

# 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:*

Roberta ALBIERO, Fabrizia BANDI, Giampiero BOSONI, Fiorella BULEGATO, Francesca CASTELLANI, Bernadette DUFRÉNE, Mario FARINA, Antonella GALLO, Jérôme GLICENSTEIN, Carlo GRASSI, Anna MAZZANTI, Angela MENGONI, Stefano MUDU, Roberto PINTO, Paul RASSE, Clarissa RICCI, Camilla SALVANESCHI, Marco SCOTTI, Alessandra VACCARI, Angela VETTESE, Francesca ZANELLA, Stefania ZULIANI.



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F. CASTELLANI, J. GLICENSTEIN, F. ZANELLA



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Edited by

FRANCESCA CASTELLANI  
JÉRÔME GLICENSTEIN  
FRANCESCA ZANELLA

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## *Questioning Exhibit Display*

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*Edited by*  
FRANCESCA CASTELLANI, JÉRÔME GLICENSTEIN,  
FRANCESCA ZANELLA

# QUESTIONING EXHIBIT DISPLAY

THEORIES, FORMS, PERSPECTIVES



# QUESTIONING EXHIBIT DISPLAY: THEORIES, FORMS, PERSPECTIVES. AN INTRODUCTION

Francesca Castellani, Jérôme Glicenstein,  
Francesca Zanella

This book presents the scientific results of a series of meetings entitled *Staging Exhibit Display: Theories and Forms*, a project initiated by the research group BiTES<sup>1</sup>, which took place at the Università Iuav di Venezia from 2022 to 2024.

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1. BiTES - Biennale Theories & Stories (<https://sites.google.com/iuav.it/iuavunitadirercabites/bites>) is a research group founded by the Università Iuav di Venezia in 2019 and dedicated to the study of exhibition systems and the Venice Biennale. Coordinated by Francesca Castellani, the group includes Roberta Albiero, Fiorella Bulegato, Mario Farina, Antonella Gallo, Carlo Grassi, Angela Mengoni, Marco Scotti, Alessandra Vaccari, Angela Vettese (Università Iuav di Venezia), Cristina Baldacci (Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia), Anna Mazzanti (Politecnico di Milano), and Francesca Zanella (Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia). The series of meetings "Staging Exhibit Display: Theories and Forms" engaged scholars and practitioners involved in the study of staging systems on the international scene. In 2022, the series included Jeffrey Schnapp (Harvard University), Giampiero Bosoni (Politecnico di Milano, and Fondazione Albini), Jérôme Glicenstein, Bernadette Dufrêne (Université Paris 8), and Cecilia Alemani (59th Venice Biennale). For 2023-24, the series included Roberto Pinto (Università di Bologna), Fabrizia Bandi (Università di

The project examined the forms and meanings of exhibition systems from the perspective of presentation and display, with the goal of surveying and comparing the methodologies and interlocutors active in this important but elusive area of contemporary debate.

Its primary goal was to analyze the historical, ideological, and procedural values inherent in exhibit display, fostering interaction between various disciplinary approaches and practical territories. This interaction served as an opportunity for the mutual rethinking of disciplinary domains, thereby redefining content and interpretive systems. The issues discussed encompass both the material and immaterial aspects of display, conceived in terms of physical, intellectual, and relational dimensions.

## I. DISPLAYS WITHIN *DISPOSITIFS*

When we visit an exhibition, especially in a museum context, it is normal for us to lower our voices, raise our eyes, keep a certain distance from the objects, pause for a while, listen to or read information. However, we remain unaware of the various display techniques used to create a seamless visit: after all, we are only there to see the artworks. Nevertheless, the way artworks are presented in museums takes into account the visitors' typical movement patterns, orientation, time spent, listening skills, and fatigue, and adapts the display to these parameters. In this way, works of art are constantly being transformed, both conceptually and technically, in order to

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Milano), Paul Rasse (Université Côte d'Azur), and Adrien Gardère (Studio Gardère, Paris). Each session focused on such specific research issues and questions as the creation of a transdisciplinary vocabulary, the delineation of a meaningful chronology of research, the mapping of sources through a variety of methodological approaches, and the recognition of setting up possible typologies that include objects, tools, and goals.



adapt to situations with regard to framing, positioning in space, lighting, connections between artworks, visitors' movements, and more. Of course, saying that museum design is based on visitors' habits is not the whole story. In fact, the history of museums shows that the public, too, has had to learn how to be a museum visitor over time, in a kind of progressive domestication (Borzello, 1987).

Exhibition devices are in fact a visible emanation of an underlying order of things that we might call a "*dispositif*." The concept of *dispositif* is central to understanding what an exhibition display is (as well as a concert, a film projection, a dance performance or any other artistic presentation in the public sphere). *Dispositif* is a French word whose meaning is difficult to translate: it is a device or apparatus, a plan, a medium, a machine, a construction, a vehicle or a situation. The term was explained by Michel Foucault as follows:

...firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the [dispositif]. The [dispositif] itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements (Foucault, 1994 [1977], p. 299).

What interests us here is again, the idea of an underlying order of things, an order that is both technical and verbal. *Dispositifs* say little about the objects as such, but much about the relationships between them, between the objects and the way they are mediated, and between objects and viewers. Foucault's definition has been expanded by many authors, including Giorgio Agamben, who explicitly defined the *dispositif* as "anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings" (Agamben, 2007 [2006], p. 31).

The term *dispositif* directly evokes display techniques insofar as they are understood as “ways to dispose elements: a setting, a method or a procedure.” As the French semiologist Jean Davallon once said:

Organizing an exhibition means to place the public in contact with objects. The ones who conceive and realize exhibitions dispose “things” (panels, showcases, objects, lighting, audiovisual material, walls, etc.) in a place. This place, however undifferentiated it may be (a simple volume, a certain location) is shaped. The designer-director of the exhibition installs—in the sense this word has in fine arts—a space (Davallon, 1986, p. 206).

In an exhibition, a *dispositif* can thus be seen as a multi-level “system of relations”: 1) relations between selected objects; 2) relations between these objects and the place where they are displayed; 3) relations between the objects and the information with which they are associated; 4) relations between people who organize an exhibition and the exhibited objects; 5) relations of an exhibition to external factors (the art world, artists’ careers, art criticism, etc.); 6) relations of the public to what is exhibited; 7) relations of the public within a context / within the exhibition setting.

In this context, it may be of interest to consider specific display situations: exhibitions, festivals, concerts, and a range of performances. Such events play an important role in the system we are describing. Thinking about art according to the notion of the *dispositif* prompts us to consider that artworks presuppose specific forms of attention and anticipation on the part of their prospective viewer—what Hans-Robert Jauss referred to as “horizons of expectation” in the field of literature (Jauss, 1972). This idea is reinforced by the fact that institutional forms are subject to change, as are tastes and relationships within society. This means that even if the general public has often spontaneously considered it normal to view works of art at a certain distance, hung in frames, placed on pedestals, lined

up on walls or on the floor, in large empty spaces accessible by large staircases, this relationship is no more natural than any other and is even the result of a complex history.

In the same way, the standardization of exhibition display procedures in museums (and the same could be said of concert halls or theaters) over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—a standardization that is now taken for granted—has often led us to forget that most works of art had other purposes before they were shown to us. Museums, galleries, art centers, opera houses, concert halls, theaters, specialized magazines, and art education have greatly “normalized” the terms of aesthetic relations over time, with their various display techniques implicitly presented as a necessary precondition for any aesthetic relationship.

## 2. SEEING AND/OR READING THE DISPLAY

Resituating the history and legacy of display techniques within the broader question of *dispositif* should be a starting point for any discussion of the relationship between visitors and artistic objects, be they “environmental,” “site-specific,” “perceptual,” “participatory,” “interactive,” “relational,” or something else. But this does not change the fact that most emerging art forms are still displayed in frameworks (material or immaterial) that have historically been shaped by the most classical of display methods. However, the continued use of this type of display is ambiguous with regard to contemporary art. Who will explain to visitors to the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris that Bertrand Lavier’s *Walt Disney Productions* (1984) should be seen not as paintings but as simulacra? Who will explain to people that they are allowed to eat from the soup bowls placed on the floor of a commercial gallery by Rirkrit Tiravanija (*Untitled [Free]*, 1992)? How does one know that the objects on display are “ready-mades” or relational pieces? If one fails to recognize the importance

of frames and conventional markers that generally enable an aesthetic relation to take place, works of art that propose other forms of approach run the risk of being misperceived, misunderstood, or even ignored. However, the rejection of contemporary artistic displays does not mean that the works fail as art, but that the displays fail to evoke a relationship appropriate to them. This is often the case when artworks are displayed in public spaces without any explanation. Conversely, when confronted with participatory works of art in classical art museums, visitors often tend to act as if the objects on display were meant for only to be viewed. Sometimes they treat them like “documents”; some visitors even try to expand their knowledge by seeking information about them.

These attitudes are not surprising given that visitors generally tend to adapt to the circumstances of their encounter with art. If you have always been told to behave in a certain manner, you will probably continue to do so indefinitely. Photographic documentation presented in a contemporary art center could be seen as an aesthetic object—regardless of content—and a contemporary dance performance in a museum of ancient art might be mistaken for a mild disturbance. Of course, most of the time there is no such misunderstanding. When we go to the Musée du Louvre, it is to see timeless masterpieces, which we find there in abundance. We take our time, stand right in front of the works, read the wall labels carefully, do not raise our voices, do not spit on the floor, and so on. When we go to a contemporary art center, we reach out our hands and hold the objects that are handed to us, we answer the questions we are asked (without ever doubting their artistic nature), we take off our shoes when asked, we try on sensors, and so forth. To put it more clearly, each time we visit an exhibition, the surest sign of our intention is that we face the artworks according to arrangements that are specific not to the works but to the *dispositifs* with which they are presented. But how do we know for sure that our actions are the right ones?

More often than not, explanations are added to answer these kinds of questions, in the form of what literary critic Gérard Genette called “paratextual information” (Genette, 1981). Paratexts are elements that surround a text and make it more accessible. Some authors have applied this concept to exhibitions, noting that artworks are constantly surrounded by informative “elements” of all kinds: labels, press kits, orientation signs, catalogues, critical texts, etc. These elements provide useful information. They function as forms of mediation—although they rarely explain what type of relationship one should have with the objects or with the exhibition display itself. The goal is to make the function of an artwork as explicit as possible, in order to prevent any kind of misunderstanding. Authorized narratives, in turn, often lead to paratextual elements that function as a “user manual,” that is, additional information or instructions that make it possible to understand their goals. In most cases, however, the efficiency of the display—the “good understanding” of an artwork by its audience—is directly related to strategies of mediation—that is, to the choices made not only by the artist, but also by the curator, exhibition designer, museum curator, communications specialist, art critic, art instructor, and so on. A display is a superposition of several layers of information, some conceived by the artists, others by mediators. The question of the boundary between the artist’s actions and those of the various mediators of the artwork is far from negligible. This is all the more true when one realizes that displays conceived by mediators always extend artistic displays—including their potential iconographic contracts—by completing them, transforming them, sometimes contradicting them. Of course, they also tend to set guidelines for us to follow.

Let’s return to our initial thoughts. We enter a place prepared to a certain extent to be confronted with works of art; we have been led there by all kinds of information, by introductions to what is to be seen and the way it should be experienced. Here we are, standing in front of the artworks.

We know their titles, we understand their themes and how they operate; we know everything about the artists and their intentions. We know how to act. All we have to do is play our role as visitors, which we do with great care. But this situation seems strange, as if we were blindly following instructions without thinking about them. Of course, one always prefers to believe that a direct aesthetic relation, spontaneous and “immediate,” is preferable to a prepared one, and to believe in universal access to all art of all periods. This presents us with an interesting dilemma: on the one hand, a *dispositif* can be seen as a “whole” capable of determining aesthetic relationships in various forms of display. From this point of view, institutional designations, guided tours, user’s guides, labels, catalogues, etc. seem to be essential to understanding the goals of any work of art; otherwise, one would miss the point, and not really be able to see anything. On the other hand, the conditioned response is detrimental to the chance encounter with an artwork, to the element of surprise and the feeling of freedom that are intimately connected to the pleasure of discovering an artwork for oneself.

To escape this kind of ambiguity, artists have sometimes considered leaving the spaces of art institutions permanently and spreading their art in everyday life. Others have attempted to intervene directly in the display, usually within art institutions, to deconstruct them and reveal their mechanisms. In the visual arts, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, and several others engaged in Institutional Critique have, since the 1970s and 1980s, become specialists in the art of deconstructing the aesthetic or political conditioning of museums. This kind of deconstruction, however, has mostly been seen by curators and museum representatives as a tribute to their own practice of decontextualizing and recontextualizing works of art, and the centralism of the institutions’ actions was ultimately confirmed by the complex deconstructions they experienced.

A heightened consciousness of the primacy of display techniques over artworks and the underlying *dispositifs* leads

to a “Copernican revolution” in the understanding of what an aesthetic relationship is. One tends to see the artwork as an element—sometimes an illustration—of a discourse rather than the other way around (discourses as ornaments of artworks). This doesn’t mean that art critics, curators, or art dealers are “artists” who use works of art in the same way as a painter uses colors from a palette, as Daniel Buren once said (Buren, 1972). One has only to remember that artists are never alone when they exhibit their work: they are always presented as part of larger strategies, with different means, and by all kinds of people.

Why should we continue to talk about works of art as if they were autonomous, disembodied entities, unframed and barely accompanied by a few remarks from the artist? An artwork never presents itself to the viewer in this way, but on the contrary always in very specific mediating contexts from which it cannot be completely isolated. The same can be said for site-specific installations, video art, body art, and all kinds of participatory art. Indeed, the organization of any type of display leads to a sequence of choices on the part of art critics, instructors, curators, exhibition designers, etc., which have consequences on the artists’ own choices. In an art event, what is to be seen is never simply a series of objects, but staged objects, enhanced objects, objects assembled in order “to make sense.” This involves interpretation (not in the sense of hermeneutics, but in the sense of what the main actors and those who contribute to the organization of an event actually do). And this kind of interpretation can also be very creative. Perhaps we should also see the better aspect of subjecting artworks to display techniques. Far from being just operations that transform preexisting objects, temporary events, rather than works of art, could effectively be what allows meaning-making situations to take place within society.

### 3. QUESTIONING THE EXHIBITION DISPLAY

A critical examination of the display device in relation to its inherent connection to ideologies, expectations, and customary practices is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the exhibition phenomenon in its full complexity and richness. Given its inherently transdisciplinary nature, the display *dispositif* functions as a site of negotiation, as an agent for manipulating different languages (images, spaces, actions, writings), as an incubator for critical readings, a collection of receptions and projections, and as a platform for experimenting with and testing the effects of communicative strategies. This transdisciplinarity renders the display resistant to a univocal approach, transforming it into a strategic crisis factor for historical, theoretical, and project disciplines.

A review of recent literature reveals several problematic nodes, the most significant of which are the relationship between the history of the display and that of exhibitions, and the challenging delineation of the boundaries and significance of the display. Regarding the second point, the reasons can be traced back to the history of a discipline that has struggled to achieve autonomy since the beginning of the twentieth century and whose boundaries are fluid, oscillating between the staging and design of interior spaces (from Bayer, 1939 to den Ouden, 2011 and Zanella, *et al.*, eds. 2024, in particular the sections on narratives and experiences). Furthermore, the reasons can be seen in the multiplicity of contexts in which the term display is used, be they disciplinary or linguistic. Display is analyzed from a narratological point of view or from the perspectives of historians or curators; in all these areas, as well as in the context of design, the role of the display can be emphasized or defined in different ways. One might consider the role of Institutional Critique in the 1970s (O'Doherty, 1986 [1977]) and of Land Art, which constituted the starting point for Germano Celant's "historical project" on installations



and display, starting with his proposal *Ambiente-Arte* for the 1976 Venice Biennale (Celant 1976; 1982).

Another pivotal moment was the emergence of the New Museology in the 1980s and 1990s, which stimulated a rethinking of the role of museums and exhibitions (Karp & Lavine, eds., 1988; Crimp, 1993; Greenberg, Ferguson & Nairne, eds., 1996; den Ouden, 2011; Jones, 2016; Grave, Holm, Kobi & van Eck eds., 2018), simultaneously with a renewed emphasis on the history of exhibitions (Altschuler, 2008, 2013; Glicenstein, 2009). In this context, a paradigm shift is defined, leading to a rethinking of the responsibility of institutions in defining the canon. In this regard, the contribution of Mary Anne Staniszewski (1998) is foundational; her history of MoMA's paradigmatic exhibitions (1929-1970) fills a gap by drawing attention to installation design, its ability to contribute to the collective unconscious, and at the same time to the "power" that museums exercise in defining visual and narrative canons. Staniszewski opened up a fertile line of inquiry that had been pioneered by scholars such as Andrew McClellan (1984), David Carrier (1987, 2006), and Robert Lumley (1988). This perspective received significant contributions in the 1990s (Duncan, 1995; Macdonald, ed., 1998), followed by further developments by Sybil Gordon Kantor (2003), Julia Noordegraaf (2004), and Victoria Newhouse (2005). In Italy, Sergio Polano (1988) carried out a seminal study of the history of exhibitions from the 1920s to the 1970s, conceived as an atlas of visual material.

Compared to this initial phase, we can hypothesize that a reorientation of research today is marked by the convergence of interests focused on "showing" across various disciplinary fields. This book aims to explore this shift through a constellation of key concepts carefully selected to critically examine the "question" of display.

#### 4. QUESTIONING THE EXHIBIT DISPLAY: FOUR KEYWORDS

Based on this research, the objective of this book is to reassess the concept of “*expographie*” (Dufrêne & Glicenstein, 2016) as an appropriate cross-disciplinarity, using the investigative approach of display to link different perspectives. In addition to historical and theoretical disciplines—such as art and exhibition history, architectural history, the history of graphic and fashion design, museology, social sciences, aesthetic and semiotic philosophies—we also include the fields of architectural practice and exhibition design. The challenge of this book lies in its role as a methodological contribution to the history of art and exhibitions, and as a potential research model for the history and design of interiors and exhibits.

Based on case studies and methodological investigations, the essays in this volume revolve around four thematic constellations in which the central and, in our view, open points of the debate on exhibition display converge. Each of these keywords intersects and interweaves with the others, forming a constellation of meanings and questions.

**1. Experience:** Understood both as an ephemeral value and an embodied memory—as stimulated, for instance, by VR or AI technologies—this term is increasingly implicated in contemporary exhibition practices and theoretical considerations. Its irreducible immanence and subjectivity pose a design problem, an aesthetic question, and a historiographical aporia.

**2. Memory:** How can we create an adequate “cartography” of the sources that would allow for the study of the display device in its complex and sometimes controversial values? This question takes into account the diverse nature of these sources and their potential systems of archiving and/or musealization, each requiring profoundly different methodological approaches and codes of interrogation.

**3. Engagement:** Identified as participatory involvement and political engagement, with all its contradictions, in the constant dialectical, social, and transformative tension between

the public, the object, the site, and the institution activated by the relational display *dispositif*.

**4. Display in Action:** A series of case studies offers an analysis of the processes of semantization driven by the intrinsic (material and symbolic) nature, plastic consistency, and dramatization of spaces, as well as the knowledge embedded in practices. Spaces and processes inherently possess a vocation for meaning that sometimes converges and sometimes collides with design strategies, thereby reinforcing their values.

Without claiming to exhaust such a transversal and complex field of investigation, this book is intended as a working outline and a methodological proposal. It is our hope that this work can open up further avenues of inquiry and provide a useful framework for future research.

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PART I

EXPERIENCE





# THE EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE

Jérôme Glicenstein

**Keywords:** Experience; Exhibition; Contemporary Art; Biennials.

**Abstract:** The relationship between an exhibition and the artworks it contains is inherently open-ended, which has significant implications for the visitor's experience. How can such a situation be described in the context of writing an exhibition history? This text looks at the multiple meanings of the word "experience," examining its manifestations in artistic practices and the ways in which it shapes our understanding of contemporary art in exhibitions.

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## I. PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON TYPES OF EXHIBITIONS

How might a critical discourse on exhibitions address the question of experience? The answer to this question is contingent upon the nature of the exhibitions themselves. Discussing an exhibition of ancient art, in which the majority of the works on display are well-known and have been extensively researched in a variety of texts, is quite different

from engaging with exhibitions of young contemporary artists, where it is not a given that the works on display will retain their relevance in the future.

In the first case, most visitors rely on a certain amount of information (often found on wall labels or in the exhibition catalogue) to mentally reconstruct the meaning of this or that work in its original context. This mental gymnastics is part of the pleasure of the visit, especially for connoisseurs and specialists. In such exhibitions, the interest in a particular object is often linked to its historical significance. The way in which artworks are presented forms a kind of visual rhetoric: the aim is generally to tell us something coherent about the art of the past and to convince us of this coherence. Such a strategy is not always successful. It is not always easy to appreciate a work of art, that does not belong to our world and about which we know nothing. When visitors appear to be completely ignorant, they are often told they can “learn to see” if they agree to follow a few rules—this is what guided tours, academic lectures, and audio guides are for. From this point of view, art history can truly function as a discipline, in the sense of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1993). And the exhibition can appear as a constraining space in which, as Tony Bennett noted, art history helps to reform visitors’ preconceptions (Bennett, 1996).

Of course, contemporary art exhibitions have quite different goals. In fact, in such exhibitions it is often difficult to relate what you see to what you know. One should rather forget the amount of knowledge recommended by art historical exhibitions and replace it with other, more intuitive, more sensitive, approaches in which interpersonal exchange plays an important role. This explains why followers of ancient art are often disturbed by contemporary art exhibitions: they don’t know exactly how to react to what is being shown to them.

The distinction between exhibitions of ancient and contemporary art is fundamental to the study of exhibitions: it divides the art world into that which is part of an established body of

knowledge, accessible, with some effort, to the greatest number, and that which, conversely, has no value, or at least not yet, in the eyes of the majority of the public. An exhibition of contemporary art, even if it presents historical works, stands on the ground of novelty and emergence: no historical distance can guarantee the importance or interest of its objects. And it is precisely for this reason that this type of exhibition is difficult to explain or appreciate. This gives rise to the problems of mediation in the traditional sense. Biennials, like the salons before them, are the most exemplary manifestations of these uncertain situations. In this kind of exhibition, the historical significance of the objects is not what matters most. Visitors' expectations are more focused on the present experience, within a temporary community embodied by the exhibition. It is therefore particularly difficult to write an account of this kind of situation.

## 2. WHAT IS THE VISITOR'S EXPERIENCE IN THE CASE OF CONTEMPORARY ART?

The question of visitors' expectations in contemporary art events is not easy to understand. Consider documenta fifteen's slogan: "Make friends not art" (ruangrupa 2022, p. 9). It sounds strange: why oppose art and friends? In fact, the subtext of the slogan implies that what makes sense in art is the communal experience itself. This motto is a direct echo of a famous phrase coined by the French artist Robert Filliou in the 1970s: "Art is what makes life more interesting than art" (Martel, 2003). In other words, art for art's sake is not something to be pursued; rather, according to Filliou, it should have a transitive value by enriching life. Here, the idea of experience takes on a different meaning: in contemporary art, works can be mediocre and sometimes they aren't even understood as works of art in the traditional sense. In fact, the contemporary art work is rarely limited to an object: the context

in which it is presented also plays a significant role. Ultimately, what's more important is a certain quality of experience that helps transform the viewer into a participant. The idea of "experience" can be confusing, however. Exactly what kind of experience are we talking about? Is it that which accumulates through the repetition of various activities, "the knowledge of life acquired through lived situations" (Rey-Debove & Rey, 2000) —what the Germans call *Erfahrung*, and what we find in the habits of "connoisseurs" and visitors to museums of ancient art—or is it the unique experience (*Erlebnis*), the intricate singularity of certain events? The word experience also evokes scientific experiments, or at least "[the provocation of] a phenomenon with the intention of studying it" (Rey-Debove & Rey, 2000), as the English and Germans say. Some artists have long since taken this logic of the indeterminacy and ambiguity a step further, as in the case of Jean Tinguely's *Métamatic n°17*, a "drawing machine" presented at the first Paris Biennale in 1959. What exactly was the work of art? Was it the machine itself or the drawings it produced? Or more broadly, was it the interactions generated by the process and involving all those who approached the work?

The question of experience is not unrelated to many concepts commonly used in art theory: sensation, perception, reception, appreciation, aesthetic attitude.... Perhaps it even brings them together, juxtaposing physiological phenomena, the feelings of the viewer, the poetics of the author, and the innumerable devices that stage art. But a difficulty arises. Is the experience of making art—the artist's experience—comparable to the experience of seeing art—the visitor's experience? To see an artwork without the presence of the artist implies that it has a certain autonomy, that it can "speak for itself." But is it that simple? Is the language of art self-evident by nature? Is there a conceptual unity between all the meanings of the word "art," regardless of the diversity of art practices? On the contrary, it seems that the decision to talk about the role of a specific experience *in* art—as it would be for an artist—implies

a shift in the order of priorities. In fact, the most important thing is no longer art—in the sense of an art object—but the experience itself, an experience that can be played out in the most diverse fields: in social life, in scientific research, in leisure, in religious practice.... The point here is to consider how art—understood as an open-ended, uncertain, activity—can enrich human experience, as advocated by the ruangrupa group at documenta fifteen or by Robert Filliou in the 1970s. Focusing on the experience of visitor as a participant, rather than on the object or on the knowledge it implies, echoes pragmatism in the philosophical sense of the term.

### 3. THE APPRECIATION OF AN OBJECT VS. THE APPRECIATION OF AN EXPERIENCE OF THE OBJECT

In the words of one of its founders, the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, pragmatism proposes to “consider thinking as a kind of action” (Peirce, 1878). Such an approach rejects a priori arguments and vague speculation, and constantly seeks to base its reasoning on facts derived from experience. The focus on events and relationships is then preferred to an analysis of objects that are ultimately considered to be unknowable (Wahl, 2003, pp. 133-136). Philosophical pragmatism holds that the world is not a fixed entity, but is constantly reconfigured by our actions and representations. As William James noted, “the world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands” (James, 2007, p. 269). If the question of experience is central here, it is because we must always consider human actions in relation to the environment that surrounds them and the relationships they generate. Peirce put it quite literally, explaining that “there is absolutely no difference between a hard thing and a soft thing so long as they are not brought to the test” (Peirce, 1878).

John Dewey is unquestionably the pragmatist philosopher whose reflections have most often associated art with the

concept of experience. This question is central to his work, and he sees it as inextricable from all human activity (Dewey, 2005). In the opening pages of his seminal book on the subject, *Art as Experience*, and even before evoking art, Dewey draws upon the examples of a woman tending her plants, a person mowing the lawn, and another one watching a fire burn. He notes that these seemingly gratuitous activities provide the people involved with a deep sense of satisfaction that depends not on the outcome of the actions taken, but rather on the unfolding of the actions themselves. In Dewey's view, these individuals, like workers who find satisfaction in the quality of the work they perform, exemplify a form of artistic commitment (Dewey, 1980).

In relation to art, experience is not merely the observation of certain categories of objects (particularly when these are sacralized within museums<sup>1</sup>), or even the simple fact of producing "artworks": it brings into play the sense of belonging to a community. Works of art are signs of a "unified collective life" and also "marvelous aids in the creation of such a life" (Dewey 1980, p. 81). Conversely, a work of art should not be considered immutable, as it is continually reinterpreted, re-evaluated, and replayed in the infinite processes of experience and confrontation with experience. For Dewey, it is only in these different processes that it takes on its meaning and value (Dewey 1980, p. 109). In *Art as Experience*, numerous examples are provided to illustrate how an aesthetic relationship, in the most traditional sense of the term, depends on variations in experience. He argues that we should abandon the idea that we can purely contemplate or passively receive immutable things. Instead, he asserts that experience is a necessary component of how we make sense of the world; all the more so because it is constantly confronted with the experiences of others, those with whom we interact (Dewey 1980, p. 135). This is

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1. Dewey rejects what he calls a "museum conception of art" because it moves away from ordinary people's concerns (Shusterman, 1999, p. 24).

far from insignificant for Dewey, who rejects the illusory idea of art's autonomy in order to consider its value in a relational way within the public space of a democratic society (Cometti, 2010, p. 40).

The idea of bringing art into contact with ordinary life, which is central to Dewey's project, implies a change in attitude towards human activities. In the words of Richard Shusterman, this means "emphasizing the qualities of harmony, creativity and imagination.... so that a greater number of everyday activities provide immediate satisfaction, not just the hope of deferred, external pleasure" (Shusterman, 1992, p. 41). The question then becomes whether or not art can be distinguished from other forms of experience, and whether or not its ultimate goal is simply to enrich ordinary life. Pragmatist thinking doesn't automatically condemn art to a subaltern or instrumental position; it simply tries to understand how art can enrich ordinary experience, which has nothing to do with art objects, as they are usually valued, distanced, and sacralized. In fact, for Dewey, the artwork doesn't count if there is no experience, and the experience is of no interest if it's about conforming to a predetermined model of behavior.

Dewey distances himself from a long line of theorists who have attempted to treat works of art as purely speculative objects. For him, aesthetic attention should not be reduced to the contemplation of works of art (Chateau, 2003, pp. 24-25). He also rejects the idea of a Kantian disinterested aesthetic relation that would exclude any practical, affective or cognitive dimension. Experience is seen as a whole, nourished precisely by the different types of interest that enrich it and give it its specific value. Nor does Dewey ascribe any special privilege to the artist. On the contrary, like Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author," he considers the active attitude of the viewer, who creates his or her own experience, as important as the artistic act: "Without an act of recreation, the object is not perceived as a work of art. The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed according to his interest. The

beholder must go through these [same] operations according to his point of view and interest” (Dewey, 1980, p. 54). In short, understanding cannot occur outside of the conscious construction of one’s experience.

Dewey’s words encourage us to rethink our relationship to art, starting with the viewer’s feelings rather than with the supposed quality of an object. To abandon the “exceptional author,” the cult of the masterpiece, and the dogma of its irreducible autonomy does not mean, however, that art or the aesthetic relationship disappears, but rather that it ceases to be seen as universal and timeless. As Jean-Pierre Cometti noted, for Dewey, “the autonomous status of art, its ‘separate’ position, is the product of the institutional conditions that have removed art from practical life, and which consequently perpetuate a misunderstanding that nothing obliges us to think is definitively inscribed in our culture” (Cometti, 2012, p. 20). The possibility of thinking about an experience in (or “with”) art, rather than an experience of art—as if this type of object were endowed with some special power—causes us to set aside habitual ways of thinking and to take greater account of the world in which we live. This leads us to be wary both of abstract theorizing that feeds on pure speculation about imaginary works of art (which have no empirical existence), and of simplistic conceptions that seek to explain that works of art can only be understood in relation to predetermined historical knowledge or to technical skills, or on the condition of that one has learned to see them correctly (whatever the method advocated).

#### 4. WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF A BIENNIAL EXHIBITION?

The previous remarks invite us to rethink the study of contemporary art exhibitions, a type of event that contributes to the very construction of the meaning of art in our time.



The experience, in the case of a contemporary art exhibition involves a triple temporality: 1) before the exhibition, while it is being prepared and programmed; 2) during the visits, encounters and events that take place while it is open to the public; 3) in the accounts that are given afterwards, which have consequences for the representations that everyone will have. In other words, the meaning of a contemporary art exhibition depends not only on who talks about it, but also on when they talk about it. What's more, talking about the genesis of an exhibition project as a curator is not the same as talking about it as a producer or as a participating artist. Talking about visiting an exhibition is not the same for a tourist or a janitor. Finally, talking about the traces of the exhibition is not the same, whether you've seen it or not.

Ultimately, an exhibition of contemporary art is above all a place for discussion: we may not always agree with the choice of works, or with some of them; we may not always understand the objectives; we may sometimes find it too simple or too complicated. We're not always sure that the exhibition is aimed at us as visitors; we wonder if we've missed something, etc. From this point of view, it is interesting to read the reviews of the salons by Denis Diderot in the eighteenth century, or by Charles Baudelaire in the nineteenth century. According to these authors, the meaning and quality of a work of art necessarily depend on what surrounds it. Artists are never alone, and their works necessarily resonate with other works and with the feelings of the public. This is one of the characteristics of biennials in our time: discussions take place, works are noticed, artists are celebrated, some works provoke controversy and are rejected. The common understanding is that positive perception (celebration) and negative perception (rejection) are the driving forces behind this type of event. In fact, such exhibitions may well not contain any remarkable works. What makes them special is the way in which the works affect the visitors, which often involves other events, meetings, discussions, etc. And if this is done well, it contributes to the success of an exhibition.

## 5. CONCLUSION: HOW IS EXHIBITION HISTORY MADE?

The considerable diversification of exhibition practices in recent years has led to an increasing focus on the intentions of the organizer (seen as a kind of meta-artist), on the way the works are arranged (exhibition design), and even on the mediation tools associated with them (catalogues, press kits, websites, labels, or guided tours). But what is almost always missing is the individual experience. This is why exhibition re-enactments are generally disappointing. No matter what you do, you can't bring back to life a vanished era: that's the limit of historical reconstructions. On the other hand, perhaps the meaning of an exhibition, unlike the meaning of a work of art, is fundamentally limited to the here and now of its experience, and it is a bit futile to try to go beyond that. Looking at the countless reconstructions of exhibitions from the past, one wonders: is it really about the exhibitions, or just about their formal appearance? Germano Celant's reconstruction of "When Attitudes Become Form" at the Prada Foundation in Venice in 2013 is a very good example of the limits of this kind of exercise (Celant, 2013). The Kunsthalle in Bern was reconstructed inside a Venetian palace, and all the original artworks were either presented or evoked by photographs. The reconstruction was very faithful, almost literal. But in terms of content, this posed a problem: much of what had been shown in Bern in 1969 was process art, ephemeral elements, since the aim was to show attitudes, rather than objects. In Venice, forty years later, the organizers didn't show processes, but rather relics, which obviously contradicted the spirit of the first show and confused the visitors, who were unable to grasp what was to be experienced.

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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.

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## 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 on<sup>1</sup>. 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.

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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 dispositif<sup>2</sup> 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 knowledge<sup>3</sup>. 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 meaning<sup>4</sup>. 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

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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 appeals<sup>5</sup>? 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.,

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

2022)<sup>6</sup>. 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 Histories<sup>7</sup>, 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

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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 work<sup>8</sup>. 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:

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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 Salons<sup>9</sup>.

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 values<sup>10</sup>? 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 *materiaux* 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

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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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# EXHIBITING THE VOICE. DISPLAYS OF THE INVISIBLE

Stefania Zuliani

**Keywords:** Voice; Display; Exhibitions.

**Abstract:** Starting from Adriana Caverero's theory of the voice and Mladen Dolar's book *A Voice and Nothing More*, this paper aims to examine how the museum can exhibit the voice and its always acousmatic physicality, an invisible yet profoundly corporeal element. Furthermore, by analyzing some significant exhibitions that have made the voice and, more broadly, sound the cornerstone of their proposal (*Voices* curated by Christopher Phillips in 1998, *The body of voice. Carmelo Bene, Cathy Berberian, Demetrio Stratos* held in Rome in 2019, and the exhibition *I suoni del mondo* at the Castello di Rivoli, 2024), the essay seeks to prove how the museum, which has always been a privileged scopic device, through the exhibition of the sound and, above all, of the vocalic element, can take on a new capacity to construct and exhibit knowledge, overcoming the "high esteem for the sphere of vision" (Cavarero, 2005).

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## I. SILENCE

Sit down. Put on the headset. Someone is walking around you in the space. The footsteps get closer. A woman's voice at the back of your neck says: You're in a museum now. People walk around these clean white spaces. But their minds walk in other places, down dark corridors, into rooms filled with forbidden memories. (Phillips, 1999, p. 89)

The voice, welcoming and calm, is that of Janet Cardiff. The space, constructed "through fact and fantasy" as always in the Canadian artist's work, is undefined, has the boundaries of experience, the dimensions and duration of our unrepeatable being, here and now. Museum, garden, urban borderland—she moves across the tracks, towards the *terrain vague* that unites and separates the city from the countryside. In this walking piece, proposed by Cardiff together with George Bures Miller in Kassel for *documenta 13*, the place is created, shown each time through the sound of the voice, which gives body to the word and transcends it. For the voice is not a servant of language, but a force that contradicts the transparency of vision, that disrupts the privilege of the eye on which Western thought has been based at least since Plato, the "philosophy (that) closes the ears" of which the museum is both the result and the device. As Adriana Cavarero argued with intelligence and passion in the pages of her book *For More than One Voice. Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, the metaphysical propensity "for an abstract and bodiless universality, and for the domain of a word that does not come out of any throat of flesh" (Cavarero, 2005, p. 8) not only determined the reduction of the voice to a mere vehicle of meaning (the logos, according to Aristotle, is *phonè sementikè*), but also the predominance of the sphere of the eye. This philosopher, who chose the words of Italo Calvino as a poetic trigger for her argument ("A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the



air the voice, different from all other voices<sup>1</sup>”), clarifies that since Homer, a poet without sight, seeing (*idein*) also means knowing and the functioning of thought is modeled on the functions of the eye: *theoria* comes precisely from *theorein*, to contemplate, a verb that, according to Bruno Snell, expresses “the faculty of the eye as it apprehends an object” (Snell, 1953). These are the objects that, not by chance, inhabited the Museion, the house of the Muses, where conservation and exhibition were certainly not in question, and which would only be established as indispensable functions with the revolutionary birth of the modern museum, because the construction of knowledge, more symbolic than physical, was at the center of the space of the ancient museum. A knowledge that, then as now, is expressed in the luminous metaphors of vision: to illuminate, to clarify, and also to expose (to show, to display), if, as Hubert Damisch wrote, to expose (the work) means to bring it from darkness to light: “*l’exposition implique un passage de l’obscurité de l’atelier, de l’armoire ou du cachot, à la lumière qui fait la condition de la visibilité*” (Damisch, 2000, p. 46).

“The eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears”: Heraclitus’ sentence indicates the direction of a thought that, far from the Jewish tradition in which the voice is revelation and creation, is based on the privilege given to sight, to the eye that projects and illuminates reality: “Revelation will be a function of sight. It will be a seeing. But not a hearing. And this in spite of dialogue” (Zambrano, 1992, p. 83). Not even the consideration that introjections and the identifications that follow in the first weeks of life are related to sound, and in particular to the mother’s voice, rather than to sight, has truly called into question the foundational value of the gaze in relation to reality. Nevertheless, “the importance of precocious auditory and vocal introjections has also to be acknowledged; for it is only afterwards that the organization of visual space

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1. Citation from *Un re in ascolto* (A King Listens), (Calvino, 1988, pp. 33-64).

enables the perception of the object as an eternal” (Rosolato, 1999, p. 120). The denial of the cognitive value of hearing is the deceptive result of a radical denial of the materiality, of the corporeality of the voice, of what Roland Barthes calls the “grain” of the voice, of its complex nature, irreducible to the purity of a single function, be it communicative, expressive, or aesthetic. If, in the psychoanalytic perspective of Guy Rosolato, the voice is *Between Body and Language*, in the reading proposed by Giorgio Agamben, who, like Adriana Cavarero, places the voice as a philosophical problem in a different perspective from that of Derrida<sup>2</sup>, the voice refers to the occurrence of an instance of speech, a vocative act—and “the vocative is the case of the voice”—which is a call and a nomination. And so, it implies a relationship. The relationship that is established (that should be established) in the museum space between the visitor and what the museum presents, different each time. There is no voice without the other, every word uttered, every sound emitted is an appeal—*le cri*, as Lacan wrote—an appeal that cannot be resolved into a simple instruction, just as it should not be a univocal message that a work, an object, a semiophor, to quote Pomian, expresses in the space of the museum, however inhabited and therefore sonically unstable. The voice thus becomes a model and instrument of destabilization in the tidy exhibition spaces, where sound is a disturbing element even now that, unlike in the past, people

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2. Although following different paths, both Adriana Cavarero and Giorgio Agamben call into question Derrida’s well-known theses on the privilege that metaphysics would have granted to the voice at the expense of writing. The last chapter of Cavarero (2005) is devoted to the analysis and criticism of the reflections that Derrida dedicated to the voice on several occasions, while Agamben focuses in particular on what was proposed in *Grammatology*, underlining that the Derridian critique of metaphysics is based on an inadequate reading of Aristotle, since what it is in the voice and what makes it significant are precisely those *grammata* against which, according to Derrida, metaphysics affirmed the primacy of the voice (Agamben, 2023, p. 79).

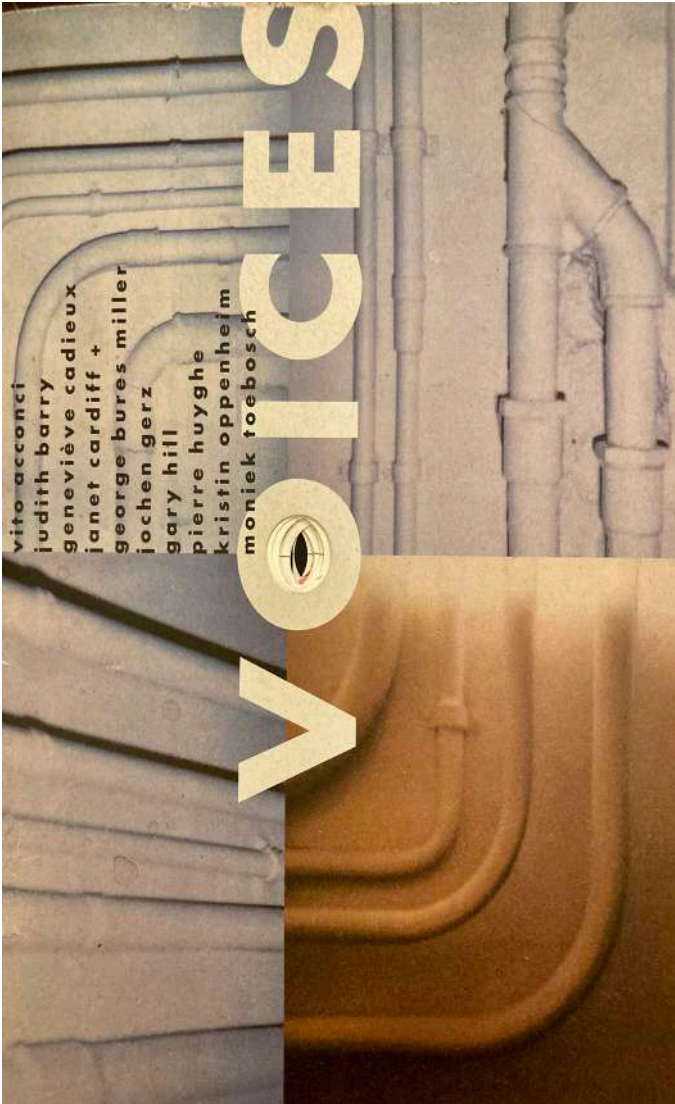
are no longer as silent in the museum as they were in the church. For every *flatus voci*, whether occasional or deliberate, always produces restlessness, disorientation: in fact, the voice is always acousmatic, always without a recognizable origin.

Mladen Dolar, one of the founders of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis together with Alenka Zupancic and Slavoh Zizek, and certainly one of the most convincing interpreters of the subversive potential of the voice, wrote in his excellent essay *A Voice and Nothing More*, that “the voice as the object appears precisely with the impossibility of disacousmatization. It is not the haunting voice impossible to pin down to a source; rather, it appears in the void from which it is supposed to stem but which it does not fit, an effect without a proper cause” (Dolar, 2006, p. 73). Distancing himself from Derrida, who seems to share with the “phonocentric” tradition the prejudice that wants the voice as a space of immediate access to pure presence, Dolar argues that the voice is, rather, “a blind spot” in the production of meaning and “a disturbance of aesthetic appreciation” (Dolar, 2006, p. 21)—a gap, a limit, an imperfection that belies the transparency of the word, that pollutes it and makes it something other than itself. In short, the voice is the ballast of the word and, at the same time, the perspective, the imprecise horizon, the shadow and the density. If “the nature of the voice is that of being veiled by the visible” (Dolar, 2006, p. 81), then the visible, what is exposed to the gaze, acquires through the voice a reassuring opacity, a thickness that does not allow the gaze to penetrate it, a density that prevents any rapid formulation or appropriation of meaning. The voice becomes the instrument, never consumed, of a subversion with rigid expository geometries, with simple scopic mechanisms designed to reassure the spectator and harness his desire for enjoyment and knowledge. It is not the controlled sound of the installations, which also expands the spatial limits of the work and transgresses its unity: it is the voice and its exposure that manifest (but do not show) themselves through specific reproduction devices—audio guides, for example—or, more

rarely, it is incarnated, unrepeatable, in the artist's body. It is the human voice, not the sound, natural or mechanical, nor even the musical composition that is in fact interesting as a disturbing element and, for this reason, effective in redefining the exhibition canon, which for its part has already largely welcomed and tamed the presence of sound tracks, reproduced in the isolation of listening through headphones or in the distracted sharing of a temporary sound viewing experience. Of course, stopping in front of a video, preferably in the shelter of a dark cube, has become a museum ritual that is anything but occasional and cannot be reduced to an interval of museum fatigue, a spectatorial practice that needs to be contextualized and analyzed in its real effects. But my observations in this case are essentially directed at some specific exhibition episodes, temporary or otherwise, in which the voice manifests itself as such in the museum spaces, undermining the privilege that has always been granted to the visual experience. Inevitably, this is a very partial and probably not exemplary selection, which excludes a whole series of artistic experiences are excluded in which, as in the case of performative conferences,

[...] the voice plays a secondary role compared to the word, the attention is in fact directed towards the contents and/or the communicative situation, despite the fact that discussions and artist conversations depart from the trunk of artistic research based on the use and exposition of the body (Gallo, 2022, p. 13).

The vocal performance, however implied and conditioned by the meaning of the word, instead constitutes a priority in the works collected in the exhibition *Voices*, whose catalogue in itself serves as an explicit thesis statement, starting with its cover, marked by a hole that penetrates the "body" of the book without allowing any light to escape.



Cover of the exhibition catalogue *Voices*.

Where does the voice come from? How does it relate to the object, to the gesture, to the image on display? What is the role of the audience, what is its possible response to the call that, it has been said, the voice, every voice, expresses? These are the questions posed by the works collected by Christopher Phillips in *Voices* and placed in dialogue with three different sites—the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, the Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona, and Le Fresnoy—Studio national des arts contemporains in Tourcoing—responding to three different architectures and their unique sound. Each building has, in fact, its own sound, a sound that, in the most fortunate cases, has the harmony of a song, as Paul Valéry wrote in his dialogue *Eupalinos ou l'architecte* (1921).

Vito Acconci, Judith Barry, Geneviève Cadieux, Janet Cardiff + George Bures Miller, Jochen Gerz, Gary Hill, Pierre Huyghe, Kristin Oppenheim, and Moniek Toebosch were the artists invited to participate in this project, which brought together three languages—English, French, and Spanish—and many voices that articulated, in the exhibition spaces and on the pages of the catalogue, a complex polyphony, a composition, not always symphonic, of thoughts and sonic experiences that prevented any disembodied contemplation. The following passage from the curator's introductory essay, *From Narcissus to Echo: The Voice as Metaphor and Material in Recent Art*, is unambiguous. A thesis that, at the end of the last century, had the double value of a balance and a proposal, juxtaposing the now historical work of Vito Acconci and Jochen Gerz, both born in 1940, with the research of artists of later generations who recognized in the voice a motive for reflection, occasional or, as in the case of Cardiff, constant, making the vocalic an instrument of investigation capable of destabilizing optical certainties, and questioning the cognitive and, above all, ordering function of the gaze on which the museum apparatus is based. In *Voice off*, an installation created by Judith Barry for the exhibition *Voices*, the precise objective was to question the privilege granted to vision in the experience of artworks

(and of reality) by highlighting the effective/affective power of the voice. To this end, the artist constructed a bipartite environment, a room divided into two equal parts, with two videos with separate soundtracks projected on either side of the wall. On one side, a dreamlike sequence was accompanied by several voices from above, composed of fragments of everyday speech, snippets of songs, and bits of inner monologues. On the other, the video shows a figure distracted by voices and sounds whose meaning he struggles to understand. Barry says she considers this work to be a “demonstration room”:

The viewer can shuttle back and forth between two competing kinds of aural registers, each with various scopic elements. I wanted to do more than just demonstrate how we are possessed by sounds, by the voice, by our abilities to become what we hear, to be different because of it, and to transform through it as we do when we speak other languages or sing, for instance.... It seems to me that the aural and the visual affect the body very differently. (I am thinking here of Fredric Jameson’s distinction between affect and effect). There is a way you can give yourself over to the voice when you let yourself or cannot help yourself. Obviously this occurs differently in the visual register (Barry, 1999, p. 77).

The difference between what is seen and what is heard is therefore manifested, activated, and exposed in Judith Barry’s installation. Through both the use and the traumatic negation of the voice, whose sudden absence is charged with tragedy, she demonstrates, as in sensory theory, the importance of the vocal and sound element—from which we cannot escape, because we cannot close our ears—in the construction of the experience. And above all, the museum spaces—which despite constant attempts at soundproofing as achieved in the white cube, a silent whitewashed sepulcher in which, as O’Doherty writes, “the Eye is the only inhabitant... The Spectator is not present” (O’Doherty, 1999, p. 42)—cannot entirely escape the acoustic shaking of the voice, and not only because the

voice has been the protagonist of avant-garde and, therefore, borderline artistic practices such as those recounted in the exhibition *The Body of the Voice. Carmelo Bene, Cathy Berberian, Demetrio Stratos*<sup>3</sup>.

The exhibition, curated by Anna Cestelli Guidi and Francesca Rachele Oppedisano at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome in 2019, through images (photographs, graphic and verbal notes, poetic and musical scores) made eloquent by video and audio recordings, as well as objects, documented the journey of three protagonists of contemporary research on the voice, creators of a decisive step within what we can undoubtedly call the cultural history of the voice, “what writing and history had to presuppose and at the same time lay down, in order to begin” (Nobile, 2019, p. 57). The starting points of the exhibition came from different but not discordant positions, found in the works of Beckett and Artaud, Bene, Berberian and Stratos, who contributed significantly to the affirmation in the second half of the twentieth century of the *phoné*, “the pure sound, extraneous both to the semantic substance of the *logos* and to the vocal form of the *melos*” (Barbieri, 2019, p. 38)—a voice devoid of meaning and song manifested itself by coinciding with the appearance on the artistic scene of practices that found their own specific space of expression in the material dimension of the body (the “body as language,” to quote Lea Vergine). The exhibition in Rome was thus an adventure of the voice and of art, narrated according to a well-studied but not surprising exhibition itinerary (including videos with headphones, wall projections, numerous display cases) that began in a gallery dedicated to studies of Stratos’ vocal experiments, translated into seductive visual landscapes through the use of digital technologies. On this occasion, the voice—the body of the voice—did not destabilize the exhibition canon, which essentially maintained the optical

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3. The exhibition was held at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome from April 9 to June 30, 2019.



privilege and proposed a sequential reading that was not too synaesthetic. Undoubtedly more radical, because it was freer from historiographical and documentary constraints, was the exhibition proposal recently presented at the Castello di Rivoli. Museum of Contemporary Art<sup>4</sup>.

