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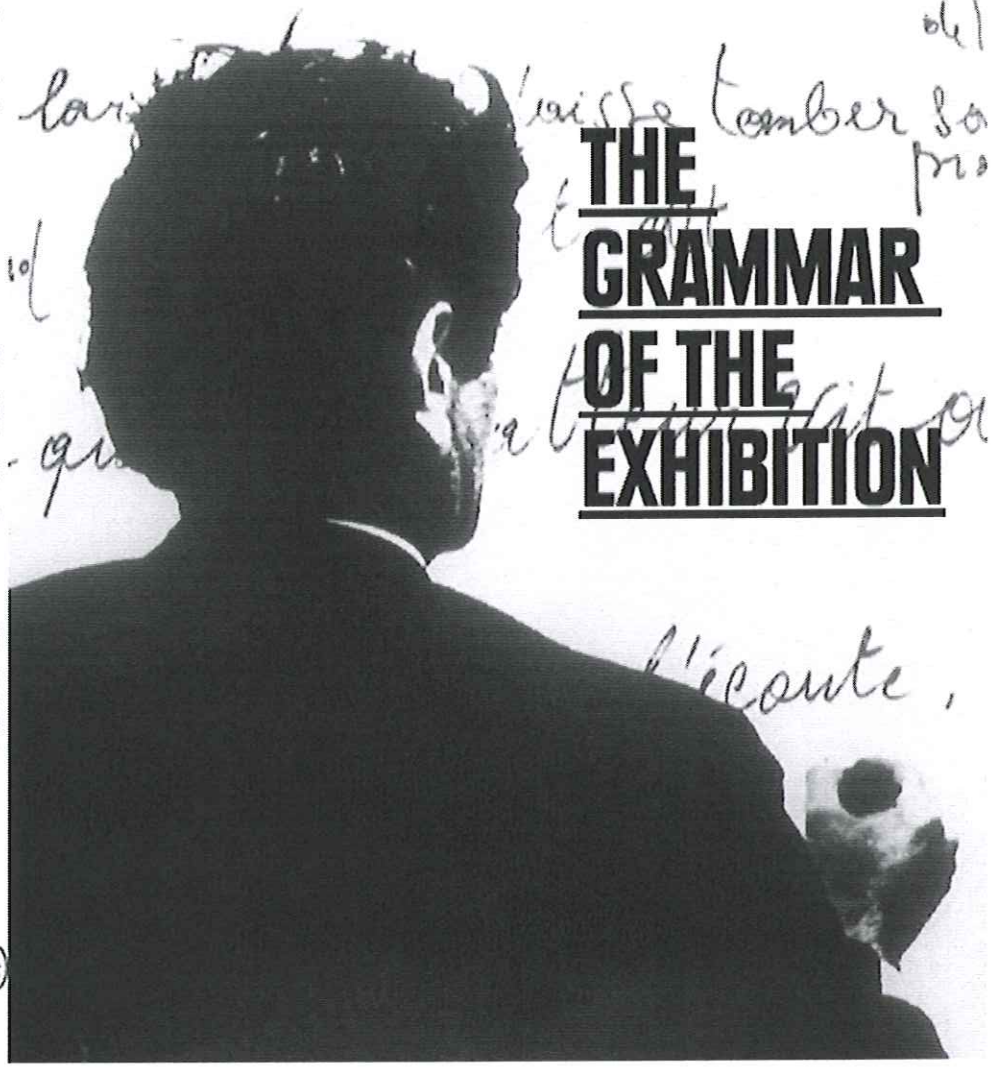
THE GRAMMAR OF THE EXHIBITION



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COVER IMAGE
Marcel Broodthaers,
Le Corbeau et le Renard (1967)
Collection MACBA, Museu d'Art Contemporani Barcelona.

Contents

On the Writing of Exhibitions

The exhibition has become a new paradigm of contemporary culture. Sustained by its own rules and grammar, and constituting a discipline in its own right, it produces narratives. The exhibition is both a paradigm of what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called "the culture industry" and an exemplary of the utilization of artistic expressions as an ideological and political instrument. This essay provides an overview of some milestone publications that have documented and explained the history of exhibitions.

Throughout the twentieth century and the opening decade of the twenty-first, the exhibition has not only embraced the most unprecedented manifestations of contemporary art but has also been, and continues to be, the driving force for the production of art, giving rise to a kind of post-studio practice that has transformed the ways in which art is created and understood. And, indeed, the ways in which it is legitimized and consumed. As formulated in the mid-1990s by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne in the introduction to *Thinking about Exhibitions*, a multidisciplinary, international anthology illustrating the need for debate on this cultural format, "exhibitions have become the medium through which most art becomes known... Exhibitions are the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed."[1] Yet, as Mieke Bal claims, the exhibition is also an utterance within the museum discourse, as I will show in the following paragraphs.[2]

The exhibition as we know it today came into being as an offshoot of the museum and developed in parallel to the democratization of free time and leisure brought about by the social conquests of modernity. The emergence of tourism in the twentieth century was undoubtedly another element which, when combined with the above, helped cement its success. The origins of the exhibitions of contemporary art, however, can be traced back to the seventeenth century. According to Francis Haskell, "there where exhibitions of contemporary art in Italy (usually because of a religious festivity) as well as in Paris (with the patronage of the Academie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture)."[3] From the eighteenth century to the early 1900s, the temporary

NOTES

1—Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (eds.), *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996).

