

# **Question V: What Is an Exhibition?**

**Text: Elena Filipovic**



## WHAT IS AN EXHIBITION?

Elena Filipovic

WHAT IS AN EXHIBITION? Artists have been aware of the implications of the question for a long time. Gustave Courbet's 1855 rogue pavilion (across the way from the official Salon), featuring a self-financed presentation of his own paintings, was perhaps the first and most dramatic indication of artists' desires to reimagine the way institutions organized and displayed their work. And from some of the earliest avant-gardes (Constructivists, Dadaists, Surrealists) to the present, artists have been the most active instigators of critical responses to, and reinventions of, the exhibition as a form.<sup>1</sup>

Think of Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore's 1957 exhibition, bluntly titled *An Exhibit*, which had no images and "no subject, no theme other than itself; it was self-referential,"<sup>2</sup> thus making the display of *display* both its content and driving methodology. Or of Graciela Carnevale's 1968 exhibition in Rosario: At the height of the Argentine military dictatorship, she locked up guests at the opening, who only realized afterward that their sequestration in the empty exhibition space (and the resultant confusion, fear, paranoia, and eventual escape) *was* the exhibition. Or of Martha Rosler's 1989 *If You Lived Here*. . . , an exhibition series that refused to be the solo show requested by the institution, and instead offered a makeshift, disorderly mix of art and non-art items related to housing injustices in New York that delivered an implicit critique of the host institution. Or of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's 1991 *Every Week There Is Something Different*, set against a backdrop of seismic shifts in recent American history (who could ignore, for instance, that the first Gulf War was at that very moment changing the rules of politics and war weekly, if

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1. Art history has been exceedingly slow to account for the importance of the exhibition as a cultural form. And if it seems vital that we finally take adequate account of the history of exhibitions, the goal is less about simply creating a new object for art history, and more about undertaking real discussions about the role and repercussions of the exhibition. See Bruce Altschuler's *The Avant Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994) and *From Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions That Made Art History, vol. 1, 1863-1959* (New York and London: Phaidon Press, 2008).

2. "Pop Daddy: An Interview with Richard Hamilton by Hans Ulrich Obrist," *Tate Magazine* no. 4 (March-April 2003): <http://www.tate.org.uk/magazine/issue4/popdaddy.htm>.

not daily?), and offering a checklist and arrangement that the artist changed each week, so that the exhibition was not a singular constellation of artworks or a single, consistent message, but instead several constellations, each revealing how one object put next to another could provoke different readings of both. Or even of David Hammons's unannounced 1994 exhibition at a shop for African objects, in which items made by the artist and the regular wares of the shop were mixed with little indication, through presentation or price, of their differing status. These are just a few examples among many.

Each artist's approach was different. But long before the advent of that professional species—the curator—and not letting up in the face of its spectacular rise, each found a way to lay bare and counter some of the implicit and most stalwart expectations of the exhibition as such. Their example makes it apparent that this seemingly simple question—What is an exhibition?—should be asked, all the better to interrogate the premises that quietly support and perpetuate the most conventional notions of “the exhibition.”

The critical consensus today would seem to be that an exhibition—from its 15th-century roots in legal terminology as the displaying of evidence—is, in the most basic terms, an organized presentation of a selection of items to a public.<sup>3</sup> Simple enough. And reductive enough, even presuming that the “presentation” can be physical or virtual, real or projected; the “items” either spectacular or discursive, material or immaterial; and the “public” either known or unknown, composed of one or many. But if the roots in legalese suggest that what is held up for view aims to convince and demonstrate like evidence in a court of law, resulting in exhibitions organized to speak conclusively, authoritatively, and absolutely, then the tacit understanding of “the exhibition” seems problematic.

What exactly are we viewing, as spectators, or contributing to, as artists, or organizing, as curators? No theater of proofs, the exhibition should be a performance of another sort. Of course it can be many things, but perhaps first and foremost it is not a neutral thing. In its many lives, it has been understood as a scrim on which ideology is projected, a machine for the manufacture of meaning, a theater of bourgeois culture, a site for the disciplining of citizen-subjects, or a *mise-en-scène* of unquestioned values (linear time, teleological history,

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3. This definition paraphrases the way Wikipedia and most dictionaries define the term.

master narratives).<sup>4</sup> Political powers and the institutions they support may long have been invested in making the exhibition each of those things at different moments in history. But if we adopt instead the model of the exhibition that artists have at times called for—critical, oppositional, irreverent, provisional, questioning—the term might be understood in an altogether different way.