*The Sounds of the World* was not actually an exhibition about the voice, but rather a project that proposed an intersection of different practices and forms of contemporary sound art with the aim of inclusivity. More or less well-known works by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė and Lina Lapelytė, Max Neuhaus, Susan Philipsz, Irene Dionisio, Hito Steyerl, Cooking Sections, Teresa Margolles, and Cally Spooner occupied the museum's exhibition galleries, passageways, attics, and outdoor spaces, constructing a sonic itinerary that was extremely heterogeneous in terms of inspiration and production technique, ranging from the recording and editing of environmental sounds, natural and otherwise, to singing. The most interesting intervention is the unprecedented and site-specific one by Ramona Ponzini, sound artist, curator and Japanologist, who was commissioned by the Castello di Rivoli in 2021 to create *frogs.picus.VANNA*, a three-channel installation. *Promenade* is the work that Ponzini conceived as a counterpoint to the visible and an unveiling of the invisible through a route—a walk, in fact—that was an exercise in listening and an active vocal essay involving less frequented and even inaccessible areas of the castle. The artist recorded the sounds and the spatial response to her singing in the gardens of Villa Cerruti, Parco Melano, extending to areas of the Castello di Rivoli that were

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4. *I suoni del mondo! The Sounds of the World*, curated by Marianna Vecellio, Castello di Rivoli, December 5, 2023-April 1, 2023. The exhibition was realized thanks to the support of the Ministry of Culture, “under the banner of inclusivity that aims to promote access to art for people with visual impairments.” <<https://www.castellodirivoli.org/mostra/i-suoni-del-mondo/#:-:text=I%20suoni%20del%20mondo%20%C3%A8,supporto%20del%20Ministero%20della%20Cultura>>.

inaccessible to visitors: the Falconers' Gallery, the Nymphaeum Grotto, a sixteenth-century tank, and a medieval well.

Composed of sounds and voices, a sound material that is rigorously and regularly combined in terms of color and temperature (and here, synesthesia is indeed a shining figure), *Promenade - Sound Scribbles* is the bold translation of Sol Lewitt's permanent installation *Panels and Towers with Colours and Scribbles*, a journey that turns us inside out and makes us something else (Berman, 1999). *Promenade - Reverse* is the work that Ramona Ponzini undertook in connection with Lothar Baumgarten's installation *Yurupari - Rheinsberg Room*, 1984, which is only offered for viewing in the one physically inaccessible space of the Falconers' Gallery. In this case, the collected tracks are combined with a recording of her voice, resulting in a fusion of word, sound, and image. A composition that is created through naming—the artist reads backwards the words in the indigenous Yurupari language describing the flora and fauna of their world, which Baumgarten recorded on the gallery walls, painted cobalt blue and dotted with feathers that penetrate the walls like pins. This reflection on colonialism and the ambiguities of taxonomy—an instrument of order and constraint by which the sound intervention is measured—becomes not a commentary, but rather an extension and a counterpoint in which meaning is not duplicated, but condenses and sinks, preventing any transparency. Here, the voice becomes a powerful heuristic tool, capable of restoring the exhibition's intrinsic meaning of “bringing forth,” which encompasses not only bringing to light but also exposing one to the potentialities of time and the experience of the body. Revealing the invisible.



Ramona Ponzini, *Promenade - Sound Scribbles* (2023).



Ramona Ponzini, *Promenade - Sound Scribbles* (2023).



Ramona Ponzini, *Promenade-Reverse* (2023).

Photo Giorgio Perottino for Castello di Rivoli. Museum of Contemporary Art.

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# THE EXHIBITION AS AN IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE<sup>1</sup>

Roberto Pinto

**Keywords:** Immersive strategies; Damien Hirst; Contemporary Art; Set-up strategies; Facts and fictions.

**Abstract:** In recent years, artists have employed a variety of strategies to create immersive and all-encompassing experiences that, in the majority of cases, seek to envelop the viewer in an alternative reality. On numerous occasions, artists have sought to elicit emotional responses from viewers by placing them at the center of the visual spectacle, positioning them as active participants in the artistic process. The exhibition *Damien Hirst. Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* can certainly be situated within this long-standing tradition and provides an interesting case study for examining the characteristics and limitations of such processes.

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1. Another version of this text was previously published in Italian in Morandi, *et al.*, 2020.

When art widens the angle, capital widens the boulevards (Lerner 2017, p. 31).

Contemporary art has, in a number of instances, adopted a strategy of spectacularity in order to engage the viewer. In many cases, artists have used strategies aimed at creating immersive, all-encompassing experiences that attempt to envelop the viewer in an alternative reality that is quite different from the everyday<sup>2</sup>. In the current artistic season, such projects continue to be staged by artists who have, on numerous occasions, sought to elicit emotional responses from viewers by placing them at the center of the visual display, thus making them active participants in the artistic process.

Damien Hirst's recent exhibition *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, held from April 9 to December 3, 2017, at Punta della Dogana and Palazzo Grassi in Venice, can be situated in the context of this long-standing tradition. It seems to me an interesting case study for exploring the characteristics and limits of these processes. The analysis of this exhibition, which was visited by more than 360,000 people, could even help to anticipate some possible developments of the artistic and exhibition system. In this instance, Damien Hirst demonstrated an extraordinary ability to devise a system for integrating conventional museum practices, in highly meticulous and extremely faithful reconstructions of stories from ancient history, with an equally rigorous pursuit of potential forms and representations of credible yet entirely fictional realities. By challenging the conventional boundaries of scholarship and verisimilitude, the artist not only proposed works and organized an exhibition in two vast, prestigious exhibition

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2. I am not referring here to the many spectacular exhibitions using high-definition projection technologies to create immersive experiences that allow the viewer to "inhabit" Van Gogh's paintings or to "see" Caravaggio's destroyed or inaccessible paintings, even though these examples do touch on the issues raised in this text.



spaces, but also created a network of knowledge around it that supported and enhanced the credibility of a carefully articulated narrative that linked the objects on display and embraced nearly the entire history of humanity.

The starting point of the story, and of the exhibition concept, was the alleged discovery of a shipwreck at the bottom of the Indian Ocean that yielded an enormous treasure trove of objects and works of art, the result of a chance discovery of the site made by a group of fishermen. The exhibition presented the “found” and catalogued objects in the Venetian museums, accompanied by a documentary-style film distributed on Netflix<sup>3</sup>. The film, bearing the same title as the exhibition, *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, chronicles the adventurous endeavor undertaken to recover the ship and its contents. Using cinematic techniques and the codes of scientific television broadcasting, the film invites viewers to immerse themselves in the story, fostering the perception that the artist’s construction is real (Tanni 2018). In other words, it is a mockumentary, a film shot like a documentary but in this case, depicting a fiction staged by the artist. Similarly, despite some obvious indications to the contrary that Hirst scattered throughout the galleries, visitors to the exhibition may have believed they were truly confronted with an incredible underwater archaeological discovery, and thus with a genuine collection that had gone down with the ship that carried it eighteen centuries ago.

The inscription “Somewhere between lies and truth lies the truth,” placed directly above the door at the entrance to the Punta della Dogana, was likely the first key to interpretation provided by the artist through a play on words. Some of the characters that could be seen in the exhibition seemed completely out of place, despite the fact that they were well

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3. The film, directed by Sam Hobkinson, was released in 2017, a few months after the opening of the exhibition. Damien Hirst also appears in the film as the financier of the excavation of the wreck.

hidden within encrustations, including Goofy, Mowgli, Baloo, and Mickey Mouse, to name the most prominent. In Hirst's fiction, for the first time in history, this enormous concentration of art and culture of the past, after the cleaning and subsequent restoration of each individual piece, was offered to the astonished gaze of the spectator. Unlike those who had only seen the film, visitors were able to wander around the rooms that house these "wonders." Although each of the works on display was unique, and thus an autonomous work of art that could be sold individually, it was possible to consider the entire exhibition as a single artistic operation that transcended any possible hierarchization of the individual sculptural groups and objects on display. It should be noted that the British artist conceived the work almost as if it were a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which even elements that are generally considered completely extraneous had to be included. In *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, for example, the scientific and informational devices played a role in the construction of meaning more than ever before.

In this sense, the exhibition catalogue assumes a central role in my analysis. This traditional tool for the scientific study of the artist's work and the works on display was designed in a strictly functional way to consolidate the narrative structure. It begins with a text by the curator, Elena Geuna, which, instead of providing us with technical data or a historical analysis of the exhibition and Hirst's work, becomes an instrument of narration. The text begins with the most archetypal and stereotypical opening of fairy tales: the phrase "Once upon a time" (Geuna 2017, p. 10), which introduces the story of the fictional character Cif Amotan II<sup>4</sup>, a freedman from Antioch, who lived between the middle of the first and the beginning

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4. By anagramming this name, one can easily compose the sentence "I am a fiction," in one of the many keys that reveal the falsification process implemented by the artist. It should also be noted that the possibility of manipulating names or using titles in a meaningful way (echoes of

of the second century AD. Because of his love for art and the earnings from his work, he is said to have amassed an incredible collection of artistic objects and jewels with the intention of building his palace of wonders. She then points out that, over the centuries, the account of the dramatic shipwreck of the vessel *Apistos*<sup>5</sup> has been enriched with details, with real events being incorporated into new narratives, giving rise to a myriad of parallel stories, often transmitted orally, which make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between authentic elements and the fantastic.

Geuna also points out that during the Renaissance, some of the sculptures purportedly belonging to the collector were a source of inspiration for drawings, preparatory studies, and works by artists of the time, ostensibly giving visual form to what could only be thought of in images. The exhibition demonstrated the long and painstaking process required to create a convincing forgery that appeared credible and resulted from careful study. The ubiquitous use of stamps and wax seals (tangible evidence of collections imprinted on the drawing sheet itself) on the nearly fifty drawings provided particularly compelling evidence of this meticulousness. It is also interesting to note that both the materials used to create these works and the techniques employed seemed, at least at first glance, to be based on traditional construction procedures or methods that could be reasonably compared to those of the period in question. With regard to the series of drawings, the specification “pencil, pastel, gold ink on vellum” was consistently indicated (Geuna 2017, p. 331).

In addition to the sculptures and the drawing rooms, an important place in the exhibition itinerary was occupied by large-format photographs hung on the walls, the underwater

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Duchamp’s work also resonate here) is often used by Hirst, who also makes this mechanism explicit in numerous interviews.

5. In this case, the Greek name of the ship is reflected in the title of the exhibition; the translation of *Apistos* is “unbelievable.”

documentaries on the discovery shown in the projection rooms, and the information and dissemination apparatus that accompanied and narrated the enormous number of works installed<sup>6</sup> in the Punta della Dogana and Palazzo Grassi. Each element was autonomous and, at the same time, an integral part of the project, so much so that visitors were left wondering whether the marble or bronze sculptures placed in the center of the room could be separated from the narrative and the information apparatus. In *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, it was difficult to distinguish figure from background, impossible to separate canvas from frame. Such an operation inevitably raises questions (not entirely new, of course) about the status of a work of art itself and its limits. The exhibition therefore called into question not only what parts of *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* should be considered works of art, but also what could be preserved in a permanent collection in the context of such an operation. In addition, one of the surprises of the exhibition were the perfectly lit display cases and a state-of-the-art information system that would be the envy of the most prominent international museums. Among the works listed in the catalogue were twenty-one display cases (containing jewelry, tools, coins, vases, etc.) that were themselves classified as individual works of art. Regardless of one's aesthetic or artistic appreciation of Hirst's project, it offered an extraordinary opportunity to analyze the ways in which contemporary artists can implement the mechanisms of exhibition display and strategies for engaging the viewer, especially because of its extensive scale and ambition. At the same time, it can be seen as a tool for examining the manipulative possibilities of art with regard to the concept of truth.

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6. To give just one example, in Room 23 of the Palazzo Grassi, the display case containing a model of the Apistos could be framed by visitors with a digital screen that, placed near the model, allowed them to visualize the hypothetical place where the works had been found, as well as a reference to the location in the exhibition where the actual work was displayed.

This is not merely through the conventional mimetic weapons of reality that it has consistently used, but also through the capacity of the exhibition itself to serve a single, coherent, and yet fantastical narrative construction of reality.

From another point of view, Damien Hirst's operation can be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile, in a clearly artificial, but also complex and sophisticated way, the need for art to make research and even to exist with the thrust towards ephemeral events that has characterized it in recent decades. A sign, then, of the search for a balance between the most contemporary forms of culture, deeply influenced by a performative and participatory dimension, and traditional aspects that are intimately linked to the production of the objects. In the words of Boris Groys, "Today's artistic events cannot be preserved and contemplated like traditional artworks. However, they can be documented, 'covered', narrated and commented on. Traditional art produced art objects. Contemporary art produces information about art events" (Groys 2016, p. 4). *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, like any other such event, tended to make the viewer part of the show staged by the artist<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, it aimed to satisfy a traditional market that is incapable of embracing anything less than the object, the concrete, tangible manifestation of its richness and the possibility of accessing, if only for a moment, the eternity to which art has always aspired. The element of death and progressive decay, a leitmotif in Hirst's production, was clearly present here, albeit treated literally. What seemed to emerge was the figure of the celebrated collector as the driving force of the operation, a veritable *deus ex machina*, seen not only as the embodiment of the mercantile chain that underpins the art economy, but also as a figure mirroring that of the

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7. In addition, he has a particular gift for creating icons that can become social messages. Hirst's Instagram account has more than one million followers, and the hashtag #damienhirst has more than 314,000 posts (last consulted 23/05/2024).

artist himself (who in fact used himself as the model for a bust depicting the collector (Geuna 2017, p. 195), no longer (only) called upon to invent new readings or new interpretations of the world, but also to reorder it, to accumulate it, to create an archive of it.

The spectator's experience was therefore complex and participatory, although there is some doubt about the participatory aspects which, however much we want to consider them as finely articulated, were ultimately rather standardized, in terms of the emphasis with which each theme, each object, each work, was treated, perhaps to the detriment of the cognitive and interpretive possibilities of the spectators, who were primarily encouraged (or perhaps induced?) to be amazed. This aspect did not undermine the careful staging and enormous effort behind the British artist's operation, but if his primary objective was to challenge the veracity of historical and museum constructions, or at least of the univocity with which they are presented, the marvelous process of historical falsification in *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, with its constant spectacularization, may not have been entirely convincing.

Another exhibition presented in Venice at the same time as Hirst's, *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied*, may provide further insight into this matter. The result of a collaboration between Udo Kittelmann, the curator, and three artists, Thomas Demand, Alexander Kluge, and Anna Viebrock, the exhibition revolved around similar themes: the concept of spectacularization, the relationship to the public, and the relationship between experienced truth and staging. At first glance, the similarities between the two exhibitions (including the economic investment made to produce them) appear numerous, but the differences between them are equally evident.

As Udo Kittelmann tells us, the exhibition is a kind of experiment in the attempt to create "a project to carry out together" (Kittelmann 2017, p. 14). The impetus (and, in a way, the pretext) for this undertaking was the reproduction of a painting by Angelo Morbelli, which the curator and the artists

shared and discussed. *Giorni ultimi* (Last Days), completed in 1883, was the first, and perhaps the most successful (with this painting Morbelli won the Fumagalli Prize in Brera, in 1889, and the gold medal at the Universal Exhibition in Paris), of a cycle of canvases set in the Pio Albergo Trivulzio in Milan<sup>8</sup> that deals with social themes close to verista (realist) literature. At the beginning, the three (plus one) protagonists of this experiment perceived the elderly painted figures as images of sailors, and the environments as the interiors of a Venetian space, but this was an incorrect interpretation. However, their different interpretations of the painting and the fruitfulness of their errors of exegesis allowed for the birth of an exhibition whose heart lies in the physical reproduction of those painted spaces, which were reconstructed in the Ca' Corner della Regina, the eighteenth-century Venetian palazzo that is now the headquarters of the Prada Foundation, in a fake narrative mechanism that also resonated on the other side of the lagoon. In *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied*, however, the creation of a new reality was based on the acceptance of chance, on the apparent diversity of three personalities who, despite a similar capacity for research and experimentation, have specificities that are difficult to assimilate, starting from the use of art (Demand), cinema (Kluge), and theater (Viebrock) as privileged fields of action.

It should come as no surprise, then, that as an extended incipit for the exhibition catalogue, a text was commissioned from the American writer Ben Lerner, who was able to breathe new life into the concept of *ékphrasis*<sup>9</sup>. His poetic text, entitled

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8. It should be noted that the artist went so far as to work in a studio in the Pio Albergo Trivulzio between 1902 and 1903 in order to explore themes such as old age and death.

9. The writer has previously collaborated with Demand (see Lerner, Demand, 2015) and with other artists, and has published numerous novels (see Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Minneapolis, Coffee House Press, 2011) in which art plays a central role.

*The Snows of Venice*, was written specifically for Alexander Kluge. Here too, the viewer was called upon to interpret the exhibition, “the visual dramaturgy,” in the words of the curator (Kittelman 2017, p. 315), but the experiment of *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied* was, in my opinion, much more convincing and intellectually solid precisely because the three-voice game orchestrated by Kittelmann was more refined and somewhat transparent. Fact and fiction were necessarily mixed, almost mirroring what happens in any cultural process, where the original meaning is inevitably distorted and re-actualized by another subject’s reading. Hirst’s *grandeur* is a winning weapon with which to engage the general public, capable of involving them in a kind of fairy tale through a process of immersion that requires minimal effort on the part of the viewer. Without diminishing the artist’s remarkable ability to construct a story layered with a multitude of visual strategies, an incredible wealth of detail and, last but not least, an enviable entrepreneurial talent, it can be argued that Hirst’s project has reached its limit in its excessive self-reflection and the narcissistic game of challenging the system at all costs. This approach seems to have forgotten to leave room for the dark, even morbid aspect that so clearly and disturbingly characterized his earlier projects. In different ways, the two exhibitions took as their starting point “the dominant mantra of bigger is better, and the better is richer” (Bishop, 2013, p. 6). And perhaps it couldn’t be otherwise when considering the identity of the exhibition spaces themselves. In the one case, the pursuit of sensationalism was clearly driven by economic investment, whereas in the other, ostentation was neither an end nor, much less, a means to an end; it was simply not a necessity.



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IMMERSED IN THE IMAGE.  
THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE  
OF VIRTUAL REALITY

Fabrizia Bandi

**Keywords:** VR art; Aesthetic Experience; Immersiveness; Performer

**Abstract:** This essay explores the distinctive aesthetic experience of VR artworks, drawing on French phenomenological theory to elucidate the sensory aspects of this kind of engagement. It explores the bodily encounter between the viewer and the visual content, examining how virtual reality blurs the boundary between the real and the virtual, challenging traditional notions of spectatorship and aesthetic object.

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Virtual reality (VR)<sup>1</sup> is a technology that is becoming increasingly prevalent in the galleries of many museums. It is

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not uncommon to find VR installations with seats and headsets even in exhibitions that use other languages. Conversely, VR can also be a tool that brings the museum experience directly into our homes. With the right device, it is possible to enjoy a VR artwork from the comfort of your living room sofa. This type of artwork can be installed in almost any location (provided it is not too brightly lit), since the essence of such works is constituted by the aesthetic experience of the user, which can be fully realized with the proper technical equipment.

Before examining *how* this occurs, it is first necessary to establish a brief premise. When I use the term “aesthetic experience,” I am describing sensible experience; in particular, I am referring to French phenomenological theory, which during the last century sought to thematize a dimension of meaning that arises from bodily perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). In this context, artworks must be understood as components of the perceptible world with which individuals engage: the work of art represents a specific type of object in front of which viewers adopt an attitude that allows them to grasp its expressive and affective character (Dufrenne, 1953). Therefore, on the one hand, we need to consider the tangible effects of experiencing a VR artwork; on the other hand, we must also need to explore the specific characteristics that clearly differentiate it from more traditional artistic objects and images.

This medium offers us a series of immersive content that requires special equipment to experience. Wearing a VR headset (with or without hand controllers), users find themselves in a digital space that surrounds them 360 degrees: it can be freely explored by moving the head in any direction, turning around and, in some cases, even walking within the space. The character of these images is therefore uncertain, poised between

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a real image and a real environment. The contents visualized on the display inside the helmet are certainly high-definition digital images, but the architecture and technology of the device—in particular the two stereoscopic lenses that give the perception of depth—mean that the sensible impression is markedly different from the visual experience we are used to. In other words, if by “image,” I refer both to what I observe depicted in a painting hanging on a gallery wall and to what I see in a VR display, it is easy to see that we are dealing with two aesthetic objects of a dissimilar nature, which correspondingly imply to different aesthetic experiences.

A first way to characterize this visual dimension is to describe it as an “environmental image” (Pinotti, 2020; 2021). What unfolds is, in fact, an artificial world in image. And this is precisely the specificity and peculiarity of virtual reality: it is an image that thinks it is a space—and behaves like one. In the photograph of Luca Pozzi’s installation *Rosetta Mission 2020* (a project funded and curated by the AN-ICON research group<sup>2</sup> in 2021); we see a girl wearing a headset and behind her, live on the screen, the video of her experience. This gives us a good idea of what is meant by “spatial image”: it envelops us, separates us from our surroundings, and reveals an environment that is shaped by the movements of our body or the controller we hold in our hands.

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2. The AN-ICON Residency - 12th Atelier “Luca Pozzi: Rosetta Mission 2020,” curated by Elisabetta Modena and Sofia Pirandello: <<https://an-icon.unimi.it/calendars/4994-2/>>. Since 2021, in addition to the eleven studios physically present in *Casa degli Artisti*, the *12th Atelier* is hosting a program of artist residencies produced by AN-ICON.



Luca Pozzi, *Rosetta Mission 2020* (2021), VR (6DoF), 2-10 giugno 2021, Casa degli Artisti Milano. Edited by Elisabetta Modena, Sofia Pirandello e The Swan Station. Produced by ERC Advanced Grant « AN-ICON. An-Iconology: History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images ».

To understand the nature of this experience, I would like to refer to the aesthetic theory of the French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne, who has devoted an entire book to describing the perceptual processes triggered by the particular object that is the work of art. Dufrenne was writing in the 1950s, so he certainly could not have been referring to VR, but some parts of the argument he develops can clarify certain aspects of these experiences. The fundamental element of his thought is the flesh-and-blood presence of the viewer, the only one capable of transforming a work of art into an *aesthetic object*. The work, according to the philosopher, is completed not at the moment when the painter applies the last brushstroke to the canvas or when the sculptor chisels the last groove into the stone, but when it is experienced by the viewer (Dufrenne, 1953). In other words, it is only in the physical presence of a

work of art that its essence is revealed, and this emerges from the perceptual relationship with the individual.

When considering the application of this model to virtual reality, one is faced with a number of problems that initially seem insurmountable. The first is to determine where the work is located and consequently, what it is made of. The material substrate that usually initiates the experience seems to be absent: a painting is clearly a physical object, while the structure of the VR work remains “hidden” in the hardware of the device. What our sensible experience conveys to us is the encounter between our eyes and the seemingly unframed image displayed inside the headset. The concrete support is obviously there, but it is not *immediately* perceived. This is one of the fundamental features that determines the experience of virtual reality: the supposed *transparency* of the medium (cf. Bolter & Grusin, 1999). We can “feel” the weight of the helmet on our head, but the impression of being in contact with the image is still predominant. It could be said that changing the aesthetic language of the work also changes its genetic code: we are, effectively, dealing with a *binary code* that defines the visual content as it is actualized, i.e. with software that manages all the variables of the scenarios, the actions and interactions that can be performed within them, the sounds present in the artificial environment, and so on.

Feeling part of another dimension, immersed in the image, also profoundly changes the role of the experiencer. In contrast to traditional images, where, to simplify a bit, it can be said that “one is *not* there, one does *not* participate, the recipient is *not* part of the event, does *not* belong to it” (Wiesing, 2014, p. 145), here we have the opposite. In virtual reality, the relationship between the user and the images during the aesthetic experience is completely reversed. In fact, it must be stated that the experiencer *is there, participating, being part of the event, and ultimately, actually belonging to it*. The experiencer embedded in these works is not merely a detached observer,

but instead becomes a real *performer* called upon to bring the work to life, each time in a different way.

For example, in *Eurydice. A Descent into Infinity* (2022), Celine Daemen reinvents the ancient myth by placing users in the shoes of Orpheus in the search for his beloved.



Celine Daemen, *Eurydice, a Descent into Infinity* (2022), VR (6DoF), produced by Studio Nowhere & Silbersee. Netherlands.





Celine Daemen, *Eurydice, a Descent into Infinity* (2022), VR (6DoF),  
produced by Studio Nowhere & Silbersee. Netherlands.

The ethereal silhouette of the nymph, which only appears fleetingly, acts as a guide to this descent into the underworld as users walk through the tangled maze, creating their own unique path. The sensation of meandering endlessly through the crumbling corridors leading to Hades is undoubtedly heightened by the possibility of “really” moving within a fairly large physical space. When, as in this case, those experiencing the digital environment also enjoy ample freedom of movement, it becomes even more apparent how necessary the role of the user is for the evolution of the work itself: the experience literally unfolds through the paths that are successively chosen and the glimpses of space towards which the gaze is directed.

This aspect may seem insignificant, but on the contrary, it determines a key element in defining the ontological status of this type of work. If, for example, an artist were to design a virtual installation and no one, not even the artist, were to experience it—which is theoretically possible—one might wonder whether it really exists. Certainly, there would be a sequence of codes, a computer program. But knowing its structure does not mean experiencing it in its entirety: its appearance, its shapes, its colors; just as a meticulous description of a sculpture and knowledge of the materials from which it is made would not convey its essential complexity.

In this respect, virtual immersive art seems to bear a resemblance to cinema or music; musical scores and film stills are sequences of signs or data that need to be reproduced or elaborated. To illustrate this point, I propose the following example. In the year 2015, an unpublished work by Vivaldi was performed. Prior to that moment, the existence of the manuscript—accidentally discovered in the archives of a German library—was completely unknown. More importantly, the piece had not been heard by anyone for the past two hundred years. One might wonder when the composition actually came into existence, when the score was first authenticated, or when it was first performed and heard. I believe that in such a case, as with VR art, the experience of the work is decisive. Such an aesthetic object exists only by virtue of its encounter with an audience. In the case of the Vivaldi work, there is a “score” that serves as an authentic material coefficient, but it is not enough to make the work “real.” Furthermore, just as tools (musicians and their instruments) are necessary to translate musical language into a perceptible register, so in the case of VR works, the appropriate hardware and apparatus are necessary to actualize the content of the experience.

In the context of virtual reality pieces, however, the issue is particularly profound, because the artists lack total control over their creations. Unlike other forms of representation, the artist must *necessarily* invite viewers to enter the work

and choose their own point of view, to become the director of the images they will see. This is a reversal of the traditional position of the spectator, who traditionally stands passively in *front* of the work. Instead, viewers actively create the scenario of their own experience, step by step. One might even interpret this structural feature as an elaboration of the symbolic form implied by perspective; rather than the artist presenting us with a fixed vision of the world, the creators of a VR experience deliberately choose to give life to works that are merely rough sketches of their intentions. It is then up to the experiencers to bring these works to full completion. Placed at the center, they serve as the “zero point of the coordinates” within an artificial spatial system shaped by their own movements.

The philosopher Mikel Dufrenne, in his *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique*, defined the spectator as “*exécuteur*,” as a “witness” and “performer” (Dufrenne, 1953), as much an active participant in the realization of the work of art as the artist. According to Dufrenne, however, the role of the spectator is limited. Indeed, the required *performance* is rhetorically implicit in the process of perception:

But, in the plastic arts, we may be tempted to give the title of performance to that kind of ‘game’ [*jeu*] which the spectator must play or act out [*jouer*] in front of the work in order to select or multiply his perspectives on it... The work is a forceful lover who draws the spectator to precisely those points where he must place himself in order to become a witness. But it is too much to call this sort of activity performance, for it is not a question of creating the sensuous but of perceiving it (Dufrenne, 1953, p. 51).

Conversely, the immersion and interaction required by VR installations ask the “spectator” to literally become the *performer* of the work in the most meaningful sense of the word, creating part or all of the artwork through gestures and actions.

However, Dufrenne's argument rests on another factor that seems to be undermined in virtual reality: the physical presence of the experienter. The environmental image generated by VR devices evokes the ambiguous feeling of being in a space that is not the actual physical location (in the literature on the subject, this phenomenon is referred to as "being there"<sup>3</sup>). The result is a sense of being situated between two distinct states: on the one hand, in the flesh, in physical form, in the tangible world—where I am wearing the headset and my corporeal body is visible—and on the other, a disembodied gaze or a virtual bodily entity within an image world. This dichotomy is underscored by the subtitle of Alejandro Inárritu's celebrated work *Carne y Arena: Virtually Present, Physically Invisible* (Fondazione Prada, 2017). The body disappears but is indirectly reintroduced into the artificial world through the coupling of visual content with kinesthetic sensations. The physical body thus remains active, and its movements respond to the image variations that occur inside the headset due to the tracking technology used. In such virtual art, therefore, the experiencers retain their kinesthetic capacity, but paradoxically lose their anchorage in the world. They behave *as if* they are in the image world, but in reality, they are not. To better understand the implications of this "relocation"<sup>4</sup> of the body, we can draw upon the argument developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who explored this notion in relation to one of the experiments conducted by Max Wertheimer. The psychologist analyzed the perception of body movements reflected

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3. The field of *presence studies* is very broad and I refer to only one specific aspect here. Fundamental references in this field of research include: Ijsselstein & Riva, 2003; Slater & Usoh, 1993; Biocca & Delaney, 1995; Lombard & Ditton, 1997.

4. The experienter in virtual environments is subjected to a *deterritorialization*—as Pierre Lévy (1995), inspired by Deleuzian philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), states—but unlike other devices or communication systems, immersive images force a *reterritorialization*: to re-establish oneself in a new "here" (Bandi, 2021).

in a mirror: “This *virtual body* ousts the real one to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is, and that instead of his real legs and arms, he feels that he has the legs and arms he would need to walk and act in the reflected room: he inhabits the spectacle” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 291, emphasis added). Here, too, the presence of the body is questioned, and a virtual body emerges in response to a new set of circumstances. Similarly, subjects who participate in a virtual installation resituate themselves in that space and establish a new “pact” with it (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 292).

In closing, I would like to emphasize the limitations of this technology, but not in a negative sense. Indeed, the concepts of “presence” and “immersiveness” have been evoked in this text, but the experience offered by this medium is far removed from what we encounter in the real world. The body that enters this artificial dimension is a diminished one, in most cases with only eyes and ears. Users are just partially able to inhabit the spectacle, because although they are immersed in the image, they can never transcend the physical dimension.

Therefore, the goal of virtual reality art should not be to provide a mere simulation of an alternative reality, but quite the opposite, just as a painting should not be seen as a banal reproduction of any given content. As Franzini argues, the role of art is to complicate our vision of the world, to invent new ambits and meanings. Representation does not merely reproduce reality, but also reveals its complexity (cf. Franzini, 2011). This “complicating our vision of the world” certainly corresponds to a specific interpretation of the virtual. The philosopher Tomás Maldonado described this concept as the innate desire of the human being to “illusorily furnish the world” (Maldonado, 1992), a desire that has manifested itself over the centuries through various techniques and has been a constant challenge to art. The fact that today these media represent one of the possible ways of satisfying this need

should prompt further reflection. Art has these new tools at its disposal, with which it can make the image a driving element of reality rather than its opposite. VR artworks, now a widespread but still little systematized phenomenon, can now be seen as a conduit for users to experience unexplored scenarios that would otherwise be inaccessible, offering a different but equally effective way of consecrating an imaginary and making it truly relevant and real.

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PART II

MEMORY



# THE ARCHIVE: BETWEEN HISTORY AND EXHIBITION PRACTICES

Francesca Zanella

**Keywords:** Archival Practices; Process; Memory; History of display

**Abstract:** In the context of a growing interest in the role of archives in artistic and curatorial practices and historical research, the results of the conference *Archivi esposti* (Bari 2021) mark the return of the representative framework, but also the arrival of, and perhaps a turning point in, the reflection on the relationships between the archive, history, memory, and the exhibition. These relationships have been intertwined in multiple fields since the 1990s. I would like to take this as a starting point to traverse the sometimes inseparable links between object, work, the definition of narrative paths, and the archive as forms of the contemporary condition, drawing a map to suggest the themes that are particularly significant in the present era.

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## I. THE ARCHIVE, BETWEEN “DISCOURSE” AND PROCESS

In reflecting on the relationships between the archive, history, memory, and exhibition, I would like to start with questions about the role of exhibitions as a site of narratives and of the transformation of the meanings associated with artworks and objects: How does the display ascribe meanings by triggering relationships and suggesting absences, defining a space of interaction on multiple levels? What is the role of the archive as a possible starting point for narratives, but also as a repository of the traces of temporary and temporal phenomena such as exhibitions, and at the same time as a possible site of display? Finally, what are the tools needed to preserve and interpret, but also to reconstruct, histories?

The preconditions for such a discourse can still be seen in the artworks that focus on the archives and archival practices brought into focus by Hal Foster (2004) and by a number of seminal exhibitions (from *Deep Storage*, 1998, to Okwui Enwezor’s *Archive Fever*, 2008), which continue to serve as the foundation for critical interpretations. Since the end of the 1990s, there has been a proliferation of both punctual investigations limited to specific works and proposals for defining an overall picture (from Baldacci, 2016 to Calahan, 2022). Moments of confrontation between historians have been promoted continuously and in different contexts, while the subject of art archiving practices has been addressed in curatorial workshops. Museums have begun to promote residency programs in order to open themselves to new analyses of their collections. Consequently, some of the projects that have been implemented have triggered a broader reflection on the processes of decolonization, proposing a reinterpretation of museum collections from an archival perspective, as in the *L’internationale* project (2013-2016) (Zanella, 2019), which is also an expression of an orientation towards the transformation of the museum into an archive, beginning with a rethinking of the logic of collecting and historical narratives (Groys, 1997).

The constant reference to this historical institution, entrusted from the outset with the preservation of state testimonies, to the place of the *arché*, and to the practices of archiving, organizing, and conserving, has thus initiated a dialogue that continues today with the specific field of archival studies. In this field, a debate has developed that is increasingly oriented towards understanding the new processes of archive construction also in the context of postcolonial theories (Ernst, 2016), as well as in the search for a definition of the specificity of art collections. After the first foundational discussions on the subject (Merewether, ed., 2006; Breakell, 2008), today we have to consider the temporal and symbolic dimensions of the archive that are specific to the work, as Nancy (2014) points out. Other authors have helped us to understand that it is essential to reflect on each act that leads to locating the testimonies stored in the archive and consequently, on the nature of exhibitions, installations, and displays: the archive as curatorial practice and as artistic practice; the archive between history and memory in the research of artists, philosophers, and historians; the archive in its formation in studios, museum spaces, and data centers, between accumulation and selection.

For each of these trajectories, the point of intersection passes through excavations, reorganizations, and metaphorical, analogical, and digital exhibits, acts whose succession is not necessarily given, but is itself the object of questioning, especially with regard to important dimensions that are also intrinsic to contemporary culture: that of the lost (on which Francesca Castellani reflects here), but also that of temporality, the ephemeral, and the awareness of the power of translation. Themes that, precisely because they are the foundations of contemporary culture, do not belong to artistic research and writing alone, but are shared by philosophical thought as well as by historical research in which reflections on temporality, transience and therefore, we would add, archivability, return.

In *Questioning Exhibit Display*, one of the words of the constellation proposed as a key to interpretation is memory.

It therefore seems necessary to start our reflection from Aleida Assmann's book (2002), an investigation of the changes in cultural memory that develops through an analysis of "functions," a definition of "mediators" (metaphors, writing, images, body and places), and finally a reflection on the different "repositories": not only archives, but also simulations and works of art. It is neither accidental nor irrelevant that the interpretation of the artist's contribution, of his or her becoming in and from the archive, concludes the dense argumentation on the transformation over time of the mechanisms of memory and remembrance, and thus of the relationship with the individual and collective past. Especially when the interpretation of such simulations leads to reflections that are also relevant to an analysis of the phenomenology of exhibitions and above all, of display in contemporary culture. An important passage in the text is the one in which Assmann takes up the concept of biodegradability developed by Derrida in the seminar *Biodegradables* (1988/89). Recognizing the transformative dimension of the work can also mean identifying in the archive the place of preservation, but also of transformation itself, underlined by the pervasiveness, because it is plural and collective, of the actions of accumulation and the "tendency towards decentralisation in historical archiving" (Ivi, p. 389). The increasingly popular modes of archiving (Appadurai, 2003) are also confronted with the paradigm shift imposed by the digital, a context in which preservation can only take place thanks to the continuous digital transcription of information in a process of permanent migration "archives and writing are no longer stable data warehouses, they are fluid systems that self-organize" (Assmann, 2002, p. 398).

The data cloud is self-organizing, but at the same time, as Manovich (2017) tells us, it is a medium that goes beyond the symbolic system of databases, and that also imposes a shift in the paradigm of display or visualization.

It is not enough, however, to focus on processuality, as this takes on meaning when examined from the current

“environmental” dimension of many contemporary manifestations, which can be understood from Benjamin’s definition of the concept of medium as “a sensitive environment or milieu that is constantly being reconfigured by a series of techniques, apparatuses and devices” (Somaini, 2018, p. 104). In this way, current media theory can be opened up to an analysis that is “at once aesthetic, epistemological and political of the relationship between technical *Apparatur* and the ‘Medium of perception’” (Ivi, p. 106).

The relationship between the archive and the display (understood as the environment and as the action [Beck, 2014] of rewriting and re-signifying), must therefore be brought to the fore and assume a new centrality within a discourse on the archive that is not only conducted in Foucauldian terms (Foucault, 1966; 1969). The complexity of this relationship can be restored if we also take into account the physical and spatial nature of the object/phenomenon, the system of stratifications that can trigger connections and relationships that are not immediately apparent (Breakell & Russel, eds., 2024).

And, as the study of memory and history teaches us, an awareness of the nature of documents and traces, but also of the mechanisms of perception, is fundamental, which, in the field of visual arts, means rethinking the status of the artwork and its transformations over time. It is also essential to evaluate the repercussions of the process of selection not only as an act (whether conscious or accidental) of constituting the archive, but also as an act that underlies the dimension of creation proper to history or the construction of memory. Fundamental to this perspective is the meaning of the word “memory” for Benjamin: a medium that collects images, “paying attention not only to the image found, but also and above all to the circumstances in which it took place,” and an idea of history that “is brought back to the experience of remembrance” (Marchesoni, 2018, pp. 111, 113).

History, or rather histories, that are also traced through the device of the exhibition impose a translation, a re-reading, and a return to the present time.

## 2. EXHIBIT / DISPLAY

One of the problems with which we are still struggling today is the difficulty of delimiting the scope of the display, and thus its definition. The reasons for this are to be found in the history of a practice that began to take on the definition of a design discipline at the beginning of the twentieth century, but whose boundaries are still fluid today, moving between staging and interior design; in the complexity of the discourses on display understood as both an act of presentation and a narrative; and finally in the inviting and constant confrontation with art theories and with the progressive move away from an idea based on the sole object dimension of the work.

Obrist (2001) has already questioned the meaning of “installation,” a term with even more connotations than “display,” noting the difficulty of finding a common meaning while identifying a common rejection of a gaze centered on the object dimension and a tendency to see installation as a site and tool through which to explore interactions, and thus the network dimension.

The multiplicity of meanings of display also has linguistic roots. For Martin Beck in German, display is an activity, while exhibition, despite its ephemeral status, is a static format (Beck, 2014).

Turning to other linguistic contexts, Chapman, Scholten and Woodall (2015) have noted that the meaning of display oscillates between the etymology of the Latin *displicare*, referring to the act of the hand that “uncovers and unfolds,” which emphasizes showing, and that of the Dutch term, which instead emphasizes the relationship to forms of reception and the audience. The importance of the linguistic context is



demonstrated by the efforts of an international body such as ICOM to create a common conceptual framework for museology: in the two English and French linguistic frameworks of the first edition of the *Key Concepts of Museology* (Mairesse & Desvallées, 2010), the term *display/scénario* is not taken as an autonomous lemma but recurs as an essential component of display.

A fluidity of meanings that is also given by the articulation of discourses in the passage from the level of project theory to that of critical analysis and disciplinary debates: from making visible ideas that are “non-visual” (Bayer, 1939), to the distinction between exhibition design and exhibit display that restores the complex dynamics triggered by the project between spaces, objects, and narratives (Neuburg, Burtin & Fischli, 1969) and thus the public.

On the distinction between project and semiotic reading we find, for example, the reflection of Giovanni Anceschi (2011). Then there is the narratological analysis of Mieke Bal (1992), who investigates the display “as a sign system working in the realm between visual and verbal and between information and persuasion” (p. 561); while Michael Baxandall (1991) sees the exhibition as a field of forces in which three agents, the author of the artifact, the exhibitor, and the observer, act in different ways, removing the contribution of the display. Then, in the field of exhibition history, a paradigm shift leads to a rethinking of the responsibility of institutions in defining canons, also through the display. Foundational in this regard is the contribution of Staniszewski (1998) who filled a void by drawing attention to installation design, its ability to contribute to the collective unconscious, and at the same time the power that museums have exercised in defining visual and narrative canons.

Today, one can hypothesize that a reorientation of research is marked by the convergence of interests in exhibition display in different disciplinary fields, even more invested by the postcolonial debate and the need to deal with a panorama of

conflict, censorship, and loss. In this regard, the results of a recent research project are particularly stimulating, exploring the possible connections and divergences that the display between the museum and the theater may have with respect to a crucial issue such as trauma, one of the territories of the study of memory. By comparing different ways of understanding key concepts such as performance, stage, and display, the project has generated new reading hypotheses (Delgado, Kobiálka & Lease, 2024).

Another important component of contemporary culture is the convergence and epistemological confrontation between the dimension of exhibition narrative, the dynamics of scientific research, and the new processes of creating, organizing, and archiving digital data (Bruno Latour's actor/network theory and exhibition projects for ZKM).

Perhaps this lies in the area of confrontation that is emerging between disciplines, where the progressive transformation of the idea of the artwork also converges; it is increasingly open to questioning the environment and confronting itself with the tools of scientific research, as demonstrated by the questions raised by the definition of the Anthropocene in artistic research (starting from Demos, 2016), the idea of display as a collective act involving "subtle and dynamic interactions, and socially, economically, and historically situated and highly controlled environments, designed to elicit particular psychological responses" (Chapman, Scholten & Woodall, 2015, p. 13).

As Somaini notes, the notions of media ecology, media environments, and environmental media presuppose "an increasingly close intertwining of technology and nature, which produces transformations in the forms of sensory experience" (Somaini, 2018, p. 106).

All of this calls for new tools of analysis, and a rethinking of archival processes.

### 3. ARCHIVE, HISTORY AND DISPLAY PRACTICES

How does one construct history from the intersection between archive and display (an act or device that integrates or rewrites the work and the object, or weaves together a sequence of facts or concepts), an intersection that inevitably triggers an unstable balance between two spheres characterized by somewhat antagonistic properties? The archive, which is both an instrument for authenticating the truth and the site of contradictions that can emerge, for example, through a reading of its creation; and the display, an indispensable component of the exhibition, by its very nature ephemeral and temporary, struggling with decay.

Some of the contributions collected in *Archivi esposti* suggest possible trajectories of investigation, highlighting the multiplicity of perspectives. First of all, the question of whether exhibiting archives “does not risk defusing by force of exposure that subversive, transformative potential of which archives are an inalienable reserve” (Zuliani, 2022, p. 29); the need to study the territory of display in relation to the specificity of the structure and nature of the archive (Castellani, 2022); the need “to reposition the investigation of archival practices in art and contemporary art history precisely from the convergent reflection on the exhibition complex” (Mancini, 2022, p. 21), verifying the continuous reaffirmation of the canons of Western culture.

These considerations give rise to further questions. First, it is necessary to determine whether or not anything has changed since the first phase of the archival impulse, as exemplified by the work of Thomas Hirschhorn, Sam Durant, and Tacita Dean in Foster’s now canonical text. The main paradigm shift of modernist “remediated representations” only partially affects the authorial dimension as a result of the practices implemented. In fact, the archival artists “make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present... push the postmodernist complications

of originality and authorship to an extreme” (Foster, 2004, p. 4). Above all, it begins to redefine the boundaries of the archive by including the Internet mega-archive. The artist is both engaged with informal archives and is a producer of archives, implementing dynamics that seem to contradict the archivist’s principles of verification and order, and that lead Foster himself to question the principle of order inherent in pre-modern archives: “Perhaps all archives develop in this way, through mutations of connection and disconnection, a process that this art also serves to disclose” (Ivi, p. 6).

It is useful to emphasize that these considerations were shared during the same period by some voices in archival studies, articulated by Manoff (2004) the year Foster’s essay was published. Of particular interest are the voices of Cook (Cook & Schwartz, 2002) and Osthoff (2009), who highlight the performative dimension of archivists’ archival work.

To answer the question of what the parable of the return to the archive is today, one can perhaps trace a sign of change in Cook’s own identification of the community dimension as a contemporary mental model and “formal system” (Cook, 2013). For Cook, the response to a condition characterized by both a focus on the political dimension and an inevitable confrontation with the digital one, is that of a pluralistic approach, in which the archivist-activist guides a collaborative creative process aimed not only at identifying evidence, but also at constructing memory. In this way, the archivist becomes a co-participant in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction.

To what extent do the paths of discourse on the archive intersect, or converge, in different disciplinary fields? Is there a common understanding of the role of the archive in historical disciplines, and in the arts in particular?

Certainly, within the field of art history, the archive has long been the place that testifies to historical evidence. This is still the case today, not only when it supports the market and thus the certification of authorship (Donati Ferrario &

Simoncelli, eds., 2018), but also when it provides the basis for the history of exhibitions. This function as a locus of historical evidence is recognized in all those contexts where the archive is reinvestigated in order to decolonize narratives (Mbembe, 2002), either through excavation or through the acquisition of works by Western institutions.

The shift away from the modern conception of historical evidence begins with an understanding of the archive as process and flux, the Fosterian way (Dehghani & Chattopadhyay, 2022). Some say that “collecting, recording and presenting old and new data today seems to be a practice of both artists and art historians.... The work of art and the history of art are both fictional constructions that reveal our view of the past. They reveal our view of the past. The archive seems to be the perfect missing link between the two” (Pas, 2017, p. 32).

Another component of this shift is the change in centrality from text to image as a mediator of memory, which contributes to the creation of new processes of reconstruction and narration (Assmann, 2002), and thus to the hybridization of practices and methods. An openness to the image also leads to a sectorialization of analyses whose starting point is a reflection on the nature of the transmedia dimension (Manovich, 2001): photography, audiovisual, film, and other contexts in which the archival turn manifests itself as a shift from citation to the practice of reuse, which also becomes pervasive through an interweaving of critique and creation (Federici & Saba, 2014) and leaves significant traces on installation and exhibition practices (among them the different paths represented by the works of Mieke Bal, Studio Azzurro and Forma Fantasma).

The media/performative condition undoubtedly imposes a paradigm shift in analysis, introducing the temporal dimension as a constitutive component of both the work and of the exhibition, and giving rise to a necessary reflection on the question of archivability.

This dimension should also be evaluated in a different light, following, for example, the suggestion of Georgina

Born (2014), who reflects in anthropological terms on the temporality of practices, on the concepts of time, change and history in relation to cultural production. What is interesting to incorporating is the process of engaging the past and the future in the present, defined as “temporization.” Again, the relationship between archive and display is central.

But to return to the initial question, how much does this affect the relationship with the archive in its multiple forms, narratives and thus the authorial dimension? How much, for example, do the collective dimension and the forms of activism expressed through display impose new reading tools and archival processes (Lester, 2022)?

This new territory is only now beginning to be reflected upon both in terms of project activity (Gottlieb & Szeląg, eds., 2014; Camocini & Dominoni, eds., 2022) and curatorial practice. Such questions were programmatically posed, for example, in *ruangrupa’s* curatorial proposal for *documenta 15* (oncurating, 2022). There, new processes and modes of action/expression, which also find connections within the project, were placed at the center, thus reviving a question that is beginning to be grasped in several places.

This articulated framework of perspectives and intersections in the field of archival theories and practices is also manifested, for instance, in the field of design history. Architectural historians are increasingly returning to the archive in relation to design history (Mansion, 2015), identifying it as a site of the “transformative gesture” (Wigley, 2005) and questioning sources and how to investigate them (Scodeller, 2017). One of the first contributions to this field, that of Beatriz Colomina (1994), starts precisely from an evaluation of the authorial dimension. By comparing two contrasting cases, such as the archives of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, she highlighted the extent to which the archive can be the result of the author’s construction of his or her own memory, and how this can condition historical research. This conditioning has also been imposed in recent years by the acquisition policies of some

institutions whose collections have grown out of a predominant interest in the collections of designers.

#### 4. FINAL REMARKS

What archives should be displayed? With this question, I would like to conclude my reflections, in which I have tried to extract from a broad debate, albeit limited to recent decades, some useful themes for exploring the relationship between display and archive.

If the dimension of display is one of the founding conditions of contemporaneity, and if display is to be understood as a palimpsest that allows for the manifestation of possible connections and not merely as the presentation of an object or the structuring and visualization of an event or concept, then archives for the history of display and the forms of archiving display can only be multiple. These should no longer be limited to institutional forms, which could be deconstructed through historical research, and can be questioned by confronting a vast system of dispersed sources whose nature has yet to be defined.

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“THE VICTORIOUS PROVISIONAL  
ARCHITECTURE<sup>1</sup>.”

CONSERVATION ISSUES IN THE HISTORY  
OF EXHIBITIONS AND EXHIBITION SPACES  
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ITALY

Giampiero Bosoni

**Keywords:** Exhibition display; Exhibit Design; Project Archives; Virtual Museum; Website.

**Abstract:** This essay reflects on historical research on the design of temporary exhibitions in Italy in the twentieth century, emphasizing the value of archival research. These provisional arrangements leave only drawings and photographs as memories. Two avenues of research are explored here: the journal *Progex* (1989-1994), edited by Giampiero Bosoni and dedicated to various themes of exhibition design, and the 2010 website “Exposizioni.com” a virtual museum of Italian

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1. This brief reflection is taken from a letter to his wife sent while he was a political prisoner in Brescia in 1944. Pagano, G., “Poesia dal Carcere Giudiziario di Brescia,” 1944, in “Casabella-Editoriale Domus,” a special issue dedicated to ‘Giuseppe Pagano architetture e scritti,’ 1947, F. Albini, G. Palanti, and A. Castelli, eds.

exhibition design, supported by the Franco Albini Foundation and ASAL. These efforts underline the importance of project archives in reconstructing the history of exhibition design, a key field for architecture and design in Italy.

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Throughout the twentieth century, the ideation, design, and construction of settings for exhibitions and exhibition spaces in general, both cultural and commercial, have represented a fundamental workshop of modern project culture in Italy and beyond, in both architecture and design, but also in the field of art. Its legacy can still be seen today in the works of many contemporary designers and artists, as well as in several emblematic cultural and commercial events, such as the Milan Triennale, the Venice Biennale, the Milan Trade Fair and its famous Salone del Mobile, linked to the now equally famous Fuorisalone.

