'Rondom Rembrandt' – Otto Neurath's (r)evolutionary art-related exhibition

Rembrandt died on October 4th 1669

This specific date, a day and year in 'our calendar', helps to evoke some relationships. It states that a 'well known' person died – approximately 440 years ago – in itself not very telling information. But as always: the more we know already, the better and more fully we can relate to such barren and dry facts and figures.

Otto Neurath (Vienna/Austria 1882 – Oxford/UK 1945) [1] and the team[2] he worked with in the Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum in Red Vienna (Fig. 1)[3] were concerned with another kind of 'dry facts': Social facts which to the one who could 'read' them were relating to quality of life, of human existences, the conditions of society, the structures, and their interrelatedness. In this museum work of the 1920s and early 1930s, which was geared at the 'illiterates', such facts were not rendered as exact figures, or (even worse) long and complicated rows of figures.

Fig. 1: Poster-like motif of the museum in Vienna, around 1928,
Iso-Coll. 3/2, University of Reading

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[1] Otto Neurath was a philosopher, sociologist, political economist, historian. For a contextualisation of Neurath, and information on his life and work see: Stadler, F. (2001); Paul Neurath in Nemeth and Neurath 1994; see also: Gruber 2000; Sandner 2006; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_Neurath.

[2] Otto Neurath consistently underlined that the quality and amount of the work accomplished was due to team work and the input of specialists from different disciplines. Most prominent among these, the artist and graphic designer Gerd Arntz (1900-1988), the architect Josef Frank (1885-1967), and Marie Neurath (1898-1986; née Reidemeister); Marie and Otto Neurath married in their second exile, the UK in 1941.

[3] The images used for this paper are from the Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection at the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading, referenced here as: Iso-Coll., 3/2, University of Reading. The photographs were taken by the author and are reproduced with kind permission of the Department.

One of Neurath's many dicta in the context of these endeavours was: 'To remember simplified amount pictures is better than to forget accurate figures.'[4] In this vein, facts could well be presented as rounded amounts and visualized in pictorial charts (amount pictures). This was done in order to produce comparable visualisations (to be experienced and discussed in the public spaces of museum and exhibitions), and to provide the basis for active viewing and for identifying factual relations. The aim was to bring pertinent information, as well as the empowerment to deal with it, to non-specialist audiences, to the masses of the 'uneducated' who were to have their say in shaping the future.

With this paper on 'Rondom Rembrandt' (1938)[5] I want to look at two aspects: firstly, the specific approach in this historical art-related exhibiting, and secondly, the techniques and themes applied in this special example of 'Wiener Methode'/Isotype work,[6] which was based on the earlier work of Neurath and his team in the Viennese museum of 1925-1934. Before 'Rondom Rembrandt', Isotype principles had mostly been applied to subject matter such as health, housing, social and economic development. In this exhibition, the Isotype-work aimed at a democratic approach to treating and learning about art historical topics.

The concepts and circumstances behind 'Rondom Rembrandt' seem reliably documented. Some, presumably all that is left of the primary materials are available for study in the Isotype Collection in Reading, with an exhibition scrapbook, the accompanying booklet,[7] correspondence, and original typescripts conveying Otto Neurath's thinking and planning. These documents,

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[4] Neurath 1991: 192.

[5] I have earlier referred to the 'Rondom Rembrandt' exhibition, however, within a more general presentation of Otto Neurath's museum and exhibition work and from a museum studies perspective, without specifically looking at art historical traditions or concerns (Kraeutler 2008).

[6] This work had become internationally known as the 'Wiener Methode (der Bildstatistik)' (Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics). Later, 1934 in exile in Holland, the acronym ISOTYPE (also: Isotype; standing for International System of TYpographic Picture Education) was introduced instead.

[7] This is also found in the Rijksmuseum Research Library: Rondom Rembrandt, s'Gravenhage, 1938; together with a short entry that it had been published on the occasion of the exhibitions at de Bijenkorf; Object Number: C/RM0127.ASC/235*1. (http://library.rijksmuseum.nl/rrl/; accessed: 16, July 2009).

together with Marie Neurath's reports, Paul Rotha's[8] article of 1946, published in the <u>Museums Journal</u> of the (British) Museums Association, and remarkable comments by yet another expelled art historian with Viennese academic roots, Alma S. Wittlin,[9] were used to explore the concepts and scope of 'Rondom Rembrandt', how it was intended and organized, which themes and topics it treated, and how it was meant to become interesting and provide useful information for Dutch people in 1938.

In the early 1940s, recalling the work for the 'Rondom Rembrandt' exhibition and its aims, Neurath wrote:

> There are people who are interested in Rembrandt's paintings, drawings, etchings etc. (...) (They) may enter a museum or buy a book with pictures and text, perhaps a cheap one, which serves as a kind of guide. There are others, who heard of Rembrandt, are interested in the famous man, like some of his pictures, but do not know how to come into closer contact with him.[10]

Obviously, 70 years ago just as today, evolving technologies for producing, reproducing, and using images influenced visual cultures and all related work.[11] To employ new methods and a range of visual material when dealing with these phenomena, was not an Isotype 'monopole'.[12]

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[8] Paul Rotha (1907-1984) worked with Otto and Marie Neurath, producing experimental film with realistic film sequences, realistic stills and animated Isotypes (Neurath, in Nemeth and Stadler 1996: 309).

[9] Alma S. Wittlin (1899–1990) authored many articles on museums and learning and two influential books on museum work (Wittlin 1949, 1970).

