Exhibition Cuttings

Mathieu Copeland

Translator: Simon Pleasance

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Because Mathieu Copeland was acclaimed for his catalogue *The Anti-Museum* (2017), we thought it important to embark on the debate over the catalogue's function with him. Here is his reply.

- 1 Exhibitions are accompanied by an ensemble that presents them, represents them, and thus makes them present. This set made up of connected forms, paratexts—to borrow Gérard Genette's term—and “exhibition prosthetics”, in Joseph Grigely's provocative turn of phrase, associates the names of the artists and the curator(s), the exhibition's title, the texts and essays, the notices, the audio guide, all augmented realities, printed media, and, needless to add, the catalogues. Joseph Grigely questions the reality of the exhibition thus: “Where does an exhibition begin & end? Is an exhibition just about the materialization of specific works of art, or is it also — and if so, in what ways— about the various conventions that go into the making of exhibitions, which include press releases, announcement cards, checklists, catalogues, and digital-based media?”¹ He thus prefers talking in terms of exhibition “prosthetics” “to describe an array of these conventions, particularly (but not exclusively) in relation to exhibition practices.”²
- 2 Let us shift Gérard Genette's analysis and terminology from one field (literature) to another (exhibition-making). Genette quotes J. Hillis Miller, who, in *The Critic as Host* (published in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, London, Seabury Press, 1979), defines “para” as “an antithetical prefix which designates both proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority [...], something that is situated at once on this side and that side of a boundary, a threshold or a margin, of equal status and yet secondary, subsidiary, subordinate, like a guest to his host, a slave to his master. Something that is para is not only at once on both sides of the boundary separating interior and exterior: it is also the boundary itself, the screen acting as a permeable

membrane between the within and the without. It involves their confusion, letting the exterior in and the interior out, it divides and unites them”.³ The relation to the prosthesis, for its part, is the extension. The prosthesis is constructed in the negative from a damaged body. It contributes to complete a broken entity, a fragmented and incomplete reality. Although attached to the exhibition, the prosthesis does not belong to it and will always be a reminder to its host that it is complementary, and not identity-related. It contributes to it as an added piece, a *parasite*. It wavers around the fabric of the site—and never becomes part of it.

- 3 If the material nature of the exhibition is indecisive and intangible, it is also intelligible and intellectual, while also being perceptible, a source of wonder and continually experimental. So let us consider those occurrences where the exhibition is also the paratext. It has always seemed fundamental to me not to exploit works to put them at the service of a discourse which is not theirs. A work exists through and for what it is. The polysemy of a work of art comes *through* what defines it. The exhibition is one of the vehicles which can temporarily hallmark, and even index, a work. As a bearer of meaning, it declares its desire for autonomy with regard to the work, and in so doing asserts its dependence. Nor is the paratext a remote value of the exhibition. And if, for Genette, “paratext = peritext + epitext”, the paratext is an integral part of the exhibition. It is the exhibition, and vice versa. The paratexts of the exhibition structure the sensitive architecture that the exhibition is. I would more readily borrow from the botanical glossary the vocabulary of cuttings and grafts, as augmented organisms. The exhibition is a series of replicated organisms, “re-potted”, which bind together and form just one. A foreign graft which adapts to its host and shares the same material character. A symbiosis which takes root. Let us imagine the exhibition and its catalogue as two autonomous entities which nurture one another, which recognize one another while accepting their differences, and which make each other grow.
- 4 The exhibition only exists for a given period of time, specified and normalized by the calendars of the host institutions. The catalogue reinstates this time-frame and goes beyond it. Long after the end of the event, it remains and contributes to a retro/prospective memory. It constitutes the living and ongoing memory of the exhibition, its surviving part.
- 5 What, more specifically, about the viewpoint of the critical writing in the context of biennials, triennials and other major events which publish catalogues underpinning their shows? The catalogue for the historical exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* can be summed up as a splendid discoloured yellow folder more than as the experience of a saturated Kunsthalle, with demolished pavements,... or its pasteboard remake in Venice (2013). The same goes for that other folder which we also owe to the extraordinary Harald Szeemann, published in 1972 for *documenta* 5—and its cover illustrated by Ed Ruscha with that drawing of ant dancing a figure 5. Again with regard to *documenta*, this latter displayed at the bottom of the cover of the catalogue for its 10th showing a seminal X in a silvery flat tint with the small “d” run through by a large Roman numeral X, printed in red. Online, Hatje Cantz described it thus: “For the first time in the history of *documenta*, the companion publication attempts to go beyond a survey and interpretation of the exhibited works of art to document and analyze the cultural development of the western world from 1945 to 1997 [...]”.⁴
- 6 The “large-scale” production of catalogues continues to perpetuate the memory of these major events. What about those other voluminous catalogues of art fairs, and

those weighty auction-house books, one of whose challenges is the immemorial conservation of not very memorable events? Is the necessity of their physical, printed material character still evident—especially in the digital age?

- 7 Let us try to justify the question of the addendum and the over-production of objects, also involving the industry necessary for the physical production of catalogues and its global impact on an internationalized production. It is urgent that we re-think the ecology of the exhibition, and, for the context that specifically concerns us, of the catalogue in the ecosystem of the “exhibition”. By analyzing this science of the reciprocal relations which form these social and economic environments, let us dwell on the possibilities offered by catalogues: these cuttings make it possible to preserve those fleeting balances that exhibitions are.

NOTES

1. Grigely, Joseph. *Exhibition Prosthetics*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010, p. 6. Edited by Zak Kyes
 2. Grigely, Joseph. *Ibid.*, p. 7
 3. Miller, J. Hillis, quoted by: Genette, Gérard. *Seuils*, Paris : Le Seuil, 1987, p. 7, (Poétique)
 4. www.hatjecantz.de/documenta-x---the-book-3632-1.html?article_id=3632&clang=1
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AUTHORS

MATHIEU COPELAND

Mathieu Copeland is a curator who has been developing a practice that seeks to subvert the traditional role of, and renew our perceptions of exhibitions. He co-curated the exhibition *Voids: A Retrospective* (2009) at the Centre Pompidou, Paris and the Kunsthalle, Bern, and edited the celebrated anthology *Voids*, and realised *The Exhibition of a Film* (2014), an exhibition as a feature film for cinemas. His recent exhibitions include *A Retrospective of Closed Exhibitions* at the Kunsthalle Fribourg (2016) and *The Exhibition of a Dream* at the Fondation Gulbenkian (2017). Copeland edited the critically acclaimed anthology and manifest publication *Choreographing Exhibitions* (Les Presses du réel, 2013), and co-edited the anthology *The Anti-Museum* (König Books, 2017). He recently edited the anthology *Gustav Metzger: Writings* (JRP | Editions, 2019).