The Evolving Role of the Exhibition and its Impact on Art and Culture

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The Evolving Role of the Exhibition
and its Impact on Art and Culture

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Introduction

The art exhibition has had a long and complex history, evolving with the ever-changing demands of society while at the same time challenging those very demands. Exhibitions act as the catalyst of art and ideas to the public; they represent a way of displaying and contextualizing art that makes it relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences. The art exhibition, by its nature, holds a mirror up to society, reflecting its interests and concerns while at the same time challenging its ideologies and preconceptions. Keeping art relevant to society and to a diverse audience at any given point in history is one of the main goals of the art exhibition and one of the reasons it is so important to the history of art.

Art exhibitions hold a precarious yet steadfast role; as undefined yet self-sufficient entities, they take on multiple identities. “Exhibitions are strategically located at the nexus where artists, their work, the arts institution, and many different publics intersect.”1 Ultimately associated with a larger institution, exhibitions can bear the tremendous responsibility of furthering the goals of that institution, whether that is bringing in viewership or revenue. But, their relative independence also allows that they serve as platforms for experimentation and challenging convention in search of new ideology that best suits the needs of a contemporary society.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the emergence of the art exhibition and art criticism as the primary mediators between the European artist and his public. This was likely brought about by “a change in the public’s relationship to painting

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and sculpture and in the role of the artist himself.”  

Ancient Greek and Roman artists exhibited their works before they were to be installed in public buildings, though the work was seen as offerings to deities rather than autonomous works of art. This remained true through the Middle Ages when most artistic production was for the church. Then in the sixteenth century, artists began to attach their name to their work, creating work that reflected their individual aesthetics as artists. In the seventeenth century art exhibitions were held in artistic capitals such as Rome, Venice, and Florence in conjunction with religious celebrations, and it was during this time that artists realized they could use these exhibitions to help establish their own reputations.

Academies of fine art were soon founded that held exhibitions in royal precincts, allowing artists to branch out from purely religious concerns to more secular matters. The earliest academy in Europe, The Accademia delle Arti del Disegno in Florence, was founded in 1563. These Italian institutions were copied in France in 1648 with L’Académie de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris. Responsible for the state’s educational program in the fine arts, its first exhibition was held in 1667 for the court society only, but by 1725 the exhibition moved to the Louvre and was open to the general public where it became known simply as the Salon. Part of the role of the Salon was to enhance the image of national sovereignty embodied by the monarchy, which also dictated many rules and formalities by which the Academy abided in choosing works for exhibition. Before 1748, the Academy was made up exclusively of French artists, but that changed with the

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3 Holt, 3.
death of Louis XIV and the Salon became a more international platform.\textsuperscript{4} Academies and the exhibitions that went along with them gradually emerged in other countries, and by 1790 there were over one hundred in existence. The importance of these early academies rested in the incredible power they wielded, overseeing the instruction of the fine arts and hence dictating artistic style to society through exhibitions of their members’ work. Their overwhelming influence remained most prominent in France.

The Enlightenment Era and the French Revolution brought about a liberalization and disruption of eighteenth-century social patterns. This had significant impact on the nineteenth century European art world, one being that the Salon was now open to any artist who wanted to submit work for consideration. After 1815, there was an increase in the number of submissions as “artists became aware of the value of the exhibition to themselves and its role in determining taste.”\textsuperscript{5} This newfound awareness led to an increase in single artist exhibitions and subsequently to the artist’s use of the exhibition as a format for stating their political or aesthetic position.

Eventually, the specific Salon style exhibition went out of favor, and by 1900 there was no longer a Salon, having become weakened by the 1863 Salon des Refusés, the Impressionist Exhibitions starting in 1874, and in 1890 when the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts seceded and formed its own salon. “The Salons had for so long constituted a truly universal showcase of both foreign and French contemporary art,”\textsuperscript{6} but their role was carried on in different ways through a new age of exhibitions that evolved to meet, and challenge, the demands of a changing society.

\textsuperscript{4} Holt, 3.  
\textsuperscript{5} Holt, 10.  
Exhibitions will continue to challenge convention, particularly as dictated by the museum. Like the Academies of the past, today’s museum represents the hierarchical fine arts institution of society, the dictator of taste and “rules.” Exhibitions, however, as temporary and relatively independent entities represent ideal forums for dialogue and for change. It was in the form of alternative exhibitions that artists were originally able to defy the rules of the Academy, and it continues to be through high concept temporary exhibitions that traditional rules and conventions may be called into question, and alternatives introduced.

Installation throughout the course of history has seen numerous changes. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, a quantitative method was used for collecting, which led to galleries that were covered floor to ceiling with works of art. In the nineteenth century an evocation of a place or environment usually pertaining to the bourgeois or the museum was most important; from the Parisian Salons to the world’s fairs to the Venice Biennale, “installation [was] decidedly an ornamental and illustrative process.”

Exhibition installation of this time was concerned mainly with a particular direction or situation, anchored in the tradition of the classical painting gallery in which the atmosphere was ceremonial if not sacred, ornate frames and lush interiors “imbuing the exhibited objects with preciousness.” Works were displayed in close proximity so as to cover a room. The goal of this expository method was to have objects be seen and sold, and to have the gallery visitor observe the whole rather than interpret. With the advent of the World’s Fair this method became more refined, and there was a new emphasis placed

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8 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 374.
on the individual work and the linear articulation of works of art. It is the mid-nineteenth century that sees “the establishment of a connecting relationship among the diverse exhibited artworks,”\(^9\) and with it the beginnings of the exhibition as a whole work of art.

The function and ideology of the art exhibition is a relatively new topic in art historical literature, one that is only beginning to be explored in terms of its societal and artistic role. The notion that “exhibitions have become the medium through which most art becomes known” and they “establish and administer the cultural meanings of art”\(^{10}\) speaks to the very nature of the art exhibition, which warrants in-depth exploration. Its temporality, narrative form, and its ability to express point of view are all components of its inherent nature. In presenting art to the public in a strategic and organized way, often through telling a story and posing questions that leave the viewer thinking, the exhibition serves as a form of contextualization for art. This notion of the exhibition as a medium itself, as an autonomous work of art that relays knowledge and challenges, is one I hope to explore further.

Through examining a range of exhibitions that span time, place and theme, I seek to identify the unique characteristics of exhibitions that have made them “the medium through which most art becomes known,” as markers of pivotal moments in the history of art. Each of the following chapters explores a group of exhibitions that present common yet differing themes and goals. All are pivotal in their contribution to the artistic dialogue of the time, reflecting cultural concerns, while challenging viewers and their preconceptions.

\(^9\) Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 374.
\(^{10}\) Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 2.
Chapter one, entitled *Challenging Aesthetic Ideology* will focus on exhibitions that have challenged the public’s perception of what art is. The very notion of placing an object or concept within an exhibition context automatically assumes its status as art, and whether or not what is displayed fits with a viewer’s expectations of art is one of the many questions brought up by the exhibition. Chapter two, *Challenging Expectations of Display*, takes this issue a step further, exploring how the ways in which art is displayed and in what context impacts the viewer’s perception. People often have strong opinions about how art should be displayed, and many exhibition designs seek to challenge these preconceptions.

In chapter three, *The Issues in Displaying Cultures*, we examine a series of exhibitions that take on cultural identity as a theme, approaching it in different ways through varying narrative and presentation techniques. The differences in approach show just how large a role point of view plays in the exhibition process and in the presentation of art to the public. This greatly impacts the viewer’s interpretation of the work and the culture or cultures on display. Chapter four, *The Exhibition as a Mirror of the Human Experience*, takes this concept of displaying identity and explores the role of the exhibition in documenting human life and human experience by conveying real and relatable emotion.

Chapter five, *Exhibitions that Ignite Controversy*, moves into a somewhat different category while still examining the exhibition’s potential for emotional impact. Controversy infiltrates a majority of art-related exhibitions, but some leave behind a legacy of controversy for various political or social reasons that comes to define the exhibition. What does this say about their contribution to society and to art? By exploring
what makes an exhibition inherently controversial, we learn a lot about societal expectations and beliefs. Chapter six, *The Blockbuster Phenomenon*, again looks at a group of exhibitions that have been given a label. “Blockbuster” is a label that contains both positive and negative connotations in relation to art, evoking images of big budget exhibitions that bring in high revenue. These exhibitions also tend to draw the widest audiences, yet they are criticized for relying on tried popular themes that contain little substance. What are the ramifications of this type of exhibition on the art world?

Finally, chapter seven, *The Large-scale International Exhibition*, will explore another specific type of exhibition that has a far-reaching global impact by nature. Often these exhibitions are institutions in and of themselves, faced with the task of challenging themselves year after year. These exhibitions aim to make significant contributions to the dialogue on contemporary art while at the same time acknowledging their own historicism. A discussion on The Venice Biennale, the oldest and arguably most important of these institutions, is the main focus of this chapter, acting as a summation of many of the ideas discussed through the examination of the previous exhibitions.
Chapter 1: Challenging Aesthetic Ideology

Exhibitions through history have often called into question the very nature of art, what makes something a work of art, and what makes it worthy of exhibition. Perhaps the first time an act of defiance was made in art through use of an exhibition was in the Salon des Refusés of 1863. Authorized by Emperor Napoleon III, it was held alongside the official Salon in the Palais d’Industrie. During a time when there were very few exhibition events other than the Salon, a new law governing the Salon that limited the works by individual artists to three per category, as opposed to unlimited as it had been before, was highly upsetting to many artists as it increased selectivity and decreased their chances of having their work shown at all. Gustave Dove and Edouard Manet were selected by their colleagues to present a petition to the Minister of State in protest of this new rule. It was the Emperor who then decided that works rejected by the Salon would then be exhibited elsewhere in the building.

Approximately 2,800 paintings were rejected by the Salon that year, and about 930 of them were displayed in the Salon des Refusés. Many artists did not wish to participate for fear of public scrutiny; the preface to the catalogue acknowledged these individuals by stating they “regretted the great number of artists who did not see fit to include their works in the counter-exhibition,” which was then signed by eight committee members. Some of those who did choose to include their work would of course go on to become some of the most revered artists of the nineteenth century, for instance, Manet.

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Of the works rejected from the exhibition, many similarly rejected traditional academic ideals of history, mythology, and an insistence on drawing and finish.\(^{12}\)

There was no real organization to the exhibit in the way works were hung, packed in floor to ceiling like the Salon. The two exhibitions were separated by a turnstile, and the Salon saw to it that some of the more grotesque works were hung near the entrance of the Salon des Refusés in hopes of dissuading people from venturing further, one of them being Manet’s *Le Bain* and another being James McNeill Whistler’s *Symphony in White No. I*.\(^{13}\) The exhibition, despite some of its negative connotations at the time, helped to embody the new directions modern art was taking. It is significant both in challenging the aesthetic authority of the Academy of Fine Arts and in “reinforcing a growing popular acceptance of multiple styles and genres.”\(^{14}\)

The Salon des Refusés paved the way for another act of defiance a decade later: a series of Impressionist exhibitions, which were also in opposition to the official Salon. In 1874 the first exhibition was held, created by a society of artists, later known as the Impressionists, who wished “to make [their] members work known to a growing market of art buyers and the critics who informed them.”\(^{15}\) The exhibition opened two weeks before the scheduled Salon opening and then ran concurrently with it, using the Paris studio space of well-known photographer Nadar. It included over 200 works, sixty of them belonging to today’s recognized core group of impressionist painters, Cézanne, Monet, Renoir, Pissaro, among others. Perhaps the hallmark of the exhibition was

\(^{12}\) Wilson-Bareau, 309.
\(^{13}\) Wilson-Bareau, 312.
\(^{15}\) Altshuler, 35.
Monet’s *Impression, Sunrise*, the painting that gave the movement its name. The organization of the work, unlike the floor to ceiling Salon hang, employed a very different aesthetic by sparsely hanging paintings in only two rows, grouped according to size. The hanging committee was led by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and as an artist himself, he no doubt was sensitive to artists’ dismay over how their works were exhibited in the Salons. It also reflected a more buyer-friendly atmosphere, which was one of the goals of the exhibit.

The exhibition garnered a lot of press, and generally favorable reviews, which recognized the show’s merit, at least as an artistic exercise. One review of the time from the *Revue de France* states: “The important thing now is to understand their way of seeing and decide whether or not their technical resources are adequate.” Another from *Le Petit Journal* states: “I’m too fond of freedom not to greet the venture with sincere applause.” The impressionist exhibitions from 1874 to 1886 “constitute the most important historical model for the artist-organized group shows that were central to the life of advanced art until the 1960’s.” They helped pave the way for a number of alternative exhibitions that arose in opposition to the academic stronghold of the Salon, introducing both alternative stylistic aesthetics and alternative exhibition aesthetics.

With the dawn of modernism came a time of great cultural and artistic change. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, which opened in 1929, became a symbol of the new, an apex of modern and contemporary art and ideas. In 1934, MoMA boldly challenged conventions in its exhibition *Machine Art* (Figure 1), an exhibition devoted to

16 Altshuler, 35.
17 Altshuler, 41.
18 Altshuler, 41.
19 Altshuler, 35.
highlighting the artistic merits of objects created without artistic intention. Rather than walking into a gallery and encountering traditional paintings or sculptures, the viewer was instead met with the sight of familiar utilitarian and household items that challenged their preconceived notions of what constitutes art. Organized by Philip Johnson, the founding chairman of the museum’s Department of Architecture, which was the first of its kind in any museum, the exhibition displayed industrial products and applied arts in a non-contextual setting. A year after the exhibition, the department’s title was changed from just architecture to “Architecture and Industrial Arts.”

