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The Exhibition in the Age of Formatting

Nicolas Bourriaud

Translator: Simon Pleasance



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The Exhibition in the Age of Formatting

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- Lionel Ruffel, *Brouhaha: les mondes du contemporain*, Paris: Verdier, 2016
- Olafur Eliasson: *Baroque Baroque*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015
- Olafur Eliasson: *Reality Machines*, London: Koenig Books; Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2015
- Studio Olafur Eliasson: *en cuisine*, Paris: Phaidon, 2016
- Studio Olafur Eliasson: *Unspoken Spaces*, Londres: Thames & Hudson, 2016
- Huang Yong Ping: *Monumenta 2016: empires*, Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux – Grand Palais, 2016
- The Curatorial Conundrum: What to Study? What to Research? What to Practice?*, Cambridge: MIT Press; Feldmeilen: LUMA Foundation; Annandale-on-Hudson: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2016. Sous la dir. de Paul O'Neill, Lucy Steeds, Mick Wilson

- 1 Since the early 2000s, the critical literature devoted to the exhibition has developed considerably, and several books have ushered in a wholesome labour of historicization, the best known example probably being the portrait gallery produced by Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (2008), while, in 2010, his colleague Jens Hoffmann launched *The Exhibitionist*, a theoretical review devoted to the art of the exhibition, focusing on a defence of curating as a fully-fledged authorial activity. Many other publications posthumously made the legendary Harald Szeemann the tutelary figure of that new generation of exhibition organizers, facing social phenomena in a more direct way, readily getting away from the museum context and art historical discourse, and less concerned with art history's established hierarchies, and even suspicious of its westernized and patriarchal ways of thinking. Within the university, and at art schools, a specialized teaching of the history and analysis of the exhibition has started to assert

itself, accompanied by a sizeable publishing output. But, in just a few years, one does not proceed unscathed from a knowledge focused on the artwork to the introduction of a critical discourse on the exhibition as format: is shedding light on the curator connected with an art criticism that is slowing down? Let us not forget that these theoretical advances, as well as this slow ratification of the art exhibition as an object of study in its own right, went hand-in-hand with the rise of the figure of the curator (to the point of making the French term *commissaire d'expositions* obsolete, the term being etymologically associated with a delegation of power by the State), a figure based on whom novel areas of knowledge have been organized. This emergence of the exhibition as a specific form, which we can date back to the late 1990s, has become more tangible through the increased number of curatorial studies and programmes devoted to exhibition design and organization.

- 2 It is in this context that Paul O'Neill, Mick Wilson and Lucy Steeds have brought together the writings which form *The Curatorial Conundrum*, dealing with the study, research and practice of curating. This compilation, based on contributions to a symposium held by Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies, draws up a solid list of research venues, but without opening up innovative prospects or taking short cuts. In this book, readers will nevertheless find the nub of present-day lines of thinking around the socio-political challenges of the exhibition, especially in its post-colonial, cross-disciplinary and collaborative dimension. The fact remains that the nagging issue raised by the review *The Exhibitionist* – that of the exhibition as a product of an author's subjectivity – remains totally outside the scope of the twenty or so essays making up *The Curatorial Conundrum*, thus implicitly confirming that the exhibition's central challenge lies in the complex and at times conflicting relations between the curator and the artist, and the institution. But this blind task also illustrates a re-institutionalization of the exhibition praxis, which some have seen fit to describe as a resumption of the curatorial issue by the University, in the face of an art world which it deliberately reduces to a mere market, thus asserting itself as the main force of resistance to reification.
- 3 But where does the exhibition discourse stand today, when the figure of the curator, around whom these questions have piled up, seems to be being challenged yet again, to the point of giving way, in the art world, to the twosome formed by the consultant/collector, and even more so to the figure of the artist reclaiming his rights? Most large international art events, once the favoured terrain of assertive curating, have recently been entrusted to artists: the DIS group at the Berlin Biennial, Raqs Media collective at the Shanghai Biennial, Christian Janowski at the Zurich Manifesta, and Elmgreen & Dragset at the Istanbul Biennial are all apparently sounding the death knell for the age of super-curators. But let us not forget that it is the issues developed by artists of the 1990s, and their insistence on the stuff of the exhibition, which has given rise to this recent generation of curators. As Philippe Parreno said at that time about his own work, one has to “[...] think of the exhibition in terms not of forms or objects but of formats: formats of representation, for interpreting the world. The question posed by my work could be the following: ‘What is the nature of the tools that enable us to understand the world?’”¹ More recently, at his complex show at the Centre Pompidou, Pierre Huyghe defined his approach as a desire “[...] to show something to someone, rather than someone to something.”² Far from symbolizing the decline of the exhibition in favour of the work as luxury item, we should interpret the alleged tarnishing of the dazzle of the curatorial function as the sign of a massive aesthetic involvement aimed at the exhibition format,