This remarkable design heritage, being “provisional” and therefore “ephemeral,” is inherently destined to have a relatively short, if not extremely short, lifespan. In Italian, this aspect of brevity is emphasized by the term for exhibition design “*allestimenti*,” from the verb “*allestire*,” derived from the Latin “*lesto*,” meaning quick or hurried. The etymological origin of the term indicates that exhibition design is confronted with a temporal dimension in which Vitruvius’ historical concept of “*firmitas*” (solidity, endurance), which alludes to the eternal quality of a well-constructed building, is lost, or at least takes on a different meaning. The Italian critic Raffaello Giolli demonstrated an acute understanding of this eternal quality, which transcends the time constraints imposed by the rapidly changing rhythm of exhibitions, when he commented on the installation conceived by Edoardo Persico with Giancarlo Piretti and Marcello Nizzoli for the *Sala della Vittoria* at the VIth Triennale di Milano in 1936. He articulated the concept of ‘eternity’ by saying, “When architecture reaches this point,

it needs only one day to live” (Giolli, 1936, pp. 14-21). Of course, this remains an eternal “life” in our memory through those who were able to see it during its brief tenure. But fortunately, thanks to the archives that preserve its history in the form of various documents, it is possible to see it again, to meditate on it and to study it through a richly preserved photographic apparatus, as in the case of the abovementioned *Sala della Vittoria* at the Triennale. Nevertheless, almost all the material pertaining to its graphic and design conception has been lost. This kind of situation leads me to pose the central question that I will try to address in this short essay. What methodologies, techniques, and critical approaches should be used to preserve and study an intense and specific design practice for realizing works that were meant to live for a few days or weeks at most? The possible answer to this question inevitably involves a specific work of reconstruction through various archives: those of the designers and the various collaborators of the project (graphic designers, artists, set designers, support technicians, etc.), those of the companies specialized in this type of temporary construction, those of the exhibition venues, and last but not least those of the magazines interested in this type of work and consequently, of the photographers’ archives. Having reiterated that the archive is the terrain, the field of investigation based on which the work of excavation and research takes place, it is worth remembering that for this work of reconstructing the now-erased “crime scene,” it is necessary to read all the traces well, taking great care not to stop at just the obvious appearances, but to go deeper, as the “evidentiary paradigm” proposed by the historian Carlo Ginzburg in his book *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* reminds us, in that “the hidden, invisible part of reality is no less important than the visible one” (Ginzburg, 1986, pp. 158-209).

As a historian with an interest in this subject, I have approached this field of investigation on several occasions, and each time, discover different aspects to reflect on in order to shed proper light on this particular archaeological excavation.

For these reasons, it seems important to take this opportunity to explain two of my experiences that have allowed me to deal with the subject of ‘archaeological excavation’ in the field of exhibition history and the related aspects of conservation and study. I will present, analytically and critically, two different working and research tools: a journal specifically dedicated to the field, of which I was the editor from 1989 to 1994, and a website created in 2013, intended as a kind of museum of Italian exhibitions in the twentieth century and the many stories they tell, with the widest and most complete documentation possible.

### I. A MAGAZINE: *PROGEX - DESIGN & EXHIBITION ARCHITECTURE*



Covers of the ten issues of the magazine  
*Progex—Design & architetture espositive (1989-1994).*

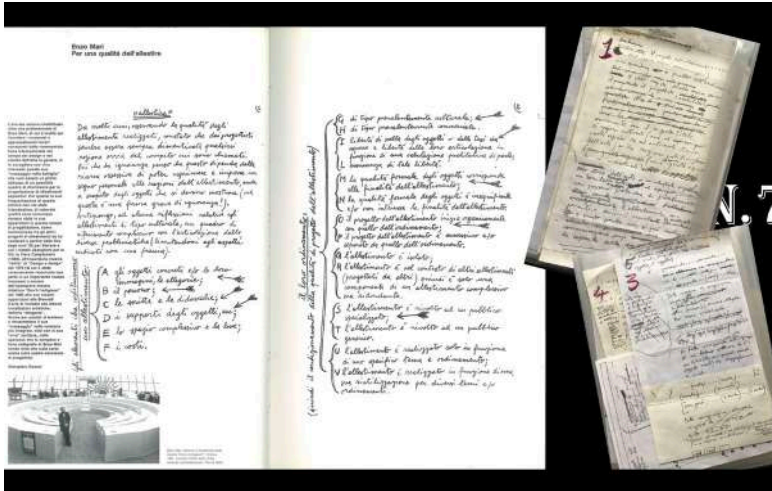


Let us begin with the magazine *Progex—Design & architettura espositiva* (*Progex - Design & Exhibition Architecture*), a biannual periodical published in ten issues between March 1989 and May 1994. In 1988, I was asked to edit and conceive it, together with my friend, the wonderful graphic designer Italo Lupi, who took on the role of art director. The magazine was sponsored by a group of four prestigious companies specialized in exhibition construction: two Milanese companies, Plotini Allestimenti, founded in 1937, and Way Allestimenti, founded in 1880; Fidanzia Sistemi, founded in the mid-1970s and based in Bari; and Weyler, the licensee of the famous German Octanorm stand construction system.

As in all in-house periodicals, there was a final section dedicated to the publication of the companies' latest realizations, which were very often conceived by prominent designers, so that these projects were interesting to document and included various working materials (from drawings to photographs of models, prototypes, and construction sites). Coming from the experience of twelve years as editor of a prestigious cultural magazine, *Rassegna: problemi di architettura dell'ambiente*, directed by Vittorio Gregotti (which happened to be another in-house publication, financed by six companies), I immediately imposed myself with a directional line of content and research that would remain as free as possible from conditioning. Fortunately, this line was well accepted by the sponsors, and the editorial team (Sonia Calzoni and Andrea Nulli, with the coordination of Ivo Allas) and I were able to develop issues free from editorial influences, and, in some cases, quite daring in terms of the breadth of the content. Starting with the first issue, we introduced a thematic layout that remained almost constant throughout the ten issues. After an editorial text by the editor, usually devoted to the main themes explored in the issue, there would be an introductory essay followed, usually of a historical nature, on an emblematic theme in the history of exhibitions, and then a number of very interesting contributions, of which I

will mention just a few here. Paolo Ferrari, a close collaborator of Achille Castiglioni and Pierluigi Cerri in those years, opened the series in no. 1 with the text “La mise en scène” (Ferrari, 1989); in no. 2, the Italian linguist Gabriella Cartago took up the lexicographic theme “The History of Words: Set-up” (Cartago, 1989, pp. 4-9); in no. 3, Gianni Pettena reconstructed the history of staging revolutionary festivities immediately after the storming of the Bastille in Paris in “The Instant City” (Pettena, 1990, pp. 4-9); in no. 4, Raimonda Riccini, then research assistant to Tomas Maldonado, dealt with the topic “Setting up the Universal. Interiors, Pavilions, and Cities in World’s Fairs” (Riccini, 1990, pp. 4-11); in no. 7, Enzo Mari’s handwritten notes were published in a kind of ideal manual of good staging, entitled “For a Quality Set-up” (Mari, 1991); in no. 8, Andrea Nulli proposed the curious transversal theme “The Mask-Making Architect. Camouflage, between Architecture and Installation Art” (Nulli, 1992, pp. 4-11); in no. 9, Sandro Marpillero, from the United States, wove together his theoretical texts “Learning from Chaco Canyon” and “Empire State Plaza Installation” with an interesting conversation with one of the best-known artists of environmental installations, “Incontri: Mary Miss, Art Installation as a Research Model” (Marpillero, 1993, pp. 4-11); and in the same issue, Lauren Kogod wrote ‘The Absence of an Exterior. For a Definition of the Field in Temporary Architecture’ (Kogod, 1993, pp. 12-17).

Alternating with these themes of a more general theoretical nature were other texts, more historically oriented, dedicated to significant design cases presented analytically through various in-depth archival documents. These included among others, the precise reconstruction of the famous Finnish pavilion designed by Alvar Aalto at the 1939 New York World’s Fair (Bosoni, 1989b, pp. 18-25); in no. 2, an essay by Dario Matteoni, then editor-in-chief of *Rassegna* (directed by Vittorio Gregotti), dedicated to the interesting case of “L. H. De Koninck: the ‘Publicité’ Pavilion at the Exposition Internationale in Brussels,



Double page of Enzo Mari's essay "Per una Qualità dell'allestire", with preparatory notes by Mari, in *Progex*, No. 7, December 1991.

1935" (Matteoni, 1989, pp. 28-35); in no. 3, Giacomo Polin (then editor-in-chief of *Casabella*, then directed by Vittorio Gregotti) wrote the article "An Architectural Superattraction, Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini with Piero Bottoni, The Electric House at the 4th Monza Triennial Exhibition, 1930" (Pollin, 1990, pp. 34-41); no. 4 included the historical reconstruction, with partly unpublished iconographic material, of the "Montecatini Pavilion at the Milan Trade Fair, Set-ups 1954-68" (Bosoni, 1990b, pp. 24-35); no. 5, dedicated to the theme of schools, included two interesting in-depth studies: "The Exhibition Project at the Bauhaus, Weimar, Dessau, Berlin 1919-1933" (Herzogenrath, 1991, pp. 8-15), by the scholar Wulf Herzogenrath, and "The Theme of the Exhibition at the ULM. Didactics of Communication at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm" (1953-68) (Ludi, 1991, pp. 16-21), by the Geneva lecturer and former student of the HfG at ULM, Jean Claude Ludi; in no. 6, Arthur Rüegg, of the Zurich Polytechnic, a well-known scholar of

the Le Corbusier Foundation, offered an in-depth, previously unpublished study entitled “Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, the Nestlé Pavilion at the Paris Fair 1928” (Rüegg, 1991, pp. 12-21), while the well-known English architectural critic Brian Hatton commented in detail on the major exhibition curated by Douglas Clelland Associates, *Glasgow’s Glasgow* (Hatton, 1991, pp. 4-11); in no. 7, a series of original texts by Giuseppe Pagano, Cesare Cattaneo, and Carlo Emilio Gadda accompanied a long historical report with several illustrations dedicated to “Giuseppe Pagano (coordinator), Leonardo da Vinci’s Exhibition at Palazzo dell’Arte, Milan, 1939” (Bosoni, 1991, pp.18-24), followed by Sebastiano Brandolini (then editor-in-chief of *Casabella*), who devoted an in-depth report to “Foster Associates, London Stansted Airport as a Large Exhibition System” (Brandolini, 1991, pp. 52-57); in no. 9, dedicated to the United States, Maurizio Vogliazzo and Sergio Butti addressed the temporal aspect of Frank O. Gehry’s work from 1965 to 1988 in the essay “The Count of Lautréamont Did Not See Pop” (Butti & Vogliazzo, 1993, pp. 18-21); and in no. 10, Andrea Guarnieri dealt with “The Didactics of Curiosity. Bernard Rudofsky’s Exhibition Project” (Guarnieri, 1994, pp. 26-35).

Another important part of *Progex* was dedicated to interviews with historical protagonists of design in the field of exhibitions. We began in no. 1 with some hypergraphic and image coordination by the graphic designer Bob Noorda, who was interviewed in particular about his work for the COOP supermarkets (Nulli, 1989a, pp. 10-17); we continued in no. 2 with “Encounters: Pierluigi Cerri. Exhibition Design as Part of the Discourse” (Bosoni, 1989a, pp. 10-19); in no. 3, we had a wide-ranging discussion on the history of Franco Albini’s exhibition design and his studio, in an interview with the young member Antonio Piva, “Exhibition Design as a Place for Experimentation” (Bosoni, 1990, pp. 10-15), as well as a historical contribution by Franca Helg, “The Exhibition as Newspaper” (Helg, 1990, pp. 16-19) and an in-depth

study by the historical contributor Darko Pandakovic, "The 'Classicism' of the Modern" (Pandakovic, 1990, pp. 20-23); in no. 4, the interview "Encounters: Aldo Rossi. Exhibition Design as Architecture" (Nulli, 1990b, pp. 12-23) included a very important, and still largely unknown, contribution by one of the major protagonists of the history of architecture in the second half of the twentieth century; no. 4 also included two other very interesting interviews, one with the graphic designer Max Huber on reconstructing the history of Studio BBPR in "BBPR with Max Huber and Franco Buzzi Ceriani: The Form of the Useful at the 9th Milan Triennial Exhibition, 1951" (Calzoni, 1990, pp. 36-41) and another with Italo Rota, "Designing in France: Invention Between Museography and Exhibition Design" (Bosoni, 1990a, pp. 42-49); no. 7 contained one conversation with a protagonist of Italian design history, "Encounters: Sergio Asti. Exhibition Design as a Tool" (Bosoni & Calzoni, 1991, pp. 10-17) and another with a protagonist of the history of twentieth-century Italian art, "Emilio Vedova, The Space of Art in the Artist's Project" (Nulli, 1991a, pp. 26-35); in no. 8, there was a collection of conversations with a famous Austrian architect, "Encounters: Boris Podrecca. Set-up as Dialogue" (Cappellato, 1992, pp. 12-25) and a meeting with Shunji Ishida, Renzo Piano's historic collaborator, to talk about "EXHIBIT IBM, Tour Europa 1984" (Allas & Bosoni, 1992, pp. 26-39).

Of particular importance for this type of magazine, which was founded by four companies specialized in the construction of exhibition stands, was the fact that a special section was dedicated to the history of some prominent Italian companies in the sector that no longer existed, but that were very important for famous achievements in the past. In this case, locating their archives required long and patient research. For this reason, I would like to mention the section dedicated to the Organizzazione Milanese Allestimenti (1958-72) (Nulli, 1989b, pp. 20-27) in no. 2; as well as, in issues no. 3 and 7, the first and second part of the research on the *Allestimenti*

*Cussino* (1922-83) active in Rome (Nulli, 1991b, pp. 36-45); and in issues no. 8, 9 and 10, the first, second, and third part of the historical reconstruction dedicated to *Impresa Teatrale Ponti* (early twentieth century, 1976) (Calzoni, 1992, 1993a, 1993b) probably the most important Italian company in stage design among those no longer active.

From the ten issues that were published, two led to thematic monographs: no. 5, dedicated to the places of teaching and training in exhibition design, presenting research from universities and schools in Geneva, Milan, Palermo, Paris, Turin, Venice, and Vienna, and no. 9, edited by Sandro Marpillero, then visiting professor at Columbia and Harvard Universities, dedicated to various aspects of the American tradition of exhibition design.

The editorial part of the magazine was completed by a section devoted to book and exhibition reviews, with contributions from both established authorities and younger authors, including Annalisa Avon, Alessandra Ponte, Gabriella Cartago, Carlo Camarlinghi, Letizia Tedeschi, Sergio Butti, Sebastiano Brandolini, and Sergio Polano in addition to members of the editorial staff.

Unfortunately, the magazine, printed at about two thousand copies, was not translated into English. It was sent free of charge to a small circle of architects, professionals and clients of the sponsors or potential sponsors. By the fourth issue, national and international subscriptions were available, with requests coming from as far away as Israel and Australia.

## 2. A WEBSITE: EXPOSIZIONI.COM

In 2010-11, the Fondazione Franco Albini came up with the idea of virtually reconstructing Albini's historical installations, recreating a visual journey. With funding from Accenture, a series of 3D models of famous installations designed by Albini in the 1930s were built over the course of those two years.



Opening screen of the website Exposizioni.com.



Opening screen of the Exposizioni.com website with a still image of the folding model of the large backdrop designed by De Pas, D'Urbino, and Lomazzi for the Driade stand at the Milan Salone del Mobile, 1968.



Opening screen of the Exposizioni.com website with a still image of the Mostra del Tessuto designed by Luciano Baldessari, V<sup>e</sup> Triennale di Milano, 1933.

On the basis of this research, a proposal was made in 2012 to extend this type of study towards the creation of a “virtual museum” of the most important installations created in Italy during the twentieth century. This research program was immediately joined by ASAL Assoallestimenti, an association recently affiliated to FederlegnoArredo, as an interested supporter of the initiative. The initial idea quickly evolved into a very ambitious program aimed at creating a multimedia archive of all existing documents (study drawings, technical-constructive drawings, models, prototypes, photographs of the various construction phases, project reports and all types of documents between designers, clients, and fitters) relating to a wide selection of projects realized by the most prominent Italian designers.

The site currently presents forty-six projects by nine designers (F. Albini, L. Baldessari, A. and P. G. Castiglioni, J. Colombo, I. Migliore+M. Servetto, R. Piano, G. Ponti, E. Sottsass) with long descriptive texts accompanied by extensive documentation from numerous archives, from the more general, such as the CSAC in Parma, the CASVA in Milan, the MART in Rovereto, or the Archivio Progetti Iuav in Venice, to the more specific, from various private sources.

On this basis, the idea was born to create a portal that would reflect Italian excellence in the art of display. The aim was to constitute a fundamental historical memory, a tangible trace of an extremely important path in the history of modern architecture. It is a collection of still unpublished documents, a considerable amount of graphic material, textual and photographic data, belonging to the archives of some of the most important Italian architects of the twentieth century and today.

One of the objectives is also to compare different approaches and design paths, analyzing detailed spatial, technical, and material solutions that illustrate the evolution and changes in this field of design in different physical and temporal contexts. I think it was of great importance to make this documentation accessible to all those who are interested in learning about this fundamental aspect of Italy’s cultural heritage, and to offer



comprehensive insight into this subject, both historically and technically.

It is regrettable that the *Exposizioni.com* project has been at a standstill for a considerable period of time, partly as a result of the discontinuation of financial support, but also due to the difficulty in positioning it within the current system of university evaluation for scientific production. The latter fails to account for content produced in a multimedia context, which deviates from the established norms and conventions associated with traditional publishing.

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# EXHIBITING DESIGN ARCHIVES. THE CASE OF ETTORE SOTTASS

Fiorella Bulegato, Marco Scotti

**Keywords:** Design Archives; Digital Humanities; Accessibility; Tangible/Intangible Culture.

**Abstract:** The valorization of events within the history of design cultures, especially those that are hidden, lost, or forgotten, involves the reconstruction of processes inherent to design and represents one of the major challenges for contemporary archives. Starting from the reconstruction of the debate and from the analysis of a specific case study, namely the “dispersed” archive of Ettore Sottsass jr, this text reflects critically on the digital models for the consultation and display of documents utilized by different types of archives operating in the field of design.

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## I. EXHIBITING THE ARCHIVE?<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between archives and exhibitions describes a rich and heterogeneous scenario (Lester, 2022), a system with a wealth of connections and practices, and intersecting disciplines and documents. While the exhibition itself prefigures an encounter with—and between—archives, an opportunity in which the data they contain generate new narratives and research studies, and speak to the public, one cannot fail to consider how the archive itself, beyond its material and physical nature (Lester, 2018), is fundamentally built on a system of relations between the parts (Dellapiana, Filippini, Remondino & Tamborrini, 2024, p. 285). The possibilities offered by digital technologies to reconstruct these relations (Bulegato & Scotti, 2024, pp. 275-284) make it possible to update the role of the archive as an entity capable of producing and exhibiting (Latham, 2011; Dever, 2019, p. 105) new and original stories to a wider public, reconstructing in particular the developmental processes that characterize the history of design.

In this sense, the archive of the designer and architect Ettore Sottsass jr. is an exemplary case study and illustrates an important challenge to initiate a broader reflection on the spatial configuration of the archive (Castellani, 2022, p. 42), based on the idea of reconstruction as a premise for the creation of a participatory “system” (Schnapp, 2008)<sup>2</sup>.

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1. The contents of the essay were shared by the authors. In particular, paragraphs 1, 2, 3 were written by Fiorella Bulegato, while paragraphs 4, 5, 6 were written by Marco Scotti.

2. The text published here extends the reflections published in Bulegato & Scotti, 2022a; 2022b; 2024, which are mainly based on the results of the research project *L'archivio di Ettore Sottsass jr: inventario e registro digitale dell'attività riguardante il design e la grafica*, Università Iuav di Venezia, Dipartimento di culture del progetto, research fellow Marco Scotti, principal investigator Fiorella Bulegato, cofunded by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, December 1, 2019-November 30, 2021.

## 2. ETTORE SOTTASS JR., ARCHIVE AND ARCHIVES

In the contemporary debate, the term “archive” has gone beyond an exclusively public dimension to represent entire bodies of material collected in a more or less recent past (Schnapp, 2008). It is a term that carries a certain ambiguity (Derrida, 1995) as it is understood today—with a structure that is as fluid as the roles associated with it (Clement, Hagenmaier & Knies, 2013)—that often overlaps with both libraries and museums, and that necessarily needs to be studied from a broad interdisciplinary perspective (Manoff, 2004).

Opening it to public use and, at the same time, to possible exhibition dynamics requires the necessary reconstruction (Depauw, 2011) of a true network of documents, projects, works, information, and chronologies, a central theme for any study that approaches a designer’s archive, aware of how these systems can reflect and convey processes and procedures that are fundamental at different levels.

Based on this approach, a research project was undertaken between 2019 and 2021 with the aim of reconstructing all aspects of the artistic and design practice of Ettore Sottsass jr. (Innsbruck 1917-Milan 2007), starting from the archive donated by his wife Barbara Radice to the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice in 2018, and taking advantage of the potential offered by digital technologies.

The materials relating to Sottsass jr.<sup>3</sup>, both as a person and as an architect, designer, photographer and artist, constitute a fragmented and scattered collection that is physically divided among several institutions. The archive kept in Venice, which includes his personal archive and that of his firm, is just one part of it, complementing the fonds kept in other institutions, mainly in the Bibliothèque Kandinsky in the Centre Pompidou in Paris and in the Centro Studi e Archivio della

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3. For a preliminary overview of the figure of Sottsass, see Sottsass Jr., 2010; Thomé, 2014; Zanella, 2018.

Comunicazione-CSAC Università di Parma, thanks to decisions made in previous decades by Sottsass jr. himself and his heirs. Other materials, some of which are considerable, are kept by manufacturing companies or collaborators with whom Sottsass jr. worked—the result of working practices or exhibitions—and are sometimes organized in actual archival structures, as in the case of the Olivetti Historical Archive in Ivrea, the Aldo Londi and Bitossi Archives in Montelupo Fiorentino, or the Centro Studi Poltronova in Florence.

The research, carried out in collaboration with the Centro ARCHiVe-Analysis and Recording of the Cultural Heritage in Venice, a structure dedicated to the technology, promotion, and digital preservation of the cultural heritage of the Fondazione Cini<sup>4</sup>, was part of the long-term project, still underway, to digitize and inventory the more than one hundred thousand items of the Sottsass Archive held at the Fondazione itself, with the aim of enhancing it and making it accessible online. Choosing the idea of interconnection as its central focus, the process began with the development of an information system based on the practice of linked open data (Listo, 2019; Bonini Lessing, Bosco, Bulegato & Scodeller, 2019, p. 6). The general objective is to define and use “appropriate standards and formalisms” to achieve “an explicit definition of both the meaning and the implicit relationships between resources with the purpose of making them semantically accessible and interconnected” (Listo, 2019, p. 29), which found an ideal field of application in the Sottsass jr. archive. Physically, it is a series of heterogeneous materials consisting of the so-called dossiers containing all the design and personal material,

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4. The Centro ARCHiVe was founded by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini together with the Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Conservation and the Digital Humanities Laboratory of the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL-DHLAB), with the Helen Hamlyn Trust as supporting founder (<https://www.cini.it/istituti-e-centri/archive-analysis-and-recording-of-cultural-heritage-in-venice>).



meticulously divided and classified both chronologically and in terms of design categories (art, architecture, interior design, product design, graphic design, exhibitions and exhibition designs, publication design, press articles, miscellaneous). It also includes documents such as artistic graphics and posters, receipts, drafts of publications, books, university theses, and a collection of baskets.

As the work of the author himself, who initially collected and organized the materials, and as a result of his wish to donate the materials to various institutions and spaces for conservation, the complex Sottsass jr. archive is an excellent example of the design of memory (Sarno, 2021, p. 194), of the creation of a system that includes both a private and a public dimension and that, in order to insure a correct interpretation, must be seen through the lens of its contemporary divisions and fragmentations.

How does one study and connect a system defined in this way, with other archives that have been separated from it over time and have thus found a new dimension?

### 3. RECOMPOSING THE ARCHIVE

Architecture and design archives, a typology with a relatively recent history (Irace, 2013; Bonini Lessing, Bosco, Bulegato & Scodeller, 2019, p. 8), are based on the design process, an activity that extends over time and involves various subjects in addition to the designer, and that must be reconstructed as a unique whole (Irace, 2013).

To study such a process, it is essential to have access to all the documents that define it, so as to in order to be able to approach it critically, starting from the most extensive organized collections.

The most recent study dedicated to the figure of Sottsass jr., based on his archive, was carried out by the CSAC on the occasion of the centenary of the designer's birth.

The institution holds an important Sottsass jr. archive, complementary in its structure to the one in Venice, donated by the designer himself by public deed in 1979, and based on a selection of projects from his firm and from his personal work. The CSAC, a research center at the Università di Parma founded by Arturo Carlo Quintavalle in the late 1960s, has since its inception organized activities aimed at creating a body of collections and archives of art, photography, architecture, design, fashion, and graphic design, in parallel with the study and enhancement of these collections through the organization of exhibitions and the publication of their respective catalogues (Quintavalle, 2010, pp. 15-56).

It was here, in 2017, that the Sottsass jr. archive was presented to the public for the first time, in an exhibition titled *Ettore Sottsass. Oltre il design*, which ran from November 18, 2017, to September 23, 2018. It was the result of a major effort to catalogue and digitize the entire collection, accompanied by the simultaneous publication of the catalogue raisonné (Zanella, 2018). Like the exhibition, this volume is the result of a collaboration between the archivists and the Centro's curators, and a team of scholars, curators, and researchers invited to approach Sottsass jr.'s practices and experiments from different points of view.

Along with other publications (Radice, 2017; Barbero, 2017) and exhibitions organized on the occasion of the centenary of his birth, which have significantly updated the range of available studies and resources, the exhibition *Ettore Sottsass, L'Objet Magique* (2021) held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris from October 13, 2021, to January 3, 2022, represented yet a further step forward. Once again, the archives in Paris were reread, rethought, and exhibited, providing an opportunity to establish new relationships with the collections and projects selected by the curators. It is no coincidence that two of the texts in the catalogue (Sarno, 2021; Saraiva, 2021) were specifically dedicated to the archives donated to the institution. The contributions shed light on the structure

and the choices made based on new interpretation models, adopting a non-hierarchical approach to the analysis of the entire photographic collections, diaries, and personal notebooks, objects related to the collaboration with Olivetti and personal, often experimental elements such as packaging and graphics, highlighting the eclectic and encyclopedic nature of the archive.

These two cases can help us understand the indispensable relationship between the designer's archive and the possibilities of exhibition. But as the materials are digitized—an ongoing process in both these institutions<sup>5</sup>, in different ways—the relationships can expand, making it possible to reconnect with any other relevant material that might be accessible online, and to define new narratives and interpretations that might spill over into the physical realm as well.

#### 4. HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND DIGITAL PERSPECTIVES

Further research to consider the possibility of reconstructing a design archive thus involves digital strategies and practices, understood as a tool to provide a complete and coherent overview of projects and activities (Scodeller, 2017). This practice has for some time been at the center of the debate in Italy on digital design archives, which explores how they could constitute a fundamental resource for research (Scodeller, 2017), both in terms of defining a working and investigative methodology and in terms of highlighting their specificity, which could make it possible to distinguish them from libraries, exhibitions and collections.

Thanks to the renewed role of the archivist, now “digital” and increasingly open to a multidisciplinary approach that

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5. Reference to their respective portals: <[http://samha207.unipr.it/samirafe/loadcard.do?id\\_card=23890&force=1](http://samha207.unipr.it/samirafe/loadcard.do?id_card=23890&force=1) e <https://bibliothequekandinsky.centre-pompidou.fr/concept?id=0591c337-7619-4393-91b7-897763f4a121>>.

integrates the skills innate to researchers, curators, publishers and historians (Clement, Hagenmaier & Knies, 2013), archives, collections and museums dedicated to design have presented various projects that seek to experiment with new models to avoid the risk of dispersing the materials, to facilitate new research perspectives to enliven the archive with tools that can complement and enrich physical visits. Based on an inclusive idea of accessibility—and with some important forerunners, such as the Graphic Design Documentation Centre of Aiap-Italian Association of Visual Communication Design—digital archives such as those dedicated to Gio Ponti<sup>6</sup> or Vico Magistretti<sup>7</sup> represent not only fundamental examples for the protection and valorization of design understood as a cultural asset, but also the potential for activating heritages through new exhibition strategies.

The research dedicated to the Sottsass jr. archive follows this line and seeks to further explore the possibilities it offers. It sees the digital dimension as a fundamental element, considering that since the very donation of the materials to the Fondazione Cini, the main concurrent objective has been to make available original primary sources, not only to scholars for historical research, but also to a wider public. For this purpose, it is necessary to start afresh based on models of knowledge activation and production (Schnapp, 2018), of possible specific curatorial approaches, to successfully combine the study and linking of materials with methods of long-term conservation, which at the same time could consider a shorter timeframe for the activation and accessibility of the archive (Schnapp, 2018, p. 306). A perspective that, looking to models of participation and integration, wants to consider the archive as a place dedicated to connections, exploring the specific potential of the digital object (Irace, 2013) as a place that allows “new” forms and formats of publication and exhibition. In order

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6. <<http://www.gioponti.org/it/archivio/>>.

7. <<https://archivio.vicomagistretti.it/magistretti/>>.

to understand the research that has been carried out and to communicate the possible correlations between the different archives that preserve the Sottsass jr. materials, we examine, as a case study, the reconstruction of the process behind the graphic design project developed by Sottsass jr. for the XI Triennale di Milano in 1957.

Specifically, the digital record dedicated to the individual dossier<sup>8</sup> in the Archivio Sottsass jr. at the Fondazione Cini has, in addition to the links within the fonds, allowed access to the materials preserved at the CSAC and those from the fonds of the Bibliothèque Kandinsky in terms of photographic documentation and chronological references, as well as relations with the Historical Archive of the Triennale di Milano.

## 5. RECONSTRUCTION AMONG ARCHIVES: THE CASE OF THE XI TRIENNALE DI MILANO

Within Sottsass jr.'s long and complex relationship with the Triennale di Milano, which began in 1947 (Modena, 2018, pp. 73-80), his participation in the XI Triennale in 1957 was particularly extensive: "In addition to designing the logo and the exhibition design for the Glass Section, Sottsass displayed *Miraggio* (a pattern printed against a brown background with white, yellow and red motifs on Lilion rep fabric) in the Fabrics Section, which won second prize ex aequo, and some jewelry—a gold necklace and a hinged pendant along with a concave oval-shaped gold pin—in the Jewelry Section curated by Arnaldo and Giò Pomodoro with creations designed, among others, by Gianni Dova, Emilio Scanavino and Enrico Baj" (Modena, 2018, p. 75). The graphic design commission was thus carried out, as was often the case, at the same time as other projects and commissions for exhibition design and

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8. *Manifesto per la XI Triennale di Milano*, 1956 G, Archivio Ettore Sottsass Jr. Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice.

the first experiments with the design of products for both industry and craft, but with a coherent design methodology and the development of a consistent language.

Moreover, in those years the Triennale was a privileged and essential context for any designer, especially in Milan, who wanted to engage in the debate on design and its relationship with the arts. In particular, this edition opened with the protests of the Movimento di studi per l'architettura (MSA) which, led by Giancarlo De Carlo, had appealed to its members not to participate in the event, a request that was respected by everyone except Marco Zanuso and Sottsass (Pansera, 1978, p. 81): this is yet another confirmation of his tendency to prefer alternative points of view and to avoid the influence of dogmatism in his work (Sottsass, 2010, pp. 159-60).

The design of the logo for the XI Triennale<sup>9</sup> was initially the subject of a competition that, as can be seen in the materials preserved in the historical archive of the Triennale<sup>10</sup>, did not produce a result, so the commission was given directly to Sottsass (Undicesima Triennale, 1957, p. 23; Modena, 2018, p. 198). Correspondence in the Venice archives<sup>11</sup> shows that the commission came directly from the secretary of the Triennale, Tommaso Ferraris, who, on July 2, 1956, wrote to the architect announcing that he, Carlo Mollino, Giuseppe Ajmone and Carlo De Carli wanted to talk to him about the commission. On August 31, he was asked to contact the painter Ajmone in order to urgently complete the printing of the logo. It is difficult to reconstruct any dialogue or collaboration between

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9. Centre Pompidou/MNAM-CCI/Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Fonds Ettore Sottsass, *Documents chronologiques*, documentary collection documentaire assembled by Sottsass: postcards, press clips, photographs, notes (1950-2000), SOT B 15.

10. Archivio Storico Triennale di Milano, *Riunione della Commissione giudicatrice del Concorso per il Marchio della XI Triennale del 16 aprile 1956*, ASTM, TRN\_11\_DT\_077\_V, 77.01 – Marchio.

11. *Corrispondenza XI° Triennale di Milano*, 1957 V, Archivio Ettore Sottsass Jr. Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice.

the two since this letter was followed exclusively by telegrams urging the delivery of the project.

The design phase, on the other hand, is well documented in the CSAC<sup>12</sup> collection, in a series of works in which line and color play a decisive role. This shows how the experience of abstract and informal art had been completely reworked and appropriated by Sottsass, who at the time was still in close contact with the artistic circles of MAC, the Art Club, and was working with Cardazzo's Naviglio and Cavallino Galleries, where he presented his work, also designing the logo and staging the exhibition in Milan<sup>13</sup>. It should also be remembered that Sottsass had recently returned from his American experience with George Nelson, which undoubtedly brought him into contact with artists such as Gorky and Motherwell (Modena, 2018, p. 198), whose work clearly influenced him, as did that of Hans Hartung. More specifically, the materials preserved in the CSAC archive consist of the following:

A first folder of 16 drawings focuses on gesture and color, red, black and grey, with an analysis of color washes and orthogonal intersections of lines of different thickness [and] a second folder of projects with sketches and prints belonging to a later phase of development, bear witness to the methods of application of the Triennale's traditional integrated design and thus to the different uses of the logo on supports and materials of various sizes; it would, in fact, be printed on the letterhead, on the cover of the official catalogue, on nametags and for conferences and on invitations (Modena, 2018, p. 198).

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12. Archivio CSAC, *Progetto per allestimento della Sezione del Vetro, e progetto per marchio, XI Triennale, Milano, 1956-1957*, 16 drawings, 29 sketches, 1 glossy, 9 printed, 3 silver bromide photographic prints.

13. *Sistemazione della galleria del "Naviglio," Milano, 1955 I*, Archivio Ettore Sottsass Jr. Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice.

In this case, too, Sottsass' design method focused on the study of the lettering, using a sans-serif glyph that becomes an integral part of the logo itself flanked by abstract black shapes—lines, grids and circles that can be found in his artistic production as well as his interior design and installations, or in his contemporary projects for rugs and ceramics—and two brushstrokes of color reminiscent of the Italian flag. The simplification may also reflect his “knowledge of previous logos, especially those of the IX and X editions, found in a clipping in the archive” (Modena, 2018, p. 198). Thus, Sottsass engaged with the work of authors such as Marcello Nizzoli and Bruno Munari, anticipating some of the developments in his work in the years to come that would lead, for example, to the development of the logo for Olivetti's electronics division in 1958 and the trademark for Poltronova in 1961.

The Venice archives include only one poster for the XI Triennale, with the logo in a vertical format, both in color and in black and white, transforming it into a module that fully occupies the space and organizes the shapes and marks, unlike the cover of the catalogue, on which they are superimposed and completed with color washes and yellow dots. It should also be noted that the original cover bears the location of the original painting that inspired the project, an important detail that further emphasizes Sottsass' design method, in which his training and practice as a painter play a fundamental role.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This reconstruction of a system of relationships between different collections to provide a broader historical perspective is just one example of the potential of digital archives to reassemble, make accessible, and display design heritage.

Once the fully digitized Sottsass jr. archive is online, everyone will be able to test the possibilities offered by these



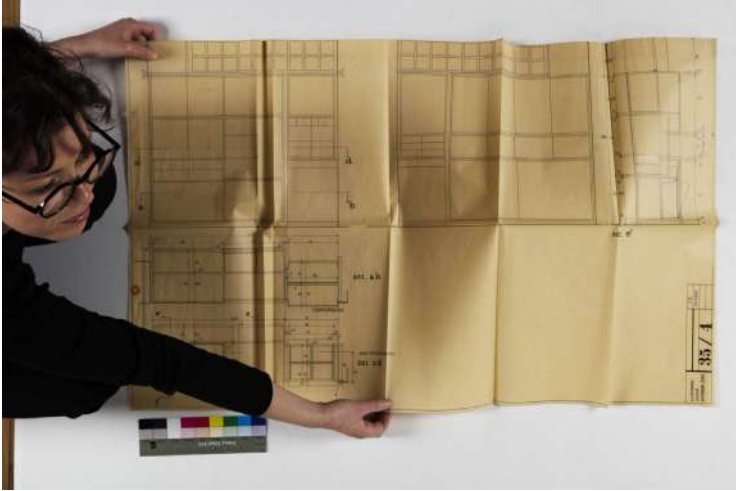
forms of publishing and exhibiting materials, as well as reconstructing narratives, consulting in particular the more than seventy historical-critical records—including an archival and bibliographic reconstruction—developed in this research study and dedicated to Sottsass' design and graphic work.

Preservation and selection are the actions that lead to the creation of any archive. It was often Sottsass' own hand that consciously carried out the operations that later defined the structure of his memory. Their traces, found in the various collectins, are essential to reconstruct the many worlds of this eclectic architect and designer, and to reveal the influences and intersections between the various design activities that characterized his lifelong experimentation.

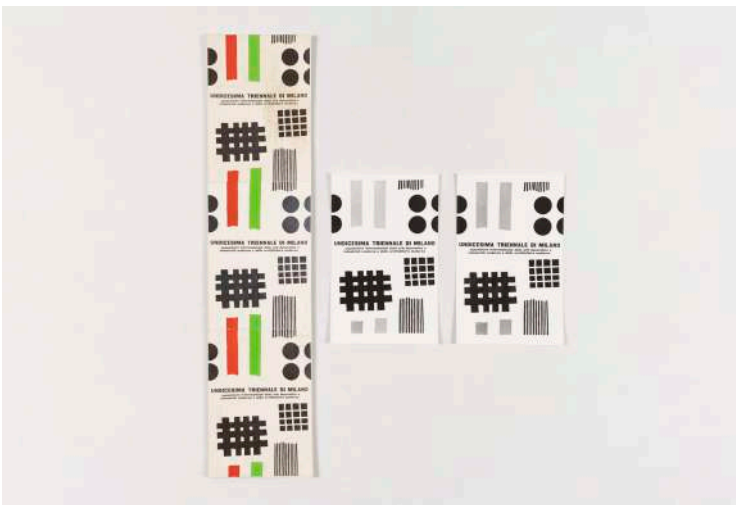
In its various incarnations, the archive thus appears as a resource that allows for multiple narratives (Saraiva, 2021, p. 200) through complex systems of relationships. It is a fundamental tool for which we must rely on the practices of visual archaeology, fully cognizant of its importance in the modern era as a means of collecting, preserving, retrieving (Merewether, 2006), and enjoying historical knowledge and memory.



Dossiers from the Ettore Sottsass jr. archive, donated in 2018 to Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia. Fondazione Giorgio Cini onlus, Archivio Ettore Sottsass jr., Centro ARCHiVe Venezia.



Materials being processed on the vacuum table during the digitization of the Ettore Sottsass jr. archive, donated in 2018 to Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia.  
Fondazione Giorgio Cini onlus, Archivio Ettore Sottsass jr., Centro ARCHiVe Venezia.



Materials taken from the Dossier *Manifesto per la XI Triennale di Milano* (1956\_G\_01): a study of the concept of modularity. Fondazione Giorgio Cini onlus, Archivio Ettore Sottsass jr., Centro ARCHiVe Venezia.

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MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE.  
THE EXHIBITION AS SEMIOSPHERE  
AND ITS ANACHRONIC TEMPORALITIES

Angela Mengoni

**Keywords:** Display; Anachronism; Visual Semiotics; Hubert Damisch; Jurij Lotman

**Abstract:** The paper addresses a phenomenon that has recently emerged as a prominent feature in exhibition strategies, namely the “anachronic” montage, in which a constellation of contemporary and past works replaces chronological progression or coherence. The article will examine the museum hall and the exhibition space as paradigmatic examples that illustrate the functioning of cultural dynamics and their plural temporalities in accordance with the writings of Jurij Lotman. It will examine how Hubert Damisch responded to the question of the anachronic temporalities of display in the exhibition he curated at the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam in 1997, entitled *Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum*, which gave rise to a theoretical reflection on the relationship between plural temporalities and mobility in display.

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## I. "IMAGINE A MUSEUM HALL"

Some striking changes in the exhibition practices of museums suggest that today a "semiotics of the new museums" would be necessary in order to understand them in terms of the generation of new meanings and values (Pezzini, 2011)<sup>1</sup>. Among these changes, which have been ongoing from the eighteenth century to the present day, one can mention the hybridization of the traditional function of the museum with those typical of entertainment and with the needs of economic profit, as well as the consequent redefinition of the relationship with the spectator, an ever greater mediating role of the museum institution and the change of its traditional architectural typology (Ivi, p. 18). The semiotic approach aims at studying these mutations, conceiving the exhibition (with a more or less permanent character) as a *text*, that is, as a signifying manifestation that operates a "proposal of meaning" addressed to the spectator through semiotic strategies such as the definition of a *path*, of an *orientation* and of some criteria of *order* for the organization of the objects. This is why the difference between traditional and "new" museums has been described in terms of the tension between *linearity* and *circularity*, *chronology* and *event*, *oriented gaze* and *floating gaze* etc. (Zunzunegui, 2003).

Within the framework of these new exhibition strategies, however, there is a phenomenon that has recently come to the fore and invites us to reflect less on spatialization strategies than on the temporalities articulated by the montages that each exhibition constitutively proposes, namely the increasingly widespread criterion of *anachronic* montages in which contemporary and past works coexist and in which heterogeneous constellations gradually replace the chronological progression or coherence.

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1. Where no English edition is cited in the bibliography, translations are by the author.



Even if we cannot explore in detail the important debate in the early 2000s about the role that an “anachronism of images” plays in the temporalities and the historicity of art history (Didi-Huberman 2000), it is nonetheless evident that exhibition strategies—with their juxtaposition and display of a plurality of objects in space—inevitably raise the question of temporal and historical models for art history and visual culture, since they depend on how we conceive of the ways in which the work of art “produces” the time (or times) in which it is inscribed and in which it should also be known, as Hubert Damisch noted, “What do we say when we speak of ‘duration’? What do we say when we speak of ‘history’? And what do we say, since the question would sum up all the others, when we speak of ‘anachronism’?” (Damisch 1992, p. 137). The word anachronism here does not refer to an error in historical accuracy. On the contrary, the question of anachronism implies the very notions of context, duration, and history, since it is the work of art that activates a series of relations with other objects, even if they are not strictly artistic and belong to other historical periods, on the basis of some structural operations and features. Relationships that are *immanent* to the work and activated by it, as Damisch pointed out shortly afterwards: “it is evidently the object studied (and for example the way in which a whole story can weave itself through a set of texts and works of art around the subject provided by the myth [the Judgement of Paris]) that produces the time and the very duration in which it is inscribed and in which it demands to be known”.

A “story” is woven “through a set of works of art”: an image that is remarkably close to the idea of the exhibition as the weaving of a plurality around specific pertinences. The way in which the work of art “produces” the time in which it is inscribed and in which it can and must be known—an important and perceptive remark that recalls the necessity of display—implies the need to reconfigure the very notion of historical temporality, activating genealogies that transcend

the diachronic linear progression punctuated by “influences” and defined by exclusively philological criteria. Here, then, the interweaving or layering of multiple temporalities and genealogies in the work of art necessarily configures itself as *anachronic*, to use a term that does not imply a pejorative connotation as in anachronism or anachronistic (Nagel-Wood, 2010, p. 13).

It will come as no surprise, then, to discover that the museum hall and the exhibition space have been privileged examples in illustrating the functioning of the cultural dynamic itself, in which plural temporalities are always active; and that, on the other hand, the work of art has been seen as a condensation of anachronistic “dialogues” with other works of art, a dialogue that can be made visible and displayed, as it were, through the exhibition. I will therefore turn to how semiotics and structuralist art theory have conceived of such a relationship between display, the generation of meaning, and plural temporalities.

When Juri Lotman attempted to describe the dynamics of meaning production that runs through “the actual cultural process” (1990, p. 126), he elaborated a model in which each part of the system was immersed in a semiotic space and the mutual relationship between elements was “not a metaphor but a reality,” a model he would call the *semiosphere*, after the biosphere of the biologist Vernadsky.

As the term itself suggests, spatial modeling plays a crucial role in the semiosphere, but its internal stratification of temporal layers is also fundamental. The semiosphere is not the sum of the individual parts of the system, but rather is knowable through them as participants in a complex network of inherently dialogical relations. Culture consists of semiotic spaces that are “eroded and full of transitory forms,” since the irregularity of the system is the sense-generating principle that lies at the heart of “every living culture” and the plural

development of its manifestations, based on the dynamics of asymmetry and binarism (1990, p. 124).

*Sphere, (a)symmetry, boundary, center, periphery*—these are some of the terms that govern this grand spatial modeling. Despite the importance of topological structuring, however, the temporal dimension is declared from the outset to be fundamental to the model of cultural dynamics. According to Lotman, the “diachronic depth” of memory is indeed necessary for cultural dynamics and the semiosphere; but, alongside this diachronic memory, which gives the semiosphere a temporal thickness, more complex temporal dynamics can be glimpsed: the semiosphere is traversed by processes that evolve at different speeds, so much so that “in the real fabric of culture, non-synchrony is not a random deviation but a rule” (1985, p. 67, my translation). The internal irregularity of semiotic space, a guarantee of its semiotic productivity, is also a temporal heterogeneity: not only because in the semiosphere, considered at a given moment, zones of dynamism coexist with zones of greater staticity, but also because a dialogical relationship between different times is always active in the semiotic space. It is here that Lotman turned to the museum hall as a paradigmatic example of a world perceived synchronically, in which objects created in different epochs coexist (and collide):

As an example of a single world looked at synchronically, imagine a museum hall where exhibits from different periods are on display, along with inscriptions in known and unknown languages, and instructions for decoding them; besides there are the explanations composed by the museum staff, plans for tours and rules for the behavior of the visitors. Imagine also in this hall tour-leaders and the visitors and imagine all this as a single mechanism. This is an image of the semiosphere. Then we have to remember that all elements of the semiosphere are in dynamic, not static, correlations whose terms are constantly changing. The evolution of culture is quite different from biological evolution, the word ‘evolution’ can be quite misleading (1990, pp. 126-127).

The metaphor of the museum space is not episodic. Lotman systematically linked the display of art objects and the reflection on temporality, as if the presentation in space were the precondition for the visualization of a temporal dynamic which, as we have just seen, does not obey the idea of an “evolution,” that is, a purely diachronic progression. In fact, the evolutionary model is not applicable to art and its history: “In art history, however, works that have come down to us from remote cultural periods continue to play a part in cultural development as living factors. A work of art may “die” and come to life again; once thought to be out of date, it may become modern and even prophetic in what it says about the future” (1990, p. 127).

Works of the past can prove prophetic by being reactivated in contact with the gaze of the present. Art thus reveals itself as the seminal site of all processes of the production of cultural meaning: “culture possesses within itself an uninterrupted dynamic process of the birth and rebirth of meaning the mechanism of which is precisely art” (1994, p. 71). And the display of works of art and objects of visual culture in space is the emblematic site of this continuous rebirth of meaning, which Lotman examined in *The Artistic Whole as Everyday Space* (2022, pp. 167-181) and in his so-called theory of the *intérieur*. In contrast to an art history that isolates the artwork and traces it back to a single *zeitgeist*, the interior—the environment in which the co-presence of “different objects and artworks within a given cultural space” takes place—offers the model of a constitutive interrelation not only between artworks of different genres, but also between artworks of different epochs, which is reactivated in the present moment through the gaze. This whole (*ansambl*) is in fact inseparable from the fact that it is enjoyed from a present in which a productive collision is generated not only with the gaze of the spectator, but also in the dialogical relationship “between the historical context and the modern text” (2022, p. 40): the dialogue between the culture (and texts) of the past and the

contemporary gaze or text is constitutive of cultural dynamics and capable of generating meaning both for re-reading the past and for understanding the present. This *mutual readability* is fundamental and characteristic of the museum space as a model of cultural dynamics. What happens, Lotman asked, when, for example, Chinese artifacts are placed in baroque ensembles or when African objects are shown in the context of modern European art? These are texts that mobilize very different codes, but there is “something common” that makes it possible to reread other texts (from elsewhere or from the past) from this new context and, at the same time, to reread the works or the contemporary context “as seen from the perspective of these inserts” (2022, p. 181).

Lotman summarized the dynamics of this veritable anachronic montage that generates reciprocal legibility:

The interrelationship between cultural memory and its self-reflection is like a constant dialogue: texts from chronologically earlier periods are brought into culture and, interacting with contemporary mechanisms, generate an image of the historical past, which culture transfers into the past and which like an equal partner in a dialogue, affects the present. This process does not take place in a vacuum: both partners in the dialogue are partners too in other confrontations, both are open to the intrusion of new texts from outside and the texts, as we have already had cause to stress, always contain in themselves the potentiality for new interpretations (Lotman 1990, p. 272).

## 2. ANACHRONIC “MOVES” IN THE MUSEUM

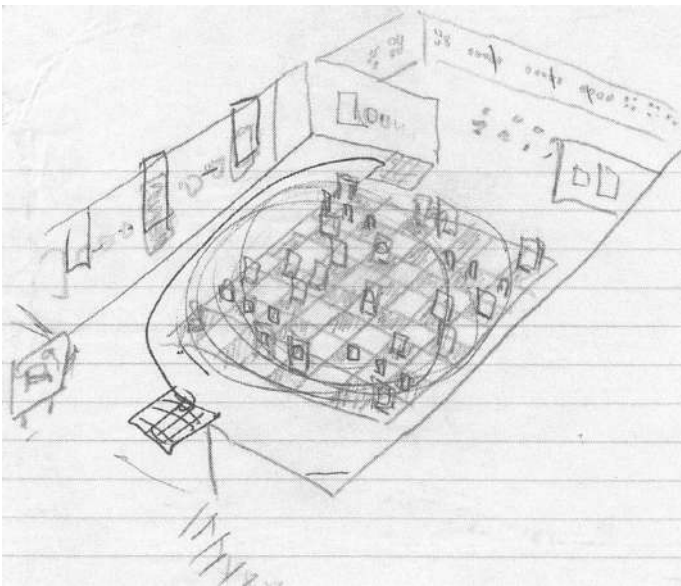
If, for Lotman, the museum hall had a paradigmatic value and thus a universal status, Hubert Damisch, for his part, took up the question of the anachronic temporalities of the exhibition on the basis of a concrete exhibition project that he curated at the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam

in the summer of 1997 under the title *Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum*, which gave rise to a theoretical reflection on the very nature of display (Damisch, 1997; 2000). This was not the first time that Damisch had curated an entire exhibition project; two years earlier, with the exhibition *Traité du Trait* at the Louvre, he had proposed a similar project: to define the trait—which would be translated into English in its graphic meaning as a *stroke* or *mark*, and in its linguistic version as *feature* (1995, p. 20)—as an *operation* rather than a stylistic or technical fact, through a constellation of works from different periods, also drawn from the Louvre’s drawing collections. Through the exhibition and the dialogue between the works, the *trait*, in its difference from the drawing, was thus constructed as a real *theoretical object*, sanctioned by its operation as an “action or attack” on the surface and, above all, by its character of deviation from the order of representation. On this occasion, Damisch adopted a methodological position:

The methodological choice [*parti pris*] I shall adopt here can be summed up as follows: far from claiming to view works - and among them the graphic productions of the past - through the eyes of their contemporaries (if such a claim is tenable to the end), it would be important to be clear about what our own view of them owes (even if we put on the spectacles of a Diderot or those of a Baudelaire, or try to think with Pliny or Alberti) to the times in which we live, and to the drives and resistances of all kinds that the productions and practices of those times raise up in us, to the openings [*ouvertures*] they provide onto the past and to the blindness, even repression, that can ensue (Damisch, 1995, p. 18).

