an institution. The study measures, through such readily available arguments, the museum's *brand image* on a quantitative economic level rather than the audiences' *experience with* the brand image on a qualitative social level.<sup>8</sup> The study's incapability to explain the VGM's high reputation is because the study, through focusing on the museum as a company, can rely only on universal services museums provide to their users. Through such a universal approach, it is impossible to reveal the secrets behind a single museum's success and instead can only measure the reputation of museums in relation to each other. High visitor numbers, interest from the public, educative potential and outstanding collections are presupposed feats. They are elements a museum can be extremely fortunate to have, giving

<sup>8</sup> Hooper-Greenhill identifies such quantitative research as being characteristic of the art museum in particular (256). In order to break away from a focus on visitor numbers, museums need to (1) consider the nature of their audiences, and (2) review their policies and practices.

a museum more freedom and possibilities in reshaping and optimizing the museum experience. Nevertheless, these factors do not determine solely the extent to which audiences appreciate a museum visit. In relation to visitor numbers, the Erasmus study acknowledges, "big is not always beautiful", indicating, "only two of the most-visited museums are in the top 5 of our overall reputation ranking".<sup>9</sup> The study instead concludes that, despite the established causal link between high visitor numbers and reputation, the *familiarity* of a museum is one of the most decisive aspects of a high reputation.<sup>10</sup> In order to be familiar with the public, then, a museum has to put in a tremendous communicative effort in reaching as many people as possible. If the VGM ranks fifth globally on familiarity, does this not mean the museum's communicative force is an important, if not the most important, driver behind its audience appreciation? The VGM, rather than taking their intrinsic strengths such as collection, popularity of the artist, and financial stability for granted, goes the extra mile to not only meet the expectations of audiences but also exceed them. Figure 2 illustrates museums of the twenty-first century need to be more than treasure houses that rely solely on their educative function. The museum of the twenty-first century experiences an interdisciplinary, purpose-driven revolution, where traditional functions of the museum as treasure house and educative center have expanded to include *social* and *economic* functions influenced heavily by the need for entertainment and leisure. This thesis proposes the Erasmus study has overlooked one key reputation driver that can account for the VGM's presence in the top three most appreciated museums globally: its communicative persuasive force in relation to its audiences.

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<sup>9</sup> Van Riel and Heijndijk 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 22.

## The twenty-first-century museum

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A museum is now expected to be:

- an object treasure-house significant to all local communities
- an agent for physical, economic, cultural and social regeneration
- accessible to all – intellectually, physically, socially, culturally, economically
- relevant to the whole of society, with the community involved in product development and delivery, and with a core purpose of improving people's lives
- a celebrant of cultural diversity
- a promoter of social cohesion and a bridger of social capital
- a promoter of social inclusion
- proactive in supporting neighbourhood and community renewal
- proactive in developing new audiences
- proactive in developing, working with and managing pan-agency projects
- a resource for structured educational use
- integral to the learning community
- a community meeting place
- a tourist attraction
- an income generator
- an exemplar of quality service provision and value for money.

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*Figure 2.* Graham Black's extensive list of museological functions in the twenty-first century. This list shows that a museum today is much more than a preserver of artefacts and increasingly incorporates functions that deal with the entertainment value and enjoyment factor of the museum in contemporary society.

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## Communicative theories as analytical models: museum versus audience

This thesis is based on the assumption that the key factor that determines the public's appreciation of the VGM is the way in which the museum communicates *with* audiences and, perhaps even more notably, *for* audiences. Peter Vergo and the New Museology are responsible for two insights that have shaped the course of museum practice in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The first is that museums are not neutral providers of information, but consciously give shape to *what* they communicate and *how* they communicate.<sup>11</sup> The second insight is that the authority of the museum as provider of information has neglected the active role of recipients of information: audiences.<sup>12</sup> The New Museology thus stresses the subjectivity of museums when communicating with audiences, but also highlights the role of audiences as active co-producers of knowledge rather than passive receivers of it. Munson observes that in the 'old' museology "museums [...] catered to a single audience: the visitor seeking to experience greatness".<sup>13</sup> The New Museology is responsible for an awareness of (1) a plurality of audiences and (2) the varying needs of

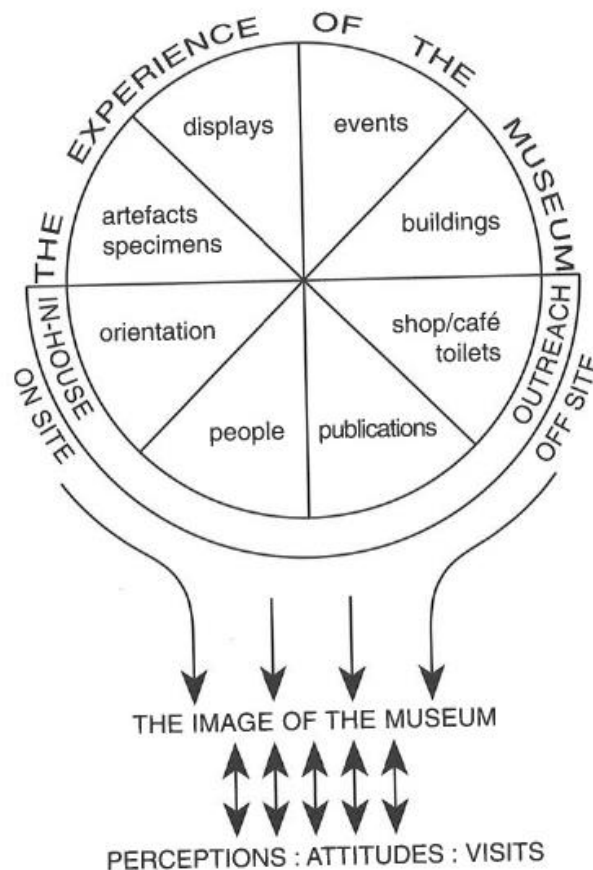
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<sup>11</sup> Vergo 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Munson 61.

these audiences.<sup>14</sup> This awareness is not only apparent in museum studies as a field of study; museums are increasingly concerned with the types of visitors entering their building and the demands these visitors have. Although there are audiences that do still visit museums for their greatness, the multiplicity of functions as outlined by Graham Black indicate that through adopting functions that are removed further from the collection and the museum's educative purpose, the presence of different audiences is confirmed; some seek to be educated, others search for enjoyment or leisure.



*Figure 3.* Hooper-Greenhill's *holistic* museum communication model shows that the image of a museum is made up of both on site and off site elements of communication that together form the museum experience. Hooper-Greenhill does illustrate a reciprocal relationship between the museum image and (audience) perceptions but does not offer a similar holistic model as to what make up perceptions.

<sup>14</sup> Vergo 2-3.

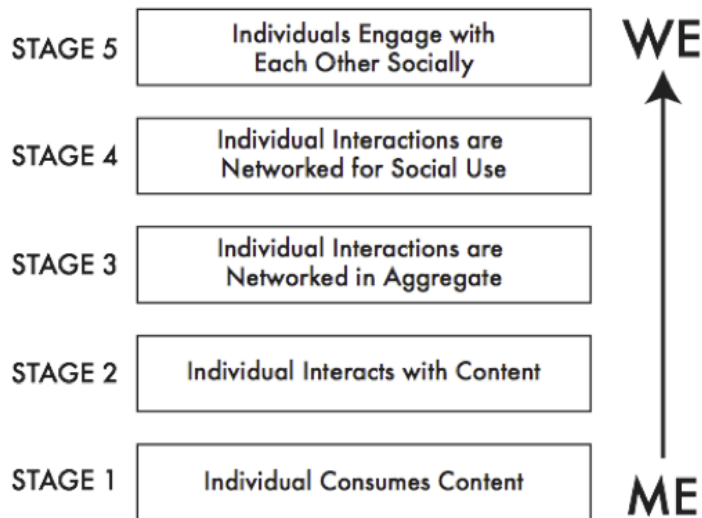
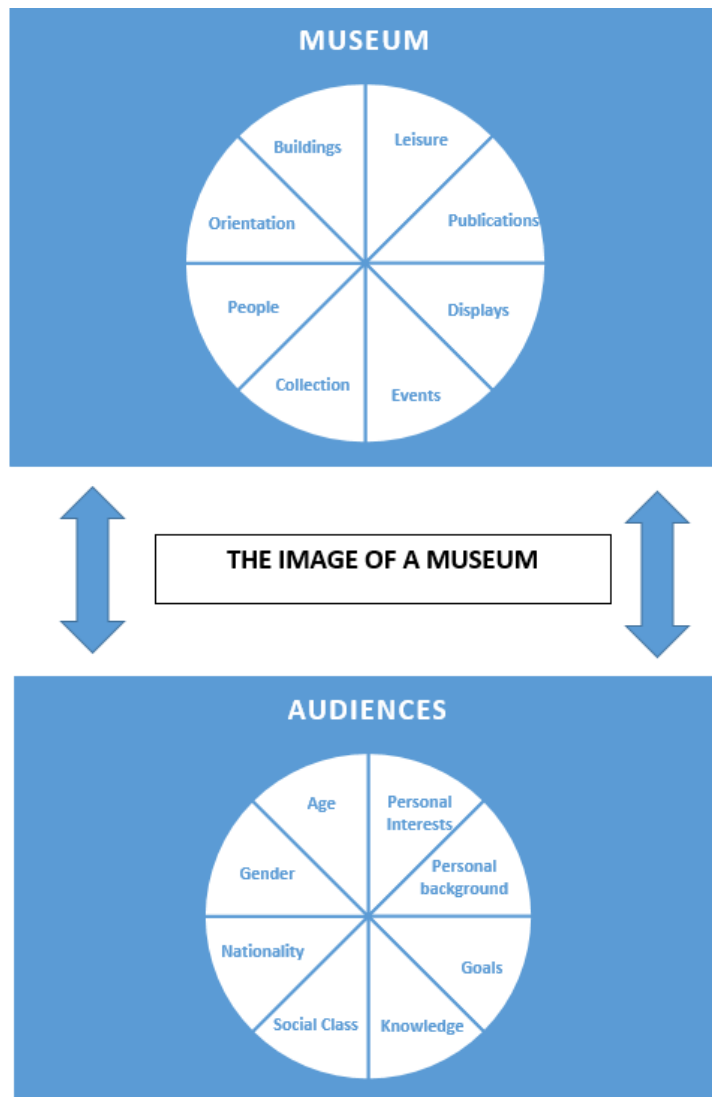


Figure 4. Nina Simon identifies five stages of audience participation in museums. Implied in this model is a sequential process in which stage 5 is the most optimal audience participation. In the final stages of participation, Simon removed the role of the museum completely.

Interestingly, theories of the communicative processes in museums treat the before mentioned discoveries of The New Museology separately. They either focus on the museum as speaker or emphasize the audience as a vantage point from which to analyze reception. This research employs two models of museum communication synchronously in order to gain, on the one hand, an understanding of what happens on either ends of the dialogue

between museum and audiences and, on the other hand, to address the grey area between construction and interpretation of communication. In this grey area is also determined what audiences experience and how they appreciate their experience. Firstly, this thesis makes use of Hooper-Greenhill's communicative model (figure 3). Making use primarily of the first insight of The New Museology – the museum as a subjective creator of narrative – Hooper-Greenhill's approach is particularly useful in deconstructing *what* museums communicate holistically. Through this holistic approach, it becomes clear that the museum does not communicate through its collection alone, but incorporates a vast amount of additional means in order to establish its image. The second communicative model by Nina Simon (figure 4) departs from the second insight of the New Museology – the increasingly important role of the audience as an active player in the museum setting – and addresses the extent to which the museum audiences interact socially with the museums. Simon shows that by focusing on *how* museums communicate, the museum, rather than taking education as a societal function in itself, has a larger societal purpose that relies predominantly on its ability to promote social inclusivity and audience participation. When promoting such larger societal purposes, museums must allow the *audience* to take on the leading role in museum



*Figure 5.* A personal communicative framework that aims to analyze the interaction between museum and audiences holistically. The interplay between the museum and audiences have at its core a general image of the museum. The left half of each pie chart shows more general dispositions of both museums and audiences, while the right hand side incorporates more individual characteristics.

communication. Simon does not prioritize the museum's part in the establishment of potential dialogue; whether audiences engage with object-based displays or other people, the museum ground is the motivating factor to bring about such interaction. This thesis aims to analyze the totality of communication in order to identify how this array of aspects results in a museum's image. The research makes use of an interpretation of both communicative theories in which museum and audience consist of both generalities and specifics, as is illustrated in figure 5. The pie chart for both museums and audiences indicate that there is a general image of both the institution and the visitor.

However, the increase in individualism of both museums and audiences indicate that communicating to all effectively is a tough task. Analyzing the conscious persuasive means present in the

museum's activity will elicit the effectivity of communication in the VGM.

## Classical rhetoric as an analytical model of communication

Hooper-Greenhill's and Simon's communicative theories, despite approaching the communicative function of museums from different ends of the dialogue, do share common ground in that they (implicitly) state museums are communicative.<sup>15</sup> This communicative purpose is often associated with the educational function of the museum: in providing 'objective' information, the museumgoer feels educated and enlightened on the subject in question. This study does not consider this function as communicative because it presupposes (1) a hierarchical relationship where audiences are subjugated to the museum as institution of expertise and (2) audiences as consumers of knowledge rather than co-producers of it.<sup>16</sup> The list of museum functions of the twenty-first century museum by Graham Black indicates that the museum has adopted a variety of additional functions, each of which stress the importance of a dialogical or reciprocal relationship between the museum and its audiences. Although the Erasmus research conducted by van Riel and Heijndijk is useful in gaining a rational understanding of the success of large museums today, it leaves aside the groundbreaking discovery of The New Museology, where the museum is a *constructor* of narrative, rather than a *provider* of information. This thesis perceives the before mentioned Erasmus study as focusing solely on non-artistic available arguments. The non-artistic arguments the museum is predisposed with are a collection, an interest in that collection, and a quantitative expression of this interest in visitor numbers. A rhetor has non-artistic arguments at his disposal; they simply exist.<sup>17</sup> What the study fails to do is to address, reaffirm, question, or discuss the means through which museums actively *construct* their image and arguments for the benefit of their audiences. In other words, the Erasmus study and communicative theories do not consider what Aristotle calls the "offshoot of dialectic", the art of rhetoric, or artistic persuasive discourse. Central to this thesis are the three modes of persuasion: (1) *ethos*, (2) *pathos*, and (3) *logos*.<sup>18</sup> This element of classical rhetoric has been selected for this research specifically, due to the strong connection the appeals have with the most basic aspects of communication in any setting: a speaker, a

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<sup>15</sup> Leigh 1.

<sup>16</sup> Vergo 2.

<sup>17</sup> Corbett 23.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 39. According to Corbett, "we persuade others by three means: (1) by the appeal to their reason (*logos*); (2) by the appeal to their emotions (*pathos*); (3) by the appeal of our personality or character (*ethos*).

receiver, and a message. While most textbooks concerning rhetoric, such as Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (1965) and, more recently published, Crowley and Hawhee's *Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students* (2009), function as guides in producing persuasive discourse, these research employs their overview of rhetoric as instruments of analyzing the totality of the VGM.

Similar to communicative theories, classical Greek and Roman treatises of rhetoric focus on either one of the appeals over the other two to come to their conclusions. Plato condemns rhetoric as an art through his emphasis on *pathos*. Aristotle refutes Plato's condemnation by analyzing rhetoric as an offshoot of dialectic (thereby focusing on *logos* mainly). Cicero and other Roman rhetoricians valued most the position of the orator in society: the speaker's *ethos*.<sup>19</sup> This research departs from Michel Meyer's definition of rhetoric in ensuring a coherent, holistic and complete analysis of the VGM in light of the three appeals of rhetoric. Meyer states "rhetoric is a negotiation between individuals – *ethos* and *pathos* – on a question (*logos*) which divides them to a greater or lesser degree or purports to abolish or at least diminish their distance".<sup>20</sup> This thesis assumes that when museums focus on either one of the three appeals predominantly, this does not produce effective discourse. For example, the Erasmus study has favored *ethos* in its study of reputation.<sup>21</sup> However, when a museum focuses on its authority or *ethos* solely, it does not only neglect audiences but furthermore increases the communicative distance between the rhetor and the listener. By contrast, focusing solely on the emotions of the audience or *pathos* will undermine the status of the museum as an authority on the subjects presented to the viewer. Lastly, an overemphasis on the collection and the argument itself, or *logos*, ignores a potential dialogue between museum and audiences altogether. Rather than favoring one appeal over the remaining two, I claim that the interconnectedness, equal, and appropriate relationship between the three appeals of rhetoric determines excellent

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<sup>19</sup> Kennedy 103. Kennedy notes that Cicero's treatise of rhetoric reflect an unawareness of Aristotle's three modes of persuasion. Meyer notes that Cicero's writings stem from an interest in the character, values, and virtues of the speaker above those of the argument or the audience that is visible throughout Roman rhetoric. He furthermore sees the political landscape of the Roman Empire as aristocratic rather than the Greek democratic landscape as the determining factor to place *ethos* on a pedestal above the other two modes of persuasion. Meyer 4.

<sup>20</sup> Meyer 6.

<sup>21</sup> Crowley and Hawhee 195. "The appeal to ethos refers to proofs that rely on community assessment of a rhetor's character of reputation."

oratory. This research uses classical treatises of rhetoric and the three different appeals as analytical tools across the totality of the museum experience. This analysis based on the three appeals is used for each of the museum's communicative forces that are experienced directly by the visitor. Persuasion is a powerful tool that museums should use only when it empowers audience, and should be used cautiously when exercising power.

### Research question, sub-questions and scope of research

Analyzing the rhetoric of the VGM through its communicative elements that make up both the museum and audiences, this research answers the following research question. Is persuasive dialogue with and for audiences a key driver behind the VGM's high appreciation, and, if so, what forms does this type of communication take throughout the museum experience in the Rietveld building, the Kurokawa wing, and off-site dialogues? The research incorporates the museum's architecture, its display of objects in both the permanent and temporary exhibitions, leisurely functions, orientations, publications, and people to determine the image and the perception of the VGM from the year 2014 onwards. 2014 marks the year that the VGM formulated a new strategic plan and museum website, the museum implemented a new instalment of the permanent collection, and an underground entrance was built to serve more visitors and connect the two buildings more clearly spatially and visually.

Chapter 1 analyzes the Rietveld building and the permanent collection through its rhetorical appeals and its relationship between museum and audiences in its communication. The experience-focused elements from Hooper-Greenhill's chart are explored extensively, such as building, display, events, and objects. The museum shops are seen as part of the museum experience. Each of these elements will be analyzed from the perspective of the rhetor, as well as from Simon's interest in social participation. The elements are analyzed for their appeals to *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. This analytical holistic analysis wishes to answer how the Rietveld building and the permanent collection are persuasive. What does the current permanent instalment communicate to the visitor?

Chapter 2 analyzes the new entrance of the VGM and the Kurokawa wing's architectural properties. In addition, the chapter analyzes the Kurokawa wing by the same experience-focused elements as Chapter 1, this in order to identify similar and different rhetorical strategies between these buildings. This research analyzes three types of exhibitions, which were installed in the Kurokawa wing since 2015. These case studies have different connections and associations with the permanent collection on display in the Rietveld building. The conclusion of this chapter gives an answer to the question: what does the Kurokawa wing communicate in relation to the Rietveld building and has persuasive discourse become more effective through targeted visitor research?