*The exhibition?* A single category term speaks for what can have such wildly different aims and ambitions, with vast intellectual, aesthetic, and ideological—not to mention geographic, economic, or institutional—differences between its organizing bodies. Retrospective, monographic, survey, group, biennial, triennial: each denotes a variant in the category. To say nothing about the fact that the tenor of the result can be alternately overwrought, spectacular, modest, sensitive, eloquent, transgressive . . . The list can go on and on. All equally merit the term “exhibition.”

Implicit in the question is thus not so much what the meaning of the exhibition *is* as a category/genre/object, but what it *does*, which is to say, how exhibitions function and matter, and how they participate in the construction and administration of the experience of the items they present.

It goes without saying that, without artists and artworks, the exhibitions of the sort we are discussing would not be possible (and curators would be, quite simply, out of a job). Artworks are the essential fulcrum around which both exhibition and curator turn. Still, an exhibition is more than the series of artworks produced by a list of artists, occupying a given space and hung more or less high on a wall. And no matter how vital ideas may be to its preparation, conception, or thematization, an exhibition is not a merely transparent representation of ideas (or ideology or politics) in space. Organize the very same artworks in the very same space differently, give the exhibition a new title, and you can potentially elicit an entirely different experience or reading of the contents. This suggests that an exhibition isn't only the sum of its artworks, but also the relationships created between them, the dramaturgy around them, and the discourse that frames them.

Can it be argued, then, that what a particular exhibition *is* lies as much in its contents as in its method and form? And, further, that one cannot actually separate any of those elements as if one were not part

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4. See Donald Preziosi, *The Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phan-tasms of Modernity* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

of the other in the construction of an exhibition? In other words, that there can be no such thing as contents (artworks) participating in a show which are not concerned, in the very moment of being exhibited and for as long as they are exhibited, by what brings them together and what company they find themselves in? This is not to say that the presentation *is* the message or context *is* content. And make no mistake: This is no plea for the status of the curator as an artist or for the curatorial conceit to itself approach the status of quasi-artwork.<sup>5</sup> What is at stake is an ethics of curating, a responsibility toward the very methodology that constitutes the practice.<sup>6</sup> That responsibility is also the responsibility to attend to artworks in a way that is adequate to the risks that they take.<sup>7</sup> I have seen this done before. The exhibitions (whether organized by an artist or a professional curator) I've admired most and have found most engaging and thought provoking seem to have developed their methodology and form from the material intelligence and risk of the artworks brought together. In these, the artwork was generative of the exhibition itself.

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5. The understanding of the artwork, artist, and curator on which this essay is founded could not be further from the idea that the curator is a producer or coproducer of the artwork itself, as argued for in numerous essays by theorists and curators, including Boris Groys, "Multiple Authorship" in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, eds. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 93–100; or, more recently, John Roberts, "The Curator as Producer: Aesthetic Reason, Non-aesthetic Reason, and Infinite Ideation," *Manifesta Journal* no. 10 (2009–10): 51–59.

6. The conception of the exhibition that this essay pleads for is diametrically opposed to the idea of the artwork as impotent and in need of being "cured" by the curator. See the following essays by Boris Groys: "Politics of Installation," *e-flux journal* no. 2 (January 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/31>; "Curator as Iconoclast," *History and Theory*, *Bezael* no. 2, [www.scribd.com/doc/47605999/Boris-Groys-The-Curator-as-Iconoclast](http://www.scribd.com/doc/47605999/Boris-Groys-The-Curator-as-Iconoclast); and "On the Curatorship," *Art Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008): 43–52. All of these contain a variant on the following statement: "In its origin, it seems, the work of art is sick, helpless; in order to see it, viewers must be brought to it as visitors are brought to a bed-ridden patient by hospital staff. It is in fact no coincidence that the word 'curator' is etymologically related to 'cure.' Curating is curing. The process of curating cures the image's powerlessness, its incapacity to present itself. The artwork needs external help, it needs the exhibition and the curator to become visible. The medicine that makes the image appear healthy—that makes the image literally appear, and do so in the best light—is the exhibition."

7. After struggling for the words to describe this responsibility, I encountered the notion in Briony Fer's brilliant *Eva Hesse: Studio Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). There she speaks directly to the role of the art historian attending to artworks in ways "appropriate to the risks they take," but this idea matters just as powerfully for the curator of an exhibition. I have borrowed her beautiful formulation here.

