

Exhibition Staging: Notes and Queries

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exhibition curating talks

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1. Urgency

Mark Nash: Does it make sense to talk about exhibition design, what defines its cutting edge, in terms of urgency? I think of El Lissitzky's Soviet Pavilion at the 1928 Pressa exhibition in Cologne or the Republican Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition. In this period, battlegrounds were drawn between socialism and fascism and architects and exhibition designers took sides – think also of the Exhibition of the Fascist revolution from 1932–34 which owed a lot to cinematic scenography.¹ Of course contemporary exhibition design does not have to respond to such major political narratives. The client's brief (whether curatorial team or museum director) is more pragmatic, having to engage with complex institutional protocols as well as inevitably limited resources.

Documenta11, I would argue is a different case. As time passes it is increasingly seen as a landmark exhibition. *The New York Times* cited Harald Szeemann's Documenta 5 and Documenta11 as the two most important exhibitions. One of the demands of the design brief for Documenta11 was to accommodate a wide range of materials: sculpture, painting, moving image, installation within a design concept which enabled both individual works and a curatorial vision concerned with urgent questions of democracy, urbanism, creolite and creolization, and truth and reconciliation to emerge clearly. Documenta11 couldn't have happened without your design, it was essential to the concept, but it would be interesting to hear your thoughts on your response to the demands of the curatorial team as well as those of individual art works.

Wilfried Kuehn: What is *exhibition staging* in terms of the architectural part? If staging in spite of its ambiguous hint to theatricality means display, what does this entail? As a prefix, the *dis-* of display seems to indicate an opposition, a negation or a separation. It points to an apparatus designed to separate a work of art from its context and to distance it from the visitor. The distancing entails a form of alienation necessary to display a work of art. If without it a work can't be exhibited, we are confronted with a problem inherent in the architecture of exhibiting: the display interferes with the artwork as it ideologically frames it. From this perspective, the 20th century could be read as a battle of art against display just as in the 19th century art was challenging the exhibition, culminating in the emancipation of painting from the Salon and eventually questioning the picture frame and at last the institution altogether. So even without an explicit ideological agenda as expressed in socialist exhibitions, the design of an exhibition has a political narrative. What seems different today in relation to the 1930s exhibitions you mention is the advent of the curatorial as a proper praxis present in exhibiting. Just in the moment art had

successfully left behind the plinth, the pedestal and the museum wall in order to claim the political narrative, using actually the entire space of the installation and the political context as a material to work with and thus as a central means of producing art, the curator entered the scene. First of all, Harald Szeemann, who introduced the curatorial narrative as a novel form of authorship. So, the question arises: what does this curatorial narrative mean in terms of spatial narratives and in that sense, what does it mean in terms of architecture? Before we speak about the design for Documenta11, it would be important to address the curatorial approach or concept at its base, I think.

2. Affective Curating

MN: A key aspect of curatorial practice involves, to adopt a psychoanalytic term, evoking in the viewer a sense of what one might call *post hoc/afterwardsness*. A 'mode of belated understanding or retroactive attribution of sexual or traumatic meaning to earlier events... [from the German word] *Nachträglichkeit*, translated as deferred action, retroaction, après-coup, afterwardsness' (Teresa de Lauretis).²

I am not sure that it is helpful to talk about the aesthetic impact of curating in terms of repressed sexual or traumatic meaning. I am simply (if anything is simple in these discussions) talking about the way the meaning of an exhibition (or for that matter a film) only emerges during the process of viewing and is then consolidated after the event. In the traditional cinema viewing one discusses the film once it has finished, but during the process of watching you may share your thoughts, feelings and questions with a partner (particularly if you are watching at home where the codes of silence and concentration are not socially enforced). In the exhibition there is a similar process – following the *parcours* set out by the exhibition organizer or curator, which you may vary depending on your particular interests, focusing attention on particular works as opposed to others and so on. Then at the end you make some judgments or observations which you couldn't do until your visit was finished: "This section was too crowded, that period of work was not so interesting, that juxtaposition was key to the whole presentation and so on".

These may seem rather general observations, but they point to a key division in modalities of curating: between the affective, and the conceptual. Both cinema and exhibitions contain both elements. The challenge for Bertolt Brecht for example was how to connect a theatre of pleasure and a theatre of instruction. My position is that an exhibition has to engage affectively before it can develop critically or conceptually. This is kind of 101 curatorial studies. Except to say that some curators and exhibition organisers simply fill a space with work to illustrate a particular theme or concept, when the challenge is to use the exhibition to connect feeling with critical judgement.