Here we find the gaze of a present that “activates... openings to the past,” that is, new readings of the past, reserves of meaning that are brought up to date precisely through the dialogue between the works. To activate this dialogue, Damisch intervened in the exhibition system at the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, questioning the traditional *accrochage*

and transforming the museum into a chessboard on which the exhibition becomes a game of movements, activations, and deactivations of the relationships between the works—a game of exchanges, but also of tensions and conflicts, as Yves-Alain Bois summed up: “What if it is the very form of the exhibition, the exhibition as form, that is at stake rather than the subjectivity of the curator?” (Bois, 1997, p. 114). The premise of this curatorial gesture was precisely in “dreaming up another rule of the game, another economy of the exhibition, another way of distributing the works, in a word: another principle of connection [*branchement*] and circulation of flows, possibly pushed to the point of short-circuit” (Damisch, 2000, p. 19).



Sketch by Hubert Damisch for the exhibition *Moves* in 1997  
(Courtesy Teri Wehn-Damisch).

The museum’s vast modernist hall, “a cube with no openings to the outside, its walls painted uniformly white,” was transformed into a chessboard with sixty-four black-and-white

squares on the floor; on the squares are arranged some thirty objects, paintings mounted on freestanding mobile crates (found in the museum's storerooms), sculptures, and objects on pedestals (dishes, a television set, etc.). Detached from the wall on which they were usually hung, the works were visible from the front as one entered the space, offering a simultaneous montage that could then be crossed by moving between the crates.



View of the exhibition *Moves*, Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam, 1997  
(Courtesy Teri Wehn-Damisch).

The game of chess was chosen for its ability to articulate synchronic and diachronic dimensions, as well as the temporalities of the semiosphere as conceived by Lotman: “for at any time during a game of chess,” as the author wrote in the catalogue, “the distribution of the pieces on the board can be considered either as the product of a given history (the succession of moves from which it results) or a ‘position’—in other words, a system—which contains all the necessary



and sufficient information for the player whose turn comes next to be able to decide a move in an informed manner” (Damisch, 2000, p. 91). If reference was made to the game of chess on an iconographic level (Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel* for the rook, or Kandinsky’s *Blue Rider* for the horseman), the most interesting “game” consisted in the activation of series focused on a particular relevance, which could then radiate from that relevance to other works; let us see how Damisch described their functioning. Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel*, which was at the center of the chessboard, was not juxtaposed with thematically, stylistically, or historically coherent works, but was placed in frontal tension with Van Eyck’s *The Three Marys at the Tomb*. In this way, a polarization was drawn between excess and absence or lack, excess in a human presence that claims to ascend to heaven (with its visual sign of ascent) and absence in the empty and open tomb in the earth, which nevertheless sets a sign for a different kind of presence. This polarity between the emptiness that evokes a presence and the abundance of an arrogant presence activated zones of meaning that opened up in other works. For example, the empty sarcophagus was reminiscent of Sol LeWitt’s grid or Man Ray’s stripped coat hangers, which in contemporary works illuminated a denser idea of emptiness, absence, expectation. On the other hand, the walls of the museum were covered with works that functioned as “footnotes” to the game on the board. For example, Dubuffet’s *Funerary Staircase for Jacques Ulmann* (1967), with its winding ascent, referred to Bruegel’s *Babel*, opening up a series of cross-questions between the two works: how much of the meaningless ascent of the biblical narrative remains in Dubuffet, and how much in Bruegel’s announces the plastic texture that would occupy the entire surface of representation centuries later?



View of the exhibition *Moves*, Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam, 1997  
(Courtesy Teri Wehn-Damisch).

However, these relationships were only accessible to the extent that visitors invented their own itinerary, renouncing a position that guaranteed an overall view and accepting to be confronted with constantly changing and partial perspectives. The spectator is in perpetual displacement [*déplacement*] (Damisch, 2000, p. 120), and confronted with the frustration of a constricting device, but also escapes the most problematic of curatorial postures, namely “the illusionary, deceptive, hence manipulative expository agency that pretends to be as self-effacing as the third-person narrator of nineteenth-century realist fiction” (Bal, 1996, p. 158).

Without going into the details of the sophisticated short-circuits activated on the chessboard, it should be clear what we are concerned with: the device took the anachronistic relationships between old masters and contemporary works as the fulcrum

of a different notion of “history,” and the exhibition became a meta-reflection on a different model of historicity:

The juxtaposition, in the same play area, of old masters... and of more recent, even contemporary works... should serve to ‘precipitate’ the distance that normally keeps these works apart in the space of the museum. To *precipitate* this distance, in the chemical sense of the term, but not to make it disappear. The interval that remains between the squares on which the various pieces stand will bring out the relationship that inevitably develops, in such a space, between the old masters collection and the modern and contemporary one (Damisch, 1997, pp. 82-83).

Precipitation and interval—there is a precipitation of the diachronic temporal distance that contracts; at the same time, however, the works that are approached by this precipitation maintain the distance that makes it possible to establish the relation, the interval to produce a new reciprocal *legibility* (it will “bring out the relationship”), just as in the Benjaminian collision that characterizes the dialectical image. Thus, Van Eyck’s empty tomb can provide a genealogy for the absences and expectations of Man Ray or Sol LeWitt, but at the same time the contemporary work activates a new sense of this emptiness.

The notion of “influence” is thus redefined and overturned, as Louis Marin (1984) argued apropos the exhibition *De Kooning and the Flemish and Dutch Tradition* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1984, which offered him the opportunity to question the deterministic-causal logic of the relationship between past and present in art history in order to open up to a logic of structural consonances and reactivations. In the catalogue text, the term “influence” is detached from its purely biographical status (De Kooning’s early artistic training in the Netherlands) by the artist’s own words; in an interview with Harold Rosenberg in the September 1972 issue of *Art News*, De Kooning defines the question of influence in terms that Marin says are illuminating:

I am an eclectic painter 'by chance'; I can open virtually any book of reproductions and find a painting in it by which I might be influenced. It gives such satisfaction to do something that has already been done thirty thousand years ago.... If I am influenced by painting from another time, it is like the smile of the Cheshire cat in Alice. The smile remained when the cat was gone. In other words, I might be influenced by Rubens but I certainly would not want to paint like Rubens (Marin, 1984, p. 32).

Marin explored this passage carefully.

The cat's body disappears in the diachronic flow of time, in which all bodies are concretely inscribed, but its smile remains, i.e., the presence of these *figural virtualities* reactivated by time: the "possible" that Rembrandt's work contains as a smile is not bound to the "body" of its historical-chronological occurrence and is ready to reappear centuries later in a new form, under new historical conditions. It is the case of the materiality of Ruben's painting that emerges from the figures depicted and that, centuries later, will be the prominent materiality of De Kooning's paintings, among which, conversely, some barely recognizable figures will emerge. The presence of these figural possibilities traces what Marin called a "historical logic of forms" rather than a chronology of styles. Thanks to the Cheshire Cat's smile, works that are not contemporary in the sense of being coeval are nevertheless "*co-temporal*," that is, in Marin's terms, they belong to a common temporality (Marin, 1992). It is therefore the work of art itself that opens up those possibilities; "one must therefore look," warned Marin, in order to understand the "influence" of Rubens on de Kooning, but also of de Kooning on Rubens or Rembrandt.

When Hubert Damisch speaks of a "*valeur d'exposition*" capable of "moving out of the shadows and into the light, bringing to light what was previously invisible," we must understand this illumination in terms of what Walter Benjamin (1990) called "*Lesbarkeit*," a new legibility in which the present moment or the artwork of the present ignites new realms of

meaning in the work of the past. The exhibition in which contemporary artworks come into play, as in *Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum*, can itself be the agent of such a redefinition of historicity:

The museum has long responded to this question by proposing masterpieces of the past as models for a history to come, and it must now formulate this question from a radically different angle: that of a history—if there can and should be such a thing as ‘history’—that obeys an opposite perspective and finds its anchor in the present. One of the aims of experience is to measure the light that the productions of the present shed on those of the past, and the light that can be expected to be shed on them (Damisch, 2000, pp. 97-98)

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“A PLACE OF BARBARISM.”  
THE “MUSEUM CRISIS” AND THE EXHIBITION

Mario Farina

**Keywords:** Aesthetics; Exhibition; Modernism; Crisis.

**Abstract:** This paper explores the concept of the contemporary art exhibition through a thought experiment set in a museum. Drawing on philosophical aesthetics and cultural criticism, I examine the evolving function of museums and the crisis of museality in the face of post-historical art. This essay juxtaposes modernist and postmodernist perspectives on the relationship between art and history and the display of art in museums. The objective of this examination is to propose a reevaluation of the role and significance of museums in exhibiting art in the context of everyday life.

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## I. A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

I would like to open this paper by using an argumentative tool that has had much success in philosophy, namely what today is called a thought experiment, but which has a tradition that goes back at least to Plato:

We are in a museum we have never been to, a museum of contemporary art, to be precise. It is similar to many other museums we have visited (the walls are white and rather bare, the staff are young and speak good English, the information graphics are small and minimal, the facilities are well signposted, and the bookstore is excellently stocked). We find ourselves in a large room with only a fire extinguisher leaning against the entrance, a green chair against the wall on the opposite side, and a large rectangular sign on the wall with the words “Gallery being installed” in the center. On the floor, near the entrance, we notice a rectangular leaflet identical to the leaflets used in the same museum to accompany the works. The leaflet reads as follows:

Title: *Am I Re(a)d?*

Technique: mixed

With this installation, the author wanted to evoke a feeling of confusion in the viewer. The work has a high degree of mystery that accentuates the sense of urgent loneliness that people feel in the contemporary world.

Now. How should we interpret the flyer? It could be the title of the artwork, “Fire extinguisher,” so it would allude to the red of the object and the importance of reading (and thus interpreting) its function independent of color distinctions that might distract us from the urgent (what could be more urgent than using a fire extinguisher?) loneliness we find ourselves in. Or the fire extinguisher could simply be a banal fire extinguisher, with the title ironically referring to the green color of the chair. Or the work could be the room itself, as “in the making” as our own precarious existence. Or the label could have ended up there by mistake and refer to another work in another room, so that the room we are in could very well have been staged.

This little thought experiment plays with the familiar and often ironically mocked paradoxes of so-called contemporary

art, focusing on the function of the exhibiting the work in the museum context. What interests me in it is the function that the act of exhibiting the work of art has in the current context, but in conjunction with an element that seems to me specific to contemporary art: the power of the person who decides where the caption is placed. This condition, in my view, corresponds to a number of positions that emerged during the twentieth century and addressed what has been understood as the current situation of “museums in crisis<sup>1</sup>.” My goal here is to consider these positions and explore how they can be understood in the light of the above, using the tools of philosophical aesthetics.

## 2. MUSEUM CRISIS?

In 1953, Adorno wrote an essay that is an important contribution to the collection *Prisms*, subtitled *Essays in cultural criticism and society*. In this collection, Adorno considers a number of cultural phenomena that in the German debate of the first half of the twentieth century came under the term *Kulturkritik* (cultural criticism). These were the products that, in the wake of Nietzsche, denounced the aura of inviolability of sacrosanct Western *Kultur* and attempted to demonstrate the limits of a rationality aimed at the unlimited deployment of its own dominion. Aldous Huxley, Oswald Spengler, Henry George, Thorstein Veblen: names that are often associated with a suspiciously conservative critique of modernity. It was

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1. The “museum crisis” has been much discussed in the European debate. The positions of Jean Clair and Baudrillard, for example, will be referred to later, but the work of Francesco Purini (Purini, 2008) could also be cited. In the Anglo-Saxon world, the issue has not had the same resonance, and the museum crisis is understood primarily in terms of social and cultural conditions, as reflected in the research of Donatien Grau, for example, in his discussion with Philippe de Montebello, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Grau, 2020, pp. 94-118).

precisely in this conservatism that Adorno saw the dialectical seed of a progressive discourse, capable of recognizing in the critique of decadence the reasons that allow culture to think its own salvation. The essay central to this text is entitled *Valéry, Proust and the Museum*.

Proust and Valéry correspond to two contrasting reactions to the museum phenomenon. Proust's naive enchantment is countered by Valéry's elitist snobbery. For the poet, the museum reproduces a perverse logic that devalues the work of art by turning it into an object of consumption. Everything in the museum is wrong, from the checkroom where you must leave your umbrella to the rooms whose bureaucratic prohibitions prevent you from smoking, to the arrangement of the works themselves, reduced to a jumble of forms competing with one another as if they were arranged on a market stall: the museum as "a place of barbarism" (Adorno, 1981, p. 183). In Proust's eyes, it is the corruption to which the works are subjected in the museum that awakens them, allowing them to be reborn under the visitor's enchanted gaze. Valéry, according to Adorno, fetishizes the cultural object, the work of art, and this fetishization gives rise to his refractory approach to museum practice, which pillories its purity. This defeatism is corrected by Proustian subjectivism, in which viewers immerse themselves in the works and disregard the sanctity of culture precisely because they do not believe in it, thus saving the museum experience and culture. However, this naivety would be unbearable and would lead to an opposite fetishization, that of the sovereign subject, if it were not in turn corrected by Valéry's disenchanting gaze, which, by fetishizing culture, warns of the fate that awaits it in the world of commodities.

"The only relation to art that can be sanctioned in a reality that stands under the constant threat of catastrophe," Adorno concludes, "is one that treats works of art with the same deadly seriousness that characterizes the world today" (Adorno, 1981, p. 185). Taking them seriously as broken objects suggests the horizon of recomposition, and the museum should be

considered the place where the impossible is attempted: to juxtapose the works without violence, so that from their confrontation arises the allusion to a possible whole. This would be the goal of exhibiting works in a museum. It is worth recalling, however, that in 1967 Adorno published an essay entitled *Proposal of Non-conciliation*, in which he defended contemporary art, the *neue Kunst*, from its detractors, whom he roughly identified in the opponent Cézanne (Adorno, 1997, p. 331), who had died more than sixty years earlier. It should therefore come as no surprise that his conception of the exhibition and the museum is reminiscent of the modernist approach of the avant-garde: in one way or another, usually through pain and rupture, the work must allude to the future, to recomposition in a possible horizon.

Adorno’s position seems to me paradigmatic of the way in which a part of philosophy in the last century has dealt with the transformation art has undergone, and which is linked, in no small measure, to the practices of its display. On the basis of this kind of reflection, there has been general talk of a crisis of museality. The museum has always been an ambiguous place for aesthetic reflection, part tomb, part temple of art, but in any case, a space directly linked to the function of the work. To exhibit a work of art is to ask a rigorous question about its meaning, to move away from the impression that the work must express something enigmatic, that its meaning is enclosed in a hermetic structure: in short, that the work has the modernist function of revealing a world. The crisis of the museum has been understood in light of this function, that is, as the difficulty that the museum faces when it has to fulfill its task of displaying and exhibiting the world that the work of art is supposed to open up<sup>2</sup>.

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2. I refer here generally to the modernist aesthetic conception of the work of art, as expressed not only by Adorno, but also, for example, by Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” (Heidegger, 2002, pp. 1-50).

These reflections are clearly articulated, for example, in the position of historian and curator Jean Clair, who in 2007 published the book *Malaise dans les musées*, in which he rails against everything he perceives as perversions of the contemporary museum: its transformation into a kind of shopping mall devoted to the horizontality of entertainment rather than the verticality of culture, the increasing importance given to the non-exhibitory areas of museums (restaurants, relaxation areas, bookstores), the greater importance of the container (the museum as architecture) over the content (the works of art), following the famous example of the Guggenheim in Bilbao<sup>3</sup>. Observations of this kind have been very successful in cultural publicity, as evidenced by the mass of publications thematizing this transformation of the museum from a place of culture to a place of consumption and entertainment.

This is a kind of long lament for what is perceived as the loss of the museum's function as a place to exhibit works of art, which was very influentially thematized in Baudrillard's 1977 essay on the Centre de Pompidou entitled *L'effet Beaubourg*. In it, the museum is no longer the place where living art is exhibited, no longer the place where great art sets its own elitist standards of distinction that exclude ignorance; rather, it is the place that celebrates the death of art, and where the masses flock to gleefully observe its corpse<sup>4</sup>. At last art is dead, say the masses, at last it has ceased to exclude us from its sacred enclosure, at last we can invade these new shopping malls into which museums have morphed, sullyng the sacred aura of art with our silly tourist T-shirts. Although Baudrillard had no

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3. Perhaps the clearest position on this issue is the one expressed by art critic and historian Jean Clair. For his position on the Guggenheim Foundation museums, especially those in New York and Bilbao, see Clair, 2008, p. 104.

4. Mass is described as the energy that dissolves the cultural space of the museum through the new museums, of which the Centre Pompidou is the emblem: a pneumatic space in which culture moves as light and rarefied as air (Baudrillard, 2008, pp. 57-70).

nostalgic intentions, his remarks played a paradigmatic role for anyone who wanted to assert the perversion of contemporary museum culture.

### 3. MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

The position set out in the previous paragraph is based on a conception of the work of art that could easily be described as modernist. If we take into account the meaning of this term in philosophical aesthetics, the modernist conception corresponds roughly to the idea that, through a subjective distortion of representation, the work of art can maintain the Stendhalese *promesse de bonheur* invoked by Nietzsche and Baudelaire<sup>5</sup>. The faithful and harmonious representation, aimed at the display of artistic beauty, is no longer capable of expressing the *truth* of a subject who is constantly experiencing the impact exerted by the state of the world on his or her person and who therefore finds in disharmony, dissonance, and fracture the way to allude to the need for recomposition and the promise of future happiness. This idea of the work of art unequivocally clashes with the fate that has befallen the exhibition of the so-called contemporary work of art.

If there is one point on which much of the philosophical aesthetics concerned with the work of art since the second half of the twentieth century converges, it is precisely the absence of the future in artistic production. The absence of the future here means the absence of history and is expressed as the absence of the enigmatic meaning that the work of art is supposed

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5. Robert Pippin has effectively summarized the problem of artistic modernism from the perspective of philosophical aesthetics, presenting it as questioning both the role the viewer and the historical conditions in which the work takes shape. In this sense, modernism would be a way of taking modern art to the extreme by artistically questioning the status of art itself (Pippin, 2014, pp. 63-68).

to reveal. The examples are countless. The Marxist critic of postmodernism Fredric Jameson spoke of contemporary art as a horizontal pastiche devoid of planning (Jameson, 1991, pp. 1-54), analogous to the criticism of transavantgarde art by the great theorist of postmodernism in philosophy Jean-François Lyotard (Lyotard, 1992). Post-historical art was also spoken of by an author of a completely different extraction, namely Arthur C. Danto, who theorized the “artworld” as the moment in which art has made its meaning explicit and no longer has anything to achieve nor any unconscious to reveal (Danto, 1992, pp. 9-10). Similarly, Boris Groys speaks of contemporary art as a prolonged and tendentially infinite delay, in contrast to the promise of attainment that characterized modernity (Groys, 2010, pp. 84-101), and Peter Osborne insists on the static nature of the contemporary (Osborne, 2013, pp. 15-35).

There is thus a broad consensus on this fact: the contemporary artwork has a non-historical character, at least not in the sense in which modernism understood it. This does not mean that contemporary artwork cannot have history as its thematic object. That would be easily refuted by the facts. Italy’s pavilion in the 2022 Biennale, curated by Gian Maria Tosatti, for example, had as its subject a precise historical and social phenomenon: the emptying of the productive fabric and the production of industrial ruins, and the resulting social vacuum. The point of the post-historicity of art concerns art as a whole, whereby in the same era and in the same paradigm of contemporaneity there can exist both the most political and engaged of artworks, and the most detached and pop imaginable. It is not the individual work of art that is post-historical, but the condition of art as a whole. In this sense, Boris Groys characterizes contemporary art not through the image of pluralism, but through the category of contradiction (Groys, 2008, p. 2), that is, through the continuous horizontal juxtaposition of extremes, whereby art reacts to



the emergence of abstractionism by producing realism, and to the dominance of engagement it reacts with detachment.

But if this is the case, is the so-called crisis of museums not rather a crisis of expectations? Those who flee in horror at the masses munching popcorn in the halls, those who are amazed at the space given to bookshops and cafeterias, those who—like Jean Clair—blame the overwhelming power of economics in art for this unfortunate state of affairs, are these people not seeking something from art that it is no longer able to give, at least in the traditional sense? In a word, are they not seeking the exhibition of something that art no longer exhibits?

### 3. THE EXHIBITION OF SOMETHING

Back to the thought experiment. The idea of a post-historical art, as Danto calls it, seems to be well expressed by the person walking around holding the label that can be attached to any work. What, then, is being exhibited in museums? If the expectations of those who still expect a work of art in the modern, or modernist, sense are frustrated, and if, on the other hand, we find the conservative critique of the museum unsatisfactory, it is a question of what is exhibited in the museum. In this regard, I would like to take up an argument by Boris Groys that seems promising.

The argument is contained in *In the Flow*, a collection of essays published in 2016. Groys starts from the idea that contemporary art has, to a certain extent, fulfilled Duchamp’s project by converse. If Duchamp wanted to extend the museum to the whole of life, contemporary art has broken down the barrier between art and life, but in the sense that it has dragged art into the course of ordinary reality: *in the flow*, indeed<sup>6</sup>.

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6. In this regard, I refer to the forum on Boris Groys in the journal *Lebenswelt*, edited by Francesco Campana, in which I participated, as well as to the volume *In the Flow* by Boris Groys (Campana, 2017, pp. 1-45).

Art objects are indistinguishable from ordinary objects, but not because life has become art (as modernism wanted), but because art has become everyday life: a Brillo box, a Disney comic strip, a television recording.

If this is true, one can then ask whether exhibiting works still makes sense, whether the museum still makes sense. The answer that the thought experiment at the beginning of this text suggests to me is a positive one. Unlike Danto, who thought that contemporary art had no unconscious to exhibit, and unlike Groys, for whom the museum is in fact abolished by entering in the flow of ordinary life, I am convinced that the empirical observation of the existence of museums, and indeed of their proliferation, tells us that there is always something unconscious to exhibit. In the case of contemporary art, perhaps it is the power of the person who hangs the label on the wall. Who confers meaning? In what way is it established? This is a question we have yet to clarify, one for which there is no definitive answer.

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# FROM THE PANOPTIC SCIENCE MUSEUMS TO THE MUSEUM AS A HERITAGE MATRIX

Paul Rasse

**Keywords:** Museum; Museology; Heritage; Mediation; Public; Contemporary Museums.

**Abstract:** From an anthropological perspective, the history of museums can be divided into two main periods: that of museums as indispensable panopticons, facilitating the improvement of art, science, and technology; and, since the late twentieth century, that of museums as cultural media, increasingly transformed into heritage matrices and preservation centers. Indeed, since the 1980s, at a time of apparent decline, the museum institution has been revitalized by assuming a hitherto overlooked and undervalued function—that of communication and mediation aimed at the general public. In the context of an ever-changing world, museums play a crucial role in identifying and selecting the traces we have inherited or will bequeath to future generations in order to define, mark, and give meaning to our shared history.

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From an anthropological perspective, if we consider that the project of anthropology is to highlight major socio-cultural movements over the long term (Rasse, 2006), and synchronically, the history of museums can be divided into two main periods: that of museums as indispensable panopticons facilitating the improvement of art, science, and technology and, since the late twentieth century, that of museums as cultural media transformed into heritage matrices and preservation centers. Indeed, since the 1980s, at a time of apparent decline, the museum institution has been revitalized by assuming a hitherto overlooked and undervalued function—that of communication and mediation aimed towards the general public. It underwent a metamorphosis with the emergence of a new museology, the proliferation of eco-museums, the advent of science and society museums and finally the rise of contemporary art museums through architectural design, exhibition scenography, and their engagement with a wider public sphere (Rasse, 2017).

## I. UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD THROUGH MUSEUMS

The emergence of the first prominent public museums, which evolved from cabinets of curiosities, dates back to the French Revolution and is emblematic of the expansive universalist aspirations of the Enlightenment. In order for the unfettered exercise of reason, so dear to Kant, to unfold, flourish, and encounter constant critical engagement, and thus to progress indefinitely, it was necessary to produce forms of universal knowledge that transcended vernacular knowledge and local epistemologies and engaged humanity in a process of collective intelligence (Kant, 1785, pp. 207-217). Science is built incrementally as disparate strands of knowledge scattered throughout societies are systematically collected, accumulated, confronted with one another, and synthesized. They then act as catalysts for further inquiry, enriching, reinforcing, or

challenging existing paradigms. The history of the sciences, Latour writes, could be summed up as humanity's ingenuity in inventing devices that harness the knowledge, constituting what he calls the "panopticon of knowledge" (Latour, 1989, p. 145). The museum stands as a prime representation of such a framework, simultaneously assembling and preserving collections of artifacts in a single place, thus providing opportunities for study for artists and scholars alike; incidentally, it also serves as an instrument of education in truth and beauty for the wider population.

"The art museums of the Directory and the Consulate," Dominique Poulot explains, "developed the image of a universal institution, that aspired to concentrate 'all the exemplary masterpieces of every genre and school'" (Poulot, 1997, p. 217). Until then, in a society without visual representation, access to works of art had been limited to those who could afford to travel to see the original paintings of the great masters, usually housed in princely palaces and bourgeois interiors, in cabinets of curiosities and sometimes even at archaeological sites where relics of antiquity were beginning to be unearthed. Such journeys remained dangerous, however, as with Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), often considered the founder of art history, who was tragically murdered in a hotel room in Trieste. These opportunities were reserved for a tiny minority of scholars who would encounter, at best, only a handful of artworks in their lifetimes and would have only fleeting memories of them, unless they were compelled to revisit them. It is important to remember that in those days, light was provided by candlelight or oil lamps, while heating depended on fireplaces and chimneys, meaning that interiors and wall paintings were heavily smokestained and dimly lit, if not relegated to attics or cellars.

In order to establish aesthetics as an academic discipline, a critical science of beauty, or a philosophy of art, it was imperative to develop panoptic frameworks—spaces where the most exquisite works produced by previous generations

could be collected, organized, and preserved for study by aesthetic specialists. Fine art museums thus served as the first compendium of painting; at their inception, they were accessible primarily to art historians and accredited artists only. Once the paintings of the royal household had been consolidated in the Louvre, where they were safe from vandalism, the Directory instructed the generals of the victorious French army in Belgium and Holland (from 1794) and especially in Italy (from 1796), to select the best artistic masterpieces and send them to Paris (Deotte, 1993, p. 84). Elsewhere, in the provinces, bishoprics, archbishoprics, and monasteries became temporary repositories for collections confiscated from the nobility, supplemented by casts and copies of varying quality.

In the scientific field, the aim of natural history museums is to compile and create an exhaustive inventory of nature, to survey and assemble in an organized collection of specimens the elements that make up the three earthly orders: mineral, vegetable, and animal. Natural history museums therefore became key elements in a great scientific endeavor, that of *systematics*: an anthology or compilation of a thorough inventory of the world, from which a universal classification system could be established, transcending local particularisms. As Jacques de Mollinos declared to the representatives making up the Committee of Public Safety on the 3 Messidor, in the second year of the French Republic, “it is undoubtedly a bold undertaking to build for nature a palace, or rather a temple, worthy of her and capable, in a certain sense, of containing it in her entirety” (Bezombes, 1994, p. 30). And to dispatch expeditions to every corner of the earth, to bring back the specimens that together make up “terrestrial nature,” with museums entrusted with preserving them as unalterably as possible, to the point of creating one of those famous panopticons that house in one place the objects needed to understand the universe. At the same time, the weight of the institution and the prestige of the buildings give the professors of the museum the authority they need to impose the same rules of



engagement, the same system of organization and the same methods of classification, enabling the accumulation and the juxtaposition of knowledge essential to the process of collective intelligence (Rasse & Lambert, 2013, pp. 68-74; Rasse & Lambert, 2021, pp. 36-43).

In the field of technology, we could also include the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers, founded during the Revolution and embodying the same overarching project. Its founder, Abbé Grégoire, adopted Vaucanson's idea of centralizing in one place "the instruments and models of all the arts whose purpose is to provide nourishment, clothing, and shelter," with a view toward technological advancement and the training of artisans. (Ferriot, 1989, p. 98)

## 2. AN INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS AND A BREAKTHROUGH IN COMMUNICATION

Museums were designed to meet the needs of scholars and artists rather than those of the general public, who until recently were merely tolerated (Gibson, 1952). This is not the case in France, where the state has played an essential role in financing and controlling museums since the Revolution. In other countries, the creation and development of museums has been primarily the result of private initiatives by industrialists or wealthy collectors, and sometimes even by scientific societies. Cross-subsidization from both public and private sources ensures a high degree of autonomy for museums in major European capitals such as London and Berlin; this principle has meant that they have had to pay a greater attention to the lay public, whose donations and large numbers of visitors have made their existence possible. They were among the first to conceive original, systematic forms of scenography, such as dioramas designed with the general public in mind.

Conversely, French museums have tended to retreat into their scientific function as panopticons of knowledge,

prioritizing the accumulation, organization and display of collections according to the principles of systematic taxonomy overseen by the Musée de Paris. In art museums, this has led to a diachronic categorization of collections by period and genre, intended for the use of experts (Van Praet & Fromont, 1987, p. 60).

The phenomenal expansion of communication technologies, however, has entirely turned the equation on its head. They allow each individual to bring all available knowledge to his or her workplace. It is now possible to have easy access to the most extraordinary works produced by mankind without difficulty, even if they are scattered around the world. Photography, cinema, video, and news-editing techniques have already taken a giant leap forward. The digitization of documents and their distribution via telematic networks accelerate and greatly facilitate their dissemination and storage, so much so that it is preferable, to see the original of a painting in a photograph, or on a screen with reproductions of sufficient quality to allow it to be enlarged or reduced at will, to zoom in on specific details, and to switch seamlessly between them. Similarly, video or cinema provides access to animals living in their natural habitats, interacting with each other, in a way that is far more vivid than even the most impressive taxidermy or diorama. Not to mention the incomparable possibilities offered by new devices for selecting, accumulating, compiling, classifying, comparing, and organizing the images and documentation accumulated on each object of knowledge, operations that Bruno Latour argues, are an essential condition to the progress of science.

It is easier to understand why the museum has lost its original function as an irreplaceable apparatus for research and the training of scholars and artists. By the second half of the twentieth century, they had become an obsolete institution that the state and local authorities allowed to slowly wither away, unsure of what to do with pompous and obsolete buildings, overwhelmed by dusty collections sheltered in the silence of deserted halls. In order to escape their deadly fate,

they had to reinvent themselves, to find a new purpose, and to do so, they had to develop a previously marginal function: communicating about their heritage collections by intensifying public outreach, scenography, and mediation....

At first, the curators thought that all they had to do was simply to open the doors of the museum wide, leaving the content and form unchanged, to attract the public in droves, enticing them to visit the panopticon, be fascinated by the accumulation of collections, experience the work of classification, and appreciate its value. Unfortunately, this did not prove suitable for the general public, since attracting them would require a profound transformation of the institution, completely revolutionizing its meaning and role.

Today, the functions of research, conservation, and communication are closely intertwined. On the one hand, it is a question of attracting new audiences, informing them better by creating appropriate teaching and didactic tools. But more than that, it is about engaging the community in a process of reflection on the culture that unites them and on the heritage they wish to preserve, interpret, and pass on to future generations. Communication gives museums an audience, providing it with social benefits and legitimizing the costs of their other functions (research and conservation). Still, the path to achieving this objective is not so straightforward.

To transform the museum into a place of communication, it is first necessary to rethink its structure. This phase involves creating additional space, securing reserves elsewhere in a controlled environment that meets the specific requirements for storage, conservation, and documentation. The most aesthetically pleasing, impressive, and accessible spaces will be dedicated to the public, reinventing and encompassing the institution, becoming focal points while storage areas will be relocated or relegated elsewhere. The latter constitute an inexhaustible resource from which the museologists regularly draw to conceive and renew exhibitions. Particular attention is paid to the museum entrance, which is designed to welcome

visitors, and the museum often includes an auditorium, educational workshops for children, a library, a gift shop, rest areas, and restaurants.

The exhibition itself is the focus of careful study (De Bideran, 2019, pp. 39-50). It is presented in a didactic itinerary, supported by the selection of remarkable, exceptional objects arranged in a meaningful selection, meticulously staged, annotated, illuminated, even scented and enhanced with sound, to transform the visit into a sensory, emotional, surprising, and wondrous experience, as frequently described by museum curators (Varutti & Deramond, 2020, pp. 171-177; Pianezza, 2020, pp. 85-110).

### 3. DEVICES FOR THE VALORIZATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Collections are undeniably the foundation on which museum institutions symbolically rest and continue to stand. Their sheer scope is often beyond the comprehension of most visitors, yet it is they that underpin the legitimacy of the institution. In an age in which everything is increasingly commodified, destined to be either exchanged, purchased, or sold, in which the essential material forms of our environment are condemned to an imminent obsolescence and destruction, the rules of inalienability and inexpressibility bestowed upon museum collections endow them with an unparalleled status. They are enveloped in an aura that verges of the sacred. Although in practice these principles apply solely to the public collections of museums under state control, their influence transcends the entire institution, sanctifying it with a profoundly positive image as a bastion of eternal preservation.

The heritage process begins with the selection of traces and culminates in their interpretation, ultimately leading to the creation of a collective memory. It can be broken down into three main stages:

1) *Selection*, i.e. the choice, from among all the available artifacts, of those that seem essential enough to merit inclusion in the collections, to be given heritage status.

2) *Conservation*, which includes not only the restoration that ensures the preservation of the objects selected in the previous stage, but also their authentication, cataloguing and assigning an inventory number, before classifying and documenting them in order to give them a meaning.

3) *Interpretation and mediation*, to ensure that these collections are publicized, or in other words, that they are made known to as many people as possible, to justify the choice of their selection, to demonstrate their interest and, at some point, to demonstrate their significance.

All these mechanisms have a commemorative aspect and participate in the collective memory.

Museums, as a matrix of heritage, by virtue of their permanence, their visibility, their place in the city, both physical and symbolic, constitute a powerful, structuring element in the memory matrix of communities. More than any other entity they help to anchor collective memory, to certify and stabilize it, to nourish the complexity of forms of collective intelligence that societies have about themselves.

#### 4. THE CASE OF CONTEMPORARY MUSEUMS

Since their inception, museums have been adept at harvesting, discriminating, naming, organizing, classifying, interpreting, and displaying, albeit, with the difference that now applies to society as a whole, especially in the realm of contemporary art. Today, after a long period of resistance, most curators seek to intervene in the contemporary art scene (Heinich, 1998, p. 43 *passim*) in one way or another. Both small and large museums are eager to play their part in the prestigious game of distinguishing and legitimizing the work of artists, selecting and delineating the aesthetic traces that will be passed on to

future generations. This role is essential at a time when there have never been so many artists and artistic proposals, when the boundaries between art, talent, and even professionalism are so fluid (Heinich, 1998, p. 75 *passim*), while the ability to produce and reproduce works on an industrial scale has shaken up the rules of art and rendered the virtuosity of the creator insignificant, proletarianized as he is in the face of what Marx called the feats of the machine (Marx, 1973, p. 10 *passim*).

The more the artists' work transcends the framework of the canvas, slips off the picture rails, finds its way into nature, settles in the most unlikely urban spaces, dematerializes into video images, gets lost or constructed in digital networks, the more the museum remains the ultimate reference, to the point of becoming the source of all aesthetic judgment, the obligatory passage to all consecration, as Jean Clair had anticipated in 1974.

The museum... is an ambiguous institution, equally ambivalent, which on the one hand alienates the artwork by cutting off or "disconnecting" it from its sources, its origins, from the milieu that gave birth to it, in order to restore it to itself, to its own domain, that of art, but which on the other hand and as a corollary, through its institutional authority, can value everything and introduce as work of art anything that crosses its threshold. [...] Since Duchamp's urinal, countless works have functioned on the basis of this ambiguity (Clair, 1974, p. 192).

The museum is becoming a producer of contemporary art. However, it does not act randomly, it chooses artists whose reputation is attested by the fact that they have already been exhibited in other museums. It orchestrates their artistic proposals. The curators complement the exhibitions with works on loan from institutions or from renowned collectors and organize them in a fluid, surprising layout that the mediators do their best to explain to visitors. Lastly, they document them in catalogues that will serve as a record of the exhibition, in

brochures that are widely distributed at the museum gates, in audio guides or in smartphone applications that can be downloaded from the museum's website. In addition, they often include photographic or video reports that shed light on the genesis of the work and the artist's biography. All of this is placed under the sanctifying light of the institution, under the gaze of the crowds of visitors who flock to the entrance, in the discourse of the guides or mediators aimed at tourists, schoolchildren, students, and the captive public (Sidorova, 2019; Emond, 2023).

On the day of the opening, the press, radio, and television cover the event all the more extensively because everyone else is talking about it—advertising posters on the city walls promote it, while the postal or electronic mailboxes of all the cultural actors, politicians, and trendy industrialists in the vicinity have already received invitations to the vernissage. Guests, whether in a hurry or patient, experts or not, can testify that they, too, have had an *encounter* with the masterpiece installed in the sanctuary, preceded by its media halo.

This whole operation is constitutive of the artwork, which is no longer reduced to the mere materiality of the artistic proposal, since the institution brings its aura and energy, its capacity to legitimize it and make it shine in the eyes of experts, visitors and, even more, in the eyes of the city and the international networks of protagonists and enlightened enthusiasts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As a result of the rapid development of digital technologies, anyone can access a wealth of knowledge on a particular subject while sitting comfortably in front of a screen. Current devices allow us to immerse ourselves in exhibitions as if we were there, even better than if we were actually there, enabling us to move around, get closer, zoom in and out on certain details

(Bernier, 2011, p. 86 *passim*). This may raise concerns: will museums be depopulated, abandoned, betrayed once again by a technological breakthrough? Electronic media are in no way comparable to museums, preserving *musealia*, an authentic heritage, inviting us to unique experiences in contact with them and, to a greater extent, with the past. And the more the people browse, document themselves, see increasingly faithful reproductions of the images, the more they long for to be there in the presence of the original, to feel its energy, to have their own unique experience in the aura of the institution.

Museum exhibitions, and contemporary art installations in particular, are constantly dismantling and rewriting the global history of modernism. In such a tumultuous epoch, in the midst of troubled and uncertain transitions, the need for museums is crucial. They have become the sanctuary where *musealia*, the relics of the past, are explored and reenacted. They enable us to question the present and project ourselves into the future. This is undoubtedly the reason for their success. In addition to the aristocratic heritage, museums remind us that we are all heirs to this tradition—that it was the people who helped to provide the elite with the means to cultivate taste and the liberal arts. The popular heritage evokes our struggle with the elements, our survival in the most inhospitable environments and in the most difficult times of poverty and hardship. Some objects recall explorations conducted to the ends of the known world, while others recall discoveries, the emergence and development of industrial or artisanal production.

In our ever-changing world, museums identify and select the traces that we will pass on to future generations along with those that have gone before us, to define and give meaning to our shared history. We can, and should, argue about the choices curators make, but it is very likely that when our grandchildren reflect on the culture of the early twenty-first century, they will do so on the basis of cultural heritage collections.



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CARING FOR A “DIFFICULT HERITAGE”.  
ADDRESSING THE CANON  
OF ITALIAN FASHION  
BY DECOLONIZING ART MUSEUM PRACTICES

Alessandra Vaccari

**Keywords:** Italian Fashion; Heritage, Made in; Decolonisation; Museum.

**Abstract:** This chapter examines the colonial collections preserved at the Museo delle Civiltà in Rome, which has embarked on a critical review of its history and the ideologies underlying the foundation of its ethnographic and commercial collections. These collections consist of materials and artifacts, including clothing, footwear, and accessories, that were displayed at trade fairs and expositions to justify colonial expansion during the years of the Fascist regime. Through its analysis of the artistic research project “Decolonizing the Gaze (2022-23),” this chapter aims to contribute to the critical reflection on materials that have typically been excluded from the Made in Italy narratives. It also seeks to shed light on the practice of caring for a “difficult heritage” from the perspective of fashion history. In doing so, this text aims to demonstrate that colonial materials and artifacts constitute an invaluable resource for addressing and discussing the canon of Italian fashion in the twenty-first century.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1929, Thayath, the pseudonym of the Futurist artist Ernesto Michaelles, published a still life photograph in the magazine *L'industria della moda* (issue no. 4) of a colonial helmet placed next to a magnifying glass. The photograph also shows the shadow of a hand on the helmet, simulating the gesture of lifting it. This image, so evocative of the shadows of history, provides the perfect backdrop for this text on the decolonization of fashion and museums in Italy, which aims to explore the debate on the importance of preserving the challenging memories of the colonial period by bringing together the fields of fashion history, museum studies, and artistic research.

Fashion has garnered significant attention in its relationship to museums, with heritage becoming a predominant issue in twenty-first-century culture. However, the focus has often been limited to a past worthy of celebration and valorization rather than critical investigation. The approach to fashion history proposed in this text seeks instead to focus on the forgotten and the repressed (Evans, 2003), in the firm belief that forms of amnesia often conceal ideologies, inequalities and deterritorialization. As this text will show, museum displays can always be a critical device for addressing history—even when they are obscured or marginalized, as exemplified by the collections of the former Colonial Museum in Rome, which have been kept in storage for decades, and which are still underexposed. These collections consist of materials and artifacts, including clothing, footwear, and accessories, that were displayed at trade expositions as justification for colonial expansion during the colonial period. More broadly, this study sees museums as “laboratories for understanding human society” (Procter, 2020, p. 220) while their collections are to be studied as a “reflection of the world outside” (*Ibidem*).

This text examines practices that aim to construct contemporary encounters with colonial materials of the past. It focuses on the artistic research project “Decolonizing the Gaze, The

Colonial Heritage of Italian and International Fashion Design and Its Impact on the Collective Imagination”, conceived by the artist Caterina Pecchioli, and devotes particular attention to the first phase of this project—in which the author of this chapter was able to participate—which took place at the Museo delle Civiltà di Roma (Museum of Civilizations in Rome) between 2022 and 2023<sup>1</sup>.



Caterina Pecchioli, *Decolonizing the Gaze*. Research panel, 2023. Project supported by Italian Council. By kind permission of Caterina Pecchioli and Museo delle Civiltà.

1. The author would like to thank Caterina Pecchioli and Enrica Picarelli for involving her in the project from the beginning. She also thanks the fashion designer Semhal Tsegaye Abebe and fashion designers Nosakhare Ekhatior and Victor R. B. Abbey-Hart for their contributions during the public discussion held at the Museo delle Civiltà di Roma on June 3, 2023. She also expresses her gratitude to museum researchers Gaia Delpino and Rosa Anna Di Lella for all the information they provided, and for the time they devoted to an online interview on May 3, 2024.

This museum undertook a critical examination of its own history and the underlying ideologies that have shaped its collections. In “Decolonizing the Gaze,” the museum’s colonial materials, which were imported to Italy to develop the country’s fashion industry in the early decades of the twentieth century, form the subject of analyses through which the complex notion of “Made in” is explored.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how fashion—which, like art, has historically been part of colonial propaganda machines—has its own role to play in addressing the effects of colonization in the present day. The notion of “care” seen in the title has received particular interdisciplinary attention, and is used here to challenge the binarism that continues to permeate many areas of our culture (Modest & Augustat, 2023). Conceptually, this allows us to embrace the ambiguities inherent in colonial testimonies, and demonstrates the possibility of connecting different practices and spaces by forging and strengthening fundamental ties. This chapter does not propose any solution to the Eurocentrism of museums inherent in many fields, including fashion. Instead, it reveals fashion’s potential for interconnectedness (Chatzidakis, *et al.*, 2020), which underlies our ability to imagine new worlds and identities.

## 2. FASHION AND ITS HISTORY IN ITALY

Through its association with modernity, fashion has been seen as an art form that conveys a temporal construct centered on progress. This notion, in turn, underpins the very idea of Europe as it deliberately distanced itself from Africa during the colonial era. Victoria L. Rovine (2015) has suggested borrowing the concept of the “time-lag of cultural difference,” conceived by the philosopher Homi Bhabha (1992, p. 64), and applying it to fashion history to show how European fashion deliberately sought to distance itself from Africa temporally,

geographically, and culturally. The implication here is that fashion was not only part of the colonial propaganda machine, but was in fact integral to its ideological infrastructure. Just as in art, encounters between different cultures in fashion resulted in contrasting representations, in which the centers of colonial power were deemed *avant-garde*, while the colonies were seen as trapped in the stasis of tradition (Bhabha, 1992) or as expressions of fetishistic fantasies (Clifford, 1988). Consider the role of Paris in women’s fashion and the convergence of the European centers of colonial power and modernity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the emergence of a plurality of fashions in the globalized world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been characterized by what fashion theorist Simona Segre Reinach (2014) calls a constant desire for an “emancipation from Paris.”

The emergence of modern Italian fashion as a concept is no exception. Since the country’s unification, Italians have called upon fashion to represent an identity in a state of formation (Levi Pisetzky, 1978), positioning it as a redemption of sorts from the cultural, industrial, and productive subordination to international—especially Parisian—fashion. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, the wearing of Italian fashion was often seen as a source of shame. Rosa Genoni, a seamstress, fashion theorist, and activist for workers’ rights in the fashion industry, urged Italian women to overcome this sense of inferiority (Vaccari, 2022). In her writings and public speeches, Genoni (1908, p. 14) called for their liberation from Paris: “from industrial servitude on the one hand and from aesthetic servitude on the other.” She also called for the wearing of Italian fashion to play an active role in constructing the country’s still fragile cultural identity and, significantly, associated it with a feeling of shame rather than pride. Theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has defined such shame as fundamental to reconstructing identity in a non-essentialist light. First and foremost, she writes, shame carries political

significance “because it generates and legitimates the place of identity—the question of identity—at the origin of the impulse to the performative [...]. It constitutes it as to-be-constituted” (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, p. 64).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, as Italian fashion slowly began to emancipate itself from Paris, it simultaneously began to distance itself from Africa, a trend brought about by the country’s colonial expansionist policies. This began with the declaration of Eritrea as an Italian colony (Royal Decree-Law No. 6592 of January 1, 1890) and culminated in the Ethiopian War and the Fascist regime’s declaration of the rebirth of the Roman Empire in 1936. The apex of Italy’s “time-lag of cultural difference” came in 1938 with the enactment of the racial laws. Art historian Giuliana Tomasella (2017) has highlighted how the impact of these laws on colonial artistic expression heightened the sense of separation from colonized peoples, reinforcing the model of the “savage,” independent of time and history.

As I have argued elsewhere (Vaccari, 2004; Vaccari, 2005a; Vaccari, 2005b; Lupano & Vaccari, 2009; Vaccari, 2017), the effects of such separateness on the history of taste manifest themselves in myriad ways, among which are autarkic variants of “primitivist” modernism and classicism in the service of the colonial cause. The first includes the many experimental experiences that lie at the intersection of art, fashion, and design. One such example is the beach and garden outfit entitled *Selvaggio* (*Savage*), composed of a fringed top and skirt made of materials that were unconventional for the European fashion industry: raw jute, in this case, hand-crocheted by Anita Pittoni’s Studio d’arte decorativa Stoffe d’arredamento Mode di Eccezione (Studio of Decorative Arts for Furnished Fabric and Exceptional Fashion) in Trieste in 1938.<sup>2</sup>

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2. The outfit is kept in the collections of Trieste’s Civici Musei di Storia dell’Arte (Civic Museums of Art History).



In the latter case, when colonialism becomes a memory of empire, we see the proliferation of representations of exotically tinged “Romanitas,” in which the culture of the colonized is subsumed into the language of the colonizer (McLaren, 2002). In a photograph published in *Moda* magazine (issue no. 10, 1937), for example, the actress Silvana Jachino stands on a pedestal in the pose of an ancient statue, wearing a magnificent white evening gown made by the Moro fashion house. The model, however, is called *Beduina* (Bedouin), and she wears it with a headscarf and a sash at her waist, referring to oriental Berber motifs.

### 3. MANIFESTING A “DIFFICULT HERITAGE”: ROME’S FORMER COLONIAL MUSEUM

The heritage of Italian fashion has been the subject of several detailed analyses that have highlighted the complex relationships between identity, industry, and the country’s cultural institutions (Augello, 2022). Where these studies have fallen short, however, is in taking into account the country’s colonial history. The Italian anthropologist Giulia Grechi (2021) has written of “an enormous difficulty in recognizing the coloniality inherent in our cultural heritage, which almost remains invisible.” Here, the notion of “difficult heritage,” coined by Sharon Macdonald (2007; Macdonald, 2013; Gravano, 2016; Belmonte 2023), can help us understand why this reluctance persists into the twenty-first century. By “difficult heritage,” we refer to places that preserve the memory of trauma, which is why they are difficult to transform into spaces of collective memory (Labanca, 1996).

The former Colonial Museum in Rome is one such place, since it preserves evidence of the country’s colonial legacy on Italian fashion heritage. Its collections include a significant body of colonial materials intended for the Italian fashion industry. But the museum also testifies to the difficulties these

materials have had in becoming part of the collective narrative of Italian fashion. As Rosa Anna Di Lella, who together with Gaia Delpino manages its heritage, has observed, its closure to the public in 1972 (Margozi, 1999; Fiorletta, 2019) went “hand in hand with the physical denial of colonialism and its objects” (Di Lella, 2020). The historical-critical process of studying both these collections and the ideologies underlying their objects began at the end of 2017, when the collections of the former Colonial Museum were merged with those of the Museo delle Civiltà di Roma. The latter was established by the Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali (Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities) in 2016 and brought together the “Luigi Pigorini” Prehistoric Ethnographic Museum, the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions, the “Giuseppe Tucci” Museum of Oriental Art, and the Museum of the Early Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup>

The art historian and curator Andrea Vilianni has described the Museo delle Civiltà, of which he is the director, as an “epistemic and pedagogical building site” (Basili, 2022), rather than an exhibition space and a place to analyze “the crimes of the past as well as the gaps, omissions, and chain of more recent—often bureaucratic—consequences.” Overcoming a conception of the ethnographic and colonial collections as “relics that seem to document the past, while instead they still reflect the inadequacy, rejection, and violence perpetuated in the present” (*Ibidem*), the museum made the openness of its collections its most distinctive feature (Delpino, 2024). Indeed, this openness is the first step in documenting forgotten or unwanted histories and restoring their complexity to a multiplicity of subjects, including those from the countries to which the material in these collections belongs.

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3. After the closure of the Colonial Museum in 1972 and of the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient, which managed the museum’s heritage until 2012, its collections were entrusted to the “Luigi Pigorini” Prehistoric Ethnographic Museum before being incorporated into the Museo delle Civiltà.

