

Art-Historiographical Exhibition Analysis

Assessing the role of exhibitions in the historiography of art

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Introduction

Art exhibitions showcase selected exhibits in temporary, unique constellations for the public, enabling new approaches to the art on display. When the exhibitionary propositions convey art-historical contexts, exhibitions contribute to the historiography of art. If we wish to determine the contribution of exhibitions to the development of art history as a discipline more precisely, we can do this by employing a specific method, defined in the present text as art-historiographical exhibition analysis. This qualitative method is informed by an equally historical and theoretical research interest. Approaches to the history of exhibitions, hitherto treated separately – the history of the *exhibition as a form or practice* and the history of *exhibited art* – are combined and expanded to include findings from curatorial studies informed by cultural studies.

Since the 1990s, the history of exhibitions has emerged as a field of art-historical study in its own right (Bogdanovic and Bremer 2016, Gleadowe 2011, Myers 2011, Rattemeyer 2011, Vogel 2017, Ziaja 2013) that either focuses on the historical features of exhibitions or considers these insofar as they carry art into the public sphere.¹ One of the precursors of the historical interest in the art exhibition as a form is a study by Georg Friedrich Koch (1967), who was the first to address the history of temporary exhibitions, from their “preliminary and early forms” in antiquity up to their increasing popularity in the 19th century. The seminal essay *Inside the White Cube* by the critic and artist Brian O’Doherty (1976/1986) is considered a further significant

1 The much-cited 1996 anthology *Thinking About Exhibitions* by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne is considered an inventory of what was then a newly emerging interdisciplinary field of research (Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne 1996). Since then, at the interface between art history, museum history and research, as well as the more recent field of curatorial studies, art history has increasingly broadened its scope to also include exhibition history.

mover, with its critical focus on the white exhibition cell as the standard of modern exhibition practice. In line with this tradition, numerous studies devoted themselves to the history of exhibition architecture and display in the field of art (Celant 1982, Klonk 2009, Klüser and Hegewisch 1991, Staniszewski 1998). Later, initiatives followed to systematize and historically explore specific exhibition genres and practices. Here too, the focus is less on the exhibited art works and more on the respective types of exhibitions.²

A further research approach, by contrast, addresses the exhibited art. Here, exhibition contexts take centre stage as authorities of public approval of artistic propositions and movements, allowing art-historical narratives to be retrospectively retraced or examined as to their genesis. Walter Grasskamp (1982) was the first to take an interest in the exhibitionary consecration of art and its historiographic effects in a compelling essay about the documenta. In the publication and exhibition *Stationen der Moderne. Die bedeutenden Kunstaustellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland* (Bollé and Adkins 1988), his research perspective was applied to a wide range of case studies and subsequently prominently advanced by Bruce Altshuler. In programmatic publications on the public presentation of the avantgarde (Altshuler 1996) and the exhibitions that “made art history” (Altshuler 2013, Altshuler 2008), the American art historian outlined an exhibitionary canon of modern and contemporary art in the global North, which has since been further elaborated (Foster et al. 2012). The series *Exhibition Histories*³, issued by Afterall Publishing and established in 2010, has meanwhile expanded the Western focus of this strand of research to the global level. Nevertheless, the series remains committed to the logic of acknowledging art-historical shifts in their connection with exhibition events.⁴

2 These range from Francis Haskell's overview of travelling exhibitions of works by Old Masters starting in the 17th century (Haskell 2000) to the reappraisal of the history of biennials (Jones 2016) or photography exhibitions, and to empirical research projects mapping exhibitions in private galleries during the period of the neo-avantgardes or aiming to achieve a comprehensive cataloguing of exhibitions by women artists since the 19th century. See the conference *Mostre fotografiche in Italia negli anni Settanta: spazi, dialoghi, narrazioni*, <https://arthist.net/archive/37896> (05.08.2024); the database Maconda | Le Mostre d'Arte Moderna nelle Gallerie private in Italia: i due decenni cruciali 1960 – 1980, <https://www.maconda.it/> (05.08.2024); the collaboration between Artl@s and AWARE ‘Women Artists Shows-Salons-Societies: Towards a Global History of All-Women Exhibitions’, since 2017; or Agata Jakubowska's research project at the University of Warsaw, *Globalizing the History of Women's Art Exhibitions*, 2021–2025.

3 <https://www.afterall.org/publications/exhibition.histories/about-exhibition-histories/> (05.08.2024).