Current curator of the department, Paola Antonelli states:

> Johnson took springs and ball bearings and put them on white pedestals against white walls like sculpture, and the act was necessary because he wanted people to be jolted and surprised and to think of design in a different way.

The use of a sparse hang in intimate rooms with focused light was a novel and daring approach in displaying the mundane. It was an approach used only in the display of high art up until this point, providing these objects with a high art connotation and subsequently challenging visitors to view them as such.

In the years preceding *Machine Art*, there was an interest in exhibits of the applied arts, specifically at the Met with their series of exhibitions entitled *The Architect and the Industrial Arts* and with their collaboration with Macy’s in 1927 for their *Art-in-Trade* expositions. These exhibitions displayed contemporary room settings, installed and

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22 Marincola, 86.
furnished by major designers, both in the museum and in Macy’s store windows. The fad of designer installations enjoyed brief popularity, eventually succumbing to the curatorial dislike of simulated exhibition environments. Foreseeing this, “Johnson transformed utilitarian products of the machine age into seductive ready-made sculptures,” taking them out of their daily context and giving them a new, more abstract significance. Johnson himself stated, “a machine made an ideology,” and in the inherent qualities of the machine and machine-made products is a purely stylistic and aesthetic nature.

The categories of objects as established by the exhibition include industrial units (machines and machine parts), household and office equipment, kitchenware, house furnishings and accessories, scientific instruments, and laboratory glass and porcelain. In the accompanying catalogue, Johnson states: “This Exhibition has been assembled from the point of view that though usefulness is an essential, appearance has at least as great a value,” and this is shown through the juxtaposition, for instance, of a ball bearing and a propeller, highlighting both of the objects’ intrinsic beauty as abstract objects containing both organic and industrial elements. This exhibition, and many that would follow from the museum, greatly helped to challenge the public’s perception of what constitutes art. MoMA was the exception to the rule at this time, embracing modern design and setting the “standard for showmanship with respect to high art.”

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23 McClellan, 207.
24 McClellan, 207.
25 “Philip Johnson discussing the 1934 exhibition Machine Art.”
27 Barr and Johnson, 9.
28 McClellan, 207.
This is Tomorrow (Figure 2) at Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 1956 once again challenged notions of the nature of art and how art is produced. Devoted to the collaborative process, it strived to make the point that all types of artists could work harmoniously together to create art. The exhibition enlisted thirty-seven painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, and engineers, including Richard Hamilton, Nigel Hendurson, Victor Pasmore, Kenneth and Mary Martin, Erno Goldfinger, Alison and Peter Smithson, and James Stirling.29 Twelve groups of artists worked together on a project, and each came up with something uniquely different, some concerned with pop culture, others with a different aesthetic strand of abstract Constructivism.30 “The variety of what was shown fit with the Independent Group’s rejection of idealist aesthetics and with it penetrating interest in a diversity of cultural artifacts.”31 It is an exhibition remembered for its focus on objects of popular culture placed in a new context, somewhat similar to the ideas found in Machine Art. Though, in this case, the challenge to convention was in the form of established artists of different disciplines coming together to create, merging interests and ideas with the intent of producing new and challenging art.

The group comprised of artists Richard Hamilton and John McHale, and architect John Voelcker combined elements of high and low art, arranged in a bizarre, ultimately thought-provoking way. They juxtaposed, for instance, cultural artifacts such as a full-size model of Robbie the Robot from the popular science fiction film Forbidden Planet with a large iconic photograph of Marilyn Monroe in a billowing skirt and a poster of van

29 Marincola, 126.
30 Altshuler, 355.
31 Altshuler, 355.
Gogh’s *Sunflowers*. The installation also included a squishy floor that emitted a strawberry scent, a corridor of optical illusion, and all of these elements existed within a structure comprised of uneven walls and lopsided doorways. With no specific aesthetic program or prescribed style, groups could use the gallery space however they wanted, as one press release called it, “spontaneously and democratically organized.” Another stated, “It gives a startling foretaste of the diversity and enormous range of the Art of the Future.” The exhibition represented a major survey of British artistic power and served as a precursor to the work of American Pop artists. While scattered in its themes and presentations, it presented the unified theme of a “rejection of idealist aesthetics,” or, alternative manifestations of art to consider.

The 1960s and 1970s ushered in a new era of “exhibitions” that pushed the boundaries in their conceptualization and presentation. Conceptual art, marked by its focus on the artistic experience and theoretical components, made the need for objects relatively superfluous. Often referred to as “actions,” rather than exhibitions, these works are composed of individual acts often performed by the artist. In one of Vito Acconci’s most controversial works in 1972, entitled *Seedbed* (Figure 3), the artist is physically present in the work and directly engages the viewer. In this psychological work, Acconci positions himself under a ramp in the floorboards of the Sonnabend Gallery in New York and masturbates as visitors walk over the ramp. Though they could not see him, a speaker in the corner of the room made him audible as he invaded visitors’ minds with his erotic and forceful language, addressing individuals as he heard them walking above. The

32 Altshuler, 366.
33 Altshuler, 366.
34 Altshuler, 355.
reciprocal nature of the work is what most interested Acconci, feeding on the link between artist and viewer at the crux of the work.35

The notion of the presence or absence of art in this work is called into question, as is the viewer’s expectations of the gallery environment they are entering; there is nothing on the walls, nothing really in the room at all, immediately defying typical expectations of an art gallery. The ramp and the non-contextualized sounds coming from the lone speaker in the corner are the only clues as to what is being presented, but the inability to immediately place the sounds or comprehend what is going on is a major component of the work. Ultimately, Acconci wants it to be evident that art is all about ideas and the artist is inseparable from these ideas. The artist, here, is physically producing something, hence the title, *Seedbed*; It may be seen as art to some and to others it may seem an extreme act meant only to shock, but, it indisputably serves as a conceptual and aesthetic challenge for the viewer who struggles to accept the artist’s terms.

Whether through larger exhibitions comprised of multiple artists or smaller single-artist shows, it is clear that exhibitions have the power to imbue change and provoke questions. In each of the exhibitions discussed, the viewer is forced to consider alternative forms of art, through work that strays from what is expected in terms of style, theme, concept, or production. In some cases, there is power in numbers, through exhibitions that involve multiple works or multiple artists so as to better prove a point. However, a single artist with a single concept, as seen through Vito Acconci, can create

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just as much of an impact, demanding all of the viewers’ attention and forcing them to consider the very specific challenge that is posed to them.

Chapter 2: Challenging Expectations of Display

In all exhibitions, the method of display plays a huge role in its impact, its message, and its reception. The space in which art is displayed, the juxtaposition of the objects on display and the ways in which they are presented are all key components of the exhibition installation. Specific intervals between exhibited artworks establish a certain spatial language, and this connection has, through time, taken the place of the frame, the wall, the environment, and the architecture, “establishing the world of the installation.”

Up until the twentieth century, most groupings of artwork were characterized either by movements or according to simple contrasts between the modern and the traditional, or “the academies and the rebels.” This early form of exhibition was not meant to be analytical, a notion that has become increasingly important in exhibition design. But, through history there have always been exhibitions that challenge the status quo and raise new questions in accordance with their time.

In 1905 at the Salon d’Automne in Paris, the Fauves gave their exhibit a new thematic approach that went beyond simply presenting themselves as a group. They emphasized a single principle of their work – color. Works were displayed and grouped according to use of color in an early example of the power of the exhibition to focus its audience. The 1913 Armory Show in New York also went beyond a mere presentation of artists. Its aim instead was “the cultural and educational growth of a public,” and its

36 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 375.
37 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 375.
desire to “extend the mental space” was achieved through its structural design.\textsuperscript{38} The space accommodated approximately 1,600 works of art arranged in rooms in the shapes of rhomboids or octagons with open corners. The organization was meant to “expand the territory and influence of the individual works,” separating them from their historic and productive context and placing emphasis on the individual work. This was essentially the precursor to the white cube mentality, the modern day ideal for exhibiting works, as exemplified through the design of MoMA and other modern museum and gallery spaces. As Brian O’Doherty states, “the ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is art.”\textsuperscript{39}

The notion of the ideal way to display art is one that continues to be challenged over and over, and one of the first to do so in a major way was The International Exposition of Surrealism (Figure 4) of 1938. Reacting against minimalist and reductive installation ideals, it sought rather to inundate the senses, as “a surrealist exhibition was a voyage through the viscera of the unconscious rather than a walk through a void.”\textsuperscript{40} Surrealists encouraged use of all the senses and even the interference of the outside world. The exhibition, organized and curated by Marcel Duchamp at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, engaged the sensations of touch, taste and sight as well as the use of labyrinth-like passages through works of art. Objects were enveloped by shadows and visitors were given flashlights in order to view them. This untraditional progression through the gallery space served to instill both fear and pleasure in its audience, but nonetheless drew the spectator in.

\textsuperscript{38} Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 376.
\textsuperscript{39} Brian O’Doherty, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space (Santa Monica: Lapis, 1986), 14.
\textsuperscript{40} Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 382.
Visitors first encountered Salvador Dali’s *Taxi Pluvieux* at the entryway, an old taxi with water drizzling down the insides of the windows, a shark head in the front seat, and a mannequin in the back with live snails crawling over it. Next, the visitor walked through the *Rue Surrealiste*, a wide corridor of about twenty mannequins dressed unconventionally by various artists. The large central room was a grotto of sorts, its ceiling covered with 1,200 bags of coal and its floor with a carpet of dead leaves, but in a clearing was a sparkling pool of waterlilies.\(^4\) This was an installation where the artwork consumes the space; the viewer was not given space for contemplation between visual input. In some ways this concept harks back to early days of Academy exhibitions where artwork covered the gallery space, but it takes the idea a step further, as an exhibition more akin to a theatrical performance, eliciting emotion and response and demanding interactivity.

Further challenges to display expectation are exemplified by the ‘ahistorical’ exhibition, a fairly recent trend, aimed at directly defying the organizational conventions of the museum. Attempts at organizing works by artist, school, and chronology first appeared in the late sixteenth century, and by the eighteenth century museums began to adhere to this new taxonomy almost exclusively. It remains today the primary means by which artwork is exhibited in most museums. There have in recent years, however, been a number of temporary exhibitions that abandon traditional chronological arrangement in an effort to reveal correspondences between disparate works of art from different periods and cultures. Classification by material is also abandoned in this inclusive form of

\(^4\) Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 382.
installation. “These affinities cut across chronological boundaries as well as the conventional stylistic categories implemented in art history.” 42

Prominent Swiss exhibition designer, Harald Szeeman curated an exhibition in 1988 at the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam called *A-Historische Klanken* (Figure 5), or “Ahistorical Sounds”. The exhibition made it possible to view a fifteenth century chair and a Picasso portrait within the same space, a rare occurrence in the typical gallery setting. Upon entering the gallery space in the Boymans Museum there was a tremendous amount of light and space readily noticeable. At first glance it appeared to be a typical White Cube installation, with evenly spaced objects and careful consideration of placement. Upon closer inspection, it became clear that the objects were extremely diverse, and perhaps the perceived visual balance was in accordance with the White Cube ideal as an ironic statement.

In each of the three rooms was a sculpture at the center, one by Joseph Beuys, one by Imi Knoebel and one by Bruce Nauman. These central sculptures were meant to resonate with the other works of art, producing a spatial dialogue and allowing “ahistorical sounds to resonate”43 According to Szeeman, the main room was “the site of spiritual confusion,” with an appeal to human creativity and suffering through pieces by Breughel, Beuys, and Rubens that respectively represent confusion, creativity and suffering. The theme of the room on the right was “the cryptic silence of emptiness and monochrome” juxtaposing Morandi and van Elk as well as a silver urn from 1918. In the left room there was “the sacral elevation of the apparently trivial” through combining

42 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 8.
43 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 8.
works by Nauman, Rothko, Bosch, Mondrian along with a sixteenth century Venetian
glass dish. Szeeman himself is in search of a link between disparate artforms as is
mirrored through this exhibition. Though his specific goals are not necessarily evident,
perhaps it is the purely visual aspect of this type of exhibition that is most significant as a
challenge to traditional expectations of display.

An earlier attempt by Szeemann at breaking with conventionality was his 1969
exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle in Berne, one of several
exhibitions of that time organized in defiance of “the rules.” Szeemann’s was one of the
first large exhibitions of this kind. He gathered works that had already been labeled by
previous exhibitions as being of a certain type or style, but ignored the categories and
expected arrangements, juxtaposing radically different pieces on the floors and walls of
various rooms. The exhibition was also unique in that artists either installed the works
themselves or gave specific instruction. As the first major survey of conceptual art in
Europe, “the interaction of works with the site, with each other or with the public seemed
to give the exhibition its own life force.” It marked an important methodological shift in
exhibition making, and in Szeemann’s own words, “The Kunsthalle became a laboratory
and a new exhibition style was born – one of structured chaos.”

