

QUESTIONING EXHIBIT DISPLAY

Theories, Forms, Perspectives

This book presents the first scientific outcomes of a project aimed at scrutinizing the forms and meanings of exhibition systems from the perspective of display. Due to its inherently cross-disciplinary nature, the display device is a negotiation ground resistant to a univocal approach, transforming it into a strategic agent of crisis for historical, theoretical, and project disciplines.

The objective of this book is to reassess the concept of "expographie" as a suitable cross-disciplinary, by employing the investigative approach of display to intersect various perspectives. Alongside historical and theoretical disciplines, the fields of design, architecture, and exhibit design are involved.

Starting from case studies and methodological inquiries, the essays in this volume revolve around four thematic constellations — Experience, Memory, Engagement, Display in action — where pivotal and, in our view, open points of the display debate converge.

With the contributions of:

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Questioning Exhibit Display

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Università Iuav
di Venezia

*This volume was published
with the support of funding
from Università Iuav di Venezia -
Research call 2023.*

COVER ILLUSTRATION: Vittorio Gregotti, Giotto Stoppino, Peppo Brivio, Ludovico Meneghetti, *Caleidoscopio*, XIII Triennale di Milano, 1964. Photo by Giorgio Casali, credits: Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio Progetti – Fondo Giorgio Casali.

editions-hermann.fr

ISBN: 979 | 0370 4115 9

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QUESTIONING EXHIBIT DISPLAY

THEORIES, FORMS, PERSPECTIVES

LOST IN EXHIBITION.
HISTORIOGRAPHICAL VALUES
IN LOST DISPLAYS

Francesca Castellani

Keywords: Lost; Exhibition Display; Edouard Manet; Edgar Degas.

Abstract: This essay examines the aporias and potentialities inherent in the lost aspects of exhibition display—such as ephemeral and emotional values—within the framework of art-historical analysis. If these aspects are fully acknowledged in the contemporary context, can they be applied to earlier periods, thereby reinterpreting certain elements of artistic production by considering the lost mechanisms of their display? Grounded in a theoretical framework, the essay ultimately proposes an example by reinterpreting the works of Manet and Degas in the light of some lost aspects of their exhibition conditions.

I. LOST IN EXHIBITION

The objective of my study is to examine the contradictions and the potential suggested by what is “lost” in the pursuit of an honest art-historical narrative. This topic is familiar to the discipline; I will attempt to analyze it from the fault line of the methodological crisis represented by the ephemeral horizon of exhibitions and their design.

In traditional art history—or at least that which considers what was produced before performative art practices—“lost” is generally associated with the material, objective aspect of an artwork. We use the term “lost” for a work that has been accidentally or deliberately destroyed, missing, stolen or censored; we use it for regrets or for “first ideas” that were later erased or reworked, for projects that were never realized, and so on¹. In this sense, what is lost is usually discussed as the absent counterpart of a present object. One tends to focus on a kind of ontological status of the artwork “in itself” (Glicenstein 2016, p. 18), an unquestioned object with a stable and timeless meaning. This way of thinking gains in complexity if we consider the notion of “lost” within the flexible horizon of exhibitions. The confrontation of the histories or, rather, *the stories* of exhibitions—which are necessarily relative, transversal, contextual, singular and at the same time plural—has clearly subjected institutional art history to theoretical travails, at least since the 1990s. This assertion seems even more viable when one attempts to examine all that is so intensely ephemeral, immanent, and transient, channeled through the dispositif of display.

1. In her book *Lost Art*, Jennifer Mandy (2014) proposes an interesting categorization of “lost” in ten sections: Discarded, Missing, Rejected, Attacked, Destroyed, Erased, Ephemeral, Transient, Unrealized, and Stolen, based on a series of cases from the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.