Chapter 3 proposes for an extension of Hooper-Greenhill's holistic approach, in which the use of digital communication is perceived as an extension of the museum experience. The analysis does rely on Hooper-Greenhill's communicative theory in its holistic approach, but employs Simon's theory more extensively to examine to what extent these new forms of communication enhance or decrease a sense of community. While still making use of the three appeals of rhetoric as an analytical model, the research also introduces advertising and marketing strategies in order to clarify what the potential effects of off-site communication in relation to audiences are. What message does the VGM communicate outside of the direct museum environment and what is the effect of the use of modern day media on the museum's familiarity and potential audiences?

The conclusion of the research will provide an answer to the research question, mentions some of the most notable communicative strategies, and lists potential future research topics. It furthermore emphasizes the current lack of detailed research into holistic models of museum communication that incorporate speaker and audiences simultaneously. By using such an approach, studies of the museum might come a step closer to coming to grips with how museums *themselves* are in charge of what they communicate and to what extent they want to allow the visitor to actively contribute to their image. The VGM in particular is immensely successful in recognizing the audience as the museum's most valued asset. Its unique position within a cultural landscape that is currently determined by governmental support calls for an extensive research into the entirety of this institution. This in order to identify its effective persuasion, and to explain how the persuasive character of the VGM in particular is an extremely valuable example of how museums are to stay afloat in

the twenty-first century. I hope this research into museological communicative strategies will spur on an interest in analyzing museums individually; this in order to be able to understand at a more general level potentially successful undertakings that can contribute to the appreciation of more museums.

## Chapter 1. Constructing Narratives: The Rietveld Building and Its (Semi-) Permanent Instalment of the Collection.

The Rietveld building of the VGM is the 'original' museum building and used to house both the permanent and temporary collections. The building's exterior as well as interior has changed drastically over the past 45 years, but most so in the past four years. 2014 marks the year where the VGM put into use a new instalment of the permanent collection. The new design coincided with a strategic plan for the period 2014-2017, where new goals for the coming years were formulated. One of such goals was to accommodate more visitors. A new instalment served to spread the stream of visitors across all levels of the museum equally. This thesis wants to show that while spreading the increasing amount of visitors across the museum space is a valid argument, beneath this logical argument resides a deliberative and highly persuasive approach to museum communication. This chapter explores the building, exhibition, and facilities of the permanent instalment of the VGM in order to expose how the entirety of the museum's communication radiates persuasion towards its audiences. The architecture of the Rietveld Building is essential to address because the building gives way to an initial response from the visitor *before* entering the museum. The relationship between the museum's architecture and the art it houses contributes to a unique tension, in which the visitor is continuously surprised and challenged to make sense of the innumerable cognitive stimuli the VGM offers its audiences. Rather than merely presenting its services to the visitor, the VGM actively involves the visitor to reflect upon and engage with every corner of the Rietveld building. The new instalment of the permanent display reflects the VGM's exquisite knowledge of audiences and its intricate desire to make changes based on audience input. For instance, the increase and strategic placement of leisurely functions such as toilets, cafés, and shops indicates the awareness of a variety of audiences and their needs. This chapter aims to answer the following sub-questions. How are the Rietveld building and the latest instalment of the permanent collection inherently persuasive? What does the current permanent instalment communicate to the visitor?

## An architecture that communicates. The Rietveld building

Vincent Willem van Gogh, son of Vincent's brother Theo van Gogh, was an active voice in the discussions concerning the founding of a museum dedicated to the collection of works by Vincent van Gogh. Vincent Willem was approached by the Dutch State with the request to sell his inherited collection in return for a large sum of money and the foundation of a museum dedicated to Vincent van Gogh.<sup>22</sup> A breakthrough in the establishment of a museum was reached in 1962, when the Vincent van Gogh Foundation bought the collection by means of funds made available by the Dutch State.<sup>23</sup> In 1969, the construction of a house for the collection commenced. In 1963, the project for the building of a museum dedicated to Van Gogh was given to Gerrit Rietveld, an architect better known as a key figure in De Stijl movement.<sup>24</sup> As figure 6 illustrates, Rietveld made a first sketch for the museum building. Upon Rietveld's death in 1964 and Van Dillen's death in 1966, partner Van Tricht was responsible for the execution and construction of the building.<sup>25</sup> Although the spacious feel of Rietveld's design and the geometrical shapes were largely kept intact, Van Tricht decided to eliminate the contrast in colors that had formed an important part of Rietveld's initial drawings.<sup>26</sup> The result was a museum building that was in line with Rietveld's views on space and shape, but whose grey and white overtones and overhead light sources caused "the massive, impregnable appearance of the building from the street".<sup>27</sup> Its solemn use of color and impregnability through its lack of windows that allow a peek indoors are elements that elevate the museum's character as serious about its collection and as promoting high quality. Simultaneously, rhetorical analysis can do little more than identify the appeal to ethos and, to a lesser extent, that of logos. At first sight, how does the museum's exterior architecture communicate to the audience persuasively? The reliance on the appeal to *ethos* shows that the distance between rhetor and audience increases once protocols are involved.

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<sup>22</sup> Heijne 38.

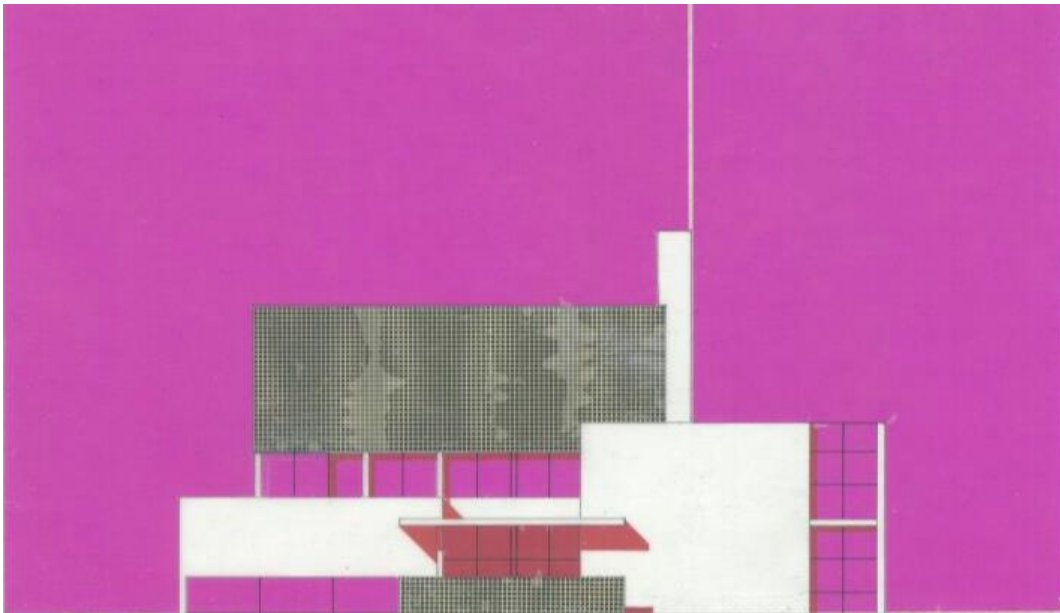
<sup>23</sup> Leighton 15.

<sup>24</sup> Kloos 84.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> De Leeuw 8.



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*Figure 6. Rietveld's original design shows more imposing windows and the use of color in the architectural design by means of a red wall.*

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Nonetheless, the VGM proves to be more concerned with the audience when comparing its architectural properties to the other cultural institutions present on the Museumplein. The Rietveld building's architecture steps away from the neo-classical influences prevalent in the iconic cityscape of Amsterdam, leaving aside any decorative elements that distract from its interior function. Its exterior does not exert ambiguity or uncertainty of its function. Additionally, there are nearly no visual relationships between the museum building and the urban landscape of Amsterdam. Through this isolation, the VGM "stands in the city as something distinct and separate", and makes the building unique.<sup>28</sup> Although the building is distinct in its appearance, its exterior is not very inviting. The interior architecture contrasts highly with the rigid and uninviting exterior of the building. In an article dedicated to the opening of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the New York Times reports

"The museum structure itself has been hailed as a turning point in museum design for its non-solemn, people-oriented qualities. Planned by the respected Gerrit Rietveld, who died in 1964, it has as its main feature a square central shaft covered

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<sup>28</sup> Tzortzi 110.

by a transparent ceiling that floods the galleries with soft natural light. The shaft also links the four main levels visually, creating the impression of a single spacious hall".<sup>29</sup>

The natural light the shaft in the middle of the Rietveld building allowed indoors, together with its function to create a feeling of being in a single space, was appreciated and a relatively new way to organize museum space. The visual integration of spaces by means of an open middle area thus highlights the individuality and innovation of the museum space. Although the building and the open space therein is characteristic of the signature museum, the choice of creating an open space in the museum is not. As Leighton states

"[Vincent Willem], who played a key role in the development of the [construction] plans, was an admirer of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York. While the comparison might seem pretentious, the interior of the Van Gogh Museum evokes something of the Guggenheim's spectacular atrium in the open-plan arrangement of the floors around a central, light-filled void".<sup>30</sup>

Considering the construction plans of the VGM coincided with the opening of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the connection Leighton makes here between the architecture of the two museums is not as pretentious as would first be imagined. The rotunda at the Guggenheim Museum in New York stresses a ceremonial viewing of art. The spiraling ramp that provides continuous visual access to both the open atrium and the shallow bays containing works of modern art give a viewing experience that comes close to a monumental perception of museum architecture.<sup>31</sup> The Guggenheim's spatial experience is in essence a tension between the rigid narrative of the exhibition and the empty atrium that the viewer can turn to when feeling too enclosed. Although the round shape of the Guggenheim Museum reinforces rigidity, the VGM's square architecture is a more nuanced way to accomplish similar effects. Although individuality is an important aspect of latter half of twentieth century architecture, this by no means implies that therefore all museum buildings looked radically different in all respects.<sup>32</sup> The Van Gogh Museum is the square version of the circular Guggenheim Museum. The center of the building is characterized by

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<sup>29</sup> Special to the New York Times 51.

<sup>30</sup> Leighton 17.

<sup>31</sup> Giebelhausen 234.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Giebelhausen argues that the signature building and individual character of museums is the main trend that can be identified in late twentieth century museum.

its open space that connects all floors of the museum, and gives the visitor a sneak peak of what is ahead. The open staircase in the atrium furthermore gives the viewer a feeling of obligation for ascending the steps, providing the rigidity of narrative that is present in the Guggenheim Museum. Additionally, the works of art are not visible from the shaft, thus creating a dichotomous relationship between the informative exhibition space and the leisurely oriented open space. The visitor in the Van Gogh Museum experiences more freedom in the arrangement of movement across individual floors. Visitors have to walk around the open atrium, but the order in which the visitor enters individual exhibition spaces on each level are no longer determined by its architecture. Thus, the shape of the building holds the capacity to individualize the museum visitor's experience to a degree. Where the collection of the Guggenheim seems to serve the extremities of museum architecture, in the VGM the museum architecture serves the extremity of the collection. While the Guggenheim museum is an "overbearing mother to the art it houses", the Van Gogh Museum is the modest father who above all else wants his paintings to shine in their own right.<sup>33</sup>

### Visual narratives: Two intertwined approaches to display

The VGM's collecting practice has developed from the artist Vincent van Gogh to a more broad interest in late nineteenth century European art, bridging the gap left by the Rijksmuseum's national focus that starts in the Middle Ages and ends circa 1900 and the international twentieth century focus of the Rijksmuseum.<sup>34</sup> An influential communicative element through which the VGM is able to speak to its visitors and engage in dialogue is its display of the permanent collection. As of 2014, the museum has put into practice a new method of displaying the permanent collection, in which the narratological structure is less rigid and allows circulation of both visitors and items on display. The museum has traded its historical and modernist overview for a playful narrative, which does hold on to a chronology

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<sup>33</sup> Buren 318.

<sup>34</sup> De Leeuw 9.

but incorporates various thematic approaches towards the life and times of Vincent van Gogh.<sup>35</sup>

The VGM uses the open area in the shaft of the Rietveld building to indicate each of the three floors by means of chronology. However, this chronology fades to the background once the visitor enters either one of the three floors. Each level is subdivided into themes that characterize the work and life of Van Gogh. Such an arrangement of narrative provides the chronological structure needed to provide audiences with clarity, yet it stimulates an active and unique exploration of different themes within the chronological structure. I would therefore describe the arrangement of the Rietveld building's collection as *chronothematic*. While a modernist chronological overview provides a structure upon which to show Van Gogh's sources of inspiration, his personal development, and his influence on future artists, a postmodern thematic approach accompanies, gives substance to, and enriches the story. By employing two types of arrangement simultaneously, the VGM is able to address two perception mechanisms that make up visual communication. Firstly, the chronological backbone is similar to the 'bottom-up' mechanism, which includes "image properties such as form, color, luminance, contrast, edge density and motion".<sup>36</sup> The chronological overview makes use of various means to optimize the effectiveness of this visual communicative mechanism. The VGM gives extra depth to the stylistic development of Vincent van Gogh by using wall colors that (1) reflect the types of color used in his paintings, or (2) contrast with the color scheme of paintings, thereby making the paintings stand out more.<sup>37</sup> The masterpieces of the collection are placed isolated from others to indicate their importance. This isolation furthermore allows crowds to gather around the masterpieces away from the side-by-side placement of works of art on the outer walls that imply a need to continue moving physically. Where isolated placement is not possible, the masterpiece is often the center painting, so that audience can continue to view the painting more readily than were it

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<sup>35</sup> This research focuses on the latest instalment of the permanent collection in the year 2018. The description below can differ from future instalments.

<sup>36</sup> Holsanova 338.

<sup>37</sup> For example, the dark grey wall color on the first floor reflects Van Gogh's use of a dark palette during his Dutch period. On the other hand, the dark blue color scheme on the walls of the ground floor and the isolated wall dedicated to the *Sunflowers* on the first floor contrast sharply with the yellow and orange present in these paintings, making these colors stand out more.

placed in a corner.<sup>38</sup> The use of natural light in the new display has been brought to a minimum; only the top level makes use of natural light, which explains the use of lighter colors on the walls to enhance the openness and freshness of the space. Where artificial light comes into play, the masterpieces in particular are placed under a bright spotlight, guiding the eye and attention to these artworks more easily. Chronology, whilst offering the museum to make a concise argument based on clarity and uniformity, is bound up deeply with the more scholarly approach to art history where paintings are classified according to their visual properties and the influences subsequent stylistic periods have on each other. Literary theorist Mieke Bal identifies such an aesthetic discourse based on continuity and similarity as threatening the educative function of the museum.<sup>39</sup> However, the VGM, in wanting to bring to the public the life and works of Vincent van Gogh, calls upon itself such an arrangement. In order to break away from the modernist conception of categorizing art in chronological sequence and the implied climactically development, the VGM has eliminated a conception of early, middle, and late style of the artist as being bound up with artistic development. Rather, each style of Van Gogh is individually contextualized based on personal motivation, and broader social developments.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, the thematic approach connects more strongly with the 'top-down' mechanism, which includes "viewers' personal characteristics such as interests, attitudes, goals and motives, prior knowledge, experiences, individual preferences and emotion".<sup>41</sup> In particular, the VGM has altered the second floor of the Rietveld building to outline themes in relation to the person behind the artist.<sup>42</sup> Audiences are encouraged to explore more in depth information, but do not have to read or go through all of the themes in order to be inspired or educated. Instead, the thematic approach allows a casual engagement with letters, paintings, objects, and interactive elements. Prior knowledge might result in audiences skipping over certain topics, while

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<sup>38</sup> On the top floor of the museum, the open shaft in the center space is most prominent and the amount of usable space limited. Therefore, paintings can only be displayed on the outer walls of this floor. Furthermore, the open roof natural daylight falling in from the ceiling cannot be obtruded, resulting in flexible walls being more difficult to install.

<sup>39</sup> Bal 204-5.

<sup>40</sup> For example, the dark tones in Van Gogh's paintings are credited to the types of materials he could obtain, while the use of color during his stay in Paris is paired with the city as the cradle of Impressionism and the avant-garde.

<sup>41</sup> Holsanova 338.

<sup>42</sup> The second floor of the VGM used to be dedicated to works on paper. Unfortunately, these works were too fragile to be displayed permanently. Currently, the final space of the second floor is organized to install a regularly changing selection of works on paper in order to safeguard the quality of the drawings, whilst still being able to show them to the public.

personal interests and individual preferences result in audiences spending more time engaging with a selection of themes. Themes labeled 'Friends' or 'Family' are easily related to, since they are concepts that exist in all of society. However, audiences with prior knowledge of Van Gogh's family and friends might skip this theme altogether. They might instead want to explore 'Van Gogh at work', a more technical and specific theme that does not appeal as much to less experienced museumgoers, or tourists visiting the museum under time constraints. Thus, the VGM's invention of arguments is not only sound in its entirety. Out of all the audiences entering the museum, it is safe to say that none of them stops to look at every collection item, or try to identify all relations between items on a visual, historical, social, political or religious level. What visual communication makes clear is that people make conscious choices about what interests them and unconscious choices in what catches their attention. The overall display and arrangement of the permanent collection emphasizes the vast amount of narratives Van Gogh elicits, but the specifics reveal that audiences are free to walk away with an individual museum experience because themes are explored freely. The thematic approach empowers audiences to learn more about specifics, ensuring each visitor leaves with a unique experience of enrichment. But more importantly, the dual approach of displaying the collection in the Rietveld building underlies an intriguing observation made by Bal, namely that through having to organize the works of art either by chronology or themes implicitly reflects the notion that "the object is not autonomous".<sup>43</sup> One key issue with identifying a lack of autonomy in art is that linguistic analysis serves as the deconstructive tool to come to such a conclusion. A linguistic deconstruction of museum practice does indeed make an artwork dependent on which meaning some speaker chooses to portray on to it. However, rhetorical deconstruction shows that the collection items in themselves constitute the argument at the disposal of the rhetor, each of the invented persuasive elements paving the way for new ways of constructing narratives. In recognizing that the collection itself is the totality of available means for the rhetor, one should also acknowledge that, although the VGM combines two strategies of persuasive arrangement, there could be many other ways to structure the permanent exhibition. In fact, in the new strategic plan for the coming four years, the VGM has stated to investigate the quality and

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<sup>43</sup> Bal in Macdonald 529.

experience of the permanent collection and considers to alter drastically the setup of this collection.<sup>44</sup>

### Textual narratives. Harmony between written and non-written persuasion

Apart from the chrono thematic visual narrative, the museum also makes use of various forms of written and textual discourse. Labels are the most prominently researched textual means in museum studies and therefore this research discusses them here for their style and function. However, the VGM incorporates a variety of additional textual means that determine more strongly the type of communication the museum engages in. These are wall texts, quotations, signage, and multimedia interactives. There exists an effective balance between rhetor, audiences, and message in each of these means individually. Simultaneously, the museum aims to create a balance in the collectivity of textual and written elements. At the core of the balance across the totality of textual narratives is an inherent desire of the VGM to both accommodate various target groups, as well as a more general aim to maintain an active and interested audience. The following discussion analyzes each textual system individually, after which a comparative approach between all textual narratives elicits the overall effect of textual narratives on audiences.

Upon entering the museum, the readily available way for visitors to find their way through the museum is by means of signage. The VGM's signage is twofold: the visitor folder includes a floor map as well as house rules, and the signs displayed throughout the museum. The floor plan indicates the general overview of the exhibition spaces, as well as an establishment of the ground rules and additional services provided by the museum.<sup>45</sup> Prior to establishing ground rules or explaining what is on display, the VGM provides the visitor first with an open invitation to resort to the information desk. This communicative strategy has two effects. Firstly, the open invitation aims to portray the museum staff as easily accessible to the visitor. Secondly, a subsequent effect of the portrayal of the staff is that

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<sup>44</sup> Van Gogh Museum. *Strategisch Plan 2018-2020* 42. The planned changes include a wish to create different installments according to the tourist season. Therefore, tourist high season will see a more conservative type of display, while in low season, the installment will be much more flexible.

