

## A Tent without a Landscape – Auditorium Victoria and Albert Museum

Asli Çiçek, Maarten Liefoghe

When René Magritte painted *The Listening Chamber* in 1952, an interior showing a gigantic green apple filling a room, the surrealist was applying a mechanism that recurs throughout his oeuvre, and that marked his strand of surrealism: placing daily objects in an unusual context, and creating associations that are triggered by realistic rather than dreamy items. What Magritte reaches with the painting could be compared to what Bertolt Brecht defined, about ten years earlier, as the *alienation effect*, and which revolutionised the staging of a narrative in theater: *‘To alienate a process or a character means at first simply to take away from the process or the character what is self-evident, known, plausible, and to generate astonishment and curiosity about it.’*<sup>1</sup> Brecht’s definition of alienation became a popular term in the critical discourse of various realms of cultural production. In architecture, however, it is less common. The auditorium of the Photography Centre in the Victoria and Albert Museum, opened in 2018, may be a project that ‘takes away the self-evident’, in this case both from a museum gallery interior, from an auditorium, and from a tent.

Designed by David Kohn architects this auditorium space is not articulated as the usual separate auxiliary space, but as an integral part of the collection display of this section of the V&A, the London museum dedicated to what used to be called the applied or decorative arts, now identifying as a museum of art and design. Positioned in the exhibition halls themselves, the auditorium itself is the big apple in the room: a large tent-like construction in a gallery at the far end of two long exhibition halls. According to the architects, the choice for (the image of) a tent is a very conscious attempt to relate to the *Dark Tent*, which they saw as a common reference both in photography and architecture. This specific type of tent was used frequently from the middle of 19th century to enable the photographers to develop their ‘landscapes’ immediately in situ. Portable and quickly put up, the Dark Tent provided the necessary dark room conditions to develop the film on glass plates. Whether this reference to the history of photography is familiar to the average visitor of the V&A photography collection is unsure, the directness of the tent’s formal appearance, however, and its capacity to define an interior are indisputable.

Tents are archetypical structures of shelter, but they also serve representational purposes. In many nomadic societies, to be allowed into the tent of the ruler equals a gesture of hospitality and openness to dialogue. In a less formal way, around 1800 the temporary structure also became a theme for decorating aristocratic interiors, famously in Chateau Malmaison’s bedrooms decorated by Percier and Fontaine on the request of Napoleon’s first wife Josephine, or in the Zeltzimmer in Charlottenhof by K.F. Schinkel. Fully unexpected in a bedroom behind the neo-classicist facade of the small castle, Schinkel created an illusion of entering a light tent placed in nature, without giving up the comforts of the interiors in a solid building. The Zeltzimmer stages a romantic dream of traveling and exploring. The small auditorium of the V&A Photography Centre offers visitors a similar unpredicted experience, with tones of alienation and displacement to it. A crucial difference with the Zeltzimmer is that this tent appears not merely as a tent interior but also as a tent standing in a gallery. Its grey-blue steel clad front has foldable doors, which allow to transform the auditorium and the gallery space ‘outside’ together into a hall for gatherings. Inside, the auditorium tent radiates with its saturated red allover finishing, reminiscent of Empire or film theatre interiors.

Integrating a space for screenings, debates and exchange in exhibition halls where usually nothing else than the collection display would be found, this auditorium-tent performs the closest possible approximation of gallery and auditorium spaces and activities. If the tent décor offers a pleasant moment of alienation, it is also what makes this imbrication of museum activities most plausible and gives it a sense of decorum in line with the V&A’s architectural and institutional character.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 15, *Schriften zum Theater*, ‘Über eine nichtaristotelische Dramatik 1933-1941’, p: 303, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963