2. DISPLAY AND ITS “LOSS”

The dispositif² of display—as a device with a real narrative infrastructure, endowed (though not always) with physical and spatial consistency—is to be understood in its various material and immaterial aspects: in its actual sculptural reality as an installation, but also as an intangible set of intentions, ideologies, expectations, relationships, planned or unforeseen reactions, in their physical, psychic, symbolic, and social implications. It is a complex “field of forces” (Baxandall, 1991), often opaque, where politics and strategies meet with viewers’ expectations and abilities, and where design interacts with bodily perception and sensory forms of knowledge³. Not coincidentally “experience,” as in John Dewey’s theoretical intonation (1934), has once again become a significant keyword, both in theoretical debate and in exhibition practices. It is subjective, immanent, and complementary to the artist’s experience, and equally necessary in establishing the temporary horizon of the artwork’s meaning⁴. Not surprisingly, “the visitor experience” is the focus of a growing body of critical writing (Desvallées & Nash, 2011; Jones, 2016; Kaitavuori, 2018; Rodney, 2019) and of the most recent immersive trends in exhibition design, to the extent of actually creating a format, a business model, and an international circuit: *Caravaggio Experience*, *Michelangelo Experience*, *Monet Experience*, *Van Gogh Experience*, and so on. These practices evoke a point of departure in the history of exhibitions, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the charismatic presence of the artwork “in itself” was not essential. Moreover, the material

2. As understood by Foucault and Agamben: see the *Introduction*.

3. See the *Introduction* for key texts on exhibition politics and the display paradigm.

4. See here Glicenstein (pp. 28–30). Since the 1990s, under the impetus of participatory practices and socially engaged art, Dewey’s thought has once again become central to the debate (Meschini, 2023).

disappearance of the work and its author is one of the most stimulating implications of the use of technologies such as VR and AI in exhibitions, in an attempt to redefine the liminal status of the image, the object, and the aesthetic experience itself (Pinotti, 2021; Arielli, 2024).

The most critical factor in a historical understanding of the values underlying and played out in an exhibition display, then, lies in its ephemeral status and in its empirical, emotional, and experiential aspects, qualities that are as essential as they are destined to be lost. In this sense, the display itself is perhaps the most conspicuous “loss” in exhibition. It seems important, however, to make distinctions and to calibrate. The loss of the material aspects of an installation can be at least partially compensated for or re-experienced with the aid of visual or written documentation, though not without the theoretical complexities raised by digital visualization or reconstruction techniques, or reenactment practices. More radical, if not irretrievable, is the loss of event-related, emotional, and immaterial values brought into play by the display. Empathy and experience (Pinotti, 2010) are generally not reducible to sedimentation and they resist historical reconstruction. Nevertheless, I think the doubt raised by Mary Anne Staniszewski (1998) in the introduction to her seminal book is still valid: the lack of data and the ephemeral nature of exhibition installations are not enough to explain art history’s tendency to neglect their connotative role in relation to the work of art. Staniszewski speaks of real “ellipses in our official history” (1998, p. xxi) and suggests a form of cultural repression, lending a psychoanalytical lexicon to the loss of the display: “repressed,” “unconscious,” “omitted,” and so on.

3. QUESTIONING WHAT IS LOST: APORIAS AND OPPORTUNITIES

All of this helps to define a paradoxical aspect in dealing with the question of what is “lost,” of whose existence we have an implicit certainty but not necessarily a memory or even an awareness. How do we resolve this aporia, and prevent the lost from becoming a lost opportunity for historiography? My idea is that this paradox can help expose some of the sclerosis and simplifications of institutional art-historical discourse. I would like to reflect on the ways in which these latent areas challenge the discipline, forcing it to rethink terminologies, domains, and tools. I am referring to the history of art, but also to the history of the exhibition as it is sometimes practiced: as a series of “exemplary” exhibitions, in an attempt to build a canon (according to which paradigm? modernism again?), or as a summation of works or authorial actions, thus always concentrating on a work-centric or author-centric system.

The irretrievability of certain aspects of what is lost in an exhibition display opens up horizons of discussion that are often explored by other fields adjacent to art history. Imprimis, the “posthumous life” of the work of art in relation to its author, in its conditions of continuity and discontinuity of display. This concept can be understood in the “post-Warburghian” sense of *Nachleben* or afterlife, in the direction indicated by David Freedberg beginning with *The Power of Images* (1981; Freedberg and Wedepoh, eds., 2024). But it can also mean the ongoing process of re-semanticizing the work within particular contexts and communities of viewers, in the encounter between exhibition rhetoric and the experiences of individual audiences (Graham, 2020). This raises the question of authorial co-responsibility raised by Michel Foucault (Glicenstein, 2009, p. 17) and developed in curatorial studies and museology as well as in studies of the negotiation of aesthetics, sociology, and media and visual studies. The recognition of the flexible, porous, unstable, and discontinuous status of the work of art,

which can be reproduced and experienced in a plurality of ways, is a directly consequence of the relativism of its authorial horizon and its semantics. Reflecting on the instability of the work of art forces an equal reflection on the instability and the lability of the historiographical object. To paraphrase Ossi Naukkarinen: we need to take leave of the predetermined and clearly defined historiographical object (2020, p. 170). From this perspective, the main element that is ultimately “lost” is the historiographical object itself. This puts us in a difficult but useful position because of the implications for our ideas and our methods of philological and archival reconstruction.