4 The author's PhD thesis examined the exhibitionary establishment of ‘individual mythologies’ and Spurensicherung [‘securing of evidence’], a subject-related tendency of the 1970s, on the basis of its most influential exhibition platforms, documenta 5, 1972, and documenta 6, 1977 (Bremer 2019).

The historical interest for such exhibitions that have left a mark on art history was revived thanks to the popularity of the *contemporary*, a recent term of periodization with a global claim. The widely debated term *contemporary* identifies art as contemporary that links heterogeneous dimensions of time and space, purportedly embodying the global-transnational era since 1989 (Alberro 2009, Groys 2010, Osborne 2018, Smith 2009). Around 2010, as the term *contemporary* became more popular, it was examined by means of relevant exhibitionary examples. These include in particular biennials, triennials and the documenta, i.e. periodically recurring 'glocally' networked exhibitions (Buurman and Richter 2017, Green and Gardner 2016) as well as museums of modern and contemporary art, whose presentation formats and contents are increasingly adopting a temporary, flexible and topical approach (Bishop 2013, Vest Hansen und Handberg 2023). Examining the defining content of the *contemporary* by means of selected exhibitions, as the studies mentioned above do, constitutes a turning point in that the introduction of an art-historical concept of periodization is no longer merely sought to be understood, but is put forward to critical and ongoing debate on the merits of its exhibitionary genealogies.⁵

The art-historiographical exhibition analysis considers both of the aforementioned approaches – the interest in the *exhibition as a form or practice* and in the *exhibited art* – in their interdependencies. In order to determine how exhibitions produce their own art-historical propositions, the method also draws on findings from curatorial studies informed by cultural studies. This field of research dedicated to developing theories about curating and the curatorial (Bismarck 2022, Journal of Curatorial Studies 2012–2025, Martinon 2013) enables an understanding of exhibitionary production of meaning beyond prefabricated interpretations. Accordingly, exhibitions are not considered to be static representations of pre-existing meanings, but rather curatorial statements about exhibits on display for an attending audience. Their distinctive narrative mode resulting from the tension between the time references of the art works, the curatorial narrativization, the temporality of the exhibition and the reception of these relationships (Bal 2002: 36–39, Bismarck et al. 2014, Frank and Bismarck 2019) is crucial for constituting new meanings in a processual fashion. Art-historiographical exhibition analysis examines the narrativity of exhibitions specifically for propositions that establish content-related references to art history.

5 These developments should be seen as effects of a vigorous critique of the canon, which, in addition to expanding the spectrum of investigations into the history of exhibitions, also calls for an examination of implicit categories of analysis (Sheikh 2010/2011).

Aim of the method

This method assumes that art exhibitions participate in art historiography, even though strictly speaking they are not located within the academic field nor primarily organize their discourse in written form (Haxthausen 2002). Considering both approaches to the history of the *exhibition as a form or practice* and as *exhibited art*, hitherto treated separately, as well as the genuine narrativity of exhibition contexts, the objects of investigation will serve to show how exhibitions achieve art-historiographical significance. The method thus relates to the wider research question of how art history as a discipline – including fundamental concepts, propositions and narratives – develops, changes and maintains itself. The research question is answered by looking at exhibitions and not, as is usually the case, from the perspective of a history of ideas and institutions or the myriad ways in which art history is *written*. The method can be applied within the historical period in which academic art history and exhibitions have existed in parallel, that is, from the 19th century to the present day.

Step-by-step guideline

The art-historiographical exhibition analysis is applied processually in five stages, each building on the former.

1. Formulating the question and identifying the object of investigation

First of all, the method requires the development of an appropriate research question. Usually, an established art-historical narrative is linked to an exhibition that engages with it content-wise. The aim is to reveal how the art-historical account was shaped, cemented or refuted by the exhibition. For instance, West-German art history of the 1970s seldom regarded artistic practices from the GDR worthy of investigation. The 6th edition of the periodic major exhibition documenta, which for the first time included and showed art from the GDR in Kassel in 1977, took a stance on this marginalization (Bremer 2017). In a way, documenta 6 had, as an institution, an art-historiographical claim enshrined in it, as the high-profile event saw itself at the time as a regular appraisal of contemporary art. It is therefore fair to ask to what extent documenta 6 played a role in framing art from the GDR in West Germany.