Artist and curator Fred Wilson posed another challenge to traditional ideals of
display imbedded in museum ideology. In a series of temporary exhibitions in the 1990s,
the major theme being “the way museums organize their collections and highlight or

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44 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 10.
45 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 49.
suppress objects within them.” Wilson brought to light these important and often overlooked issues. In his 1992 exhibition *Mining the Museum: Mixed Metaphors* at The Maryland Historical Society, Wilson “mined” the society’s collection in search of both familiar and never before displayed objects, juxtaposing them in unexpected ways so as to create a new dialogue between Maryland’s history, the museum’s responsibility, and visitor expectations. Wilson’s concept is exemplified by one of his many contrasts entitled “Metalwork, 1723-1880” (Figure 6) in which a set of fine silver is displayed alongside a set of slave shackles. Another contrast displays a whipping post among a group of European style chairs under the title “Cabinetmaking, 1820-960.” The chairs are turned to face the post as though they serve as audience seating, a chilling image. These displays, among others, call into question America’s racist past and Maryland’s role in it. In addition, it calls into question the choices institutions make in their telling of history through the objects and narratives they choose to display and how they choose to display them. Wilson himself states, “As an artist who had had work on the walls and also looked at work, I had questions about what those spaces were really doing to the artwork and to artists.” The power of this exhibition lies in its ability to reveal the possibility of alternatives and to question preexisting expectations of artistic display.

A year later at the Seattle Art Museum Wilson intervened more directly in permanent museum installation through his exhibition *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors*. In this exhibit, he moved Native American tribal carvings from to the nineteenth century to the American galleries on a subsequent floor, displaying them among works by

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47 McClellan, 107.
48 McClellan, 107.
49 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 252.
acclaimed American artists such as Winslow Homer and William Merritt Chase. How does this relatively simple action influence the public’s understanding of what constitutes as American art? Wilson also made the addition of a mannequin in a gray suit to a display of African robes with the wall label:

Certain elements of dress were used to designate one’s rank in Africa’s status-conscious capitals. A gray suit with conservatively patterned tie denotes a businessman or member of government. Costumes such as this are designed and tailored in Africa and worn throughout the continent.50

Wilson’s exhibition was comprised of numerous other reworked installations and rewritten wall texts, in addition to refocused museum spotlights on water fountains and fire alarms to further add to the newly charged environment in which the museum itself was on display and its very foundation was made vulnerable.

The use of wall text is a commonplace, expected convention of exhibited artwork in today’s society. People seem to become uncomfortable if they cannot readily access a title of a work or who its creator is. In David Hickey’s exhibition, Beau Monde: Toward a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism at the SITE Santa Fe International Biennial in 2001, the use of wall text was specifically abandoned. The entire museum was transformed into a single architectural frame to exhibit the works of twenty-one artists including Ellsworth Kelly and Takashi Murakami.51 The label for the show could be found on the outside of the building in the form of a large graffiti drawing by artist Gajin Fujita (Figure 7). Inside, there were no labels, no introductory or background texts on the walls; instead, all of the written material, including a list of the work, was handed out in the form of a
catalogue brochure. This format encourages viewers to experience the art without the
distraction of textual information that can bombard the senses and influence a viewer’s
opinion before they form one on their own. Ironically, the notion of a separate catalogue
of text and labels harks back to nineteenth century French Salons. Granted, those
exhibitions likely did it out of necessity for space and visibility reasons, but it serves to
show that frequently what is deemed to be novel in concept has often already been done.

The notion of site-specific art has been a part of society for centuries with the
implementation of sculpture in private and public spaces, though it has not necessarily
always viewed the same way as traditional “high art” given its functionalism and relation
to architecture. This was true for a long time until site-specific art became a trend,
demanding the same attention and respect as other forms of art in more conventional
exhibition spaces. The late 1960s marks the critical moment when artists’ practices took
them outside the traditional institutional framework and into what is often referred to as
‘post studio’ production, a collaborative partnership between artist and curator that would
come to the forefront particularly in the mid-eighties.52 No other artist’s practice perhaps
better represents this shift than Robert Smithson’s. Smithson’s early work, which
includes painting and sculpture, was meant for the circuit of the art museum and the
dealer. However, he soon began to create works that could be displayed traditionally but
corresponded to locations elsewhere through their documentary or photographic form.
Smithson is quoted as saying, “Painting, sculpture and architecture are finished, but the

52 Marincola, 35.
art habit continues.”\(^{53}\) This is why his works ultimately transform into site-specific exhibitions, or *earthworks*.

The most well known earthwork in existence today is Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (Figure 8). It was constructed on the Great Salt Lake in Utah in 1970 with 6,650 tons of various types of rock in a spiral formation that juts out into the water from land. The specific spot of land, Rozel Point, was specifically chosen due to a known destabilizing fault line running through it. As Smithson described the site, “[it] suggested an immobile cyclone while the flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake, a dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness.”\(^{54}\) The site is out of the way, celebrated as an escape from urbanism and the museum space.\(^{55}\) The *Jetty*, having gone through periods of being visible and submerged underwater, continues to symbolize notions of transience and impermanence in art, which is intrinsically linked to its placement. Many of Smithson’s works have been preserved to the best of their ability, yet ultimately the value he places on their permanence is secondary to the meaning given to them by the space they inhabit.

It was around this same time that artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude began creating their now infamous site-specific works that essentially take the form of temporary exhibitions. The husband and wife team are known for wrapping buildings and islands with fabric, making huge aesthetic impacts on the land and challenging the expectations of the public. Other projects include installing a fabric fence through the landscape of Sonoma County in California leading directly into the ocean, and installing thousands of

\(^{54}\) Graziani, 113.
\(^{55}\) Graziani, 114.
umbrellas at once in both Japan and California. Perhaps their most ambitious installation was *The Gates* in New York’s Central Park in 2005 (Figure 9), the most talked about art exhibition of the moment that generated both controversy and excitement. The project was first proposed in 1979 and rejected, then finally approved in 2003 by the new mayor, Michael Bloomberg. The 7,500 16-foot tall bright saffron gates of flowing pleated nylon lined the walkways of Central Park, and remained on view for only sixteen days. *The Gates* is essentially meant to be viewed as a vast environmental sculpture, enhancing and integrating itself within its surroundings.

The project also elicited an accompanying exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art before *The Gates* even opened, entitled *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: The Gates, Central Park, New York City* which celebrated and previewed the work itself. The exhibition documented the trajectory of the project since its conception through preparatory drawings, photographs, maps, diagrams as well as the components of one of the gates itself. Unlike some of their other projects, Chriso and Jeanne-Claude’s *Gates* took place in the heart of a city, even though it may be considered the part of the city closest to nature. According to Christo, they wanted whatever work they executed in New York to be directly related to human scale, injecting the work of art into people’s everyday lives. *The Gates* directly intervenes in the visual experience of walking through the park, cutting off one’s view of anything but the sky above. This was also the main complaint of those against *The Gates*, arguing that it created an unfounded blight on an important New York landmark.

The most significant quality of any site-specific work is that it is directly concerned with its exhibition space; the inspiration ultimately comes from the space,
rather than the space being inspired by the work. This is not a quality, however, exclusive
to site-specific work or to public artwork. Many artists today create work with their
exhibition space in mind, taking into consideration how the work will look in the space
and how the two may best compliment one another. As Jeanne-Claude said in an
interview, “The Gates, our work of art, is absolutely for Central Park, it couldn’t be
anymore specific, even its name.” 56

Another exhibition to seek a venue outside the confines of a museum or gallery
space was Chambres d’amis of 1986. This exhibition, organized by Jan Hoet, the founder
of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent, Belgium, featured the work of about fifty
American and European artists who were invited to work in rooms of private apartments
in Ghent. Its aim was essentially “denaturalizing its viewer’s sense of private property by
treating homes as public exhibition space.” 57 Similar to the site-specific work of Robert
Smithson and Christo and Jeanne-Claude, this work is defined by its space, yet
dissimilarly, it does not intervene in a public space. Clearly at play here is a commentary
on public versus private space.

Artist Bertrand Lavier set up one of the apartments by wallpapering several rooms
with blue spotted paper and hanging paintings in complimentary colors over it to mimic
the motif. This technique is in clear dialogue with Seurat’s innovation in pointillism,
however, Lavier framed his paintings in gold frames making a perceptual break in the
continuity of the whole. He was not only drawing attention “to the bourgeois practice of
harmonizing artwork and décor” but also drawing attention to “the similarity of effect

56 Jonathan David Fineberg, Christo and Jeanne-Claude: On the Way to The Gates (New Haven: Yale
University Press in Association with The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 177.
57 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 271.
between installation and interior decoration.” The frame in a sense symbolizes the need to protect an artwork from its physical space, which is ironically the exact opposite goal of site-specific art.

In another apartment, artist, Joseph Kosuth filled the walls with text from Sigmund Freud’s *The Psychology of Everyday Life*, which he then obscured by painting black lines through (Figure 10). As part of his Artist’s Statement in the exhibition catalogue he writes:

The fragments that make up the unitary paragraph, a made up order, which constructs (or deconstructs) the paragraph differently than the other order (of the world), which make the paragraph with sentences. And differently, too, than that order which made rooms out of windows, doors, changing ceilings, and those walls, which presume the lives, which will be lived within them.

Interestingly, these rooms, as well as those by other artists such as Daniel Buren and Bruce Nauman, will be on exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent in March of 2012. And at the same time, in keeping with the goals of *Chambres d’amis*, the museum will offer thirty international artists the opportunity to create work throughout the city and outskirts of Ghent.

Somewhere in between the public and private exhibition space lies the mobile exhibition space, an entity unto itself with the familiar goal of making art available to a wide audience. The Riksutställningar in Sweden, a government agency under the ministry of culture and now recognized as a museum, has as its slogan: “Promotes exhibition

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58 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 117.
development and cooperation.”\textsuperscript{61} Originally a government experiment, its goal was to promote “geographical and social justice” through traveling exhibitions. One particular exhibition of 1999 entitled \textit{Difficult Matters: Objects and Narratives that Disturb and Affect} (Figure 11) was a mobile exhibition installed in a trailer. The exhibition centered around objects of a controversial or explosive nature, and museums and the general public alike were encouraged to submit items. Fifty-four objects were picked up en route and placed together in showcases. Ultimately the exhibition was commenting on the collecting policies of museums, questioning, “What has happened to the objects that are associated with disappointments, with sorrow and distress, with intolerance and vulnerability?”\textsuperscript{62} The form of this exhibition allowed visitors to be co-creators through submissions and ideas, in keeping with the very nature of this type of exhibition, which is dependent on reaching a large and diverse public. The institution has as one of its primary goals to show exhibitions in non-traditional venues, and utilizing a mobile space is one.

In addition to the exhibition trailer, Riksutställningar has since developed exhibition towers, which are constructed for outdoor use in public spaces and may be placed anywhere that can be reached by a forklift truck. These towers are climate controlled and secure, providing a safe environment for their objects. The public is able to view the exhibitions during all times of day and is encouraged to give responses through a mailbox system or through text message. The first exhibition to be held in these towers centered around questions of democracy and power through “symbol-laden

objects linked to events,” each accompanied by personal narrative. In addition to the exhibition itself, local organizers were able to construct a space for debate as well as cultural events surrounding the ideas raised in the exhibition. It is vital that “any institutions must remain open to contemporary questions, to maintain creativity, and to have the courage and flexibility to engage with and participate in process, discussions, and interactions.”

The space where art is housed and exhibited inherently affects the public’s opinion of the work and how they relate to it. Through history, much importance has been placed on exhibition spaces. Earliest forms of ‘unified exhibitions’ were found in private homes in the form of Kunst und Wunderkammer, or “Art and Wonder Room.” Wealthy nobles and aristocrats often used such rooms to prominently display their collections of objects and art. Many of these collections were later bequeathed to museums or historical institutions where they were once again displayed in traditional ways and in traditional settings. The primary exhibition space today remains the museum or gallery, often taking on the style of the sparse White Cube, which offers a neutral space where art can be objectively viewed. While numerous exhibitions take place in spaces like this, the art exhibition also has the unique ability to occur in a multiplicity of places and forms due to its temporality and its ability to often act independently from established artistic institutions.

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63 Pollock and Zemans, 154.
64 Pollock and Zemans, 155.
65 McClellan, 116.
Chapter 3: The Issues in Displaying Cultures

Cultural themes in exhibitions are common, bringing to light the art and lifestyle of cultures familiar and unfamiliar to viewers. Exhibitions that present non-western or indigenous art to western audiences often demand more of a cultural and historical context in terms of display, which often offer a broader scope of educational opportunity. By contrast, exhibitions of western art in the west often come with less context and explanation, using display techniques often only to highlight the aesthetic significance of the works. The way culturally specific art is presented and the dichotomy between providing context and providing little to none drastically effects the viewer’s perception of the objects as art objects versus products of a particular culture; this is a fine line that curators must walk.