A crucial node for philology opens up here: namely, the sedimentation of the ephemeral and the construction of its legacy in a constantly relative horizon (Dufrêne & Saemmer, 2019). How and where does it settle—and thus how and where can much of what is *lost in the exhibition*, such as experiences and emotions, be archived? We can certainly rely on written, oral, and visual testimonies: letters, diaries, surveys, interviews, selfies, videos, social media, and so on. But what should be considered paradigmatic and why? According to what criteria and what hierarchies? Belonging to a critical genre or literary ability, for example? Social position or an authoritative role in the art system? What escapes the subjective to become representative? Who is the “normative spectator” (Ward, 1996, p. 461), a ghost that has long inhabited the halls of historiography? The “scholarly” audience equipped with the proper keys to critical access, or the “virgin” to whom the experience of much contemporary art appeals⁵? This tension requires us to rethink the nature of sources, to broaden the scope of exploration, and to discuss the different dimensionalities of archives, an issue that is at the heart of Francesca Zanella’s essay (see also Maiorino, Mancini and Zanella, eds.,

5. See Glicenstein’s arguments in this book (p. 24).

2022)⁶. Today, however, no matter how much we search the meta-archives of the web and social media (tools in which museums have a growing interest: Bonacini, 2020), there will always be a simpler and broader segment of the public that remains invisible to collective memory, opaque to the usual archival tools. How can all this be made traceable for research? And what kind of historiography can capture it?

The study of empirical perspectives, such as Cognitive Art Histories⁷, can provide a stimulus. Others come from nonverbal forms of historiography, including the artistic practices inspired by Institutional Critique. Advanced technologies and their forms of display also offer fluid scenarios (Manovich & Arielli, 2021-24). I find Antonio Somaini's interpretation of latent spaces and generative neural networks in AI particularly fascinating (2024). In some respects, it is an unforeseen form of "lost" with great potential: by re-mediating from a discursive to a figurative-immersive model, text-to-image generative ekphrasis systems open up unexpected horizons, to the point of creating an artificial "alternative past" that is not without concern.

4. QUESTIONS OF CHRONOLOGY

How has art history responded to these theoretical and methodological questions? I think it is safe to say that the push for reorientation has been well established in the discipline as far as contemporary work is concerned. This can be seen both

6. See also RE:SOURCE: 10th International Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology (Venice, September 13-16, 2023), and in particular, the section "Memory. How to create future memories: documentation, preservation and new technologies."

7. The topic of "Cognitive Art Histories" was the focus of a workshop in Brno, Department of Art History, Masaryk University, May 28, 2024. See also Dantini, 2018. On the concept of "empirical histories" in Dewey, Meschini, 2023.

in the theoretical-critical debate, in various historical writings of, including museology, and especially in the artistic and curatorial practices that have often emerged. More and more often, temporary and permanent exhibitions prove to be an open form of artwork, a process of authorial exchange capable of incorporating the audience's reactions and attitudes into its *continuum*, redrawing boundaries and meanings each time (Bjerregaard, 2020). The extent to which this has occurred has made it reasonable, and perhaps even necessary, to formulate a definition of contemporary art based more on the conditions of the audience's experience than on those of the work's production. This brings us to another key point in the history of art, that of periodization and the criteria that should govern it. Within this chronological framework, it becomes strategic to broaden the discussion to consider exhibition display as a constitutive, flexible, and shared part of imagining and making art. At the same time, by opening up to the spatial, temporal, authorial porosity of the artwork, the contemporary horizon has adopted the indisputability of "lost" as one of the main assumptions of its poetics.