WK: *Parcours* is a key element if we speak about the visitors' experience and the double challenge of affect and critical judgement in an exhibition. Spatial design for us starts from here and not from any particular static situation. If you look at Brecht's *V-Effekt* I would argue that Documenta11 translates this necessary tension between affect and distance into a spatial model by juxtaposing the typology

of the enfilade with that of a corridor movement. Our design was based on precisely this intersection or montage: the visitors found themselves drawn into the spaces following a logic of visual presence of the art installations leading from one space to another, similar to a classical museum which is known for its spatial passages and thoroughfares, drawing you from space to space by means of works calling your attention and involving you affectively before you engage critically. This happens by precisely breaking down the distance. On the other hand, we placed transversal corridors in-between the large rooms of the enfilade, and these corridors acted as a rational grid or network of short-cuts which led you to works or rooms you specifically searched or else, it simply interrupted the enfilade for a moment and made the exhibition apparatus visible, similar to the distancing effect of Brecht's actor stepping forward and addressing the audience outside of their role.

3. Moving Image

MN: The moving image is now a key element of contemporary art practice, gallery and museum display. Both in the 1960s, when artists were first able to appropriate and work with video, and today, when it has become an artistic *lingua franca*, the moving image has provided a means for artists to develop a 'post-medium' practice, one that moves between and is not restricted to a particular medium. These practices continue to co-exist with other moving image discourses: mainstream narrative film, art cinema, documentary film, video and television, all of which mainly work with a realist politics and aesthetics and do not engage with the discourses of contemporary art.

As a medium (if it really is such) or vehicle for 'post-medium' practice, video has the potential to bridge the gap between film theory and aesthetics and contemporary art theory and practice.

As we all know, major international museums increasingly show moving image work by transforming their default white cube space into a black box. Gallery design from the 19th century only used natural illumination (indeed until recently one was able to see paintings only lit by natural light in the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London). The modernist white cube involves a mix of natural and daylight light sources. However, moving image work provides its own light and its own architecture – traditionally that of the cinema building. It is interesting that very few of even of the most modern museums take that into consideration and design good black box environments.

However, moving image artists in Documenta11 were not interested in being in a cinema. They wanted to be in the cut and thrust of the exhibition, so we had to build projection spaces in the exhibition galleries even for single-screen work that would have been perfectly suited to the cinema! This raises issues of exhibition scenography. With even the best cinemas – we had the Bali cinema in the Kulturbahnhof to play with – this option was regarded as a comfortable dead end in exhibition terms. We had an elaborate 'supporting' cinema programme, drawing on the oeuvre of artists represented in the exhibition 'proper' but only one artist, Jonas Mekas, was just shown in the cinema. (I suspect that this was because he was ill at the time and was not able to focus on the exact mode of presentation of his almost 5-hour long work *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* from 2000).

With Documenta11 you had to confront many of these issues concerning the presentation of the moving image. A substantial number of artists presented moving image works: Ulrike Ottinger who wanted as I recall three cinema spaces in parallel! (In the end she had two), Craigie Horsfield whose 24-hour work demanded high-end computer equipment with which to edit his multi-screen documentary of a single day in the Canary Islands, and Isaac Julien who had an architect designed back projection structure to accommodate in his space. As I recall our discussions, you were able to adjust the spatial configuration (particularly in the Binding Brauerei) in relation to the needs of individual art works. At the same time, as I am sure you would admit, you were also learning about the complex needs of contemporary works. Sound penetration was an issue which came up in our discussions and needed resolution late on in the installation process.

WK: Starting from the idea that an exhibition, unlike a theater performance, does not use stages in order to stage a work, the point in time-based installations in my view is the visitor's movement. The moving images and the moving visitors then enter into a relationship that needs some attention. Unless you build a cinema replica, you have to deal with the interference and with some sort of friction between these two movements. Still, this interference is useful, similar once again to Brecht's distancing and to the fact that you often visit an exhibition with someone which makes you speak and share your perceptions and thoughts while watching, as you have already mentioned. We see that the visitor as a subject may claim a space that is defined by their proper understanding and positioning, and it may change during time following subjective movement. As architects, we are interested in this spatial question as one of typologies and it turns out that we can conceive an exhibition from this perspective going back to historical precedents like urban spaces and the garden. Moving through a landscape garden like Stowe, you are driven by a vital relation between your gaze and your body movement, which makes you change your physical position in relation to architectural presences like pavilions: buildings you see while you move, buildings that act as viewpoints which make you move, buildings that are related to one another in such a way that your body is moving in-between them. Spaces are here organized according to time, the garden being a viewing machine that presupposes a moving subject.

