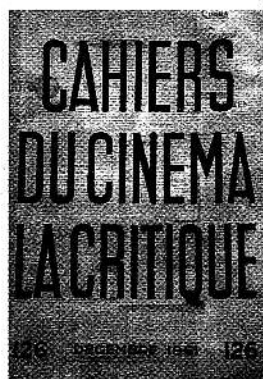


# The Exhibitionist

NO. 4

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## ON THE VALUE OF A HISTORY OF EXHIBITIONS

Julian Myers

1. Florence Derieux, "Introduction" in *Harald Szeemann: Individual Methodology* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2007): 8.

2. See this affirmed, for example, by the curator Christophe Cherix in his introduction to Hans Ulrich Obrist's *A Brief History of Curating* (Zürich and Dijon: JRP Ringier and Les presses du réel, 2008), for example, or in more qualified prose by Teresa Gleadowe in her introduction in *Exhibiting the New Art: Op Losse Schroeven and When Attitudes Become Form, 1969* (London: Afterall, 2010): 8–11.

3. See Jenelle Porter's essay "Pictures at an Exhibition" in *The Exhibitionist* no. 2. Other examples include a 2008 reinstallation at Zwirner & Wirth of Dan Flavin's 1984 exhibition at the Green Gallery; artist Mario García Torres's 2008 "reproduction" of the 1989 exhibition 9 at Castelli at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, a reprising by Edward Robinson in 2009 of the 1975 exhibition at George Eastman House in Rochester; and *Sol Lewitt: A Mercer Union Legacy Project*, organized by Sarah Robayo Sheridan at Mercer Union in Toronto in 2010.

4. I should admit to my complicity in this, having produced for Afterall an essay on Szeemann's 1983 exhibition *The Tendency Towards the Total Artwork* (see "Totality: A Guided Tour," *Afterall* 20, 2009: 100–107) as well as an edited volume on same: *HSZ: As is/As if* (San Francisco: California College of the Arts, 2010).

In her introduction to *Harald Szeemann: Individual Methodology*, the curator and art historian Florence Derieux asserts, "It is now widely accepted that the art history of the second half of the twentieth century is no longer a history of artworks, but a history of exhibitions."<sup>1</sup> Articulated in the pages of one of the most visible publications in a wave of recent scholarship around Szeemann, such wide acceptance has become increasingly hard to dispute.<sup>2</sup> One need only take in the frequent restaging in institutions of historical exhibitions (Artists Space's 2001 "fragmentary re-creation" of Douglas Crimp's 1977 exhibition *Pictures* is a signal example);<sup>3</sup> the establishment and proliferation of courses devoted to this history in curatorial training programs and universities; a new pitch in academic study of the history of art away from monographic studies and toward essays on exhibitions; and a raft of new publications, from the modest to the monumental.

Scanning my bookshelf, alongside *Harald Szeemann: Individual Methodology* sits the 2007 catalogue raisonné of Szeemann's exhibitions titled *Harald Szeemann: with by through because towards despite: Catalogue of All Exhibitions 1957–2005*; Bruce Altshuler's *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions That Made Art History, 1863–1959*, of which the first volume emerged in 2008; Hans Ulrich Obrist's 2008 collection of interviews with individual curators, *A Brief History of Curating*; and Afterall's inaugural volume (published in 2010) of a series of exhibition histories, beginning with Christian Rattemeyer's *Exhibiting the New Art: Op Losse Schroeven and When Attitudes Become Form, 1969*. Their bibliographies reveal that this new preoccupation emerges largely from European publishing houses; Harald Szeemann's name, threaded through their pages, makes it hard to distinguish this new area of historical study from the hagiography of one man. Leave aside that this consolidation of reputation has occurred around *When Attitudes Become Form* (1968), an exhibition that, unlike his later trio *Bachelor Machines* (1975), *Monte Verità* (1978), and *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* (1983), might not actually guarantee such claims for historical importance.<sup>4</sup> Pile on compilations dealing with curating more generally, which sometimes embark

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on historical studies of this kind, and whose value varies from one author to the next: *Thinking About Exhibitions* (1996), *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (2007), *Curating Subjects* (2007), *The Biennial Reader* (2010), et cetera. Five years ago this shelf would have been sparsely populated indeed; now its joints creak under the weight.