<sup>45</sup> See Appendix 1 for a step by step order of unfolding the floor plan.

audiences are more readily inclined to ask the museum staff for help when needed, not just at the information desk but also throughout the museum visit. The VGM, through this strategy enhances both the character of its staff as well as the feeling of ease of audiences entering the museum. The VGM also uses its floor plan to outline the house rules when first unfolding the pamphlet.<sup>46</sup> The VGM arrangement of information is very effective in that visitors are made aware of these rules from the start of the visit. Of course, the museum would rather not establish ground rules at all, but strict preservation policies do not allow for such a free approach. Moreover, a lack of rules also underestimates the quality of the displays, harming the character of the VGM as an honest orator in preserving the collection to its utmost abilities. The VGM upholds an appropriate distance through establishing rules (*ethos*) after establishing a personal connection with the visitor (*pathos*). The personal assistance ensured prior to entering the museum accommodates specifically audiences outside the direct vicinity of Amsterdam. Tourists have traveled from afar to visit the Van Gogh Museum and want to combine this visit with a variety of other cultural activities offered in the city of Amsterdam. Therefore, clear and uniform signage is extremely important to ensure efficient museum visits (figure 7). The VGM ornaments their message through symbols rather than written language in both the visitor folder and in the museum space in order to enhance the clarity and uniformity of signage.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, the symbol for the carrier bag received extra attention in order to "ensure a universal interpretation of which types of bags are allowed in the museum, whilst providing doorkeepers with a personal level of interpretation of this symbol".<sup>48</sup> The symbol is an appropriate communicative style in the VGM, because it allows for a more universally coherent interpretation over written language (the international character of the VGM does not allow for ten translations of what types of bags visitors can bring into the museum).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See Appendix 1 step 2.

<sup>47</sup> Crowley and Hawhee 335.

<sup>48</sup> "Museum Van Gogh". Pictomotion Website.

<sup>49</sup> According to Crowley and Hawhee, Plato's attention to the subject matter and backgrounds of audiences result in a speaker considering the most appropriate style to employ in a given discourse (Crowley and Hawhee 331-332).



Figure 7. The symbols designed by Pictomotion for the VGM are targeted towards a variety of audiences and should therefore be as universal as possible.

The VGM, like most museums, makes use of wall text to introduce the overarching narrative of a smaller selection of works of art. Labels accompanying individual works of art serve to either support the claims made in the wall text or to provide the viewer with an insight that departs from the main theme. From an Aristotelian perspective, the relationship between the wall text and the labels follows roughly two parts of speech in which the case is (1) stated in the wall text and (2) proved textually in labels or visually in works of art.<sup>50</sup> The permanent exhibition uses its ground floor space to introduce the visitor with the case in question. The VGM uses a selection of self-portraits to bring the visitor *face to face* with Van Gogh. This phrase speaks to the viewer directly, implicating that the museum visit will entail not only a confrontation with the artistic quality of Van Gogh's paintings, but will establish a more profound and personal bond with the person behind the artist. The introductory wall text supports this duality within the museum experience.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Aristotle 190-1. In chapter 13 of book III of "The Art of Rhetoric", Aristotle refutes the sophist claim that the arrangement of discourse or speech should include narration, introduction or conclusion because they are refer directly back to either the Statement or Argument.

<sup>51</sup> This thesis makes use of the online available Dutch wall text overview in order to ensure that the texts in this research are both correct and up-to-date.

"Vincent van Gogh is een van de beroemdste kunstenaars aller tijden. Wereldwijd worden mensen geraakt en geïnspireerd door zijn expressieve, kleurrijke werk en zijn bewogen leven.

De honderden schilderijen en tekeningen die Van Gogh in slechts tien jaar tijd (1880-1890) maakte, hebben een grote impact gehad. Zijn kunstwerken hebben generaties kunstenaars beïnvloed, en zijn in onze beeldcultuur nog alom aanwezig. Met een collectie van ruim 200 schilderijen, meer dan 500 tekeningen en bijna al zijn brieven biedt het Van Gogh Museum het grootste en meest representatieve overzicht van Van Goghs leven en werk.

Een bezoek aan dit museum is als een reis met Van Gogh. We volgen een kunstenaar die zichzelf voortdurend probeerde te verbeteren en die betrokken was bij de ontwikkelingen in de kunst van zijn tijd. Een kunstenaar die bovenal streefde naar een nieuwe kunst, waarin hij op een directe en universeel begrijpelijke manier uitdrukking kon geven aan de grote emoties van ons bestaan."<sup>52</sup>

In just 156 words, this concise introduction is capable of capturing each of the three persuasive appeals. The first paragraph is an appeal to *logos*, introducing the reader to the visibility and influence of Van Gogh in the present. It furthermore emphasizes the situated *ethos* of Vincent van Gogh: his popularity, his influence on modern art, and the personal identification people from all over the world have with the artist.<sup>53</sup> The second paragraph focuses on the establishment of character of the VGM. It stresses the academic and art historical importance of the artist but also establishes the honest character for its own organization by mentioning the quality and quantity of the artefacts the VGM houses. In employing active speech for the vast majority of its texts, formality and distance are brought to a minimum. The VGM displays its function in relation to the oeuvre of the artist, in the hopes of accomplishing a similar *ethos* to that of the artist.<sup>54</sup> The last paragraph is highly persuasive in its appeal to *pathos*, since it both addresses the visitor directly and states the case of the exhibit. By describing the museum visit as a journey, the VGM encourages the visitor to explore the *entire* museum and not stop by its masterpieces only. The VGM also

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<sup>52</sup> "Zaalteksten" 4.

<sup>53</sup> Crowley and Hawhee 228. Liking, power, and distance are the three characteristics of the interpersonal dimension.

<sup>54</sup> Although the paintings of Van Gogh have the power to speak to the viewer persuasive both in form and content, it is ultimately the museum that needs to effectively illustrate this persuasion.

places its organization on equal footing with the visitor by incorporating the personal pronoun 'we', decreasing the distance between rhetor and audience and furthermore emphasizes the museum visit as interactive.<sup>55</sup> The use of a first-person plural pronoun "may establish a level of intimacy that presumes much in common between rhetor and audience, even when, in fact, a great power differential exists between them".<sup>56</sup> Naturally, the VGM is a well-established museum, a research institute, and a primary player in the museum world. But in recognizing its audience as the make or break factor of its existence, the VGM enables itself to move outside of a hierarchical relationship in which the rhetor is superior to its listeners.

The labels accompanying the collection items are a mix and match interplay between tombstone labels and descriptive labels. Out of the many objects on display, descriptive labels accompany only a handful of objects. The type of collection item is key in determining the choice of label type. Firstly, the VGM displays not only paintings but also objects Van Gogh used in his lifetime. These objects already have the description in their titles and do not need an additional explanation or description. Most objects are present on the second floor of the museum, which is high in density of wall text already because it addresses mostly background information of the artist. Including descriptive labels would result in an imbalance of visual and textual narration. Too much text also results in passivity amongst visitors. In some cases, the VGM makes use of labels to explain an activity, thus restoring balance between passivity and activity.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, in comparing labels for Van Gogh's paintings, the masterpieces receive much more attention than other paintings in the display of the permanent collection. Extensive descriptive labels of between 100 to 150 words accompany the masterpieces. An example of such a label is that of the *Potato Eaters*. The label next to the painting reads

"Een echt boerenschilderij mocht volgens Van Gogh naar spek, rook en aardappelwasem ruiken, en dat doet *De aardappeleters*. Damp stijgt op van de

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<sup>55</sup> Crowley and Hawhee 213. Distance between rhetor and audience is determined both physically and socially. The more intimate the distance, the more the audience can identify with and the more persuasive potential the discourse embodies.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 219. Black situates this decrease of rhetorical proximity within a broader development in which audience demands are taken into account by museums (2).

<sup>57</sup> An example of such an approach is the text accompanying a digital display of Van Gogh's sketchbooks, in which the background information of these items coincides with an invitation to explore the digital archive.

aardappelschaal, waaruit een familie samen eet. Bij deze arme, eenvoudige boeren vond Van Gogh de essentie – en vooral ook de tragiek – van het bestaan. Hij wilde ze in al hun ruwheid weergeven, met grove gezichten en knokige werkhanden. In de kleuren zocht hij naar donkere, grauwe tonen die bij het stoffige land pasten. Hij had zich met veel studies voorbereid. Toch bleek het schilderij met maar liefst vijf figuren een 'geducht gevecht'. Uiteindelijk was Van Gogh zeer tevreden met het resultaat. Hij hoopte dat zijn broer Theo, die kunsthandelaar was in Parijs, het schilderij zou kunnen exposeren. Die vond het echter veel te somber".<sup>58</sup>

This label is characteristic of the other descriptive labels of the masterpieces in the collection. The VGM tries to offer the viewer with a close reading of the content and form of the painting, while also setting the mood inherent in the works. In case of the *Potato Eaters*, the mood is established by a multi-sensory approach that relies heavily on smell. The presence of food on the table in the painting makes the incorporation of this sense logical. Furthermore, the statement is connected closely with the artist himself, creating a personal atmosphere and decreasing the distance between rhetor and audience. Instead of downplaying the work of art further through its sensory appeal, the description slowly moves towards the formal aspects of the painting. The label guides the visitor's viewing process, but the label is not formally descriptive alone. Van Gogh's working method and reception of the painting by his brother Theo make up a large part of the text. This contextualization causes for a more intellectual viewing that is based on personal reception of the painting on the side of the audience. The label reads Theo van Gogh found the painting too gloomy. Implicitly, the label asks the question: what do you think? Is the painting, as Theo described it, too gloomy? Each of these elements actively involve the viewer in understanding and interpreting the work of art and decreases the distance between rhetor and audiences. However, the style of language used is very formal. The text makes use of jargon specific to the study of art history. Hyphenation and punctuation are used extensively also. This makes the text much more difficult to interpret. From these observations, the use of labels is directed primarily to audiences with a prior knowledge of art history or museum visiting. An elevated style in the labels accompanying the 'masterpieces' furthermore confirms the high cultural value of these works of art.

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<sup>58</sup> "Zaalteksten" 7.

For those not interested in reading the more extensive introductory wall texts or descriptive labels, the visitor can turn to quotations by Vincent van Gogh, which are situated at the top of the walls. They are readable without having to move closely to the text and therefore are readily accessible to all sorts of audiences. The quotes by Vincent van Gogh are placed within the chronological backbone of the exhibit narrative. To illustrate, the museum space '1886-1887: New Perspectives' displays the following quotation

"Vincent van Gogh september of oktober 1886: 'Wat je hier wel kunt bereiken, is vooruitgang en die vind je hier wel degelijk, dat durf ik te verzekeren'".<sup>59</sup>

The VGM effectively uses its complete collection of Vincent's letters to give substance to the argument made by the museum. The effect is embedded deeply in *pathos*, the direct speech of Van Gogh makes the artist come as close to the audience as possible, as a personification. The quick visitors or the non-frequent museumgoer, who might feel lost in the magnitude of the museum space, will feel accommodated to most. These texts do not require for much movement towards works of art, yet carry high persuasive potential in that the visitor feels like the artist is speaking directly towards them, rather than the mass narrative given in the remainder of the permanent exhibition. In using the written words of Vincent van Gogh, the VGM makes itself almost invisible as a rhetor. Direct speech in written form allows the VGM to step away as the instructor and transforms the artist into the rhetor.

For five euros, visitors can make use of a prize-winning multimedia tour through the museum.<sup>60</sup> The multimedia tour replaced the audio tour in the fall of 2014, together with the new instalment of the permanent collection, and is used on average by twenty percent of its visitors.<sup>61</sup> The VGM offers the visitor three routes for different audience activity: (1) a highlights tour, (2) exploring the museum at leisure, and (3) activities for families and children. The multimedia tour proves that the arrangement of the current instalment allows for a multiplicity of interpretations and variations. The multimedia tour naturally fits the display and allows for a logical flow even though each of the three tours cover diverging paths. Furthermore, objects temporarily not on display can be easily removed from each of the three tours without effecting the narratological structure in the same way that new

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>60</sup> The VGM charges three euros for children.

<sup>61</sup> "Eén miljoen keer met interactieve tour door museumcollectie." Van Gogh Museum website.

acquisitions or loans can be easily fitted into this tool. It provides stories that both support the myth surrounding Van Gogh but also offers new perspectives. For example, the multimedia tour pays special attention to *Wheatfield with Crows*, which symbolically characterizes the final months of Van Gogh's life, and was considered to be the artist's final work. The VGM instead offers a less well-known story on the painting *Tree Roots*, which is in fact Van Gogh's last painting. The multimedia guide includes this story in each of the different routes, highlighting its goodwill towards audiences to tell the truth and, more generally, to debunk some of the popular myths surrounding Vincent van Gogh. The question then remains why the VGM still decides to provide stories based on popular belief. The answer to this resides in a combination of each of the three appeals of rhetoric. The truth on the matter is known through the unfinished state of the painting the *Tree Roots* as well as written sources that support this painting to be Van Gogh's last, and well conducted research by the VGM to discover this fact. Yet, the VGM is forced to provide the popular narrative precisely because of its audience. In order to appeal to the public, the VGM first *has* to share the myth in order to debunk this same myth later in the museum visit. While the multimedia tour offers this juxtaposition of narratives, the arrangement of the paintings for a visitor without this guide in fact keeps alive the myth. The VGM could have chosen for a radical display that exposes the real story of the artist. Instead, the VGM exposes its primary aim not in displaying the truth but in accommodating those audiences that know the artist precisely through such myths.

The combined use of textual means is so carefully balanced that visitors unconsciously make use of a variety of types of textual discourse without feeling drained by reading wall texts only. The multisensory focus of the multimedia guide is able to provide audio interaction with audiences of different backgrounds, while the wall texts make use of different forms of written language that rely on various rhetorical appeals. In particular, the use of Vincent's letters, an inherent part of his oeuvre, has been employed to decrease the distance between rhetor and audience. The VGM only directly addresses its collection or situated *ethos* once, in the introductory text in the ground floor exhibition space where the extensiveness of the museum's collection is stressed. The remainder of the VGM's *ethos* is constructed through communicative behavior. Through the establishment of a multi-layered exhibit on both a visual and textual level, and the integration of suitable leisurely functions

throughout the museum visit, the VGM is capable of addresses such a variety of audiences that nearly all visitors leave the building with a feeling of enrichment or inspiration.

### Arranging learning and enjoyment. Strategic placement of gift shops

Exhibition spaces offer various places of rest in the form of benches or neutral spaces. However, the abundance of works of art on display, the cognitive density of the exhibition and additional available informative means, together with the large crowds of visitors, can cause for museum fatigue. In what ways do additional public functions contribute to the museum visit as a leisure activity? After all, the museum sees a shift in function that parallels increasingly other leisure activities that are less demanding cognitively. According to Stephen, "especially the modern museum with its array of ancillary spaces [...] affords a social experience for the visitor".<sup>62</sup> The places in which leisurely functions are offered are chosen carefully and in accordance with the type of activity present in each of the areas of the museum. Thus, the arrangement of toilets, cafés, and gift shops within the museum experience can be considered as integral to the narrative, at the same time as contrasting with the more intellectually draining exhibition visit.

Firstly, the museum holds four gift shops, each of which are different in character, speak to different audiences and sell different products. Each gift shop has been placed strategically. The first is found in the underground entrance hall, where the majority of visitors enter the museum. Behind this gift shop are the restrooms, which is a strategic arrangement of space in that visitors must pass the gift shop when they want to use the restroom. The entrance hall also has a boutique shop with more expensive products such as jewelry, china, and 3D-printed reproductions of paintings. The direct encounter with both shops upon entering ensures an immediate knowledge that the shops are there, and will be most likely visited at the end of the museum visit. The third shop is situated at the old main entrance of the building opposite the ground floor hall of the museum. The old entrance, although no longer in use as the main entryway, is still used for disabled visitors or group visits. Specifically, tourist groups who travel by bus enter through this entrance. This space

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<sup>62</sup> Stephen 303.

also has its own wardrobe, meaning these groups do not pass the underground entrance hall. Simultaneously, this is the group that is most likely to buy a souvenir since they are on vacation. The last gift shop is situated on the third floor of the museum and is therefore more strongly integrated into the museum visit. It is a bookshop, relating more closely to the academic and educative function of the museum. Furthermore, these objects are easy to carry for the remainder of the visit and are not potentially dangerous objects, which a fragile mug can potentially be. Placing shops of different characters suiting to the direct environment and visitors adjacent to the main route of the museum but not obtrusive makes these leisurely functions part of the museum experience instead of an additional function put forth solely at the end of the visit. Through such an appropriate incorporation of leisure as an element of the overall narrative, the VGM "attract a broader public" without jeopardizing "the original functions and purposes" of the museum.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, no leisure outside of the museum premises is possible, unless a visitor buys a new ticket. All of the leisure activities are indoors, which restricts the audiences in how much time they spend inside the museum.

### Concluding remarks. Constructing the emotive museum experience

In 2013, the VGM and TNS NIPO published a collaborative research, whose aim it was to "create an engaging museum brand experience".<sup>64</sup> Their consumer-brand relationship model indicates that the functional needs of the visitor are on the periphery of the relationship the museum and visitor can establish.<sup>65</sup> By offering exceptional information when entering the museum, providing tours in eleven languages, the functional needs of the visitor can be met through the exploitation of outstanding product features. The VGM has shown to provide exceptional practical information by making use of easily accessible information of the building (floor plans, house rules, directions) and the multilingual nature of this content throughout the museum.<sup>66</sup> Secondly, the identity needs of the visitor are met through

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 306.

<sup>64</sup> Van de Wiel and Brocx 1.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid 6.

<sup>66</sup> Floor plans are available in eleven languages, as are the multimedia tours. Additionally, wall texts are offered in Dutch and English and personal tours through the museums are offered in six languages.

accommodating to social values.<sup>67</sup> Examples of social values in the VGM can be found in its thematic approach of the instalment of the permanent collection, where concepts such as 'Friends' and 'Family' appeal to a universal audience, whereas more specific themes such as 'New Perspectives' or 'Impassioned Nature' appeal to audiences with a desire to receive more in depth art historical explorations. By contrast, 'Timeline' and 'Modern Art in Paris' fit more prominently into the chronological approach and are potentially more interesting for less well-informed visitors. At the core of their consumer-brand relationship model are the less tangible emotive needs of the visitor that find their expression in the highly subjective museum experience.<sup>68</sup> Figure 8 summarizes Van de Wiel's and Brocx's findings on the emotive museum experience into four categories. Each of these four characteristics has been incorporated into the new instalment of the permanent collection in the Rietveld building, as the rhetorical analysis of the current instalment of the permanent exhibition above has indicated. The VGM promotes interaction (with objects, staff, and other visitors), by acknowledging individuality (in offering an array of textual discourse), stimulates the search for meaning (in offering both a chronological and thematic visual narrative) and emphasizes collectivity inherent in the museum visit (between audiences but also between rhetor and audience). In acknowledging the museum experience as highly emotive, the VGM comes that much closer to pinpointing audiences' needs and is thus capable of establishing

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<sup>67</sup> Van de Wiel and Brocx 6.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

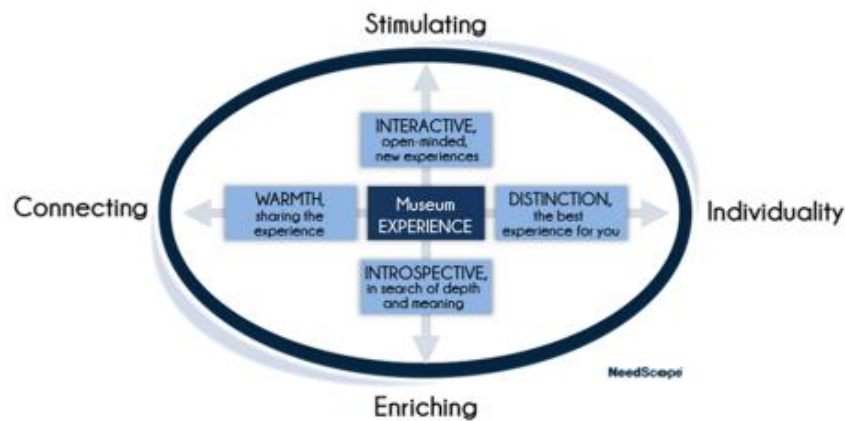


Figure 8. The psychological framework translated to the VGM museum experience indicates that at the core of the model is an individual's emotive museum experience, the middle layer emphasizes feelings the VGM can accommodate, and the outer layer shows the more general functions the VGM wishes to exert.

bonds that go beyond the physical. In the Rietveld building, the VGM only directly addresses its collection or situated *ethos* once, in the introductory text in the ground floor exhibition space. The remainder of the VGM's *ethos* is not so much situated but invented through communicative behavior. Through the establishment of a multi-layered exhibit on both a visual and textual level, and the integration of suitable leisurely functions throughout the museum visit, the VGM is capable of addressing such a variety of audiences that nearly all visitors leave the building with a feeling of enrichment or inspiration. Perhaps the sum of each of its individual parts described in this research can account for 94 percent of the total amount of visitors describing themselves as very happy or happy with their museum visit.<sup>69</sup> Important to consider now is in which ways the architecture of and the temporary exhibitions in the Kurokawa wing relate to the Rietveld building's instalment of the permanent collection and whether audiences are approached in similar ways.