2—Mieke Bal, "The Discourse of the Museum", in Greenberg et. al., 201–218.

3—Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

4—Martha Ward, "Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions" in *The Art Bulletin* 73 no. 4 (1991): 599–622.

5—Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995).

6—Stephen Bann, "The Return to Curiosity: Shifting Paradigms in Contemporary Museum Display" in Andrew McClellan (ed.), *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) 117–150.

exhibition gradually articulated itself as a discourse or a science of exhibition installation that built new models for constructing our gaze.

Nonetheless, when studying nineteenth century art, it is rare to find a reading that goes any further than the works themselves. Instead, it is the individual pieces that were the focus of study for museums and historians. Quite often, in discourses bent on the construction of art history with a formalist bias, the object has been discussed without mention of the context of its production or its first exhibition. Critical histories such as those by Martha Ward bring to the fore the fact that artists like Pissarro, Degas, Signac and Seurat strove to break with a type of exhibition design inherited from royal collections, the so-called *cluster hanging*, proposing not only a revolution in the language of painting, but also in the way of showing it.[4]

One of the places where these temporary exhibitions developed was the museum. As studied by Tony Bennett in one of the seminal essays on the subject, the most significant precursors of the museum were the cabinets of curiosities or *studioli*, rooms which contained all manner of items, dating from the Renaissance.[5] According to Stephen Bann, this original source shares some common ground with displays of contemporary art in museums.[6] Nonetheless, the museum and the *studioli* remain fundamentally different in that, in addition to the public nature of the former, the museum stored and studied the sciences and the arts separately. Natural sciences and fine arts museums were created with the development of Positivism throughout the nineteenth century, and these disciplines gradually branched out and became more specialized until they arrived, in the case of fine arts museums, at a separation between living and dead artists, as documented by J. Pedro Lorente.[7] The first instance of this development led to the creation of the contemporary art museum in the mold of the MoMA in New York (1929). The MoMA created a formula for exhibiting artworks that would become, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the paradigm for temporary projects in the following decades, neutralizing a portion of the creative experiences that had been developing in the fields of both art and "expography," and reducing the possibilities of presentation to just one: the white cube.[8]

In parallel to the museum, temporary exhibitions became the primary form of presenting artworks and maintaining the tension between the public and the private, between the collective and the individual, and between academic languages and new vernaculars in both official spaces and those created by dissident artists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These tensions developed at the intersection of civic, commercial and social milieus, giving rise to formulas as disparate as the experimental and alternative exhibition, the didactic museum and the commercial gallery. These venues acted as spaces for the cultural and social legitimization of the most innovative tendencies of the nineteenth century, the avant-garde movements of the first half of the twentieth century and, later, of the 1960s and 1970s neo-avant-gardes, while witnessing the emergence of blockbuster exhibitions.[9]

In this regard, an important bibliography has been produced over the last thirty years, although there were some precedents in the 1970s. This bibliography has had the task of cataloguing and writing the history of the exhibitions, which—because of the ephemeral nature of exhibitions—had been lost to oblivion when the goal of art

7—Jesús Pedro Lorente, *Cathedrals of Urban Modernity: The First Museums of Contemporary Art, 1800-1930* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1998).

8—Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001); Christoph Grunenberg, "The Politics of Presentation: The Museum of Modern Art, New York" in Marcia Pointon (ed.), *Art Apart: Institutions and Ideology across England and North America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986).

9—Emma Barker, "Exhibiting the Canon: The Blockbuster Show" in Emma Barker (ed.), *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (London: The Open University, 1999).

history was to develop a history based on autonomous objects and individual artists. This bibliography is still in the making.[10] Equally of note are monographs on the rise of other exhibition formats, such as the Venice Biennale (1895), Kassel's Documenta (1955) or Manifesta (1996), whose mission is to show the latest movements and tendencies in art as well as to explore new curatorial models.[11]

These new formats echoed the formulas of exhibition discourses and art communication that neither remained within the four walls of an enclosed space nor paid heed to the demands of contemplation. Although their origins lie with the historical avant-garde, from the 1960s onwards these experiments in exhibition formats went through a period of effervescence that is still ongoing today. Artists like Robert Smithson and Daniel Buren, among others, proposed presentation formulas that rejected the museum and the white cube, establishing instead a unity between production and exhibition processes. With their alternatives, they demonstrated that the presentation formulas on which the work of art was predicated were limiting.[12]