In his distinction between museums as *lieux de mémoire* expressing the uprooting of memory from its “real environments” (*milieux de mémoire*), the historian Pierre Nora (1989, p. 7) interpreted decolonization as a process that “swept into history societies newly awakened from their ethnological slumbers by colonial violation” and the end of inherited cultures. While Nora cast the museum as a site of conflicting histories, but his argument ultimately reaffirmed the distance between the museum as a European institution that produces history and the ritual that produces ephemeral forms of living memory. More recently, in an attempt to overcome this dichotomy, the museum has been conceptualized as both “a place for shared memory” (Bodenstein & Pagani, 2014, p. 43) and as a living archive of research, participation, and cultural production (Chambers, *et al.*, 2014). The Museo delle Civiltà’s initiatives have moved in this direction through forms of collaborative planning, consultation with the affected communities, and artist residencies. These are best embodied in such projects as *Depositati aperti. Come immaginare un museo decoloniale?* (Unveiled Storages. How to imagine a decolonial museum?), launched in collaboration with the Goethe Institute at the end of 2021, and the more recent *Museo delle opacità* (Museum of Opacity), inaugurated in 2023 as the museum’s first public exhibition. The title of the latter refers to the issue of identity, raised by the postcolonial poet and theorist Édouard Glissant (1997, p. 189) in terms of the “right to opacity” as a possible alternative to relations based on an understanding that becomes appropriation.

This is not the place to reconstruct the complex history of the Colonial Museum in Rome, which in 1923 found its home in the Palazzo della Consulta—the headquarters of the Ministry of Colonies—from which it originated. The museum became fully operational between 1924 and 1927<sup>4</sup>, with the bulk of its

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4. January 23, 1924, marks the date on which the administrative accounting regulations of the Colonial Museum were approved, while on

collections, including materials related to fashion and textiles, coming from the *Mostra campionaria di propaganda coloniale* (Colonial Propaganda Trade Exposition), established as an annex of the museum by Royal Decree no. 409 of March 18, 1929. As stated in the volume *La legislazione fascista 1929-34* (Fascist Legislation 1929-34), the trade exposition's primary objective was to "form a center for the dissemination of knowledge of the products and workings of the Colonies to facilitate... commercial ties between themselves and the Motherland" (Senato del Regno & Camera dei Deputati [Senate of the Kingdom & Chamber of Deputies], 1934, p. 703). Since the purpose of the Colonial Museum was primarily propagandistic, the "annex" was in fact its real driving force, seeking "justification for colonial exploitation and extractivism" (Di Lella, 2024) and "the validation of governmental choices through the economy and the import-export of materials" (Delpino, 2024).



Caterina Pecchioli, *Decolonizing the Gaze: Storage room of Mostra Campionaria, Ex Museo Coloniale*. Video still, Rome, Museo delle Civiltà, 2022. Project supported by Italian Council. By kind permission of Caterina Pecchioli and Museo delle Civiltà.

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April 7, 1927 (Royal Decree no. 581), the post of Director of the Colonial Museum was created. My thanks to Rosa Anna Di Lella for these figures.

Fashion, with its magical worlds (Wilson, 2019), can seem all too removed from colonial issues. Yet it is often the apparent innocence of its materials that channels the most significant colonial legacies. We see this, for example, in the case of the doum palm (Ministry of Colonies, 1913) that appears in the current exhibition at the *Museo delle Opacità*. Its seeds were imported from Eritrea and other colonies in the Horn of Africa and used to make buttons that were produced in Italy by the Società Anonima Industria Italiana Bottoni (Anonymous Industrial Company of Italian Buttons) of Trescore Balneario. Most importantly, these seeds were marketed as “vegetable ivory”—a name that ennobled the material but reflected the “processes of despoiling of ecosystems perpetrated by the colonial apparatus” (Di Lella, 2023, p. 170).

#### 4. CARING FOR HYBRID MEMORIES

Of all the projects that the Museo delle Civiltà has engaged in dialogue with contemporary artistic practices, Caterina Pecchioli’s “Decolonizing the Gaze, The Colonial Heritage of Italian and International Fashion Design and its Impact on the Collective Imagination” is especially remarkable for the attention it dedicates to the commercial and propagandistic aspects of fashion in the *Mostra campionaria di propaganda coloniale*<sup>5</sup>. This section of the Colonial Museum gathered samples of yarn; furs from animals such as gazelles, antelopes,

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5. The project was funded by the Italian Council (11th edition, 2022), a program for the international promotion of Italian art by the Ministry of Culture’s General Directorate for Contemporary Creativity. It was carried out in two phases: the first in Italy (analyzed in this chapter) and the second in the Netherlands. Concept: Caterina Pecchioli. Scientific consultant: Enrica Picarelli. Cultural partners: Africa and the Mediterranean; Afrosartorialism; B&W - Black&White, The Migrant Trend; CBK Zuidoost; Framers Framed; Georgetown Humanities Initiative; Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Addis Abeba; Moleskine Foundation; Museo delle Civiltà; Nation25; Politecnico di

leopards, crocodiles, and snakes (Gandolfo, 2015); textile artifacts made by students of the Royal School of Education and Work for Muslim Girls in Tripoli; and gloves, handbags, shoes, and fur coats produced primarily by Italian companies using materials from the colonies. Many of them date back to the 1930s and early 1940s, making them products of the Fascist era.

Pecchioli is a multidisciplinary Italian artist and co-founder of the artistic collective and curatorial platform Nation25 and of the art and fashion project B&W-Black&White, The Migrant Trend (of which she is also the artistic director). The people she invited to participate in the project were “African fashion designers who are active in Italy and part of the communities B&W-Black&White, Moleskine Foundation, and Questa è Roma” (Picarelli & Pecchioli, 2021; Pecchioli, 2024). The project took place between September 2022 and June 2023, and consisted of two visits to the archives of the Colonial Propaganda Trade Exposition. Among those who participated in the visits were the designers Semhal Tsegaye Abebe, who was born in Ethiopia and raised both there and in Italy; Nosakhare Ekhaton, who was born in Nigeria and arrived as a migrant in Italy after experiencing the Libyan camps; and Victor R. B. Abbey-Hart, of Ghanaian origin, who moved to Milan to study fashion design. They have created creative professional pathways in Italy centered on cultural hybridisms and founded the following fashion brands, respectively: Almaz-textile Design, Nosa Collezione and Victor-Hart. The artist and writer Anna Maria Gehnyei and a group of museum researchers also participated in the visits.

As part of the project, a participatory workshop was held on May 6, 2023, in which the artists and designers reflected on aspects of personal, cultural, and aesthetic history triggered by the impact of the objects they had selected from the

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Milano; Thami Mnyele Foundation; Università Iuav di Venezia; Università Orientale di Napoli.

archives. They explored the colonial significance of these objects and the feelings of transference they evoked. Although the workshop did not have a specific output, it created an atmosphere (Robinson, 2023) in which the participants functioned as a temporary working group studying the interplay of the spatial, bodily, and affective dimensions of fashion.

The project concluded on June 9, 2023 with a public forum discussion at the Museo delle Civiltà in Rome, attended by the present author and the aforementioned fashion designers. The day also included a guided tour of the *Museo delle opacità* and a display table showcasing research images, fashion magazines from the 1930s, books, and some pieces from the designers’ collections. Also on view was a cape by Semhal Tsegaye Abebe (2023) modeled after the embroidered velvet *lembde* of Ethiopia’s Amharic culture. When worn over the shoulders, its fabric panels resemble the legs of an animal—a cultural reference that only became clear to the project participants after they encountered the animal skins stored in the museum’s collections. The image of animals associated with power, and the ethical and cultural implications of the geographical and signifying transference of such objects, formed a leitmotif throughout each phase of the project up to the final presentation. On this occasion, beyond the various critical perspectives, the intrinsic problematic nature of these skins became apparent, embodying a right to opacity that is difficult to translate from one culture to another. This was effectively demonstrated by a question posed by Abbey-Hart during the public discussion, “will [*sic*] you wear this to visit Africa?” in reference to the dress with a fake lion’s head worn on the Paris catwalk in Schiaparelli’s creative director Daniel Roseberry’s collection in January 2023.



*Morteza Khaleghi, Nosakhare Ekhaton, Victor R. B. Abbey-Hart, Semhal Tsegaye taking part in the talk Decolonizing the Gaze. Rome, Museo delle Civiltà, 2023. Project by Caterina Pecchioli, supported by Italian Council. By kind permission of Morteza Khaleghi (photo); Victor R.B. Abbey Hart (slide), and Museo delle Civiltà (venue).*

Throughout the various phases of the project, particular attention was paid to the notion of “Made in,” which is as problematic as it is inevitable in any discussion of colonial collections. In the narrative of Italian fashion history, the



representation of “Made in” is still anchored in the country’s privileged relationship with the United States throughout the postwar period, if not strictly confined within the borders of Italy itself. This is despite the fact that the productive dislocation and processes of globalization of fashion have laid bare the limits of representations, which are incapable of recovering the geographical, human, and material complexity of Made in Italy (Redini, 2023).

Ultimately, “Decolonizing the Gaze” did not engage in a simple rhetoric of encountering the Other (Gaugele, 2020), but instead reflected on the cultural hybridity of colonial collections. These objects are hybrid not only because they are the product of colonialism, situated between one continent and another, but because their hybridity continues to manifest itself in forms of multiculturalism that are integral to today’s postcolonial condition (Bhabha, 1994). The questions that museums with fashion collections are asking with increasing urgency concern the decentralization of the canon and the deconstruction of the very concept of fashion (Steele, 2023). Caring for the hybrid memories contained within these objects means remembering that extractive culture did not disappear with the end of colonialism but continues to dominate the capitalism of the twenty-first century. In this context, fashion can be understood as a destructive force. However, as “Decolonizing the Gaze” demonstrates so forcefully, it can also be seen as a powerful, transformative force, capable of giving voice to new identities that have yet to be constructed.

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# THE ARCHIVAL BODY: ARTISTS FACING HISTORY

Clarissa Ricci

**Keywords:** Archive; Memory; Venice Biennale; Embodiment; Re-enactment; Body; Voice; Performance.

**Abstract:** While biennials are often thought of as contemporary events, they also have a significant historical presence. This is clearly demonstrated in the archival records and in the recollections of those who have participated in previous editions. By examining the diverse artistic interventions of Marysia Lewandoska, Alessandra Pirici and Manuel Pulmus, the text explores the complex relationship between archives, memory, and history, emphasizing the active role of the body in the construction and interpretation of archives. This brings to light their crucial contribution to the ongoing process of historical and memorial transmission across time.

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## I. ARTISTS FACING HISTORY AT THE VENICE BIENNALE

It (should not) be forgotten how exciting it was to wobble over a jutting slab. Equally missing from the visual documentation is the sound of the piece; the space sporadically filled with ‘clunk-clunk’ as visitors rocked back and forth on large plates or kicked chunks of marble. It sounded like a building site, with people shakily making their way over the ruins and snapping tiles, razing everything to dust. To be inside that space was a liberating experience, eliciting a range of emotions, even an empathy for those who had just come out of their own political construct, such as the DDR or West Germany—or, for that matter, anyone coming to the end of any fabricated state. (Muir, 2019, n.p.)

With these words, Gregor Muir remembered the experience of visiting Hans Haacke’s *GERMANIA* at the 1993 Venice Biennale, pointing to the inability of images to capture the bodily and emotional experience of the installation, which remained stuck in a “liminal space between the analogue and digital” (Muir, 2019, n.p.). If this precise experience of Haacke’s work mobilizes the idea of exhibition records as partial ones, it also highlights how the experience of exhibitions, in particular biennials that periodically present new works in the same venues, builds a parallel history that lives in the liminal space of memory.

From the pages of her investigation into the relationship between large international exhibitions and the proliferation of biennials, Caroline Jones warns: “Being ‘perennial,’ biennial culture resists history” (Jones, 2016, p. 88). For Jones, continuous repetition presupposes that the exhibition offers a glimpse into the future each time it is renewed. Its repetition, however, is possible precisely thanks to the preservation of memory, not through the collection of documents in the archive, but also in the memory of those who have participated in a biennial in various capacities. The exhibition itself becomes a palimpsest made up of images, memories, works, gestures that are inscribed



in people and places and that overlap, creating a setting full of traces, stories and voices from the past.

As Cecilia Alemani has pointed out, over the years the institution has solidified its position as a prominent hub for artistic practices, assuming a position of authority within the realm of contemporary art. Sociologist Olav Velthuis (2011) coined the term “Venice effect,” a concept that encapsulates the accumulation of value, expectations of recognition, and performance anxiety experienced by artists showing at the Biennale. Given the Biennale’s authoritative role, it is essential to explore the intricacies of artistic practices. This authority is not a singular entity but rather a complex layering that makes the Biennale a palimpsest that invites further investigation and understanding. The depth and complexity of this authority have profound implications for artistic practices, making it a fascinating object of study.

The unique condition of the Venice Biennale as an archive-palimpsest was brought to light in *The Disquieted Muses: The Venice Biennale Facing History* (2020).<sup>1</sup> This exhibition, marking the institution’s 125th anniversary, was a collaborative effort across all sectors.<sup>2</sup> It was fascinating to note that the multidisciplinary experimentation, a key feature of the Biennale, was a product of the Fascist governance, which the exhibition sought to show as overcome, with a focus on celebrating the seventies as a pivotal moment for the redefinition of the format. *The Disquieted Muses* visually enacted Benjamin’s paradox inherent in the writing of history, revealing moments of itself while hiding and forgetting the people and

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1. The title was inspired by a famous work by De Chirico, *Le muse inquietanti* (1918), which was also involved in the scandal De Chirico provoked on the occasion of this exhibition due to the presence of some forgeries (Bazzoni, 1962, pp. 142-144).

2. Most of the documents, photographs and rare films were mostly from the ASAC, the historical archive of the Biennale (Varagnolo, 1932; Dorigo, 1974; Alemani, 2020).

voices of history, illustrating that no life is ever “a document of culture without being, at the same time, a document of barbarism” (Benjamin, (1995 [1955]), p. 79).

Moreover, the history of the Biennale is not only revealed through the documents that have been collected and read (Enwezor, 2015). The events, works, and people that have passed through the Biennale have left their mark, creating a layered history. One can discover this history by examining the documents and the scars on the walls, the reused temporary walls, or even the artworks themselves. One example is easily traced in the installation *Tramstop. A Monument to the Future* (1976) by Joseph Beuys, when he left the shadows of Richter’s paintings exhibited at the previous Biennale. Instead of whitewashing the walls, he incorporated the traces into his narrative. In *The Disquieted Muses*, the layering of history is exemplified by a curtain designed for the entrance, which is made from a montage of black-and-white photographs revealing the many histories of the building since 1895.<sup>3</sup>



Front of the central pavilion of the Venice Biennale for the exhibition *Le Muse Inquiete*, 2020. Courtesy Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia – ASAC.

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3. The curtain and the display of the exhibition was a project by Formafantasma.

It demonstrated that when one aspect of the Biennale's history is revealed, it mobilizes and exposes all the others connected to it. Thus, the entrance to *The Disquieted Muses* was not only a physical structure, but also a symbolic representation of the exhibition's historical depth. It was a palimpsest, a layering of traces from the past, that served as a gateway to the entire exhibition, symbolizing the unique condition of the Biennale as an archive of itself, a palimpsest that transcends the mere concept of an exhibition space.

The following examples of artworks by Marisa Lewandoska, Alexandra Pirici, and Manuel Pulmus explore how artists at the Biennale have engaged with its history as an archival institution. These examples depart from the traditional approach of exhibiting documents or revealing hidden histories. Instead, they engage with the spaces of memory and address the bodily experience of remembering.

## 2. BODILY MEMORIES. ARTISTS BEYOND THE DOCUMENT

Among the many stories of his patients, the neurologist Oliver Sacks (1970) collected those of amnesic patients who could recall specific memories even though they could not recognize people. This is because deep emotional memories stored in the limbic system and other regions of the brain can influence a person's behavior for life, despite amnesia. For Clive, for instance, his passionate relationship with his wife Deborah before his encephalitis was so deeply engrained in his memory that it was impossible to erase (Sacks, 2017). Similarly, procedural memories, such as the unconscious memories of procedures related to movement, are stored in more extensive and primitive parts of the brain and can remain largely intact even after extensive damage. Repetition and rehearsal, timing and sequence are of essential here.

Remembering is therefore also a sensory experience with which the body establishes a living relationship. Engaging

with history can thus also become a physical and emotional translation, as was the case with the embodiment of the archive staged during the 2013 Venice Biennale at the Romanian pavilion which presented *An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale* by Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pulmus. Their exhibition on the Biennale consisted not of artworks but of a series of performances.



Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pulmus *An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale*, Romanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013.

Through the dancers' bodies, Pirici and Pulmus staged reproductions of a selection of artworks exhibited at the Biennale over the years. The daily time and space of the Biennale was occupied by five performers who used minimalist and essential choreographies to reenact its history, relying solely on their bodies. Hailing from the periphery of the EU, Pirici and Pulmus challenged the authority and authorship of Western European and North American art history by presenting an expansive and inclusive platform that allowed visitors to critically examine the past and contextualize the present. As the curator Raluca Voinea (2013) pointed out,

*An Immaterial Retrospective* was not a corrective history of the Biennale, but rather an illustration of the event's longstanding focus on Western European artists and North American art. This served to highlight the different relationships that exist in the art and political worlds, as well as the conservatism that has characterized the exhibition for many years, with a preference for figurative painting and sculpture.

*Il Supremo Convegno* (1895) by Giacomo Grosso, Intillimani's performance at the 1974 Biennale, and the intervention *Wall Enclosing a Space* (2003) by Santiago Sierra at the Spanish Pavilion were among the many memorable works selected to compose the Biennale's historical script, pointing to the way we look at the past and we historicize the present itself. The project was both an affirmation and an undoing, as it attempted to re-archive history while challenging the weight of the archive and its form. The work appealed to public memory to reveal its constructed nature and to question how memories are selected and by whom.

What was exhibited was the visual and emotional memory of a work through the body, inevitably changing its forms. Rejecting the notion of the viewer as a mere spectator of the artworks, the exhibition encouraged visitors to become participants, immersing themselves in their own feelings, memories, and silences to construct their own vision.

Precedents for such an understanding of a retrospective as a collection of embodied memories had already been explored in at least two different cases. The first was Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Une rétrospective (tomorrow is another fine day)* in 2004.<sup>4</sup> Tiravanija's solution for his own retrospective was innovative and bold. He created seven structures that resembled the galleries and museums where he exhibited

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4. Rirkrit Tiravanija's *A Retrospective (tomorrow is another fine day)* was shown at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, ARC Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and the Serpentine Gallery, London, from December 4, 2004 to February 6, 2005.

between 1989 and 2002. However, these structures were empty, and visitors were taken on tours by guides who followed a script written by Tiravanija that described what visitors would have seen if there had been artwork on display. Throughout the space, loudspeakers played a broadcast by Sterling and a “sitcom ghost” by Philippe Parreno. The empty structures, shadows of past actions, were brought to life by the power of words—the most evocative and ephemeral tool of all.

Similarly, Marina Abramović’s controversial presentation of *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005<sup>5</sup> sought to explore the possibilities of representing and preserving an art form that is inherently ephemeral. For her project, Abramović recreated five seminal performance works by other artists from the 1960s and 70s, as well as two of her own, interpreting them like a musical score. This project addressed the issue of the lack of documentation from this critical early period, where one often has to rely on eyewitness accounts or photographs that show only parts of any given performance.

Both artists faced the challenge of exhibiting something performative in nature, but they approached it differently. Tiravanija focused on the power of the exhibition space as a framework for the experiences he conveyed through vocal reconstructions. Meanwhile, Abramović emphasized how famous performances created by other artists had become part of her identity and memory, and how they belonged to her physical identity and experience of the past. Moreover, both implied that any experience of art continues to exist in a process of translation into memory and into a personal performance.

Similarly, *An Immaterial Retrospective* shrank the scale of the space to that of the ‘presentness’ of the body. Artworks were reproduced one at a time and displayed intermittently within a specific temporal framework. The project engaged

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5. The seven works were performed for seven hours each, over the course of seven consecutive days in November 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

with the history of the Biennale on multiple levels, serving as a fleeting monument that criticized its vain display of power and luxury. Moreover, it effectively transformed history by turning monumental objects into intangible ones and objects into actions. The project brought history to life by enacting it, rather than our simply knowing it by heart. When we remember something, it comes back to life. In a letter to Sacks, his patient's wife, Deborah, wrote that transcending amnesia and discovering our continuum happens when we are present. It is the "now" that bridges the abyss. By embodying the memory, it becomes present now.

## 2. VOICING THE ARCHIVE<sup>6</sup>

The memory that lies within the body of the document is often a conflicted memory, in which different points of view and multiple readings collide (Foucault (2006 [1969]); Halbwachs, 1992; Derrida, 1996; Foster, 2004; Spieker 2008; Pan, 2024). To every piece of evidence for which the document becomes proof, there is an aporia for which the document becomes empty. Thus, if on the one hand, with Carlo Ginzburg (1986), it is possible to affirm a writing of history through clues, on the other hand, documents are a social construction of forgetting, consisting of removals and marginalizations of the existing. It is between these two poles of the historical trace and the forgotten that the relationship between the archive, orality, and the writing of history is articulated in the work *Era Ora // It's About Time* (2019) by Marysia Lewandoska, which is an example of the embodiment of the archive.

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6. *Voicing the Archive* was the title artist Marysia Lewandoska gave to her lecture at the conference *In Their Own Words. Une histoire orale des arts visuels en perspective féministe*, Conference at HEAD (Haute école d'art et de design), Geneva, March 18, 2024.

The work, which was part of the Venice Biennale's special projects commissioned by Ralph Rugoff, was presented at the Applied Arts pavilion in collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This information not only constitutes the context of the production of Lewandoska's work, but is also a necessary premise, since the artist took, reworked, and interpreted archive materials from both institutions to create the work. (Harris, 2019). The artist skillfully used the request to enhance the vast documentary heritage as an opportunity to further her reflection on collective heritage, on how history is written, and the role of women in it.<sup>7</sup> To enter the pavilion, visitors had to pass through a curtain onto which was projected a video titled *La Biennale* (2019), featuring a minute-long countdown and clips from an inauguration in the gardens in the 1960s. The video, a key element of Lewandoska's installation, captured a scene of contrast. The camera focused on the buffet table, where guests could be seen rushing to grab as much food as they could. This scene of voracious consumption was juxtaposed with the reality that there would not be enough food for everyone, and that some guests would be left out. It was to these excluded guests, who were present but not visible in the video, that Lewandoska's intervention was dedicated, in a poignant critique of social exclusion.

The room was divided by a wooden structure that created two distinct spaces. The first part featured seating designed by Michael Marriot, inspired by that found in Venetian noble palaces. Visitors could watch a video made from 16mm found footage from the archives of the Victoria and Albert Museum. The footage showed the behind-the-scenes work of curators and conservators.<sup>8</sup> Lewandoska highlighted the representation of hierarchies and gender roles in the footage, focusing on the

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7. Part of the installation that was presented at the Biennale is available at <<http://marysialewandowska.com/its-about-time-58th-venice-biennale/>>.

8. The original film consists of a film made by the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) over several months in 1978.



work of female workers. Due to wear and tear, the film retained only the images, while the original sound was completely missing, but *Era Ora! It's about time!* was not silent. In fact, there were voices coming from behind the curtain of women in conversation, a recording of a diverse group of feminists, activists, and academics portraying historical figures.



Marysia Lewandowska, installation view of *Era Ora!/It's About Time!*, 2019, Special Project. 58th Biennale di Venezia. May You Live in Interesting Times. Pavilion of Applied Arts. La Biennale di Venezia with the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Lewandowska brought them together to collaborate on the project. This recording was the central and generative element of the installation. The second part was an audio installation composed of a series of speakers and a projection that scrolled through the transcription of a conversation. At first, a mattress for visitors to lie down on seemed to evoke

the bed that welcomed Countess Felicita Bevilacqua la Masa during her illness. We could hear her talking about the future of the Venetian exhibition. The mattress also lent itself to the suggestion of awakening from sleep. As if in state of a half-sleep, distant voices were mixed, leaving one to wonder whether what was real and what was not.<sup>9</sup> This audio piece actually comprised two parts. One was inspired by the minutes of the Venice City Council, which officially established the birth and characteristics of the future Biennale. The other was inspired by the will of Felicita Bevilacqua La Masa, who donated her palace to the city to make it an exhibition space, but also to welcome young artists with limited financial resources by offering them studios (Gatti, 2019). In the wake of the backlash caused by the realization that such an important figure continues to be remembered only through a written testament, Lewandoska created the final act of a now posthumous life, attempting to give voice to an absent figure. Implicitly acknowledging the Foucauldian idea of the archive's inextricable link to power, which makes it an instrument of control, Lewandoska observed that in the countess' few remaining letters, she placed her husband at the center of public life. Lewandoska therefore imagined a conversation between the dying Felicita and a journalist whose historical name is unknown. Perhaps inspired by the figure of Giulia, Felicita's pseudonym for signing art criticism pieces, the interviewer and friend is at the countess' bedside to inform her about the events at the Florian caffè and then to reflect on how art can change the future. In the text interpreted by the two female voices, it is possible to encounter the thoughts of contemporary women and the words of writers

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9. The entire project involved the participation of a group of feminists who gathered with Lewandoska in London and scholars who participated in the construction of the script. For the complete list of participants and references used in the project, see the brochure printed for the exhibition at <[https://marysialewandowska.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/PAA2019\\_IAT\\_Publication-LowRes.pdf](https://marysialewandowska.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/PAA2019_IAT_Publication-LowRes.pdf)>.

and activists such as those of the Gruppo Immagine di Varese, a feminist group that exhibited at the Biennale in 1979 (Ricci, 2023). The conversation between the other women reflected the artistic and collective situation of Venice then and now.

The methodology of constructing these texts deserves particular attention, as it constitutes the heart of Lewandoska's approach, which seeks to give voice to these women, to imagine them as inhabiting history. Following from her earlier work *Women's Audio Archives* (1980-1993), which collected recordings of private and public conversations of academics and feminist artists, *Era Ora!* serves as an archive of possible histories using actual archival documents. Taking inspiration from these fragments of reality, the artist also invited a group of nine feminists to interact with this documentation, construct a discourse, and imagine themselves as protagonists of a change. This process allowed them to express their thoughts and feelings, to give voice to their imagination, and to reflect on the inspiration and emotions these fragments aroused. As she explained in an interview in *Art Margins*, "It reminds us of a struggle to perform against the grain, against the expectations... I refuse to fulfill the revelation of having found something, and instead I perform the revelation of absence. I direct my energy not so much towards disrupting but towards nourishing the archive" (Lewandoska & Baldacci, 2019, np).

The audio works in the V&A pavilion were thus the result of a genuine process of creative and collective writing in which the artist, creator of the work, placed herself on the margins. Rather than writing and reconstructing history by showing documents, recontextualizing them and offering a new montage, Lewandoska's project focused on dismantling, and included both the past and the future in an augmented history project that also encompassed the liminal space of memories and emotions.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS: MEMORY HAS LEGS

These examples demonstrate that artists can engage with archives not only by revealing them, but also by experiencing and nourishing them. In the context of the archaeology of knowledge, Foucault (2006 [1969]) emphasized that the archive is a system of statements that regulates what can be said, that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But Foucault also pointed out that the archive cannot be fully described because we always speak from within it. The relationship of contemporary artists to the traces of the past shows that the past can be constantly mobilized and shaken from within. This suggests that memory itself can change, that it can be purified and reimagined through a dynamic comparison with the present, as exemplified by the works of Lewandoska, Pirici, and Pulmus.

Widrich (2014) offered a new interpretation of reenactment, expanding the discussion of performance to include processes of commemoration through art in the public sphere and emphasizing the crucial role of an active audience (Tumbas, 2016). She argued that performance can become a kind of monument, translated from the German word *Denkmal*, which means a “mark for thinking” (Widrich, 2014, p. 34).

These works go a step further, moving away from traditional documents and pointing to how the viewer’s body constructs memories through emotions, senses, and perceptions. Lewandoska suggests that the past, or what we know through traces, moves into the future with our bodies, visions, and desires, as memories are embedded in our bodies. This process of looking back, which is part of our knowledge construction, involves erasing, repairing, and constructing the memory we carry into the future.

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PART III

ENGAGEMENT



BRINGING ART BACK TO THE PRESENT.  
THE MUSEUM AS A SPACE OF EXPERIENCE  
AND CONVIVIALITY

Carlo Grassi

**Keywords:** Sociology; Culture; Public; Display; Museum.

**Abstract:** Today, museums have evolved into increasingly lively and convivial spaces. This implies that the responsibility for cultural construction, as a phenomenon of social communication, must be attributed to a significant degree to the visitors themselves. In other words, the public, as a collective agent with social autonomy, is capable of transforming heritage artifacts through their appropriation and assertion, in terms of positive memories associated with public space.

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For a long time, conservators and curators followed a protocol in preparing an exhibition that included:

- providing visitors with information and documentation;
- arranging a symbolic framework in order to resist their intemperance and keep them at a proper distance;
- elaborating rhetorical strategies to guide them;

- trying to direct their gaze with panels and lighting;
- suggesting paths that illustrate the logic used to assemble the materials on display;
- directing their attention by sequencing the volumes according to the grouping or alternation of large and small dimensions;
- qualifying the exhibition space by highlighting or camouflaging the background;
- encouraging sociability or discretion by regulating the flow of entry and exit.

Conceived as a windowless monad, completely self-sufficient, focused on itself and its inaccessible treasures, the museum institution found itself in deep crisis in the second half of the twentieth century. Its renewal involves both a radical mutation that drastically modifies its function, placing it primarily in the service of the public, and the practices of interaction and participation made possible by digital and interactive devices.

Once its legitimacy and authority begin to rest primarily on its ability to attract the attention and participation of as many people as possible, the central issue of museum activity becomes communication. Indeed, the integration of the activity of conservation with that of communication means, in fact, that the purpose and meaning of the cultural project of the exhibition no longer refer exclusively to the intrinsic quality of works and collections. The main task is now the ability to stimulate and engage a vast community, inspiring visitors to reconnect with the museum and reconsider their impressions of it.

By abandoning the vision focused entirely on the objects and on the knowledge they convey, the new perspective rejects the encyclopedic vocation that seeks to maximize the visitors' concentration: it renounces exhibiting an excessive number of objects, with disdain for the fetishistic attitude that would treat works as relics. It therefore considers the exhibition as an arena dedicated to social mediation, even more than to the

care and preservation of present and past glories: a space for education and for the exchange of opinions, appealing to the register of commentary on the who, what and how.

The new museum strategy requires the viewer not to be a mere observer of the objects on display, but to intervene critically in such a way as to contribute to the construction of their value and meaning, understood as stratified phenomena made up of multiple interacting aspects. To the task of collecting, studying, classifying and preserving, it adds a pre-eminent role of making visible: the task of exhibiting materials in the most engaging way possible. It invents, as the French anthropologist Paul Rasse writes (2017, p. 282), “other forms of intervention, open to all the winds of memory and art. Operations which give more space to the multitude represented by young creation, to subaltern cultures, to ethnic museums understood as spaces of otherness and openness, of negotiation with the other”: moments capable of feeding a new symbolic public space, “heterogeneous and democratic, to question and debate cultural, scientific, aesthetic and technological choices”.

The choice of the materials to be exhibited and the manner in which they are presented define an institution. The quality of the conceptual, architectural, aesthetic, political and economic strategies that govern this choice is therefore the first object of evaluation by the public. All this in a game of mirrors that makes the public the recipient and arbiter of the event. This allows visitors to become the protagonists of the social character of the exhibition, defined starting from the collective relations that constitute it to the interactions that inhabit it, the ways of feeling and seeing that animate it, the symbolic instances that can activate it, the moods that circulate in it, the life that finds a place in it (Davis & Mairesse, 2018; Mairesse, 2023; Desvallées & Nash, 2011, 2013).

No longer focused on tradition, conservation, and patrimonialization, and conceived as an institution primarily at the service of the community, the museum takes on new and varied forms (museum of memory, neighborhood museum,

museum en plein air, widespread museum, virtual museum, ecomuseum, university museum) in order to become an operational element in the public space. It therefore multiplies the number of professions it needs to employ for the preparation of exhibitions, relying on a pluralism of skills suitable for both the management of historical-artistic artifacts and the production of events and live performances (Chaumier, 2012).

First of all, museum programs are therefore expanding the number and topics of exhibition themes in order to address a wider and more heterogeneous audience—by practicing interdisciplinarity, by attributing the values of exemplarity and knowledge to the natural and cultural heritage of the territory as well as to the ways of life associated with it; by providing a mirror through which members of the public seek not only to gain a clearer understanding of the world in which they live, but also to reflect on their own image and explore their own identity. In addition, museum programs are trying to involve artists, critics and intellectuals more deeply, to discuss exhibitions, installations, and their content, to give performers and social critics the opportunity to be heard and shown, and to challenge recognized values and established institutions.

Museums thus choose to exhibit contemporary works that are borrowed and in transit, not destined to find a permanent home there. These artifacts are not presented as such, but are also and above all signs of themselves, as material testimonies whose representational and documentary aspect refers to a reality, to a world to which the subjects attribute meaning. The objects are presented not so much for their own sake but as a propitious occasion for the exercise of criticism: as subjects for discussion and judgment by the enlightened amateurs who make up the majority of the public.

In order to attract a larger number of people, and to welcome users of different ages, cultures, mentalities and habits, to coordinate their presence, to encourage them to return, museums are beginning to focus on the eventful and spectacular nature of their activities. They are therefore transforming

themselves from top to bottom: creating recreational-educational initiatives and a communication space for the public, documentation services, information access devices, meeting and discussion rooms, video systems, audio headsets, ticket offices, restrooms, cloakrooms, bookstores, souvenir shops, cafeterias, guides, brochures, and appropriate signage.

This development was inspired both by the mass media and by the scenographic devices used in blockbuster exhibitions. The goal of providing accurate scientific knowledge has now been combined with the idea of offering visitors a space reminiscent of those used for rituals, music and celebrations: an experience capable of triggering an intense emotional charge.

Following the terminology proposed by the French sociologist Jean Davallon (1992, pp. 99-123; see also Davallon, Gottesdiener & Poli, 2000), we can identify three distinct types of museology. First, an object-based museology wherein materials are selected in terms of aesthetic and cultural characteristics, then classified and labeled according to movements, genres, styles, themes, periods, schools, or registers. Next, a museology of ideas, in which content is selected and presented according to its pedagogical interest. Finally, a museology of the point of view, which is currently prevalent and which focuses not on objects or knowledge, but on the qualities of people—the ability to free objects from the symbolic patina that stiffens and fossilizes them, forcing them to be considered from a single visual perspective that protects them from intrusive glances. It also involves enabling viewers to form their own point of view about what they see and perceive, without being afraid to question the authority of tradition.

As Joëlle Le Marec (2001, p. 50) argues, in the museology of the point of view considers that with “the constitution of the public as a ‘target,’ the formulation of objectives in terms of ‘impact’ are not harmless metaphors.” Consequently, it rejects the idea of a “receiving pole,” invariably defined in relation to a “transmitting pole” that manufactures, creates, disseminates an offer intended to be proposed to individuals under certain

conditions so as “to constitute them as ‘public,’ perhaps without their knowledge, or even against their will.” And, in the words of Paolo Fabbri (1995, p. 156), it is necessary to distance ourselves “from the traditional representation according to which the original work is first placed, which is then placed in a museum which, in turn, on the basis of its own constraints, gives it other types of meaning.” In other words, it is not a matter of learning predetermined and pre-digested content, but of discovering and admiring, of emotional participation and understanding. This leads us to think of culture not in terms of the effectiveness of the transmission of already formalized notions and knowledge, but in terms of the production of new points of view and unprecedented meanings.

This does not mean, as the critic and art historian Jean Clair (2007, p. 44) has suggested, to attribute to the recipient “the naïve belief that the paintings or sculptures exhibited speak directly to him, communicate with him, without him having to make the effort to grasp what they represent.” To imagine that, as with sacred objects in the eyes of the faithful, “an immediate magic of art persists whose effects anyone can experience as soon as he crosses the doors of a museum. That the vision of a painting be beneficent by a simple visual touch.” By acting without conscious thought about its being “consoling, reassuring and therapeutic: like touching the toes of the statue of St. Peter in Rome.”

In fact, the users of an event or a cultural product are not so because a constituted authority has decreed their social existence or symbolic status. They are so because they participate in a social community whose members, even if they do not meet in person, think and reason within a common symbolic space. That is, they make public use of their critical capacity in order to free themselves from the pre-established social determinations, to assert themselves collectively and to enjoy their own singularity. Whatever the circumstances, the latter contribute to the production of a culture that cannot in any case exclude them. Because even if they are sometimes confronted



with subjects about which they have little knowledge, they discuss them from the point of view of what they themselves are: professionals, amateurs, inexperienced persons. A social body that expands or shrinks according to the technical and symbolic devices with which it decides to associate, that works on itself, that invents opportunities for reflection, that meets others in a common interpretation, that argues and negotiates with them when their respective perspectives do not coincide.

In this sense, we need to rethink significantly the concept of the museum itself. The one-way relationship, from the institution as the official repository of knowledge transmitting cultural content to the visitors as passive recipients, is now giving way to a reciprocal one, a dialogue in which the exhibition is born and takes shape in the heart of the territory. This began with the pioneering example of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, founded in New York in 1977 by the critic and art historian Marcia Tucker, and with *Le Nouveau Musée*, founded by Jean-Louis Maubant in Villeurbanne in 1978. These are museums without permanent collections, or with no collections whatsoever, dedicated primarily to residencies of young and/or little-known artists, who conceive the works and installations for their exhibitions on site.

In any case, in order for the public to fully exercise its sensory activity, it is not necessary to imagine museums as simple random deposits of materials. A museum is a place where everyone builds his or her own itinerary, because there is no predetermined direction for the visit, no staged approach, no labels or orientation panels capable of creating conceptual windows through which to have access to the objects on display. An exhibition represents a specific context in which curatorial choices made for a particular site, scientific project, and exhibition design offer an organized collection of objects open to interpretation.

However, it is not the devices of communication and of mediation, nor the technical conditions capable of modulating the light by configuring the vision in different ways, that

determine its value and meaning. It is not the degree of integration-separation between the scenic arrangement and what is presented, nor the rhythm established by the scenography and the paths it proposes. Rather, it is the plurality of ways in which its users experience the ensemble, the ways in which they observe, appreciate, and criticize it.

Thus, on the one hand, the display tends to constitute the objects as works, transfiguring their specific form, since the assemblage adds something to their mere presence and delimits the process of their interaction with the public. On the other hand, although the exhibition is based on a museology of the point of view, it no longer opposes the political sphere of institutional discourses and initiatives to the commercial sphere of the aestheticization of experience. The exhibition does not present itself according to the linear model of production-reception and the unilateral direction from the pole of creation to that of realization, with a predetermined beginning and end. Instead, it tends to implement a symbolic, spatial and temporal decentralization that leaves the visitor's autonomy intact and proposes itself as just one voice among possible others. As sociologist Serge Chaumier (2013, p. 104) explained, "the design process is increasingly thoughtful and knowledgeable, lavish with clues conducive to approaching the object taken as the theme of the exhibition." The visitor, however, completes the exhibition, "feeds, appreciates, selects, and appropriates the material to transform it into a personal story." The visitors' itineraries respond in their own way to those proposed by the exhibition curators. The visit thus becomes "more and more an activity that requires a large investment: which invites users to be enterprising and to decide themselves how to profit from it."

Exhibition strategies have to take into account the heterogeneity of visitors, who usually come in composite groups. As their competence increases, so do their expectations and the rigor of their judgments. Discussions and exchanges of experiences during the visit and outside the museum are,

on the one hand, an essential element in the formation of tastes and opinions; on the other, they involve not only the visual, intellectual, cognitive registers, but also and above all the haptic, memorial, and emotional registers and all the sensory channels. In such a way as to combine meditation and contemplation with distraction and syncopated fruition. With a configuration that is no longer only visual but also tactile and experiential. With an observation that is not only seeing but also connecting. That is, it seeks to perceive the subjectivity of the cosal world, that which in things resists the gaze, that which André Malraux (1951) called “the voices of silence”: their non-mutism, their non-neutrality, the fact that they are bearers of many stories and convey a range plural of meanings.

Finally, according to the museology of the point of view, the fragments on display involve an exploration of form and meaning. They allow for a journey through environments, objects, and events, depending on the double register of what is done and what is said, of the setting up of the exhibition and the discourse that supports it, of the presence on site and the catalogues. Interposed at the point of intersection of these adjacent fields, the visitors play a decisive role by contesting, with their interpretation and their ability to read, the spatial organization of the shaping in relation to the set of museographic devices. They decide on the route, identify salient points, invent successive stages, evade the proposed path, alternate between distraction and concentration. In short, they oppose traditionally fixed references with their unique way of seeing, expanding the representation and political identity that society has created and wants to give of itself, with their own singular way of appropriation, capable of challenging the accepted version of tradition, its past and its present.

The curator chooses the materials and creates an interpretive plan for the exhibition, the scenographer shapes the appearance of the setting, the lighting designer manages both daylight and electric light, and the sound designer creates a sonic landscape, but all in vain. All this to craft an interesting

layout for staging environments and atmospheres, with the help also of audiovisual specialists, software designers, audience researchers, evaluation specialists, writers, editors, and art handlers. In the end, the visitors, through their appropriation, construct an original path and narrative. As Chaumier (2013; see also Chaumier, 2012) put it, “the exhibition proposes, the visitor disposes.”

Certainly, the curators’ museographic choices invite the public to adopt a perspective appropriate to what is on display, but the public is free not to do so. The museum presents not only artifacts belonging to the consolidated cultural heritage, but also cases, stories, narratives, remnants of ethnic or regional cultures, in which the boundaries between the cultural, educational, recreational and economic aspects seem to be increasingly blurred. In doing so, it recognizes in visitors an essential resource for the construction of relevant symbolic relationships and an added value of meaning about what they have come to discover. A sense that, by redefining the identity of the things observed, the visitor also questions the very subjectivity of the users and the communities from which they come or to which they belong. An alienation that prevents naive familiarity with one’s own past and with that of others.

As the Canadian museologist Bernard Schiele (2000, pp. 218, 232) wrote, “any human activity, any product of this activity, any place, territory, space in which it takes place—or has been carried out—or from which it is excluded—or has been excluded—can be qualified as heritage. It is therefore not materiality (or immateriality) that matters.” Rather, it is the user’s conscious-unconscious appropriation of this experience and the voluntary-involuntary perspective he or she adopts. In this sense, “nothing is heritage by nature or by an order that escapes us: things, materials, even landscapes form a heritage” when they are used for this purpose by subjects who agree and recognize them. *Heritage* means paying attention to things that are no longer part of the present, taking them into

account, caring for things that are no longer part of the present to invest them with meaning, entrusting them to the future.

In conclusion, the museum today is more and more a space for experiences and conviviality. This implies, as Joëlle Le Marec (2001, p. 53; see also Le Marec, 1998) observes, the acceptance of delegating to the visitor “part of the responsibility for cultural construction as a phenomenon of social communication, and thus conferring on it the status of a social collective.” That is to say, “attributing social autonomy to the public as an acting collective” capable of transforming a preserved object into an object of heritage, appropriating it, and claiming it as part of the active memory of the common space, starting from its concerns and anxieties in the present and giving it a new meaning.

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# MUSEOLOGY ACCORDING TO PONTUS HULTEN: DESIGNING A MODERN ART MUSEUM<sup>1</sup>

Bernadette Dufrêne

**Keywords:** Museology; Contemporary art; Museum's missions; Audience, Society.

**Abstract:** What is a modern art museum? How do we think about the relationship between art in the making and the public? What can the contemporary art presented in museums reveal about social issues? How can we reconcile the museum's informative and critical functions? How can we think about the subject and the public at the same time? These are just some of the questions that led Pontus Hulten to radically transform museology in the second half of the twentieth century.

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1. This article is a partial revision of the text published in the *Cahiers du musée d'art moderne* under the title "La muséologie selon Pontus Hulten" (issue 141/automne 2017, pp. 59-77), translated into English by Charlotte Bydler for the book *Pontus Hulten: His Time and Contexts*.

Perhaps the simplicity of a great idea only becomes apparent when it has already changed the world and language.

These words of Hulten's about the avant-gardists Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and Francis Picabia (1879–1953), in a note dedicated to the birth of the exhibition *Paris–New York* (1977) at the Centre Pompidou, after *Francis Picabia* (1976) and *Marcel Duchamp* (1977), can also be applied to the explorative innovations that Hulten added to concept of the modern art museum, which he opened to all publics (Hulten, 1976a).

The aim of this paper is to describe Pontus Hulten's contributions to the development of the *discipline of museology*, without offering a panegyric to a man who—not without a certain self-awareness—opened seven institutions (six of them museums) and confronted the shifting relationships between art and society and between curators and artists. Hulten, like his friend Jean Tinguely (1925–1991), accorded primacy to his artistic and political interests, and was, above all, a profoundly free man.

In fact, the simplicity of Pontus Hulten's method became apparent to the world only after he had begun to practice it himself. In 1959, the year of Sweden's participation in the 5th São Paulo Biennial, he also took the opportunity to travel to the United States to get an idea of the art that was being made there:

I went to New York after the 1959 São Paulo Biennial. To see the New World was an old dream and I decided to profit from it as much as possible. Who could know if this chance would turn up again? New York was a great shock. What most fascinated me was the extraordinary vitality of the city, its beauty, the kindness and the frankness of people. It was well before the Vietnam war. The only person I knew in New York was Billy Klüver (1927–2004)....



It was financially out of the question to take a hotel in town. I enthusiastically accepted to stay with Billy in Murray Hill where he worked as a research engineer at the Bell Telephone Company Laboratories....

My deepest desire was to see the new art made by people like Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), Jasper Johns (b. 1930) and Richard Stankiewicz (1922–1983), for whom I had the greatest respect, considering them the masters of their generation. I came to understand that in New York, that was not so evident for all (Hulten, nd).

That which was “not so evident for all” was a constitutive feature characteristic of Pontus Hulten’s thought pattern.

## I. CONSIDERING ART IN THE MAKING

After his journey, he was one of the first to introduce artists from the United States to Europe. What drove Hulten was the desire to make the most contemporary art known and understood by as wide an audience as possible. And as an art historian at heart, he wanted to research and present the history of modern art from the beginning of the twentieth century to the sources of its most recent expressions. To exhibit works by Duchamp (in 1960), Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) (in 1963), and Fernand Léger (1881–1955) (in 1964) at the Moderna Museet was to give the public the keys to understanding it, to introduce the feelings and questions that would lead the public to the heart of modern sensibility.

From the very beginning, Pontus Hulten saw the museum’s *raison d’être* as building a bridge between the present and the historical past, between contemporary art and modern art. He began his work in October 1956 in the Moderna Museet, which was still under construction. Its roof was covered with tarpaulins when he presented *Guernica* (1937) by Pablo Picasso

(1881–1973). The exhibition and the work reinforced each other:

...Picasso's painting is a political but transfigured work. It shows the contested situation of art. And since it is the masterpiece of a great painter, it does so in terms of painting. Around the painting, we gathered drawings and sketches that traced the evolution of the painting before its final form. We collected masses of documents. This exhibition in the midst of the ruins and scaffolding was grandiose. The audience was touched. It came. And it reacted. And it returned. This exhibition was the key which opened the doors to what we wanted to do (Hulten, 1974, pp. 17-19).

“When, in the 1990s, during our discussions about the great inaugural exhibitions of the Centre Pompidou—*Marcel Duchamp, Paris–New York, Paris–Berlin, Paris–Moscow*—I asked Pontus Hulten about the launch of what was then commonly called Beaubourg, and the answer that struck me most was this: ‘Don’t forget the political aspect!’” (Dufrêne, 2001). In retrospect, the significance of this remark has become clear to me. Pontus Hulten was the one who placed *Guernica* in a museum, without diminishing its impact and power, because he had made the museum a revealer, not a concealer, of social passions. Hulten wanted a museum where *Guernica* would always have its place. The political dimension of the museum is therefore the starting point of this text. Moreover, for Hulten, “all art is a catalyst and a transfer of enormous energy” (Hulten, 1974), and for this reason, museums also appeared to him as “places of great sensual concentration” (Hulten, 1974). For him, the exhibition was a phenomenological practice that revealed relationships:

[Henri] Matisse (1869–1954) showed this a long time ago: what happens between the forms is as important as the forms themselves, and the voids around the leaves count as much as the drawing of

the foliage. “I don’t paint things. I paint the voids between things” (Hulten, 1975, pp. 4-5).

“The exhibition is conceived as this language of the implicit and as a function of a ‘methodology’ that I have called the ‘exhibition-system’” (Dufrêne, 2000).

Finally, Pontus Hulten approached complicated “art worlds” with simple ideas, sharing daily experiences with artists he befriended. Contemporary art consists of new art territories that are understood and surveyed from a particular situation, from a *genius loci* that constantly shifts its focus.

## 2. THE MUSEUM’S POLITICAL DIMENSION

Pontus Hulten organized the desacralization of the museum in Stockholm, its democratization, its return to the life of the city, with two deeply committed museum directors in mind: Alfred Barr, Jr., (1902–1981), the founder of MoMA, and Willem Sandberg (1897–1984), who reinvented the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam—a process comparable to that which Tinguely recommended to all artists perform: namely a “self-depedialisation.”

Alfred Barr, Jr. was a young man of 27 when he was chosen as director of MoMA; Sandberg, on the other hand, was 50 when he was asked to become the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, for his commitment and courage during World War II. Pontus Hulten was 33 when he was appointed director of the Moderna Museet, but almost 50 when he took over the Musée National d’Art Moderne in September 1973 and put his stamp on the Département d’arts plastiques. For all three, the museum was not an institution but a commitment that led them to ask profound questions: What is the social role of a modern art museum? How can we think about both the public and the presentation of the works? According to what conceptions of art and culture?

This explains the vehemence of the criticism leveled at these innovators, who, despite their different contexts, are surprisingly similar. Sandberg and Hulten were both criticized for being “animators” and not curators, that is, for favoring the logic of dissemination to the detriment of scientific logic: an unfair criticism if ever there was one, given the quality of each museum’s collections and the director’s enrichment of each of them. This reproach recalls the “old lament” expressed by German intellectual Walter Benjamin as early as 1936: “The masses seek distraction, whereas art demands concentration” (Benjamin, 1939, p. 311).

When he became the founding director of the MoMA in New York in 1929, Alfred Barr, Jr. immediately implemented a multidisciplinary concept for the museum. Rufus Morey’s courses at Princeton had prepared him well for this end, as had a visit to the Bauhaus school during a study trip to Europe. There was no distinction between the “high” and “low” arts. Architecture, design, photography, and film all contributed to the formation of contemporary taste. For Barr, Jr., the concept of “visual arts” replaced that of the fine arts, while the field of art history expanded into what Barr understood to be the “history of civilization” (Meyer, 2013). When the Nazis attacked the Bauhaus and modern art, Barr, Jr.—who was in Stuttgart in February 1933 and left Germany at the end of May—wrote four articles that he submitted to several American magazines to warn of the danger in Adolf Hitler’s rise to power. But he did not stop at writing: from June on, he worked to help threatened German historians, museum directors, and artists. From Alfred Barr’s work, Pontus Hulten inherited the role of the exhibition as a medium for current artistic events and the conception of the museum as a “research center,” which he implemented with the creation of the Department of Visual Arts (Dufrêne, 1999) at the future Centre Pompidou.