<sup>69</sup> Bloeme and Baartman 71.

## Chapter 2. Constructing Stories at the Right Time for the Right People. Persuasive Functions of the Kurokawa Wing and Temporary Exhibitions and Their Associative Value

The previous chapter shows the VGM is highly invested in knowing its audiences in order to accommodate as many visitors as possible in the Rietveld building. The psychological approach taken in the collaborative study with TNS NIPO, however, is not able to consider the needs of audiences prior to the construction of narratives. In order to make communication with specific audiences as effective as possible, the VGM has, with aid of Motivaction, developed four personas around whom exhibitions are constructed.<sup>70</sup> These four personas are "creative Robin, challenger Ryan, conservative Pauline, and achiever Zhang".<sup>71</sup> While the first three are (potential) visitors from The Netherlands, Zhang is an added persona that conforms specifically to international target groups.<sup>72</sup> Temporary exhibitions allow for a specifically targeted communication, but also have an inherent multiplicity in how these messages can be brought to the public successfully.<sup>73</sup>

The following chapter firstly exposes the audience driven properties of the architecture of the new entrance to the VGM (as of 2015) and the Kurokawa wing<sup>74</sup>. These alterations did not arise solely from the museum's need to generate more space for its exponentially increasing amount of visitors.<sup>75</sup> Architectural properties further emphasize a desire to speak with audiences in a more personal way. Secondly, the rhetorical analysis of the exhibition space focuses less on visual and textual persuasion on site – as has been done in chapter 1 – but makes use of the museum's publications and catalogues of exhibitions in order to understand the motivations for particular choices of exhibitions and the nature of the content of these exhibitions. This information is used to explain in which ways these exhibitions relate to the content of the Rietveld building and attribute to the VGM's perception at large. On the persuasive power of exhibitions, Ferguson argues the "temporary art exhibition [...] has become the principal medium in the distribution and

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<sup>70</sup> For more a more general overview of the four personas, see Appendix 2.

<sup>71</sup> Papadongonas. "[Interview] Meer focus met persona's Van Gogh Museum."

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> As Plato writes in *Phaedrus*, Lysias, the greatest orator in Greece, could tell essentially the same story in two different ways, and it would prove as effective each time (235a).

<sup>74</sup> Because the pond that was part of the initial design did not function properly and has since been replaced by the new entrance, this architectural element will not be part of the rhetorical analysis.

<sup>75</sup> Van Heeswijk 92.

reception of art and therefore is the principal agency in the debates and criticism around any aspect of the visual arts" (Ferguson in *Thinking About Exhibitions* 179). It is unclear if Ferguson focuses on high culture scholarly debates or low culture popular debates. The Kurokawa wing's contribution to communicative strategies stress individuality and an increasing awareness of audiences and their needs. Rather than arguing the VGM and expert communities determine the course of taste, appreciation, and value of art, this chapter exposes the audience driven communicative strategies through rhetorical analysis. Central to this chapter is the following sub question: what does the Kurokawa wing communicate in relation to the Rietveld building and has persuasive discourse become more effective because of targeted visitor research? In order to identify relations between temporary exhibitions and the instalment of the permanent collection in the Rietveld building, this research makes use of Aristotle's tripartite definition of relationship. Aristotle distinguishes three types of associations: (1) similarity, (2) contiguity, and (3) contrast.<sup>76</sup> For each type of relation, a case study is chosen that reflects these relationships, namely an exhibition installed prior to 2017. Thereafter, a short analysis of temporary exhibitions following the glocalities research readdresses the categorization of exhibitions in relation to the Rietveld building. Unlike the general emotive driven research in chapter 1, temporary exhibitions and research into personas has provided the basis for a "discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener; it can defend itself, and it knows for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent".<sup>77</sup>

### Lowering the threshold. An underground entrance and a sunken building

Discussions on a temporary wing for the VGM started in the 1990s, a decade marked by a European trend that placed high value on cities' marketing and branding strategies.<sup>78</sup> The plans for the new wing coincided with a drastic renovation plan of the Museumplein to improve the city's outreach. García perceives these recent changes as merely accommodating the rise of tourism while "disregarding the social and cultural needs of the

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<sup>76</sup> O'Shaughnessy and Jackson O'Shaughnessy 55.

<sup>77</sup> Socratis in *Phaedrus* 276a, in Plato and Cooper.

<sup>78</sup> García 315-6. According to García, this development of a holistic city brand has effected the nature of cultural policy, in that business aspirations have overshadowed the leisure and community demands (316). The Erasmus study by Van Riel and Heijndijk indeed reflects such a tendency.

local community".<sup>79</sup> However, an analysis of the Kurokawa wing and the new entrance hall disproves this opinion. The new unity established between the two buildings has resulted in a renewed interest in the local or national visitor. Kurokawa's initial architectural drawing made clear that the building was to be circular in shape and threatened the open view from the Rijksmuseum to the Concertgebouw.<sup>80</sup> Kurokawa then altered his design into an elliptical shape, half of which was a sunken pond, the other half the exhibition spaces. The exhibition building consists of three floors, but the majority of the interior is situated underground (the ground level of the building). A vista connects the first and second floor visually, but Kurokawa has placed this open space on the side of the building rather than in the center.

As is stated in the Van Gogh Bulletin "Kurokawa's exhibition building is based on ellipses and circles. The main building by Rietveld, Van Dillen and Van Tricht is also strongly based in geometrical form, in this instance right angles and acute angles, and that creates a sort of a dialogue".<sup>81</sup> Thus, the persuasive power of the building's visual properties resides in its relation to its neighbor, basing its execution on similarity and contiguity.<sup>82</sup> A contrasting relationship would cause confusion to the visitor as to whether the buildings belong together, and would undermine the quality of the Rietveld building. Kurokawa's execution highlights a symbiosis in which there is room for subtleties and unresolved contradictions and where dualistic thinking makes way for an approach that accommodates something he describes as 'intermediary zones'.<sup>83</sup> The intermediary zone is the open public space that exists between the Rietveld building and the Kurokawa wing. Kurokawa has visually connected the two buildings by means of an overarching wall in the center of the ellipse form, which embraces the open space towards its neighbor and visually implies the two buildings are a set. The concept of symbiosis in Kurokawa's work additionally takes on rather philosophical dimensions. Kurokawa wanted to add a plurality to the Museumplein architecture because "after the long reign enjoyed by Eurocentric, universalist and rationalist logic it is now time for a symbiotic way of thinking based not on the black-and-white polarities but on the many shades of grey in-between"<sup>84</sup>. In relation to wanting to

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 321.

<sup>80</sup> Van der Werf 81.

<sup>81</sup> "Japanese Donation for Extension to Van Gogh Museum" in *Van Gogh Bulletin* 12.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibelings 20-22.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 20.

accommodate more visitors, the motivation for the grey overtones metaphorically serves to elicit the VGM's increasing social and public-oriented function. In particular, the use of grey connotes Kurokawa's "search for ambiguity and polyvalence at every level".<sup>85</sup> The architectural properties of the Kurokawa wing suit well with the underlying motivations to erect the building. As the following section of this chapter will show, the exhibitions in the Kurokawa wing are not so much designed for groups categorized by class, gender, age, or nationality but by personal interests, backgrounds, goals, and prior knowledge.

In 2013, architect Van Heeswijk developed a new design for an entrance that would logically connect the Rietveld building and the Kurokawa wing spatially and visually, simultaneously tackling the crowdedness of the Rietveld building. The result is a glass structure that has replaced the pond of the Kurokawa wing and completes the elliptical architectural structure (see figure 8). The use of glass contrasts with the tiled exterior of the Kurokawa wing and the predominantly brick exterior of the Rietveld building. The transparency of the glass offers by-passers and visitors a glimpse into the entrance hall that houses public oriented functions, blurring the boundaries between interior and exterior. It is an outreach the museum could not meet during the first four decades of its existence and offers a visual solution to the absence of freely accessible public spaces. Even though the VGM still does not have any spaces that are freely accessible – except for its queueing system – the glass visually symbolizes a transparency and openness. The museum has realized at the right time precisely what type of changes had to be made to the building's exterior in order to continue to please as many visitors to the museum as possible. Thus, an effective use of situatedness of invention stands at the core of the construction of the Kurokawa wing and the new entrance bridging the two buildings. Moreover, the situatedness of arguments in space as time also determines the course of narratives chosen for temporary exhibitions. In such invention, some stories arise from developments within art historical discourse at large, at other times they are the result of the VGM's own extensive research or organizational collaboration. But for the most part, they are a direct result of what the *audience* is interested in. In the remainder of this chapter, the VGM is put forth as a master of choosing the most suitable associative connections with the permanent

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 32.

collections and more poignant functions and audiences across a variety of temporary exhibitions.

### *Munch: Van Gogh. A relation of similarity*

The opening of the new entrance hall in 2015 was celebrated by a unique exhibition on the similarities in the lives and works by Edvard Munch and Vincent van Gogh.<sup>86</sup> The exhibition was a result of a close collaboration between the VGM and the Munch Museum in Oslo that started in 2009.<sup>87</sup> The exhibition provides a visual narrative much in line with the basic chronological structure of the permanent collection in the Rietveld building. Like the instalment of the permanent collection, the chronology is expanded through the use of various themes, such as the artists' production of portraits, their use of color, their focus on writing, and their mental illnesses. Although these are interesting parallels, in what ways do they speak to the viewer? The exhibition catalogue, including the cover (figure 9) is dedicated for a large part to full size images that place Van Gogh and Munch side by side, without any text.<sup>88</sup> Although this visual strategy does leave an interpretation over to the viewer, the visual relationship expects an identification of similarities. Lloyd's chapter in the



*Figure 8. The new glass entrance to the VGM designed by van Heeswijk illustrates the use of glass offers the illusion of openness.*

<sup>86</sup> On display at the Van Gogh Museum from 24 September 2015 – 17 January 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Rüger in Van Dijk et al 8.

<sup>88</sup> Van Dijk et al 36-59.

catalogue confirms such a presence of stylistic similarities, highlighting some of the most intriguing parallels between the artists. Lloyd identifies equivalent elements of style, such as their use of color as expressive and decorative, but also elicits some less well-known similarities such as their exaggerate expression of space.<sup>89</sup> Notably, Lloyd never claims the

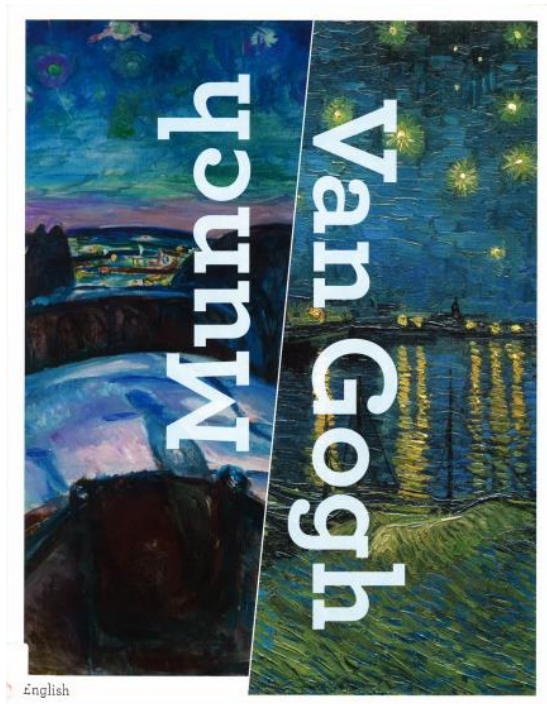


Figure 9. The cover of the exhibition catalogue for *Munch: Van Gogh*. Prominent instantly are similarities in style and subject matter between the artists.

two artists employ the *same* style; instead Lloyd stresses that the uniqueness of their individual styles comes to the fore the moment they are placed side by side inside the museum space.<sup>90</sup> The comparative approach taken in both the exhibition and the catalogue, however, highlights similarities and does little to address Lloyd's statement of the individuality of the artists to its audiences. Instead of formulating an implicit relationship between the two artists then, the continuous repetition of such comparison connotes there must be a common ground between them. Rather than the relationship between images functioning metaphorically, the exhibition makes use of simile as a trope.<sup>91</sup> Within argumentation, the employment of examples exclusively also emphasizes to an extent a rephrasing or

explanation that rests in similarity.<sup>92</sup> Thus, there exists a contradiction within the explicit message the museum emits in denying the similarities as based within *logos* and the subsequent explicit repetitious comparative approach the exhibition thereafter takes. Furthermore, the plain textual style of the exhibition and reliance on visual pairing risks downplaying the audience as passive learners who should exert solely spectatorship and

<sup>89</sup> Lloyd in Van Dijk et al 125, 143.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 147.

<sup>91</sup> Corbett 438.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 43. Examples in their defining of underlying motives should be stated in a positive way rather than in a negative way. This positive rephrasing implies a relation based on similarity, rather than one of contrast inherent to a negative example.

awe.<sup>93</sup> By basing an entire exhibition on formalist, personal, and chronological similarities, "one has to only believe strongly enough in one's theory and one will always find the matching proof – not to mention the means of making it public".<sup>94</sup> Fortunately, the exhibition catalogue does make use of all three appeals in the concluding chapter that establishes the affinity between the artists. Van Dijk firstly makes an appeal to *logos* in stating that the two artists have often been seen together as influences for later styles, which has been discussed in particular in German art historical discourse.<sup>95</sup> Van Dijk continues with an evaluation of the settings in which the two artists have been displayed side by side in the past, both in private collection as well as in exhibitions. Her focus on collectors and high standing exhibitions as standing at the forefront of comparing Munch and Van Gogh according to their painterly styles radiate an appeal to *ethos*. Stressing to such an extent the unique role of the VGM is quite problematic, because blockbusters are, above all, instruments of high entertainment value. However, in relation to the plain comparative style of the narrative, the argument in fact needs this rhetorical distance. The distance established through the appeal on character is subsequently decreased when Van Dijk introduces her third appeal. Rather than focusing on the affinity in style of the artists and their aims as artists, Van Dijk above all stresses the affinity in the reception of the artists and their image in popular culture.<sup>96</sup> Van Dijk here directly acknowledges the public as an important contributing factor to the making of this exhibition, and implicitly states also the underlying motivation of the VGM in creating such a blockbuster. Audiences want to visit exhibitions that are a once in a lifetime opportunity, and the two names attached to the 'Munch: Van Gogh' exhibition ensured high visitor numbers and a wide interest for the topic.<sup>97</sup>

Barker states "the blockbuster exhibition is a scholarly endeavor which serves to educate and entertain the public, bringing prestige and profit to the host institution in the

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<sup>93</sup> Barker defines this spectatorship and awe in a more religious way as the "blind worshippers at the shrine of art" (144).

<sup>94</sup> S. Koldenhoff in *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (2002) 10.

<sup>95</sup> Van Dijk in Van Dijk et al 202.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 216.

<sup>97</sup> "Edvard Munch in Van Gogh Museum best bezochte expositie 2015." *NU.nl Website*. The exhibition even managed to outnumber the widely popular *Late Rembrandt* exhibition, a retrospective exhibition that was on view in the Rijksmuseum in the same year. Over 585.000 visitors went to *Munch: Van Gogh* in comparison to 520.000 visitors for the *Late Rembrandt* exhibition.

process".<sup>98</sup> Thus, the primary function of the blockbuster exhibition is instructive (*docere*), but its effect is rooted more deeply in a functions to move or sway (*movere*) and delight (*delectare*) its audiences by the highly valued objects on display.<sup>99</sup> The exhibition is furthermore characterized by its collaborative nature, as well as its generous sponsoring by individual parties.<sup>100</sup> Sponsorship usually arises from a desire to enhance a sponsor's own character rather than that of the organization given support to, but in the case of the *Munch: Van Gogh* exhibition, sponsors are not of a commercial nature and instead are deeply rooted in the cultural landscape of The Netherlands.<sup>101</sup> The underlying message of the exhibition *Munch: Van Gogh* arises from Van Gogh's and Munch's search for "a visual idiom with immediate impact and were prepared to exploit their resources to the utmost to achieve that goal".<sup>102</sup> However, the argumentation made subsequently is an appeal to their immense popularity with the *general* public, rather than a professional public with extensive prior knowledge on the subject.<sup>103</sup> An indicator of its focus towards a more general public is that the exhibition's publication draws parallels between the myths surrounding the artist: in Munch's case an artistic "expression of a tormented mind", and in the case of Van Gogh the creation of a tormented mind posthumously through his letters.<sup>104</sup> Such comparisons are more difficult to make when speaking to audiences that have an affinity with the subject, since they possess the personal interest and background in knowing that the parallels appear, in some cases, farfetched.

On a more positive note, blockbusters hold the capacity to hang paintings side by side that one would normally never get to see together. The frequent local visitor in particular is accommodated in this respect, because instead of forcing this audience to travel abroad to see a Munch painting, the museum brings the work of art to their own home. Visitor demographics of this exhibition reflect both the widespread popularity of the exhibition, as well as a national interest. From the total number of visitors, 28 percent came

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<sup>98</sup> Barker 127.

<sup>99</sup> Leigh identifies these Ciceronian 'duties' of the orator (9).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 130-132.

<sup>101</sup> Van Dijk et al 239. The sponsors for the exhibition *Munch: Van Gogh* were the Turing Foundation, The Blockbuster Fund, and the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 9. VGM director Rüger emphasizes "one needs neither a degree in art history nor an experienced eye to enjoy these works; Van Gogh and Munch share a unique ability to speak to everyone directly and powerfully".

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 12-3.

from The Netherlands, confirming the appeal of the content of the artists with these audiences.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, the exhibition was on display for four months. This relatively long period of display indicates the VGM's desire to draw in as many visitors as possible, but also to allow as many different audiences as possible the possibility to visit the exhibition. Thus, it is highly accessible to many, if not most, types of visitors.