An exhibition entitled Indian Art of the United States (Figure 12) organized by René d’Harnoncourt and Frederic Douglas was first shown at the San Francisco World’s Fair of 1939 and due to its success led to a larger exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941. It was an exhibition ahead of its time in many ways, and one of the first to place equal importance on the aesthetic power of the objects as well as their social and cultural context, highlighting the tension that often exists between art history and anthropology.\(^\text{66}\) Using a variety of installation strategies from white cube display to simulated dwellings and re-creations, to performance of tribal rituals,\(^\text{67}\) it promoted a balance between western views and the values of other cultures, which continues to be an important exhibition issue.

\(^{66}\) Obrist, 173.
\(^{67}\) McClellan, 142.
Work from museum collections across the U.S., supplemented by work from private collections and the work of present-day Indians were included in the exhibition. The three floors divided the exhibition into three main sections with the headings: Prehistoric Art (Indian art before contact with Whites), Historic or Living Art (art of existing tribes), and Indian Art for Modern Living (Indian art adapted to modern culture). Each section flowed together nicely, giving the feel of a continuous narrative. Objects included in the exhibit ranged from vessels to paintings, to sculpture to clothes and jewelry, to more contemporary art produced by the American Indian for its decorative value alone. Starting at the top floor, the work showed the Native American to be prolific in their creativity prior to white contact and modern technological advancements through objects such as animals made of tiny piping. One design element on the same floor in the Pueblo room of a reproduction of a canyon wall with crude figure painting, placed the viewer back in time so as to experience the art in context and experience the world of the early Native American Indian.

On the second floor, which featured the art of existing tribes, a section devoted to the Plains Indians displayed richly ornamented costumes, and buffalo hide paintings that spoke to the richness of the new economy at the time. A room devoted to the Northwest Coast Indians presented a different perspective through art based on the richness of their environment. Totem poles, wooden chests and masks relayed a “powerful and definite

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70 Vaillant, 168.
71 Vaillant, 168.
The objects here were spotlit in an otherwise dark room to further emphasize their significance and dramatic effect. From there, visitors entered a bright white room, the modern Eskimo room, in which the masks on display clearly emphasized an interest in surrealism. The first and final floor, devoted to modern Indian art, represented the Indians adjustment to new social and living conditions through many western style paintings done in oil and watercolor in addition to silver work, beading, and weaving that harks back to their older traditions. The essence of this final section is defined by the notion that “the old arts absorb the new techniques, but are not dominated by them.”

Indian Art of the United States encouraged viewers to be more open to other cultures, to broaden their thinking and understanding. The opening sentence of the accompanying exhibition catalogue is: “For centuries the white man has taken advantage of the practical contributions made by the American Indian to civilization.”

It is important to acknowledge that the western mentality is not the only worthwhile form of progress. The exhibition catalogue also chastises the viewer’s role in the suppression of the American Indian, calling it a “violation of intrinsic human rights.” In addition to these motives, the exhibition attempted to point up common misinterpretations of the work on display and highlight the work’s importance to the history of America. Whether or not these goals were met is up for debate, but the very fact that an entire exhibition devoted to the art of the Native American Indian was presented in a major museum

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72 Vaillant, 168.
73 Vaillant, 168.
74 Vaillant, 168.
75 D’Harnoncourt and Douglas, 9.
76 D’Harnoncourt and Douglas, 9.
suggests that that the work is relevant to the history of art, particularly in America, and it raises the status of these objects to one of “high art.”

The curators, d’Harnoncourt and Douglas, are quoted as saying, “we know that increased familiarity with the background of the objects not only satisfies intellectual curiosity but actually heightens the appreciation of aesthetic values.”

It is for this reason that a concrete historical context was provided throughout the exhibition, a relatively new phenomenon in the display of other cultures. In an interview with d’Harnoncourt’s daughter, Anne, former Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a curator herself, she says that her father spent ten years working with Native Americans on various projects, intimately getting to know the culture and its people. His intense firsthand research no doubt enhanced the success and power of the exhibition as a whole.

Essentially, the main goals of the curators are outlined through their own words in the exhibition catalogue:

This publication, as well as the exhibition upon which it is based, aims to show that the Indian artist of today, drawing on the strength of his tribal tradition and utilizing the resources of the present, offers a contribution that should become an important factor in building the America of the future.

How have ‘identity politics’ had an impact on curatorial practice? “The transformation of the curator of contemporary art from behind-the-scenes arbiter to central player in the broader stage of global cultural politics” represents a huge shift in the way exhibitions are executed. The role of the curator has in many ways changed to

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77 D’Harnoncourt and Douglas, 11.
78 Obrist, 172.
79 D’Harnoncourt and Douglas, 10.
80 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 21.
that of “cultural mediator” as a result of the gradual surge in culturally specific exhibits and collections based around the ever-popular theme of cultural identity. “This shift of curatorial function, in turn, seems to have opened up new venues for the distribution, acceptance, and appreciation of previously marginalized art.”\textsuperscript{81} This ideology includes new and differing approaches to exhibiting the work of other cultures.

An exhibition that took another approach was *Magiciens de la Terre*, an exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris in 1989. Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, it is often thought of as pivotal because it “greatly influenced the discussions around curating works by artists operating outside Europe and the USA.”\textsuperscript{82} In the wake of MoMA’s infamous “Primitivism” show, it is often thought to have been organized in reaction to it. *Primitivism in Early 20th Century Art: Affinity of the tribal and the Modern* was held at MoMA in 1984, and was brutally criticized for the complete lack of contextualization it provided to the objects of “primitive” art it included. Though one of the first exhibitions to juxtapose tribal and modern objects, it failed to explore the origins of the non-western art it included. By contrast, *Magiciens* was a globalizing exhibition that specifically chose not to address difficult questions of cultural identity; instead it took a more classical thematic approach, focusing on the abstract theme of the magician and spirituality. As “one of the first exhibitions to forage a truly international assortment of artists,” it was pivotal in its contribution to the history of recent global exhibitions and the relationships between western and non-western aesthetics.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{81} Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 23.
\textsuperscript{82} Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 282.
The organization of the exhibit juxtaposed contemporary works deriving from both non-western and western cultures, allowing for the comparison of their similarities and differences. The underlying similarities that emerged were found in the “spirit and intent” of the work in keeping with the theme of the artist as magician, a theme essentially borrowed from Sigmund Freud; a section from his 1913 Totem and Taboo is quoted in the catalogue: “Art, which certainly did not begin as art for art’s sake, originally served tendencies which to-day have for the greater part ceased to exist. Among these we may suspect various magic intentions.”

Due to the overarching theme, the selection of works were based on meaning rather than form, the criteria being that they be “conduits for spiritual channeling and transcendence.” However, it is notable that many of the artists included consistently produced work that was “antagonistic to the spiritual premises of the show,” for instance, Barbara Kruger or Krzysztof Wodiczko, whose works are often political in nature. Barbara Kruger’s contribution to the exhibit was one of her familiar billboard-like images that used only text and asked, “Who are the magicians of the earth?” Below that was a list of options: “Doctors?, Politicians?, Plumbers?, Writers?” Though directly related to the theme of the show, the work explores similar social political issues at the heart of the majority of Kruger’s work.

Another one of the exhibit’s aims was to illustrate how ideas can form in a parallel fashion, independent of one another, in both western and non-western areas, through the juxtaposition of aesthetically related objects. The most widely cited example of this is Richard Long’s Red Earth Circle paired with the Australian Yuendumu

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84 Kleeblatt, 69.
85 Kleeblatt, 66.
86 Kleeblatt, 66.
aboriginal earth painting on the ground below it (Figure 13). The pairing is meant to influence the viewer’s perception of each, the ritualistic nature of the earth painting adding a dimension of meaning to Long’s piece which might not have existed in another context. It also shows Long’s work as deriving from the more elemental style which characterizes the sand drawing. However, criticism of this pairing chastises the fact that the Australian work is not given context for an unfamiliar audience, and that Long’s work is in fact given curatorial priority as the focal point of the room, positioned in such a way that it looms over the sand drawing as if it were only a reflection of western art. The choice can be read multiple ways. Ultimately, one of the goals of the exhibition is to point up the ways in which the art of differing cultures have influenced one another. No context is given to assist in this deciphering other that the placement of the works, which is certainly a calculated curatorial decision. According to curator and art historian, Clémentine Dellis, “Where it failed was in unpacking and recasting wider concepts of cultural and artistic contextualization within the fine-tuning of the exhibition space.”

Another downfall of the show was that many thought it generated confusion over the specificity of various phases of artistic creativity in the west. Much of the work chosen for the exhibition was based on a diverse grouping of aesthetically pleasing pieces that made the most visual sense in the context of the exhibition. This can be an interesting concept particularly when working with non-western art, but many believe it also “managed to misrepresent issues at the heart of a lot of the western art it included by

88 Kleeblatt, 71.
89 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 283.
90 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 283.
regressing further into a retinal mode of appreciation.”91 The chosen theme of the magician and looking at the “spiritualist” role of the artist, which was in some cases diametrically opposed to the goal of the featured artists’ work, led to complaints that the exhibition was “unable to contain the contradictions generated by the specificities of the cultural and artistic voices it includes.”92

According to a review of the time from *The Burlington Magazine*, “the show is founded upon the observation that the western ‘civilized’ world is introspective in its insistence on the primacy of western art and that all so-called international exhibitions have hitherto been limited by this perspective.”93 Contemporary art is alive in non-western countries as well, and this exhibit attempts to show this. As the article says, “in the same way as western artists work within, develop and deviate from a tradition, so too do their ‘third world’ counterparts.”94 The basis for the selection of the work, however, was based on western aesthetics. Organizers of the exhibition even admitted that it was too difficult and even undesirable to consider another viewpoint,95 likely because in bringing so many different cultural aesthetics together, it was impossible to understand all of them fully. This conceptual framework has both positive and negative connotations; on the one hand, the art of other cultures is viewed with the same criteria and held to the same standards as western art, however, it also means that curators are “imposing their values and judgments on cultures to which these may be irrelevant.”96 In the interest of creating a cohesive show organizers also essentially overlooked large areas in

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91 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 284.
92 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 284.
94 Lewison, 585.
95 Lewison, 585.
96 Lewison, 585.
contemporary art by western artists, who were chosen mainly for their dialogue with ethnography through subject matter or style, rather than for their contemporary relevance.\textsuperscript{97}

In many ways \textit{Magiciens de la Terre} took an idealistic viewpoint. Since the exhibition, curators have become increasingly uncertain as to how to exhibit works that appears to be outside the “mainstream,” whether that is because they are works of non-western cultures or because they are by newer younger artists with a culturally independent vision. The exhibit unleashed huge debate, which has never quite been resolved, as one critic said, “…it deliberately withholds answers.”\textsuperscript{98} With what aesthetic criteria should the work exhibited be approached and considered? To what extent has the organization of the show, including the work chosen, been manipulated to achieve certain goals? Are the organizers imposing a specific interpretation of the work exhibited? These of course are questions that apply to all exhibitions; there is almost always a point of view being imposed that serves to enhance either the visual or thematic impact of the exhibit.

In 1982, curator Susan Vogel installed The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s first exhibit of African art, which shows just how much of a western emphasis was held in museums until fairly recently. “The sculpture of Africa is real art, as potent and as worthy of respect as the art of any other time or place in history,” she says.\textsuperscript{99} Her 1997 exhibition, \textit{Baule: African Art/Western Eyes} (Figure 14), which first opened at the Yale University Art Gallery, attempted to combine approaches in displaying the art of non-

\textsuperscript{97} Lewison, 585.\textsuperscript{98} Lewison, 585.\textsuperscript{99} McClellan, 143.
western cultures by alternating aesthetic and ethnographic modes of display, with spotlit “high-art” in one gallery and dioramas of Baule houses and shrines in another. Vogel’s years of fieldwork in Baule, where she immersed herself in the people and culture, greatly impacted the decisions she made in exhibiting their culture. As she says, “my fieldwork turned to how the Baule presented, apprehended, and literally saw their art.”

She also speaks of the “fundamental paradox” in creating an exhibition of works by a culture of people that do not consider their work to be “art.” How, then, do you respect the culture while adhering to traditional western aesthetic values? By placing objects in an exhibition within a fine arts institution they are automatically given a fine art context, perhaps worlds apart from their original purpose and meaning. This concept, however, is far from new, as artistic institutions have long been collecting and displaying objects that did not originally have an artistic intent, which is not to say that they do not contain formal properties of art.

The introduction to the exhibition’s accompanying catalogue begins with: “The Baule mask spotlit in the museum case or hanging over the mantel has become ‘Baule Art,’ though everybody knows that once, in a different place, it was something else entirely.”

The organization of the exhibition that follows combines the perspectives of both western viewers and the Baule people. This double perspective was set forth at the start of the exhibition with the inclusion of a fully costumed, masked figure seated on a European chair in front of a shed wall, as if it were a spectator directing its gaze to the works on display. The works in the first room appealed to traditional western display

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101 Vogel, 19.
102 Vogel, 14.
aesthetics as a collection of highly valued western forms including a female torso, a door panel with elaborate carving, and objects crafted in gold; the section was even titled “Museum Masterpieces.” Throughout the seven galleries, perspectives of the Baule and of “western eyes” were juxtaposed using visuals and text. Each gallery was grouped according to the four degrees of display present in the Baule culture with a title on the wall. For instance, one room contained “art that is private” for objects that are rarely seen, such as spirit spouses. Another room designated for “sacred art” contained art rarely viewed or viewed with awe, and in the section of “decorated objects” were objects such as pottery, readily visible and used by the Baule people.