Before he was asked to work on the construction of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Willem Sandberg was the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam from 1945 to 1962,

and he was a great resistance fighter; a man used to doing what he thought was right, even if it meant going against the grain and taking risks. For him, it was always necessary to “compare the unreal world of the museum with the reality of everyday life.” He saw the new wing of the Stedelijk, built in 1954, as a continuation of the city with large windows at street level that allowed the works to be seen. Sandberg liked the paradox of the modern art museum: “The function of a museum has often been to store / Things we don’t need but still don’t want to throw away / Like all ill people our society has lost / The taste for what will do it good or bad / And it loathes things that are raw / At this moment, the function of a contemporary art museum / Is mainly to show things our society doesn’t yet know how / to use ...” (Sandberg, 1950).

A former graphic designer and typographer, as well as a communist sympathizer, Sandberg also sought to open museums to as wide an audience as possible. He was concerned both with the conditions of welcoming the public (“Let’s seek confrontation / let’s try to create the right atmosphere / open / clear / on a human scale / a place where one feels at home / where one dares to discuss laughter / a real centre of contemporary life”) (Sandberg, 1950) and with introducing techniques that were used at the nascent Festival d’Avignon in order to attract the general public, especially subscribers.

Pontus Hulten’s concept of the “living museum” owes much to Sandberg, whom Hulten considered his mentor. Hulten was an art historian and theorist by training, and the author of a dissertation on Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). In the context of the 1960s, he had to adopt the pragmatism that was the basis of his museological concepts.

### 3. “THE MUSEUM AS A PLACE OF COMMUNICATION”

In a seminal text published in 1976, “The Museum as a Place of Communication” (Hulten, 1976b), Hulten looked back on fifteen years of experience, first as director of the Moderna Museet and then between 1963 and 1968, as a member of the group of experts responsible for thinking about a new cultural structure, the *Kulturhuset* (the House of Culture). Then again as an exhibition curator, in particular for the preparation of *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* at the MoMA in 1968, and finally as the new director of the Department of Visual Arts at Beaubourg (Dufrêne, 2007, p. 75). He expressed with the utmost clarity the temptations and contradictions of the museum world of the time. The “living museum” he promoted included a category of museums that benefited from a “situation of creative freedom.” (Hulten, 1976a). Not only would they establish a relationship with the contemporary, by welcoming new forms of art, but they would also challenge outdated habits. “The living museum became a parallel place” (Hulten, 1976a). The Moderna Museet became the very epitome of this “parallel place,” where traditional museum activities (collecting, conserving, presenting) coexisted with the most contemporary events, the performances of Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage (1912–1992), Merce Cunningham (1919–2009)... However, as Hulten explained, the situation of creative freedom—a condition of the parallel museum—“became impossible after May 1968” for at least two reasons: the hardening of political power<sup>2</sup> and the new place occupied by the mass media in the field of culture and information.

The politicization of artists who wanted to act in society also challenged cultural institutions with their claims to have

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2. The activities of the Moderna Museet were considered too friendly to the demands of American minorities and opponents of the Vietnam War, so Pontus Hulten’s budget requests were bypassed by the financial authorities.

a say in the design of exhibitions. There were moments of tension between the heads of avant-garde institutions, like Hulten, and the innovative artists they promoted. This was exemplified by the installation of the exhibition *The Machine* at MoMA (West, 2017, p. 107). On January 3, 1969, the Greek-born artist Takis (Panayotis Vassilakis, 1925–2019), who disagreed with some of the curatorial choices, withdrew his work *Tele-Sculpture* (1960), and gave his gesture a manifesto-like character by staging a sit-in and distributing leaflets in the museum's garden, supported by other artists who were representatives of Institutional Critique, such as Hans Haacke (b.1936) and Willoughby Sharp (1936–2008). This formed the beginning of the AWC (Art Workers' Coalition). Hulten's career was also marked by two other events, although they only affected him indirectly. In 1972, François Mathey organized the exhibition *Twelve Years of Contemporary Art in France* in Paris, and clashed with the *Front d'artistes plasticiens*, who accused it of being "the Pompidou exhibition" (Dufrène, 1999). That same year, Daniel Buren (b. 1938) attacked the organizers of Documenta 5, including Harald Szeemann (1933–2005)<sup>3</sup>, who were accused of using the artists for their own purposes. This also illustrated the artists' militancy (Buren, 1972).

Thus, at the very moment of the museum's renewal, Hulten found himself caught in between two perspectives. One could either want the museum to become a truly global network, as predicted by media theorist Marshall McLuhan's disciple Everett Ellin—who lectured at the Moderna Museet in 1967—based on the new technologies that, according to theorist Hans Magnus Enzensberger, were supposed to be egalitarian and shared by all (Enzensberger, 1970, pp. 13-36). Or one could want it to serve the project of autonomy that was then being carried out by artists, cultural actors, and their audiences in a local context.

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3. Szeemann was an acquaintance of Hulten's.

In 1963, Hulten, then director of the Moderna Museet, praised the plans for the new *Kulturhuset* (House of Culture) drawn by architect Peter Celsing (1920–1974). The latter had planned a huge glass façade that would transmit information in real time, with beautiful images of the city (West, 2017, pp. 91–120). About ten years later, the architectural concept for the Centre Pompidou by Renzo Piano (b. 1937) and Richard Rogers (1933–2021) clearly reminded Hulten of Celsing’s project. The latter had wanted to create a duality by placing a square in front of the actual building, an idea that can also be found in the piazza in front of the Centre Pompidou. There were also the numerous references to the Russian avant-garde and its experimental projects with the mobile buildings, diverse activities, and strong popular appeal that were at the heart of the debates of the *Kulturhuset*, and which both the architects and users of the Centre Pompidou (which Francis Ponge would later call “*moviment*”) (Ponge, 1977) had in mind. But the impossibility of reconciling the two objectives—to create a place completely open to all cultural activities and to house a museum with collections—had doomed the project in Stockholm to failure even before Celsing’s death in 1974, although the building had been completed.

At a meeting with representatives of contemporary art museums organized by UNESCO in 1969, Hulten proposed a diagram in the form of four interlocking concentric circles, to show the articulation between the different levels of information and the political function that he attributed to the *Kulturhuset*. The outermost circle was the circle of raw information from the environment, followed by the sphere of information processing (e.g. workshops), processed information (e.g. exhibitions and events), and, at the center of this interlocking circle, the space of the collections and archives, which was the memory of the museum (Rivière, 1972; West, 2017, p. 11). The exhibition function was thus closely linked to information. The model institution that the *Kulturhuset* was to be, and that would have succeeded the Moderna Museet,



was more than a museum. It was conceived as a center for real life and a place for gathering and disseminating information. The project developed for the *Kulturhuset*, but which never saw the light of day in Sweden, could be seen as a precursor to the Centre Pompidou.

In an article published in the magazine *Arc* in 1975, Hulten, who had been offered the directorship of the DAP (Département d'arts plastiques) at Beaubourg in the spring of 1973, presented his plans to the journal *Museum*, but made an important reservation:

[...] perhaps it is too optimistic to imagine that this model can be realised immediately. The external sphere, that of 'raw' information, which brings the internal space of the museum into contact with the external space of the street or of life, will undoubtedly encounter great difficulties of realisation. The society we live in has become too aggressive. The risks of conflict are too great. Museums are in a way a court of miracles, where you can do things that are not possible elsewhere. (Hulten, 1975, p. 12).

Comparing this interview with his more elaborate article "Le musée, un lieu de communication" (The museum, a place of communication), written a year later, we can clearly see the convergences and thought patterns of Pontus Hulten's in the 1970s after the heavy toll of the expansion and redefinition of museums around 1968. It was no longer enough to provide parallel venues for innovative art forms, as had been the case in the early 1960s. Since the work of art's social implications had gone beyond what the public in general could grasp, and had become an issue of communication and understanding of society and its history, the museum acquired a new responsibility: that of *guiding* the public. With the public as a goal, and starting from what was unique in each museum, Hulten wanted to increase the role of the museum in society. His evolution between 1969 and 1975 can be described as carefully walking a tightrope between the power plays and

politico-economic contradictions that until then had shaped the “parallel place” of the museum. Hulten’s diagram depicted the museum’s role as a filter, as well as the “miracles” and utopias that were impossible elsewhere, all based on the special environment in which museums are located. The expression “*cour des miracles*” is suggestive in this respect; by obeying its own laws, the museum can bring about new and surprising possibilities (Rivière, 1972).

#### 4. ART AS A “CRITIQUE OF LIFE”

The museum, where the encounter is richest, is “the empirical and organic result of a work of self-fertilization between the city and the artists, between the potential public and the museum staff” (Hulten, 1974). For Hulten, the museum was a portal to a society in which art could play a very important role, in which:

[...] information, dialogue and debate must restore the work of art to the level of life and no longer make it the object of a passive cult. We would like to do what the Surrealists called “the critique of life.” Such a mechanism is of course only of interest if it operates permanently and if it is based on a methodology. A real science of information is being developed [...] (Hulten, 1976b).

Thus, Hulten’s conviction was as follows: “If we expect art to be integrated into life and to penetrate the entire society, it is in newly conceived ‘museums’ that this exchange can take place.”<sup>4</sup> (Hulten, 1975)

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4. The idea was echoed in a communiqué by the group of experts in 1972: “We must no longer regard the museum as an instrument for offering art to the public. The museum has become more critical both of art and of itself, because it has become more aware of its function outside daily life” (Rivière, 1972).

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# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE AT THE VENICE BIENNALE

Angela Vettese

**Key Words:** Venice Biennale; Political Art; Ethical Provocation; Institutional Critique; National Pavilions.

**Abstract:** It could be argued that the city of Venice, and not just the Biennale, is not the optimal setting for the demonstration of countercultural effectiveness, given its reputation as a place of escapism. The target audience for ideological solicitation is the same one that populates the elitist parties in the evenings, often sponsored by large commercial entities ranging from exclusive brands to art dealers, and collectors participating in an openly luxury-centered event. This has undermined the Venice Biennale's ability to provoke political awareness or effect change, even when an artist's work is clearly provocative. Despite the Venice Biennale's history of political action and its efforts to promote critical thinking, and despite the multicellular structure that, divided into pavilions, guarantees a certain independence for daring artistic actions, the Mostra Internazionale d'Arte seems to serve a conservationist rather than a revolutionary purpose.

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The Venice Biennale is not an optimal venue for the presentation of effective proposals in the realm of political engagement. Regardless of the degree to which individual participating artists may be involved in social, decolonial, gender, or more globally ideological issues, the very mechanism from which the biennial device was born and from which it continues to operate tends to preclude the expression of any stance of protest. This is because the institution was born as a fashionable event and has never completely shed the nature of its baptism.

The first of its kind in the world, the exhibition was born in Venice in the 1880s as part of a group of exhibitions scattered throughout the peninsula at the suggestion of the government. This series of events was intended to stimulate cultural tourism and the vibrancy of art cities. The first step towards the real Biennale, which was organized in 1887, was thus a one-off exhibition, designed to straddle the line between a craft fair, an international exposition, and a French-style salon. Later, when the idea of a periodic exhibition was conceived, to be held in 1893 and later postponed to 1895, its purpose remained eminently touristic, as well as celebratory of a newly founded country; the Kingdom of Italy was not yet thirty years old. The coincidence of the 1895 edition with the royal couple's silver wedding anniversary also served to underscore the fact that the event's inception was sanctioned by the royal house and conservative officialdom. Promoted by a group of industrialists and intellectuals such as Antonio Fradeletto and Giovanni Bordiga, it was also seen as capable of giving back a return on investment in terms of increasing the city's fame and, consequently, its trade.

The first plans of the Palazzo dell'Esposizione, erected in the Giardini di Castello especially for the Biennale, show a large reception hall with a celebratory ambience, which would later be divided in two. Photographs of the original fittings highlight walls, floors, interior decorations, plinths, and pedestals characterized by classical aesthetic concepts, in

which the works appear as entities to be contemplated and perhaps even purchased. The overall layout of the exhibition was hardly provocative.

However, precisely because of its traditional and capitalist imprint, its officialdom, and the consequent political detachment that has characterized the institution since its inception<sup>1</sup>, the International Art Exhibition provoked all kinds of institutional critiques<sup>2</sup>, both ante and post litteram. The Venice Biennale has thus aroused much skepticism about the very reason for its existence, in the form of works, operations, performances, actions and installations that have paradoxically contributed to maintaining its viability and establishing it a forum for political discourse “by other means” (Jones, 2010, p. 43). Conversely, one cannot help but wonder whether or not and how these critical positions have made themselves heard, or if they have been absorbed into the background noise.

Clearly, such a gilded venue is the ideal platform for those who engage in controversial actions and rely on the visibility of the event as a sounding board. Already in the first edition, Giacomo Grosso’s erotic, necrophilic, and blasphemous painting *Il supremo convegno* generated unease within the Church, excitement among the general public, and the potential for a tour to exhibit it in other venues. In the 1926 edition, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti tried to provoke an anarchist attack simply by proposing that the works of the Italian Futurists be shown alongside those of the Russian Futurists. As Paolo

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1. Except for the 1942 edition, which was eminently militaristic and entrusted in many pavilions to a representation of the Italian Armed Forces Corps, and the 1968 edition, which was marked by an anti-capitalist occupation. Many subsequent editions manifested a desire for engagement, including the 2015 edition curated by Okwui Enwezor and the 2024 edition curated by Adriano Pedrosa, but the approach was more human rights-oriented than overtly political and, in any case, consistently marked only the central exhibition and not the pavilions and side events, which were often “engaged” but on different and inconsistent sides.

2. The term is used in the sense of Alberro & Stimson, 2011.

Fabbri wrote, “Futurism engages and uses power to mount the ambivalent device of an elitist marginality that demands public legitimization” (Fabbri, 2009, p. 13). Those who engage in protest want to be recognized by those they protest against. One hundred years later, this is still largely the case.

The subsequent scandals associated with the Biennale are well documented (Alemani, 2020). I will mention just a few, with particular interest in those involving types of installation that aligned themselves with the goals of protest and denunciation.

In 1966, Lucio Fontana paid for the production of the reflective spheres that a young Yayoi Kusama sold for two dollars in the middle of the Giardini, in front of the Holland Pavilion, dressed in a silver kimono and without having been invited to install her *Narcissus Garden*. Most people characterized her outdoor arrangement of reflective orbs scattered haphazardly on the lawn as hostile, even ideologically, to the exhibition, an approach corroborated by the ethereal, anti-consumerist, anti-celebratory attempt to slowly uninstall the work by selling one sphere at a time until the performance was blocked and she was expelled from the Biennale.

In 1968, the artists’ boycott of the event led to demonstrations and violent police intervention, with many artists turning their paintings against the wall in protest against the classical forms of display. That same year, on June 19, the artist Nicolas Garcia Urriburu, in one of the first extramoenia demonstrations, poured 30 kilos of a fluorescent substance into the Grand Canal, rebelling against any traditional device, in an early environmentalist denunciation and making a lasting impression on the city’s inhabitants. The liberation of 10,000 butterflies in St. Mark’s Square by the group Mass Moving in 1972 was also a peaceful invasion of urban spaces and a critique of current exhibition methods from an environmentalist point of view. A new kind of work, integrated into the city but also mobile, ephemeral, and temporal, was emerging, in what could be defined as part of a relational aesthetic. Also



in 1972, Gino De Dominicis “exhibited” a living man with Down syndrome, sitting on a simple armchair in the corner of a room, in the work entitled *2nd Solution of Immortality (the universe is immobile)*. This performance, clearly intended to challenge a certain notion of respectability, was condemned and immediately dismantled. Nevertheless, it left its mark, because for the first time a human being, Paolo Rosa, was reified and incorporated into what was considered suitable for exhibition.

In 1976, in the section *Ambiente/Arte: dal Futurismo alla Body Art*, curated by Germano Celant, Jannis Kounellis proposed the twelve live horses that he had already exhibited in 1969 at the L’Attico gallery in Rome. The content of his protest was not ideological but linguistic, yet so strong that it also had political overtones. In this case, the sense of estrangement represented by the animals, on an elegant parquet floor, was even more shocking than in the first version, on a garage floor of worthless tiles.

The arrival of eighteen live sheep, each marked with a blue brushstroke, in a work by Menashe Kadishman, transformed the Israel pavilion into a sheepfold with the ritual aspects of a rural civilization (1978); this is yet another legendary event in which living beings were put on display. That same year, Antonio Paradiso subverted the traditional exhibition formats in an even more provocative way, with a work of art presenting an artificial cow designed to collect semen for artificial insemination, mounted by a live bull, to demonstrate the effects of agricultural mechanization and intensive farming.

Jeff Koons’ erotic paintings and sculptures, all self-portraits made with the porn star Ilona Staller, who was the artist’s wife at the time (1990), caused much commotion. The artist’s declared intention was to defend love, in line with the slogans used by “Cicciolina” in the Italian Parliament, where she was elected as a member. Although the artist had chosen a conventional arrangement of images on the wall and a sculpture on a pedestal, the contrast between this normality and the anomaly

of his images, which seemed more appropriate for a tabloid or a kitschy souvenir shop than an art exhibition, was puzzling. In this case, the exhibition display served the purpose of increasing visibility. It is important to note, however, that the exhibition took place in the Corderie dell'Arsenale, in one of the first years of its use as a venue for the *Aperto* section. At the time, the brick columns marking the nave were still being used to construct separate galleries in the form of boxes, and the risk of Koons' provocation contaminating the rest of the exhibition was low. The same device characterized the installation by the Gran Fury collective, also in 1990, which violently criticized the Pope for his homophobic and guilt-ridden attitude toward the gay community regarding the AIDS epidemic. Although the works were highly controversial, the fact that the participation took place in an independent space avoided any visual disturbance for the other artists and partially neutralized the scope of the intervention and, subsequently, its censorship.

The presentation of half a cow and half a calf preserved in formaldehyde, installed by Damien Hirst in 1993, was designed to illustrate a harsh truth through animal imagery; in this case, the use of box galleries was disregarded, and the viewer traversed the space between the display case containing the mother and the one containing the calf, intensifying feelings of disgust and distress, as well as a sense of unease at the anatomical dissection of the animals, displayed as if they were standing upright. In the same year, the presence of dozens of photographs of naked bodies, frontal and explicit, in Oliviero Toscani's installation, intended to challenge preconceptions and a sense of false modesty, was almost hidden in a space in the Corderie.

Many of these and other works provoked negative reactions, protests in the press, and remonstrations to the management through telegrams and letters, but none were actually destroyed. Denunciations and protests seem to be part of every edition, as an ingredient that spices up the exhibition, which lies somewhere between gratuitous (if spectacular)

provocation and social criticism. The Biennale has always featured radical abstractions or disturbing nudes capable of raising a few eyebrows, from Mondrian's perpendicular lines in 1956 (painted in 1914) to Felice Casorati's *Meriggio*, with a priest's hat and shoes between two reclining naked girls (1922, exhibited in 1964). Their inclusion in a traditional display diminished their inherent violence, but caused disappointment. Yet a scandal does not imply a political stance, as in the aforementioned painting by Giacomo Grosso, which depicts a Don Juan in his coffin inside a church, besieged by naked girls in ecstasy.

A more politically oriented attempt came with the performances, especially those that tried to involve the public in participatory reactions, starting with the so-called "Pink Biennial" section in 1976, in which the artists themselves painted the walls like house painters. But in fact, the viewer's capacity for shock remained unchallenged, even by the brigade of elderly Fluxus artists who appeared naked and in various positions without any prior preparation, in the exhibition *Ubi fluxus ibi motus* in 1990 (Bonito Oliva, 1990). Nor can it be said that Rirkrit Tiravanija's offering of food in the *Aperto* section in 1993, albeit with its pots and pans and kitchen utensils, disturbed people's spirits, considering that since the 1960s, the contemporary art public had seen or read about masturbations, self-castrations, suicides, orgiastic encounters, insults to the authorities, and brief arrests after actions considered unacceptable but immediately forgiven. It is not from within the system, nor from a population of enthusiasts ready to see and digest anything, that protests can expect to have effective consequences. And the biennial, frequented above all by passionate art seekers who can also be very perceptive, is the soul of the system.

The revival of a strongly interlocutory and engaged space such as *Utopia Station*, organized at the Arsenale in 2003 by Tiravanija, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and Molly Nesbit, with round tables made of rough wood by German carpenters,

inspired by those used in breweries, as well as boxes that resembled planks from construction sites, had some moments of genuine intellectual provocation—including a heartfelt lecture by Bruno Latour—but did not provoke any major negative reactions.

Even rabid countercultural interventions, such as Emilio Vedova's in the central exhibition of the 1997 Biennale, have had an almost neutral effect in a context where, as curator Germano Celant understood, "commitment and romanticism, consumerism and absolutism, the banal and the sublime, sociology and anthropology... all coexist" (2021, p. 247).

It is hardly surprising that the 2024 edition did not cause much of a stir, even though the chief curator, Adriano Pedrosa, entitled it *Stranieri Ovunque (Strangers Everywhere)* and conceived it as a direct indictment of the phenomena of continued colonization, ethnic and racial violence, gender discrimination, and the failure to integrate migrants. Similarly, *The Disobedience Archive*, a subsection of the show with a strong anti-censorship slant, curated and installed in 2024 by curator Marco Scotini, did not generate much of an echo.

The paradox of the Biennale is that the public that is solicited for its ethical stance is the same one that in the evenings populates pompous, pretentious, and elitist parties, often sponsored by large commercial entities, from brands such as Chanel and exclusive shipyards to gallerists and collectors participating in an openly luxury-centered kermesse.

We must not forget that the Venice Biennale has always also been a place of consumerism, and thus of explicit acquiescence to a commercial system that regulates at least in part, an artist's success. At first, sales took place in a dedicated sales office. After the closing of the office in 1973, the system became more covert and complex, but the relationship with money and art dealers has never ceased; if anything, it deepened, due to the role they played as sponsors and producers of many of the artworks shown (according to the rules, production was never covered by the Biennale itself; Ricci, 2021). It would therefore

be asking too much to expect artists to be fully sincere, or at least fully effective in their anti-capitalist stance.

Despite these premises, we cannot fail to see some interesting results in the ethical, if not decidedly political, propositions emerging from the Venice Biennale. However, they are more likely to occur more outside the central exhibition, which is primarily associated with its celebratory origins, than within the pavilions or other side events. Cases such as the *Arena*—the reflective space invented by Okwui Enwezor and curated by Isaac Julien in the central pavilion of the 2015 Biennale, a place where audiences gathered to read Karl Marx's *Capital*, listen to live music, and engage in political discussions—must again be seen as not entirely successful; its radicalism was tempered by its extreme elegance, with a red circle uniting the stage and the audience, and tiers of seating more reminiscent of lavish Italianate theatres than popular meeting places.

The Biennale's satellite structures have been more mobile, flexible, and surprising: a Norway Pavilion that consisted solely of cutting-edge conferences located in the city's main cultural institutions (2011, *The State of Things*); a Scotland Pavilion that re-evaluated the ecological journey on foot from Edinburgh to Venice (2015); a Lithuania Pavilion that focused on marshes as an environment to be protected and understood politically, organized in the form of a school (*Swamps!*, 2018).

This was not always the case: "The Venice Biennale is one of those exhibitions that refuse to die," wrote a commentator in *Artforum* after the 1978 edition (Van Der Marck, 1978). In particular, he suggested that the picturesque pavilions should be razed to the ground. Ten years earlier, Lawrence Alloway had called the event "a goldfish bowl" (1968, p. 149) whose multicellular structure was no longer capable of accommodating the so-called avant-garde. Today, we can say that it is also thanks to the multicellularity of the Biennale that it has not completely lost its ideological incisiveness.

Despite the fact that the pavilions in the Giardini were almost all built with very traditional structures, imitating small

museums with colonnades on the outside and symmetrical, courtly rooms on the inside (think of those of Germany, France, England, Russia, Denmark, Greece, for example), many initiatives have managed to shake them up. With a system based on the strong management autonomy of almost one hundred pavilions scattered throughout the city and an equal number of exhibitions on the periphery, set up in large palaces or in dive bars, restaurants, cellars and countercultural centers, a plurality of gazes has also been guaranteed. This should not be underestimated at a time when the same curators are jumping from one assignment to another in a merry-go-round that is not necessarily positive; with professionals who accept to take care of shows that take shape from Sidney to Kassel, from Istanbul to Sharjah, and Riyadh to Venice itself, the risk of uniformity is great. There is a clear danger of consolidating an international artistic canon, despite declarations of attention to a specific territory. It is also important to note that the body that runs the Venice Biennale only pays for the central exhibition; the rest is the responsibility of the countries or individual organizations, with funds from galleries, museums, and other patrons, which allows for a certain fluidity in the expression of ideas as well as in the choice of exhibits, which can turn out to be political statements in themselves.

In the best case, the artist who wants to convey a committed message must also count on the construction of an innovative linguistic character. And a strong message capable of integrating the collective memory, often even over a period of years, requires more than the declared content; it seeks forms of expression that extend to the modes of display. An example of this is the German pavilion entrusted to Hans Haacke in 1993, in which visitors found themselves walking on the ruins of a floor laid in 1938, thus before the defeat of the Nazis, and broken after the reunification of the two Germanies. Through this catastrophic path, the work intuitively but unequivocally pilloried nationalist haughtiness of any kind (Baldacci, 2017, p. 255).

If the pavilions had not encouraged freedom of expression, there would not have been a playful but provocative Clandestine Pavilion consisting of Sisley Xhafa kicking a ball (1997). We would not have seen, even if only for a few hours, censored installations such as Pipilotti Rist's, focused on the spiritual beauty of sex, on the ceiling of the church of San Stae (2005), or the installation on otherness and muslim religion at the Misericordia, a former church turned into a mosque by the green prayer carpet invented for the Icelandic Pavilion (2015). The Spanish Pavilion would not have included artists such as Santiago Sierra, Antoni Muntadas, or Dora Garcia, all of whom were otherwise engaged in questioning the very idea of national participation and thus in dismantling, closing, and transforming the physical space of the pavilion itself. There would have been no place for moments of fear and excitement such as those reserved for rethinking our relationship to aggression and fear, as with Anne Imhof's dogs at the German Pavilion in 2017, in which a glass floor separated the audience vertically from a performance guarded by barking Dobermans. The pavilions and exhibitions also address the most pressing issues of the day. At the opening of the 2022 edition, Ukraine had just been invaded, and the space dedicated to that country became an opportunity for debate even before it was officially supported by the Biennale's management.

At least two other issues should also be considered.

First, perhaps the city of Venice (and not just its Biennale) is not the place for countercultural effectiveness. It is an urban organism and an enclave that is deeply disconnected from the contradictions of the world where real conflicts take place. An alternative to the 'checkmate' of the exhibition enclosure on political instances lies in a decisive escape from the enclosure. A biennial can be created for reasons related to the political developments of a territory: the end of apartheid in South Africa for Johannesburg (1995), the return of democracy in South Korea for Gwangju (1995), a new idea of Europe for Manifesta (1996: Altshuler, 2010, p. 25). What the artists

bring, if they are truly clear about their role in these events, is a transformative attitude connected less to politics than to art's ability to concern itself with "beauty and absoluteness," in the words of Thomas Hirshhorn (2011, p. 139). He is an artist who has always manifested his desire for political interaction, who tried to create an explosive Swiss Pavilion in Venice but in fact, presented much more radical work elsewhere, such as the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. And like him, there are many others who are aware of what is not appropriate to ask of the Veneto capital that was once called Serenissima.

Furthermore, there are purely numerical reasons why even a deeply political work is destined to see its polemical potential diminished in the context of the Biennale, or for that matter, in any art exhibition. At best, this category of event is attended by a million people. Any television program with a plausible share, especially in populous countries like the United States, exceeds this number. The sounding board of the popular press is now a blunt weapon because of its shrinking circulation. Whatever amplification one might hope for from social media is diminished by the fact that its adherents are divided into niches with rather uniform opinions: few notice the novelty of something of which they are already convinced. Long gone are the days when a poem like Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* or Bob Dylan's protest songs could sting, if only for the novelty they represented. The awareness-raising effects that a politically oriented artist can hope for are linked to the dissemination of his message, and thus of his work, in media other than the protected venues of exhibitions, even the best known and most extensive ones. It is no coincidence that some protagonists of the visual arts have turned to theatrical cinema, in a paradoxical perspective that transforms the spectacle into an activist moment, such as the experimental video artist Steve McQueen, who won an Oscar for his traditional film *12 Years a Slave* (2013).

Perhaps in general, artists with a political message, whether participating in a Biennale or not, should consider relying on



their role as creators of metaphors, exemplars of good practices, indicators of directions to avoid. Trying to change the world from within the art world is a self-defeating proposition. In the long run, however, benevolent intentions combined with a deeply critical stance can prove impactful if the message that art carries from a narrow audience to a broader one can gradually climb the stair. And this process can begin not only with a properly constructed message, but with the implementation of a meaningful way to present it.

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## PART IV

# DISPLAY IN ACTION



INTERDISCIPLINARITY  
AMONG THE LOGICS OF DISPLAYING.  
STAGING AS AN INTERACTION  
BETWEEN HISTORICAL  
AND DESIGN APPROACHES

Anna Mazzanti

**Keywords:** Staging; Venice Biennale; Interdisciplinarity; Design.

**Abstract:** Drawing on personal experience as an art historian actively engaged with exhibition designers, both in the realms of research and metaprojective reflection, as well as in teaching, I aim in this paper to explore potential logics of shared understanding and delimitation between synergistic viewpoints. Examining sources as instruments of interdisciplinary connection, I will focus on historical cases within the context of biennial exhibitions, in line with my areas of expertise and research focus, spanning from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s.

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This essay aims to reflect on and account for the effects of interdisciplinary staging practices that historical expertise offers to designers in training. What is the potential of the dialogue established between art and design? What transmission values are created, what methodological reflections emerge in order to outline the roles, their limits and the points of dialogue and interference between the competences of the curator and the exhibition designer? What changes are engendered in the practice of art history through this dialogue and the choice of research topics? Starting from these questions, I will discuss here an interdisciplinary methodological approach, as well as a presentation of the research and didactic strategies I have adopted.

Before being hired at the Politecnico di Milano (2009), I had had the opportunity to study certain environments of life, creation, and exhibition of artists. The events of the research topics were then followed by such incursions, from a historical perspective, into the sphere of museography and the study of spaces.

In these pages, I would like to return in particular to the themes of two research projects that have been activated for some time within the framework of the Venice Biennale.

I will focus on two different views of the Venice Biennale that refer to different historical moments: the origin of the international exhibition in the nineteenth century and the moment of the new course inaugurated by the 1976 Biennale. I have reconsidered both themes from the point of view of the intentions underlying the exhibition, in the light of the tools acquired through interdisciplinary experience gained in a mixed research and teaching environment.

I therefore refer to the nineteenth-century debate on the exhibition model that the nascent Biennale was to adopt, a topic to which numerous studies have been devoted (Lamberti, 1985, 1995; Donzello, 1987; Dal Canton, 1995; Del Puppo, 1995; Martini & Martini, 2011; Mazzanti, 2014, 2017; Romanelli,

1995, 2005; Tavinor, 2021), rehabilitating an origin with a complex process that cannot be generically homologated to the Salon model.

Since then, the phase of renewal that the Biennale institution underwent—after passing through and being interrupted by two world wars, the cultural-political regime, the postwar debate between abstraction and figuration, the affirmation of international trends—was in the mid-1970s when exhibition and curatorial practices were revolutionized with the abandonment of traditional exhibition canons, a symptomatic effect of a general sociocultural change.

The 1976 Biennale as a litmus test, reflected a crucial moment of rupture that had been taking place since the end of the sixties, with the beginning of an era of transition from the cultural militancy of participatory and shared processes, even contradictory ones, to the seeds of cultural revisions introduced in the following decade, the eighties (Crispoliti, 1994).

This edition therefore welcomed artistic expressions and exhibition models and staging systems, sometimes dichotomous, as in the case of the two adjacent exhibitions in the Central Pavilion. They also partly shared the title through the common word *Ambiente* (Environment). *Ambiente come sociale* was the anthology of site-specific projects of urban and social engagement selected by Enrico Crispolti and reflected in original documentation (Catenacci, 2015; Tanga, 2020). Set up in four large rooms accessible through a secondary entrance to the pavilion, half hidden in a small alley, it found an ideal dialogue with the participatory actions extended to the city outside the Giardini. The prodromes of a more individualistic season, introspective and self-referential, were reflected in the curatorial choices of Germano Celant, who was entrusted with the largest exhibition in the pavilion, *Ambiente/Arte: from Futurism to Body Art*.



*Ambiente/Arte. Dal Futurismo alla Body Art* edited by Germano Celant.  
The Biennale of Venice 1976. Catalogue and poster cover.

Twenty large rooms in the historical section revived former artistic exhibition spaces with the intention of recreating their original aura. Of these, in thirteen, stripped of all superficiality and even of plaster, where the artists ‘sampled’ certain contemporary trends supported by the curator through environmental works specially created in situ (Martini, 2018, 2021; Acocella, 2017). It thus became the “canonical exhibition, the first to historize installation art” (Martini, 2018, p. 297).

As Altshuler (2010, p. 22) noted, the responsibility for a curatorial message, which Szeemann had already expressed in *When Attitudes Become Form* in 1969 and in *documenta 5* in 1972, took shape in “the increasingly central role of the curator as creative participant” (Altshuler, 1994, p. 255).

Crispolti’s militant stance, while deviating from such curatorial processes, nevertheless has an inherent predisposition to curatorial responsibility and represents an equally important



early model, as Tanga observed: curatorial practice as institutionalized criticism<sup>1</sup> (Tanga, 2020, p. 64), which in turn canonizes a different kind of dynamic and flexible exhibition design. The historical photographs in *Ambiente come sociale* return the image of a plural space in which the behavior of the visitors is consequently very different from that of individuals engaged in an experiential relationship with the work (Celant).

The visitors were thus participants in an open laboratory of ideas in which the five thematic ‘hypotheses’ into which Crispolti had divided the projects, were selected and documented in a wide range of materials: maquettes, videotapes, projects, photographic sequences, audio recordings, interviews, and various communication products. They were not arranged in a fixed, linear, narrative sequence<sup>2</sup>, but distributed in an adaptable manner in the installation designed by Ettore Sottsass with his Finnish assistant, Ulla Salovaara, using movable walls made of natural wood, tables, supports, and video stations that could be easily moved as needed. These look like the forerunners of many sustainable solutions that are frequently adopted today. The debate area, osmotic to the exhibition environment, perfectly reflected Crispolti’s interest in of discussion: “In this way, I intend to bring the problem and the experiences within the context of the Biennale in the midst of their debate, so as to allow the Biennale itself to become an instrument of real and creative presence in the current socio-cultural debate,” he wrote in *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale* (Crispolti, 1977, pp. 309-310). “In fact, the

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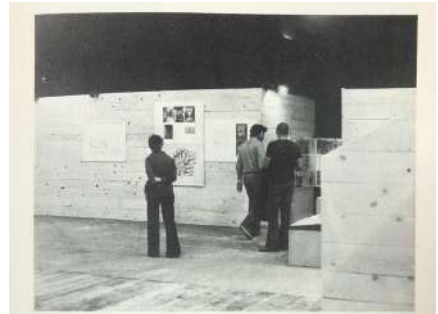
1. The democratic intention of the Biennale chaired by Carlo Ripa di Meana led to Crispolti’s inclusion in the visual arts commission headed by architect Vittorio Gregotti a few months before the opening of the exhibition. See Regorda, 2004, p. 85; Tanga, 2020.

2. Ivi, pp. 64-65, 69-70. Tanga, observing the floor plans kept in the Crispolti Archive, cites the metaphor of the concentric spiral and an information ring as the generative matrix of the layout of the first room, with the return of more immersive themes in the second room through a television circuit.

exhibited contents were directly integrated into the concrete and continuous debate as a never-ending dynamic extension of the projects Crispolti curated and that he used to call “open documentation”<sup>3</sup>.



La Biennale 1976 / Ambiente come sociale / Giardini @ Castello / 18 luglio - 10 ottobre



1976 Biennale di Venezia, Ambiente come sociale



*Ambiente come sociale* by Enrico Crispolti. The Biennale of Venice 1976. Catalogue cover.  
Two views of the rooms set up by Ettore Sottsass.

Visitors found themselves actors in the problematic fluidity of “hypotheses,” with the possibility of reproducing and thus acquiring the documents on display using the photocopier in Room 3, the “study room,” and thus generating a personalized

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3. The debates and meetings organized during the Biennale were recorded and transcribed with the idea of producing a volume that remains unpublished.

catalogue<sup>4</sup>. This activity in the context of the exhibition reflects the definition of *curatore-operatore culturale*, which embodies Crispolti and Mino Trafeli's definition of their role as curators-animators-activators. Together, they had been the driving force behind *Volterra 73*, and on the model of a similar laboratory cell, Crispolti then supported Ico Parisi's utopian experience *Operazione Arcevia: ipotesi di comunità esistenziale*, including it among the exemplary projects of *Ambiente come sociale* at the Biennale, without having yet lost hope of maturing into concrete and corrective developments (Mazzanti, 2024).

Although it is not an absolute assumption, it is nevertheless confirmed that "art history is written by exhibitions," especially those of long duration such as the Venice Biennale, which can significantly represent this art history (Castellani, 2018) through the dialogue between artists, organizers, curators, audiences, and actors who find a point of contact in the narrative devices of the exhibition.

In order to retrace these stories, it is essential to know how to interrogate the archival repository of news, physical traces, clues. It is no coincidence that this outstanding moment of the 1976 Biennale also marked the birth of the Biennale's Historical Archive, ASAC, at Ca' Corner della Regina (Romanelli, 2005; Mazzanti, 2024). A line of research aimed at the linguistic value of the archive and its internal narrative systems, reminds us how much this essential source represents a universe of indications and an organism with its own internal expository logic to be read, and how much this can contain an unexpected potential of information (see Zanella in this volume), from creation to mediation, from curatorship to staging. Writings, projects, photographs are indispensable sources for historical research, as well as for layout and cross-referencing with satellite archives. My

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4. This practice, as Crispolti recalled, was unfortunately often prevented by the complicated functioning of the equipment of the time.

interdisciplinary work and cross-disciplinary teaching have increasingly led me to consider these parallel and sometimes coinciding practices. Since the 1970s, however, exhibition design has come under the control of the curator as a practice absorbed by the curator himself, who increasingly plays the role of *curator-as-author* or *curator-as-artist*, according to what we might call the Harald Szeemann model, as well as cultural operator, as we have seen in the case of Crispolti, or artist in the position of artist-curator. Today, the Fondazione Prada is engaged with this hybrid concept, presenting, for example, *L'immagine volée* by Thomas Demand (2016), or *The Spitzmaus Sarcophagus and Other Treasures*, an exhibition project conceived by the artist and film director Wes Anderson with his graphic designer wife Juman Malouf.

Another example is the complex re-enactment of *Live in your head. When attitudes become form* (2013) at Ca' Corner della Regina, in the Venetian headquarters of Fondazione Prada. Celant's collaboration with Rem Koolhaas and Demand, in a provocative appropriative resemblance to Szeemaa'n's historical innovative model, explored the unrepeatability of the situation, the choice of "re-enacting just one small vector of that complex relational machine by Szeemann: space" (Gravano, 2013).

From this point of view, between theory and design practices applied to the valorization of contemporary art, my meta-projective reflections matured during the Design Workshop for Exhibitions and the Contemporary Art course. The goals were to investigate the role of the curator and exhibition designer in their possible relationships and contamination of roles, understanding the exhibition "*comme langage et comme dispositif*" (Glicenstein, 2009; Poinot, 2009).

The interdisciplinary approach allows students to explore new exhibition systems measured by an ethic of transversal roles, in order to exhibit their own curatorial idea, according to a kind of "Szeemann model." This inevitably adds interpretative content to the works in the exhibition, to the

point of provoking “changes in the status of artworks,” and challenging the mediation of content that is difficult to grasp.

This leads to the creation of behavioral guidelines for students to test their resilience in a harmonious installation, in close dialogue with the thought that drives it, fully respectful of the work and at the same time capable of enriching it with meaning, expressive possibilities or aesthetic revelations (Trocchianesi & Mazzanti *et al.*, 2021).

This aspect constitutes an essential starting point that a new exhibition designer must be clearly aware of, but the acquisition of this process, of acting with critical judgment, leads to the recognition of the ‘improper actions’ of curatorial and exhibition appropriation of works and their inherent messages and meanings, at the ambiguous limits of theft. It leads us to understand the extent to which the effective, propositional and prospective holding of the curatorial structure, and the content that the exhibition introduces, are the result of an intense and “active” dialogue with contemporary works and artists, and thus present similar design challenges to those of exhibition spaces. Understanding the different tasks is crucial to shaping the responsibility and awareness of the roles of curator, exhibition designer, and storyteller of cultural heritage.

The “Szeemann method” is conducive to the maturation of this knowledge, to the observation of the status of *curator-author* of which he was a forerunner, with his attitude not as a writer, nor as a critic or historian, but as a *curator-arranger*. He presents interesting practices of reflection for the exhibition designer, without prejudice to the curatorial identity in its poetic intention of a vision of art capable of creating synergy with artists and thus renewing a vision of the world as a generative matrix (Stazzone, 2019, p. 16).

To this end, the “exhibition as a means of expression” recognized by Szeemann (Ivi, p. 19) represents a series of design considerations that are also enlightening for the designer, who tries his hand at reflecting on attitudes, roles, experimenting with languages and exhibition scenarios, and with

new exhibition systems prompted by the content identified during the educational workshop.

The pedagogical intention is therefore to learn to consider the setting never as an end in itself, but as an instrument of dialogue between the works and the space, and between the works themselves, guaranteeing adequate distances to encourage a sensorial and intuitive perception of art and the “feeling of space” (Szeemann, 1981, p. 20) thus aiming at the “creation of an atmosphere,” a narrative choice that measures the exhibition environment, visualizing otherwise invisible or integrative relationships, as it happens in the famous settings created by Szeemann: atmospheric environments, capable of broadening the perception of properly lit works.

It should be remembered that the parameters of the work/space relationship are the dominant exhibition theme that artists of the late nineteenth century were already questioning, albeit in a very different historical context, in the context of the debate on the model to follow for the early Biennale.

Thus, the generative matrix of exhibitions depends on curatorial attitudes that over time have manifested themselves over time as models, albeit very different ones—Szeemann, Crispolti, Celant, Obrist....

All of them show a homogeneous process in establishing correspondences by entering into the dynamics of shared reflection with the designer (when this is foreseen), seeking a necessary dialogue as if “the exhibition space were traversed by the flow of discourses” (Stazzone, 2019, p. 21). Another important and useful aspect of the analysis is represented by the content of the exhibition, ranging from these works to the site-specific ones, to the consistency of heterogeneous materials, artifacts, objects, documents, on which, as it has been said, the Biennale has been the first to bet since 1976, when the ASAC was founded.

The submerged potential of archives, the recognized value of the document are among the foundations of multiple curatorial practices without losing the historical value of

the document. According to Hans Ulrich Obrist (2014), this is part of the generative model that characterizes first and foremost the physiognomy of artists' environments, but also the exhibition system cherished by many curators, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. From Szeemaaan to Schwartz, many have recognized this as a possible model, a vision of an autonomous, self-sufficient micro-universe.

The exploration and consideration of context is a prerequisite for curatorial construction according to the logic of interpretation and exchange with the work in its identity and as a code of conduct shared with exhibition practices.

For both disciplines—in my own teaching experience—this exercise becomes a generative practice of new narrative exhibitions that enrich the practices of exhibition design, as well as opening unexpected scenarios for the analysis of the contents to be exhibited.

Each year, the theme of the course has presented challenges and questions. Some of these are summarized below, such as the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the *genius loci*, and the site-specific.

*Art and its inhabitants. Artistic imaginaries between dwelling and installation* is the title of an exhibition theme that explored possible narrative presentations of artistic living and working spaces, from artists' homes to ateliers, sometimes already musealized, eloquent, and privileged environments that can be considered as three-dimensional portraits of the authors and models of analysis, prompting new exhibition stagings and transposing them into temporary settings.

How do we recreate the memory of a particular place, such as the artist's studio and/or home, when it exists elsewhere, or only its memory and documentation remain? In part, the theme of exhibition reenactment comes into play. It is not, however, a matter of mere reconstruction, of reproduction, but of the metaphorical reconfiguration of environments charged with memory, where an atmosphere lives and pulsates, keeping alive the reflection of those who lived and practiced

in the space. Understanding this aura, which then guides the experimentation of exhibition design, is essential.

This theme emerged from the focus of the basic research project D.E.SY acronym for Designing Enhancement Strategies and Exhibit SYstems for the Italian House Museums and Studios (Bosoni & Lecce, 2019; Capurro, Mazzanti & Spagnoli, 2019; Mazzanti, 2019), for which I was responsible and which involved interdisciplinary competences: history, museology, exhibition design, cultural heritage, digital studies.

After the initial mapping phase to identify model cases, which were then subjected to a taxonomic analysis according to recurring features, guidelines for valorization were studied. The associated educational workshop experimented with narrative hypotheses of temporary installations dedicated to the ateliers of certain sculptors and artists (Leonilde Carabba, Salvatore Fiume, Mario Negri, Ludovico Pogliaghi, Arnaldo Pomodoro) and to some designers (Fornasetti), with small exhibitions shaping micro-projects of in situ valorization within a circuit of Milanese stages, partly associated with *Museocity*<sup>5</sup> (2019).

The *Atelier natura viva* was a trilogy of small exhibitions dedicated to photographs kept in the archives of exhibitions venues in Milan: Fondazione Franco Albini, Fondazione Achille Castiglioni, and the Studio Mario Negri.

The photographs generate integrated narratives that seek an organic relationship with the different exhibition metaphor chosen from place to place. At the Fondazione Albini, it was the metaphor of the frame that guided the layout in accordance with the “diaphragmatic” peculiarities of the famous architect; the unexpected gaze constituted the narrative yardstick for the photographic narrative that, like temporal telescopes, was

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5. Association that promotes the enhancement of the Milanese museum network, the synergy between cultural institutions and encourages the opening of extraordinary cultural venues. <<https://www.museocity.it>>.



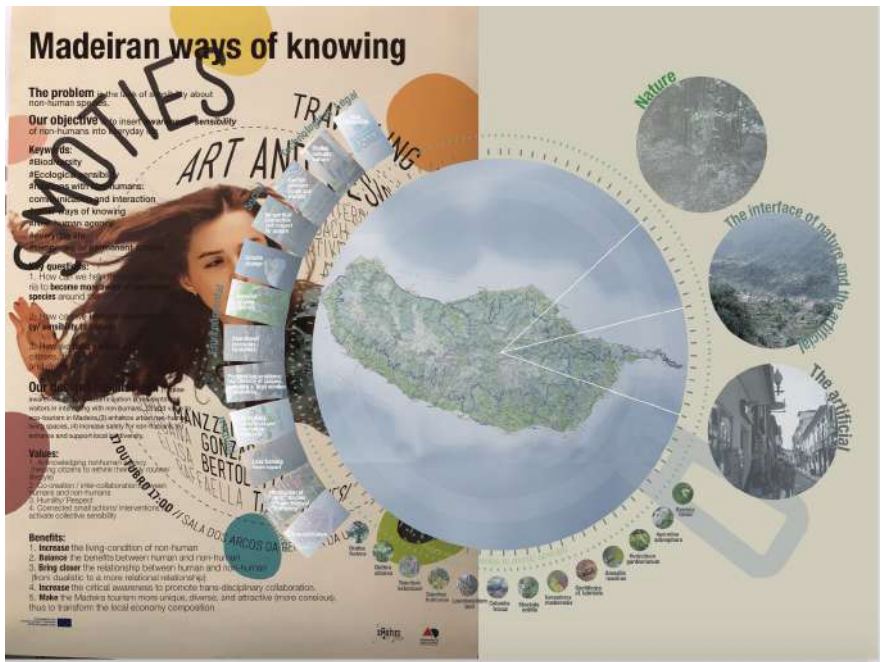


*Atelier natura viva* Museumcity, Milano 2019. From left to right:  
Franco Albini Foundation, The Mario Negri studio, Achille Castiglioni Foundation.

inherent in the environmental stratification of the paroxysm of objects at the Studio Castiglioni. In the studio of sculptor Mario Negri, the metaphor of the intimate retrospective introduced a journey through time and space of the artist's production, opening up journeys through the various studios inhabited by the sculptor over the course of his activity, through the black-and-white photographic lens of two photographers, Paolo Monti and Arno Hammacher, both close friends of Negri. The photographic insights were fully integrated into the studio, offering keys for reading and access, like a Chinese box, to the hidden meanings of space. The fruits of the project can be found in various publications, awaiting the imminent realization of a systematic and organic publication that takes into account the entire project.

Other exhibition design themes in the university workshops focused on the relationship between art and science, travel as interpreted by artists and designers from various metaphorical angles, such as memory, souvenir, reportage and storytelling, analyzing potential narrative tools such as maps and itineraries, symbolic objects, visual and written diaries. The theme of art and nature, on the other hand, encompassed several focus points, such as the Anthropocene, primary elements,

macrocosm and microcosm, living containers and the third landscape. From this theme emerged the subject for an international doctoral course, *Design, Art and Nature*, conducted by the Politecnico School Ph.D. program in partnership with the University of Madeira, which has a research program focused on non-human-centered design.



*Design, Art and Nature* poster by the course, PhD School of Design, Politecnico di Milano and the University of Madeira, 2022. *Madeira ways of knowing*. One of the final diagrams produced by the PhD candidates.

The aim of the course was to explore new aesthetics between art and design in relation to the environmental sustainability of the Portuguese island. Through the doctoral workshop, linguistic experiments led to the development of a nature-centered design “toolkit,” applying the design method to the natural sciences, with an awareness of natural

aesthetics encouraging the designer's virtuous approach to the environment.

This was also the opportunity to outline a mapping of the emerging characteristics of the "natural cube," or nature as a substitute for the white cube, a living container characterized by the spatiotemporal dimension. We analyzed the enhancement of the environmental context through the coexistence of art and nature, integration, the metaphor of the landscape as a theater to represent the visitor's cultural experience, nature as genius loci and source of knowledge and experience, and the role of the mediating artist. The resulting analysis helped to define the research topic for a future workshop, *AMBIENT-AZIONI: exhibiting environmental art. Exhibition narratives from 'place' to 'out-of-place'*.

In this case, the installation design strategy focused on site-specific works in relation to a specific environment that was an integral part of them. This favored the study of mediation processes that find an answer to fundamental questions about the immobility of the exhibition contents, which were presented in a narrative that best respected their meanings, intentions, and perceptions.

The students were therefore given tools to deepen their understanding of the artistic subject in order to identify their own catalogue of contents and points of view, and to develop valid narrative inventions for staging them, from forms of conscious and partial "reconstruction" to the display of documentation, analogue or digital material; to the generation of alternative solutions resulting from a mixed (Szeemannian) designer-curator approach; to the envisaging of direct intervention with the artists and new allusive and mnemonic fertility models, as the recent history of curating shows. The poetics inherent in the site-specific works give rise to a dialogue of expansion: analogue restitutions of a poetics of integration, reproduced by other means and with suggestive content. In this case, particular attention was paid to the resource of sound design, the object of the fundamental research to which the course was linked.