In point of fact, it was in the 1960s and 1970s when the first historical recovery of those immaterial or ephemeral practices of the avant-garde were carried out, and when artists won back the political stances that marked the early 1900s. It was also at that time that critical theory began to question the ideology of modernity, deeming it restrictive. The understanding of the public sphere as a social fabric in which it is possible to intervene, and the art practices whose critical underpinnings emanated from this understanding, were inevitable outcomes of those experiences of contact with a reality beyond the museum—experiences grouped together under the umbrella term of "institutional critique." After the rescaling of this line of thought in the 1990s, the emphasis shifted to a critical analysis of the contexts in which art is produced and disseminated, resulting in other formulas for exhibition writing that could be illustrated by Martha Rosler's project *If You Lived Here*.[14] The concluding expressions of this trend led to the assimilation of said practices by the institutions themselves.[15] The language of the exhibition was recast as "mediation," and artistic stances began to develop which do not renounce the public sphere, but rather use the same media as those existing in public space.[16]

At the same time, we have witnessed an assimilation of the discursive strategies of the temporary exhibition, whose multiple narratives reject the unified model of museum collections, a model that had become the paradigm of how to exhibit art in the twentieth century. Gradually, the chronological discourse coupled with a formalist reading of contemporary artworks, as systematized by Alfred Barr at the MoMA, has been replaced by cursory thematic and diachronic plots. With the support of textual devices, the intention of these exhibitions is to generate a less contemplative gaze in what we could call the formula of the permanent-collection-as-temporary-exhibition. This formula was tentatively rehearsed in the first presentation of the Tate Modern collections, followed, for some time now, by other museums including the MoMA and the Centre Pompidou.[17] Other experiments in exhibition models have consisted in offering artists the opportunity to create their own hangings based on the museum's holdings. Joseph Beuys did it in Darmstadt, Christian Boltanski in Baden-Baden and Paris, Joseph Kosuth in Vienna and Hans Haacke in Rotterdam.[18]

On another note, until around a decade ago, museographic bibliogra-

10—Bernd Klüser, Katharina Hegewisch (eds.), *Die Kunst der Ausstellung. Eine Dokumentation dreißig exemplarischer Kunstausstellungen dieses Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1991); Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: Making it New* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); Anna María Guasch, *El arte del siglo XX en sus exposiciones. 1945-1995* (Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 1997); Bruce Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that Made Art History* (London: Phaidon, 2008)—to date only vol. I has been published, covering from 1863 to 1959. Hans Ulrich Obrist (ed.), *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich: JRP | Ringier, 2008).

11—Enzo Di Martino, *The History of the Venice Biennale* (Venice: Papiro Arte, 2007); Michael Glasmeier, Karin Stengel (eds.), *50 Jahre. Documenta 1955-2005* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005); Barbara Vanderlinden, Elena Filipovic (eds.), *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005).

phy largely consisted of a practical handbook listing tools and analyzing exhibition techniques from the perspective of the visual qualities of the works and their conservation. Such bibliographies barely broached critical discourse about how art history should be told and how the exhibition mediates between the spectator and the work, a question addressed by Victoria Newhouse.[19] Space is never neutral; neither are exhibition mechanisms. If Malraux posited that photography assimilated objects from different cultures into modernist aesthetics, on a practical level, the elements making up the exhibition grammar do exactly the same thing.[20] Stepping into the arena of what makes an exhibition and how it conveys meaning has been the subject of my own study.[21] As analyzed by Nicholas Serota, one of the keys to curatorial practice lies at the level of the intervention of its formulas—in other words, whether one opts for offering experience, understood as contemplation in an essentialist presentation, or whether one proposes a possible interpretation.[22] Although, as Thomas West maintained in an inexhaustible special issue of *Cahiers du MNAM* about the artwork and its installation, "setting up [an exhibition] is, above all, an act of interpretation."[23] ■

12—Robert Smithson, "Some Void Thoughts on Museums," *Art Magazine*, February 1967; Daniel Buren, "Fonction de l'atelier" in Daniel Buren, *Les Écrits (1965-1990)* (Poinsot, Jean-Marc, dir.), Vol. I: 1965-1976, (Bordeaux: CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 1991) 195–204.

13—Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1977).

14—Martha Rosler, "Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint" in Wallis, Brian (ed.), *If You Lived Here: The City in Art. Theory and Social Activism. A project by Martha Rosler* (Seattle, New York: Bay Press, Dia Art Foundation, 1991) 15–43.

15—Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 1999).

16—Paloma Blanco, Jesús Carrillo, Jordi Claramonte, Marcelo Expósito, *Modos de hacer. Arte crítico, esfera pública y acción directa* (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 2001).

17—Iwona Blazwick, Frances Morris, "Showing the Twentieth Century," in *Tate Modern, the Handbook* (London, Tate Publishing, 2000).

18—Alessandra Mottola Molfino, *L'etica del museo* (Torino: Umberto Allemandi & C., 2004).

19—Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2005).

20—André Malraux, *Le musée imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

21—Isabel Tejeda Martín, *El montaje expositivo como traducción. Fidelidades, traiciones y hallazgos en el arte contemporáneo desde los años 70* (Madrid: Trama, 2006).

22—Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

23—Thomas West, "Circé dans les musées. Réflexions sur sept nouveaux musées en Europe et aux États-Unis", in *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne, L'oeuvre et son accrochage*, no. 17–18 (1986).