now fully shared by artists and those whose role it is to produce exhibitions. Is this not what they have in common? A shared terrain, therefore, and all the more so because art is being exhibited today in both historic monuments and on the street, and because exhibitions themselves readily go beyond the terrain of art, and turn into forms of leisure targeting the “general public”. Olafur Eliasson at Versailles, and Huang Yong Ping at the Grand Palais for *Monumenta 2016*, are more in need of promoters than architects, and of event organizers rather than exhibition curators. The question can be put in structural terms: what are the agencies of decision? How are the mechanisms of the curatorial choice being re-organized today? After the time of super-curators which *The Curatorial Conundrum* celebrates with a slight delay in relation to trends, there are some who think that we have entered the time of super-institutions, and that the decisive factor in the evolution of art is shifting from the act of showing towards the place of display, on the one hand the collector’s apartment, and on the other the institution (be it private or public): the recipient is taking precedence over the criteria for selecting works, and their display holds sway over the manner in which they are connected. Lionel Ruffel, who, in *Brouhaha*, tries to define the various “worlds of the contemporary”, describes the contemporary art centre as a content as much as a context. “The name ‘contemporary art’ describes less a transformation of artifacts than a transformation of the exhibition, starting from a perceptible experience. There is no nature of contemporary art. There are just conditions” (p. 56). On this point, Lionel Ruffel links up with the positions taken by Jean-Loup Amselle in *Le Musée exposé*, for whom “it is the Museum (or the art gallery, critics, etc...) which produces art and not the other way round” (p. 18). The argument is well known and, unsurprisingly, it encompasses in particular the majority of aestheticians focusing on the case of Marcel Duchamp—one thinks here of the “institutional theory of art” dear to Arthur Danto, which has become a commonplace. But Jean-Loup Amselle also joins Lionel Ruffel with regard to the matter of reversing relations between contents and containers: “All museums are museums of modern art”, explains Lionel Ruffel, because they manage to “artify” any object whatsoever on the basis of a present, and a general “contemporaneity”, which represents the real subject of the exhibition. As for Jean-Loup Amselle, he declares that it is: “The exhibition of the museum as an artwork, so to speak, which makes it truly contemporary” (p. 37). Have works of art become mere foils for postmodern exhibition venues? To define the domain of artworks, a recent minister of Culture thus used the neutral term of “contents”. It might be maintained that this reversal of values represents the very logic of globalization, as was suggested by the famous words of the boss of the TF1 French TV channel, for whom the sole function of television programmes is to create an “available human brain time”, to prepare it to look at commercials. In this expanded world of the exhibition, the *Harry Potter Show*, the work of the comic artist Zep at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille, and the blockbusters devoted to David Bowie and Björk do not even bother with an artistic alibi anymore: the exhibition is a production like any other. And when it comes to contemporary art, it is based more and more on spectacular gestures and monumental spaces, relegating to the background any reflection about the history of practices, any critical dimension, and any contextualization. Because their architecture becomes a pure event, the art centre and the museum henceforth take on a function of illustration: they create imagery, and this imagery covers up the “contents” which rekindle the attention of the public. Based on the paradigmatic project of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, but also of the Vuitton and Pinault foundations, in *Le Musée exposé* Jean-Loup Amselle presents a committed essay about the emergence of this new model of

exhibitions, within which art barely represents anything more than a pretext for national and commercial rivalries. What is being played out in the globalization of museums, he explains, is a “geopolitics of the identities and memories of which the museum is the contemporary, because political issues have now broadly become issues of identity, memory, and recognition, and because these are being broadly played out within a national and international museum space or syntagma” (p. 42). In the context of the globalized Museum, the contemporary art exhibition hardly needs authors, because the institution over-defines the meaning of artistic propositions, and production (in the Hollywood sense) takes precedence over direction. This shift introduces the generalization of a permanent encounter between the artist and the exhibition venue, gradually getting rid of all intermediaries and all historical, geographical, and social contextualization of the artistic production.

- 4 So it is no coincidence that the artist’s studio is today tending to be considered as an object of fascination, henceforth perceived as a living space where different forms of knowledge overlap, providing a context and a material quality to the artwork given over to the “global museum.” Nor is it a coincidence that, of all the books and catalogues devoted to Olafur Eliasson’s projects, it is the book of recipes for his Berlin canteen which provides the most daring image, that of an open community experience, renewing our vision of the artist’s studio. As a paragon of the exhibition-spectacle, and used as such, Olafur Eliasson here presents us with a utopian version of his world, in a cookbook which is also meant as a eulogy of daily good living.

NOTES

1. Vergne, Philippe. “Speech Bubbles”, interview with Philippe Parreno, *artpress*, no. 264, January 2001, p. 23-24
2. Azimi, Roxana. “Entretien avec Pierre Huyghe”, *Le Quotidien de l'Art*, no. 407, Wednesday 26 June 2013