Yet wide acceptance of an assertion does not demonstrate its veracity, or explain the reasons such a momentous shift may have occurred, or explore its implications for the myriad objects, institutions, relationships, and exchanges that make up the field of contemporary art and exhibitions. Which is simply to say that the work of critical thinking on this momentous “turn” in the study of art remains before us. So, what gives? One might see this development as part and parcel of a culture newly attentive to “extras” and supplements of all kinds, for example the current fad in music for bonus tracks, or in movies for making-of documentaries and commentaries. Following this line of thinking, the history of exhibitions might be merely a secondary effect of an academic, institutional, and para-institutional discourse about art, in desperate pursuit of “added values” of its own (followed in quick succession with “education” or some such, ad infinitum).<sup>5</sup>

As my introductory quote suggests, though, this ambiguous surplus is now dreaming of hegemony. A sustained analysis of institutions of art (museums and galleries)—which post-Althusserian inquiry still largely saw itself as a supplement to the history of art—has given way something more triumphant, autonomous, and central, but as yet more difficult to pin down: a history of exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> One might object that such a history would be a contradiction in terms, for of course exhibitions have been one primary infrastructure or apparatus in modernity for producing and mediating historical knowledge. That such infrastructures have themselves become common objects of historical attention in the academy (say, the history of history) will not completely dispel a suspicion that this is in some fatal way a meta-conversation, academic in the worst way.

It will already be evident from my title that I don’t fully agree with this assessment. One of the strengths of historical inquiry is to make such mediating frameworks contingent and visible as one possibility among others—not just to explain but to *denature* the present. And indeed it turns out that exhibitions are not some ineffable infrastructure at all, but that they are something historical. They appeared at a particular moment, designed to answer a certain set of specific historical conditions. Forms of display go very deep into human social behavior, from the display of medieval relics to cave paintings and beyond, but the “exhibition” as such was invented in the Enlightenment in Western Europe, as a new form of publicness for a new sort of audience. Listen, for example, to the French painter Jacques-Louis David, who argued for this new public format in a pamphlet published on the occasion of his

5. See Diedrich Diederichsen on Marx’s theory of *Mehrwert* in *On (Surplus) Value in Art: Reflections 01* (Rotterdam and Berlin: Witte de With and Sternberg Press, 2008): 21–31; also my “Art History as Added Value,” *SFMOMA Open Space*, July 20, 2009 (<http://blog.sfmoma.org/2009/07/art-history-as-added-value/>).

6. Brian O’Doherty’s *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (first published in *Artforum* in 1976, then later collected by UC Press in 2000) is a good example of this.

7. Jacques-Louis David, "The Painting of the Sabines" in *From the Classicists to the Impressionists: Art and Architecture in the 19th Century*, ed. Elizabeth Gilmore Holt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986): 5.

8. Thomas Carlyle, quoted by Richard Wagner at the beginning of his essay "Art and Revolution" in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Volume 1: The Art-Work of the Future*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Kuhn & Co., Ltd., 1895): 23.

9. Holt, *From the Classicists*, 2.

10. Described as such on February 26, 1760, by Francis Hayman, chairman of the Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. Originally compiled by Edward Edwards, and cited at length in Algernon Graves, *The Society of Artists of Great Britain 1760-1791; The Free Society of Artists 1761-1783* (London: G. Bell and Sons), 303.

1799 exhibition at the National Palace of the Sciences and the Arts (I hope the reader will forgive me for quoting at length):

For a painter the custom of exhibiting his works before the eyes of his fellow citizens, in return for which they make individual payment, is not new.... In our own time this custom of showing the arts to the public is practiced in England and is called *Exhibition*. The pictures of the death of General Wolf and of Lord Chatham, painted by our contemporary [Benjamin] West, and shown by him, won him immense sums. The custom of exhibition existed long before this, and was introduced in the last century by [Anthony] Van Dyck; the public came in crowds to admire his work; he gained by this means a considerable fortune. Is this not an idea as just as it is wise, which brings to art the means of existing for itself, of supporting itself by its own resources, thus to enjoy the noble independence suited to genius, without which the fire that inspires it is soon extinguished? On the other hand, could there be a more dignified and honorable means of gaining a share of the fruit of his labors than for an artist to submit his works to the judgment of the public and to await the recompense that they will wish to make him. If his work is mediocre, public opinion will soon mete out justice to it. The author, acquiring neither glory nor material reward, would learn by hard experience ways of mending his faults and capturing the attention of the spectators by more happy conceptions.<sup>7</sup>

This is soon after the "celestial-infernal events" of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror.<sup>8</sup> David, called by some the "Robespierre of the brush," had been imprisoned for his enthusiastic involvement as a propagandist and pageant master in the radical Jacobin government.<sup>9</sup> The artwork he planned to show, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, was his first major work after his release. In the new Republican France, he could no longer count on the patronage of the church (he'd repudiated it), the Royal Academy (as a member of the Directorate, he'd liquidated it; the exhibition was in its former hall), or the aristocracy (whose executions he'd witnessed and supported). "Exhibition" was called up to answer his predicament as a new citizen of the Republic: For whom was his art now intended? And a connected question: How can an artist support himself in these unfamiliar circumstances?