[10] Otto Neurath, 'Around Rembrandt' (Iso-Coll. 3.2 / 42). As this typescript of Neurath's was written in English, no changes in vocabulary, spelling or punctuation were made in the transcripts used here. They may sound clumsy to a reader more than 60 years after their author, whose mother tongue was not English, died. The original wording, the melody and tone, almost as if in conversation with an interested student, as well as the division in paragraphs seem to best convey the intentions of Otto Neurath.

[11] Cf. the programme of the conference 'Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History' (The Courtauld Institute of Art, London June 2009) which investigated (among others) the role of photographic archives and collections in art historical studies. 'The discipline of art history and the technologies of image reproduction have developed concurrently and their own histories are closely interlinked.' (http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/researchforum/documents/PhotoArchivesconf-poster-programme_h_.pdf; accessed 28 August 2009).

[12] I am not referring here to approaches chosen or achievements by others, be this at the Warburg Institute, in the Hamburg or Viennese contexts; see e.g. the work of Alexander Dorner (1893–1957); Alfred Lichtwark (1852–1914); Fritz Saxl (1890–1848) or Hans Tietze (1880–1954).

Neurath's Isotype concept, however, still challenges traditional thinking and practice of art museums' work in several ways: It makes us look at the methods and strategies for discussing, proposing/making relevant, and presenting art historical narrations,[13] as well as at the inclusive or exclusive roles and functions of the art museum, one of the institutions produced by, and at the same time producing art history.[14]

Putting together and showing an exhibition, the most prominent publicly received activity of museums, is a museum-intrinsic form of publishing, and usually means (is sometimes meant) to put across a specific message, information. As such, the museum is one of society's technologies – in Neurath's words 'tools'[15] – to organise information and to disseminate (agreed upon and topical) images of knowledge. It is conditioned in this activity by the potential/possibilities, and/or limitations of its own 'language(s)',[16] as well as those on the side of the audiences it aims to communicate with. In the collective work of Isotype, the exhibition was prepared so as to provide a phenomenological and conceptual experience, meant to involve the public at large, and to become a form of research in itself, by providing time and space for multi-layered discourse.

Notions and methods which had been developed by the Isotype team in this context, it seems, can still serve as a model for examining characteristics and structures of museums' activities, especially those directly related to the public/the users (such as: a transmitter of information; a provider of aesthetic experience, of spaces and places for (egalitarian) exchange, of symbol and representation, a venue for entertainment, and/or intellectual engagement).

The Isotype technique, 'developed to create narrative visual material (which) respects the

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[13] Cf. the importance placed on the narrative approach as underlined in Roberts 1997.
[14] Cf. Sandell 2002, Sturken and Cartwright 2001.
[15] This concept 'tool' was shared within the Vienna Circle (cf. Rainer Hegselmann, 'Alles nur Mißverständnisse? Zur Vertreibung des Logischen Empirismus aus Österreich und Deutschland,' in: Stadler, F., 2004, ed., Vertriebene Vernunft II. Emigration und Exil österreichischer Wissenschaft 1930-1940, Teilband I, LIT Verlag, Münster: 194).
[16] Kavanagh 1991.

interests of the public',[17] changed museum/exhibition production fundamentally. Introducing the 'Transformer', a strategic/structural position in the museum team, it meant leaving behind traditions of peer review sanctioned, seemingly finite 'truths', and instead actively sharing a critical and dynamic discourse of 'insecurity/incongruity', of open and empowering processes with the users. In this sense, this innovative 'art-sociological visualisation'[18]– fundamentally concerned with making ART accessible – was revolutionary.

The study of 'Rondom Rembrandt' shows what had been done to involve – logistically, intellectually, emotionally – 'new' audiences, employing museum-'distant' locations, a range of new techniques and new themes.

The Wiener Methode/Isotype

The Wiener Methode/Isotype-measures as applied for exhibitions – in short, an effective communication-methodology using predominantly visual means and strategies – are summed up in Otto Neurath's words: 'To furnish a museum means to be a teacher!',[19] or as Marie Neurath put it, they meant, '(...) to arouse interest, direct the attention and present a visual argument which stimulates the onlooker to active participation'.[20]

Neurath considered museums and exhibitions to be especially powerful social tools for communication and enfranchisement, and treated their articulations – i.e. exhibitions – as propositions with which to think, learn, and argue. He saw an exhibition's specific strengths as founded on two facts. Firstly, an exhibition is created in a collective effort of a working-team, and decidedly not the (possibly very specialised and idiosyncratic) means of

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[17] Neurath 1973: 240, 1996: 296.
[18] This quality was already pointed out in 1982 by Friedrich Stadler, ''Rundum Rembrandt' (Around Rembrandt) war der erste Versuch einer Visualisierung kunstsoziologischer Verhältnisse' (The exhibition 'Around Rembrandt' was the first attempt at visualising art-sociological conditions; Stadler 1982: 364-382).
[19] Neurath 1991: 257.
[20] Marie Neurath 1974: 148.

expression of an individual.[21] Secondly: that in contrast to the solitary action of (for example) book learning, exhibitions provide a space and place for communal arguing, and thus would help to foster a general 'scientific attitude'.[22]

Most often this Wiener Methode (developed over time since the early 1920s) has been referred to in contexts of graphic design – pictorial statistics and charts.[23] However, in museums and exhibitions it aimed 'bigger', employing what today is called signaletics, respecting the spatial lay-out, sense perceptions, as well as the (cultural) predisposition of the intended users, in order to enhance effective learning in three-dimensional settings, to engender active engagement, exploration on the (exhibition) users' side, as well as exchange and discourse.[24] This encompassing Isotype-approach included the design elements and structural organisation of the Isotype Exhibition Technique (with the 'Rules to keep in Mind'; advance-organisers, repetitions, chapters, redundancies), 'expressing in words only what cannot be shown in pictures', and the 'visual language of pictorial statistics', appropriate for egalitarian 'visual argumentation'.[25]

The Isotype methodology was hallmarked by interdisciplinarity, teamwork, sense-related, verifiable experiences, and above all by its fundamental user-orientation. There was a great range of printed matters with pictures and text (charts, posters, books), but also films and slides, and the 3-dimensional museum and exhibition settings, the spaces designed for presentation and exchange of pertinent information.