However, art-historiographical exhibition analysis does not need to be applied exclusively to assess established art-historical narratives on the basis of large-scale exhibitions with a high public profile. Art history has also been made in particular in and through exhibitions that opposed universalistic contexts of interpretation. A counter-hegemonic claim to art-historiographical authority can be convinc-

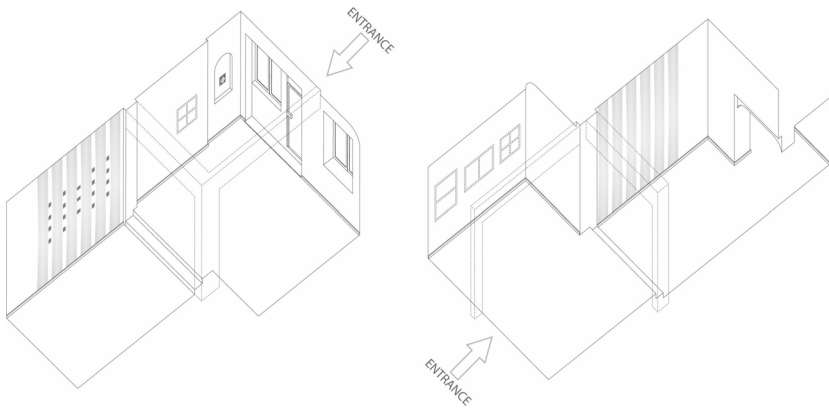
ingly demonstrated, for example, in exhibitions by women artists: because traditional gender asymmetries and male-biased analytic criteria impeded the inscription of women artists into art-historical narratives, exhibitions were often organized independently and used as a corrective to expand the art-historical canon or question its foundations.

2. Securing historical sources

The analysis of the art-historical initial narrative and the selected exhibition is subsequently substantiated through primary and secondary sources. On the one hand, it is necessary to evidence the art-historical assumption under investigation in academic publications of the time. On the other, the sources for the identified exhibition are examined in the relevant archives and, if necessary, further insights are gained through exchanges with contemporary witnesses – artists, curators, art critics (*oral history*).

3. Reconstructing the object of investigation

Fig. 1: Reconstruction of Carla Accardi's solo exhibition, Origine, 1976, interior of the Cooperativa Beato Angelico, Rome, © Luca Longagnani.



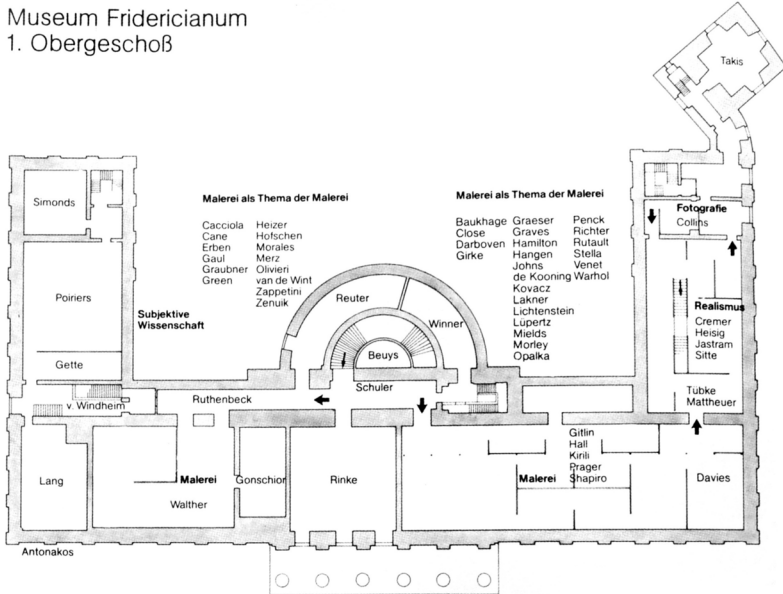
Thirdly, the selected exhibition is reconstructed in its entirety or in part. This can be done by means of an analogue or digital sketch (Fig. 1) or with a spatial model, which can be created without too much effort, for instance with the help of a shoe box, cardboard, glue, pencil and ruler or also a software programme. The basis for this is provided not only by surviving installation views and video recordings, but also by exhibition floor plans and testimonials. This makes it possible to visually and haptically recreate the selection of works and their hanging in the original spatial

situation, including, as far as possible, the lighting, displays, labels and wall texts, as well as the designated route through the exhibition. The aim here is not to be overly faithful to detail, but rather to focus on those elements that were significant for the curatorial narrative.