### *Easy Virtue: Prostitution in French Art 1850-1910. A relation of contiguity*

Although the VGM is dedicated above all to the works of art by Vincent van Gogh, the museum's existence has seen an increasing interest in late nineteenth century French art in particular. Vincent Willem van Gogh expressed a desire to move beyond the individual into the art historical context in which his art was made. "When the Van Gogh Museum was established, Dr van Gogh stipulated that it operate according to the most advanced standards, but he was equally concerned that it be a lovely institution. Visitors should be confronted not only with the work of Van Gogh, he thought, but also with that of other nineteenth-century artists, in either the permanent collection or in temporary exhibitions".<sup>106</sup> This desire for an over encompassing narrative that borders and overlaps with that of Vincent has given way to the presence of French late nineteenth century art in both the permanent collection as well as temporary exhibitions in the Kurokawa wing. Esner argues "in Van Gogh there was always perceived to be something that went 'beyond Dutch'".<sup>107</sup> French art is in proximity to Van Gogh both in time, space, and style. It has, at its core, the power to contextualize but also to show the inherent otherness of Van Gogh that is difficult to pinpoint when isolated from other artists in the Rietveld building. An example of an exhibition focusing on French art is the exhibition *Easy Virtue: Prostitution in French Art 1850-1910*. The VGM shies away from the postmodern discourse surrounding prostitution, and the male gaze inherent to the production of modern art. While devoting an exhibition entirely to this topic could provide audiences with a stronger interpretative role, the aim of this exhibition is to recreate the historical and social context of France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. "The nineteenth-century obsession with prostitution is a

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<sup>105</sup> "Edvard Munch in Van Gogh Museum best bezochte expositie 2015." *NU Website*.

<sup>106</sup> De Leeuw 15.

<sup>107</sup> Esner in Esner and Schavemaker 137.

constant. It is characterized by a desire to control it, notably in order to prevent the spread of venereal disease. But prostitution was also viewed as a routine source of entertainment".<sup>108</sup> Inherent to prostitution, then, are two important aspects: the perpetual interest in it, and the dichotomous implications of the profession for social life in France during the nineteenth century. Today, the entertainment value of prostitution and, on the other hand, the more negative connotations with the profession in terms of exploitation and diseases, is still most prominently visible in Amsterdam, where prostitution is highly visible in the cityscape.

Most important to note in relation to the exhibitions is the way in which the taboo topic of prostitution is made discussable in a public environment. The persuasive power of the exhibition originates primarily from its *off-site* exhibition in the Red Light District of Amsterdam. While De Wallen are notoriously known as the wild side of Amsterdam that exploits the sex and drugs industry, the VGM's instalment there allows a fresh cultural breeze into a part of the city known as embodying the darker side of Amsterdam. Period rooms with artworks have been installed amidst the contemporary prostitutes' working spaces. These period rooms and their place of instalment carry the power to draw in audiences that would usually not enter the VGM, in particular tourists who do not come to the city for cultural activities or citizens of Amsterdam who have not yet been to the VGM.

In the VGM, the exhibition *Easy Virtue: Prostitution in French Art 1850-1910* shies away from a dominant chronological narrative based on matters of style and form.<sup>109</sup> Van Gogh is included in the exhibition by means of his contiguous relationship with this topic. The exhibition does not criticize the prominence of prostitutes in French art and in Van Gogh's oeuvre, however it does try to nuance the contested subject through a tempered reasoning as to why prostitutes were so often depicted during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Van Gogh's portraits of prostitutes were largely a result of financial struggles and can be placed in a larger narrative that "shows how the clash of sex and money is a core feature of creative powers".<sup>110</sup> Through such explanation the exhibition on a more implicit level offers numerous perspectives that can be taken towards the topic. Explicit is

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<sup>108</sup> Post and Mulder 7.

<sup>109</sup> This exhibition was on display in the VGM from 19 February until 19 June 2016.

<sup>110</sup> Post and Mulder 7.

the combination of paintings by famous artists such as Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Van Gogh with everyday objects that promote the function of delight. The intermediality present in the exhibition furthermore encourage visitors "to examine in depth topics that resonate with contemporary preoccupations".<sup>111</sup> The ill-tempered style of the exhibition towards the profession is supported by police records, while the sweet-tempered style employs luxurious items such as an elaborately decorated bed.

The VGM and the Musée D'Orsay collaborated on what was the first exhibition on prostitution.<sup>112</sup> Their individual executions of exhibitions and publications do differ slightly, which makes it easier to identify the VGM's stance towards exhibiting. The first difference is the title of the exhibition. In France, the exhibition was known under the main title *Splendours and Miseries*, a title that clearly puts forth the dichotomy inherent in prostitution, which is the implied narrative for both exhibitions. The VGM has opted for the title *Easy Virtue*, which is the most positively resonating euphemism for

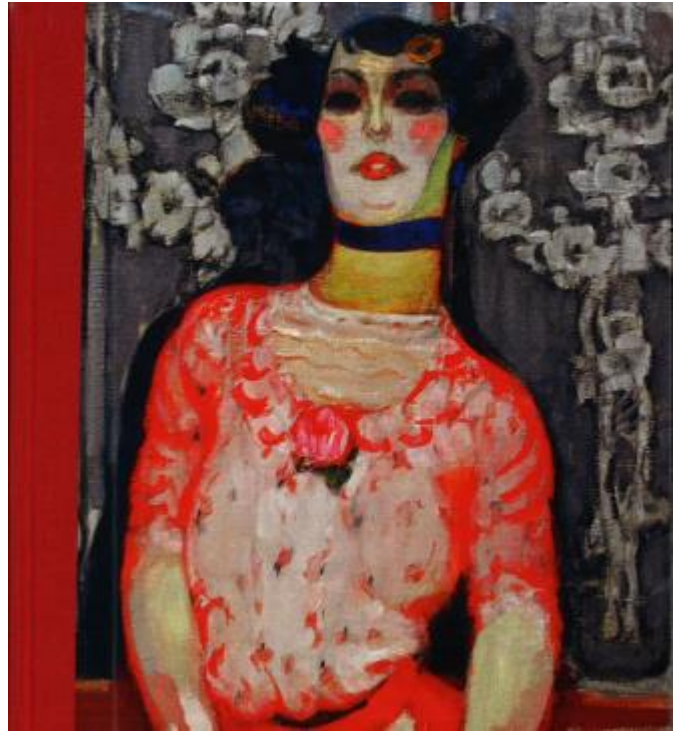


Figure 10. The cover of the VGM catalogue for the exhibition *Easy Virtue* reflects a reliance on visuals, the title does not feature on the front cover but on the binding.

prostitution. There are two possible explanations for this choice of title. Firstly, the VGM wants to emphasis more heavily the positive side of the profession. Secondly, tied up with the first explanation, the word prostitution across cultures carries a negative connotation and should therefore in itself function as inherent to the dichotomous image of prostitutes. The second difference is the narrative constructed towards individual collection items. The Musée D'Orsay was able to make use of its own masterpiece, Manet's *Olympia*, which was not available to the VGM. Although such masterpieces do contribute to the overall visibility

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

of an exhibition, in the structure of showing both sides of the profession this masterpiece is able to offer little else than an example of how an orchid in the hair is a symbolic sign for a prostitute.<sup>113</sup> The VGM did not have similar collection items as the Musée D'Orsay and lent its paintings by Van Gogh of prostitutes to the museum because they simply are not recognized by the public as masterpieces in the permanent collection. The exhibition in the VGM comes less from a wish to establish itself as a high standing institution of preservation and more from a wish to establish itself as invested in bringing an intriguing topic of discussion to the public. The third difference between the French and Dutch exhibition strongly mirrors this investment in the public also. The museum catalogues differ from each other quite drastically. The French publication is a large sized, €45 hardcover edition, while the Dutch publication is easy to carry and costs only €19.95 (figure 10). The VGM's publication is easily purchasable to audiences of all sorts to examine more closely the social, cultural, and historical background of the exhibition topic.

*On the Verge of Insanity: Van Gogh and His Illness. A relation of contrast.*

"Who doesn't know the story?"<sup>114</sup> Van Tilborgh confirms the popularity of the story surrounding what the VGM regularly describes as the 'ear incident' in the introduction of the publication accompanying the temporary exhibition *On the Verge of Insanity: Van Gogh and His Illness*.<sup>115</sup> The exhibition researches the potential illnesses of the artist from a psychological and medical perspective, offering a sound argumentation opposing the claim that Van Gogh epitomizes the common held Romantic notion of the modern day artist as a genius who is unappreciated in his own time. Organized during the summer months, the topic explored in the exhibition is directed towards a broad audience and radiates the content of a blockbuster. The cover of the exhibition catalogue appears to emphasize the popular story surrounding Van Gogh's tormented mind by making use of a segment of a self-portrait of the artist with a bandaged ear (figure 11). However, once the precise arrangement and style of *On the Verge of Insanity* are examined further, it becomes clear that in fact the primary means to inform the public is based not on similarity or contiguity.

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<sup>113</sup> Sciolino in *The New York Times*. Website.

<sup>114</sup> Van Tilborgh in Bakker, van Tilborgh and Prins 15.

<sup>115</sup> The exhibition was on display at the VGM between 15 July and 25 September 2016.

Instead, the exhibition takes a contrary position within the popular story and aims let audiences look differently at a popular topic. The VGM shows Van Gogh's mental illness spans much more time than the frenzy leading up to the infamous 'ear incident', "the reader begins to understand the full complexity of the medical issues surrounding a historical figure such as Van Gogh".<sup>116</sup> The exhibition is to set about a change in perception on the artist's mastery in his work as related directly to his illness. The exhibition states clearly that popular belief has it that Van Gogh's illness has spurred on his creativity, "yet Van Gogh never painted while suffering an attack of his illness, with the exception of a single period in the asylum in the early spring of 1890".<sup>117</sup> This *logos*-based appeal immediately draws the visitor to reconsider popular beliefs surrounding the artist.

Bernadette Murphy's publication of the book "Van Gogh's Ear: The True Story" sparked the interest in creating an exhibition focused solely on Van Gogh's mental state. She discovered a doctor's drawing that provided a definite answer to the enigma of what part of his ear Vincent van Gogh had cut off. The VGM's annual report indicates that the exhibition "is an example of how new scientific insights steer and determine exhibition making policies".<sup>118</sup> The primary motivation for the making of this exhibition is groundbreaking research in the scholarly field, and the subsequent effect of the function of the exhibition is to make audiences aware of opposing opinions held about Van Gogh across disciplines.<sup>119</sup> The exhibition starts by focusing on the 'ear incident', a strategy reminiscent of the popular myths and their truthful counterparts in the new instalment of the permanent collection in the Rietveld building. The exhibition takes a contrasting position in comparison with the execution of the theme in the permanent exhibition. Instead of asking what Van Gogh's experience was of his mental illness, the focal point in the temporary exhibition are the witnesses. What did *they* experience?<sup>120</sup> The association the audience now feels is rooted deeply in that of contrast. The exhibition forces the audience to think *outside* of the popular story and empathize with those who knew Van Gogh personally. Most interesting in this approach is that the VGM in this case does *not* perceive Van Gogh's statements in his letters as truthful accounts. Thus, the VGM questions the validity and quality of its own collection.

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<sup>116</sup> Van Tilborgh in Bakker, van Tilborgh, and Prins 16.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* 26.

<sup>118</sup> Bloeme and Baartman 26.

<sup>119</sup> Bakker, van Tilborgh and Prins 9.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

The exhibition incorporates a wide variety of perspectives, ranging from eyewitness account to modern day psychologists in order to give a complete, complex, and constructive overview of the potentialities of Van Gogh's mental instability. The VGM does not allow Vincent's perspective to shape the narrative but searches for *new* arguments. The exhibition is the result of extensive research into witness accounts and extends the usual focus of Van Gogh's mental state in Arles to a chronological overview of Van Gogh's physical and mental

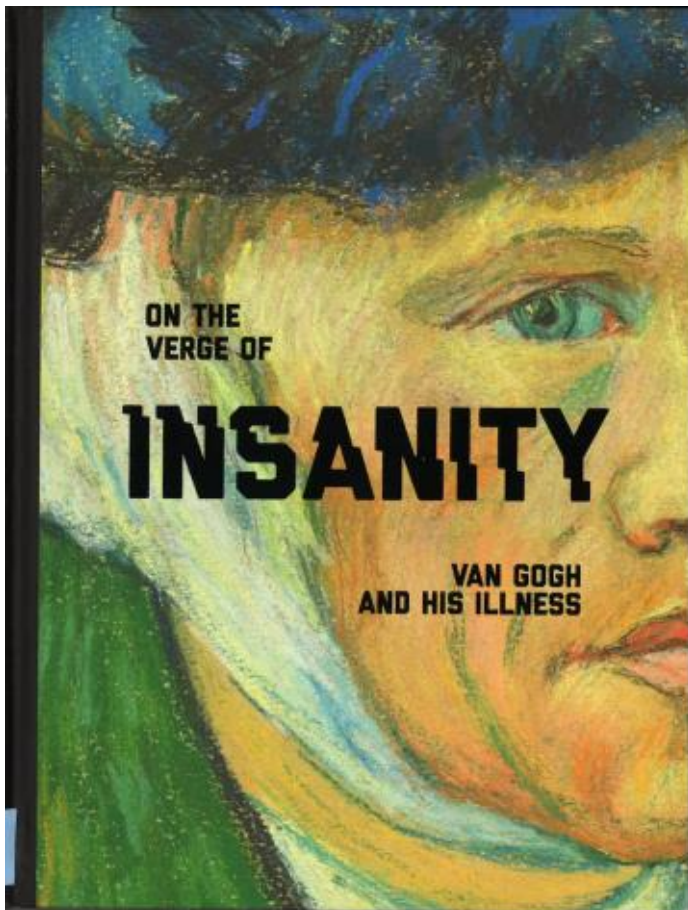


Figure 11. The cover of the catalogue accompanying *On the Verge of Insanity* visually zooms in on the most popular myth surrounding the artist.

health throughout his lifetime. The incorporation of psychological interpretations radiates with a more technical and scholarly approach to the topic. The diagnoses are not meant to give a definite answer to Van Gogh's mental state. *On the Verge of Insanity* gives the audience the opportunity to interpret the multiplicity of diagnoses individually or with other visitors. The VGM concludes that there will never be a definite answer to what disease Van Gogh had, but that most scholars would argue, "that Van Gogh's illness must have been a combination of psychological and neurological factors, genetic predisposition and an unhealthy lifestyle".<sup>121</sup> The VGM deliberately places itself *out* of the

argument by accrediting psychologists for having the apt knowledge to diagnose Van Gogh with anything. In providing an extensive amount of information on this topic in an interdisciplinary way, it opens up new conversations between both museum and visitor, and amongst visitors. The argumentation has shifted from the "troubled soul" towards a more

<sup>121</sup> Bakker, van Tilborgh, and Prins 128.

thorough approach that incorporates not only his artistic expression to explain his mental illness but pops the bubble surrounding the most commonly known myth surrounding the artist. The perspective offered in the exhibition has found its way to the Rietveld building, where this nuanced story has been incorporated on the second floor. An isolated wall is devoted solely to the topic, which reinforces its popularity and appeal to the public. However, when walking in sequence, audiences find the theme on the backside of the isolated wall. It reflects the necessity of displaying this part of Vincent's life and the museum's wish to give more attention to less well-known facts about the artist. Thus, this exhibition of contrast serves to move or sway audience opinion on commonly held opinions, which is substantiated through the amount of freedom given to the audience in placing oneself within the narrative.

#### Concluding remarks. The effect of targeted visitor research on exhibition-making since 2017

The implementation of the multimedia guide in the permanent exhibition proved effective and from the beginning of 2017 is also used for temporary exhibitions. The audience can choose between two different tours, either a highlights tour or a more extensive version. The development of the multimedia guide coincides with the establishment of the four persona in the glocalities research. And indeed, there appears to be a difference as to how temporary exhibitions have been organized in comparison with exhibitions on view before 2017. Where the previous case studies have shown to have clear indicators of a determined relation with the permanent exhibition and have both a function and style to emphasize that relation more clearly, the years 2017 and 2018 have thus far been much more fluid.

Firstly, *Van Gogh & Japan* was on view at the VGM in the spring of 2018. This exhibition was financed largely by the Dutch blockbuster fund and would, in comparison with the *Munch: Van Gogh* exhibit have to be based on similarities, have as a function to instruct, and have a plain style that reflects this function. When visiting the exhibition, however, the incorporation of the multimedia guide immediately portray that the amount of time spent in the Kurokawa wing and what the visitor wants to see is, in fact, in the hands of the viewer. The content of the exhibition is taken from a theme already present in the Rietveld building,

thus showing a relation of contiguity. When considering this relation, one would assume that the exhibition aims to delight the viewer. Indeed, the many loans of high quality do reflect this function. Nonetheless, the exhibition also has a clear educative purpose in teaching those audiences unfamiliar with Japanese print-making the formalist stylistic aspects that are characteristic of this medium. Additionally, the visitor is moved by offering an argumentation that diverges from the popular story that Van Gogh was inspired by the Impressionists while, actually, the role of Japanese art in his own artistic development might have been more influential. The multi-cultural approach furthermore shows that the museum wishes to draw in not only western audiences, but provide interesting narratives for visitors with a different cultural background. In this respect, achiever Zhang in particular will feel a sense of personal attachment to the subject. His aim is not so much to feel moved, delighted, or learned after a visit. Achiever Zhang above all wants to be able to check the VGM off the list of activities he engages in when visiting Amsterdam. Furthermore, Zhang wants to experience the highlights of the collection.<sup>122</sup> The VGM ensures this persona will visit *Van Gogh & Japan* through including the *Almond Blossom* in the temporary exhibition.

Similarly, the exhibition *The Dutch in Paris* on the surface appears to be rooted in a relation of contiguity. However, the chronological approach in relation to the developments in the city of Paris and the Dutch artists working there shows a more specific desire to bring to the museum visitors of Dutch descent. This nationalistic approach, although it was highly popular with the Dutch public, also was on show in Paris, where the exhibition was received well also.<sup>123</sup> Again, a temporary exhibition in its title refers to the multiplicity of audiences. The Dutch audience has more background information on some of the artists, meaning that the primary function for this audience is to delight. On the other hand, the French audience needs to be instructed more on the Dutch artist while possessing more personal knowledge of the social history of Paris. Simultaneously, both audience groups are moved by the incorporation of a relatively new perspective; for the Dutch visitor this is the social historical framework of Paris; for the French this is the unique Dutch style these painters developed further in The Netherlands or elsewhere. The dual narrative therefore works very well in incorporating all functions in order to accommodate more visitors. While 'Achiever Zhang' is

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<sup>122</sup> *Van Gogh leeft: alles over het merk Van Gogh Museum* 72.

<sup>123</sup> *Van Gogh blikt terug. Jaarverslag 2017* 31.

not interested in temporary exhibitions, French tourists might feel more easily an affinity with the topic, although the temporary exhibition will not be the determining factor in visiting the museum. Most prominent is the accommodation of 'Creative Robin', through offering more in depth information on a topic further removed from Vincent van Gogh.