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[21] Neurath 1991: 198.

[22] Cf. Neurath, 'Visual Aids Compared' (1996: 294-296). The term 'scientific attitude' stands for a relentlessly questioning and searching attitude, relying on measurable and arguable facts, which is directed against fundamentalism and irrationality.

[23] Cf.: Twyman 1975; Hartmann and Bauer 2002; Isotype has also been discussed in other contexts, cf.: Nikolow, S. und Schirrmacher, A. (eds) 2007; Schmidt-Burkhart, A. (2005) ; Vossoughian 2008; see also: http://www.hyphenpress.co.uk/journal/2008/05/12/isotype_recent_publications;

[24] This aspect is centrally treated in Kraeutler 2008.

[25] Neurath 1936: 65-73, 1991: 594-595. This expression was also used by Marie Neurath (1974). The clear case arguing for visualisation, visual literacy, and visualisation skills as core skills and essential to thinking has often been made (Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, Reading images: The grammar of visual design, Routledge, London 1996) and again been discussed more recently (Pink 2006).

There were the provisions ensuring that the processes of communication with the exhibition users were respected in all phases of exhibition work. These also included delivering the information which laid open the empirical data, and made it possible for the users to retrace and to check the argumentation-line. These measures, in principle Neurath's invention of 'transformation', were embodied in the 'transformer' (audience advocate, trustee of the public).[26] This was the Isotype-team member responsible for audience-orientation in all steps and processes of planning and preparation, and in all approaches and media used.

> With this, Otto Neurath was successful in establishing an organisational approach to design (…) (where) the actual structure of the team clarified the stages in the process of designing and introduced precise points when work could be evaluated and, if necessary, modified.[27]

In the art exhibition 'Rondom Rembrandt' many of the key visuals related to the users' own surroundings (the towns, the country) and to their own practical experiences (the contexts of production and consumption of goods; the commodity-features of a specific time; how Rembrandt organised the production of his paintings, how his family and surroundings changed). This clear orientation at everyday common concerns is highly interesting in the light of, for example, Pierre Bourdieu's, the French sociologist's work, which identified similar clues as pertinent and successful categories for introducing possible recognition formations for non-specialised audiences.[28]

Marie Neurath tells us about these times and concerns:[29]

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[26] Neurath 1991: 244, 245; Kraeutler 2008: 148-151; Marie Neurath and Robin Kinross 2009.
[27] Twyman 1975: 12.
[28] Bourdieu 1974, 1984.
[29] There are several Rembrandt exhibitions, held those years, which may have influenced the 'Rondom Rembrandt', there was one in Moscow and Leningrad (Rembrandt van Rijn, 1936), in Bern (Rembrandt, 1937), and at the Rijksmuseum (Rembrandt tentoonstilling ter herdenking van de plechtige opening van het Rijksmuseum op 13 juli 1885, 13 July – 13 October 1935). And there was a most interesting publication published in London: Laurie, A. P. (1930), A study of Rembrandt and the paintings of his school by means of magnified photographs (http://library.rijksmuseum.nl/rrl/; accessed: 16 July 2009). Cf.: A. P. Laurie: The Pigments and Mediums of the Old Masters (Auszug), London 1914. (Internet Catalogue search of the Research Library at the Rijksmuseum; (http://library.rijksmuseum.nl/rrl/; accessed: 09-07-07)

>There had recently been a special Rembrandt exhibition in Amsterdam, at which it had struck me how many opportunities to help the public had been missed, by conventional hanging, and by separating the paintings from the prints. Now, we could not show originals, but rather we had much of the environment in which this work had been made, and so our exhibition had the title 'Rondom Rembrandt' (around Rembrandt).[30]

Neurath did not try to change the classical art museums, but he cogently used their presence/existence, and, at least indirectly, did make use of the traditional displays. Rembrandt's works, as would have been known to everyone in Holland, were on show in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam,[31] and the Mauritshuis in The Hague, while 'Rondom Rembrandt' was at the department store 'De Bijenkorf'.[32]

Let me try to state, in brief, what – in practical terms – the 'uses' of 'Rondom Rembrandt' may have consisted of. For the commissioners 'De Bijenkorf', the immediate intention had been to attract people to their shop venues. 'Rondom Rembrandt' was the first of two exhibitions sponsored, and became a success.[33]

Obviously, it is not possible to ascertain what 'Rondom Rembrandt' meant for the customers of a department store. With an unintentional (i.e. not functional) use, this may have been an empowerment/enfranchisement in art-appreciation terms: New experiences such as talking about the painter and his artwork in a leisurely way, and with a feeling of, 'We can also relate to the 'hero' Rembrandt, to that part of our society's interests, that part of our heritage, this most important symbol of Dutch-ness'.

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[30] Marie Neurath in: Marie Neurath and Robin Kinross 2009: 57-58.

[31] Enquiries regarding possible material evidence or documentation of the 'Rondom Rembrandt' exhibition were directed to the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie in The Hague and to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. These resulted in no documents held in either of these institutions, but pointed out that big 'Rembrandt'-exhibitions had been organized by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 1935 and in 1938 (personal communication; letter from Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, NL, of November 30, 1990).

[32] 'De Bijenkorf' had its main store in Amsterdam just across the 'Gracht' near the Rijksmuseum.

