

The Aesthetic Experience and the Gesture of Exposure

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I

In this article I want to turn our focus upon the specific mode of presenting art in the form of art exhibitions. This practice might seem to be an obvious part of our use of artworks and even an implicit part of the work of art itself. Not to mention a given base for the needs and habits to socialize that we tend to seek satisfaction for in our relationship with art. Still, as soon as you start to give this specific mode of presentation a closer look it opens up as an infinitely complex site, a battle field for diverse beliefs and desires, a wide communicative network, a medium in itself. It can be seen as a discourse with its own mechanisms, traditions and internal laws. The exhibition is thus an important site, an interface where we meet art in order to enjoy it and also to make judgments about it. It is in the exhibition that the artwork is made public, it is made communicative. The exhibition is simultaneously a place for encounters and a gesture of exposure.

The tradition of presenting art in the form of exhibitions has developed in parallel with the rise of the modern art concept, through the democratization of the museum institution, the birth of art criticism and the romantic idea of the artist as an independent creator rather than a skilled craftsman. The first art exhibitions have been traced back to 17th century Rome, but the tradition of the “Salon d’Exposition” in 18th century Paris established the foundations for what is today considered an art exhibition.

An exhibition is more commonly defined as the presentation of something exclusive and exceptional for a limited amount of time. Outside the development of a specific discourse about the fine arts this mode of exposure has often been associated with the religious spheres of life, for example, in displays of the relics of saints, which it might be important for people to visit at least once in a lifetime. Following the

commercialization of society, expositions are mostly linked with the promotion of different kinds of goods, a process that can be seen as a parallel to the art market. Exhibitions have also been used not just to promote merchandise, but to underline the social status of an influential person or, as in the so-called *Grand Expositions* or *World Exhibitions*, to show the finest endeavors of an entire nation.

The history of the modern art exhibition can be traced through the 19th and 20th century by pointing to specific events at specific times and places. Various formats of presentation will then be discovered, depending upon who is the active agent in deciding the format for each event. We can recognize a rough dichotomy between the institutional tradition on one side, which can be said to be close to the positivistic view in science, as well as to the state and church with their role as universal educators. The opposing tradition can be seen as being led by the figure of the avant-garde artist, with the "Salon des Refusés" as one of the most important points of departure in modern art history. The official art scene, the spotlighted arena, has been questioned and attacked by counter presentations made by many actors on the art scene throughout the 20th century.

Within the analysis of this discourse of exposure we can discern a pendulous movement between the focus on the communicative medium for the artwork and a tracing of a specific dramatized fiction, a narrative. But within this spectrum there is also a site for the receiver of what is communicated, the reader of the story told, the observer, the spectator, the interpreter. The base for this agent is the relationship to art that our culture at different times has, the positions, the conditions and expectations involved. Questions arise: what are the conventions for art presentation and the viewing situation, how have they changed and why?

During modernism the art exhibition developed to become the specific, designed site for aesthetic experiences. We know now that the symbol for this site became the so called white cube which demanded specific behavior, specific attitudes and implied a specific system of values. The aesthetic participation with art thus included a specified aesthetic judgment, an idea of uncontested, pure, beauty based on the famous characteristics as we have all learned from Kant: disinterested satisfaction, universality

apart from concepts, purposiveness without purpose and normality without norm.

II

In 1942 Marcel Duchamp collaborated on the design of the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* held at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion in New York. His contribution consisted of a length of twine, later known as *Mile of String*. One mile of twine was strung around the galleries, making it impossible for visitors to view the rest of the artworks in the show in a conventional way without interfering with or even destroying the installation of the string. This event is often pointed to as one of the beginnings of installation art. Duchamp was, however, at the same time involved in another project that provides a wider perspective: the design of Peggy Guggenheim's museum-gallery "Art for This Century" created by Friedrich Kiesler. Kiesler's notes say that the goal of the project was to: "dissolve the barrier and artificial duality of 'vision' and 'reality', 'image' and 'environment,'... there are no frames or borders between art, space, life. In eliminating the frame, the spectator recognizes his act of seeing, or receiving, as a participation in the creative process no less essential and direct than the artist's own."¹

This was, however, not the first occasion that Marcel Duchamp worked explicitly with the exhibition practice of art presentation. He had been *Générateur-Arbitre* (Producer-Referee) for the *International Exposition of Surrealism* at the "Galerie Beaux-Arts" in Paris in 1938. Along with an involvement in the designing of the entire show, he participated with an installation work consisting of 1200 coal sacks covering the ceiling of one of the exhibition spaces. Apart from disturbing the viewing of other works in the space, the coal sacks also occasionally showered coal dust down onto the visitors. The setting of the show as a whole has been described as appropriately nightmarish, theatrical and self-conscious. The quotation from Kiesler seems to be a logical continuation of ideas from the Paris of 1938, where the exhibition itself was turned into a work on a par with its content, guided by Andre Breton's words:

¹ Friedrich Kreisler, "Notes on Designing the Gallery", 1942, quoted in Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 151.

