

BOOK REVIEWS · BEYOND OBJECTHOOD

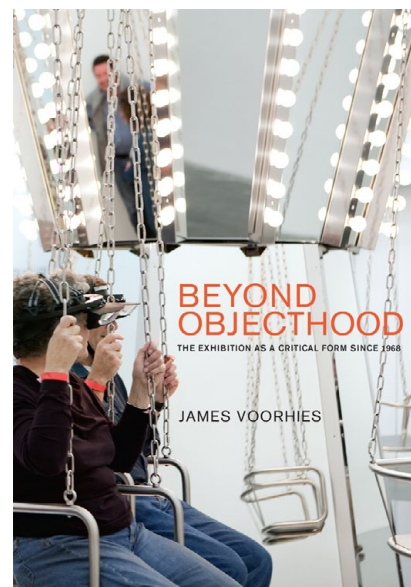
# JAMES VOORHIES. *BEYOND OBJECTHOOD: THE EXHIBITION AS A CRITICAL FORM SINCE 1968.*

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS  
/ LONDON, ENGLAND:  
THE MIT PRESS, 2017

EMÍLIA FERREIRA

IHA, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

James Voorhies' *Beyond Objecthood: The Exhibition as a Critical Form since 1968*, guides the reader through a two-way street: that of the curator's mind and exhibition history since the late 1960s, and that of the visitor who, during these years, has been compelled to turn from spectator to participant. At its centre lies the object (a concept representing a twist on how an artwork was transformed into a new category of importance/perception/value) and its relation to a specific site. The author – a curator and art historian of modern and contemporary art, who is also Chair of the Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice, Associate Professor of Contemporary Art at California College of the Arts, San Francisco, and Director of the Curatorial Research Bureau – reminds us that his study “is not exclusively focused on a history of institutional critique”, yet “it is important to point out that alternatives to existing curatorial models on the modern art institution began to take shape at this time” (p. 40). The current shift towards the “participatory” (a shift that specifically started with land art artist Robert Smithson's new proposals for the then called non-sites) is being differently discussed, as museums and other art institutions increasingly debate their role in society. This shift has its own history and *Beyond Objecthood* leads us precisely through that history and development. In its four chapters – “The Rise of the Exhibition as a Form”, “On New Institutionalism”, “The Efficacy of a Critical Art” and “The Industrial Art Complex” –, the book leaves no doubts on how our concept of art and artwork – and of museums and curators – has changed in the last 50 years, depending not only on the artists' creations but also on the curators' concepts, and on how production and reception became central to the equation. Different issues are examined in this work, namely: art criticism and new curatorial proposals, museums



and non-sites, the figure of the artist and the role of the curator as artist, critic and educator. Throughout the book, we are offered Voorhies' perspectives that necessarily cover events like Documenta, the Venice Biennale, the "anti-biennial" (p. 104) Manifesta, or sites like E-flux, discussing their purposes and consequences.

As concepts of "economics, entertainment and spectatorship" (p. 232) became increasingly central to contemporary art practice, traditional art sites, such as museums, began to change too, aiming to reach new and larger audiences by promising them a sense of difference and surprise, a sense of revelation. *Beyond Objecthood* unveils the way art, critical curation and exhibition have been historically intertwined, and how this connection has been essential in the very definition of both the artwork and the museum, questioning also, again and again, the cultural, social and economic value of an artwork and its place. At the centre of Voorhies' argument we find the exercise of curating as a means of creation (an artistic form in itself) and of communication. In this particular aspect, the role of education in museums and other venues and (non-)sites (or even through platforms such as E-flux) is also analysed as part of the critical curatorial model that arose with New Institutionalism, inviting audiences to become part of the process and part of the social and critical dialogue (see, for instance, pp. 73 or 197).

An important reflexive study on the expansive concept of the exhibition, *Beyond Objecthood* shows how a dialectic approach to alternative ways of thinking about art ended up involving one of the most traditional institutions, to the benefit of the public.

However, at the end of this challenging and referential work, some questions arise. North American scholar Frances Richard, in her review on *Beyond Objecthood*, had already pointed out how the "preponderance of his [Voorhies] references are male, and European" (see <https://hyperallergic.com/388992/james-voorhies-beyond-objecthood-the-exhibition-as-a-critical-form-since-1968/>). Another aspect may also strike the reader: the absence of more significant examples from the *traditional* art sites, or museums. Museums are in fact scarce in this book. While the text is particularly devoted to analysing the exhibition form, and therefore the object beyond itself (as a means of political and social communication as it is presented in non-conventional sites), the object within a collection, however, loses its interest to the author (or so it seems). And yet, since so many museums in the world have been closely observing participatory policies, following some of the trends of the curatorial practices studied by Voorhies, it would have been interesting to approach some of these experiences. In spite of these obstacles, *Beyond Objecthood* is a must read. It provides relevant information and it takes the reader through the history of curating in the last fifty years, stressing the social, critical and political importance of art – even if it refers mainly to a very specific part of the art world, forgetting a whole range of experiences, geographies, contexts and actors. We may argue that a lot is missing. But, as always, any book – like any exhibition, dissertation or argument – is a small part of the whole universe. And this one, fortunately for the reader, raises far more questions than answers. ●