[33] These early activities of sponsoring in the field of 'cultural branding' seem interesting, and might be associated with, catering to consumerist appeal. Cf. also: Mica Nava, '… the respectable public place in shops, cinemas, galleries, parks, etc.' (Nava 2000: 24).

One effect seems clear: 'Rondom Rembrandt' presenting and networking these themes and diverse contextualisations in a dynamic and unusual production structure/environment (as offered in the department store venues) brought an exponentiation of exposure, exploration, and potential for learning and 'meaning'.

> The exhibition as a whole showed how an interest in the arts and an understanding of a certain historical period can be combined by means of a well-arranged, language-like technique of presentation.[34]

Intervention practices/conventions of the specific discipline art history, were clearly and purposefully also employed for the 'Rondom Rembrandt'-presentations. These basically asked for activities such as looking, observing, comparing, counting, and rating, etc.[35]

Of course, putting an art exhibition into the sale-room of a department store meant that it was a necessary precondition to satisfy varied interests, as the demographics of department store customers of the late 1930's would most likely have been as diverse as today, with academically trained persons by far in the minority. By introducing everyday themes and aspects, 'Rondom Rembrandt' aimed to attract, address and involve a wide 'audience'. This was a necessary and clearly felt step away from art history's disciplinary traditions. It is exactly these everyday themes which enabled also those persons without a specialist's background to feel at home, to build up confidence, and familiarise themselves with the historic setting of the artist's life. As Neurath wrote:

> We set up exhibitions in department stores. They were visited by ten thousands of people who ordinarily would not have gone to a museum.[36]

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[34] Otto Neurath, Iso-Coll. 3.2 / 42; and quoted in Rotha 1946: 145.
[35] 'Rondom Rembrandt', just as traditional art history, worked with a periodisation of Rembrandt's life and work; was concerned with questions of authenticitiy and of attribution; worked with photographic reproductions (as, for example, also used by art historians working in the Rembrandt Research Project; http://www.rembrandtresearchproject.org/Preface:4; accessed: 16 July 2009). However, in contrast to traditional art history, 'Rondom Rembrandt' was not as centrally concerned with the artist's techniques, or with the themes treated in the works.
[36] Otto Neurath quoted in Rotha 1946: 144.

And also:

> (…) who have been very interested in this new
> type of exhibitions and this new type of booklet.[37]

The department store venues for which the 'Rondom Rembrandt'-exhibitions were prepared, introduced an extraordinary quality.[38] These locations underlined the effort to provide egalitarian opportunities for seeing pictures (art works) and for thinking and talking about them as something other than 'holy relics'. It made the act of 'going to exhibitions' easy and continuous with everyday concerns. 'Rondom Rembrandt' rendered the topic presented comprehensible with common knowledge and capabilities, rather than something that requires a specific 'lofty' attitude and the prior internalisation of an authorised body of knowledge.

With this, we are in the middle of the continuing/ongoing discussion of whether a museum (especially an art museum) is a 'shrine', or a 'tool', and if so, what kind of a tool? Traditionally art museum work has concentrated on the study of the artwork as a solitary object which can be exhibited, exclusively interpreted, and understood by, and within the disciplinary tools, framings, and screens of the discipline (art history). Scholars more recently have come to study art from a broader, visual culture perspective.[39] Treating questions of authentification and the examination practices used in these processes, as well as embedding artists in their socio-cultural context have become more common. Nowadays, scientists working in different disciplines have adopted the view that to share their findings with the non-specialised, broad public, forms an important part of the epistemological process.[40] Others, with a broader museological focus, have discussed questions regarding visual culture, and are actively challenging the ways in which author/audience positions are constructed in museums and galleries through exhibitions' languages.[41]

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[37] Otto Neurath, Iso-coll. 3.2 / 42.
[38] Cf. Nava, '… the department store is one of the archetypal sites of modernity. It exemplifies the ambiguity of the visual', (Nava 2000: 24).
[39] Alpers 1983, 1989; Bal and Bryson 1991; Stafford 1999.
[40] Cf. Nikolow and Schirrmacher 2007.
[41] Bennett 1995, 2004; Duncan 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 2007; McClellan 1994, 2003.

Such concerns and approaches seem to restate notions, methods, and enterprises 'already there' and successfully applied in Otto Neurath's and his team's work.

The Isotype-Art Exhibition 'Rondom Rembrandt' (Around Rembrandt) and Visual Argumentation

By the late 1930s when 'Rondom Rembrandt' was prepared in Holland, the ISOTYPE rules and exhibition techniques had been fully developed. The same synchronic method and visual argumentation as applied to world events in previous work, was used to conceptualise Rembrandt's art, his official and private life, his time and surroundings.

Also for 'Rondom Rembrandt', there was a purposefully mixed arrangement of informative pictures, using pictograms (Fig. 2), pictorial statistics and charts, prepared according to the conventions (for arrangement in time-line, spatial line and amount-axis; for type face, colour, lay-out, sizes, spacing, and amount of verbal information used).
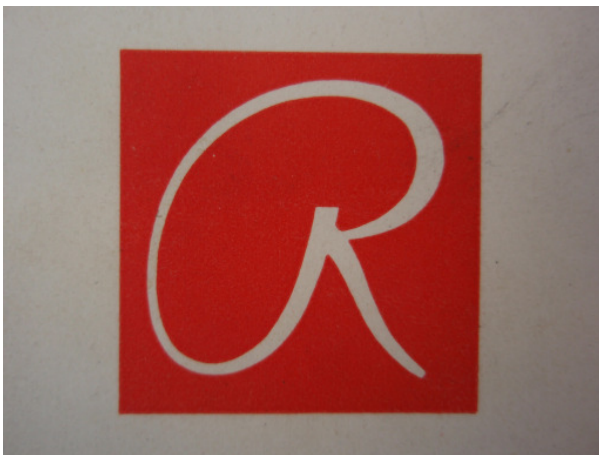

Fig. 2: Pictogram for Rembrandt's paintings, echoing the characteristic initial of the artist's signature. *Iso-Coll. 3/2, University of Reading*

The interpretive ISOTYPE-technique for this special case of art hisorical 'visual argumentation' is examined in the following section.