“Surreality depends on our wish for a complete disorientation of everything.”²

What can we assume these presentations were about? Were the gestures only ways of enhancing the spectacular presence of something different? Getting attention? The least we can say is that these presentations question the idea of the viewing of art as an encounter between a neutral subject and an exposed object. The audience that had adjusted themselves to the rules of the art exhibition and the implicit aesthetic attitude were certainly disturbed by being physically forced to behave differently than usually. The presentations also brought into question the idea of the artwork as a form. Should we, as it has been done within current art history, view the Mile of String as a work of art?

III

About twenty-five years later, in 1967, the young American art critic Michael Fried wrote his famous essay “Art and Objecthood”. In this essay Fried offers an analysis of the debate between representatives of what we know as high-modernism and minimalism with an extremely affected and serious tone.

Fried’s text is in strong opposition against what he prefers to call “literalist art”, the art of mute objecthood, which in his opinion is a threat to modernism and an totally “corrupted and perverted by theatre”. I quote: “There is a war going on between theatre and modernist painting, between the theatrical and the pictorial — a war that, despite the literalists’ explicit rejection of modernist painting and sculpture, is not basically a matter of program and ideology but of experience, conviction, sensibility.”³

The war was then about experience. By criticizing texts — now just as famous as his own — by minimalist artists Donald Judd and Robert Morris, Fried makes strong statements about not only the authentic work of art, but also about the authentic sensibility and authentic experiences of art.

What he calls the corrupted and perverted theatrical experience is something that

² Quoted in Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, 122.

³ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood”, in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 828.

includes the viewer — a viewer who is contextualized, placed in time and space. Fried writes that “[t]he experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation — one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder” and as the worst possible setting for Fried — “the entire situation” means exactly that all of it — including the beholder’s body”.⁴ What he objects to is the fact that for something to be perceived at all is for it to be perceived as a part of a situation.

The modernist sensibility that is threatened has on the contrary as its ideal something that is “incorporeal, weightless and exists only optically like a mirage”.⁵ Everything that is worth looking at lies within the syntax of the work of art. The concept of quality and value are meaningful or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. The modernist sensibility — the authentic experience of modernist art — is timeless — as though one’s experience has no duration because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest. “It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness: as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.”⁶

So a time-based presence is set up against a timeless presentness. If we just would be acute enough we would not need time in our experience. That would be the ultimate experience of art.

IV

The theatricality Michael Fried so wished to avoid in art had certainly taken its place already in the Surrealist exhibitions I described above and has of course a genealogy that goes much further than that. But Fried’s articulation of it in critical terms made many people aware of new possibilities to approach contemporary art. What Fried did

⁴ Ibid., 826.

⁵ Ibid., 829.

⁶ Ibid., 832.

in his essay was not what he probably set out to do, namely to strengthen the position of modernist art — but through his critical articulations and phenomenological descriptions of minimalist art works he opened up a new vocabulary and a set of tools for continuing what we today know as a very active philosophical and artistic debate.

This awareness also brought the spectator onto the scene into a unforeseen visibility which has not but increased and become implicit in much of the art production and presentation today. This does not mean that the modernistic art exhibition in the white cube does not still exist, it might still be the most dominant mode of presentation, but it means that it most of the time involves a consciousness of the relationship between the art work, the space and the viewer.

Another question that was also articulated by Fried and which I wish to emphasize in this specific context is the form of the artwork — the same question I touched upon concerning the *Mile of String* above. In describing the artist Tony Smith's experience of a car ride as an argument for the significance of the experience itself Michael Fried draws the conclusion that the theatrical character of literalist art is without the art itself "as though the object is needed only within a room — what replaces the object is above all the endlessness, or objectlessness, of the approach or on-rush or perspective. It is the explicitness, that is to say, the sheer persistence, which the experience presents itself as directed at him from outside that simultaneously makes him a subject — makes him subject — and establishes the experience itself as something like that of an object, or rather objecthood."⁷ We are then left with our experience, situated in time and space but without the object.

V

The fourth "Manifesta", the latest event of a series of the newest European "Biennale" developed during the 1990s, took place in Frankfurt in the summer of 2002. In principle "Manifesta" follows the tradition of surveys of absolutely the latest trends within the visual arts that has been established by, for example, the "Venice Biennale"

⁷ Ibid., 828.

and “Documenta”. But the founders of “Manifesta” wanted to create something different, something newer than new, by keeping the event nomadic — it changes location each time, and its format open — different curators and theme every time.

The three curators of “Manifesta 4” didn’t stop calling it an exhibition, but stressed its “rhizome” structure. They did not talk only about artists, but about “participants”. They didn’t really talk about exhibition spaces, but about “points” where the participants, the mediating curators and the city of Frankfurt, the three main articulating “vectors”, reinforce and support each other. They did talk about a community of people who live, think and make art, they talk of a work in progress not completed without the involvement of the spectator.