You might then say that an exhibition is the form of its arguments and the way that its method, in the process of constituting the exhibition, lays bare the premises that underwrite the forming of judgment, the conditioning of perception, and the construction of history. It is the thinking and the debate it incites. It is also the trajectory of intellectual and aesthetic investments that build up to it, for artist and curator alike. But, most importantly, it is the way in which its very premises, classificatory systems, logic, and structure can, in the very moment of becoming an exhibition, be unhinged by the artworks in it. If artworks are simultaneously the elements in an exhibition's construction of meaning while being, dialectally, subjected to its staging, they can also at moments articulate aesthetic and intellectual positions or define modes of engagement that transcend or even defy their thematic or structural exhibition frames.<sup>8</sup> The artwork can, in short, resist the very exhibition that purports to hold it neatly in place. That is the idea of the work of art to which I would like to subscribe.

That said, we have all witnessed the scene: an exhibition whose heavy-handed curatorial premise and lack of sensitivity instrumentalizes the artworks it presents. Such an exhibition may leave even a great artwork little possibility to articulate itself against its context—although I'd like to think that the force of the artwork can still unsettle what the curator says he or she is showing or doing in the exhibition. Much better, of course, is when the curator doesn't seek to illustrate curatorial ideas with artworks (as if exhibition making were like lining up docile ducks in a row), but instead allows the particular recalcitrance of the artwork to be a model for thinking what the exhibition could be. Either way, because the exhibition is a temporary state of affairs, its framing of the work of art—whether done sensitively or badly—is, by definition, fleeting. One might even say that if it can last indefinitely, it is simply not an exhibition. The frozen immobility of Donald Judd's Marfa, Texas, compound is not an exhibition, I would argue, but a shrine, a temple, a permanent collection—and that notwithstanding the fact that the contents are displayed for view, that Judd himself conceived their presentation as the ideal and ultimate public presentation of a specific grouping of works, and not

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**8. This has always seemed the force of exhibitions as cultural objects and what utterly separates them from, say, illustrated essays, which might on the surface seem like an appropriate comparison. After all, illustrated essays (or even an art historian's slide lecture) create juxtapositions, comparisons, and relationships between (images of) artworks accompanied by theoretical arguments (maybe even the same ones that might be expressed in an exhibition catalogue or press release), but both lack the material confrontation with the artwork itself, which can refuse the very conventions that purport to hold it in place.**

notwithstanding whatever other exhibition-like qualities it might be said to have. For there is an immutability and conclusiveness in a presentation conceived with no end in sight that is contrary to what an exhibition is.

The ephemerality and lack of absoluteness of an exhibition might be its most important features. Against the model of the exhibition as the display of some indelible proof, one might admit how subjective an enterprise it is, and inevitably so. I can't help thinking here of *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes's response to Jean-Paul Sartre's claim that all texts involve the mutual exchange of responsibility between reader and writer (incidentally, the latter were gathered in a publication titled with the question *What Is Literature?*). Barthes is in partial agreement with Sartre but he argues that *how* a text is written—its form—is as important to the politics of its exchange as what the text says. And, he insists, one cannot escape from the fact that there *is* a form. Even the kind of writing that attempts to achieve the appearance of neutrality, a “zero degree” of style, denying that it even has a form, in fact has one.<sup>9</sup> As with writing, so it is with exhibition making, with some curators and art institutions invested in the appearance of a zero degree of the exhibition and the pretense that the artwork selection, organization, dramaturgy, and discursive framework could not have been otherwise, as if their choices represent the unflappable truth of History, instead of one possible reading among many. That is how dominant ideas, positions, and values solidify and get perpetuated.

But what if we thought of the exhibition as the site where deeply entrenched ideas and forms can come undone, where the ground on which we stand is rendered unstable? Instead of the “production of knowledge” so frequently cited in institutional statements of purpose, an exhibition might provoke feelings of irreverence or doubt, or an experience that is at once emotional, sensual, political, and intellectual while being decidedly not predetermined, scripted, or directed by the curator or the institution. In my experience, the artwork can change (and often does change) what I think I know, and an exhibition is at its best when its curator can admit that. Celebrated here, then, is the exhibition as a place for engagement, impassioned thinking, and visceral experience (and of course even pleasure, as Dieter Roelstraete so vociferously calls for elsewhere in this volume), but not necessarily as the platform for the sort of empirical knowing that we have all too often been led to believe is important to the artwork and the exhibition alike. As Susan Sontag explains:

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9. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).