The overall theme and approach chosen is beautifully 'enacted'[42] by the title of the accompanying booklet.

Fig. 3: Titlepage of the Rondom Rembrandt booklet.
Around the 'R' (Rembrandt's paintings): Two concepts
and four pictograms representing the areas treated,
explain the approach and content of the exhibition
and of the booklet. *Iso-Coll. 3/2, University of Reading*

The charts featured only limited text, sometimes the key to the specific amount/number represented by the symbol/icon, and the lead image.[43] Besides these pictographic elements there were maps - very common synoptic (re)presentations - and extensive use of photographic reproductions of Rembrandt's and other artists' works.

These visuals together delivered a diagrammatic, inter-medial configuration and synoptic view[44] – rather than merely picture or word-based, and/or temporally consecutively presented information. This is shown here with a map-example from the 'Rondom Rembrandt'-exhibition and booklet (Fig. 4).

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[42] Cf. the caption used for this image in Marie Neurath and Robin Kinross 2009: 57.

[43] Marie Neurath epxlains the German term 'Führungsbild' like this: 'illustrations in a chart to suggest meanings to the viewer' (Marie Neurath and Robin Kinross 2009: 20).

[44] Cf. Rhodes, D. D.; Arrowsmith, J. R., The Synoptic View as a Model for Poster Presentations, (http://adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2004AGUFMED51A0014R; accessed: 25 August 2009).
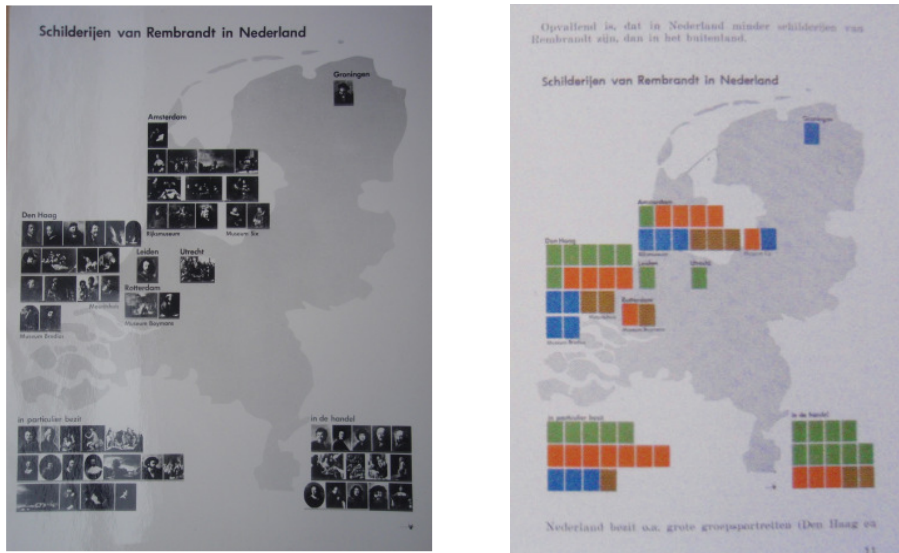
Fig. 4: A map of the Netherlands with photographic reproductions and coloured rectangles respectively, representing Rembrandt's paintings of different periods, show where the artist's works were in 1938, at the time of the 'Rondom Rembrandt' exhibition (left: exhibition-version; right: booklet-version). *Iso-Coll. 3/2, University of Reading*

'Rondom Rembrandt' 'showed' rather than described the historical background, wars and peace, Rembrandt's contemporaries, the flourishing of the country, and of the cities and universities of Amsterdam and Leiden.
Some organizational schemes were specific to certain pictorial charts – for example, for a chart relating to Rembrandt and Rubens (Fig. 5).
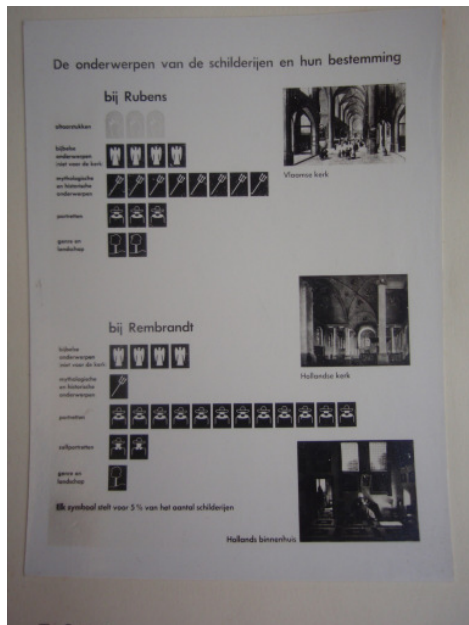

Fig. 5: Exhibition version of the chart relating to the thematic specialisation of Rubens and Rembrandt respectively. *Iso-Coll. 3/2, University of Reading*

With 'visual weight' (numbers of pictorial signs representing amounts of artistic genres), this chart ("The

subjects of the paintings and their destinations") rendered the basis for comparing the extent of thematic specialisation in the works of the two artists. Specific symbols were prepared for portrait, landscape, religious and mythological paintings. In the exhibition-version the lead images (reproductions of other Dutch artists' works showing interiors) gave the clue/background for their respective markets, the commentary established the percentage-relation to the complete oeuvres of Rembrandt and Rubens, at the same time relating these to market interests. [45]

The basic activities of counting, measuring, comparing – the 'factual connections' to be made by the users – were offered in many instances of the 'Rondom Rembrandt' exhibition. These, just as well as the games, functioned as incentives for engaging on an easy level, and asked for careful screening of overviews, pictograms and lead images. This made the visitors spend time and energy for visual and intellectual activity, comparing insights, contemplating relationships and stating and arguing possible meanings.