Lastly, the focus on prints in the exhibition *Prints in Paris: From Elite to the Street* implies a relation of contrast, since these works are not included in the Rietveld building. The title itself also refers to a contrasting relationship inherent in the medium itself: its popularity both in high and low culture. This contradiction is able to exert multiple functions and styles. The execution of period rooms further emphasizes these contradicting styles and functions, by making use of an elaborate visual style on the ground floor and making use of a plain style on the first floor of the exhibition. The prints are not detached from their context but are part of a larger narrative of the fin de siècle, in which paintings, drawings, photographs, and decorative arts are used to provide a contextual framework. The intermedial approach provides a variety of viewers to observe and interact with objects they find interesting. This intermedial approach, however, is not used in the exhibition catalogue. The VGM only uses image of prints, while its textual narrative does place high value on the social historical context that is visually present in the exhibition. The content of the exhibition is targeted towards "Creative Robin", which makes up around 30 percent of Dutch visitors to the VGM.<sup>124</sup> The nature of the collection which, due to its fragility, cannot be on display for longer periods of time<sup>125</sup>, can be a motivating factor for this type of audience to be interested in the exhibition. The comparative approach inherent in the exhibition title, on the other hand, appeals directly to "Challenger Ryan". The incorporation of a screen to make one's own print to share on social media will also appeal to this persona because this target group is particularly active on social media.<sup>126</sup> By contrast, 'Achiever Zhang' and 'Conservative Pauline' will be less interested in the exhibition, since in the case of the former of interest is the permanent collection;<sup>127</sup> of the latter the exhibition topic is too far removed from Van Gogh.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> *Van Gogh leeft: alles over het merk Van Gogh Museum* 45.

<sup>125</sup> *Van Gogh blikt terug. Jaarverslag 2017* 27.

<sup>126</sup> *Van Gogh leeft: alles over het merk Van Gogh Museum* 50.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* 73.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* 65.

The overall trend that is visible in the Kurokawa wing is a development of exhibitions that, above all other groups, favor the persona of 'Creative Robin'. This is in accordance with the VGM's annual report, in which it is stated that top priority is attracting a group of national visitors that will return to the VGM on a more regular basis. However, in focusing on this target group for the Kurokawa wing's exhibitions, the relational effect of the image of this building to that of the Rietveld building risks an increase in visitors that are higher educated and have more in depth prior information on the topics addressed in such exhibitions. While the exhibitions installed before the glocalities research are constructed in relation to the permanent collection, the exhibitions organized in the previous two years show no clear relational connection with the permanent collection in that the vantage point is now the type of audience an exhibition should attract. Taking such a vantage point might sustain the prejudice that museums are for the educated elite but it also celebrates some of the unique demographics of the VGM, such as its low average age of visitors. The exponential rise in national visitors in particular for the *Much: Van Gogh* exhibition and the overall relatively low percentage of Dutch visitors to the museum has resulted in an active interest of these audiences on the VGM agenda. The VGM's agenda in turn is made primarily through the knowledge of audiences and knowing when to speak to which audiences at the right times and in the right ways. Blockbuster exhibitions are planned primarily in tourist seasons such as spring or fall in order to draw this international public to the museum. 'Achiever Zhang' wants to check the permanent collection of the VGM off his wish list. Therefore, the temporary blockbuster exhibition functions as an extension of the narrative provided in the Rietveld building, as is the case for the exhibition *Van Gogh & Japan*.

Exhibitions that have incorporated the multimedia guide and the glocalities research seem to be able to communicate more effectively to various target groups. The highlights tour is targeted towards 'Achiever Zhang' and 'Challenger Ryan', the in depth tour is more interesting for 'Creative Robin', and the family tours are targeted towards 'Conservative Pauline'. This effectivity is then not so much situated in the argument chosen within the exhibition, but in its verbal construction of narrative in addressing audiences in particular in order to achieve certain persuasive effects. The VGM is now able, through these personas, to address more individualistic and personal characteristics rather than aiming at accommodating nationalities or age groups. While temporary exhibitions offer an extension

of narrative in relation to the permanent exhibition on site, the persuasive force of the museum prior and after the museum visit is increasingly important in ensuring individuals continue to feel inspired and interesting in the organization as a whole. In the twenty-first century, the role of digital communication has not only become more visible but also an intricate part of everyday social activity. The following chapter analyzes the VGM's use of digital communication in exercising this social interactive function.

## Chapter 3. Constructing Social Inclusivity. Digital Communication as a Meaningful Extension of the Museum Experience

Where most research into the rhetoric of the museum ends at the museum's exit, this thesis calls for an extension the general trend in museology to analyze physical museum spaces alone. Today's museum has embraced the use of social media and technology for its potential persuasive power that is capable of transcending any physical or emotional barricade the audience might feel towards the museum's content or message. This chapter argues the importance of the familiarity a museum possesses outside the near vicinity of its physical presence has resulted in a democratization of knowledge that can explain for the VGM's high reputation in the Erasmus study. The aim of this chapter is to expose the rhetorical strategies present within the museum's current online communication model. The growing importance of the non-visitor in a museum with an increasing amount of functions can be perceived as an embedded trend that has been caused by decreased governmental funds and the commercial image of the city in light of tourism. The museum's image is most directly put forth off site communication, bordering the commercial and embedded in a fundamentally market driven persuasion. I wish to address these issues but I would also like to make clear that in the VGM's case, online communication is used inherently persuasively. In particular, the use of social media is exerted as an appeal to the emotions, while the museum website is used mainly as an argumentative and ethical appeal. Therefore, this chapter attempts to answer the following sub-question: What message does the VGM communicate outside of the direct museum environment and what is the effect of the use of modern day media on the museum's familiarity and potential audiences?

### Digital architecture. The museum website

The new instalment of the permanent exhibition in the Rietveld building coincided with the launch of a new museum website. This website has been widely praised, winning a gold medal at the European Design Awards in the category Promotional Site in 2015.<sup>129</sup> With the

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<sup>129</sup> "Goud voor Van Gogh Museum website." VGM website.



Figure 12. The VGM logo as designed by Total Design.

new website, Fabrique – designer of the new museum website – confirms the ascendancy of the one-time visitor by dedicating the first half of the homepage to practical information<sup>130</sup>. Visit the Museum. Plan your Visit. Book Tickets. Visit the Webstore.<sup>131</sup> When deciding to enter the Van Gogh Museum website, the visitor is confronted solely with second-person discourse. This direct discourse is potentially intimate but is also part of a larger advertising strategy. Although first and second-person discourse are characterized by intimacy between rhetor and audience, the VGM is on thin ice by placing itself in an instructive and therefore superior role.<sup>132</sup> Some individuals might plan to book their ticket but for those who are not, the one-sided stream of imperatives can lead to an emotional resistance of a significant part of the audience.<sup>133</sup> The second half of the homepage features a story where one can ‘meet’ Vincent; stories which are uploaded frequently<sup>134</sup>. The motivation for such an approach is situated in a more general need of the VGM to extend its persuasive force outside of the museum space. As van Zeggeren, designer of the website, states “don’t wait until you reach the museum to meet Vincent [...] – start online.”<sup>135</sup> ‘Meet Vincent’ allows both visitors and non-visitors to interact with the content of the exhibition, either prior to or after the museum visit. A combination of practicalities of the visit and an opportunity to discover thematic approaches to the life and time of Van Gogh and contemporaries makes the entirety of the VGM website one that informs, inspires, enriches, and seduces to an additional museum visit.<sup>136</sup> The logo of the

<sup>130</sup> “Ontmoet Vincent.” Fabrique website.

<sup>131</sup> Van Gogh Museum website homepage.

<sup>132</sup> Crowley and Hawhee 220.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid 221.

<sup>134</sup> Usually, a new story is uploaded to the website every couple of months.

<sup>135</sup> Van Zeggeren. “How we designed the Van Gogh Museum website.”

<sup>136</sup> “Ontmoet Vincent.” Fabrique website.

VGM is also included on the homepage, establishing the brand mark that should make audiences feel familiar with the museum in the future. "A simple, black and white logo to counterbalance Van Gogh's work" is precisely what one can distinguish in figure 12. It reflects the calculated and square nature of the Rietveld building, and can be used both vertically and horizontally in arrangement.<sup>137</sup> The squiggly lines emphasize Van Gogh's brushwork, while the use of color takes the viewer to imagine works such as the *Sunflowers* and *Wheatfield with Crows*. Perhaps unintentionally, the spatial arrangement of 'Van Gogh Museum' looks a lot like the interior architecture of the Kurokawa wing.

Surprisingly, on the homepage of the website there is no separate heading for education. This absence is directly tied up with the core mission of the museum: "to make the work of Vincent van Gogh and the art of his time accessible for as many people as possible, with the goal to enrich and inspire them".<sup>138</sup> The VGM aims to be inclusive when considering age, gender, class, or nationality. An educative heading on the homepage steers towards a particular age group (children), nationality (Dutch), and class (schools that have the budget to plan a group visit). Although education definitely *contributes* to giving expression to the mission of the VGM, it does not *define* the museum's aim in the broadest sense of the word. Guides of educative groups visit the website with a set purpose and will be able to find the services they are searching for through the menu bar. People without a sense of purpose are instead guided by providing the essentials on the homepage. In this sense, the VGM is able to communicate with as many people as possible, providing a valuable website visit for everyone. The arrangement of the website can be best described as an approach to start from generality and move into specifics. However, when it comes to audiences, the VGM seems to want to accommodate a group of (potential) visitors that is as large as possible. Although this is in accordance with the mission statement of the museum's strategic plan, the ways in which in particular the 'Meet Vincent' segment of the website currently is used do not appear to reflect the content of the instalments of either the permanent or temporary exhibitions. For example, the story created for the exhibition *On the Verge of Insanity* departs strongly from the interdisciplinary content of the exhibition and instead asks the question: How did Vincent cope with this difficult period in his life?<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> "Van Gogh Museum: New Visual Identity". Total Design website.

<sup>138</sup> Van Gogh Museum. *Strategisch Plan (2014-2017)* 19.

<sup>139</sup> "Meet Vincent: On the Verge of Insanity." *Van Gogh Museum website*.

Does this mean that the VGM portrays a different image of itself online and what are the broader implications of the image of the museum from this perspective? A rhetorical analysis of the website shows that, in fact, the museum rephrases its message to persuade to audiences different to those who visit the museum. Museum audiences today are able, through the use of online tools (including the VGM website) to enter the museum with more knowledge on the subject than ever before. The VGM website hovers between stages 1 and 2 of Nina Simon's design in providing the website visitor with materials that the VGM presents to the visitor and that the visitor in turn can interact with individually. This seems as though in accordance with the structure of the narrative in the permanent display, as well as the emphasis on individual meaning-making. However, as the remainder of this chapter will discuss, there are other types of communication the VGM employs off-site that exceed the first two levels and instead come much closer to a museum in which a collective sense of identity is stressed. Much like the Rietveld building and the Kurokawa wing, the museum website serves as the architecture to establish character digitally. Instead of taking a distanced approach, however, the museum has shaped a conscious personality with which it wants to communicate. More prominently visible than in the museum architecture, the museum website most clearly reflects this brand personality. The VGM formulates its personality as being personal, venturesome, genuine, and colorful.<sup>140</sup>

Currently, the VGM does not sell tickets at the reception desk and instead asks *all* visitors to reserve a ticket online.<sup>141</sup> The museum offers entrance to the museum for various timeslots and upon choosing a timeslot one is obliged to enter the museum until half an hour after the indicated arrival time. Once one has entered the museum, the visitor can remain inside the museum for as long as one wishes. After receiving my own ticket, I got an additional email with a personalized video.<sup>142</sup> Welcomed by a staff member of the VGM holding up a message board with my name on it, I received some information and establishment of ground rules. Instead of being addressed as one of the masses, I was welcomed as an individual with unique needs. The VGM furthermore included my name in the network of Van Gogh's friends, which sparks a feeling of inclusivity in Van Gogh's

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<sup>140</sup> *Van Gogh leeft: Alles over het merk Van Gogh Museum* 35.

<sup>141</sup> This system was temporarily in effect for the spring period of 2018 and has been reintroduced in July.

<sup>142</sup> Mulder. *Adformatie Website*. This video was in use during the exhibition *Van Gogh & Japan* in the spring of 2018 and has now been reincorporated for the summer months.

*personal* network as opposed to being included in the VGM's *entrepreneurial* network. The museum furthermore visualizes the nuisance mobile phones can cause for visitors, by juxtaposing images of a multitude of people who take pictures of a painting with people quietly and personally interacting with it. Such a rhetorical persuasion of the emotions *is* brought outside of the periphery of the museum and into the private sphere by means of this video. As Socrates states "isn't the rhetorical art, taken as a whole, a way of directing the soul by means of speech, not only in the law courts and on other public occasions but also in private?"<sup>143</sup> I would like to add that the rhetorical art is determined not only spatially, but also temporally. The museum website and the services provided in the digital realm serve to uphold a close relationship with the institution for an extended period of time. Whereas ticket desks and a museum visit used to make up the total museum experience, museums can now engage in meaningful relationships with their audiences for months or even years. The VGM has realized the importance of obtaining and sustaining contact with its visitors. The primary benefit of the online booking system is that the VGM has information of the visitor that generate a snow ball effect. By offering valuable information prior to the visit and an excellent museum experience during the visit, audiences will more likely reply positively to the VGM's offer to become a member of the digital newsletter after the museum visit.<sup>144</sup> An additional effect of selling tickets online is the possibility of tracking more accurately the demographics of all visitors into a database. Such a database is extremely valuable in offering even more personally targeted museum experiences in the future.

Taken together, the museum's website currently can be best described as a combination of an institution-oriented website and a collection-oriented website.<sup>145</sup> Institution-oriented websites are characterized by the power of the institution over the channel of communication, while the collection-oriented website highly emphasized the accessibility of the museum's content, either through a visual focus on works of art, or through taking the visitor on a journey through the collection.<sup>146</sup> Because the website is

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<sup>143</sup> Plato's *Phaedrus* 261a-b in Plato and Cooper.

<sup>144</sup> Bloeme and Baartman 72. The amount of national visitors who signed up for the newsletter has increased by 46 percent.

<sup>145</sup> Sánchez Laws 44.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* Apart from institution-oriented websites and collection-oriented websites, Sánchez laws also identifies the user-oriented website. Such websites highly emphasize the interconnectedness of people and a personalized approach that values input from the user.

most frequently visiting *before* deciding to go to the museum, the websites functions primarily to instruct visitors about what is on display and the practicalities of the visit. Although such an approach creates a larger distance between the institution and its audiences, the VGM has found a balance in which argumentation can either be supported through the appeal to *ethos* or through the appeal to *pathos*. The museum website can be placed under the first category; however, the museum's increasing attention to social media reflects the VGM's desire to create a platform in which audiences can actively contribute to the museum's image.

### Let's stay in touch. The persuasive potential of social media

The VGM makes extensive use of various types of social media in order to reach a mass audience with its collection, upcoming events, and web shop items. Currently, the museum has over 700.000 followers on Instagram, more than 1.6 million followers on Twitter, 2 million likes on Facebook, and nearly 5.6 million followers on Google+.<sup>147</sup> As figure 13 shows, the overview of online fan bases in the year 2016 has experienced an outstanding increase. Thus, social media have become an increasingly important and determining factor in how both visitors and non-visitors perceive the museum. Whether the museum posts updates on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Google Plus, the communicative structure in which these updates are brought to the public remains similar (see figure 14). The VGM always incorporates an image into its outreach; usually these images are of either collection items or merchandise products. Accompanying the pictures are either statements of what the picture represents, or a passage from one of Van Gogh's letters. The possibility to comment directly on the interplay between text and image the



Figure 13. The popularity of the VGM in digital media sees a tremendous rise in 2016.

<sup>147</sup> These numbers are taken from each social medium respectively in May 2018.

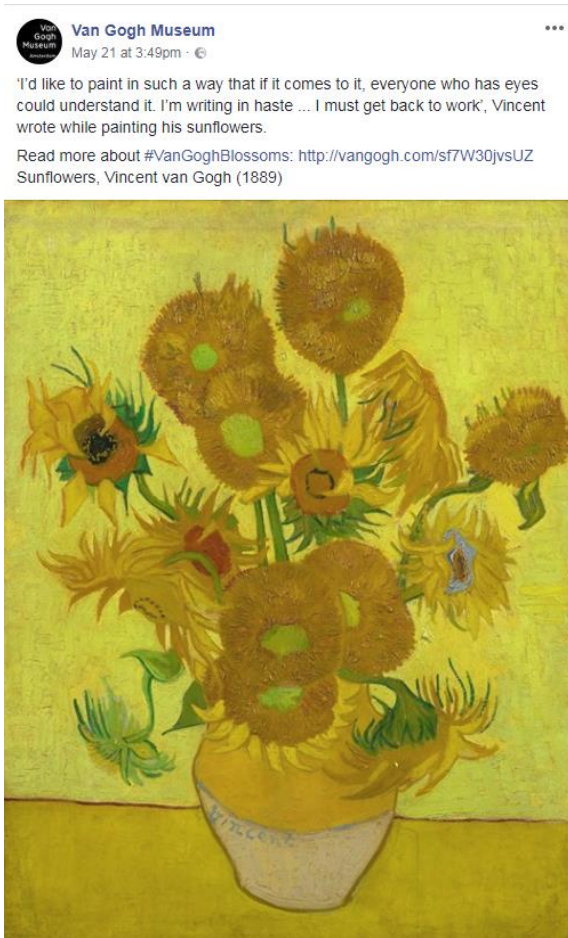


Figure 14. An example of a social media post, in which a quotation from the artist has been juxtaposed with an image to imply a connection between these two textual means.

VGM offers here, and the ability for other individuals to in return respond to individual comments places the user in the role of active participant in a collective social interaction. The VGM always includes a hashtag that corresponds either to one of the thematic arrangements in the Rietveld building, or to the current temporary exhibition. A link to the website provides users with the option to explore one of the 'Meet Vincent' stories that are posted frequently, in particular for the temporary exhibitions. In its presence on social media, "the presentation of the museum's public image and even of the collection will be open to input from the public".<sup>148</sup> What does this imply for the

persuasion of the museum in the digital realm? Through social media the VGM is capable of offering relevant interactions for a variety of individually driven target groups.

Social media "use different metaphors for

the ways in which they model relations (and also their perceived strength)".<sup>149</sup> Facebook's focus on communities, friendship, and family are relations that can be identified both in the permanent collection, the Kurokawa wing, but also in the posts the VGM makes available on this platform. The high number of members in the VGM's Facebook community indicate that the rhetoric chosen in the digital realm is specifically effective in this medium. Another benefit of Facebook's emphasis on close relations is the option for users to comment on works of art vocally, rather than contemplatively and in silence in the museum space. Not only does this facilitate the engagement of visitors to speak out, the effect of such interaction with the museum's content is the addition of "a new layer of interpretation to a

<sup>148</sup> Sánchez Laws 45.

<sup>149</sup> Sánchez Laws 96.

collection".<sup>150</sup> While new interpretations can be of extreme value to the museum in creating new narratives for both the permanent and temporary exhibitions, up until now the VGM does not appear to actively use the medium in recreating its content. If the VGM were to make active use of the interpretations and opinions of audiences in this medium, the museum's *ethos* as well-established research institute could be potentially harmed. If audiences are able to make sense of the life and works of Vincent van Gogh as well as the museum is capable of doing, then what benefit would a real life museum visit still hold? In communicating the various collection items simultaneously (such as quotations from Vincent's diary together with a painting), the museum in fact removes itself from the dialogue altogether, appearing to function as a channel through which the artist is able to exert his own opinion. What communicative processes on social media reveal is that the vantage point taken for many of the posts is that the audience actively comes up with the premises.<sup>151</sup> Rather than the museum acting as an instructor, the museum supplies the audience with already present argumentation that is open to interpretation from the public. Bitzer, a contemporary interpreter of classical rhetoric, identifies such a reciprocal interpretative communicative process as inherently persuasive and contributing specifically to the substance of rhetorical persuasion, otherwise known as enthymemes.<sup>152</sup> To illustrate, the museum's communication on Facebook does not supply the audience with any direct persuasion, but consciously arranges two statements (a visual and a quotation) to ask from the receiver what meaning they extract from such a combination. In this way, a focus on the enthymeme will always result in effective persuasive discourse, because it requires from the audience the premises upon which rational persuasion is built.<sup>153</sup> Through such a reciprocity, meaning-making or heuristics in fact a way through which meaning is "cocreated between rhetor and audience".<sup>154</sup> In accepting such a communal way of generating interpretations, the distance between rhetor and audience has to be minimized when considering Meyer's perception of rhetoric. Thus, social media is capable, by its implicit metaphorical function as related to community, friendship, and family, to ensure dialogues that are motivated to a large extent by emotional responses to text and image. On a final note, the lack of ethical

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>151</sup> Bitzer 187.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. 188.

