an Exhibit through the Lens of Sociability : Spectator Participation, Urban Intervention and Other Ghosts

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REFERENCES

Exhibition, Design, Participation: 'an Exhibit' 1957 and Related Projects, Londres: Afterall Books, 2016, (Exhibition Histories). Sous la dir. d'Elena Crippa

- 1 The Exhibition Histories collection, in which this book is the seventh volume, does not aim to propose a history based on proper names, successive movements, or emblematic works. Rather, it invites us to think in terms of relationships, to consider the discordant and often contingent forces that give form to an exhibition (curators, artists, different kinds of public, institutions, and critical reception at the time, and today); to study closely the spatial, mass-media and critical conditions in which the works were displayed, by publishing archival documents (photographs, plans, texts); and lastly to open up the area of interpretation to different theoretical stances. This book is no exception. It is organized around an exhibition titled *an Exhibit*, that was held almost 60 years ago, in 1957 at the Hatton Gallery, in the university of Newcastle upon Tyne, then at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London. A rich visual dossier documents its display in these two venues. A few previously unpublished documents allow to “grasp” the positions of each of its three leading figures—Victor Pasmore, Richard Hamilton, and Lawrence Alloway— as well as this of David Sylvester, unfortunately isolated here as the sole voice of the critical reception at the time.¹ Further repeats, from *Exhibit 2* in 1959 to recent reconstructions, are listed in a separate section. The theoretical essays, for their part,

take up the challenge of offering new interpretations to an exhibition hitherto closely associated with Richard Hamilton and the exhibition practices of the Independent Group.

- 2 *an Exhibit* included neither distinct works nor objects, but was formed by Perspex panels with industrially predefined colours and dimensions. Suspended according to a geometric yet irregular pattern, they created interplays of translucency, opacity and reflections in the gallery space. The enduring fascination wielded by *an Exhibit* is based partly on its intrinsic ambiguity. “A show which would be its own justification”,² to borrow Richard Hamilton’s words, it is often quoted as a reflection on the exhibition *per se*, a powerful spatial device for producing meaning. But, described as “a populable [sic] art work”,³ it embraces rather the notion of expanded work, in reciprocal complementarity with its public. *an Exhibit* includes indeed the spectators in its design, to a point where it is not complete without their presence and intervention; in so doing, it offers them an environment to “populate”, and makes up for a lack of sociability. An exhibition, we are reminded by the conceptual artist Martin Beck in his stimulating essay,⁴ needs a form to render the relational structure forming it visible. But it is also a *discursive form*, made up of debates and interpretations which develop in time, never completed at the moment of its immediate presentation. The distinctive feature of *an Exhibit* is to make this dynamic and incomplete form evident, because its project is based on something that is lacking, on this desire to be “populated”. And to offer, through art, a structure of paradoxical sociability: abstract, conveying the Cartesian and disciplinary logic of a grid, but immediately undermined by the absence of any “information” to be communicated, through its free, improvised play. According to Beck, the space of this being-together remains forever unachievable, like the ghostly meeting between the incomplete and broken down reflections which “populate” this visual and perceptual labyrinth of abstract forms and industrial materials. Between potential future development and impossible realization, *an Exhibit* displays both the desire for art’s intervention and its limited powers in terms of social change. A tension which, far from being counterproductive, contributes to its attraction today.

- 3 *an Exhibit* is also the surprising encounter between the utopias of collective transformation of life peculiar to abstraction, the attempts of the latter to rein in industry through a supra-individual art, and the paradigmatic reproducibility of Pop Art, with its sensibility for a layered and deliberately disturbing meaning. Part of the clout of this book is precisely that it frees *an Exhibit* from the exclusive association to British Pop Art and to a single artist (Richard Hamilton). Thus, Elena Crippa’s rich and detailed main essay,⁵ closely follows the careers of the three designer-organizers of the show, before and after this collaboration, and dissects their shared points of interest, while at the same time including *an Exhibit* in the history of Great Britain after the Second World War, its system of art education and public art, and its artistic and commercial exhibition practices. An important place is earmarked for British constructivist abstraction, and for Victor Pasmore, in particular. This standpoint does not exploit *an Exhibit*, nor does it make it a political stake, but it restores the importance of hitherto underestimated elements. This applies for example to the Newcastle upon Tyne fine art department, where Hamilton and Pasmore taught in the 1950s. Its geographical marginality encouraged an unusual freedom to experiment, and made it possible to hold the *an Exhibit* show or, two years earlier, *Man, Machine, and Motion*, at a time when the ICA in London would refuse to fund their production.⁶ By stressing the art school setting and the teaching profession, Crippa highlights an artistic context where exchange, collaboration