Using such an approach was decisive for presenting diverse materials (the artists work and the interrelatedness of social facts) and for evoking diverse possibilities of readings. At the same time, it meant that conclusions about the meanings of the information presented were largely left to the viewers. They were asked to actively study the information and seek relationships[46] – a natural activity for scientists – and the activity which was to be evoked also from those newly initiated users. They should feel confident, curious, and positive in the 'familiar atmosphere' of the department store.

The intentions behind the 'Rondom Rembrandt' can be summarised as follows: to render an interesting and comprehensible picture of the famous painter of the Dutch Golden Age, to help the users to work out categories of art appreciation, and to develop competencies and self-esteem in relation to the fine arts.

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[45] Otto Neurath, Iso-Coll. 3.2 / 42: 3.
[46] Cf. Discussion of potential of diagrammatic presentations in Schmidt-Burkhart 2005: 35.

Otto Neurath pointed out that:

> The new idea of the AROUND ISOTYPE
> EXHIBITION and the AROUND ISOTYPE
> BOOKLET is the combination of individual
> events, particular pictures and then in analysis of
> such pictures in detail, on the one hand, and in the
> addition of environmental material on the other
> hand. The exhibition dovetailed these various items
> in a peculiar way, and the booklet did the same. [47]

The 'Isotype Exhibition Technique' offered additional guidelines for the visualisations, and for relating to the interests of the users. These included: *express in words only what cannot be visualized, avoid monotony*, *aim to satisfy varied interests*, *avoid overcrowding*, *unify charts and models*, and *emphasize experiences of daily life*.[48] *Overcrowding* was avoided by selecting only those aspects of obvious relevancy, by leaving out information, reducing the amount of text-information, and using visuals. This, for example, was carried out with respect to the exact dates of the self-portraits, which as Neurath argued do not matter to any great extent for the non-specialist, and therefore could be implicitly and satisfactorily expressed by visual means (Figure 6).

Fig. 6: Series of photographic reproductions of Rembrandt's self-portraits, combined with the life-line and the colour-coding consistently used in the exhibition and booklet. *Iso-Coll. 3/2, University of Reading*

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[47] Otto Neurath, 'Around Rembrandt' (Iso-Coll. 3.2 / 42). As this typescript of Neurath's was written in English, no changes in vocabulary, spelling or punctuation were made in the transcripts used here.
[48] Otto Neurath, Iso-coll. T 1572.

This sequence of self portraits, taught many things, you see immediately alterations in his gesture, in his personality, you see his gaiety his depressive habits as an old man. You see, immediately how his brush is changing, from the first paintings to the last. We subdivided his life line, and gave each of these subdivisions a particular colour (…). These colours lead the visitor through the exhibition, the reader through the booklet. [49]

With a view of fostering new capabilities and changing attitudes of the users, Neurath underlined that Rembrandt's painting technique, a topic usually associated with competency in the specialised art field, can be made interesting to the non-specialised audience.

… it is important to show details in enlargement, even to the layman, who learns, what research means - he likes that, assumed, that this knowledge does not ask for long hours of studies.
(W)e showed photographs of some of his (Rembrandt's) pictures for comparative purposes. We tried to give some understanding of the painter's brushwork by showing a hand painted when he was young, and one painted in his old age.[50] (Figure 7).
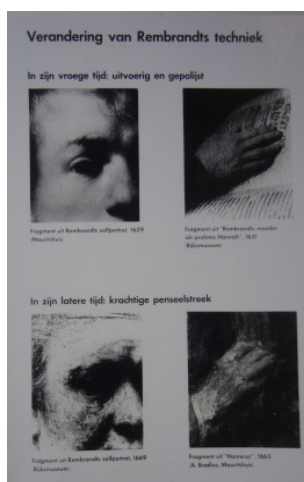
Fig. 7: Photographic reproductions showing the characteristics of Rembrandt's work as a young and more mature artist, respectively.
Iso-Coll. 3/2, University of Reading.

[49] Otto Neurath, Iso-Coll. 3.2 / 42.
[50] Otto Neurath, Iso-Coll. 3.2 / 42 and quoted in Rotha 1946: 144-145.

The photographs combined with pictorial statistics and assembled in thematic or chronological order, conveyed the intended messages visually. Visual guidance by colour coding - here Rembrandt and his family (Fig. 8) - aimed at keeping aware of fundamentally important background information, the time scale and the changing surroundings, without producing 'visual noise', to help the user to tune in and to follow the message in an undisturbed way.
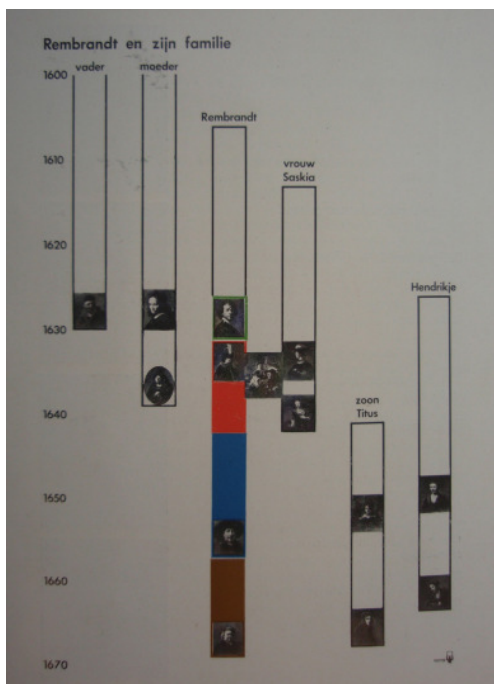