<sup>154</sup> Enos and Lauer 203.

appeal in social media can be explained through its diverging arrangement of speech. Rather than the museum space, in which introductions and conclusion are the ideal place to establish one's own *ethos*, the characteristic short message sent out on social media are not capable of upholding such an arrangement.<sup>155</sup>

### A social revolution. The accessibility of images

The VGM's active involvement in different communities shows that the museum is willing to put in additional efforts to accommodate audiences who usually do not feel invited into the museum space. Key in establishing a productive foundation of appreciation is what Simon has called the art of relevance. From her perspective, museums have to keep in mind two questions potential audiences ask themselves before deciding to visit a museum: "how much meaning will I get out of this experience, and how much effort is it going to take for me to have that experience?"<sup>156</sup> Rather than labeling the accessibility of images as opening the door, such a transparent form of communication actually means "opening up walls and turn them into construction sites".<sup>157</sup> On a deeper level, it is difficult for a museum to take a leap in making available to such an extent one of their main sources of income. What the VGM has recognized is that not the collection, but the *public* is the largest source of income for the museum. Simon observes "relevance fundamentally is not about you telling somebody what you are about; it's about you empathizing with how it feels to be outside that door".<sup>158</sup> Crucial for museums to understand, then, is the urgency of listening to the wants and needs of audiences.

The popularity of the museums and large amount of complaints received by visitors who thought the museum was too crowded has spurred on the prohibition of photography and the wish to incorporate more extensively the online ticket system that ensures a more effective distribution of visitors. Although these changes appeal in particular to Simon's first indicator of relevance, such measures effect audience in how much effort they experience in coming to the museum. Simon states "museums should prioritize providing opportunities for

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<sup>155</sup> Corbett 82.

<sup>156</sup> Simon. "The Art of Relevance." 1:40-1:51.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. 4:40-4:47.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 7:05-7:13.

visitors to engage in ways that are familiar and comfortable to them".<sup>159</sup> The museum's lack of outreach in terms of photography had to be compromised elsewhere. The VGM has found two ways in which to solve this problem: on site, selfie walls have been installed and encourage visitors to share their experiences on social media; off site, the entire collection is digitally available and insights into the collection are offered through strategically formulated posts on social media accounts that stress individual reception and interpretation. These forms of outreach have all been made to speak to audiences of various sorts: from the selfie taking tourist to the non-visitor who wants to know what is on display. The freely accessible selfie walls make for an interactive and highly visible alternative, where people now wait in line much longer than they do in front of paintings or interactives with the collection. The VGM realizes that visitors have the power to "promote and spread [...] content to new audiences in authentic ways".<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, when visitors choose to make use of the multimedia guide, the tablet provides an excellent alternative to the use of smartphones. They have a similar look and feel yet provide the visitor which much more insight into the collection on a multisensory level. In each case, the VGM has discovered the most appropriate and socially interactive way in which to speak directly to these audiences.

The rapid advance in technology has paved the way for a new medium through which the museum can communicate persuasively with its visitors. Smartphones have become the main technology through which nearly everyone can freely explore their direct and indirect environment and, more importantly, express their identity. The free application Touch Van Gogh was launched in October of 2013 and has received multiple awards, including a recognition by The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) as one of the best apps for teaching and learning.<sup>161</sup> According to the AASL, the Touch Van Gogh app fosters "the qualities of innovation, creativity, active participation, collaboration" and is furthermore "user friendly to encourage a community of learners to explore and discover".<sup>162</sup> The first version of the application included six paintings. Currently, the third version of the application comprises nine paintings, each of which make complex technological research easily available to people interested in learning more about Van Gogh's working procedures.

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<sup>159</sup> Simon. "Museum Photo Policies Should Be as Open as Possible."

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> "App Touch Van Gogh". *Van Gogh Museum website*.

<sup>162</sup> "Best Apps for Teaching and Learning 2015." *AASL website*.

The accessibility of complex information is facilitated through the application. Through the act of rubbing and the additional information that is provided, the user learns about underlying paintings as well as underlying motivations of the artist for making particular formal or aesthetic choices. Van Gogh's lack of money is seen as a direct cause for his reuse of canvases. Many of his works produced in The Netherlands have been reused for his Impressionist paintings completed in France. The VGM also explains the larger benefits of this technology for their own understanding and expertise on Van Gogh's oeuvre. The VGM introduces Macro Scanning X-ray Fluorescence Spectrometry as a tool with which "we can identify the pigments and their distribution in the hidden paint layers. Sometimes we even rediscover Van Gogh paintings that were supposedly lost".<sup>163</sup> Thus, the application is capable of revealing narratives that focus less on the subject matter of paintings and more on the invisible technical renderings of these objects. This makes the use of the application relevant for both on site and off site interaction, accommodating a large number of potential users.

#### Concluding remarks. Effective digital communication, familiarity, and appreciation

While the VGM highly reinforces the use of mobile applications, active sharing on social media, and engaging with the museum's website, this transparency quickly disappears upon entering the museum. A no picture policy could harm the museum's *ethos*, in that new visitors do not have their expectations met. The sharp contrast of an open reproduction policy online and the prohibitory real life experience of the works of art is in fact a contrast the museum visitor has brought upon herself. There is no doubt that the presence of the museum in online forms of communication is for *people*. A more important question to ask then is: for which people? Lynda Kelly has been actively involved in analyzing the audience of museum's social media activity, discovering that those who visit museums generally [...] use social media tools in greater numbers than non-visitors.<sup>164</sup> This conclusion indicates that visitors will want to be kept updated on either upcoming event or, in the case of the VGM, publicized images. Simultaneously, such negative perception of strict photography policies can be countered. Kelly observes that "social media provides the perfect vehicle to take [the

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<sup>163</sup> IJsfontein and Van Gogh Museum. *Touch Van Gogh: What Paintings Can Reveal*. Mobile application.

<sup>164</sup> Kelly in Drotner and Schrøder 60.

idea of a museum being for people] further with the transformative museum enabling learners, users, visitors to become participants wherever they are and however they choose" (Kelly in Drotner and Schrøder 68). The VGM achieves a universal relevance in the interaction and sharing of images by implementing a strict photo policy indoors, contrasting highly with the reproduction and visibility of images off site. The democratic and free online communicative means in fact show no other option for the VGM than to take this more lenient perspective towards images online. Quick and wide spreading of images online is hard to avoid, and is therefore easier to be celebrated for its communicative strength to generate familiarity amongst both visitors and non-visitors. The rapid globalization of society in the twenty-first century has caused for more far-reaching interaction, but also a blurring of previously more clear-cut societies and demographic groups. Esner and Schavemaker acknowledge the blurring of personal demographics such as age, class, gender, and nationality in online communication by stating

"In today's culturally complex multimedia societies there is no longer just one dominant culture, but a wide range of different cultural worlds and many different audiences. These different audiences choose the genres and expressions of media that best suit their lifestyle"<sup>165</sup>.

The flexible, individual, and multiple approach to twenty-first century museum audiences makes the establishment of a rhetoric which appeals to as many people as possible a challenging endeavor. The VGM faces two challenges: one, a communication that directs itself towards as many people as possible might feel generic (like the welcome video prior to a visit) and could alter audience response; and second, the absence of the VGM in trying to debunk modernist myths of Van Gogh in the digital realm can potentially harm its truthful character. The museum, by engaging in media that have their users as their center, is forced to slacken the reins and allow the audience to provide the input necessary in order to accomplish collective social interactions. However, this implies the acceptance of the eschewed perception of Van Gogh in popular culture. The VGM has, through its website and social media accounts, integrated itself into the popular media that have caused the creation of the myths surrounding Van Gogh in the first place.

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<sup>165</sup> Esner and Schavemaker 19.

The credibility of the VGM is determined, then, in large part by its increasing public function. Because the VGM strives to become as independent from government support as possible, it takes matters into its own hands by single-handedly creating a hypervisibility in the online community. An opposite stance is also relevant, especially when considering museums that struggle to be financially viable: museums have to consider their recreational functions in order to generate enough revenue to stay afloat. De Waal states "although the museum is still perceived as one of the 'cultural' activities in the leisure sector, terms such as recreation, culture, and leisure are losing their individual meaning and relevance".<sup>166</sup> Thus, the audience expects their museum visit to incorporate such functions because they are also visible in other spare time activities. This analysis has tried to clarify the far-reaching effects of the use of digital communicative strategies in terms of their extension of leisure from on-site to off-site. Its presence in modern media (its own website, social media accounts, collaborations in television and film) has as its basic function to inform (potential) visitors. However, the individuals through these media are accommodated both on a personal and social level. On a personal level, individuals can explore the collection and information on Vincent at leisure. On a social level, digital media offer a platform to share opinions on works of art and makes visible the collectivity of the community surrounding the VGM. Digital communication has, above all, paved the way for a highly individualistic society. Within such a society, individuals want to be able to not only belong to groups they feel an affinity with, but furthermore express their individual voice *within* such smaller scale communities. The VGM has, through its website and activity on social media, welcomed the audience as the most essential member in museum communication above its own agenda and traditional museological functions. Research into the workings of online audiences is necessary to target more successfully and personally. Yet, the acceptance of the VGM to loosen the reigns on its authoritative voice within the digital community is a good first step towards true empowerment of audiences, in which potential personal, social, or cultural thresholds are erased. It indicate a shift towards what Simon calls "me-to-we experiences", in which individual users contribute to an overall better understanding of the collective museum experience.<sup>167</sup> The differing styles of the museum website and the VGM's social media accounts can currently be classified as being more *ethos* oriented for the website, and

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<sup>166</sup> De Waal 212-3.

<sup>167</sup> Simon. "Chapter 3: From Me to We." *The Participatory Museum*.

*pathos* oriented for the social media accounts. For the period 2018-2020, the VGM wishes to create a website that combines these two different platforms.<sup>168</sup> Once again, the VGM recognizes that combining each of the three appeals is what establishes the most effective discourse. Characteristic of the communicative approach is a personal interaction with both visitors and enthusiasts to ensure a global interaction with the Vincent van Gogh.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Van Gogh Museum. *Strategisch Plan 2018-2020* 47.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* 56.

## Conclusion.

The persuasion inherent to the Rietveld building, Kurokawa wing, and digital communicative means show an innate excellence of oratory on the side of the VGM, where the rhetor is constantly in search of the most suitable dialogue with its audiences. The recent changes to the museum's strategic plan, its use of a variety of visitor research models, and the increasing awareness of online communication and marketing strategies show that the museum continues to search for an optimal balance between its diverging and, at times, contrasting purposes. The VGM must exert its function as a research institute, acknowledge its subjectivity in the production of narratives (both in the museum and off-site), and continuously develop its societal purposes towards audiences. The VGM has an exquisite knowledge of what to communicate to which audiences, and to maintain appropriate distance where necessary and decrease the distance where suitable. While this research has done the absolute most to be cohesive and coherent, this research was limited and conscious in its choices as to which exhibitions and publications were chosen for this research. In order to fully grasp the development of persuasion in the VGM, a study into the policies of different directors in the VGM could prove to be a valuable approach. Another potential approach could be a comparative study of the VGM's communicative strategies in comparison with the other two museums on the Museumplein in order to see what is done different, collaboratively, and more effectively in terms of persuasive dialogue. The instalment of the latest temporary exhibition in the Kurokawa wing, a multisensory experience of the final years of the life of Vincent van Gogh, can provide insight into the role of technology in museums of art to enhance the emotional interaction of audiences and museum content. The museum this year also readdresses its installment of the permanent collection. Once finished, a comparative endeavor into the effects of both instalments can again prove valuable to assess the effectivity of persuasive discourse.

## What establishes effective persuasive discourse?

This thesis started from the assumption that reception results not only from a museum's collection, visitor numbers, or financial viability. The role of the museum as a communicator, its subjective construction of an image, and the important role of the audience in museum

communication have led to a holistic inquiring into the VGM's communicative persuasion across the museum experience. An extensive knowledge of museum audiences in particular has the effect of producing narratives that are not only suitable to a broad range of audiences, but that furthermore have in mind specific audiences that can benefit from particular approaches. The VGM's interest in audiences has caused for a familiarity that can explain the high appreciation for the institution, as the Erasmus study in the introduction of this thesis has shown.

A rhetorical analysis of the museum building, the new instalment of the permanent collection, and the leisurely functions present in the Rietveld building each illustrate an inherent need for the museum to speak to a variety of audiences with varying needs. The chrono thematic arrangement of the Rietveld building and the corresponding arguments chosen for each type of narrative show an innate desire to speak to a plurality of audiences through their differing distances inherent to either chronological or thematic displays. Similar motivations can be identified in textual persuasion, where quotations and audio fragments play a large part in encouraging visitors to not passively read. The plurality of textual means does not reflect solely an appeal to various audiences but also coheres to the different voices that the museum can make use of. The interplay of educative functions and leisurely functions in the museum finds a balance because leisure is scattered throughout the narrative and viewed as part of the narrative the VGM communicates. In placing such functions on route in an unobtrusive way, the audience at various moments can easily turn its back on the intellectual museum visit. Similar effects are reached in the museum architecture, where the open shaft in the building functions as a leisure space. The use of selfie walls encourages the visitor to experience the dichotomous relationship with the exhibition spaces that do not allow photography.

The architectural properties of both the new entrance as well as the Kurokawa wing are situated in an increasing knowledge of audiences. The VGM realized a targeted visitor research was necessary in order to solve continuous disappointing national visitor demographics, the vast majority of visitors coming from abroad. The comparative analysis of exhibitions installed prior to this research and after the implementation of the glocalities model illustrate that the museum's exhibitions and accompanying publications have become much more accessible for national and local visitors from 2017 onwards. The relations of

similarity, contiguity, and contrast each have differing styles and functions to accommodate various audiences. When exhibitions are based on similarity, the persuasion of these exhibitions primarily focus on high-standing character of museum and collection. Its use of plain style reinforces the aim of the museum to instruct, but do not try to persuade the audience in taking a particular point of view. The blockbuster exhibition, because it appeals to such a vast audience (including tourists) must be made easy to understand and functions through the quality of paintings and the character of the VGM and museums or sponsors that have contributed to the exhibition. Whilst this leaves the visitor in awe and wonderment, the blockbuster does not ask for active visitor participation. The exhibition catalogues reflect this trend by relying for a large part on images. The exhibitions that relate contiguously to the Rietveld building's narrative and collection already show an increase in visitor specificity. Van Gogh's prominence that is visible in blockbuster exhibitions based on similarity is lessened in French themed exhibitions in particular. The VGM incorporates Vincent van Gogh into contextual social narratives. The exhibitions' appeal is primarily one of argument and the exhibitions are often the result of more in depth research. Rather than celebrating the economic value of works of art, the objects in these exhibitions serve to strengthen argumentation and the character of the VGM as a research institute. The VGM more readily uses a tempered style and draws harsher conclusions in each of these exhibitions. Lastly, exhibitions based on contrast take groundbreaking research (often conducted by an external party) to provide new insights. These exhibitions have as a function to move audiences to adopt a different point of view and are grandiloquent in style in order to sway the audience. The VGM in these exhibitions in fact moderates its own character and argumentation. The glocalities research shows that the content of temporary exhibitions since 2017 has shifted from internationally appealing subjects to highly specific topics to speak to national audiences particularly. Thus, the museum building, new entrance and exhibitions show forms of relation with distinct functions and styles that are aptly chosen for each case. But underlying these changes is an increasing interest to accommodate national visitors, and the higher educated younger visitor in particular.

What sets the VGM apart from the majority of museums in the Netherlands and worldwide is its overarching familiarity with audiences that can be classified in two groups: visitors and non-visitors. Digital communication in particular plays a vital role in making the

museum visible to the latter group. Its communicative means place high value on the accessibility of the collection, but also promotes a sense of community that is rooted deeply in a fluid postmodern society where groups are not similar in age, class, gender, or nationality but by personal interests. Additionally, digital communication proves effective to visitors of the museum since it expands the museum experience both prior and after the visit through effective usage of the museum website and social media. The museum website offers a duality in its layout. This layout is similar to the chrono-thematic instalment in the Rietveld building. The use of social media is intended to establish a long-lasting relationship after a potential museum visit. The museum makes use of a coherent visual and textual style that incorporates fragments of Vincent's diary entries, visuals (either a painting, image, or video), and a hashtag relating to the content in the museum (either a theme in the permanent collection or a temporary exhibition). Viewers are encouraged to comment on these posts, which makes them active participants in the establishment of the VGM's character.

This research has shown that the VGM's increasing interest in audiences and audience research has resulted on the one hand in a better understanding of how to communicate with particular groups, but also to identify a style of speaking that adheres to a more general public. By taking the audience as the vantage point for changes to either museum buildings, educative content, or copyright policies, the museum is simultaneously capable of exercising its character as being warmhearted and not too serious. Such an approach is capable of producing persuasive discourse in which the distance between museum and audience is diminished as much as possible. However, the final choices to the look and feel *are* still determined by the VGM. In identifying the rapid changes in the VGM's attitude towards audiences, it is only a matter of time before the audience will be an active voice in the completion of future museum activities or institutional changes. The extensive research and increasing knowledge of audiences conducted by the VGM is capable of inspiring not only its visitors, but the professional museum community at large. I highly motivate other museums to follow the exceptional endeavors of the VGM in order to ensure their increasing popularity in the long run.