Though much of the display was rooted in western tradition, the inclusion of wall labels including quotes from Baule individuals allowed them to present their own stories and to talk about the objects in their own words, a method that is not commonly used in the display of any cultures’ art. In the “decorated objects” section, theatrical simulation was used to show how the Baule would view the objects in context, and the voice of a Baule man provided additional information on the scene, which helped bring the culture to life in perhaps the most tangible way. The autobiographical component to the show provides context while also giving respect and credit to the “artists” and their culture. Vogel also readily admits that the product of her research is much more personal and “entangled with the biography of the researcher” than is typical. But this is perhaps one of the reasons the exhibition is so successful; its more personal nature touches viewers

104 Adams, 21.
and connects them with the an unfamiliar culture in a very human way that promotes acceptance and understanding.

While many approaches exist in the artistic display of non-western cultures, it is more often than not that the work is given a culturally specific and historical context. This is not as often the case in the display of western art and “It remains to be asked why an integrated, or balanced, approach to installation, now widespread in installations of African, Asian, and Native American material, is so rarely used for western art.”105 When should art be contextualized and when should it stand on its own? And what role do exhibitions play in the way the art of any culture is viewed and interpreted by viewers? As seen through the examination of these select exhibitions, there is often a distinctive point of view that coincides with the presentation of cultures, whether it stems from within the culture or from the perspective of an outsider, they are often not comprehensive. It is also often the case that one culture imposes its ideals and value system onto another, creating a misnomer that can be detrimental to the integrity of both cultures.

105 McClellan, 145.
Chapter 4: The Exhibition as a Mirror of the Human Experience

Most successful art exhibitions essentially reflect the interests or concerns of society at a given time or place. Everything from theme, to the way an exhibition is designed, to the way it is marketed is a reflection of societal interests and expectations. What is important to society and what demands attention? Exhibitions use a variety of strategies to touch their audiences, to connect on a personal and human level, even a universal level. This is essentially one of the main goals of the exhibition today: to bring art to a place of relevance that is relatable to a wide audience.

Family of Man (Figure 15) is one such example, a landmark exhibition of 1955, curated by famed photographer Edward Steichen. It was first shown at The Museum of Modern Art and traveled all over the world to thirty-seven countries due to its success. The exhibition was comprised of 503 photographs by 273 photographers grouped according to themes such as love, death, and family. In total, eight million people

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viewed the exhibition. The show’s mission was to portray the universality of the human experience and to portray the important role of photography in the documentation of human life. As one of the most important exhibitions in the history of photography, it is also pivotal in terms of its bold subject matter and installation design.

The exhibition was comprised of works of contemporary photography by both unknown and famous photographers, “in order to enhance its immediacy and relevance.” Photographs featured images of ordinary people from around the world engaged in universal human activities such as work, play, laughing, crying, giving birth, and dying, from intimate portraits to candid to landscape scenes. Many photographs originally featured in *Life Magazine* and other magazines were included. The entrance wall to the exhibition displayed the text:

There is only one man in the world
and his name is All Men.

There is only one woman in the world
and her name is All Women.

There is only one child in the world
and the child’s name is All Children.

A camera testament, a drama of the grand canyon on of humanity, an epic woven of fun, mystery and holiness – here is the Family of Man!

In the last of a series of photomontage exhibits at MoMA curated by Steichen, the Director of the museum’s Department of Photography until 1962, this one was unlike any of the others before it. The rise of photographic exhibitions during this time is important
since photography is often thought to be the artistic medium of the modern world.\textsuperscript{110} This was also a time, however, when photography was still struggling to be recognized as a fine art, in the same league as painting or sculpture, so to devote a major exhibition in a major museum to the medium played a large role in legitimizing it as a fine art. Steichen, however, did not want to present the photographs as “high art,” rather, he broke the barriers between the art and the viewer through his unique installation style that submersed the viewer in imagery.\textsuperscript{111} In Steichen’s introduction to the catalogue he says the exhibition “demonstrates that the art of photography is a dynamic process of giving form to ideas and of explaining man to man,” and that it was conceived as “a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.”\textsuperscript{112}

The organization of the exhibition relied both on the universality of human emotions as well as the use of seductive display strategies. The photographs were not grouped according to artist or school, or even region. Rather, they were grouped according to theme and aesthetic relevance. Upon entering the exhibit were pictures of courtship on a strip of lucite, and beyond that could be seen the family portraits, and beyond that Ansel Adams’s \textit{Mount Williamson} on the back wall. The exhibit was designed to be viewed as a sort of photo collage itself; photographs of all different sizes hung together, some from the ceiling, some from walls, mounted in various ways. The layered effect to the display allowed for multiple works to be viewed at once, from different perspectives and juxtaposed with different works based on the position of the


viewer, playing with depth of field and peripheral vision.\textsuperscript{113} To walk through the exhibit was essentially to walk through life, to experience the joys and sorrows and to project those experiences and emotions onto one’s own life.

A variety of installation techniques were used throughout the exhibition, for instance a hospital curtain was used as the backdrop for the images of birth. The photographs in the center of the first room of family life were suspended from the ceiling at various angles, greeting the viewer face-to-face, and surrounding that were photographs of the world of work. In another area were photographs of children playing, displayed on a carousel-like structure with the quote by John Masefield: “Clasp hands and know the thoughts of men in other lands,” and eerily beyond that could be seen images of death and mourning.\textsuperscript{114} Quotes taken from various sources, including the Bible, Hindu scripture, Chinese proverbs, and African and Russian folk sayings, were used to provoke further questions in the viewer. Images of injustice and loneliness were in the most traditionally arranged section and the most confined space, physically making the viewer feel uncomfortable. In the final sequence of images were nine portraits of men, women, and children, followed by an image of a dead soldier with the quote by Sophocles: “Who is the slayer. Who the victim? Speak.” Then at the climax of the exhibition was the only color photograph: an image of a hydrogen bomb explosion glowing red and orange in the darkness of the room shocked viewers “back into polychromatic reality with this reminder of life in the modern world.”\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{113} Sandeen, 40. 
\textsuperscript{114} Steichen, 204. 
\textsuperscript{115} Sandeen, 48.
Outside of the museum setting, site-specific exhibitions can directly interact with daily life, interrupting daily routine and expectations, contributing also to the potential for a wider audience and a more immediate impact. An example to consider is The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt that has been exhibited throughout the country. Started in 1987, The Names Project Foundation sought to find a way for friends and family of those who died of AIDS to remember their loved ones and commemorate them in tangible form. The first forty panels of the quilt were displayed first to the public from the mayor’s balcony of the San Francisco City Hall. Later that year, 1,920 panels were displayed on the National Mall in Washington D.C. (Figure 16) for one weekend, and in that weekend over half a million people visited.\textsuperscript{116} Gay rights activist, Cleve Jones, who first conceived of the Quilt, said: “we have borne in our arms and on our shoulders a new monument to our nation’s capitol…our monument was sewn of soft fabric and thread, and it was crated in homes across America…”\textsuperscript{117}

In an example of using art and its exhibition to make a difference, “The Quilt’s provocative appearance on the Mall [gave] the project’s leadership an opportunity to denounce the country’s indifference to the AIDS epidemic and to rally for greater attention to research and support.”\textsuperscript{118} The metaphor of the quilt, a symbol of warmth and American tradition, was a brilliant strategy for bringing AIDS into the American mainstream and garnering public attention for the epidemic.\textsuperscript{119} Displayed in one of the most public and historic places in the U.S., this is a major exhibition of artwork, and

\textsuperscript{117} Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 141.
\textsuperscript{118} Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 137.
\textsuperscript{119} Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 136.
whether or not it falls into the category of a typical “art exhibition,” it certainly deserves mention.

The Quilt has no one home where it resides on display, and now with over 44,000 panels, pieces of it travel around the country to schools and other organizations that wish to exhibit it; this is a unique phenomenon in the exhibition culture, which shows the work to be more of a living, breathing national symbol rather than the more common inaccessible work of art. The last time the Quilt was displayed in its entirety was in 1996 on the National Mall, though this time it covered the entire Mall. There are no specificities as to the design of the Quilt, aside from that each panel must be three by six feet and each must contain the name of the person it is commemorating; other than that, creators are free to do as they please. There is also no set structure to the organization of the Quilt’s display aside from merging panels together to create twelve-foot squares. Neither is there any agenda behind the display and “no one tells the viewer where to start, finish, or pay particular attention.”\(^{120}\) It is an exhibit of “art” entirely dependent on its ability to touch its audience through the universality of human mortality and empathy.

Public art that strives to make a statement, whether it be social or political, draws on human emotion and universal human experience. It is impossible to get closer to human experience than art created by real people who have been through real tragedy and real experiences that others can either relate to or develop empathy for. One such artist, who uses these concepts in his works of public video projection, is Krzysztof Wodiczko. A Polish artist, Wodiczko is best known for interfacing the facades of buildings and monuments around the world with larger than life projections of parts of the body, mainly

\(^{120}\) Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 140.
hands and faces that serve to literally bring the structures to life. He has created over seventy large-scale slide and video projections that have been included in many international exhibitions due to their politically charged and aesthetically challenging nature. As Wodiczko stated in an interview, “Public space is a site of enactment. It belongs to no one, yet we all are a part of it and can bring meaning to it.”

His installation at the St. Louis Public Library employed crime victims and inmates sharing their stories in real time while their hands were projected onto the building and to the scale of the building, as if the building made up the rest of their body. The public was then invited to speak to the building through an open-mic. According to Wodiczko, “This type of projection brings more opportunities to more people to join each other in an attempt to speak up and open up, open up and share in public space something that is usually regulated to private domain.” Another installation used the Bunker Hill monument as a projection site for the heads of individuals at the top with the rest of the monument acting as their body. Individuals were projected as they shared their stories about loved ones who had been killed in Charlestown, where the monument stands symbolizing, as Wodiczko states, that “the battle perhaps continues.”

In 2001, Wodiczko’s Tijuana Projection (Figure 17) at the Cultural Center of Tijuana, Mexico, projected faces onto one of the city’s landmarks, a unique rounded building, which gave the illusion of a gigantic, disembodied, somewhat distorted head speaking to the public of experiences and tragedies. The projected faces were those of

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123 “Power.”
young women, who make up ninety percent of factory laborers in Tijuana and have devastating testimonials of their experiences. Tijuana is on the border between Mexico and the United States, precariously placed and many of its people subject to great adversity. The issues raised by the young woman in the process of this installation were stories of rape, incest, and poisoning in the factories where they work. They spoke in real time into a camera nearby the installation site, which was then projected onto the building for the entire crowd to witness. Wodiczko says of the experience:

During the projection, you could sense the kind of electricity and pain among those who came to witness it. The position of the image was very special. Standing in front of the building we saw the face over our heads speaking to us…but also speaking to the larger world beyond.

Images of tearful faces bombarded onlookers, the raw emotion in their faces and words touching people in an undeniable way.

What better way to articulate human experience than through exhibiting human beings themselves? Performance art has had a complex history, struggling like photography once did to define itself as a fine art. Perhaps at its most extreme, performance art can include a physical being on display. This is exactly what artist Marina Abramović did in 2002 at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. In a work entitled, The House With the Ocean View (Figure 18), Abramović inhabited a confined space of three white cube rooms, open to the gallery on one side and suspended from the wall on the other. Leading up to each was a ladder of knives to ensure the artist could not “escape” and no contact could be made with her. The three rooms included a bathroom, a

124 “Power.”
sitting room, and a bedroom, each incredibly spare and minimalist. Viewers watched at a slight distance as Abramović subjected herself to a temporary life of fasting and silent meditation while incorporating elements of daily routine like showering, going to the bathroom, and drinking water.

Referred to as a “living installation” the work depends on the interaction between the artist and viewer, as Abramović states, “The public and I actually made the piece. Without the public, the piece doesn’t exist, so they filled it.”\textsuperscript{126} She also says “They take what they need for their own life to enlarge awareness.”\textsuperscript{127} The audience stood where the ocean would be, were this a real house with an ocean view, and watched Abramović as she watched back and, feeding off of their energy. A wall text in the gallery laid out the conditions she set for herself as well as those she laid out for her viewers: “(1) Remain silent, (2) establish energy dialogue with the artist, (3) use telescope.”\textsuperscript{128} In another room of the gallery was a participatory piece Abramović devised, a coffin like wooden box called the Dream Bed. A visitor could lie down in it for one hour wearing the same cotton shirt and pants outfit dyed a different color for each day of the week that Abramović wore herself in the installation. One last element, a single channel video called Stramboli was placed at the entrance to the gallery and featured the artist lying at the edge of the ocean, trapped between land and sea, as waves hit her face. According to the gallery’s press

\textsuperscript{126} Marincola, 139.
\textsuperscript{127} Marincola, 139.
release, “Each work demonstrates part of Abramović’s concern with creating works that ritualize the simple actions of everyday life.”

The artist says, “I created space with no time. I created the feeling of here and now.” This notion is exemplified by the large crowd the exhibition consistently drew, including many returnees and many that would stay for hours at a time, simply watching and perhaps reflecting on their own lives. A human being willingly on display, giving over their privacy and comforts for the sake of art is undoubtedly an incredible act. It is certainly an exhibition of sorts, but is it art or is it a statement on humanity? By placing it in a gallery context, the piece is given a “high art” connotation, perhaps exemplifying its very point and leaving what is left unexplained for the viewer to grapple with.

