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The Art of the Exhibition

JEAN-MARC POISSOT

It is quite clear that exhibitions have evolved in an unprecedented way in the latter half of the 20th century, and that this development has had consequences both tangible and symbolic in terms of artistic activity, the socialization of art, art criticism, and even art history. Monographs of certain historical exhibitions and recurrent events are already thick on the ground, and becoming thicker. They have given rise to the publication of first works dealing with the history of exhibitions, which include the book edited by Bernd Klüser and Katharina Hegewisch, and published in 1991 in Frankfurt under the title Die Kunst der Ausstellung (which is awaiting translation into French), and Bruce Altshuler's book The Avant-garde in Exhibition, New Art in the 20th Century (New York, 1994).

The most recent references in both these books encompass, for example, the exhibition Quand les attitudes deviennent forme (1969) organized by Harald Szeemann when he was director of the Bern Kunsthalle. Harald Szeemann is no stranger to the specialist French-speaking readership, because he has, in the past, put on his Machines célibataires show in Paris (Musée des arts décoratifs, 1976) and in Brussels (Palais des beaux-arts), and GAS (Grandiose, Ambitieux, Silencieux, 1993) in Bordeaux, on top of which other exhibitions have spawned various interviews. Because most of his writings have been published in German, we have had to wait for Michel Baudouin and La Lettre volée to publish a selection of them under the title Écrire les expositions.

Harald Szeemann has been organizing exhibitions since 1957, and he has turned them into nothing less than a vehicle of expression which he monitors at every step, from museography to catalogue, by way of the practical method of producing a show. The interest of the writings selected by La Lettre volée lies in the fact that through prefaces, notes, projects, and extracts from interviews given since 1969, Harald Szeemann comments on and analyses what he does, and at the same time describes the content and organization of his exhibitions. Szeemann thinks with the objects and works which he exhibits. He does not comment on his own activity prior to the 1972 Documenta 5, where the critical remarks of artists—including Buren who rebuked him for using artists like dabs of colour—made him aware that his activity is no less of an intellectual and symbolic activity than that of the authors he enlists to write chapters in his catalogues. This thinking involves complexity. Harald Szeemann does not muddle having one’s say with having power, nor does he confuse exhibition and simplification. His concern is to ensure that the exhibition can be a subtle and articulate language. Whereas for Documenta 5 he devised a group of sections which described, from 1972 onward, the trends and artists marking the international art scene over the 10 or 15 years that followed, he tried not to confine himself to an accountable history reduced to a succession of movements, he thinks up a crosswise category of individual mythologies which enables him to retain the subjective dimension of art, but without overlooking a presentation of the social dimension of imagery. Szeemann retains contradiction in the way his discourse is articulated. Thus he states very clearly in Le désir de l’œuvre d’art totale (1983) that this does not exist and that if it were executed it would probably be a totalitarian world, but he explores forms of utopia as he also managed to do with Monte Verità. Harald Szeemann discusses anthropology to qualify such explorations. The itinerary in effect proposed within a community living in Ascona between the last quarter of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, and made up of anarchists like Bakunin and Errico Músham, reformers, theologians, vegetarians and advocates of a matriarchal society, but also of a Bohemian fringe clustered from 1909 on around Countess Franziska von Reventlow, is another form of exploring mechanisms, forces and tendencies deep inside the human mind, which Swiss, Austrian and German art historians tried to work out at the beginning of this century.

So this collection is well worth reading to gain an understanding of a line of thought espoused by Harald Szeemann, to gauge what an exhibition can and should be, and to grasp where it fits into the great chapters of the history of contemporary culture.

The compilation put together by Bernard Fribicher is something quite different. As curator of the Musée cantonal des beaux-arts at Sion, Fribicher embarked on his professional career after the advent of exhibited art, but, like Harald Szeemann, he is exercised by the idea that the exhibition can in its way help to produce a better world. This is how we should understand L’Art exposé : quelques réflexions sur l’exposition dans les années 90, sa topographie, ses commissaires, son public et ses idéologies : as a manifesto. The contributions by Christian Bessou, Paolo Bianchi, Hans-Peter von Däniken, Isabelle Graw, Thomas Huber, Mary E. Jacob and Rémy Zaugg, which Bernard Fribicher interweaves in his writings, help him to develop his own theses and persuasions. Unlike Szeemann, however, whose range is delimited by 20th century European and western art seen through his own exhibitions, Fribicher observes the doings of other “exhibition organizers” for the past decade, and focuses on current art, with a keen eye on the southern hemisphere.

Fribicher is especially interested in the disappearance of the centre (in another version than Hans Sedlmayr’s Verlust der Mitte) under the influence of the quest for a contextualization of art beyond the museum, but also under the effect of the planet-wide dispersal of art’s life, as attested by the upsurge of recurrent exhibitions (New Delhi, Sydney, Istanbul, Dakar, etc.) This phenomenon intrigues him but also gives vent to his wrath in his well-reasoned criticisms of the MAMCO (Museum of contemporary art at Geneva), that “neo-liberal show case museum” which would treat works and trends equally on the same level, and the Conca maxima show organized by Hans-Ulrich Obrist in Zurich.

The debate is a complex one, because Paolo Bianchi, who is featured in the book with several pieces including one titled “L’art de l’exposition”, unhesitatingly concludes in this text : « Dialogue and the process of encounter are often more
important than the artwork per se. » (p. 237). How, in fact, are we to make up our minds between the interest in objects, which implies a critical reading of the objects, and a questioning of their status and the acceptance of the diversity of cultures as expressed in exhibitions such as the Rasheed Araeen show in London (The Other Story. Afro-Asian Artists in Post-war Britain, 1989), the Dakar Biennale, and Klima Global-Arte Amazonas (Berlin, 1993).

What is to be done in a period when it would seem that, after the excesses and tendencies of the 1980s, the sole path to be explored is that of a far-reaching contextualization of artistic activity and an opening-up to cultures where art has never known an autonomy comparable to that of western art? What is at issue here is, indeed, a contradictory exhibition project which is questioned by Isabelle Graw in relation to the show in the Le Corbusier Habitation unit in Firminy, Hans-Peter Däniken with Artscape Nordland, and Mary Jane Jacob in a broader text.

Last of all, this collection includes a contribution from Bruce Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne, “Cartographie des expositions internationales”, who are also co-authors of an anthology of important texts recently published by Routledge: Thinking About Exhibitions. It would be comforting to think that an equivalent volume in French might be forthcoming.

Translated from the French by Simon Pleasance