The Exhibition. Theories and Practices

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- 1 Since the 1990s, exhibitions have become a popular research subject, with numerous studies devoted to them. This has given rise to a desire for a history of exhibitions which, unlike the history of art, should take into account the practical and social conditions in which the works are displayed. Among the numerous responses to this issue is Bruce Altshuler's *Salon to Biennial*.¹ The title of this two-volume summary is self-explanatory: it is a history of visibility and recognition in connection to large-scale events aimed at a wide audience. The appearance of the history of exhibitions has accompanied the emergence of curators who, embracing the legacy of Harald Szeemann, are reclaiming their authorial status and exploring the possibilities offered by that medium.
- 2 *Site Read: Seven Curators on Their Landmark Exhibitions* is part of this trend. It brings together previously unpublished accounts by exhibition designers on projects selected for their innovative character. In his contribution to the book², Bruce Altshuler points out that what is considered innovative consists of inventing formats which disrupt habits by exhibiting outside of museum settings, or by shaking these settings up. Altshuler's examples are embedded with precision and care in a richly documented strain of similar projects, such as *Chambres d'Amis* (1986), *Skulptur Projekte Münster* (since 1977) or *Cities on the Move* (1997-1999). By combining this essay with testimonies, *Site Read* nevertheless signals the discontinuity which ultimately always separates curatorial activity and its historicisation. Altshuler connects similar projects together, while the testimonies account for the great variety of their motivations, means and concerns. Seth Siegelaub³, who promoted conceptual artists by publishing books at the end of the 1960s, explains in simple terms that at the time, printing was seen as an available territory, rich with experimental potential. In 1969, Jennifer (Licht) Winkworth, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was entrusted with creating an exhibition to counter the criticisms the museum was facing: young artists

were not taken into account. Winkworth⁴ describes the urgency, red tape, as well as lack of funding and consideration that disrupted the preparation of one of the first exhibitions of *in situ* works. Raimundas Malāšauskas explains in humorous tones how he came up with the idea of using hypnosis to stage exhibitions in the minds of the public alone, and how he succeeded in this endeavour.⁵

- 3 These various projects were characterised by the contexts and motivations which gave rise to them, as well as by their scale and relationship to the exhibited artists. Alan W. Moore outlines this in connection with *Real Estate Show*, which was organised on 1 January 1980 in a New York squat, and was advertised by word of mouth.⁶ Mary Jane Jacob recounts how, in 1990, *Places with a Past* brought together international artists that were specifically selected to create installations in various locations in Charleston (South Carolina, USA). These fascinating adventure-like accounts are filled with unique insights on art and making it public.
- 4 In addition, recent publications offer narratives in connection to the positions of three curators. Jens Hoffmann, Pierre Bal-Blanc and Maria Lind all have in common the fact that they came to prominence in the 1990s and have managed institutions and biennials which they used to fuel their reflection on the act of curating. Through essays and interviews, *In the Meantime: Speculations on Art, Curating, and Exhibitions* presents the work of Jens Hoffmann, who contributed to research on new exhibition forms. His chronicles often consider exhibitions through a historical perspective in order to better analyse them. His choice of monographic texts and artists (Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Valeska Soares, Maaïke Schoorel, John Bock, Marepe, Alexandre da Cunha, Renata Lucas, Danilo Dueñas, Yoan Capote, Claire Rojas, John Baldessari, Brian Bello) demonstrates his attention to minority visibility and non-Western art scenes. The discussions transcribed in the book outline the variety of contradictory debates fuelled by Hoffmann's clear-cut, sometimes militant, opinions.⁷ He champions the centrality of hanging in exhibitions, which he considers as scenes on which the works evolve, guided by the script of the exhibition's concept. His most ambitious projects are based on the interpretation of books and historical exhibitions. *When Attitudes Became Form* is a contemporary re-reading of Harald Szeemann's famous exhibition. *Other Primary Structures* reinterprets *Primary Structures*, the first Minimal Art exhibition in 1966. Hoffmann's project documents and comments on *Primary Structures*, while including artists from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe who were not part of the original exhibition in 1966.
- 5 Hoffmann's essays on his exhibitions were originally published in catalogues that included the list of participating artists, which is sadly nowhere to be found in *In the Meantime*.⁸ This choice seems symptomatic of an approach which, since it is focused on curatorial innovation, predominantly conceptualises the forms and structures of exhibitions. Hoffmann favours the promotion of a craft whose disappearance he bemoans, caused in his opinion by curatorial practices that hinge on conference programmes and events rather than focusing on hanging. He expresses this clearly in an interview with Maria Lind, "To Show or Not to Show?"⁹ which illustrates their deep differences.
- 6 Lind, for her part, explains that in her practice, works are a starting point from which she derives the format of her projects. Her concern for art is noticeable in *Seven Years*,¹⁰ a collection of the columns she published in *ArtReview* magazine between 2011 and 2017. They show her subtle and careful approach, which is quick to draw