All of these disparate exhibitions that span multiple decades embody ideas that are central to many exhibitions. In particular, themes related to mortality and to the human capacity for empathetic emotion unite these exhibits, explored and presented using varying approaches. All use the approach of including representations of real individuals, whether in person or through images or symbols, these people serve to expose universal truths of humanity through the stories their art tells. When a piece of the life of any human being is on display, the viewer relates to what they see on an individualized, personal level, forming connections across time and culture. Through these exhibitions, which consciously and strategically use the human experience as the basis for their format and universal appeal, the power of art and the power of its presentation are made obvious.

130 Marincola, 138.
Chapter 5: Exhibitions that Ignite Controversy

Controversy within the art exhibition is not a new theme; it may even be viewed as an inherent characteristic of the exhibition, fitting in nicely with its transient nature and flexible format that encourages experimentation and risk taking. The exhibition can act as a template, the ideal platform for new and untried ideas. Often reflecting attitudes or concerns of society at a given time, whether challenging them or simply reflecting them, exhibitions make themselves vulnerable to criticism and even public attack. Ultimately it is the attention, good or bad, warranted or not, that brings notice to the exhibition and its parent institution and promotes dialogue, which is a primary goal of any exhibition.

In 1969, it was Thomas Hoving, then director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who was held primarily responsible for a controversial exhibition entitled *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968* (Figure 19). In the museum’s monthly bulletin, Hoving wrote:

> The Metropolitan Museum of Art will open an exhibition that has nothing to do with art in the narrow sense—but everything to do with this museum, its evolving role and purpose, what we hope is its emerging position as a positive, relevant, and regenerative force in modern society.\(^{131}\)

This exhibition during the 1960s, already a time of heightened racial tension in the country, was not well received by many museum-goers who felt it was not the place of the museum to introduce racial and political issues into art.\(^{132}\) Many were also critical of the museum’s exclusion of Harlem residents from having any part in the planning of the

\(^{131}\) McClellan, 44.

\(^{132}\) McClellan, 44.
exhibition, in addition to the exclusion of art by residents of Harlem, particularly since it was known to be such a thriving artistic community. Critics of the exhibition were also against of the exhibition’s exclusive use of photography, used in this context as a form of visual documentation rather than fine art. Essentially, various contrasting opinions on the exhibition characterized it as either an insult to Harlem residents and black artists, significant in shattering racial barriers, or frightening subsequent institutions away from addressing racial topics. However, “as is true for any watershed event, each of these observations captures some bit of truth.”\textsuperscript{133}

The exhibit and associated catalogue, whether meaning to or not, succeeded in offending numerous groups, most notably African Americans and Jews, as well as Irish, Puerto Ricans, and groups of artists and art critics.\textsuperscript{134} Curator Allon Schoener takes responsibility for the vision of the exhibition, in which a sixty-year panorama of Harlem history was presented through six sections divided into decades. The show was comprised of a total of seven hundred photographs and five hundred projected images, ranging in size up to fifty feet long. Thirteen galleries were organized chronologically with headings such as “1900-1910: From White to Black Harlem” or “1960-1968: Militancy and Identity.” Various layouts were used to display the multitude of images, which included photographs and reproductions of ephemera such as magazine covers and advertisements. Images covered the walls, and in some cases took the form of freestanding sculptural column forms in the center of a gallery, often highlighting

\textsuperscript{134} Dubin, 19.
prominent African Americans like Alice Payton or Billie Holiday. Films and videos were interspersed throughout the exhibition, and one television even showed footage of the intersection between 7th and 125th street in real-time. Audio speakers spread throughout the galleries also featured period music and voices of Harlem residents.

The exhibition catalogue drew just as much controversy as the exhibition, if not more. The American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Defense League along with numerous synagogues throughout the city protested the exhibition, taking particular offense to an introductory essay written by seventeen-year-old high school student and Harlem resident, Candice Van Ellison. Several passages of her essay, outlining her experience growing up in Harlem, highlighted tensions between Jews and African Americans. For instance, lines like, “Behind every hurdle that the Afro-American has yet to jump stands the Jew who has already cleared it,” or “Thus, our contempt for the Jew makes us feel more completely American in sharing a national prejudice,” were cited as particularly offensive. The essay went on to highlight tensions between African Americans and Irish as well as Puerto Ricans. Articles were written and picket lines formed outside the museum. Damage control was tried, Candice Van Ellison apologized for offending anyone, and Thomas Hoving insisted that he has not recognized the racial undertones in the essay. Protestors stood outside the museum on the exhibition’s opening night to which only half the invited guests attended and a few joined the protestors instead.

136 Cooks, 25.
138 Dubin, 34.
Critics of all races felt similarly that the exhibition favored multimedia and high production value at the expense of content, and that it was essentially a sociological exhibit rather than an art exhibit.\textsuperscript{139} New York Times art critic, John Canaday, dismissed the show altogether, giving it a “nonreview” by saying: “It would be presumptuous of me to review the Metropolitan’s show on the only grounds that are important –its thoroughness and veracity as a social document.”\textsuperscript{140} The exhibition even prompted other institutions to mount exhibitions in retaliation that tried instead to focus mainly on the work of black artists. The Whitney, for example, mounted a show in 1971, \textit{Contemporary Black Artists in America}, though it too was protested and criticized because it failed to employ a black curator.\textsuperscript{141}

Was it an exhibition meant to stir up controversy, or to stir up feelings of guilt in a primarily white audience? Hoving surely intended for the exhibit to raise questions, though he was not prepared for the uproar that would ensue. Allon Schoener, curator, said that he and Hoving “saw the exhibition as an opportunity to change museums.”\textsuperscript{142} Hoving also said, “we intend to shake off the passivity that renders too many museums unresponsive and by default almost irresponsible.”\textsuperscript{143} The backlash surrounding the exhibit mainly involved arguments surrounding the function of a museum as one of “nonpolitical aesthetic contemplations” or not.\textsuperscript{144} The 1960s produced multiculturalism and outreach initiatives in museums that have become even more prevalent in the decades since, though there still remains reluctance in many museums to engage in political

\textsuperscript{139} Cooks, 14.
\textsuperscript{140} Cooks, 45.
\textsuperscript{141} Cooks, 43.
\textsuperscript{142} McClellan, 45.
\textsuperscript{143} McClellan, 45.
\textsuperscript{144} McClellan, 45.
Allon Schoener still thinks of *Harlem on My Mind* as “revolutionary,” though he admits, “We all bumbled it. The biggest regret I have in retrospect is that it’s hard to imagine that one could have been so naïve about some of the things that happened, because they seem so obvious now.”\(^{146}\) The infamous exhibition took on various meanings and affected groups of people in varying ways. Perhaps in the long run it helped to advance photography’s association with “high art” through the exclusive devotion of a major museum exhibition to photography. It also attempted, though somewhat unsuccessfully, to bring a marginalized community to the forefront and into the realm of the art world. At the same time it, unintentionally, raised issues within museum culture that had yet to be addressed in the ways Fred Wilson would later do. Important black curators, like Thelma Golden, also credit the exhibition with helping them secure jobs in major museums, as she states: “Had the protests not happened, I’m not sure the Whitney or other institutions in this city would have changed.”\(^{147}\) Whatever its faults or redeeming values, *Harlem on My Mind* can be defined as “the harbinger of many more battles to be fought.”\(^{148}\)

In contrast to the social controversy raised by *Harlem on My Mind*, other exhibitions raised questions of political and moral ethics. For instance, in 1989 Robert Mapplethorpe’s retrospective photographic exhibition *The Perfect Moment* (Figure 20) struck controversy due to some of its homoerotic and masochistic themes, and critics of

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\(^{145}\) McClellan, 46.  
\(^{146}\) Dubin, 53.  
\(^{147}\) Dubin, 54.  
\(^{148}\) Dubin, 63.
the exhibition took particular exception to its being partially funded by the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts). Senator Jesse Helms cited “gross misuse of federal funds” and presented his case before congress, where a version of his proposed bill that forbade federal funding in support of “obscene or indecent materials” was passed and put into effect. The exhibition, which originated at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, curated by Janet Kardon, was scheduled to open at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington D.C. in the summer of 1989. The Gallery cancelled the show shortly before it was scheduled to open for fear that it would jeopardize the museum’s future federal funding as well as the reputation of the NEA.

The night the Corcoran cancelled, the enraged arts community of Washington D.C. projected some of Mapplethorpe’s most controversial photographs in billboard size on the façade of the museum, a defiant act that turned into a unique exhibition in its own right. The seven “obscene” photographs at the center of the controversy included one of Mapplethorpe’s most famous images, *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980) which features a black man’s uncircumcised penis, two explicit images of children: *Honey* (1976) and *Jesse McBride* (1976), as well as Mapplethorpe’s infamous *Self Portrait* (1978) in which the artist is pictured inserting a whip into his anus. A few days after the Corcoran cancellation, all of the works were featured at The Washington Project for the Arts, a more alternative arts space. But controversy arose again in 1990 when the exhibition traveled to the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center and the museum and its Director,

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150 Peggy Phelan, “Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA and you: “Money Talks”: October 1989,” *TDR*, 34, No. 1 (Spring 1990), 4, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1145999. At the time, the NEA was already being criticized for their part in helping to provide a grant for contemporary artists, one of which was Andres Serrano of the infamous *Piss Christ*. 
Dennis Barrie were charged with “pandering obscenity” and forced to appear in front of a grand jury. Ultimately, they were acquitted, and as Barrie stated, “the verdict protects the rights of art museums to continue as both esthetic and educational institutions.”

The issue of politics inserting itself into art practices became a hotly contested debate after controversies like the Mapplethorpe exhibition. What the government should or should not support, and under what circumstances they should step in to make a moral judgment call in terms of art and its display, is an ongoing debate that will likely never be resolved. Another exhibition entitled Sensation, which first opened in 1997 in London and then at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, immediately sparked controversy in New York for some of its works, particularly an image of the Virgin Mary by Chris Ofili that included elephant dung and pornographic images of female genitalia. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in particular spoke out against the exhibition, threatening to withdraw City Hall’s annual seven million dollar grant to the museum. A resolution was passed to end federal and city funding for the museum, which was then reversed about a month later. While many political and religious figures chastised the show, many art figures and celebrities spoke out in its defense.

In relation to exhibitions like Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment and Sensation, what is the role government? It appears that politics become involved when there is a question of moral, cultural, or religious defamation. The debate against government regulated art focuses on the notion that artistic interpretation is completely subjective, there are no criteria that constitute what is morally acceptable and therefore there are no criteria for what should or should not be funded by government. However,

151 Lankford and Shere, 15.
contrasting opinion argues that government must uphold certain values and need not be associated with anything that challenges that commitment. One of the roles of the NEA throughout its history has been “to initiate, encourage, and support new ideas and developments in the arts,” and some argue that, “to invite innovation is to create the possibility for controversy.” It may also be argued that government censorship in any form is an abuse of power; if censorship becomes acceptable under certain conditions, who is to say it would not become more liberally applied?

These exhibitions are again examples of institutions taking risks, in some instances calculated risks to draw attention, emotional response, and to present a challenge to audiences. The controversy surrounding *Harlem on My Mind* and other exhibitions that take on themes of cultural identity show culture to be a sensitive topic that is almost impossible to present in a neutral way; there is always a point of view associated with the presentation of culture, and so, there are always other points of view that will provide criticism. In other cases, exhibitions knowingly invite controversy through their inclusion of controversial subject matter, as is the case with *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* and *Sensation*. In some cases the controversy and “sensation” can overshadow the integrity of the art, harming the integrity of the entire exhibition, which presents a dilemma that must be dealt with. Aspirations of publicity and revenue no doubt fuel the majority of organized exhibitions, but it is paramount that every measure be taken to ensure that the legitimacy of the art on display and the practice of art in general not be compromised.

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152 Lankford and Shere, 16.
Chapter 6: The Blockbuster Phenomenon

In the 1960s and 1970s the notion of the blockbuster exhibition came to fruition as museums began to depend more on marketing and high profile programming to bring in more visitors and increase revenue.\textsuperscript{153} In 1963, Leonardo’s \textit{Mona Lisa} was lent by the Louvre to the National Gallery in Washington D.C. for a special exhibition that would help demonstrate cooperation between allies of the “free world.” Two million people visited the museum by the busloads to see the work, a symbol of “the potential size of the public for art.”\textsuperscript{154} Depending on how the blockbuster exhibition is defined, however, there are many that preceded those of the sixties and seventies. If it is by the inclusion of masterpieces or foreign loans that draw tremendous publicity and large audiences, the Italian Renaissance exhibition of 1930 at the Royal Academy of London was certainly a blockbuster. Retrospectives at MoMA of van Gogh and Picasso in the 1930s could surely be characterized as blockbusters as well. For these exhibitions though, money was not the chief impetus behind their organization. Even in Thomas Hoving’s early blockbusters at the Met, which included \textit{Harlem on My Mind}, populism and publicity were more important than the exhibition bringing in revenue.\textsuperscript{155} Financial pressures on museums in the late sixties and early seventies changed this.