But what happens when we try to question the fluid and transient horizon of exhibition display in earlier chronologies? Is it possible to rethink the sources and reopen the questions without losing the *fil rouge* of philology? This work has been done partially and quite well for the historical avant-gardes, which is a favorable ground both for the availability of visual and non-visual documentation and for a clear need to satisfy a cultural horizon that is still partly tied to modernism (Altshuler, 1994, 2008; Staniszewski, 1998). I would like to focus instead on a field of study that, in the 1980-90s, introduced an innovative perspective on the history of exhibitions and display, namely the nineteenth century. The "classic" literature on the "exhibitionary complex" (Bennett, 1996) led the way in questioning how exhibitions were designed. The conditions of visibility, the hierarchies in the possible ways of moving through the space, the formats, and the wall layouts were

analyzed by deciphering their causes and their subsequent consequences for the market circuit, the consolidation of the role of the critic, or the career choices of the artists themselves (Holt, 1979; Mainardi, 1987, 1994; McClellan, 1990; Ward, 1991; White & White, 1993; Bennett, 1996; Mayo Roos, 1996). By restoring complexity to the canons and the spaces reserved for exhibitions, these studies marked an opening to the social context, to cultural expectations, and to the margins of taste; they told us much about the politics of management and viewing, about economic analysis, about the scope of mediation and reception, and about the active role of the viewer. Rarely, however, have the “sacred confines” of artistic invention been breached. Have we really been able to bring to fruition the possibilities opened up by these perspectives of study, to change our methodological habits and the direction of our questions?

Exhibitions produce audiences (and vice versa), but they also produce artists. Let me return to Martha Ward, and the seminal question in the last paragraph of her pivotal essay: “What’s important to consider in writing a history of the modern art exhibition?” (1996). One of the most interesting aspects to explore is the impact of exhibition practices on artistic practices, and the author’s awareness of the dynamic interactions with audiences and the exhibition system: an area that still holds much potential for discovery. How much, for example, might the conditions of “exhibitionality” (Ward, 1991, p. 599) have influenced the generation that grew up and trained in France between 1840 and 1850, the generation of Degas, Manet, Fantin-Latour (Fried, 1996)? By the time these artists joined the profession, exhibitions had already been a prominent part of the art system for decades. The temporary, unstable, media-driven horizon that qualifies the work of art and the way in which it is shown was an integral part of their mental habits. It seems to me an abstraction to think that they did not take this into account when conceiving their works. So perhaps it is legitimate to open the scope of

analysis and to extend some of the questions intended for what is contemporary to this generation as well.

5. MANET THROUGH HIS DISPLAYS

Let us take a charismatic example: Edouard Manet, a “medial” and “expository” author par excellence, not surprisingly at the center of illuminating analyses outside the confines of art history (Foucault, 2004 [1971]; Wollheim, 1987; Bourdieu, 2013 [1998-2000]). It is possible, I think, to question some aspects of his approach to composition in light of the conditions in which the works were displayed, simply by reconsidering what we already know. When Manet provoked the selection committee of the Exposition Universelle of 1867 by sending a list of thirty-five works instead of two, he was not just fighting a battle for artistic independence, according to the *habitus* that Emile Zola had implanted in him. He had in mind a concrete and relatively new form of exhibition, one that was being used in private exhibition spaces (Ward, 1991). He was thinking of the monographic exhibition, which he considered an essential condition to the legibility of his work⁸. Manet seems to have embraced the rhetoric and the new visual possibilities opened up by the monographic form to a degree that perhaps even his contemporaries did not fully grasp. He seems to have created a linguistic connection between different works, through the visual and conceptual sequences determined by the cohabitation in space and the rhythm of what Germano Celant calls “exhibition phraseology” (1996, p. 375). This “*cohésion absolue*” (Champfleury, 1867:

8. After the jury’s rejection in 1867, Manet, as we know, rented a warehouse for a solo exhibition of more than fifty works. It is also symptomatic that, in 1865, Manet removed his paintings from Martinet—the private gallery where he had exhibited in 1861 and in 1863—because he had shown only two of his six paintings (Darragon, 1989, p. 107).

in Darragon, 1989, p. 137) alludes to a completeness that resides not in the individual works, but in the relationship between them—and between them, the artist, and the public, which is precisely what happens in the infrastructure of the exhibition display. In contrast to the modernist discourse on the self-sufficiency of the work of art, the stakes are placed on an expanded and fluid dimension that transcends the actual scope of the work as well as the temporal fragmentation of artistic operations. What seems important to me is that Manet's production appears to be closely modeled on the form of the monographic exhibition, something that is evident when his works emphasize the relationships between them, either directly (note the black cat that migrates from *Olympia* to *Déjeuner dans l'atelier*) or indirectly (Victorine “desnuda” in *Olympia* and “vestida” in *Jeune Dame en 1866*). It is a game of clues in which the audience is called upon to participate, recognizing and adding meanings to the so-called finished paintings. So we can, or perhaps we must, imagine that a vision of the artwork as an unstable, migrating media object suggested by the reality of the exhibition environment around it, was alive in Manet's mind and became an essential part of his creative process.