Fig. 8: Chart showing Rembrandt's and his family's development in photographic reproductions of portraits by the artist, with time line and colour coding. *Iso-Coll. 3/2, University of Reading*

If we had not done this, we should have had to label all his etchings and paintings with their dates, thus burdening the visitor with more detail than he could absorb.[51]

 (...) Other charts showed the life lines of Rembrandt and his family, those of famous contemporaries and of certain institutions against a background of war and peace.[52]

By placing Rembrandt into a social context of everyday concerns, a concrete historicity and time concept were

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[51] Otto Neurath, Iso-Coll. 3.2 / 42 and quoted in Rotha 1946: 145.
[52] Otto Neurath quoted in Rotha 1946: 145.

introduced. Also Rembrandt's reception within society, developed in relation to the time line (where his works had gone, who bought from whom, for how much and when) was argued visually (Figures 8 and 9).
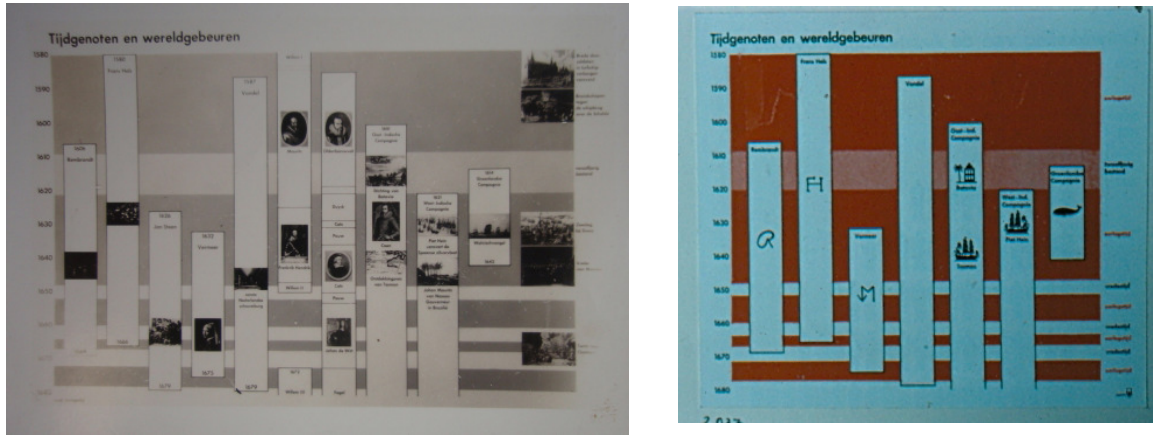

Fig. 8: Timeline and synoptical view rendering important personalities, buildings, events of Rembrandt's time; to the left the chart as used in the exhibition and to the right, the preparation of the synoptical view for the booklet. *Iso-Coll. 3/2, University of Reading.*
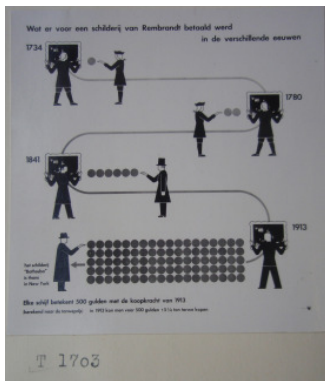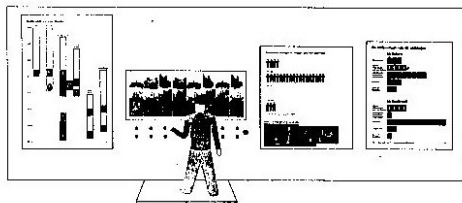

Fig. 9: Chart with timeline and pictograms showing the market value development of Rembrandt's works. *Iso-Coll. 3/2, University of Reading.*

Fig. 10: Chart showing the placement and use of the game in the ‚Rondom Rembrandt' exhibition. *Iso-Coll., University of Reading.*

In order to actively involve the non-specialized audience in the discussion of painting techniques, 'Rondom Rembrandt' also used simple question and answer games similar to those used a decade earlier in Vienna (Fig. 10).

In this sense, with an encompassing user orientation and such a great range of provisions for engaging the non-specialist, the 'Rondom Rembrandt' exhibition was a multilayered medium for democratic visual argumentation:

> (…) where the methods of presentation were devised with the need for public information in mind and not merely to satisfy the personal aesthetic taste of the director.[53]

These qualities and the success of the 'Rondom Rembrandt' exhibitions had not gone totally unnoticed in the museum world. In 1946, Paul Rotha,[54] the influential British film maker, had been invited as a speaker to the Museums Association's Annual Conference. In his presentation and discussion of visual communication techniques, and the developments of what (also) he called the 'Age of the Eye',[55] Rotha reported on 'the well-known work of the Isotype Institute'. He specifically pointed at its efforts in creating a 'picture language' and 'orchestra of instruments for visual education',[56] at the outstanding approach and quality of 'Rondom Rembrandt', and quoted extensively from Otto Neurath's manuscript for the planned book *From Hieroglyphics to Isotype*.[57]

In 1945, Alma S. Wittlin exchanged letters with Neurath about the 'Rondom Rembrandt' exhibition concept. She later paid tribute in two of her widely read publications, remarking that 'Rondom Rembrandt' was among the most advanced exhibition concepts and designs which she had been able to find in museum work of the inter-war years in Central Europe.[58]

Still, there seem to be no evidence of other contemporary reactions or direct influence of 'Rondom Rembrandt', in its own time, or later.