Most museums, particularly those in the United States, which are privately owned and do not receive government subsidies, were greatly affected by rising costs of building maintenance, programming and staffing.\textsuperscript{156} The concept of development offices, capital campaigns, and marketing and membership drives were virtually non-existent in

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  \item[153] McClellan, 210.
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museums until the 1950s, and even admission charges were rare.\textsuperscript{157} New building and renovation plans along with new programming were all part of museums’ efforts to reach out to larger and more diverse audiences, which also led to higher associated costs. The single best way to bring in the public was through the expertly advertised, highly anticipated blockbuster exhibition. In 1998, Jay Gates director of the Phillips Collection in Washington D.C. stated, “Virtually everything that is quantifiable about America’s major museums follows the performance of their exhibitions.”\textsuperscript{158} The late 1980s saw a decrease in corporate funding and federal aid to art museums, placing further pressure on high profile exhibitions to do the work. Impressionist exhibitions were rampant. A Newsweek article from the time entitled “Show Me the Monet” reflects this time in the history of the art museum, referring to a deal in which the MFA Boston loaned the Las Vegas Bellagio Hotel and Casino Gallery twenty-one works by Monet in order to turn a million dollar profit.\textsuperscript{159} This infiltration of commercialism into the art museum goes along with the blockbuster mentality in multiple ways, which includes major advertising campaigns and an excess of exhibition related merchandise.

The exhibition often credited as the first blockbuster, \textit{Treasures of Tutankhamen} (Figure 21), became an international phenomenon. First shown in London at the British Museum in 1972, it became the museum’s most attended exhibition of all time. It then traveled to multiple countries, including the United States where it was seen by a vast number of the American public between 1976 and 1979 during its tour to Washington D.C., New York, Chicago, New Orleans, L.A., Seattle, and San Francisco. The extensive

\textsuperscript{157} McClellan, 212.
\textsuperscript{158} McClellan, 212.
hype and publicity surrounding it drew large and diverse audiences in each major city it traveled to. An exhibit of artifacts found during the 1922 excavation of the tomb of Tutankhamen by Howard Carter, it included his famous solid gold funeral mask, the towering statue that guarded the entrance to his tomb, along with lamps, jars, jewelry, furniture and other items for the afterlife.

The exhibition installation evoked the feeling of a tomb and presented the fifty-five objects in the order in which they were originally found, alongside massive photomurals of the excavation process. The series of darkened rooms not only helped to place the objects in a context, but it helped to highlight the dramatic impact of the opulent gold and jeweled treasures. The nine galleries and their spotlit objects corresponded to the four rooms of the tomb, the Antechamber, Treasury, Burial Chamber, and Annex, and the transition to each room was marked by a large photomural and a quote by Howard Carter in an effort to document the excavation. This aspect of the installation was particularly important to Hoving, who felt strongly that the exhibit should reflect the excavation process. It was an exhibit that appealed to museum-goers and non museum-goers, presenting art as both entertaining and educational. The exhibition first opened at the National Galley though it was the Met that initially organized the U.S. exhibition and possessed the photographs from the excavation. According to the National Gallery, “a combination of the age-old fascination with ancient Egypt, the legendary allure of gold

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and precious stones, and the funeral trappings of the boy-king created an immense popular response.”

At the National Gallery alone, over a period of 117 days, the exhibition drew 835,924 visitors and over one million at the Met. Over 8 million people in the U.S. alone attended the exhibit. The U.S. tour in particular was developed to show good will between Egypt and the U.S. after a long period of tension. The show was even billed as “a bicentennial tribute to the American people from the people of Egypt,” and income from the sale of exhibition related merchandise went toward the renovation of the Cairo Museum quarters where the Tutankhamen treasures would be permanently displayed. Kathleen Arffmann, manager of Visitor’s Services at the Met during the time of the exhibition says the exhibit was “a turning point in museum-going.” She is also responsible for devising the idea of a date-and-timed ticket for the exhibition, noting that the exhibition sold 900,000 tickets in just five days during its New York visit.

What was it about the exhibition that attracted such a wide audience? Surely a great number of factors contributed to its success, for instance the public’s interest in Egypt and ancient civilizations, and particularly in mummies. Perhaps also the notion that it was an exhibit of one of the greatest archeological finds in history demanded the public’s attention. Twenty-nine percent of those that visited the Met exhibition were first

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time visitors to the museum.\textsuperscript{166} Those first time visitors no doubt visited other parts of the museum as well, and many likely returned again after that, as Arffmann concludes, "The exhibition put museum-going on the map as a leisure time interest. It had never been as popular as after that event."\textsuperscript{167}

Whether they bring in revenue or bring in publicity to the museum, blockbuster exhibitions continue to be vital aspects of a museum’s livelihood. One of the more recent blockbusters at the Met opened in May 2011, entitled \textit{Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty} (Figure 22). The retrospective of the British designer was put on by the Costume Institute and garnered the Institute’s largest audience to date with 661,509 visitors during its three month run, along with the title of the eighth most popular exhibit ever to be held at the Met.\textsuperscript{168} With one hundred designs, including rare examples of McQueen’s early work, the exhibition drew largely from the McQueen Archive in London to bring together a lifetime of artistic achievement.\textsuperscript{169} According to the Met’s Director, Thomas P. Campbell,

\begin{quote}
There are any number of fashion designers with the creative distinction to warrant a presentation of their work in an art museum. But I can think of few whose careers fit as easily within the language and methodologies of art history as that of Alexander McQueen.\textsuperscript{170}
\end{quote}

He also adds that McQueen’s designs “address themes normally beyond the ambitions of fashion,” which themes include narrative, aesthetic, beauty in the unconventional, and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{166} "Treasures of Tutankhamun."
\item \textsuperscript{167} "Treasures of Tutankhamun.
\item \textsuperscript{169} Andrew Bolton, \textit{Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty} (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 7.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Bolton, 9.
\end{itemize}
repetition, while never succumbing to predictability.\textsuperscript{171} Many of his designs also draw on mythic imagery that leave traces of chivalry, brutality, romance and heroism in his work.\textsuperscript{172} As Campbell also notes, he challenges the viewer to “embrace new ideas about gender, history, and nature” through his work.\textsuperscript{173}

Upon entering the exhibit, the visitor was immediately transported into another realm, aware that this was only the beginning of a visually and mentally challenging journey. The first room, which contained examples of McQueen’s early work, used industrial looking scenery comprised of woods and metals, and each room after that became increasingly more dramatized, reflecting the evolution of the fashions themselves. The design of the exhibit followed a fairly chronological order, exposing the viewer to the designer’s mental and artistic process as it developed throughout his career. One room in the middle of the exhibition forwent this setup, displaying a mixture of objects, designs, and runway videos in the form of a “cabinet of curiosities;” an early format for the display of artworks and treasures, it served to place McQueen’s work in an art historical context. A piece of wall text in one of the rooms stated, “McQueen’s collections were fashioned around elaborate narrative,” and the exhibition itself followed this same notion. An elaborate design narrative anchored the fashions in the exhibition installation and brought the designs to life, as they would have been on the runway.

Curated by Andrew Bolton, the exhibit highlights and explores the dominant themes in McQueen’s work that speak boldly to viewers. In his introduction to the catalogue, Bolton states: “The concept of the Sublime underlies the premise of the

\textsuperscript{171} Bolton, 9.  
\textsuperscript{172} Bolton, 9.  
\textsuperscript{173} Bolton, 9.
exhibition…which explores McQueen’s profound engagement with Romanticism.”¹⁷⁴ It is clear upon walking through the exhibit that much of his inspiration was drawn from the Romantic movement of the late 18th century, its ideology and philosophical abstractions.¹⁷⁵ The exhibition was broken down into themes as well, including romanticism, exoticism, primitivism, nationalism, and naturalism. For each theme there was a different “set” to elicit different emotional responses that correspond with the works on display.

His designs often revolve around the concept of individualism and much of his expression is autobiographical, as McQueen himself stated, “For me, what I do is an artistic expression which is channeled through me. Fashion is just the medium.”¹⁷⁶ Best known perhaps for his notorious runway shows, which evoke avant-garde installation and performance art to ignite profound emotional response from the audience,¹⁷⁷ the same can be said for this retrospective exhibition. McQueen once said of his work, “I am going to take you on journeys you’ve never dreamed were possible,”¹⁷⁸ and that is exactly what this exhibition attempted to do. It is both the theatrical installation design mixed with the theatrical yet personal and autobiographical nature of McQueen’s work that made the exhibition such a must-see. The Met, though unaware of just how popular the exhibition would be, was surely trading on the newfound interest in McQueen since his very public suicide the previous year. The designer also coincidentally became a household name just about a week before the exhibition opened when it was revealed that Kate Middleton’s royal wedding dress was a McQueen design. A confluence of timing and showmanship

¹⁷⁴ Bolton, 12.
¹⁷⁵ Bolton, 12.
¹⁷⁶ Bolton, 92.
¹⁷⁷ Bolton, 12.
¹⁷⁸ Bolton, 184.
brought about a tremendous public response that could not have been anticipated by the museum, forcing it to extend the exhibition by a week, to implement special Monday hours when the museum would normally be closed, and to extend hours through midnight on the show’s final weekend.\(^\text{179}\)

The fate of the blockbuster exhibition remains to be seen, though its demise has been predicted several times over. The term, originally derived from an aerial bomb that could destroy an entire city block, was adapted by the film industry in the 1950s and then by the visual arts community in the 1970s, supposedly during Thomas Hoving’s reign at the Met.\(^\text{180}\) The term has developed a negative connotation particularly in the field of visual art, associating such exhibitions with little substance and gimmicks that cheaply draw on the public’s already established interests or popular culture themes. It is increasingly an association museums are trying to steer away from, while still conceiving of exhibitions that produce monetary success.

The current economic climate is also encouraging museums to focus more internally on their permanent collections, to devise creative ways of exhibiting their own holdings both permanently and temporarily, which decreases the possibility for major artist retrospectives or exhaustive exhibitions on impressionism, for instance. Though, the Met did recently have a very successful exhibition on Picasso in 2010 in which they used only the works from their holdings. As a New York Times review says, “When in doubt,

\(^{179}\) “661,509 Total Visitors to Alexander McQueen Put Retrospective among Top 10 Most Visited Exhibitions in Metropolitan Museum’s History.”

haul out the Picassos.” Though the collection failed to present a full picture of the artists work, and lacked many of his most important works, the name “Picasso” is always enough to draw crowds. So much of the blockbuster phenomenon rests in the name attached to the exhibition, and its familiarity to the public. This is the root of much of the criticism surrounding the blockbuster. In a sense, blockbusters are essential to keeping art alive and well, and keeping it apart of the mainstream public discourse. But, at the same time, it is vital that the integrity of the art and the artistic institution be maintained through thoughtful exhibitions, not necessarily safe ones, which challenge the public to think about art differently.

Chapter 7: The Large-Scale International Exhibition

Venice had long been a popular tourist attraction and artistic center, scheduling its national exhibitions to alternate with those of Milan and Turin, when its first International biennale of fine arts was held in 1895. The first Venice Biennale was held in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of King Umberto and Queen Margherita, and in conjunction with the city’s national exhibition of art. It initially followed Munich’s notion of inviting selected artists and limiting the overall size of the exhibition.\textsuperscript{182} 150 foreign artists and 150 Italian artists were invited to submit one or two works; 200 works by Italians would be selected by jury, while all submissions by foreign artists would be included. The exhibition committee would also receive a ten percent commission from any sales of work in the exhibition. Prizes for the top two works selected by the jury received ten thousand and five thousand lire respectively.\textsuperscript{183} In the end, there were 516 paintings and 60 sculptures, three-fifths of them by foreign artists. The original biennale took place in a single exhibition hall with four galleries, a Beaux-Arts classicist style structure characteristic of fine arts museum of the time, within a public park.

The exhibition opened on April 30\textsuperscript{th}, 1895, and little attention was paid to the exhibition by English and French critics, but the most extensive review was written by a German, August Wolf in the *Kunstchronik*.\textsuperscript{184} Victorio Pica also published multiple writings on the biennale and it was he who established the biennale as a permanent exhibition during his time serving as secretary-general.\textsuperscript{185} Wolf began his review by looking at the Italian artists who he says were, “well represented both in number and in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[182] Holt, *The Expanding World of Art*, 335.
\item[183] Holt, *The Expanding World of Art*, 336.
\item[184] Holt, *The Expanding World of Art*, 336.
\item[185] Holt, *The Expanding World of Art*, 337.
\end{footnotes}
quality.”\textsuperscript{186} In contrast, Pico stated, “The room that attracts the public more than any other is the one where the work of the English painters is hung, and this is only natural and right because they set before us a whole original view of nature and humanity.”\textsuperscript{187}

The Venice Biennale was originally modeled after the World Expositions, which were very popular throughout the 19\textsuperscript{th} century,\textsuperscript{188} and now the biennale, which has become a major institution in its own right, is a demonstration of art’s contextual shifts and its place in society.\textsuperscript{189} Venice paved the way for future biennials that would soon be established in various countries including Sao Paolo in 1951. Then, between 1984 and 2000, over fifteen international biennials were formed including those in Havana, Istanbul, Lyons, Santa Fe, Shanghai, Berlin and Montreal.\textsuperscript{190} It was no doubt a major influence on Documenta as well, which started in 1955 in the city of Kassel, Germany as an experiment to be held every four years, and now every five, with the ambition of improving the framework and staging of the exhibition.\textsuperscript{191}

Initially founded in reaction to postwar Germany and Nazi defamation of modern art, Documenta has become “the most distinguished venture of the postwar era.”\textsuperscript{192} The now notorious Documenta 5, held in 1972 and directed by Harald Szeeman, “proved that the Documenta was able to meet the demands of presenting both topical art and thematic exhibitions, and gave birth to a new model of mediating art.”\textsuperscript{193} It is widely cited as an

\textsuperscript{186} Holt, \textit{The Expanding World of Art}, 337.  
\textsuperscript{187} Holt, \textit{The Expanding World of Art}, 350.  
\textsuperscript{188} Marincola, 55.  
\textsuperscript{190} Marincola, 55.  
\textsuperscript{191} Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 72.  
\textsuperscript{192} Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 71.  
\textsuperscript{193} Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, \textit{Museum Culture: histories, Discourses, Spectacles} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), 164.
early example of exhibition as spectacle, and its unified theme of “Individual Mythologies” set it apart as a way of “producing art history without historical concepts.”  