At Documenta11 we had to deal with the paradox of fitting these experiences into the dense fabric we laid out inside the Binding building, thus having to fit landscape-like experiences of strolling and viewing into a grid-like urban network. As a result, we explored the spatial model of a labyrinth, which reflects both the urban layout and the garden. While we pursued this rather typological path working with you, the curators, we were aware that once the artists would come in with their works, there would be yet another moment of spatial transformation. On presenting our layout for Documenta11 in the competition phase when we didn't have any artists' names or exhibit lists, our idea was morphological and typological in the same way as it would have been in an urban design: you know that the form you give a building ensemble is based on the spatial relations and in-between spaces while you don't yet know the exact shape of the single buildings. Still, it differs from a masterplan as it is not abstract but concrete in terms of the specific spatial situations it designs. If you accept this analogy, the artists

who come in act as authors of the singular buildings or plots, in that they give precise subjective forms to each part of the layout. The level of appropriation that comes with the artistic intervention needs autonomy within the spatial boundaries of the urban design. This meant we had to grant each artist the possibility to realize their installation almost as if it had been a solo show while we had to keep in mind the relations in-between the pieces. At this point, conflicts necessarily arise. The sound of one work spills over into an adjacent installation, access to a space featuring projections needs to be limited in order to keep the light out, and the ensuing sound and light locks, once put into place, are not supposed to block viewing axes or curatorial relations between the works.

In general, if we consider that almost each artist conceives their work as an installation, including painters like Luc Tuymans at the Binding brewery, the exhibition architect clearly cannot provide the space as such but needs to provide a framework in which spaces would be able to take hold. Ultimately, here the white cube actually proves to be a naked cube, its whiteness an absence of surface altogether and the level of architectural presence a mirror-image of the curatorial narrative present in a group exhibition.

4. Theatrical Fields

MN: The art exhibition can become a stage, not the traditional proscenium with its clear demarcation between performance and viewer, but rather, as Ute Meta Bauer has argued,³ a more flexible and fluid space within which the viewer can become a participant in the production and relay of the individual works and their meanings. The art exhibition as a whole can be, indeed is almost inevitably, theatrical in one way or another. Curating involves a presentation of art works analogous to theatrical presentation. The gallery is a stage into which the visitors/audience are invited. The building or exhibition architecture propose a spectacular logic, which is also a subjective logic, in the sense that the exhibition proposes a series of tableaux within which the viewer is invited to participate in a process of identification/dis-identification. Curating is really an architectural *mise-en-scène*, *moving people through exhibition spaces is like moving actors on the stage.*

*Wilfried, perhaps you would like to comment on connections between stage design and curatorial practice and how exhibitions are choreographed and mounted? It seems to me that the challenge, particularly for architects, is how to respond to contemporary subjectivity. If, as I would argue, subjectivity is dispersed between a wide range of platforms which deliver interpellations (to use Althusser's term), then how do you elaborate a building form which is both contemporary as well as able to respond to future developments? Contemporary museum practice seems increasingly to rely on conferences and seminars, dance and performance, music concerts and so on to keep visitor numbers high. In the past, these practices were accommodated in an all-purpose auditorium/theatre, even if in most cases the architects were not able to make allowances for the demands of specific media (e.g. the projector throw, aspect ratio and sound damping required for cinema) and which often have competing demands. In many ways I think we are still working with classical models (the Greek temple, the arena, the agora) and the challenge now is to rethink this vocabulary. *Focusing on notions of theatre and theatricality might be one way forward.**