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[53] Rotha 1946: 145.

[54] The co-operation with Rotha, from 1941 onwards was a continuation of the experimental work of producing and showing 'diagrammatische Filme' (diagrammatical films) which had been started as early as 1927 by the GWM in Vienna, and continued, also in the United States from the 1930s onwards, with titles such as 'Blood Transfusion', 'World of Plenty', 'Land of Promise', 'Total War in Britain' (cf. Neurath 1991: 644).

[55] The talk was about 'The film and other visual techniques in education' (Rotha 1946).

[56] Rotha 1946: 142.

[57] Rotha stated that he was engaged in editing and preparing Otto Neurath's manuscript for publication the same year (cf. Rotha 1946: 144).

[58] Cf. Wittlin 1949: 176.

Otto Neurath's exemplary art history museum work

Let me round up main points and come back to our own time. 'Rondom Rembrandt' presents a good example of Neurath's work, which had definitely moved out of an era when

> (...) exhibitions and museums were collections of dead pieces inadequately related to their environment, their very presence explained to the public by little illegible labels.[59]

As usual in Isotype-work, also in the exhibition 'Rondom Rembrandt' this had been offered, with a decisive and stringent perspective of the 'future user',[60] in a collage-like and 'constructivist' approach, corresponding with Neurath's fundamentally democratic and developmental concept of 'orchestration'.

Neurath, the Vienna Circle-philosopher, in his efforts of 'humanising' specialist/expert work, as shown here with the example of an art exhibition, proposed a forum of research that draws upon the expertise and methods of several of the relevant disciplines - art history, sociology, geography, political economy, perceptual psychology, anthropology, etc. - without presuming any one of these to be a complete explanatory model, but with the understanding that each of these disciplines must retain the rigour of its methods and yet be open to exigent testing, and to other approaches.

Aware of the systemic undercurrents of the 'hidden curriculum',[61] Neurath criticized that the traditional museums rarely employed self-reflective mechanisms in their activities, as was provided in his work by the 'transformer', the 'trustee of the public'. And that, exactly for this reason, usually only a very small part of the (visually) transmitted information and the visual

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[59] Rotha 1946: 145.
[60] With a tradition in visitor studies, and research into exhibition design, and formative evaluation, the concept of the 'future user' has become commonly adopted since Otto Neurath's times.
[61] This is the school-related image used for the known phenomenon of systemic undercurrents causing incoherence in content, style of message and the actual practice and message delivered. The 'hidden curriculum' is reflecting and at the same time sustaining culturally dominant values and attitudes (cf. Hooper-Greenhill 2000:5).

media was in fact directed towards the goal of communicating.[62]

The Isotype-methodology, developed to avoid these pitfalls, provided mechanisms for constant, critical and thorough self-reflective checking, for the scientific attitude necessary to deliver unambiguous statements (propositions) in effective and 'visually enticing' environments.

The notions and ideas found in Otto Neurath's work seem prescient of more recent research, of findings of contemporary museum and audience studies, and of constructivist – or connectivist – educational theory of our age, of the 'linguistic, iconic and spatial turns'. Also more than half a century after Neuraths critical work, it still seems that exactly these fundamental aspects, touching on the structures and characteristics of the traditional museum, need to be rethought and changed to provide the sustainable 'museum for the future user'.

In 1955 (10 years after Neurath's death), in a speech to the American Association of Museums, Richard Nixon, then vice-president, suggested that having a meditative and exclusive individual experience before an object was a symbol of democracy; whereas to present the social history of an object was associated with Soviet-style propaganda.[63] Indeed, today we have moved away from such crass ideology. This is most probably not a question of right or wrong, but of 'and' and 'as well as', and of approximations. However, the question remains, what position in the communicational set do (art) museums' and (art) exhibitions' environments actually offer for non-specialised as well as for specialised audiences?

In words reminding of Neurath's arguments for user-orientation, another author, almost fifty years later, requested:

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[62] Neurath 1991: 182.
[63] Quoted in Marstine 2006: 9.

> Museums are not collections. They are not organizations whose main function is to preserve collections. They are institutions run by people whose main task is to organize public interaction <u>with</u> collections, which of course must be preserved to enable this to happen. Collections become museums only to the extent that their staff <u>accept responsibility</u> for the quality of the experience of the public. Accepting responsibility does not mean determining what people experience, but stimulating, enabling and supporting people in choosing what they want.[64]

If the art museum, the most perceptible and publicly important concrete manifestation of art historical research, wants to adopt such an egalitarian and inclusive attitude, and apply it in a wider museological sense, it cannot restrict its work to the exclusive level of discipline-oriented collection research. It is then asked to present the results of art historical research so that they make connections, and has to offer broad and inclusive contextualisations.

About seventy years ago, with 'Rondom Rembrandt', Neurath and his team proposed an example of exhibition work geared at democratically engaging also the non-specialist in this sublime subject. They based their work on the results of the specific disciplines – among others art history – and transformed these in an interdisciplinary and 'humanising' approach. With this – introducing novel successions of meditations and argumentations – they proposed a structural change, from the seeming certainties of the expert Authority (exhibition author, museum) to a collage of voices and perspectives, broadening the social base for meaning in many ways.

'Rondom Rembrandt', the (r)evolutionary art related exhibition treated in this essay, presents an oustanding example of this critical approach to exhibition work. It underlines that 'Neurath's writings, lectures and organizational activities are to be seen as a conscious preoccupation with knowledge.'[65]

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[64] O'Neill 1991: 34 (underlined as in the original).
[65] Nemeth in Nemeth and Stadler 1996: 7.

Acknowledgements

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