Szeeman was also director of the Venice Biennales of 1999 and 2001, which contain a very different organization. While Documenta is presented as a single unified exhibition organized by one curator, Venice has one main exhibition organized by a single curator in addition to multiple national pavilions in which nations present their own exhibits. Documenta has emerged as more of an international exhibition overtime, but it was Venice that was originally founded with international camaraderie as a goal.

In all of these international exhibitions, “diplomacy, politics, and commerce converge in a powerful movement, the purpose of which seems to be appropriation and instrumentalization of the symbolic value of art.” Specific goals of each, however, vary depending on the country, though ultimately these exhibitions tend to be fairly united in their common goals of globalizing art. “The nature of the interests that generate the events and their common commitment to the possible horizon of internationalism seems to associate them in an intimate way with the ups and downs of modernity-and with the range of its possible interpretations.” As reoccurring exhibitions, either yearly or every few years, they face the difficult task of challenging themselves so as to maintain relevance and evolve with contemporary society.

These exhibitions have in a sense “eclipsed the spectacular blockbusters of the mid-1970s to mid-1980s as national promotional vehicles.” Blockbusters bring tourism and publicity as well as good public relations but they fail to promote national culture in

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194 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 76.
195 Marincola, 56.
196 Marincola, 56.
197 Sherman and Rogoff, 267.
the way that these international exhibitions do.\textsuperscript{198} Often blockbuster exhibitions that focus on a specific nation’s history offer much more condensed themes and specific points of view. For instance, \textit{Treasures of Tutankhamun} presented a very specific aspect of Egyptian history, one that was decidedly more glamorous and intriguing to the public, whereas, the larger international exhibition has the ability to offer multiple stories and multiple viewpoints that bring nations together and put the art into a more global context. The opportunity for presenting a diverse range of images and artists through the international exhibition is unparalleled; though works are often still carefully selected to fit certain criteria and a certain theme, the display of diversity that highlights both differences and commonalities among nations is championed through these exhibitions.

The most recent Venice Biennale, the 54\textsuperscript{th} International exhibition of art, was given the name \textit{ILLUMInations}, referring both to the role of the contemporary artist and to the exchanges between artists and the various countries represented at the biennale. The exhibition which included 83 artists from 89 participating nations, the most that have ever participated, attracted over 440,00 visitors, an 18 percent increase from the previous exhibition.\textsuperscript{199} Bice Curiger, a Zurich-born art historian and co-founder of contemporary art magazine \textit{Parkett}, was the third woman to hold the prestigious position of Director, essentially given the task of creating “an exhibition without borders.”\textsuperscript{200} When asked what sets the Venice Biennale apart from other exhibitions today, Curiger answered: “The biennale today is an excellent occasion to launch new trends and young artists,

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\textsuperscript{198} Sherman and Rogoff, 267.
\textsuperscript{200} Bice Curiger and Giovanni Carmine, \textit{ILLUMInations}, (Venezia: Marsilio Editro, 2011), 4.
\end{flushleft}
above all because it attracts such a large number of visitors.” She also revealed that she asked these five questions of each participating artist and curator: “Where do you feel at home? Will we speak English in the future, and if not, which language? Is the art community a country? How many countries do you feel you belong to? If art were a nation, what do you think would be its constitution?” This series of questions embodies the larger globalizing goals of the biennale as an international institution, connecting disparate nations and peoples that bring something new to the artistic dialogue it creates.

The exhibition contained multiple celebrity artists, like Cindy Sherman, Martin Creed, and Maurizio Cattelan, in addition to numerous newcomers, and approximately half of the works were created specifically for the biennale. Due to the short amount of time directors have to put this show together, Curiger admitted that the art network of the internet allows for the pre-screening of artists before the actual travel takes place. The work of sixteenth-century Italian painter Tintoretto was also included in the exhibition, according to Curiger, as “a tribute to the city and its heritage, and to that antique world that is often overlooked by visitors to the biennale.” This fusion of the established artist, the new artist, and the historicized artist of the past was a conscious decision on the part of Curiger and speaks to the nature of the contemporary art world which evolves while maintaining its connection to history.

In ILLUMInations, Curiger decided to stay away from political statements within the headlining exhibitions in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni (Figure 23) and the Arsenale. She focused instead on classical themes of form, composition and materials, which

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202 Fanelli.
203 Fanelli.
speaks to her decision of incorporating the work of Tintoretto.\textsuperscript{204} The main focus of the biennale was on “light and enlightenment, mutual interaction between artists, the relationship between art and popular culture and on issues of identity.”\textsuperscript{205} These more universal, timeless themes help to ensure the exhibition’s potential lasting impact on visitors; current event themes also contribute to the exhibition’s relevance in contemporary society, but it is the overall universal themes that will have staying power. According to Curiger, the overarching theme of light, as referenced in the title itself, refers to a classical theme in art, and more symbolically to the idea that the exhibition “aspires literally to shed light on the institution itself, drawing attention to fertile opportunities and dormant, unrecognized strengths as well as to conventions that need to be challenged.”\textsuperscript{206}

This exhibition’s overt link with history through the incorporation of Tintoretto’s work sets it apart from other biennales; In the main hall of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, aside from three works by Tintoretto, the rest of the exhibit featured a fairly conservative collection of works by artists such as Gianni Colombo, Jack Goldstein, Sigmar Polke, Seth Price, and Gabriel Kuri. The Arsenale contained works of a larger more dramatic approach that created a dialogue with the space. The other new component to the biennale was Curiger’s introduction of four “para-pavilions” in which four artists were invited to create spaces to display the works of four other artists. For example, Franz West recreated his kitchen in Vienna to contain a projection made by another artist on the


\textsuperscript{205} Adam and Morris.

\textsuperscript{206} Curiger and Carmine, 43.
inside. As stated by Curiger in her introduction to the *Illuminatons* catalogue, she “sought to create a rhythm…to create possibly unexpected meetings between works by artists from different cultural horizons and who work according to different criteria.”207 Most critics of the biennale agree that the central pavilion exhibition did not take too many chances, but it was free of many of the pretenses and trends of the time that have often plagued biennales in the past. Critic Roberta Smith even praised it for “playing down spectacle in favor of art.”208

By contrast, it seems that some of the international pavilions of this biennale, which were not curated by Curiger, were some of the most politically oriented of recent years, particularly Poland, Egypt, Israel, Denmark, and the United States. Poland, for instance, for the first time chose a non-Polish national artist in favor of Israeli-born artist, Yael Bartana. Her video trilogy, entitled *…and Europe will be stunned* focused on a fictional Jewish Renaissance Movement, which called for the return of the 3.3 million Polish Jews killed in the Holocaust back to their home. According to the artist’s statement, “This is a good time to unite again – to change Europe and Israel for the better.”209 The United States Pavilion included six new works by collaborative artists, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, that used “quasi-Surrealist strategies of free association and unexpected juxtaposition” to pose questions relating to the relationship between art, politics, and international identity in today’s society.210 One of the works

207 Curiger and Carmine, 37.
210 Curiger and Carmine, 464.
outside of the pavilion included an upside military tank with a treadmill on top that activated the tank’s treads when run on.

In addition to its relevant and current themes, this biennale was also characterized perhaps by a more streamlined, technological approach, through a single 600-page accompanying catalogue as opposed to the usual double volume, and the addition of an iPad app as a way of connecting with contemporary audience. It is important that the biennale evolve with the changing times, while keeping a part of its history, exemplified by the spotlight on Tintoretto, so as to keep it relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences. In response to the biennale’s seeming rise in popularity, Curiger stated:

The popularity of the biennale is encouraging for contemporary art, especially compared with an exhibition in a museum or gallery where visitor numbers are more limited. What also makes the biennale relevant today is the national pavilions. In Venice you can visit 89 pavilions containing new works from all over the world. This could be developed further and given greater emphasis. The Venice Biennale is the only exhibition in the world that offers such an opportunity.211

It is this “world stage” mentality that makes the biennale so unique, akin to the Olympic games; nations confront one another, essentially competing yet coming together in united common interests and under the unified goal of raising the global status and appreciation of contemporary art.

211 Fanelli.
Conclusion

The intrinsic nature of the art exhibition is what sets it apart from all other forms of artistic display or expression. The transience of the temporary exhibition lays the foundation for novelty, for risk taking, for experimentation that coincides with the mentality of contemporary society, or further challenges that mentality. Exhibitions are essentially spaces of experience, manipulated environments prepared specifically for an audience so as to achieve a certain goal. How have exhibition forms and demands affected artistic production? We may be too close to recent history to properly analyze the ways in which the modern exhibition has affected artistic production and artistic institutions, but going back to a quote, it is clear that “Exhibitions have become the medium through which most art becomes known.” If this is the case, exhibitions and their organizers carry a tremendous responsibility to the public and to history.

As the world of the internet paves the way for a new type of exhibition space and format, the role of the curator will have to once again evolve to fit the needs of time. The process of designing and executing exhibitions has changed overtime and will continue to, as will the audiences. There is perhaps an opportunity to touch a much larger and more diverse audience with the introduction of new media as a new variable. The marketing of exhibitions to reach these audiences and form a connection with them will become increasingly important. How will institutions continue to draw audiences who could just as well view exhibited works at home? Through history, challenges have been

212 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 462.
213 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne, 2.
posed to the exhibition that have inspired its evolution, which will only continue, as art and society are ever changing.

Ultimately, the exhibitions chosen for discussion here are somewhat interchangeable; many of them challenge aesthetic ideology, expectations of display, while dealing with issues of cultural identity and the human experience, and almost all of them contain elements of controversy or carry other labels that define them. Large scale or small, global or not, these exhibitions are microcosms of something much larger, of much larger issues pertaining to life and art. As reflections of the state of society and of art at a given time, they should be viewed as markers of cultural and artistic evolution.

An exhibition is the embodiment of a multitude of choices, often by multiple individuals, responding to pressures, preconceptions and established traditions. By examining some of these choices we can begin to understand how exhibitions are created, what their intent is, and what their reception can reveal to us as a society.

One of the foremost characteristics of the exhibition is its ability to be a total work of art. Like a painting or photograph, an exhibition adheres to the same criteria as any work of art that strives to produce aesthetic equilibrium, defined by what it includes and omits, and attempts to contribute to a larger artistic dialogue connecting history and contemporary ideology. “Art works, historical expositions, nature interpretations, and technological exhibits…are products of an ongoing struggle by individuals and groups to establish what is real, to organize collective interests, and to gain command over what is regarded as having authority.” ²¹⁴ Exhibitions have come to represent something greater

than themselves, as larger entities or totalities that help to establish certain ideologies and themes within art. The challenge of the exhibition moving forward is to maintain the relevance of art in society. As society evolves, so does art. There are always alternative art histories to reveal, new narratives to be told, and the exhibition serves as the preeminent platform for this. Exhibitions, like works of art, are products of a specific time and place, reflections of culture and society at any given point in history. A primary goal of the art exhibition is to tell a new story, to provide a new context for art that is accessible and relevant to contemporary viewers, and this remains the ongoing challenge of the exhibition moving forward.
Figures

Figure 1


Photo: http://www.core77.com/blog/featured_items/remake_it_new_by_william_bostwick_10536.asp.

Figure 2
This is Tomorrow, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1956.

Figure 3


Figure 4

Photo: http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-museum-that-is-not/.
Figure 5

*Figure 5*


Figure 6


Photo: http://www.firstmediation.com/blog/?tag=harvard.

Photo: http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_sep001198601_01/_sep001198601_01_0106.php.

**Figure 11**


**Figure 12**


Figure 13


Photo: http://www.csm.arts.ac.uk/mres-art-exhibition-studies/.

Figure 14

**Figure 15**


**Figure 16**

Photo: http://usu.edu/ust/index.cfm?article=50554.
Figure 17


Figure 18

Photo: http://bombsite.com/issues/84/articles/2561.
Figure 19


Figure 20

Figure 21

Photo: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40479291?seq=1

Figure 22

Figure 23


Figure 24


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