For the Classicist painter, all things led inexorably to the example of Greece. David quotes Abbé Jean-Jacques Barthélemy's *Voyage du jeune Anacharsis* (1787), which referred to a "habit of public exhibition of paintings" among the Greeks. More proximate examples are the bourgeois exhibiting societies founded by artists in England in the 18th century: the Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, out of which developed the Society of Artists of Great Britain, and then the dissident Free Society of Artists. (Their fractious dealings later led to the founding of the Royal Academy of Arts in London.) These societies imagined their "new practice" of temporary public exhibitions as both educational and entrepreneurial—an enterprise that early on came to include charging a shilling at the door.<sup>10</sup> This new model, David implores, "brings to art the means of existing for itself, of supporting itself

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by its own resources, thus to enjoy the noble independence suited to genius." And indeed the painter's ambitions were realized. This exhibition earned him acclaim and his own "considerable fortune."

Let me sum up. First, I would argue that "the exhibition" as such has a history, and this is when it began—not, as Derieux maintains, in the second half of the 20th century, though her periodization suggests that radical shifts in the practice of art in this moment emphasized the importance of mapping this history.<sup>11</sup> And second, that the history of art is unintelligible without such a consideration of the artwork's public life, as hereafter *mediated* by the dreams and practicalities of exhibition making. Already, then, we see the peculiar combination of public virtue and marketplace ambitions native to exhibition making. So too does there appear, even in this early moment, the exhibition's task of calling its public into being (far too often it's imagined the other way around). David placed his faith in constituencies among the emergent bourgeoisie who might, or might not, support and legitimate his work: "If his work is mediocre, public opinion will soon mete out justice to it." Far from being taken for granted, this new constituency had to be seduced, or persuaded (this was the evident aim of David's pamphlet), which predicts the sorts of anxiety and consternation about the dangers of public judgment that haunt contemporary practices of exhibition making and art making—for Catherine David no less than Jacques-Louis.<sup>12</sup> Not for nothing did some among the 20th century avant-gardes flee into obscurity, privacy, or bohemia.<sup>13</sup>

The crucial task of a history of exhibitions, then, would be to attend to this particular constellation—a desired autonomy, the social situation of the artist, institutions, the market, and the public—as they assumed new relationships over time, in and through practice.

Of course, no one would care if the work at the center of this array had not itself been worth looking at—if David's sense of his audience, and the situation of his painting's public life, had not transformed the *form* of the work itself, from its scale and pictorial organization to its fervid hyperrealism to the costumes of its women. As Ewa Lajer-Burcharth has amply demonstrated, the work makes no sense without knowing the conditions of its exhibition.<sup>14</sup> But the reverse is true as well. Severed from an account of the painting, David's attenuated situating and inventing would not count for much, and would fade into mere maneuvering and publicity.

What, then, is to be the value of an ascendant history of exhibitions, as somehow distinct from a history of artworks? Speaking as an art historian, I find Derieux's distinction overstated: The history of art is the history of exhibitions, and vice versa. But in my experience, too much of the writing in the emerging subfield—and I am not excluding *The Exhibitionist* and my own efforts—stops short at precisely the moment of turning to the works at hand; a phobia of artworks seems to be the cost of a fetishization of exhibitions.

11. Erica Levin and Danny Marcus, for example, confirm Derieux's intuition: "In recent decades, however, the production of exhibitions on-site has become at least as important as studio practice, if not more so; and though galleries continue to serve as vendors of art objects, curators have come to occupy a pivotal role in the economy of art's production, exhibition and exchange. Artists who base their practice on exhibition-making are bound more than ever to organize their working lives around exhibition spaces." See Levin and Marcus, "Elegant Obstinacy, Meaningless Work" in *We Have as Much Time as It Takes*, eds. Julian Myers and Joanna Szupinska (San Francisco: CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2010): 23. Terry Smith's *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University Press, 2009) also corroborates Derieux's periodization.

12. I have in mind the recurring unease about audience and populism articulated by Benjamin Buchloh, Catherine David, and Jean-François Chevrier in "1960–1997: The Political Potential of Art, Part 1 & 2" in *Politics, Poetics: Documenta X: The Book* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Documenta and Cantz Verlag, 1997): 374–403, 624–43.

13. On this see Boris Groys, "Critical Reflections" in *Art Power* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008): 111–18.

14. See "The Revolution Glacée" in Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David After the Terror* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1999).

15. T. J. Clark, "On the Social History of Art" in *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973): 13.

16. Ibid.

Which is to say that this writing, whatever its value, too often demurs from the work of building (to quote the art historian T. J. Clark) "the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes."<sup>15</sup> It politely refrains from attending to the historical mediations between these different spheres, or providing an "account of their change and ambiguity."<sup>16</sup> If our contemporary fixation on exhibitions hopes to be something more than anecdote, confession, half-encrypted publicity, or half-abstracted meta-discourse—that is, if it aspires to become a history—then these will be the tasks before us.

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