WK: For Boris Groys, who contributed a text to the Documenta11 catalogue and who actually brought me to HfG Karlsruhe in 2006, we designed the exhibition *Dream Factory Communism* which took place in 2003 at the Frankfurt Schirn Kunsthalle. Theatricality played an important role in his curatorial concept, which combined large-scale Socialist Realism pieces from the 1930s in an intriguing dialogue with footnote-like works by Sots Art painters Komar&Melamid and Erik Bulatov, and a large installation by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. While the exhibition showed mainly Stalinist era art, it actually spoke about the relation between avantgarde and mass culture. Stated otherwise, the exhibition was realist and about realism beyond the socialist (as Groys pointed out, socialist realism meant socialist in content, realist in form). In order to do so, it consciously addressed the western visitor and their Hollywood-shaped sensibilities, evoking in them an uncanny familiarity. Theatricality was used here neither in the classical way of scenography nor in a psychological sense. Instead, I would argue, it was used as a self-reflection, as a way to question the role and the means of the exhibition as forms of discourse. Ekaterina Degot (in her *Dream Factory* essay intitled *The Collectivization of Modernism*) emphasizes the shift from 'project' to 'projection' in Soviet avantgarde art around 1919: how mediatic phenomena took over from material objects and how they shaped an understanding of art as mass distribution without regard for the original. If we look at this shift to 'projection' as an anticipation of capitalist realism exemplified by Pop Art, it becomes clear why 'realism', be it socialist or capitalist, should not be identified with the realist figuration of subject matter. Realism actually means that art identifies with reality instead of commenting it. I would understand your proposal of addressing contemporary subjectivity and the theatrical in this realist sense: the exhibition puts the visitor in a position of subjective experience that breaks down the distance of contemplation we know from the 19th century museum. Instead of searching for the aura, the exhibition offers a situation in which a field of relations can be produced by the visiting subject. If we let go of the classical museum, we certainly don't want to replace it with the temple, the arena or the agora. All of these can be used though as momentary appropriations in designing an exhibition. Returning to our point of departure, what seems most relevant is the way we confront display and I will give you an example.

For Artists Space NY and Kunsthalle Dusseldorf we designed a traveling exhibition on Capitalist Realism in 2014 which featured many of Sigmar Polke's and Gerhard Richter's paintings from the 1960s. In those years, these works were shown in settings like gardens and furniture stores, everyday situations in contrast with the museum. Today, the original works need to be protected from natural light and from humidity and of course from theft and vandalism, thus calling for extended display mechanisms. Our idea was to show them without any display, to place them on the floor, lean them against walls and even windows, exposing them to bright sunlight and the visitor's very immediate presence. In order to do so, we made a simple suggestion: exhibit reproductions only, show excellent life-size prints of the original works and place them freely in the space so that visitors can come very close. The curators followed through with our concept, losing an important public sponsor as a casualty who insisted on original works for them to co-finance the exhibition. Meanwhile Gerhard Richter was excited about showing facsimiles. Display turned out to be a way of breaking down a distance and involving the visitors' subjectivity on another level. Although the exhibition consisted of objects, in truth these objects were 'projections' in Degot's terminology and thus on the same

plane as video projections or exhibition prints of a photography. If we use the exhibition as a way of installing diverse media freely and beyond typological restrictions of white or black cubes, we can think of the contemporary museum as a place that is organized like a city and a garden where situations and spatial constellations are to be conquered by the visitor. Documenta11 could serve as a model!

5. Epilogue

MN: We are familiar with the discussion of the exhibition space as a neutral, white cube. Here are the curators of a project of the 2006 Shanghai Biennial: "The modern art museum is a "neutral" exhibition space, pure and evenly lit, earning the moniker, the "white cube". The "white cube" is an architectural space that echoes the Christian religious space; it resonates with spiritual references - there a wide range of art works may be canonised as "works of fine art". In it, art works are turned into objects worthy of adulation and focused gazing. On the other hand, the "white cube" is also a system of partitioning from nature, separating art works from the living world from which it arises while simultaneously keeping apart the creative situation from the conditions of connoisseurship, and separating the space of art appreciation from that of daily experience".⁴ The aim of the Yellow Box project (its title controversially introducing a racially stereotypical colour into the white cube!) was to "investigate issues of connoisseurship and display that are embedded in Chinese traditional spaces". To this end they staged an exhibition in Xiao Ximen (Minor West Gate) - newly constructed traditional wood frame vernacular architecture built under the auspices of the Qingpu District Government.

This project has two resonances for our discussion. The first concerns the use of vernacular domestic architecture, not just in this context to emphasise the connection of traditional architecture with that of literati collection and connoisseurship, but also more generally as one form of exhibition space in the West (e.g. the Sir John Soane Museum housed in his London town house). Whilst many collections of contemporary art are also displayed in domestic settings, there seems to be a desire on the part of more wealthy collectors to present their collection in a purpose-built museum space. This move devalues the importance of domestic scale in the appreciation of most modern and contemporary art.

The second concerns the global, post-colonial context for contemporary art exhibition today, for the presentation of which Documenta11 was crucial. This raises the question of culturally appropriate forms of presentation, western white cube minimalism being one (increasingly inappropriate) such.

References

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