In conclusion, this interdisciplinary exercise offers art historians and critics the opportunity to reconsider the neuralgic centrality of the exhibition since the birth of the Biennale, promoted by the philanthropic paternalism of the progressive political class to the diatribes on staging strategy that should have been adopted and, therefore, on the number of works it could contain. This could have been a large and democratic number, or rather a more elitist choice for the environmental care of the content exhibited, the harmonious sequencing and the attention to lighting, all essential for the correct enjoyment of many artistic trends, from Divisionism to late international Impressionism and Symbolism.

To counteract the effect of a uniform exhibition or commercial gallery so uninteresting as to be inaccessible, filled to the brim with works in an unruly hanging of styles and genres haphazardly juxtaposed according to prevailing market demands (Ricci & Tavinor, 2021; Tavinor, 2021), it was necessary to find an alternative. Proposals were adopted, albeit moderate ones, in dialogue with international secessionist visions through which glimmers of reflection on the exhibition methods of the Biennale, then at the height of its international fashion and power, were opened up, in heated discussion within the promotion and acquisition committees (Del Puppo, 1995; Mazzanti, 2017).

Due to space constraints that I have already exceeded, it is not possible here to engage in further reflections on the subject of exhibition display in this context. In this text, I have offered here some indications of an ongoing process of historical reflection as applied to the narrative strategies of the exhibition.

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# THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ARTIFACT. EXHIBITING LINA BO BARDI

Antonella Gallo

**Keywords:** Lina Bo Bardi; Exhibit Design; Display.

**Abstract:** This essay presents a case study of the exhibition on Lina Bo Bardi at the 9th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale in 2004 (and in 2006 at MASP in São Paulo) as a form of “critique in action”. Through the dispositif of display, the curators presented and defended the philosophy of exhibition design espoused by this celebrated Italian architect.

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There are at least two reasons to examine Lina Bo Bardi’s exhibition legacy: her techniques and her sense of spatial texture. The first reason is of an artistic nature: the formal stagnation that plagues contemporary exhibition design. While curators are willing to talk endlessly about mediation, the field of exhibition design as a technique, as a skill, is conspicuously absent from their discourse. In this lack of attention to the exhibitionary aspect, the context is reduced to mere text. The second reason has a political connotation: Bo Bardi excelled in her formal understanding of the equally vast and

mysterious entity called “the social.” Her poetry, her attention to the sensory aspect of the exhibition—never vulgar, yet not elitist—serves as an antidote to the contemporary populist tendencies of art institutions.

Jean Davallon, in his work *L'exposition à l'œuvre. Stratégies de communication et médiation symbolique*, situates the phenomenon of the exhibition as a work or artifact. He asserts that it is “essentially an object resulting from the implementation of a technique. It is an artifact. As such, it responds to an intention, that is, a goal or a desire to produce an effect. The question is how this intention will be visualized or, if preferred, what task is assigned to the exhibition” (Davallon, 1999, p. 9).

If we consider the exhibition as an act of language, as a space where language is produced, we have to make a fundamental choice between two distinct fields of communication, which have different objectives and consequently use different means. A didactic project aimed at the transmission of analytical and rational knowledge, organizes documents—deemed objective by historical and/or scientific research in relation to the theme of the exhibition—according to a chronological and typological development. These documents are presented as neutrally and precisely as possible within the exhibition layout. In contrast, an exhibition project that supports a thesis is not merely the presentation of facts but rather the representation of a world, a thought, a climate, a cultural or political event. This second type of communication assigns a narrative role to the means of spatial architecture, rhythm, symbols, signs, materials, analogies, and all other rhetorical resources—including, importantly, emptiness and silence. This narrative role is complementary to, but does not compete with, the materials on display.

When at Ca' Pesaro, as part of the 9th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale in 2004, and later in 2006 at Masp,<sup>1</sup> we had the opportunity to exhibit the

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1. The exhibition *Lina Bo Bardi Architect*, presented as part of the 9th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale and held at

results of a long research project on the figure of Bo Bardi, we had no doubt about the approach we needed to take in terms of exhibition philosophy and technique, given our communicative objective: to make the relevance of this figure present, highlighting the expressive power of her work, and the civilizing, humanistic, ethical, symbolic and critical dimensions that permeate her entire oeuvre.

The exhibition was conceived as a reflection on the encounter between Italian and European architectural culture and the fusion of cultures, languages, and peoples that is Brazil, a melting pot likely anticipating the characteristics of a future metropolitan and globalized civilization. In the path traced by Lina Bo Bardi, which interweaves the roots of Italian art and culture with the search for the authentic, archetypal and popular Brazilian culture, we glimpsed an alternative route to contemporary cultural industry. It was a call to the most genuine paths that today's architecture should seek, and serves as a tangible example of the possibility of expressing a living idea and form of culture, even in the era of globalization—a new culture capable of finding its own identity and projecting itself into the future, while preserving the rich and diverse history of the mingling peoples that have come together and will continue to do so. In the organization and design of the exhibition *Lina's World*, her ideas and values were prioritized and considered inseparable from her works.

The exhibition revisited Lina Bo Bardi's architectural work without forgetting her graphic work, her projects for

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the Ca' Pesaro Gallery of Modern Art from September 10 to November 15, 2004, was restaged in 2006 at the MASP Museu de Arte de São Paulo from January 10 to June 9, 2006. Organization and installation: Luciano Semerani, Antonella Gallo, Giovanni Marras. Iconographic research: Antonella Gallo, Giorgio Girardi, Giovanni Marras. In the Brazilian edition of the exhibition, original easels designed by Lina Bo Bardi for permanent display at the MASP gallery in 1968 were used to show the drawings. Dismantled after the architect's death, the display was reinstalled in 2015. In 2006, the easels were lying unused in the museum's warehouse.

the theater as a “scenic architect” and costume designer, her furniture and jewelry designs, and her inexhaustible creativity in all the arts. A selection of materials was entrusted with the task of conveying her unique conception of industrial design, her understanding of the relationship between nature and civilization, and the profound yet modern connection this architect maintains with Brazilian popular culture. It also emphasized the value of an architectural experience conceived from an essentially anthropological perspective within the metropolis, and her vision of monumentality as the “dignity of civil” architecture. The manner in which the exhibition was conceived and realized stems from a desire to vividly and concretely communicate this point of view, along with our particular interpretation or perspective on the meaning of the content presented.

It is well known that situating an exhibition in pre-existing spaces obliges the designer to interact critically with the context. This relationship can range from mutual enhancement, in cases where the place possesses its own cultural and aesthetic value, to the use of the space as a mere support, or even to its complete negation, if it is deemed an obstacle to be removed in order to allow the exhibition to exist in total autonomy.

The great hall, which occupies the entire ground floor of Ca' Pesaro from the Corte interna del Pozzo to the Grand Canal, with its stone walls and wooden ceiling, often embodies an oxymoron common in Venice—a maximum of interiority, like a treasure chest, juxtaposed with an urban exterior, like a street. We felt that the most appropriate way to engage with this space and its character was to embrace it as a visible presence and to play off it in contrast with the materials on display. Another crucial aspect of the exhibition design was the “way of showing.” Inspired by the vitality that her exhibitions brought to the displayed materials, we wanted to organize an informative and emotional journey for visitors to discover the figure and work of Lina Bo Bardi. The goal was to achieve a similar result, and naturally, she herself guided

the path. Through her “way of showing” the Afro-Brazilian civilization, her writings and the museographic principles she theorized with her husband Pietro Maria Bardi and applied in the creation of the São Paulo Museum of Art and in her numerous exhibitions, she gave the direction. This need led us to create a dialogue between three elements: the precious interior of the entrance hall of the Venetian palace, the drawings and models of the architecture on display, and an expanded exhibition infrastructure. The latter, like a nervous, arterial, or lymphatic system, was able to imbue the heterogeneity of the traces of a life and an anti-academic artistic vision with “random” motivations.

Bo Bardi understood the formative role inherent in communicating through an exhibition. She recognized that the effectiveness of this form of communication is intimately tied to the degree of engagement that exhibition design can provoke.

From the “civilization project”<sup>2</sup> that showcases her personal discovery of the potential of Brazilian popular culture to the

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2. Shaped by her background, her foreign gaze gave her the ability to perceive the uniqueness and vitality of popular culture without conflating it with folklore. Through two landmark exhibitions—*Babia no Ibirapuera* (1959) and *Civilização do Nordeste* (1963)—she embarked on a series of actions aimed at valorizing the roots of popular culture in northeastern Brazil in order to confer an authentic identity—artistic, cultural, social, and economic—to a different project of modernity. In the years of the unfolding Brazilian “economic miracle,” the study of Brazilian pre-craftsmanship represented a clear alternative to the dominant models of the time. Like the anthropophagic avant-garde movement, Bardi assigned a critical aesthetic function to the theme of the primitive a critical aesthetic function within the framework of a political and identity-forming project. Hence the need to reinvent language as an act of liberation from a cultural superstructure necessary to find other forms of expression, “exchange,” communication. In the fields of architecture and design, this meant connecting cultures and opening up the boundaries of “taste.” Exhibitions played a fundamental role in this process of asserting popular culture as a distinguishing feature, which played a decisive role in giving her modernist creations an identity. Through disruptive installations, exhibitions become the privileged means of staging the material culture that was relegated to folklore by official

“museographic revolution” of the São Paulo Museum of Art, to the shows on design and everyday culture at the SESC-Pompéia, Lina Bo Bardi’s exhibitions bring to the public her efforts to present a penetrating vision of the reality of facts, the universality of the objects and phenomena on display, the achievements of the arts, and collective technical solutions<sup>3</sup>. But she did this in a playful and poetic manner. For Bo Bardi, the interaction with the viewer is framed in terms of experience, promoted by arousing the viewers’ interest and stimulating their curiosity. It should be noted that her extensive knowledge of the performing arts, combined with extreme technical rigor, underpins the design of her exhibitions. The need for a strong impact on the public, the immediacy of slogans, and the choreography of mass movement within a fluid space marked by suspended bodies and inclined planes were derived from avant-garde theater. Moreover, Lina Bo Bardi’s exhibitions have inherited an exhibition tradition influenced by the propagandistic function that exhibitions, architecture, and graphics had in the 1920s and 1930s with Futurism and Constructivism.

From Persico to Terragni, from BBPR to Albin, the practice of an interior architecture that develops its spatial narrative more through figuration, out-of-scale elements, and citation, rather than through literary apparatus, borrowing the technique of montage from cinema and the layering of glazes from painting—all of this came to us when encountering Bo Bardi’s work. The general structure of the exhibition followed a thematic approach: ten short, concise and synthetic mottos—slogans drawn from Bo Bardi’s writings and the manifestos of her exhibitions—organized the materials thematically. Printed on long banners of white canvas suspended from the ceiling, they served

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culture, thus introducing a radical discontinuity into the Brazilian social and aesthetic imaginary.

3. It is precisely in this activity that Bo Bardi effectively synthesizes the concepts that run through her entire body of work.

as signposts for the “islands” or “foci” distributed throughout the space, which grouped objects and drawings together or reduced them to a single reconstruction of a moment. The titles announced by the banners found a reinforcing counterpoint in the laminated panels hanging at varying heights from the ceiling, which enlarged reproductions of drawings, magazine covers, posters, or paintings she created. Both the banners and the laminated panels had another function: to reduce perceptually the enormous height of the hall and to relegate to the background the heavy austerity of the wooden ceiling beams. Here, as in MASP, there were no chronologies, no typologies, just topology and elective affinities. In her words, “a false abundance, a false confusion, rigorously planned” (Bo Bardi, 1985, p. 236). The “islands” and “foci,” the stations through which the narrative structure of the exhibition unfolded, did not create a prescribed path. In fact, the exhibition had no beginning and no end, allowing the visitor to gain a complete and comprehensive view of the “scene” before freely approaching any theme or detail. Adopting the approach with which Bo Bardi experimented for arranging the MASP collection<sup>4</sup>, and similarly employing in the juxtaposition and topology of the *dispositio*, Bo Bardi’s abolition of distinctions of time,

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4. In Lina Bo Bardi’s exhibition design for the MASP Pinacoteca, the paintings are held mid-air by tempered glass panels firmly anchored to concrete bases. Anarchically scattered throughout the gallery space, they float in mid-air, eliminating the historiographical boundaries imposed on artworks in “museum mausoleums.” She described this strategy as a Benjaminian effort to break with the aura that distances ordinary people from understanding art, presenting it as “work, highly skilled, but work; displayed in a way that can be understood even by the uninitiated.” She believed that “the purpose of the Museum is to create an atmosphere, a conduct aimed at creating in the visitor the mental form adequate for understanding the artwork, and in this sense, no distinctions are made between an ancient work of art and a modern one. According to the same perspective, the artwork is not placed according to a chronological criterion, but is presented almost deliberately to provoke a shock that awakens reactions of curiosity and investigation” (Bo Bardi, 1950, p. 17).

genre and school so cherished by academic museography, the drawings of the works—essentially reflecting the architect's creative moment, the beginning of the design process—were displayed inside double panes of safety glass held by a cubic base with a slit at the top. This was a transcription of the exhibition easels with concrete bases designed in 1968 for the MASP art gallery. Here, however, the bases, measuring 50 x 50 x 50 centimeters, were hollow. Made of 3 centimeters of painted MDF, they supported the weight of the glass thanks to a 5-kilogram sandbag placed inside. Scattered throughout the space, the easels formed the fabric of a narrative that finds its peaks in the various islands. These were the stations where Lina Bo Bardi's work, her anthropological or socio-political research, her craftsmanship, were narrated through both original materials and free reconstructions of some scenographic devices originally conceived by her for the setup of her exhibitions.

*The Hand of the Brazilian People*, sign and title of an emblematic exhibition organized by Bo Bardi at the MASP in 1969, opened the exhibition by presenting the theme through a partial and free reconstruction of the *Forest of Master Trees*, which she created as a scenic apparatus for the exhibition *Caipiras, Capiáus: Pau-a-Pique* (SESC-Pompéia, 1984). The base for securing the master trees, irregularly star-shaped and inscribable within a square measuring 3.70 x 3.70 meters, consisted of fourteen pieces of MDF of varying sizes, each 3 centimeters thick. Equipped with hinged metal pins at the bottom, the trees—twelve painted wooden poles, 5 meters high and 20 centimeters in diameter—were suspended from the ceiling beams with metal cables. Among the trees were the animals of the forest, the fetishes, both playful and macabre, of ancestral beliefs, and the handmade objects that she had collected for other exhibitions on popular culture. Created on various occasions, this fantastic bestiary presented a series of rhetorical figures, mediated by popular culture, that established a new relationship between architectural artifice and nature. In the second station, an oversized laminated photograph



of one of the costumes Bo Bardi designed for the production of *In the Jungle of Cities*<sup>5</sup>, a series of original watercolor costume designs, and a plywood reconstruction of the *Meticcio Marionettes*—which appeared in the exhibition *A Thousand Toys for Brazilian Children* (SESC-Pompéia, 1982)—introduced the theme of ‘the Mask’:

For Lina, the rediscovery of the value of ornament and tattoo as a language does not stem solely from identifying with the mixed-race Brazilian world or rejecting the criminalization of nudity and exhibited sex. Rather, this position distinguishes clearly between authenticity and truth. Here, authentic also means “self-made,” according to the etymology. The tattoo as clothing and language, nature itself as a creeping efflorescence that insinuates itself and envelops hard materials, the popular and fantastic animal imagery that emerges from the forest and presents itself in the theater, sits at the table, as in fairy tales and dreams, and the very interaction of puppets and toys more as fetishes or unruly presences, remain far from the picturesque or the charming. All this helps us discover a new way of living authenticity, which has nothing to do with the presumption of truthfulness, but instead preserves the emotional intensity of representation. The costume sketches, the scenographies, and the love for jewelry are consequences of a reversal of clichés about a “modernity” that is obligatorily aphasic and austere (Semerani, 2004, p. 55).

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5. Bertolt Brecht’s play was directed by José Celso Martinez Corrêa at the Teatro Oficina in São Paulo in 1969. Collaborating with the most innovative figures in Brazilian theatre, Lina created several sets, sometimes also designing costumes. Among others: Brecht and Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera* (1960); Albert Camus’s *Caligula* (1961), directed by Martim Gonçalves at the Teatro Castro Alves, Salvador, Bahia; *Gracias Señor* (1971), directed by José Celso Martinez Corrêa, at the Teatro Terça Rachel, Rio de Janeiro; and *Ubu—Folias Physicas, Pataphysicas e Musicaes* (1985) by Alfred Jarry, directed by Caca Rosset in São Paulo.

Another oversized laminated photograph of her watercolor *Landscape with Water Lilies* (1925), and on the easels, drawings and sketches for the residential complexes of Itamambuca (1965) and Camurupim (1975), the *Rastro Perfume Factory* (1977), the *Casa do Benin in Bahia* (1987), the *Vertical Garden for the New City Hall of São Paulo* (1990-92), watercolors and terracotta models, illustrated the theme of “Landscape.” “The Dignity of Civil Architecture”—a central theme in the exhibition and in her own story—was expressed in the many drawings for the São Paulo Museum of Art (1957-68) that documented its metamorphosis through a long design process, from the initially conceived glass pyramid to the grand gateway between the city’s districts. A metropolitan triumphal arch on the scale of a mass society, this architectural presence represented the reinvention of the “monument” in our time and social reality. *The Metropolis* is the title of a small, splendid painting by Bo Bardi, reproduced here enlarged on laminate, but also the banner that introduced the reading of SESC-Pompéia (1977-86), through the original drawings displayed and a new large model made especially for the exhibition. This model, with its detailed interior accuracy, showed the spatial and iconic richness of the narrative inventions developed by the architect in the repurposing of the old factory. “Indistinct Boundaries” is the motto that united enlarged photographs and posters of publications and cultural events promoted by Bo Bardi, linking the multiculturalism of the Mediterranean with that of the new homeland that she had chosen for herself. After the cascade of “Objects of Use,” the station that gathers a selection of seats designed by Bardi, among which the *Roadside Chair* (1967) stood out for its simplicity and essentiality, another white banner signaled the presence of *Le Polochon*, the couch-seat-pig on wheels with two ends. This is all that remained of the scenic apparatus she conceived for the staging of *Ubu Roi*, the vainglorious wooden monarch, demagogue and bloodthirsty, greedy and cowardly, more puppet than character, a symbol of power, invented in 1896 by Alfred Jarry, “the initiator of the only positive avant-garde that never

dies: the Avant-garde of cynicism and destruction” (Bo Bardi [1985], 1994, p. 262). Opposite *Le Polochon*, the banner of “The Beauty and the Right to the Ugly”<sup>6</sup> introduced another animal on wheels, the *Grande Vaca Mecânica* (1988), never built but detailed in an executive project by Lina Bo Bardi, making its reconstruction in Venice possible. It was essentially a large zoomorphic container-exhibitor designed for MASP, in which the use of animal transplantation applied the rhetorical figure of metonymy. Made of painted sheet metal and equipped with sensors that caused it to emit animalistic mooing sounds and light up its eyes when someone approaches, the *Vaca* in our installations also functioned as a *Wunderkammer* for a small collection of ex-votos, ritual objects, toys, and utensils made from recycled materials by the people of the Northeast, which she had previously exhibited in other shows. Finally, in the last station, “The House as Soul,” a selection of mostly unpublished sketches of *Casa Cirell* and *Casa do Chame-Chame* (1958), particularly incisive and expressive, showed the evolution of a design research aimed at reaching the inner depth of the idea of dwelling.

Prioritizing the construction of the discourse over the means, exhibition apparatuses and reconstructions were conceived as supports for the presentation of ideas. These “bases” allowed the energetic charge of the themes at play, interpreted symbolically, to be made present. From the design of the supports to the arrangement and display of the works, every action in the exhibition project was directed towards creating a pulsating space, a space where everything gravitated, where images

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6. *The Beauty and the Right to the Ugly* is the title of an exhibition organized by Bo Bardi at the SESC-Pompéia in 1982. Emphasizing the diversity and richness of cultural expressions that do not conform to Eurocentric aesthetic standards, she wrote in the exhibition brochure: “The right to the ugly is an essential basis of many civilizations, from Africa to the Far East, which have never known the ‘concept’ of beauty, the obligatory concentration camp of Western civilization” (Bo Bardi, 1982, p. 241).

existed, as in a dream, outside of any temporal and spatial sequence. The spatial fluidity that characterized the layout, in the fundamental alternation of impulses and slowdowns or pauses, facilitated the coexistence of works of different natures, bringing objects closer to the viewer through precise focuses or collective expressions. The decision not to follow a chronological criterion in presenting the materials was not a formal whim, but a deliberate choice to avoid crystallizing and freezing Bo Bardi's work within a historical path. Following a Warburgian approach, the exhibition based its communicative effectiveness on resonances and formal contrasts, on the rhythm of juxtapositions, and on the freedom of individual, oblique thematic associations made possible by the display. The *raison d'être* of all this was neither simple aesthetic contemplation nor didactic instruction, but rather the emotional and almost "osmotic" participation that can arise from direct contact with the "things" when they are perceived as "alive"; when the exhibition narrative, with its way of showing, of orchestrating the material to produce meaning, seeks to rescue the works from the "cadaverous coldness" typical of relics.

"But linear time is an invention of the West; time is not linear, it is a marvelous entanglement where, at any moment, points can be chosen and solutions invented, without beginning or end" (Bo Bardi, in Ferraz, ed., 1994, p. 327). This concept of time, fundamental to understanding her work, permeated our exhibition. By contrast, but not indifferent to the context—embracing the principle known in the technical language of music theory as "dissonance" or "tension"—we juxtaposed the baroque space of the Venetian palace and the reflection of the Grand Canal with a labyrinthine space, and with it that "entanglement of time" necessary to try to narrate the complex design labyrinths traversed by Lina Bo Bardi.



Exhibition Lina Bo Bardi Architect, Venice, 2004. Photo: Umberto Ferro.



Exhibition Lina Bo Bardi Architect, Venice, 2004. Photo: Umberto Ferro.

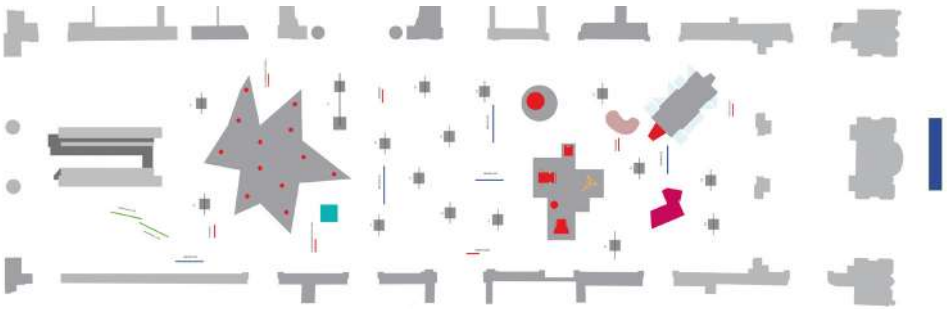


Exhibition Lina Bo Bardi Architect, Venice, 2004. Photo: Umberto Ferro.



Exhibition Lina Bo Bardi Architect, Venice, 2004. Photo: Umberto Ferro.





Exhibition Lina Bo Bardi Architect, Venice, 2004: installation design for the central hall of the Ca' Pesaro Palace, floor plan.

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COSTANTINO DARDI.  
EXHIBITION DESIGN  
AS A RELATIONAL ACTION

Roberta Albiero

**Keywords:** Costantino Dardi; Exhibition Design; Installation Art; Neo-avant-garde.

**Abstract:** This text explores the work and ideas of Italian architect Costantino Dardi (1936-1991), focusing on his approach to exhibition design and installation art. Dardi conceived of exhibition design as a dynamic interaction between art, architecture, and space, in which each exhibition becomes a unique event. The significance of installations as aesthetic and behavioral operations defines new relationships between artworks and their environments, highlighting the complexity and uniqueness of each installation's spatial and temporal dimensions. Influenced by the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s, his experimental approach to architecture reveals a keen interest in the interplay between aesthetics and new architectural forms, which he explored through various exhibition projects. The text also discusses Dardi's reflections on the dialectic between the ephemeral and the perennial aspects of art and architecture, illustrated by his exhibition projects

in Rome and Venice. These projects represent a synthesis of space, exhibition setup, and artwork, blurring the boundaries between exhibition and installation.

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The painting without place, the statue without space, art without landscape constitute the only true programmatic commitment in the field of museum organization and exhibition design, having nothing to do with functional complexity, with distributive variety, with the intertwining of paths and layouts that characterize other architectural themes.... Yet this one-dimensional theme, consisting of the placement in space of a work of art, is actually terribly difficult and complex (Dardi, 1986a).

As Franco Purini argues, exhibition design is certainly the architectural theme that comes closest to the artistic event (Purini, 1997). For Costantino Dardi, it is as an “environmental action,” the site of maximum tension and synthesis between art and architecture. In Dardi's configurations, the artwork and the space around it merge into a complex and necessary unity. “Every exhibition is an event,” he wrote, “an unrepeatable conjunction of intellectual and psychic tensions, which unfolds over time for the enjoyment of the paintings in an exhibition” (Dardi, 1990).

The impermanence that distinguishes the short life of an exhibition, between its emergence and its disappearance, does not diminish the value of a snapshot capable of capturing the present, and above all, makes it an intense accumulator of creative energy. A place for the rapid implementation of ideas and their verification, for the density and concentration of thoughts and energies, of cultural themes and aspects, the exhibition traverses and reflects a point of view on society at a specific historical moment. The compositional and formal structure, moreover, differs only in scale from that of more complex architectural works.

In the golden age of Italian exhibition design, which culminated in the 1950s and 1960s with the works of Franco Albini and Franca Helg, Ignazio Gardella, Carlo Scarpa, BBPR, and the Castiglioni brothers, to name but a few of the authors active during that period, museum architecture, exhibitions and displays reached the highest levels of poetry and innovation. The teachings of some of these masters, in particular Carlo Scarpa and Franco Albini, were the starting point from which Costantino Dardi embarked on an original path that marked a turning point in exhibition design. Dardi's prolific output—with over sixty projects in the field of exhibitions and museums—has not been fully critically evaluated in its most significant aspects.

Dardi's training at the "Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia" under Giuseppe Samonà between 1955 and 1962 was the starting point from which the Friulian architect embarked on an original path that led him to experiment with unexpected relationships of "tangency" between art and architecture. Between the 1970s and the early 1990s, the themes of exhibiting, showing and reflecting on the museum were among the most significant and experimental cores of Costantino Dardi's thought. The "tangential relationship between aesthetic research and new architecture" (Dardi, 1978) is ground zero for a reflection on architectural language that Dardi operates starting from a careful, in-depth look at the ongoing process of re-foundation in the Italian neo-avant-gardes of the 1970s. His relationship with art began during his friendship with the painter Giuseppe Zigaina, a friend and neighbor in their hometown of Cervignano, as well as a companion on cultural adventures. With the beginning of his stays in Rome, first during his military service and later through his introductions into the Roman art world, in particular with Elisa Montessori, Dardi actively visited critics such as Filiberto Menna, Achille Bonito Oliva, and the artists of the neo-avant-garde, such as Giulio Paolini, Mario Merz, Alighiero Boetti, and Jannis Kounellis, from which

began an exhibition season that continued uninterrupted until his death.

The projects realized by Dardi between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s represent a constant reflection on the relationship between art and architecture, a terrain on which he experimented with spatial syntheses of great originality, built on counterpoints and tensions, suspended in a delicate balance in the temporality of the event. The ephemeral, pushed to its limits, became an installation of environmental art, an exhibition of the uniqueness of space that “gathered together” works of art, the exhibition apparatus, and the place. In all the exhibitions of this period of intense activity, many of which were held in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, whose restoration he oversaw until his untimely death in 1991, the same tension is present, in a unique and indissoluble relationship between art and display.

## I. EXHIBIT DESIGN AS INSTALLATION

Installation: aesthetic operation and artistic outcome not pursued as a shaping of the world, its redesign, or stylistic design, but as the definition of the relations between the thing and the world. (Dardi, 1990).

The autonomy of language and the relationship between artwork, apparatus, and space are the most important aspects of his work. For him, the apparatus was not only functional, but determined a degree of relationship that was necessary, both with the artwork and with the space in which it is situated. Dardi believed that the three components were inseparable, parts of a single configuration based on unique and unrepeatable relationships.

The idea of the exhibition, of the apparatus that displays, illuminates, communicates, was overtaken and replaced by the idea of the installation, understood as a configuration

endowed with linguistic and formal autonomy that reacts through analogy and difference, continuity and discontinuity, light and shadow. Dardi's work is based on the dynamics of opposites that refer to a complex reality in which contrasts coexist and dissolve in a dynamic and unstable equilibrium that lasts for a brief moment. This reflects a sense of restlessness: the awareness that order and balance can only be achieved by accepting fragmentation, in a sense of suspended time between nostalgia for the past and nostalgia for the future, where the present is the artwork conceived and crystallized in its material existence.



32,82, Cinema Exhibition at the Lido of Venice (1982); photograph of the setup; luav Archivio Progetti/MAXXI.

For Costantino Dardi, the installation is “an aesthetic operation and an artistic outcome not pursued as a shaping of the world, its redesign, or stylistic design, but as the definition of the relations between the thing and the world.” Installations

are devices that trigger unexpected reactions between interior and exterior space, as in the project for the Strada Novissima; or in the urban space, as in the trellises built for the exhibition 32,82; or in the landscape, as in the temporary pavilions in the Giardini, drawn by the light of the lagoon and evoking an image of fluidity and transparency (Albiero, 2020).

The relationships between object and context “are always different and unrepeatable, just as the time and space of the installation are different and unrepeatable, an operation that is both aesthetic and behavioral” (Dardi, 1990). The installation contains a relational dimension that characterizes the many projects the Friulian architect dedicated to exhibition design, a field of experimentation for speed of execution and temporal compression, lightness and light. These are aspects that distinguish Costantino Dardi’s language: the measured and delicate spatial interweaving of the lattice structures, the *esprit de geometrie*, the white and absolute light, the contextual relationships, the pure volumes and the configurations that, from time to time, critically interpret landscapes, cities, interiors, in terms of similarities and differences.

## 2. EPHEMERAL AND PERENNIAL.

### A PAIR OF OPPOSITES IN DIALECTICAL TENSION

“The brief duration and fleeting transience of that which is destined to endure do not burden future architecture with signs that are substantially different from those that characterize unlimited validity and presence in perpetuity” (Dardi, 1984).

In the essay *The Work of Fitzcarraldo*, the Friulian architect reflected on the similarities and differences between architecture destined to last only one day and architecture carved in stone. For Dardi, the ephemeral and the perennial represent two sides of reality filled with opposites that coexist. Both have the value of constitutive matrices of urban space: that of the physical continuum of buildings, and that made of light, air, void. The

view of the *Rio dei Mendicanti* by Canaletto from 1723 is the image that he felt best embodies the indissoluble relationship between the permanent and the ephemeral, between the solid, heavy space of buildings, churches, palaces, or bell towers that mark the boundaries of the urban scene and, in counterpoint, light, mobile structures such as balconies, draperies, flags, ropes, boats, oars, trees, sails. The two cities, one fixed and immobile, with a layered presence, and the other fluid and dynamic, animated by currents, wind and light, correspond to archaeological Rome, with its monuments and stones, and to Venice, with its transparencies and lightness, made of water and reflections.<sup>1</sup>

The dialectic between the permanent and the transitory is present in all of Dardi's exhibition projects, in particular those realized in Venice for the Biennale and in Rome during the *Roman Summer*<sup>2</sup> between 1976 and 1985. In 1982, Dardi designed the exhibition *Avanguardia/Transavanguardia*, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, based on the works of the avant-garde and transavantgarde artists. The path he designed for the exhibition along the Aurelian Walls in Rome, which was reopened to the public between Porta Metronia and Porta

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1. In Dardi's words, "The city of earth facing the city of air, the solemn architectures that defy time and the light architectures that defy the wind, the city of the image confronting the city of form, the real city next to the virtual city, the optical simulation facing the logical construction." See Dardi, 1984, p. 98.

2. In those same years, between 1976 and 1985, Renato Nicolini's "Roman Summer" exploded like a cultural bomb in the heavy and critical climate of the capital. Thanks to the determination of the young cultural councillor Argan, previously inaccessible places opened up to urban life. Spaces and monuments that had long been inaccessible to the people of Rome were suddenly used for concerts, exhibitions, installations and film screenings. The ephemeral event reactivates urban space and produces culture. In 1981, in addition to setting up the exhibition *Avanguardia/Transavanguardia*, Dardi, with U. Colombari and G. De Boni, designed *Massenzio 81* on "the cinema as an invention without a future." On this, see Albiero, 2020.

Latina, reinterpreting the rhythm of the wall, represented an opportunity for the development of the dialectic created by the juxtaposition of a lightweight structure and the ancient stone walls. The exhibition structures, small cubic spaces screened by white curtains and corresponding to the arches, defined a succession of voids and solids regulated by the distance between the arches. The exhibition spaces created a spatial dance of changes, illusions, interior perspectives and projections onto the archaeological ruins and the surrounding landscape, light and shadow, in a captivating and exciting sequence.

The city of Rome became a synthesis between the eternal monument and the airy and light spatialities that served as a counter-space, in a dialectical game that collapsed the distinction between exhibition and installation in a poetic evocation that Dardi translated into the narrative image in *Speaking Architecture and Archaeology of Silence*: “the project recalls, with its white curtains, the image of the barbarian encampment leaning against the walls of the Eternal City” (Dardi, 1985).



C. Dardi, *Avanguardia/Transavanguardia* at Aurelian Walls, Rome (1982); photograph of the setup; luav Archivio Progetti/MAXXI.



### 3. THE SPACE OF ART

For centuries, the theme of the relationships between artwork and place has been a symptom of a problematic relationship between art and the world, almost certainly dating back to the moment when easel painting dissolved the necessary connections the figure established with the wall or large frame, loosening the ties between the painting and its context. At the same time, it opened a new path to the existential crisis of modern art (Dardi, 1984).

Dardi observed how the theme of the relationship between artworks and places was elaborated by the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s in movements such as Conceptualism, Arte Povera, or performance art, which were far removed from the ideological dimension of the historical avant-garde artists, who were concerned with “the plane of method, the status of art, the anthropological and psychoanalytic dimension of language, the worldly and social implications of artistic communication” (Dardi, 1990). In this regard, he wrote:

Distributing their signs in the landscape, placing their objects in museum halls or arranging their works on gallery walls, Mario Merz and Joseph Beuys, Daniel Buren and Richard Long, Giulio Paolini and Vettor Pisani, Jannis Kounellis and Joseph Kosuth, despite their apparent disregard for a disciplinary control of space, have each time elaborated a new and original product, an analysis of place, simultaneously critical and creative, a poetic and unrepeatable synthesis of object and context: what is technically defined as an installation but is perhaps a remarkable exercise of a new art of configuration, a new season of scenography, silently eloquent and subtly rhetorical (Dardi, 1990).

Dardi extended the idea of contextual relationships underlying installation art to different scales, from the interior space

of the gallery and the museum to the city, from archaeological ruins to the landscape.

Among his museum projects, one of the most remarkable is the renovation project of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, in which Dardi was involved from 1982 until the end of his life. His ambition was to intervene in the existing building by Piacentini by restoring its relationship with the sky and to light. The anachronistic palace was stripped of superfluous and anachronistic decorative elements, and its essential spatial structure and its urban role as a living space open to the city were restored. Unfortunately, the project was not fully realized according to Dardi's plans; the space above the roof, which was intended to be an open terrace overlooking the city of Rome, was not completed. Regarding to the question of light, Dardi wrote:

Along with the theme of the art space, light constitutes the most formidable and fascinating issue that characterises the configuration of space for the installation of artworks. Shielding, modulating, concentrating, diffusing, graduating, enhancing or reducing natural or artificial light using light that is direct or indirect, lateral, zenithal, reflected, diffuse; calibrating lights and shadows, sharp contrasts, half-shadows; varying the brightness of the object and the background, of the artwork or the furnishings, of the support or frame, the architecture of the museum and art gallery, addresses the most significant programmatic challenges: resolving into image and form, the spatial displacement of materials whose existence is founded on the image and form of the art space. Light then assumes a dual role, that of end and means, instrument and result, structure and image, language and style, design and relief, interpretation and representation at the same time (Dardi, 1986a).

The installation for the Gallery of Peace is based on the relationship to urban life and context.

Created on the occasion of the Festival of National Unity in Rome's EUR district, held from August 30 to September 16,

1984, it consisted of five pairs of towers, each fifteen meters high and made of a metal structure measuring 3 x 3 meters. Suspended from these portals were ten blue canvases stretched on steel cables, depicting the shapes of the continents and the word 'peace' in all the languages of the world. Forty artworks on the theme of peace, painted by forty different artists invited by Filiberto Menna, were also displayed. "A visual tool for seeing peace," as Dardi defined it, the gallery staged art, the city and the public as actors contributing to social harmony, an event that became a space, an urban art installation, that lived with and in the city.



The Gallery of Peace, Rome (1984); photograph of the setup;  
luav Archivio Progetti/MAXXI

In the competition project for the exhibition of Picasso's famous painting in *Guernica* (1981), Dardi imagined an underground urban space in which to exhibit the renowned artwork, in order to evoke the tragedy of war in a dark space lit from above, much as he had in one of his earliest projects, the Resistance Museum in the San Sabba Rice Mill in Trieste (1966-1968), a site of Nazi horrors.

In 1986, Dardi experimented with a form of exhibition design that interacted with another artistic expression, cinema, in sets for the Boullée exhibition in the film *The Belly of an Architect*, directed by Peter Greenaway.

Due to a paradox of history, the greatest homage to his work is paid by an English director, Peter Greenaway, in the film *The Belly of an Architect*, which tells the story of an American architect who comes to Rome to set up an exhibition on Boullée in the immense silent spaces of the quintessential funerary monument, the Vittoriano. Along the wide staircases, models are aligned, extraordinarily large or extraordinarily small, while in the lofty colonnade, Rome pays homage to Boullée by erecting the great *pavese* of the projects of the architect of the revolution (Dardi, 1987).

A final group of projects explores the theme of exhibition on the scale of the landscape. The museum becomes the landscape and the landscape becomes the museum. The landscape becomes the object of the exhibition, as in the case of the project for the landscape plan of the Gola della Rossa Natural Park in Serra San Quirico (1985). An abandoned quarry, a large sculpture and a dent in the mountain become an artistic object that also contains fragments of architectural objects and natural elements.



Frame from *The Belly of an Architect*, by Peter Greenaway (1987);  
luav Archivio Progetti/MAXXI.

Besides its recovery, the enhancement of the area includes a series of interventions ranging from primary to advanced tertiary, including a museum of architecture and sculpture, the landscape staircase and a network of nature trails marked by the presence of red houses and green classrooms: the former, resting places for refreshment; the latter, scattered nuclei of a museum dedicated to nature, geology, vegetation, and scientific observation (Dardi, 1987).

We should not forget the project for the Arboretum Park and Museum in Pistoia (1979), in which the landscape and its structuring elements create the composition, maintaining a dynamic tension between nature and artifice.

In contrast, in the project for the *Giorgio De Chirico Imaginary Museum* (1991), Dardi aimed to create a landscape of architectural elements and artworks, integrated in a context in which nature determines the sense of time and light through the “the clearing of diverging shadows,” he wrote. “A clearing

on the edge of a forest with black foliage, where a group of columns stands, polished shafts without base or capital, arranged on the grid of a rigorous geometry” (Dardi, 1991).

Between the heavy columns, massive stones emerge formed according to the absolute figures of the Platonic solids: a cube, a sphere, a cone, a pyramid. The sun casts sharp shadows on the ground: some diverge from the trajectory of the sun’s rays, mysteriously intersecting the shadows cast by the other solids. Among the columns, a few volumes emerge, white cubes carved by inclined planes, such as the base on which the unsettling muses stand in front of the Este Castle in Ferrara, shielding the view and focusing the gaze on the bright rooms where a rarefied selection of Giorgio de Chirico’s works is displayed (Dardi, 1991).

It is in this dynamic interplay between object and landscape that the installation reveals its true essence. It is not simply an arrangement of objects in space but rather a dynamic dialogue, a living interaction between the artwork and its environment. The installation becomes a place of encounter, a *locus* of engagement where the viewer is invited to participate in the unfolding dialogue between form and context, between the material and the immaterial, between presence and absence.

In this sense, the installation transcends the boundaries of traditional artistic practice, blurring the distinction between art and life, between the gallery and the everyday world. It is a liminal space, a threshold where art and reality converge, where the boundaries between the aesthetic and the experiential dissolve. It is an invitation to engage with the world in new and unexpected ways and to inhabit the spaces between things with renewed awareness and sensitivity.

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1986: ADALGISA LUGLI  
AT THE VENICE BIENNALE.  
CONTEMPORARY ART'S  
ENCYCLOPEDIA TURN

Stefano Mudu

**Keywords:** Adalgisa Lugli; Wunderkammer; Venice Biennale; Art and Science; Collection.

**Abstract:** This essay focuses on *Wunderkammer*, the 1986 exhibition curated by the Italian art historian Adalgisa Lugli for the 42nd Venice Biennale. The show established a dialogue between art and science through a method of free associations and anachronisms reminiscent of Surrealist exhibitions. The aim of the text is to explore how the “cabinet of curiosities” became a museographic method to organize contemporary art exhibitions, including the *Encyclopedic Palace* (the 55th International Exhibition curated by Massimiliano Gioni in 2013) or *The Milk of Dreams* (the 59th International Exhibition curated by Cecilia Alemani).

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## I. A CASE STUDY

In 1985<sup>1</sup>, when she was invited by Maurizio Calvesi to curate one of the seven sections of the 42nd edition of the Venice Biennale, the art historian Adalgisa Lugli (1946-1995) was already widely recognized and respected within Italian university circles. She was teaching at the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Bologna and had already published one of her most renowned research works: a volume entitled *Naturalia et Mirabilia. Il collezionismo enciclopedico nelle Wunderkammern d'Europa* (1983), an in-depth historical-critical study of a particular form of private collecting—the *Wunderkammer* (literally, ‘chamber of wonders’)—that was widespread in northern Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and manifested itself as an environment in which unusual materials were placed side by side. Rare and monstrous, natural and artificial, sacred and profane (Lugli, 1983, p. 19), these objects were arranged in ways that reflected the collectors’ research in their respective fields of expertise, usually related to art or science. Following the research carried out in the early twentieth century by David Murray (1904) and Julius von Schlosser (1908) in *Naturalia and Mirabilia*, Lugli traced a genealogy of these unusual collections, from their archetypes in ecclesiastical repositories or Renaissance treasure chambers known as *Schatzkammer* to museum exhibitions, their contemporary heirs. As explained in this essay, Lugli carried out an extensive and eloquent research project in the 1980s (first in her book, then in the Biennale), which had the great merit of proposing these “cabinets of curiosities” not as an obsolete museographic format, but as a meaningful exhibition device that would be increasingly adopted, including in the contemporary visual arts.

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1. The art historian must have received the invitation in early 1985, because the reply, in the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts (hereafter ASAC), is dated “28.V.85.”

Throughout the twentieth century, Lugli argues, “*accumulo, spostamento, spaesamento seguono il classico percorso della meraviglia*”<sup>2</sup> (Lugli, 1986d, p. 106). These cabinets of curiosities were often used as mechanisms for creating a dialogue with user of the collection or for an exhibition. As in the case of the *Wunderkammer* exhibition, the creation of these projects requires an approach that is never neutral, since the display is the first vehicle of non-verbal communication (Lugli, 1992b, p. 54), and the different ways of arranging the objects and the connections that are created between them and the environment (Lugli, 1992b, p. 58) allow us to grasp the symbolic use of the collection or its meaning.

*Le caratteristiche del museo ai suoi esordi non sono cambiate rispetto a oggi. Il trattenere oggetti è da una parte uno degli archetipi del comportamento umano.... Ogni vera collezione avrà un progetto, attraverso il quale il collezionista esprimerà la sua visione del mondo, della storia dell'arte, o imprimerà alla raccolta il senso delle ricerche che sta compiendo nel campo degli studi naturalistici. In ogni caso la sua creazione, derivata da un insieme di oggetti, sarà legata al suo destino personale* (Lugli, 1992, p. 71)<sup>3</sup>.

Although they refer to the characteristic rules of a museum collection, Lugli's words can refer to any form of exhibition in which curators, acting as collectors, can be “logographers” (Lugli, 1996, p. 104) and write their own exemplary history through the objects, making value judgments through their

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2. “Accumulation, displacement, and disorientation follow the classical path of wonder” [author's translation].

3. “The characteristics of the museum in its early days have not changed. On the one hand, the preservation of objects is one of the archetypes of human behavior.... Every real collection has a project, through which the collectors express a vision of the world or of the history of art, or imbue the collection with a sense of their research in the field of naturalistic studies. In any case, their creation, derived from a collection of objects, is linked to a personal destiny” [author's translation].

choices. So it is not surprising that Lugli, invited as a curator to Venice in 1986, found it necessary to return to the theme and reintroduce it in the exhibition, both conceptually and formally. As this text will show, the founding mechanisms of the Wunderkammer were not only applicable to the themes of that year's Biennale's, but they also became the guide for structuring a form of display that became a manifestation of the encyclopedic aspiration of an artistic context: a period of Western art history characterised by the intermedial "*in cui si sperimenta con i materiali più diversi e in cui permane con forza la tendenza a riprodurre le forme visibili*"<sup>4</sup> (Pomian, 1997, p. 11). This tendency seems to me to have intensified in recent years, making Adalgisa Lugli's exhibition an indispensable case study for understanding the material and symbolic dynamics with which the most contemporary curatorial approaches operate, even in the context of the Venice Biennale.

## 2. ART, SCIENCE AND WONDER

"*La Biennale tra atomo e pennello*"<sup>5</sup> (ASAC 1), "*Biennale scientifica*"<sup>6</sup> (ASAC 2), "*Magica Scienza*"<sup>7</sup> (ASAC 3), "*L'arte rincorre la natura*"<sup>8</sup> (ASAC 4): these were the titles of some of the articles that appeared in the Italian national press in the spring of 1986. The articles announced the edition of the Biennale designed and coordinated for the second time by the Roman art historian Maurizio Calvesi, and celebrated the thematic proposal identified by the director: "Art and

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4. "In which experimentation with the most diverse materials, and the tendency to reproduce visible forms persist strongly" [author's translation].

5. "The Biennal between the atom and the paintbrush" [author's translation].

6. "Biennial science" [author's translation].

7. "Magical Science" [author's translation].

8. "Art chases nature" [author's translation].

Science.” A topic considered “*impegnativo e solenne*”<sup>9</sup> (ASAC 5) which, although sporadically investigated by other artists in the context of the Biennale, was for the first time being proposed programmatically for the main exhibition with the aim of “*suggerire la complessità di aspetti, anche contraddittori del problema*”<sup>10</sup> (ASAC 6). Calvesi did not want to propose a systematic overview on one or the other discipline; that is, he did not want to offer a positive, rational, and analytical view of science or, on the contrary, an exuberant and eccentric version of art. Nor was he really interested in making room for excessive “*pretese teoriche*”<sup>11</sup> (ASAC 7) on either side. Rather, he was interested in balancing the dialogue between the two sides and offering some examples.

In fact, the exhibition was divided into seven sections—or in the words of the critic Enrico Tantucci, “*sette muse*”<sup>12</sup> (ASAC 8)—which highlighted the broad scope of scientific disciplines, and, at the same time, the many possibilities offered by the application of their rules to other disciplinary fields, including art.

The seven sections behaved as stand-alone exhibitions, entitled *Arte e Biologia*, *Colore*, *Tecnologia e Informatica*, *La scienza per l'arte*, *Spazio*, *Arte e Alchimia* e *Wunderkammer*, which were conceived by several curators chosen by Calvesi<sup>13</sup>. While the first sections were intended to describe the futuristic peaks of recent art-science experiments and focused on contemporaneity by presenting works from the last thirty years,

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9. “Challenging and solemn” [author’s translation].

10. “Suggests the complexity of aspects, even contradictory aspects of the problem” [author’s translation].

11. “Theoretical claims” [author’s translation].

12. “Seven muses” [author’s translation].

13. *Arte e Biologia* was curated by Giorgio Celli; *Colore* by Attilio Marcolli; *Tecnologia e Informatica* by Roy Ascott, Don Foresta, Tom Sherman and Tommaso Trini; *La scienza per l'arte* by the Ministry of Cultural and Environmental Heritage; *Spazio* by Giulio Macchi; *Arte e Alchimia* by Arturo Schwartz; and *Wunderkammer* by Adalgisa Lugli (ASAC 9).

the last three seemed to be more like historic-genealogical surveys. In fact, they acted as temporal anchor points that could demonstrate how contemporary artistic themes had already been addressed by the historical avant-garde artists—such as Surrealism or Dadaism, for example—or they could openly declare that art sometimes “*recupera modelli epistemologici del passato, più congeniali all’economia dell’immaginario*”<sup>14</sup> (ASAC 10). In this sense, the *Wunderkammer* exhibition presented itself as one of the historical examples of maximum coincidence and concentration of the art-science theme, since these cabinets of curiosities reflected that moment of “*infanzia della scienza*”<sup>15</sup> (Lugli, 1986c, p. 28) in which the mechanisms of knowledge are strongly connoted by forms of knowledge that traditionally concern art. Thus,

... come nasce intorno alla metà del Cinquecento [la camera delle meraviglie] è pensata come una collezione in cui possono convivere insieme i prodotti, i reperti della natura dei tre regni minerale, vegetale, animale e ciò che l’uomo fa con le sue mani, quindi le opere d’arte (Lugli, 1986c, p. 28)<sup>16</sup>.

To show the extent to which the mechanisms that had inspired these collections were still relevant, the curator conceived her exhibition as a journey between past and present that, alongside the reconstruction of a “cabinet of curiosities” as it existed in seventeenth-century museums, proposed a truly composite collection. The exhibition was presented in eight rooms in the east wing of the central pavilion at

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14. “Retrieves epistemological models from the *past* that are more congenial to the economy of the imaginary” [author’s translation].

15. “The infancy of science” [author’s translation].

16. “... as it came into being around the middle of the sixteenth century, [the chamber of wonders] is conceived as a collection in which the products, the artifacts of nature from the three kingdoms, mineral, vegetable, and animal, and what man makes with his hands, thus works of art, can coexist” [author’s translation].

the Giardini, where works of the most varied kinds were gathered together. Twentieth-century sculptures or paintings by such artists as Meret Oppenheim or Alberto Savinio; rare, curious and precious objects such as Properzia De' Rossi's *Nocciolo di Ciliegia*, a cherry stone carved at the beginning of the sixteenth century with more than one hundred small strains; and works by André Breton and André Masson were juxtaposed with objects by anonymous artists from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The dialogue between these works was created to respect the evolution of the marvelous, but was frequently based on visual and formal "rhymes" that referred to affinities in content; in the first room of this seemingly anomalous itinerary, for example, the carcass of a monstrous fish belonging to the collection of the biologist Lazzaro Spallanzani was placed on a shelf in front of Pino Pascali's sculpture *Dinosauro* [*Dinosaur*] (1966).