interpretations that are as unexpected as they are enlightening. The result is a way of thinking about art in the moment when it manifests itself. Maria Lind's outlook and reflection seem to be fuelled by a curatorial attitude which is particularly apparent in her search for novelty and her concern for the exhibition's context. Several essays are devoted exclusively to books, such as those by artist Falke Pisano and poet Lisa Robertson, as well as an alternative exhibition space, The Artists Institute, or to little-known artists such as Marie-Louise Ekman. Petra Bauer's film *Sisters!*, which documents a feminist and anti-racist organisation, is discussed alongside The Showroom, the modest social organisation that distributes it. The richness of her articles creates occasionally surprising connections and reveals her sensitive approach, in line with her depiction as a curator whose activity is defined less as a specialised skill than as a state of mind that can adapt to very diverse activities.

- 7 *Collective Exhibition for a Single Body* is connected to a project which Pierre Bal-Blanc produced on commission for Kontakt, the Erste Foundation's collection devoted to the art of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, which he had previously undertaken in Athens and exhibited at documenta 14. The project is a choreography for one body, whose every move is a proposal made by an artist or based on an artwork. As indicated by the title, this is indeed a collective exhibition for a single body. It is intended as an active tool for reflection on the issues of interpretation and the social normalisations of the body. The book documents an enriched approach to works and performances produced in the former communist bloc, which sought to go unnoticed, to evade attention and to circulate in documentary form for political reasons. In this publication, every artist¹¹ is presented independently, and a description of the musical score is also included. The project's protocolary writing underlines its position within a radical understanding of Conceptual Art, further highlighted by the book's inclusion of a license limiting the conditions of sale and use. This can also be understood as Pierre Bal-Blanc's response to the question I raised of an exhibition through legal means.
- 8 The books by Pierre Bal-Blanc, Jens Hoffmann and Maria Lind, constituted of various materials, cannot replace actually experiencing curatorial projects. However, they all invent a grammar and an edited mode of expression in order to define as accurately as possible their respective leanings and approaches. In this way, they differentiate themselves from practices which could have seemed outwardly similar.

NOTES

1. *Salon to Biennial - Exhibitions That Made Art History, Volume 1: 1863-1959*, London: Phaidon, 2008 and *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions That Made Art History 1962-2002*, London: Phaidon, 2013 (Ed. by Bruce Altshuler)
2. Altshuler, Bruce. "Innovating Sites", *Site Read: Seven Curators on Their Landmark Exhibitions*, Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2019, p. 13-37
3. "Site in Context: Seth Siegelaub in conversation with Teresa Gleadowe", *Site Read*, p. 39-59
4. Winkworth, Jennifer (Licht), "Making Spaces: An Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art", *ibid.*, p. 61-77

5. Malašauskas, Raimundas, ““There is a magnet in your hands’: Hypnotic Show”, *ibid.*, p. 157-173
 6. Moore, Alan W., “Excavating Real Estate”, *ibid.*, p. 79-97
 7. See, in particular, “Conversations” (p. 213-306) and “Interviews” (p. 223-210), in: Hoffmann, Jens. *In the Meantime: Speculations on Art, Curating, and Exhibitions*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019
 8. Hoffmann, Jens. “Catalogue Texts”, *In the Meantime*, op. cit., p. 121-162
 9. Hoffmann, Jens. ““To Show or Not to Show?” / with Maria Lind”, *ibid.*, p. 273-278
 10. Lind, Maria. *Seven Years: The Rematerialisation of Art from 2011 to 2017*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019
 11. Milan Adamčiak, Geta Brătescu, Anna Daučíková, VALIE EXPORT, Stand Filok, Tomislav Gotovac, Sanja Iveković, Anna Jermolaewa, Július Koller, Jiří Kovanda, Katalin Ladik, Simon Leung, Karel Miler, Paul Neagu, Manuel Pelmuş, Petr Štembera, Mladen Stilinović, Sven Stilinović, Slaven Tolj, Goran Trbuljak.
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