How can we describe this “new” gesture of exposure? Where and how is the spectator situated? What is the status of a possible aesthetic experience and judgment?

“Manifesta” represents the current attempts to be contemporary not only regarding the content and form of the presentations, but also concerning the organization and the articulation of the concept. The physical site of the project was not a specific exhibition space but the city of Frankfurt as a whole. The project was also present through broadcasting by radio and television as well as through an on-line “identity”.

Nearly 90 participants were involved in this meeting between art and life — most of the works functioned under interventionalistic principles, they were kind of drilling holes in reality. The work went under name of archives, institutes, corporations, investigations, networks and scientific research. Through just a few examples you can get an idea of the set up of layers of gestures:

A white cubic structure closely pressed to the banks of the Main Island seems to be falling into the river Main. It is the work by the Italian artist Gianni Motti and is a reconstruction of the cell in which the Kurd leader, Abdullah Öcalan, has been kept imprisoned for over three years on a Turkish island. How should this be interpreted in the art context? A disguised political demonstration? A mimetic work of art, a realistic image? It is a quotation, a kind of ready-made? Or a gesture of exposure making us reflect on reality.

Shortly before the start of “Manifesta 4”, the Swiss artist Christoph Büchel simply

auctioned off his official invitation to the show on Internet. He called his artistic contribution "Invite Yourself". Sal Randolph, an American artist bid over 15.000 dollars and got the invitation. She in her turn invited another 100 artists into "Manifesta" according to the principle "Everybody is Invited". Can this be seen as a post-modern form of "Salon des Réfuses" — an open invitation without a jury? Maybe, but with permission from the curators this time . . . It might also be seen as an internal show, an American intervention into the European "Biennale", maybe a parasite, an attack, a cockoo bird in the nest? Or only one way to get into the circuit of the market of symbolic value — with the help of money?

Presented as a designed space by the French artist Mathieu Mercier, The "Manifesta" Archive is said to be "an open construction site bringing to light the geographies, materialities, crossovers and modes of mobility, exchange and transport informing thinking on contemporary art today".⁸ In the archive the visitor can find texts, sound and visual recordings provided by all the artists that the curators visited during their nine months long research period. Maybe this is the "Salon de Réfuses", but incorporated in advance by the curators. Exposed but not shown. A gesture of transparency, openness and accessibility as if power structures and responsibilities did not exist.

On the whole great importance is accorded to "Manifesta" as the Project in itself — a project that invites you to live with it. Somehow the exhibition is turned into an organized game to play. It seems possible to change everything without any bigger difference occurring, — artists — art works — sites — virtual spaces. Because this is a game with systems — systems of the art world, of the city of Frankfurt, of urban contexts, of communication, of economical structures, of politics, of identity, of reason and logic, of language and narrative, systems of concepts, signs, symbols, the idea of art and the conventions of understanding and appreciating art. It is simultaneously amusing, witty, disturbing and annoying, the works turn into systems themselves — and are simultaneously incorporated and swallowed by larger systems — of art

⁸ <http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta4/en/projects/archive.html>. Retrieved 11 March 2005.

tourism, entertainment and commerce.

Still, the project involves situations that pose questions about the difference between seeing what you know and knowing what you see. The reflection contains yourself as a spectator, questioning you as much as everything else. So we are left with the problem of not knowing what we see and wondering how to relate to it.

VI

Where do we then end up?

No object to encounter or judge, only an experience as an ambiguous sense of being placed in time and space.

In his brilliant little book *The Man Without Content* the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben shows how we have come here. *The Man Without Content* is the artist whose gestures we so wish to experience and judge, but as Agamben says:

Critical judgment seems to be going through an eclipse about whose duration and consequences we can only make guesses. One of these — and not the most pessimistic — is that if we do not start to ask right now, forcefully, about the foundation of critical judgment, the idea of art as we know it will slip through our fingers without a new idea to take its place effectively. Unless, that is, we resolve to extract from this temporary opaqueness the question capable of burning from head to toe the phoenix of aesthetic judgment and allow a more original, that is more initial, way to think art.⁹

Aesthetics has to be transcended.

Agamben reminds us that the entrance of the work of art into the aesthetic dimension is a relatively recent event and when it took place introduced a radical split in the spiritual life of the artist, changing substantially the aspect of humanity's cultural production.

To be able to transcend the aesthetic dimension we should have to rethink the idea of art as the expression of the artists creative will. Agamben takes us to the Greek distinction between *poesis* and *praxis* where the essence of *poesis* is found in the

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), 51.

production of truth and in the subsequent opening of a world for man's existence and action.

Contemporary art then seems to be made of expository gestures — gestures towards a transcendence of aesthetics. What the spectator encounters is not a “work“ but a desire to be “a being-at-work”. And to even try to articulate that encounter demands a completely different approach.