Like a collector, Lugli not only gathered a range of unconventional objects that served to illustrate the concept of wonder, but also built a collection based on the mechanisms of *Wunderkammer's* museographic format, including the juxtaposition of objects of disparate natures and extractions. In other words, she herself acted as a curator-collector, writing a new, exemplary, and unprecedented history based on conscious criteria of aesthetic and critical value. Lugli was convinced that the selected materials should not create meaningless accumulations but should follow an arrangement calculated down to the smallest detail (Lugli, 1986c, p. 30), and to this end, she created an architecture made up of objects "*allineati, dominati, rilevati come le lettere e le immagini di un rebus*"<sup>17</sup> (Lugli, 1986c, p. 32).

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17. "Aligned, dominated, identified like the letters and images in a rebus puzzle" [author's translation].

### 3. THE ORDER OF THE COLLECTION

In a later essay entitled *Museology* (1992), Adalgisa Lugli seemed to reiterate these positions by emphasizing that

*l'opera d'arte« l'opera d'arte, il reperto naturalistico, il manufatto con la più varia destinazione esistono al di là e al di sopra del loro essere singolo ed entrano tutti prima o poi a far parte di un sistema di oggetti, che li modifica in parte e dal quale ricevono un'impronta incancellabile*<sup>18</sup> (Lugli, 1992, p. 77).

According to her, the objects that appear in a collection—whether it be a collection of wonders, a museum or even a biennial exhibition—behave like “*frammenti sparsi*”<sup>19</sup> (Lugli, 1986a, p. 20), removed from their original context and capable of being mixed up thanks to the will of a new narrator who writes a new story with them. The latter is a theory of accumulation that neither originates with nor is limited to the *Wunderkammer*. In her introductory text to the Biennale exhibition, Lugli cites the emblematic style of Walter Benjamin’s *passages*, the collections of quotations with which the philosopher constructs “*straordinari panorami e straordinarie opera*”<sup>20</sup> (Lugli, 1986a, p. 20). But we cannot ignore the vast literature that has speculated on the subject, analyzing a range of examples as wide as include the montage of images used by André Malraux in the construction of his *Musée Imaginaire* (1947) and the associative iconographic method used by the art historian Aby Warburg in the conception of his famous

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18. “The work of art, the naturalistic repertoire, the artifact with the most varied purposes, exist beyond and above their individual being and sooner or later, they all become part of a system of objects that partially transforms them, and from which they receive an indelible imprint” [author’s translation].

19. “Scattered fragments” [author’s translation].

20. “Extraordinary views and extraordinary works” [author’s translation].



*Bilderatlas*. But what seems most useful to emphasize here are the consequences of choosing a spatial arrangement of objects of this kind. In fact, the placement and organization of materials always leads to the production of new configurations that must be considered as spatially and temporally complex. Although they can be analyzed as autonomous units, the objects in a collection actually present themselves as entities endowed with specific spatial and temporal characteristics—they are endowed with a certain form and are anchored to a certain historical moment. Through their juxtaposition or aggregation, they thus create new configurations, themselves layered, characterized by formal and/or anachronistic contrasts. Removed from their reconstituted order, the objects described by Lugli reconnect in the most diverse ways, resuming old relationships or creating new ones. “*il collezionismo fa sempre dei ready-mades, anzi si può dire che lo spaesamento dell’oggetto, resecatto dalle sue radici, sia una condizione ideale per far affluire nuovi sensi di lettura,*”<sup>21</sup> she wrote. (Lugli, 1983, p. 12). It remains to be understood what motivates this approach and what forms it has taken since Lugli’s exhibition.

#### 4. THE CURATOR AS COLLECTOR

It has already been said that the authors of a *Wunderkammer* are traditionally collector-logographers who “write” their own story, their own personal narrative, by assembling the materials at their disposal. They use a form of writing that is considered hieroglyphic because it is made up of objects (Lugli, 1996, p. 104).

The metalinguistic operation that Adalgisa Lugli carried out for the conception of the exhibition at the Venice Biennale, as

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21. “Collecting always makes ready-mades, in fact, it can be said that the decontextualization of the object, cut off from its roots, is an ideal condition for new meanings, new readings to flow in” [author’s translation].

already mentioned, also shares the same mechanisms typical of the collector. Curators—professional figures who, by definition, care for the materials they use—edit, manipulate and manage existing objects by temporarily displaying them in provisional configurations with a specific meaning; the exhibition is the result of a clear museographic choice functional to the acquisition of knowledge on a specific subject. In the *Wunderkammer* model, the curator identifies specific materials that can comment on a theme and by bringing them together, obtains a very personal response. In selecting the materials, curators are aware of the “*contenuto delle immagini e del loro dosaggio*”<sup>22</sup> (Lugli, 1986c, p. 30), as well as the effects of meaning that may result from these choices. In the *Wunderkammer*, the collector’s erratic accumulation reflects an encyclopedic desire to gather together, within the confines of a single room, “*tutto quello che la natura ha prodotto spontaneamente insieme a tutto quello che vi si è aggiunto come opera dell’uomo*”<sup>23</sup> (Lugli, 1986e, p. 107). However, it is becoming increasingly clear that even in the most contemporary art exhibitions, the order in which the curator selects and organises the materials, has the ambition of:

*animare, contaminare, moltiplicare le parti, per esercizio di una furiosa facoltà combinatoria, che riesce a far compenetrare elementi apparentemente non permeabili.... Ne esce una realtà di sovrapposizioni continue, destrutturata nei suoi elementi fondamentali, privata di ogni certezza, ma anche continuamente in evoluzione e sottoposta a smontaggi allusivi, simbolici*<sup>24</sup> (Lugli, 1987a, p. 111).

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22. “Content of the images and their dosage” [author’s translation].

23. “Everything that nature has spontaneously produced, together with everything that has been added to it as the work of man” [author’s translation].

24. “Animating, contaminating, multiplying the parts, through the exercise of a furious combinatorial ability that succeeds in making seemingly impermeable elements interpenetrate.... What emerges is a reality of continuous superimpositions, deconstructed in its fundamental elements,

While in Lugli's time, this encyclopedic turn was certainly motivated by a postmodern cultural context that looked to the past and at other disciplines to counter the positivism of art history,<sup>25</sup> since the 2000s, the same organizational approach seems to reflect the exuberance of visual culture, which by definition expands its field of operation.<sup>26</sup> The scholar Jacob Lund verbalized the meaning of the contemporary condition, emphasizing the fact that it "refers to the temporal complexity that follows from the coming together in the same cultural space of heterogeneous clusters generated along different historical trajectories, across different scales, and in different localities" (Lund, 2019, p. 9). This has been demonstrated in numerous exhibitions. Examples include *Time is out of Joint* (La Galleria Nazionale, Rome 2016-18), a complex rearrangement of the permanent collection curated by Cristiana Collu, which juxtaposed classical art with works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; or *Slip of the Tongue* (Punta della Dogana, Venice 2015), in which the artist-curator Danh Vō juxtaposed works by the masters of medieval art with very contemporary works, in a general rediscovery of the synchronic potential of cultural heritage; as well as more recent exhibitions in the context of the Venice Biennale. In the emblematic *The Encyclopedic Palace* in 2013, Massimiliano Gioni gathered a series of objects made by personalities who did not necessarily belong to the art world, offering a broad and varied view of human knowledge. The exhibition seemed to

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deprived of all certainty, but also constantly evolving and subjected to an allusive, symbolic dismantling" [author's translation].

25. Postmodernism is an ideological movement that expresses a peremptory skepticism of grand narratives such as art history, religion, or science, which seek to offer a positivist version of how reality and things work in the universe.

26. "Studies on visual culture are based first and foremost on the possibility of considering any kind of image that can be considered culturally relevant, a case study as an object of analysis" (Pinotti & Somaini, 2016, p. 38) [author's translation].

achieve these goals in an installation model reminiscent of the *Wunderkammer*. This interpretation is not far-fetched, considering that a few years earlier, in 2010, Gioni had stated:

I also began to think about the forerunner of the modern museum, the Wunderkammer, and the idea that a show in a museum could contain not just works of art but also objects, traces, relics, and scraps of lives and stories (Gioni, 2010, n.p.).

This statement highlights a curatorial stance that Cecilia Alemani also adopted in the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale, in *The Milk of Dreams*. Along with more contemporary works designed specifically for the occasion, the exhibition included five smaller, historical sections, dubbed “time capsules” that served as “miniature constellations of artworks, found objects, and documents, clustered together to explore certain key themes” (Alemani, 2022, p. 30). Some in particular—such as the first capsule, “The Witch’s Cradle,” inspired by Surrealist exhibition design—were intended as authentic “chambers of wonder” that set up a “narrative not built around systems of direct inheritance or conflict, but around forms of symbiosis, solidarity, and sisterhood” (Alemani, 2022, p. 30).

## 5. A PLAY ON MEANING

These exhibitions undoubtedly have much in common with Adalgisa Lugli’s *Wunderkammer* exhibition, so much so that it now seems to be the initiator of a museographic trend or model. This is not only due to the spatial and temporal assemblage that guides the curators in organizing the objects, nor to the ambition to make manifest the responses to a theme in the reduced space of one or more rooms; nor to the eccentric, often bizarre aesthetic results. All of these experiences seem to be in dialogue, above all, because of the way their formal organization creates consequences for the individual objects and for

the history of the art or things to which they are related. The collection, when organized according to conscious criteria of aesthetic and critical value, still succeed in adding a great deal of value to the works (Lugli, 1996, p. 104), because when cut off from their roots, they are in an ideal position to allow new meanings and new readings to flow in (Lugli, 1983, p. 12). Perhaps, in the case of ancient objects, they are liberated from the meanings that history has built around them; or, if the work is contemporary, they are adapted to dialogue with themes that were not thought of by the artist who made them; finally, when juxtaposed, all objects participate in “the complex process of rewriting and rereading history that has marked the last few years, when it has become clearer than ever that no historical narrative can ever be considered final” (Alemani, 2022, p. 31). Between past and present, the associative model inherited from the *Wunderkammer* allows the game of interpretation to be enriched with additional meanings. Certainly, its form serves as an interesting model for describing the complexity of the cultural production of our time, reminding us that we live on the shoulders of giants, and that we must always keep our eyes on the past, as Lugli pointed out when, shortly before the opening, she was asked if we should expect a “*Biennale con la testa girata all’indietro*”<sup>27</sup> (ASAC 12). She replied, “*gli intrecci passato/presente sono molto più numerosi di quanto si pensi*”<sup>28</sup> (Lugli, 1986, p. 109).

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# THE CATALOGUE AS EXHIBITION SPACE: THE EMBLEMATIC CASE OF DOCUMENTA X (1997)

Camilla Salvaneschi

**Keywords:** documenta X; Catherine David; Exhibition Catalogue; Montage; Fragment.

**Abstract:** This paper presents an analysis of the catalogue *Politics Poetics* and its relation to the documenta X exhibition, which was curated in 1997 by Catherine David. Conceived as a collage of artworks, photographs, and seminal Western philosophical and political texts produced after 1945, the catalogue challenges the rigid divisions between work, document, and commentary, as well as between exhibition display and memory, reflecting the multifaceted and polyphonic nature of the cultural event David conceived.

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## I. DOCUMENTA X: OPENING SPACE FOR DISCURSIVITY

Like a film, documenta is a long and patient process of montage (David, 1996, p. 1).

Three key concepts are encapsulated in this brief description of documenta X (dX): deceleration, montage, and multidisciplinary. Together they illuminate Catherine David's curatorial project, its departure from traditional exhibition modes, and its embrace of a discursive curatorial platform that took the form of an open and multifaceted "manifestation culturelle" (David, 2019). The year 1997, which marked its opening, was a year of great exhibitionary excitement. It was the end of the twentieth century, and dX was competing with a plethora of exhibitions, both locally and globally. The previous year, Manifesta, the European "nomadic" art biennial, had launched its first exhibition. At the same time as documenta, the 3rd Skulptur Projekte in Münster and the 47th Venice Biennale were opening their doors, to which should be added inaugural biennials in Cairo, Havana, Istanbul, and Johannesburg.

In this context, David chose a confrontational approach to the institution, questioning its continued relevance in the changing global artistic climate and its ability to respond to the urgencies of the time. As such, the show was intended to respond "to the new conditions within the visual arts" (David, 1997, p. 258). It attempted to present a critical review of the past, to provide an interdisciplinary look into the future, and at the same time to represent the present moment, the *hic et nunc* of the exhibition (David, 1996, p. 1). By engaging with these imperatives, David's exhibition would not be limited to a traditional display within the walls of a gallery or a museum; it would have to move away from the old exhibitionary formats to become a multidisciplinary exhibition that encompassed art and visual culture, with an emphasis on artistic practices that challenged the status quo. A certain politics was therefore at the core of the exhibition's project. This was evident, on the one hand, in its choice of artists (although documenta

would have to wait for Okwui Enwezor in 2002 to achieve the status of global exhibition), and on the other, in its approach to theory. The latter was clearly dX's strength, to the point that the exhibition was nicknamed the "theory documenta" (Marchart, 2011; Marchart, 2022).

The theoretical manifestation took place in three different formats: a magazine (*documenta X documents*), a series of daily lectures ("100 Days—100 Guests"), and a theoretical publication accompanying the exhibition (*Politics Poetics*). Each of these outputs were fragments that, when edited together, formed a constitutive part of the exhibition. As mentioned earlier, they were part of a "process of montage." David intended for the publications to exist in such a way that everything overlapped and became integrated (David, 2019). Each piece of theory had its own purpose, its own space, and its own time. The magazine functioned as a kind of preparatory tool, anticipating the actual exhibition. The first issue was published almost one year before the opening, providing insight into the curatorial endeavor and substantiating David's philosophy. The magazine was followed by the intensive "100 Days-100 Guests" program, which began to unfold at the opening. Held at 7 p.m. in the Documenta-Halle, the talks accompanied the exhibition throughout its duration, making the event more alive, with new content and discussions each day. The audience was invited to sit on Franz West's chairs and listen to speakers from fields and disciplines that ranged from art and philosophy to science, politics, economics, and history. The final space of this discursive extension was represented by the accompanying catalogue, entitled *Politics Poetics*. Like most exhibition catalogues, the publication was meant to cover the time beyond the exhibition, becoming a monument to the exhibition and its theoretical background.

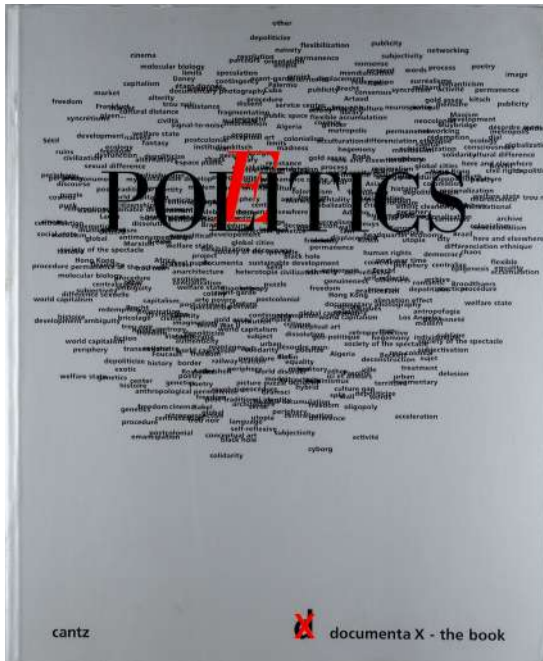
While touching on issues such as the fragmentation of the publishing apparatus and its readership, this text focuses on the volume *Politics Poetics* and explores its relationship to the exhibition. Developed as a collage of artists' works,

photographs, and some of the major Western philosophical and political texts produced after 1945, the book makes a “political statement” (Former West, 2017) that legitimizes and monumentalizes not only the exhibition but also an alternative history of post-1968 critical intellectual and artistic practice. By analyzing this emblematic case, the text seeks to understand the revised role and use of the catalogue in the context of contemporary large-scale exhibitions. Reflecting on the publication through the notions of fragment and montage, this text attempts to shed light on questions such as: How does the catalogue relate to the exhibition it accompanies, and indeed, does it necessarily accompany it? How does the catalogue relate to the works on display and how are they reproduced? How do we deal with the temporality of the catalogue, which is often seen as an extension of the exhibition, a souvenir to perpetuate it, when in most cases it must be produced and published before the opening?

## 2. dX’S CATALOGUE: BETWEEN FRAGMENT AND MONTAGE

The dX catalogue is a hefty tome entitled *Politics Poetics*. On the silvery cover, the title is laid out with a game of overlays reminiscent of the logo, where the “d” is covered by the red “X” of the exhibition’s number. This superimposition was intended to self-consciously show David’s break with the past, as if the old Documenta were being erased to make space for this new one. On the cover, an italicized red “e” imposes itself on the “l” (el) and the “i,” making politics poetic so as to underline the strong connection between aesthetics and politics both in the show and in the art world at large. The connecting “e” seems to weave the two words together, symbolically alluding to their creation of new meanings. Beneath the title appears a cloud of keywords—a conceptual map in which words related to the political, economic, and social conditions of the time

are randomly scattered. On the back cover, the volume claims to “indicate a political context for the interpretation of artistic activities at the close of the 20th century through a montage of different images and documents from the immediate postwar period to the present” (David, *et al.*, 1997b).



Cover of *Politics Poetics. documenta X The Book* (1997).  
(Courtesy Hatje Cantz Verlag. Photo Piero Demo).

The cover makes explicit, in both words and layout, the principle of montage that underpinned the publication and the exhibition as a whole. Montage is further described by the editors at the beginning of the volume:

To evoke the vast narrative of postwar history and to suggest the complex relations between singular artworks and sociopolitical

situations... a montage technique has been adopted, mixing texts and images from the archives of recent world history with original contributions conceived especially for this book. Literature and journalism are interspersed; artworks are reproduced alongside documentary photography; critical commentary focuses on particular historical, philosophical, or social issues... (David, *et al.*, 1997a, p. 25).

The term montage is used here to refer to its use in the world of cinema and all the disciplines that deal with the moving image. However, montage is not just about putting together different elements; it involves arranging them in a deliberate manner to evoke a reaction from the audience. In this sense, it is often associated with curatorial and editorial activities. According to one of its first theorists, Sergei Eisenstein, montage is a “method of dismemberment and recomposition” (Baldacci & Bertozzi, 2018, p. 19). It is a response to the fragmentation of the modern world, and for this reason it has taken on a sociopolitical, artistic, and allegorical significance. In the twentieth century, montage became the model for explaining not only the formal characteristics of numerous artworks—an artist’s response to a rapidly modernizing and industrializing world, in the face of which traditional means of representation no longer served their purpose—but for outlining the relationship between the arts and larger cultural formations (Vettese, 2018, p. 6). It is under this spectrum that it may be associated with dX.

In the introduction to the volume, the editors state that the material was not conceived of as encyclopedic, but rather as a polemic reading of historical and cultural interrelationships: “certain lines of aesthetic production and political aspirations are pursued which are capable of serving in the necessary contemporary debate as an instrument of productive analysis” (David, *et al.*, 1997a p. 25). This explains why texts by authors such as Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, or Édouard Glissant, are included only in excerpt form, as fragments. These range in length from a paragraph to several pages. Political theorist

Oliver Marchart defines these texts as “sound bites”—or “theory bites,” suggesting that the specific knowledge produced by these authors is not fully embraced, but rather used as a reference point for further reflection (Marchart, 2011; Marchart, 2022, p. 79). However, as stated in Friedrich Schlegel’s “Atheneum Fragments” (number 77), “a dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments” (1971, p. 170). This implies that fragments, as basic units—unique and autonomous (Adorno, 2008)—despite being decontextualized and recontextualized, can be generative of reverberations and new considerations on the issues elaborated in the exhibition. This, after all, is nothing new. The fragments were selected from some of the most relevant authors and texts in the fields of art, culture, and philosophy, so as to reiterate once again their importance in the construction of both historical and contemporary discourses. Arguably, it was never the intention of the catalogue to fully embrace all these theories, but rather to present them and connect them to the recent history of art, similar to the way theory supports the research around an exhibition.

This is illustrated in the temporal construction of the volume, divided into four crucial dates: 1945, marking the founding year of Europe’s postwar democracies; 1967, signifying the onset of protests and anti-imperialist movements in the “Third World”; 1978, indicating the beginning of the restructuring and flexibilization of global capitalism; and, 1989 denoting the end of existing socialism. The temporal index is overlaid by a thematic one, from which the book’s main strands of discourse emerge. These include, among others, a focus on architecture and urbanism, where the controversies between art and politics are most evident, cinema as the most adopted medium of the twentieth century, and the recent interpretation of *Antigone*, the archetypal Western drama. Overall, juxtapositions, timelines, montages, and fragments were intended to “upset the strict divisions between work, document and commentary, creating a multifaceted, polyphonic structure” (David, *et al.*, 1997a, p. 13).

According to Cornelia Barth, editorial coordinator of dX's publications, the book's structure as well as its rhizomatic character were inspired by architect Rem Koolhaas and designer Bruce Mau's *S, M, L, XL* (1995). But it was arguably a bulimic approach to theory and the production of content that was their real common ground. Indeed, at over 1,300 pages, Koolhaas and Mau's volume is a kind of monolithic diary, containing a collection of twenty years' worth of essays, reflections, excerpts from notebooks and diaries, sketches, photographs, and architectural drawings and plans produced by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), which Koolhaas founded in Rotterdam in 1975. Borrowing the term "rhizomatic" from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), *S, M, L, XL* allows the reader to engage with it at multiple points, emulating the way in which thought can be imagined. A similar approach is applied to dX's catalogue and its process of montage. In fact, the volume does not need to be read in perfect order from front to back. As is often the case with the magazine, "most readers will construct their own order, they will select and read only some of the text" (Beetham, 315), organizing their own narrative. Montage thus remains an open practice, with the possibility for the reader to fill it with a multiplicity of meanings.

Another crucial reference, especially in the context of documenta, is Harald Szeemann's 1972 documenta 5 (d5) and its catalogue. With the exhibition, for instance, d5—like its later iteration dX—sought to circumvent conventional art historical labels or styles with a more fluid model of broad thematic categories (Sigrídur Arnar, 2017). Instead of a traditional bound book, Szeemann wanted d5's catalogue to be unfixed, mobile, and even participatory in nature, so that the reader could engage with it, modify it by adding inserts, taking them out, rearranging the order of the chapters, and so on. The orange plastic cover featured the number five, created by a small army of ants designed by artist Ed Ruscha. It was designed as a ring binder, almost resembling an "administrative



loose-leaf binder or a technical training manual with a thumb index” (Foster & Krauss, 2016, p. 554), suggesting that the exhibition and curatorial practice were a work in progress that would continue after the opening of the exhibition. While the imposing size of the 1972 catalogue was criticized as over-designed and not user-friendly, it undoubtedly changed the course of Documenta’s publication history. It paved the way for the subsequent fragmentation of the publishing apparatus and, in so doing, transformed the exhibition’s temporality, extending it in time from the magazine that preceded the opening of the exhibition, to the catalogue that monumentalized it. With *dX*, the magazine would, in fact, precede the book without creating repetitions and redundancies. As the curator mentions:

In the magazines there were pieces that couldn’t be found in the book. They were another space of the exhibition. Obviously, there were resonances between the magazines and the catalogue, some contributors for instance wrote for both publications, but the editing of the two was completely different. With the periodical we were almost at the beginning of the process, we had time to research, debate, change, and then as we moved forward, we started condensing for the catalogue. The editing of the catalogue is a work of summarizing, of choices, and of definition. In the periodical you are conceiving, in the catalogue you are finalizing (David, 2019).

While the word “condensing” might not seem the most apt in describing of an 830-page volume, it is clear that the catalogue must consider the final reflections and considerations about *dX*. Its function is to become a documentation of the exhibition and the artworks, but this ultimately presents a dilemma. Since an exhibition catalogue is always planned in advance and sent to the printer long before the opening night, several months of the curatorial process are excluded from its pages. This temporal gap poses one of the first problems with reading an exhibition catalogue (Smith, 2010). As the scholars Bruce Ferguson and Milena Hoegsberg put it,

in the worst case scenario, [catalogues] become little more than visual memory aids for the visitors, or stand-ins for the experience of the real thing for those who could not attend.... Even if a catalogue has substantial essays by insightful writers, there is a strong likelihood that their texts will not, or truly cannot, address the actual experience of the exhibition, and thus amount to little more than an incomplete archival record, or, quite often, an academic conceit (2010, p. 360).

Similarly, Michael Glover has written that a catalogue, while unable to provide a definitive image of the artworks and of the event, has to convey its feel and impact on art, while shedding light on something crucial about the nature of its subject. Its duty “to a greater or lesser degree, [is to push...] onward [the] march of scholarship” (2020).

Certainly, *Politics Poetics* responds to the latter demand. Aware of the gap between the publishing of the catalogue and the opening of the exhibition, it simply avoids the documentation of the show and the artworks. The classical structure of the catalogue, with the essays at the beginning followed by the description of the artworks, is completely neglected to give space to the creation of new understandings, new meanings about art and culture at the end of the twentieth century. As observed by Panos Kompatsiaris, the catalogue “transgressed its usual role as an illustrative supplement to become a literary performance in itself” (2017, p. 50). Even more so, it became a “site of the exhibition.” Art scholar Gwen Allen uses the term “site” to define the documenta 12 magazine project (2007), although it is arguably already applicable to this case (2020, p. 152), and dX’s catalogue, program of talks, and magazine were conceived as parts of the exhibition, extensions of it, that had to be seen and experienced to grasp the full extent of dX’s perceptual and pedagogic experience.

### 3. FINAL REMARKS

Convincingly, but always provisionally, *Politics Poetics* thus becomes the vehicle for other content and another temporality of the exhibition, one that extends to both before the opening, with its historical approach to art, and after, when it has ended. It is not a document of the exhibition, but a display for art. The catalogue, as it was conceived, exists alongside the other spaces of the show and becomes itself part of the cultural manifestation envisaged by David. The montage of different fragments is intended to do just that: to show and visualize the lines of theory that come into play in the artists' works and in the exhibition itself. The timeline presented in the index becomes an instrument for reading the artworks published in the book. By presenting some of the most important artists and artworks of the twentieth century in chronological order, David transforms the catalogue from a document into an exhibition. The superimposed images change in scale, grounding theory in the visual and vice versa, as often happens with publications that are combined with texts—some designed in type, others seemingly handwritten—that serve a historical function or otherwise aiming to demonstrate the renewed or continued importance of certain artworks. All in all, the catalogue, like an exhibition, becomes a space where alternative visions and new readings of the contemporary converge. The page, as the space where this convergence takes place, harkens back to the early display experiments by Seth Siegelaub, or to André Malraux's theories for the *Museum without Walls*. In doing so, the catalogue removes itself from its purely documentary function as an appendix to the exhibition, and instead becomes a space where the intellectual and philosophical questions explored in it come to life. The volume, as a mnemonic device and legitimizing tool, may be considered here as a working document that serves an archival function, not for the exhibition, but for the construction of intellectual debates at the

turn of the twentieth century. In fulfilling this function, it recalls Sigmund Freud's *Note Upon a Mystic Pad*:

If I distrust my memory—neurotics...—I am able to supplement and guarantee its working by making a note in writing. In that case the surface upon which this note is preserved, the pocketbook or sheet of paper, is as it were a materialized portion of my mnemonic apparatus, which I otherwise carry about with me invisible (2006, p. 20).

The catalogue thus becomes the space, the notepad, where these memories or fragments of thought are created and simultaneously preserved. Through theoretical texts, interviews, and works by guest artists, *Politics Poetics* creates a memory of the process of thinking, researching, and organizing (montage) the exhibition, exemplifying the continued relevance of dX through the permanence of its existence.

The volume posits itself both *a posteriori* and *a priori*, engaging with the multiple temporalities of the show and its becoming rather than its being. With this choice, David seems decidedly more focused on the future relevance of the volume in art-historical terms rather than on that of the exhibition itself. Indeed, both the novelty and the limitations of this approach lie in the fact that the notions, ideas, and subjects discussed in the various streams of discourse only become clear when visiting the exhibition. The public could read these fragments while the exhibition was on display and understand how it came to be only after seeing it in its entirety. This again proved to be a conundrum—the exhibition remained impossible to grasp in its totality and complexity because of the vastness of its output and its temporal nature, and the catalogue did not, could not remedy this. While the catalogue can be praised for demonstrating the possibilities for this kind of publication, it also illustrates the ephemeral nature of such a curatorial endeavor, in which the projects intellectual foundations and the research conducted by the curator seem more important than the art displayed in its pages.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**ROBERTA ALBIERO** is an architect and Associate Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the Università Iuav di Venezia. She is coordinator of the Master's program in Architecture and lecturer at the Allestire Esporre Abitare 1 laboratory and the WAVE summer workshops. She has given lectures, conferences, and workshops at Italian and foreign universities. She is co-author of the book *João Luis Carrilho da Graça. Opere e Progetti* (with R. Simone, Electa, 2003) and numerous studies on twentieth-century Italian architecture, including *Adalberto Libera. Palazzo della Regione Trentino-Alto Adige*, (Unicopli, 2003), in particular on the work of Costantino Dardi, on whom she has published several essays, including “Effimero e perenne. Su alcuni progetti romani di Costantino Dardi” (in M. Doimo, M. Pogacnik, eds., *Fare mostre. Italia, 1920-2020: colpi di scena e messainscena*, Mimesis, 2020), and “Costantino Dardi. L'arte della configurazione” (*Firenze Architettura*, 2018). She curated the exhibition and the book *L'invenzione di un linguaggio. Franco Purini e il tema dell'origine, 1964-1976* (LetteraVentidue, 2021). She has also organized conferences, exhibitions, and installations on these themes.

**FABRIZIA BANDI** is a postdoctoral researcher in the ERC AN-ICON project “An-Iconology. History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images” led by Andrea Pinotti, at the Department of Philosophy, Università di Milano. She holds a Ph.D. in Philosophical Sciences-Aesthetics and Art Theory (Università di Palermo). Her research interests include phenomenology and aesthetics, with a particular focus on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience and the aesthetics of architecture and art. From 2016 to 2020, she was an Adjunct Professor of Aesthetics at the Politecnico di Milano,

at the Mantova campus. Currently, she is an Adjunct Professor of the Aesthetics of Objects course at the Università di Milano. She is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Studi di Estetica* and is on the board of the *Italian Society of Aesthetics* (SIE). She is the author of the book *La percezione armata: esperienza estetica e immaginazione in Mikel Dufrenne* (Mimesis 2018). In 2022, she was awarded National Scientific Qualification (II fascia) in the field of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Language.

**GIAMPIERO BOSONI** is Full Professor of Interior Design and History of Design at the Politecnico di Milano. As an architect, he has collaborated with Figini and Pollini, Vittorio Gregotti, and Enzo Mari, which led him to develop an interest in the theory and history of architecture and design projects. He has written and edited some 20 books and published more than 300 articles for numerous international journals. In 1997 he designed the *Museum of Design* exhibition for the Milan Triennale, creating the Milan Triennale Design Museum Collection. In 2009, the MoMA in New York commissioned him as editor of the book *Italian Design*, dedicated to the Italian section of their collection. In 2006, he curated the exhibition *Il Modo Italiano - Italian Design and Avant-Garde in the 20th Century* for the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and MART in Rovereto. He has curated numerous exhibitions, including the major shows at the Milan Triennale *Made in Cassina* (2009), *Tecno. The Discreet Elegance of Technology* (2011) and *Oswaldo Borsani, Architect, Designer, Entrepreneur* (2018), with accompanying books published by Skira. From 2018 to 2021, he was president of the Italian Association of Design Historians (AIS/design), and since 2022, has been co-director of the *AIS/design Journal*. He has been a member since 2008 of the scientific committee of the Franco Albini Foundation; since 2021, of the Gianfranco Ferré Research Center of the Politecnico di Milano; and since 2023, of the Board of Directors of the CASVA Foundation (Centro Alti Studi sulle Arti Visive) in Milan.

**IORELLA BULEGATO** is a graduate architect and Associate Professor at the Università Iuav di Venezia. From 2010 to 2014, she was a researcher at the Università degli Studi della Repubblica di San Marino. Her areas of interest include history and design criticism, as well as aspects related to the conservation and archival-museum valorization of the heritage of communication design. She has written numerous essays and articles for professional journals, and was an assistant editor for the online journal *Ais/Design. Storia e ricerche* (with M. Dalla Mura and C. Vinti, 2013-16). Since 2004, she has published several monographs, including *Salvatore Gregorietti. Un progetto lungo cinquant'anni / A fifty-year project*, with A. Bassi (Skira, 2017); *Il design degli architetti in Italia 1920-2000*, with E. Dellapiana (Electa, 2014); *I musei d'impresa. Dalle arti industriali al design* (Carocci, 2008); *Michele De Lucchi. From Here to Here and Beyond*, with S. Polano (Electa Architecture-Phaidon, 2005); and the index and complete list of works in S. Polano, *Achille Castiglioni: Complete Works 1938-2000* (Electa Architecture-Phaidon, 2002).

**FRANCESCA CASTELLANI** is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art at the Università Iuav di Venezia and in the Ph.D. program in the History of Art at Ca' Foscari-Iuav, Venice. She coordinates the research group BiTES-Biennial Theories & Stories. Since 1995, her research has focused mainly on the history of the Venice Biennale as a paradigm of exhibition history. In this field, she has organized conferences and seminars, including “Lo Scrittoio della Biennale” (Venice, 2009-present), “Staging Exhibit Display” (Venice, 2022-2024), and “Esposizioni/Exhibition” (Parma, 2017). She has published numerous essays and co-edited several volumes, including *Esposizioni/Exhibition (Ricerche di S/Confine, 2018)*, *Crocevia Biennale* (Scalpendi, 2017), and *Lo Iuav e la Biennale di Venezia* (Il Poligrafo, 2016). Forthcoming publications: “Venice Biennale 1948: The Mostra degli Impressionisti at the German Pavilion and its Politics” (*OBOE Journal*, 5, 1, 2024), *Sulla Biennale. Storie da un cantiere di studio* (Postmedia, 2024), and *1863. Manet refusé* (Bolis, 2025). Her research interests also include the history of European art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a focus

on its cultural and projective dimensions, including Orientalism, Revivalism, French and Italian Impressionism, and the intersections between art and literature.

**BERNADETTE DUFRÈNE** is Full Professor of the History of Heritage and Museums at the Université de Paris 8. Her two main areas of research are the history of twentieth-century museology and the cultural heritage of North Africa. She is the author of two books on the history of the Centre Pompidou (*La création de Beaubourg*, PUG, 2000, and *Centre Pompidou, 30 ans d'histoire* [ed.], Centre Pompidou, 2007) and numerous articles on international exhibitions. Together with Jérôme Glicenstein, she also co-edited *Histoires d'expositions/Exhibitions' stories* (Hermann, 2016). Another part of her research focuses on the history of Maghreb heritage and the exhibitions that have brought it to the forefront, and ways of building museum collections.

**MARIO FARINA** is Associate Professor of Aesthetics at the Università Iuav di Venezia, where he has been a researcher since 2020. Between 2014 and 2019, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Università di Firenze. He has conducted research at the Universities of Cologne, Bochun, and Frankfurt, University College Dublin, and Boston University. His research interests include classical German philosophy, critical theory, philosophy of literature and art theory. His publications on these topics include the monographs *Critica, simbolo e storia. La determinazione hegeliana dell'estetica* (Ets: Pisa 2015) and *Adorno's Aesthetics as a Literary Theory of Art* (Palgrave Mcmillan: Cham 2020).

**ANTONELLA GALLO**, architect, is Full Professor of Architectural and Urban Composition. Since 2003, she has been a member of the Doctoral Program in Architectural Composition at the Università Iuav di Venezia. Her research focuses on the form, construction, and character of architecture in the works of certain modernist figures and in the expressions of modernism in Latin America, with particular reference to the work of Lina Bo Bardi. The critical analysis

in her research aims to reconstruct the design processes that endow high-quality architectural works with a specific but simultaneously generalizable and thus transmittable reality. She participates in conferences and seminars at both Italian and international universities and is involved in project consultancy for national and international competitions. Her publications include “Teatro/Architettura” (in L. Scala ed. *Teatro e scena urbana: Ricerche e sperimentazioni spaziali dell'Avanguardia russa*, LetteraVentidue, 2021) and *Indistinti confini. Tra ricerca e progetto* (Il Poligrafo, 2018); “La tradizione del saper fare,” in: A. Gallo & G. Marras, eds. *Invenzione della tradizione. L'esperienza dell'architettura*, (Il Poligrafo, 2017).

**JÉRÔME GLICENSTEIN** is Full Professor at the Department of Fine Arts at Université Paris 8 and specializes in contemporary art and exhibitions, on which he has published several books: *L'Art: une histoire d'expositions* (PUF, 2009), *L'Art contemporain entre les lignes* (PUF, 2013), and *L'Invention du curateur* (PUF, 2015). He co-directed a project for the “catalogue raisonné” of the Centre Pompidou's exhibitions (2010-2014), which included co-editing with Bernadette Dufrêne *Histoires d'expositions/Exhibitions' stories* (Hermann, 2016). He is also editor-in-chief of the academic journal *Marges* (PUV). His most recent book is *Insaisissables valeurs. L'économie en trompe-l'oeil de l'art contemporain* (Hermann, 2023). Forthcoming books include *La Globalisation de l'art contemporain* (PUV, 2024) and *Qu'est-ce qu'une exposition? Écrits critiques (2000-2022)* (La lettre volée, 2026).

**CARLO GRASSI** is Professor of Sociology of Culture and Communication at the Università Iuav di Venezia. Among his most recent publications are *La macchina e il caso. Sociologia del dispositivo fotografico* (Postmedia, 2020); *La facoltà di giudicare. Sociologia dell'azione normativa* (Inschibboleth, 2021; French edition Kimé, 2022.) He edited and introduced *Jean-Luc Nancy, Dies Irae* (Westminster Press, 2019); *Dominique Wolton, Viva l'incomunicazione. La vittoria dell'Europa* (Armando, 2022); and *Sociologia della cultura* (Editoriale Scientifica, 2023), in collaboration with Dominique Wolton and

Davide Borrelli. He is a member of the editorial board of *Hermès France* and scientific director of the journal *Hermès Italia*.

**ANNA MAZZANTI** is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art at the Politecnico di Milano, Department of Design. Her research interests focus on the history and criticism of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, environmental art, the relationship between art and space, with particular reference to the sites of creation and the history of the staging of art. She was responsible for the interdisciplinary research group DE.S.Y. (Designing Enhancement Strategies and Exhibit Systems for the Italian House Museums and Studios). She is part of the BiTES research unit and a member of the Archivio Enrico Crispolti, Rome. She is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Daniel Spoerri Garden Foundation and an advisor to the Region of Tuscany, Contemporary Art Department. Her recent publications include “Operazione Arcevia. Existential Community. The Reality of the Experience and the Utopia of the Vision” (in F. Zanella, *et al.*, eds., *Multidisciplinary Aspects of Design. Objects, Processes, Experiences and Narratives*, Springer, 2024); “La Committenza difficile. Enti pubblici e l’arte contemporanea, 1980. Crispolti, Fagone, Zingarelli. Impegno e riflessioni sulla contemporaneità” (in Ministero della Cultura, DARC & Fondazione Scuola dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali, eds., *Arte e spazio pubblico*, Silvana, 2023).

**ANGELA MENGONI** is Associate Professor of Visual Semiotics at the Università Iuav di Venezia. She was a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for the Philosophy of Culture at the University of Leuven KUL, and a senior researcher at *eikones - Iconic Criticism: The Power and Meaning of Images* at the University of Basel. She was a DAAD fellow (2018) and a coordinator of the Villa Vigoni trilateral research program “Travelling concepts. Towards a terminological cartography in art theory” (2020-2022). Her research interests in visual semiotics and image theory concern the relationship between image, memory and trauma, with particular reference to postwar European art and biopolitics, and the representation of the body in late modernity. Among her publications: *Pensiero in immagine. Forme, metodi, oggetti*

*teorici per un Italian Visual Thought* (Mimesis, 2022); “Sémiotique de l’art. L’épaisseur à l’œuvre,” *Actes Sémiotiques*, 127, 2022 (co-edited with S. Caliandro); *Interpositions. Montage d’images et production de sens* (MSH, 2014).

**STEFANO MUDU** holds a Ph.D. in Visual Culture. In Venice, he collaborates with the Università Iuav di Venezia and Università Ca’ Foscari di Venezia, while he also teaches Media Theory at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Sassari. His research interests focus on re-enactment and other forms of enactment as artistic practice, reactivation strategies in visual culture, and rethinking art history in relation to queer, eco-feminist, environmental and colonial issues. He is the author of the monograph *Spazi Critici. I luoghi della scrittura d’arte contemporanea* (2018) and editor of the volume *Altrove. New Fiction* (2020). He is a member of the transnational research program entitled *A Natural Oasis?* (2021-22), dedicated to the study of artistic scenarios in the Mediterranean. For the last two years, he has worked in the curatorial team of the 59th Venice Biennale, assisting the artistic director Cecilia Alemani in the research for the central exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams*. During this same period, he was also a tutor for the ASAC Biennale college *Writing in Residence* project (2022-23).

**ROBERTO PINTO**, an art historian and curator, is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art at the Department of Arts, Università di Bologna. He has dedicated many years to theoretical reflection, which complements his curatorial practice, focusing on the dynamics and forms of contemporary exhibition and public art. His recent publications include “Amid Political Commitment and Space of Freedom. The Importance of Being Alternative and Self-Managed” (in *SKANK BLOC BOLOGNA Alternative Art Spaces since 1977*, Mousse Publishing, 2024); “Filiberto Menna and the Analytical Lines of the Contemporary” (in: *Armi improprie. The State of Art Criticism in Italy*, Johan & Levi, 2024); *Nuove Geografie Artistiche. Le mostre al tempo della globalizzazione* (Postmedia, 2012, 2023), and *Le relazioni oltre le immagini. Approcci teorici e pratiche dell’arte*

*pubblica* (with C. Guida: Postmedia, 2022). He has curated numerous exhibitions in Italy and abroad, including *Stranger Knocking* for the Italian Pavilion at the Melbourne Biennale 1998. He was curator of the 5th Gwangju Biennale, Korea (2004), and the 3rd Tirana Biennale (2005). He is currently the scientific curator and coordinator of the ArtLine project, a permanent sculpture park at CityLife in collaboration with the Municipality of Milan, and serves as the editorial director of the journal *piano b*.

**PAUL RASSE** is an anthropologist and Professor Emeritus of Information and Communication Sciences at the Université Côte d'Azur. He has published a dozen books and more than a hundred scientific articles on the anthropology of communication, scientific communication, museology, mediation, and cultural engineering. His major works on museology include *Le musée réinventé: Culture, patrimoine, médiation* (CNRS, 2017), *Le projet culturel: conception, ingénierie et communication* (Territorial Editions, 2017), and *Les musées à la lumière de l'espace public* (L'Harmattan, 2000). He is also a member of the editorial board of the journal *Hermès France*.

**CLARISSA RICCI** is an Adjunct Professor at the Università di Bologna. Her research focuses on the history and networks of exhibitions, biennials, fairs, and contemporaneity. She was a recipient of the Getty/ACLS Postdoctoral Fellowship in the History of Art (2019–2020), and was previously commissioned by the Università Iuav di Venezia (2017–2019) with researching the founding of Arte Fiera in Bologna. She has also been a visiting scholar at Columbia University in New York City, and received a Library Research Grant from the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. The author of *APERTO 1980-1993. La mostra dei giovani artisti alla Biennale di Venezia* (Postmedia Books, 2022), she has written numerous essays, and edited many books, including one on the Venice Biennale entitled *Starting from Venice. Studies on the Biennale* (2011), and, more recently, *Double Trouble in Exhibiting the Contemporary: Art Fairs and Shows* (2020); she also wrote the entries on the Venice Biennale for the *Grove Art Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2018). She is the



founder and editor of the *OBOE Journal: On Biennials and Other Exhibitions*, and editor of *Venezia Arti*.

**CAMILLA SALVANESCHI** is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow at the San Francisco State University and the Università Iuav di Venezia. Her research focuses on contemporary artists' publishing projects since the early 1980s, with a particular emphasis on the recent evolution of art magazines and the expanded field of arts publishing. She recently co-edited the volumes *En plein air. Minimal Architecture, Maximum Sustainability* (with Sara Marini, 2024) and *The Exposed Body* (with Angela Vettese, 2023). Salvaneschi is editorial member of the US-based *Art Margins Online*, and is the founder and editor of the *OBOE Journal: On Biennials and Other Exhibitions*.

**MARCO SCOTTI** is a postdoctoral fellow at the Università Iuav di Venezia. He holds a Ph.D. in the History of Art and has been a research fellow and post-graduate researcher at CSAC, Università di Parma. His recent research has focused on the figure of Ettore Sottsass, on the interweaving of art, architecture and design culture, on specific aspects connected to exhibitions and archives in avant-garde artistic practices in the second half of the twentieth century, on the theme of the unrealized in the visual arts, on digital archives and the digital humanities, and on the history of graphics and advertising. He is an Adjunct Professor at Università Iuav di Venezia, where he teaches the history of design, and has taught a contemporary art history workshop at the Università di Parma and a course on video game screenwriting at the Accademia Santa Giulia, Brescia. He has worked as a curator for several institutions, including MAXXI, Fondazione Cirulli, CSAC Parma, and MSU Zagreb, as well as for galleries, awards, and events such as the Biennale Roncaglia and Premio Suzzara, and for several independent projects. Together with Elisabetta Modena, he founded the digital museum MoRE ([www.moremuseum.org](http://www.moremuseum.org)), an archive/museum dedicated to unrealized contemporary art projects. In the field of communications, he has collaborated with institutions such as Fondazione Modena Arti Visive, Fondazione Cirulli, CSAC Parma, and Novara Jazz. He is a

member of the editorial staff of the online magazines *Venezia Arti* and *Ricerche di S/Confine* and collaborates with the magazine *Zero*.

**ALESSANDRA VACCARI** is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art at the Università Iuav di Venezia. Her research and teaching experience focuses on the history and theory of fashion. As a faculty member of the Department of Visual Arts, she has previously taught at the Università di Bologna (2006-2014) and has been a visiting professor at many international universities, including the University of the Arts London, the University of São Paulo, and Stockholm University. Her interdisciplinary work focuses on three main areas: Italian and European modernist fashion; the temporalities of fashion; and the impact of fashion on environmental sustainability and social change. In addition to numerous articles, book chapters, and monographs on fashion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she co-edited the book *Time in Fashion: Industrial, Antilinear and Uchronic Temporalities* (2020). Her most recent book is *Indossare la trasformazione* (2022). She is currently working on the proceedings of the international conference *Earth, Water, Air, and Fire: The Four Elements of Fashion*, which she organized with Anneke Smelik in 2023.

**ANGELA VETTESE** is Associate Professor of Theory of Art Criticism at the Università Iuav di Venezia and coordinates the Ph.D. program in Visual and Performative Arts, and Fashion. She has taught at numerous art academies and at Bocconi University in Milan (2000-2007, 2010-2013). As an art critic, she has contributed to *Il Sole 24 Ore Domenica* and other international magazines since 1986. She has curated several exhibitions and written essays for international catalogues. Vettese was president of the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa in Venice (2002-2013), director of the Galleria Civica in Modena (2005-2008), and director of the Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro in Milan (2008-2010). She served as Councilor for Culture and Tourism for the city of Venice (2013-2014). She has also worked with the Venice Biennale, co-curating an homage to John Cage (Peggy Guggenheim Collection, 1993), the Venice Pavilion

(2007), and the Norway Pavilion (2011). In 2009, she served as President of its International Jury. Additionally, she has been a member of the scientific committee for Palazzo Grassi-Punta della Dogana in Venice, the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, and the Commissione Monumenti in Milan. She is currently a member of the Scientific Committee of the Museo Madre in Naples and AGO\_Museums of the city of Modena. She founded and directs the academic journal *OBOE: On Biennial and Other Exhibitions*. Her research has long focused on the Venice Biennale within the international exhibition system, with particular attention to issues of national politics and identity in the context of de-globalization. She has published numerous studies on this topic, including “L’arte contemporanea e la sua efficacia politica” (*Il Mulino*, 2023);” Preface: Montage in Contemporary Art. A New Technical Tradition Prompting a Non-teleological Philosophy of History” (In C. Baldacci, M. Bertozzi, eds. *Montages—Assembling as a Form ad Symptom in Contemporary Arts*, Mimesis, 2018); and “The National Pavillion at the Venice Biennale as a Form of Public Space” (in G. Urbonas, A. L. Lucas Freeman, eds. *Public Space? Lost and Found*, SA+P Press-MIT School of Architecture and Planning, 2017).

**FRANCESCA ZANELLA** is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art, and teaches History of Architecture at the Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia. She is a member of the scientific committee of CSAC, University of Parma, which she directed from 2015 to 2020, and a member of the scientific committee of the MoRE museum of unrealized projects. Her fields of research are the history of Italian architecture and design in the twentieth century, the history of industrial exhibitions in the nineteenth century, and the history of art exhibitions in the twentieth century (*Dal progetto al consumo*, Parma, MUP; 2011, with V. Strukelj; *Esporsi. Architetti, artisti e critici a confronto in Italia negli anni Settanta*, Verona, Scripta, 2012). She has curated numerous exhibitions, including *Architecture and Advertising* (2005), *Torre Agbar, Communication and Consensus Project* (2006), *City and Light, Phenomenology of the Illuminated Landscape* (2008) and for the CSAC, *Ettore Sottsass. Beyond Design* (2017-18)

(catalogue edited by Silvana 2017), *1968. A Year* (2018-19) and *Design!, Objects, Processes, Behaviors* (2020-21) (catalogue edited by Electa 2023), *Andrea Branzi. Tales of Design* (2023) as well as artist residency projects at CSAC (Luca Vitone, Massimo Bartolini, Eva Marisaldi, Sissi). She also works with contemporary archives, coordinating digitization and enhancement projects for the CSAC (Ettore Sottsass and Enzo Mari), and is currently coordinating a project funded by the MIC with the CSAC in partnership with MAXXI, to create a database dedicated to Pier Luigi Nervi in collaboration with the DHMoRe Center at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, of which she is a member.

**STEFANIA ZULIANI** is Full Professor of Theory of Art Criticism and the Theory of Museums and Exhibitions in Contemporary Times at the Università di Salerno. Since 2019, she has been the coordinator of the Ph.D. program in Methods and Methodologies of Archaeological and Art Historical Research. In 2018, she was appointed by the MIBACT as a member of the scientific committee of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome; from 2015 to 2020, she was part of the scientific advisory committee of the CSAC. As an art critic, she has collaborated for over twenty years with the Filiberto Menna Foundation–Center for Contemporary Art Studies (Salerno-Rome), for which she has edited catalogues and curated exhibitions. Since 2016, she has also been a member of the advisory board of the Leonardo Sinisgalli Foundation. She has published numerous essays and monographs on the dynamics of the contemporary exhibition system, including *Senza cornice. Spazi e tempi dell'installazione* (Arshake, 2015) and *Torna diverso. Una galleria di musei* (Gli ori, 2022) and the recent articles “Economia 'dell'imperduto'. Gli archivi dell'arte contemporanea tra esposizione e oblio” (in *Archivi esposti. Teorie e pratiche dell'arte contemporanea*, Quodlibet, 2022) and “Where is our place?. L'installazione come spazio performativo” (in *Poesia musica pittura. Riflessioni e performance oggi. Per uno sguardo sulla modernità*, Cacucci, 2021).

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