and transmission take precedence over the objective of a definitive and self-sufficient artwork, and where the “Pop Art” and “abstraction” categories reach their limit. *an Exhibit* tallied with Hamilton’s and Pasmore’s educative and artistic concerns, and their shared interest in the artwork as cognitive object (an object to look at and to look through, for the Duchampian Hamilton;⁷ a “real object”⁸ and a “subject-object”⁹ for the modernist Pasmore), in the extension of the work towards the environment, in the notion of seriality and in the writings and teachings of László Moholy-Nagy or Paul Klee.¹⁰ The notion of participation is another point where the three organizers converge, even if its sphere of meaning remains vast, ranging from a major artistic principle for Lawrence Alloway, who comes out in praise of it in “The Spectator’s Intervention” and who—in *an Exhibit* as later in the 1959 exhibition *Place*—sees in it the counterpart of a novel protocol-based art,¹¹ to art’s intervention in the public place, a distinctive feature of Victor Pasmore’s architectural projects, from his wall reliefs of the 1950s to the asymmetrical and dynamic structure of the *Apollo* pavilion (1954-1969) designed to be used by the inhabitants of the mining village of Peterlee.¹² *an Exhibit* thus takes part in the parallel history of public architecture and urban organization in a period when art, partly supported by the powers that be, dreamed of freeing up everyday relations to space by creating conditions of multi-dimensional and dynamic experience.

- 4 The (hi)stories recounted in this book are many, varied and rich in openings, even if we might regret that they do not lead to raising the notion of “design” as an issue, outside of the British context, or unravelling the links and breaks with contemporary and earlier projects (De Stijl springs to mind). The book would also have benefited from including more critical readings such as the recent one made by Kevin Lotery, for whom *an Exhibit* responded—in a rather ambiguous way—to the flowering of exhibition design as a technology of social organization in the ideological context of postwar industrial production.¹³

NOTES

1. Criticism of the London version of *an Exhibit* features in: Massey, Anne. Muir, Gregor. *Institute of Contemporary Arts 1946-1968*, London: ICA, 2014, p. 123-124
2. According to Richard Hamilton, *Collected Words, 1953-1982*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 1982, p. 26.
3. A definition taken from the chronology of the London ICA’s activities in : Massey, Anne. Muir, Gregor. *Institute of Contemporary Arts 1946-1968*, *Op.cit.*, p. 184
4. Beck, Martin. “Revisiting the Form of ‘an Exhibit’”, *Exhibition, Design, Participation. ‘an Exhibit’ 1957 and Related Projects*, London: Afterall, 2016, (Exhibition Histories), p. 204-215
5. Crippa, Elena. “Designing Exhibitions, Exhibiting Participation”, *Exhibition, Design, Participation. ‘an Exhibit’ 1957 and Related Projects*, *Op. cit.*, p. 12-75
6. *Ibid.*, p. 27
7. *Ibid.*, p. 22
8. An interview with Victor Pasmore by Leif Sjöberg, 1960, *Exhibition, Design, Participation. ‘an Exhibit’ 1957 and Related Projects*, *Op. cit.*, p. 174

9. Crippa, Elena. "Designing Exhibitions, Exhibiting Participation", *Op. cit.*, p. 17
10. *Ibid.*, p. 29
11. *Ibid.*, p. 70-72 ; Lawrence Alloway, "The Spectator's Intervention" (1955), originally published in French; English translation in *Exhibition, Design, Participation. 'an Exhibit' 1957 and Related Projects*, *Op. cit.*, p. 170-172
12. Hatherley, Owen. "Our Friends in the North", *Exhibition, Design, Participation. 'an Exhibit' 1957 and Related Projects*, *Op. cit.*, p. 188-203
13. Lotery, Kevin. "an Exhibit/an Aesthetic: Richard Hamilton and Postwar Exhibition Design", *October*, no.150, autumn 2014, p. 87-112