Another hypothesis seems interesting to me. The layout of the large room of the Salon des Refusés in 1863, which can be seen in the photograph of a caricature published by Juliet Wilson-Bareau (2007, p. 310), brings to the fore a fact that could be found in the sources but whose visual impact could not be assessed: the possibility that *Le Bain* (now known as *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*) should not be read as an isolated painting but as an element of a dysphasic triptych. The arrangement on the wall invites a visual and intellectual game that disorients our cultural habits. Between *Jeune Homme en costume de Majo* and *M.lle V... en costume d'espada*, which are similar in size and setting, the incongruity of *Le Bain* makes it stand out.



Édouard Manet, *Jeune Homme en costume de Mayo*, 1863 (Salon des refusés), New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Édouard Manet, *Le Bain*, 1863 (Salon des refusés), Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

Édouard Manet, *Mlle V... en costume d'espada*, 1862 (Salon des refusés), New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The mutual relationship between the two “vertical panels” evokes a unity that is immediately denied by the absence of a narrative connection with the horizontal element in the center, reinforcing the “artificial” and provocative effect noted by Théophile Thoré (1863: in Wilson-Bareau, 2007, p. 317). It would be fair to argue that Manet did not design the exhibition layout; but the logic of the exhibition design at the time, which grouped works by the author on a crowded wall, gave the artist the tools to foresee this arrangement and indirectly suggest it through the dimensions of the lateral paintings. Intentional or not, this is perhaps the first of the rebuses that Manet played with his public. He would go on to use dystonia, playing with another form of Western tradition: the diptych, in the *contrapposto* of his *envois* at the Salons⁹.

Rereading the example of *Le Bain* in the light of the 1863 wall invites us to more carefully reconsider certain traces that

9. See, among the many examples, the rhetoric of opposition between *Olympia* and *Jésus insulté par les soldats* at the Salon of 1865.

have remained latent in the documentation available on the display, however fragmentary or lacunose it may be. Have we asked the right questions of these documents? Have we sufficiently questioned what little we know about the supports or other poor and inevitably lost installation devices? Have we been able to break the habit of considering them in their technical or documentary role, and to bring them back to the horizon of the artwork's intentional values¹⁰? Is the mirror that David places in front of the *Sabine* (Desbuissons, 1997; Johnson, 2006) a trivial external device, an aid to the painting? Or is it an integral part of the *immatériaux* of its execution, on par with *matériaux* such as light, drawing, pigment and its application, and so forth? How should we consider the display case Degas leaves empty for the entire duration of the fifth exhibition of the *Indépendants* in 1880 and then for another fifteen days at the sixth exhibition in 1881, before placing his *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans* there? (Pantazzi, 1988). A diversion, a trivial delay? It is hard to think so when it comes to Degas, who was a perfectionist known for his attention to installation details (Ward, 1991), and all the more so because this is a work he had pondered over for years. With consummate media savoir-faire, Degas seems to have wanted to emphasize the work's absence by staging a waiting game, a precise strategy of expectation. The emphasis on a device that is empty and completely unorthodox—one displays anatomical specimens, ethnographic mannequins, and merchandise under glass, not sculptures (Pantazzi, 1988; Kendall, 1998)—is, I think, part and parcel of the intentional values that substantiate the *Petite danseuse*. It is a deliberate system of diverse and converging negations, in opposition to the values of permanence celebrated by Western sculpture (Castellani, 2016). Made of wax and adorned with the ready-made of degradable materials, the

10. This was the case, for example, with the frames, thanks to the specific interest of the artists and critics (Ward, 1991, p. 611).

Petite danseuse—this cultural saboteur—was not created to last but to be lost, and to confront us with loss.

The analysis of these lost devices appears to strongly suggest a conscious and vital use of the display dispositif, encompassing its physical, conceptual, and relational aspects by these nineteenth-century artists. They were keenly aware of the need to seize this opportunity to rethink authorial agency and the role of the audience in the production of their works. It is up to us to seize the opportunity to rethink our own questions and disciplinary methods as well.

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