## List of Figures

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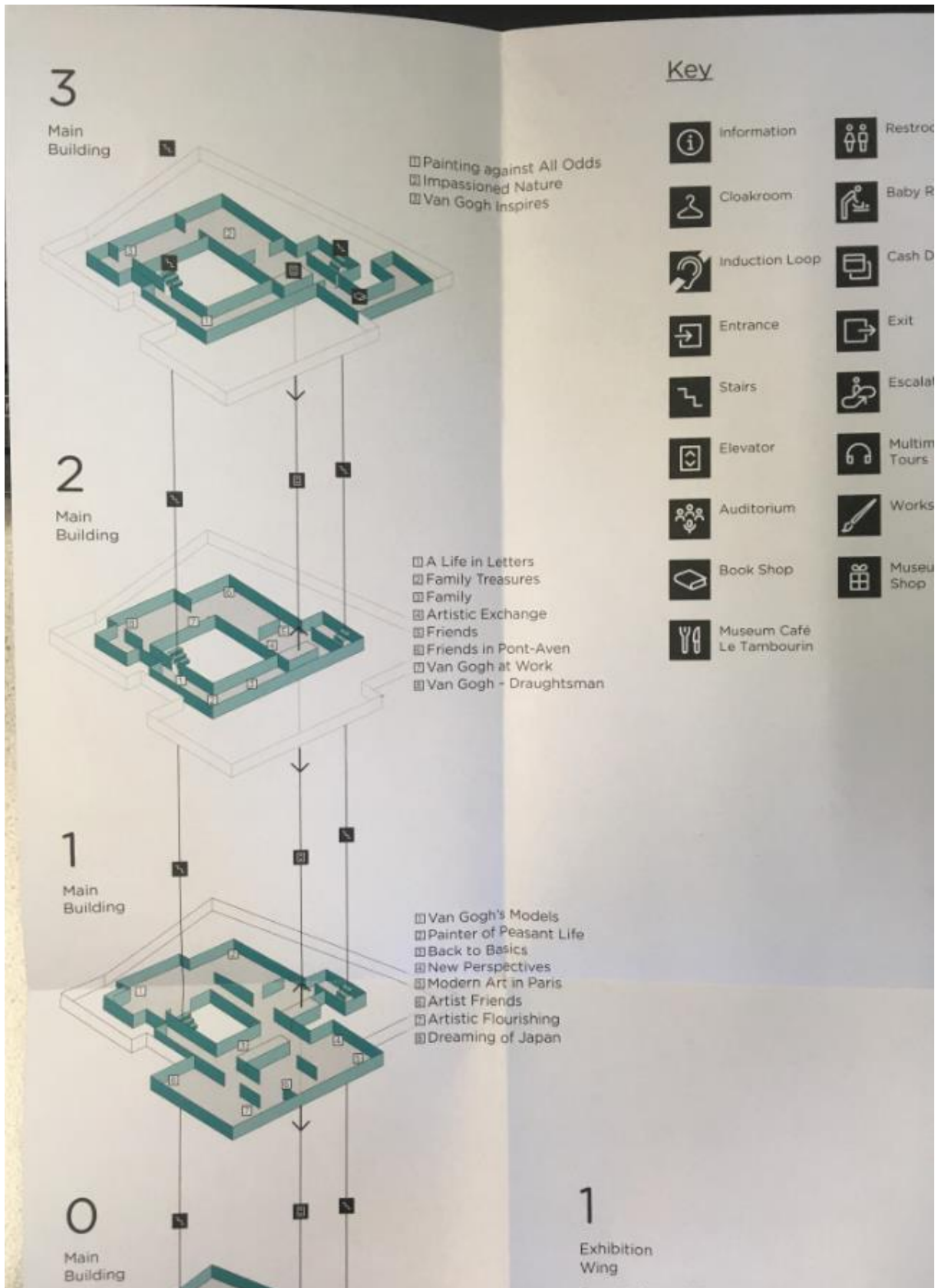
## Appendix 1: A systematic explanation of the Van Gogh Museum floor plan



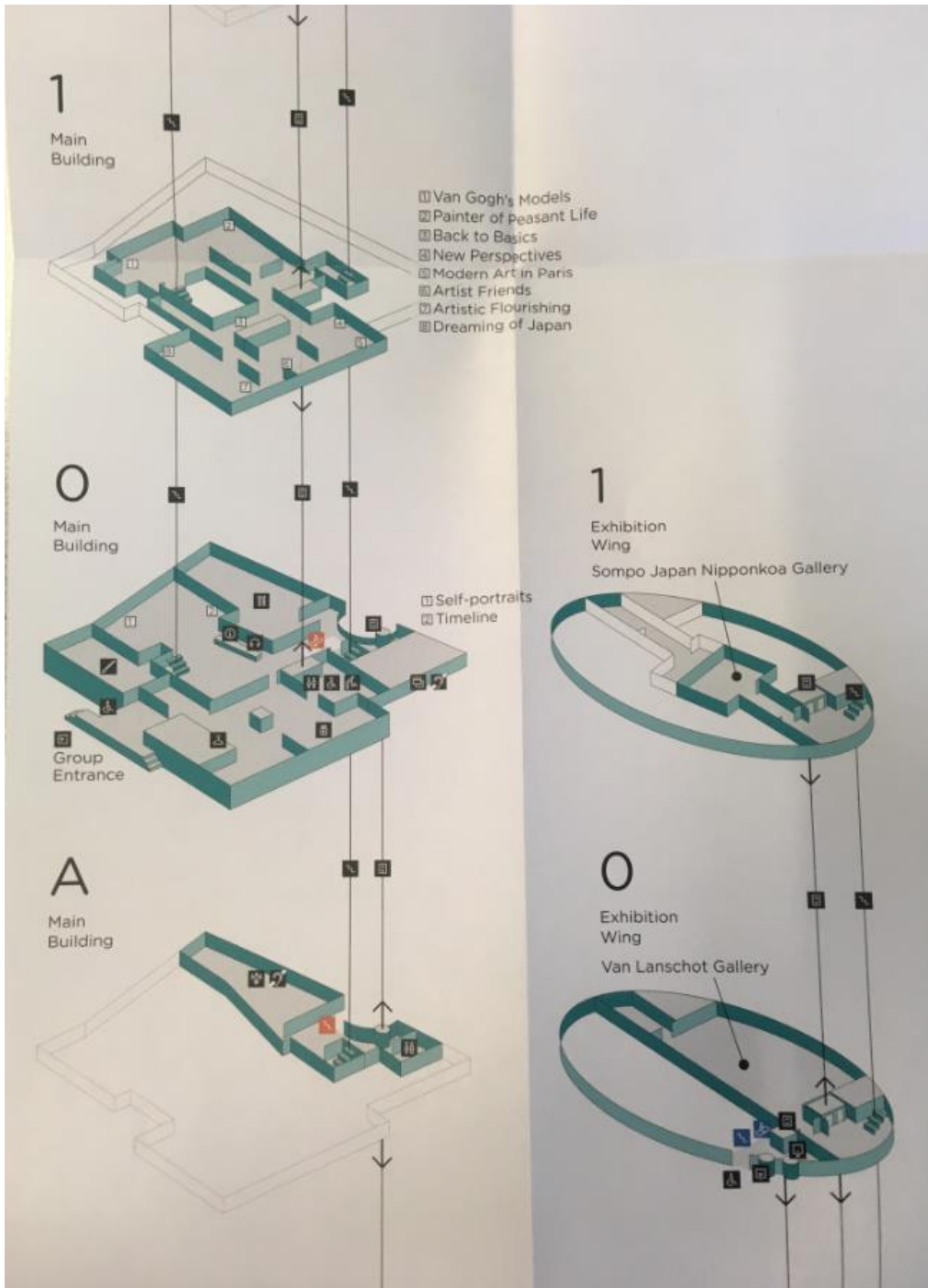
Step 1. Cover (front and back). Language indication.



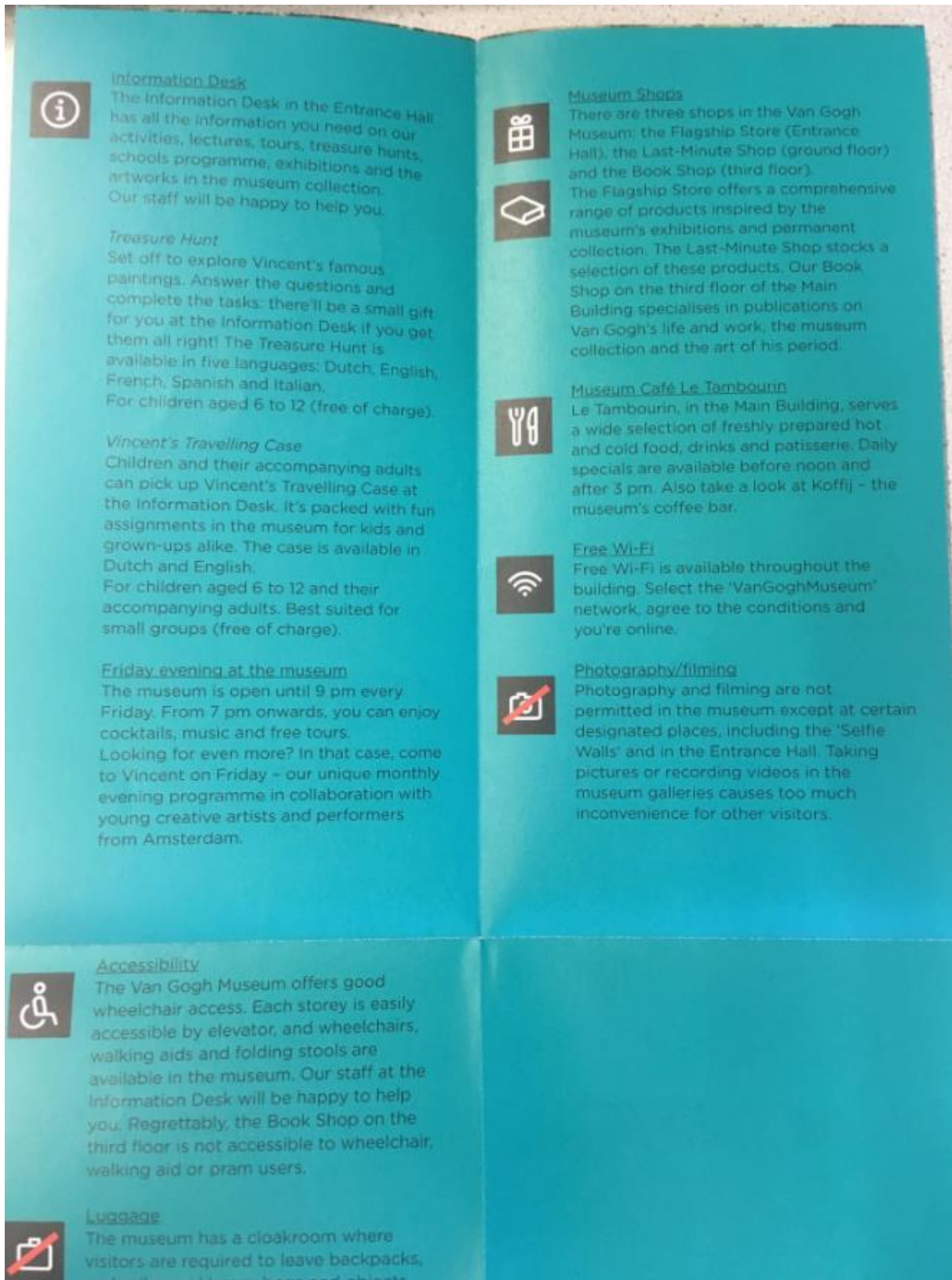
Step 2. Word of welcome, house rules, and entrance hall.



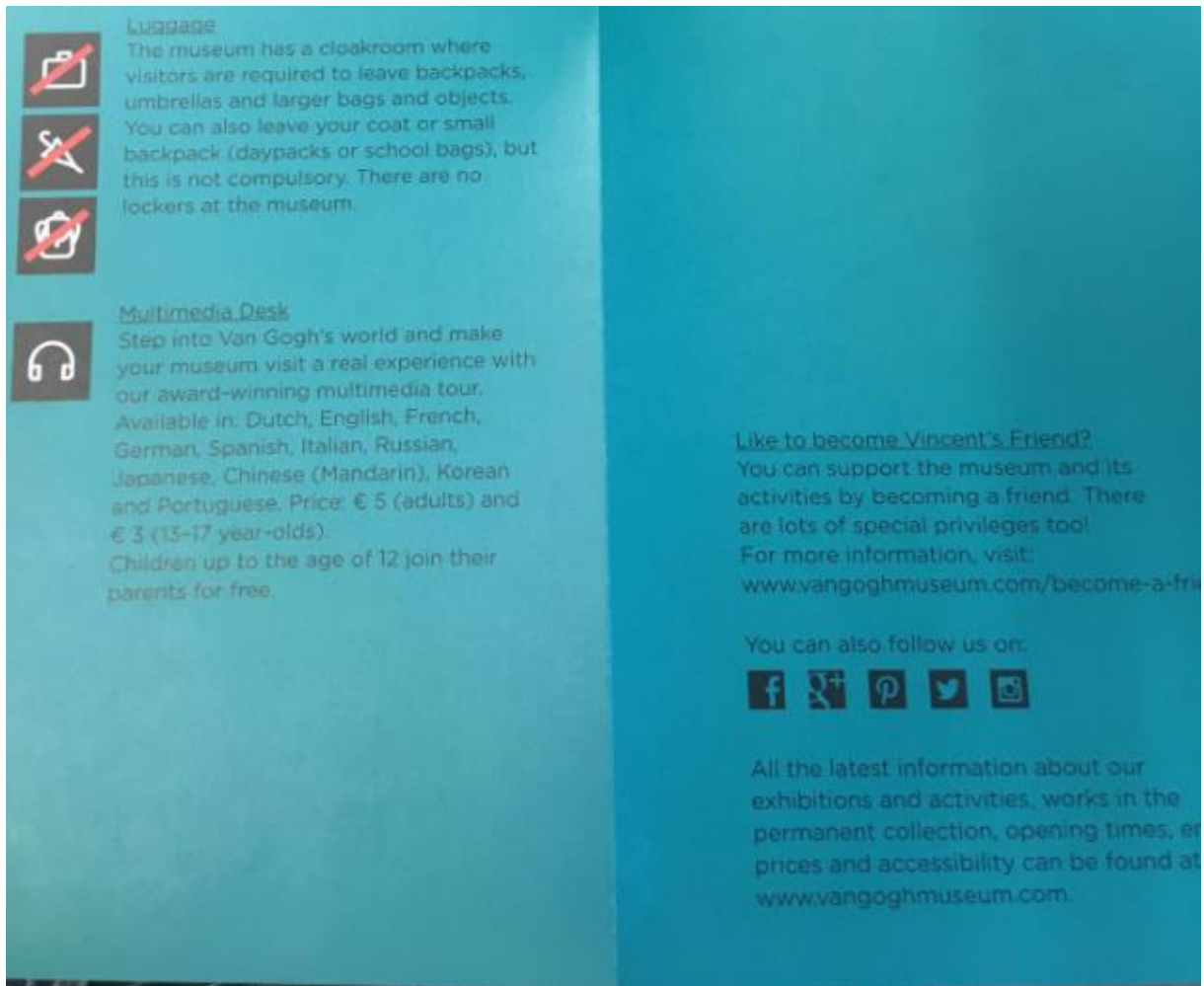
Step 3. Unfolded entirely, the main building and exhibition wing are explained spatially by level. The Rietveld building map also lists where to find particular themes. Facilities are translated into symbols that are explained in the key accompanying the map (part 1).



Step 4. Continuation of step 3.



Step 5. Unfolded backside shows additional information of symbols and listing of activities in the museum.



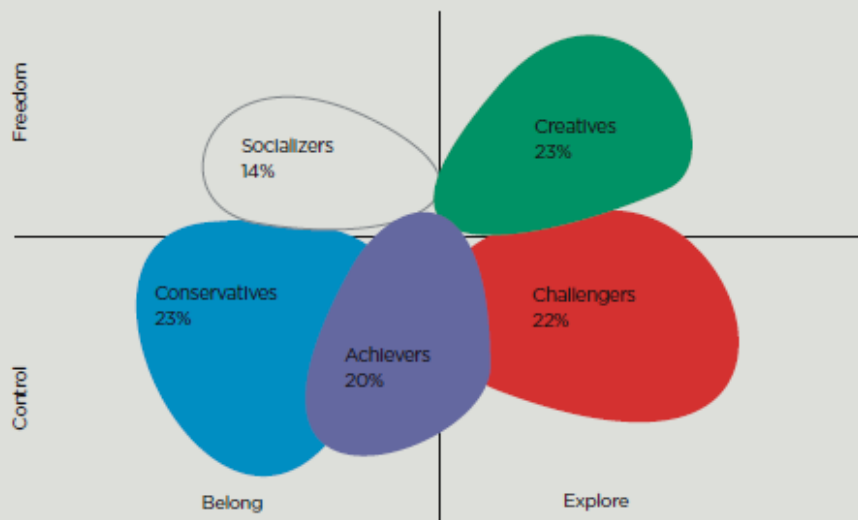
Step 6. Remainder backside folder unfolded. A separate reference is made to social media and the museum website on the right hand side.

## Appendix 2: Overview of the museum experience of four personas

### De vier persona's van het Van Gogh Museum

De persona's zijn gebaseerd op uitgebreid en wereldwijd doelgroepenonderzoek van het marktonderzoeksbureau Motivaction. Dit onderzoek geeft diepgaand inzicht in de waarden, de culturele verschillen, de voorkeuren en het gedrag van consumenten wereldwijd. Motivaction heeft voor het Van Gogh Museum persona's ontwikkeld op basis van bezoekers uit de zestien voor ons meest relevante landen. Hieruit kwam naar voren dat vier typen mensen het meest karakteristiek zijn voor onze bezoekers; dit zijn de zogenoemde 'Creatives', 'Challengers', 'Conservatives', en 'Achievers' (zie ook het model hieronder). Voor deze vier types zijn vervolgens persona's ontwikkeld die nationaal en internationaal toepasbaar zijn: Robin, Ryan, Pauline en Zhang.

Er zijn wel verschillen tussen de landen, maar per land zijn altijd twee tot drie persona's relevant voor het museum. De 'Creative' (verpersoonlijkt door Robin) komt in elk land terug.



#### Glocalities model

De percentages geven de gemiddelde verdeling van de segmenten aan op basis van 20 landen wereldwijd.

## Maak kennis met Robin, Ryan, Pauline en Zhang.

### Persona's

Robin, Ryan, Pauline en Zhang bestaan niet echt, maar je herkent ze vast wel. De meesten van onze bezoekers zouden een van hen kunnen zijn. Het zijn de vier typen mensen die interesse hebben in een bezoek aan het Van Gogh Museum. We noemen Robin, Ryan, Pauline en Zhang 'persona's', omdat zij de verpersoonlijking zijn van deze vier typen bezoekers. En dan kan Pauline ook een man zijn en Zhang een Braziliaanse vrouw. Het type herken je onmiddellijk, zeker als je verder leest en meer over ze te weten komt.



ROBIN is een hippe dertiger; ze woont in de grote stad, is een veelzijdig type, leidt een druk bestaan en houdt van kunst.

Ze komt graag naar het museum en vindt er moeiteloos haar weg.

RYAN daarentegen, houdt helemaal niet zo van kunst.

Hij komt naar het museum omdat hij vindt dat hij er geweest moet zijn en omdat hij houdt van leuke uitstapjes: en daarbij doet hij het liefst zoveel mogelijk verschillende ervaringen op.

Deze momenten deelt hij met zijn vrienden op social media.

### Waarom persona's?

Als we van onze bezoekers weten wat ze willen en wat ze belangrijk vinden, kunnen we hierop inspelen en hun museumbezoek nog onvergetelijker maken. Zo vindt een aantal bezoekers het prima om met 'je' en 'jij' aangesproken te worden, maar willen anderen dat weer helemaal niet. Sommige mensen willen het museum graag zelf ontdekken en anderen willen juist geholpen worden. Voor wie bij Bezoekersservice of in de winkel werkt, is het misschien lastig in te schatten wat bezoekers verwachten van hun museumbezoek.

Met de persona's in ons achterhoofd kunnen we nog publieksgerichter werken. De persona's bieden houvast: we leren de verschillende typen bezoekers beter (her)kennen, zodat we kunnen inspelen op hun behoeften. Dat geldt natuurlijk in de eerste plaats in het museum. Maar ook bij het vertalen van de collectie naar educatief aanbod, de inrichting van de gebouwen of het bereiken van potentiële bezoekers, kunnen de persona's heel goed van pas komen. Dankzij de persona's kunnen we inschatten wie bepaalde onderwerpen aantrekkelijk vindt, van tentoonstellingen tot lezingen tot een plek waar selfies gemaakt mogen worden. Ook kunnen we beter inschatten met welke boodschap en via welke kanalen we hen kunnen bereiken, om hen te verleiden tot een bezoek.



PAULINE kom je, net als Robin, vaak tegen in het museum. Ze is een vrouw van middelbare leeftijd uit de provincie, die met haar familie of vrienden graag een museum bezoekt.

Ze bereidt zich goed voor en wil alles uit haar bezoek halen. Ze bekijkt de collectie uitgebreid en maakt gebruik van alle faciliteiten die we te bieden hebben.

ZHANG is een Chinese man, formeel en carrièregericht. Op reis met zijn familie zal hij het Van Gogh Museum zeker bezoeken.

Ook hij is goed voorbereid. Hij wil graag beleefd ontvangen worden. Ook wil hij de tijd krijgen om alles in zich op te nemen en om selfies te maken!

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