A work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing *in* the world, not just a text or commentary *on* the world. . . . [Artworks] present information and evaluations. But their distinctive feature is that they give rise not to conceptual knowledge (which is the distinctive feature of discursive or scientific knowledge—e.g., philosophy, sociology, psychology, history) but to something like an excitation, a phenomenon of commitment, judgment in a state of thralldom or captivation. Which is to say that the knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than knowledge of something (like a fact or a moral judgment) in itself.<sup>10</sup>

The defense of the particular excitation Sontag speaks about could be the intangible contract the exhibition offers both to visitors and artists. It cannot, in that case, attempt to educate and prove *the* answer, but might instead encourage unconventional ways of looking at and reading the artwork (and then the world). The following may perhaps serve as an example. Collected in the pages of his book *Inside the White Cube* is Brian O'Doherty's description of a major Claude Monet exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1960. In O'Doherty's telling, the exhibition's curator, William Seitz, had decided to take the frames off the paintings. He hung the works, frameless, on the gallery walls; sometimes he even inset the canvases to make them flush with the wall itself. In a single gesture, Seitz showed Monet's paintings to be something other than portable commodities used to elegantly line bourgeois homes, something other than polite renditions of water lilies in dappled light. In their stead, Seitz stressed what he saw as their "implicit flatness and doubts about the limiting edge" (as O'Doherty so keenly observes).<sup>11</sup> Seitz advanced a reading

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10. Susan Sontag, "On Style" in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Picador, 2001): 21.

11. Description detailed in Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press, 1999): 25: "Impressionist pictures which assert their flatness and their doubts about the limiting edge are still sealed off in Beaux-arts frames that do little more than announce Old Master- and monetary-status. When William C. Seitz took off the frames for his great Monet show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1960, the undressed canvases looked a bit like reproductions until you saw how they began to hold the wall. Though the hanging had its eccentric moments, it read the pictures' relation to the wall correctly and, in a rare act of curatorial daring, followed up the implications. Seitz also set some of the Monets flush with the wall. Continuous with the wall, the pictures took on some of the rigidity of tiny murals. The surfaces turned hard as the picture plane was 'over-literalized.' The difference between the easel picture and the mural was clarified."

of Monet's particular brand of modernity and presented it so that viewers could confront the artist's oeuvre as they never had before. It seems to have riveted the young artists who saw it, not surprisingly, since they were at that moment grappling precisely with questions of illusionism, edge, and the relationship of easel painting to the wall.

Reading about that show as a curator just starting out, I recall being in turns impressed and slightly disturbed by the audacity of Seitz's curating. "What if he had been wrong?" I remember thinking to myself. That was before I had realized that it isn't (or at least shouldn't be) a question of right or wrong, of proving something to be true or not. To propose a reading of an artwork is different than to claim to know what that artwork ultimately or definitely "means"; the artwork, after all, is not an algebraic exercise with a single given answer, determined by the set of equivalencies between a certain form and a certain meaning. In other words, the exhibition need not be the place for an empirical object lesson, but instead the place for us to take the risk of reading an artwork against the grain of its already accepted historical meanings. In understanding this, I remember also understanding that, somehow, an exhibition is always made (perhaps can only be made) from the vantage point of the moment in which it finds itself (and Seitz's moment was one of Color Field painting, Clement Greenberg, a young Frank Stella, and, of course, the discourse on flatness). This realization underscored the fact that an exhibition, no matter what else it is, is not abstract or ahistorical, but a concrete situation located in a particular place and time.

At their best, exhibitions venture out on a limb, allowing all of the strange and wondrous incommensurability of the artwork to provoke its own terms of engagement. Such an endeavor could only be subjective in the extreme, and, as a result, fallible, inexhaustive, potentially contradictory, and provisional—all things that some of the best exhibitions in my memory have dared to be. The task, I think, is to celebrate exhibition making in which the immediacy and persistent intelligence of an artwork (and, through it, its particular way of responding to the world) might lead to the construction of exhibitions that could offer themselves as a counterproposal, an idyll, an antidote of sorts to everything else (the media, the market, the culture industry, History . . .) that claims to know what the "right" art and narratives are at any given moment. An exhibition should strive, instead, to operate according to a counter authoritative logic and, in so doing, become a crucible for transformative experience and thinking.

What is to be done, then, with what Documenta artistic

director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev recently referred to as “this obsolete 20th-century object, the exhibition”?<sup>12</sup> We can, of course, remain mortgaged to the idea that the exhibition cannot be other than what it has already conventionally been or what some so doggedly want it to be, in which case it might indeed be obsolete as a valid enterprise. Or we could lobby for it to be what exceptional examples in the recent and distant past have already pointed to. In that case, there is no reason the question “What is an exhibition?” should ever lose its relevance. It should probably be asked at regular intervals, again and again, lest we forget that the exhibition must not become calcified into an inviolable or unquestionable edifice.

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**12. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “Letter to a friend,” an open letter first circulated by email via the *DOCUMENTA (13)* newsletter and recently published as the third**