4. Interpreting the art-historiographical arguments of the exhibition

Once the reconstruction is accomplished, the art-historiographical propositions of the exhibition are interpreted. Taking into account the form and practice of the exhibition as well as the displayed art, exhibition historians identify the specific narrativity of the exhibition context. From these they deduce the art-historiographical statements of the exhibition, while always bearing in mind its partiality. Returning to the example of documenta 6, the art from the GDR was exhibited in the prestigious museum Fridericianum, but in rooms that had been claustrophobically cramped by a temporary mezzanin floor, which had an oppressive effect on the large-format paintings. Conceived as a self-contained unit, the section could only be visited after the 'Western' exhibition segments in the Fridericianum (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Floor plan of documenta 6, 1st floor of the Museum Fridericianum, from *Informationen, special edition documenta 6. 1977: X.*



Thus, the figurative-expressive character of the state-sanctioned art from the GDR must have seemed even more unusual in the Kassel international comparison, as if it referred to conventions of a different time. In this way, the exhibition constituted, also in interrelation with the discursive contributions in press reports and the catalogue, an art-historical special status of the GDR contribution.⁶

5. Establishing the historical context of the art-historiographical arguments of the exhibition

The art-historiographical proposition of the examined exhibition is elaborated via an interpretative process that, in principle, remains open-ended. Even though the exhibitionary argument cannot be evidenced ‘mathematically’, it should at least appear plausible within the corresponding historical period. The validity of the interpretation is ensured by a final contextualization of the findings to avoid inconsistent readings. On the one hand, the art-historiographical proposition of the exhibition analyzed can be linked back to the afore-mentioned art-historical narrative in academic publications, and on the other, it can be related to the corresponding reviews of the exhibition. In this way, it is possible to identify repetitions, deviations or counter-arguments of and to dominant art-historical topoi produced at certain points by the exhibition.

Case study

The inaugural exhibition at the Cooperativa Beato Angelico in Rome, entitled *Un quadro di Artemisia Gentileschi* (A painting by Artemisia Gentileschi) (1976), serves as a pertinent example for illustrating the methodology of art-historiographical exhibition analysis. Until the 1970s, a progressivist and geographically centred art-historiographical model fashioned on the principle of Giorgio Vasari’s *Le Vite* prevailed in Italian art history, which insisted on artistic ‘descent’ and the competition between artists conceived as male. Here, the work of women artists was barely considered (Iamurri 2007). This raises the question of how female-identified producers of art and culture reacted to this imbalance in and through self-organized exhibitions. As a case in point, we can consider the example of eleven women who, as a cooperative, organized various women artists’ exhibitions in a self-managed gallery in a street named after Beato Angelico in the centre of Rome from 1976 to 1978 (Bremer 2020, 2022). The cooperative’s exhibitionary activity is particularly suitable as an object of

6 Conversely, this does not preclude, as testimonials show, that encounters with the exhibited objects, despite adverse exhibitionary conditions, have in some cases generated more far-reaching meanings.

investigation because its self-declared goal to exclusively “present, study, collect and document works by women artists who work or have worked in the field of the visual arts” formulates a partisan art-historiographical claim.⁷ Archive material is accessible in the shape of exhibition views, announcements, press reviews and correspondence in the Fondo Suzanne Santoro, Archivia, Casa internazionale delle donne in Rome. Former members were able to provide personal information about the cooperative.

If we reconstruct the opening exhibition on 8 April 1976 on this basis, we can see that a large-format historical oil-on-canvas painting was installed on an easel in the bare, low-ceilinged exhibition room on the ground floor of an early modern building, diagonally across from the only entrance door, and a leaflet was laid out next to it. The four-page body of text provided a biography and a catalogue of works by the Roman artist Artemisia Gentileschi, establishing a production context for the work on display: an *Aurora* from approx. 1627 from a private collection.

To include a representation of the goddess of dawn, painted by the historical artist Gentileschi, in the inaugural exhibition of the feminist space suggested an art-historical new beginning under the banner of ‘woman’. The curatorial narration assigned the work via the text apparatus to the Baroque period, but at the same time anchored it in the present: the painting on the easel appeared in an unfinished process of coming into being. The unconventional installation of the life-size female subject – not on the wall, but in the room and facing the incoming visitor at eye level without the usual museum-style barriers – underscored its relational potential (Fig. 3). Instead of resorting to historicist periodization, the women’s cooperative followed the criterion of an inter-periodic acknowledgement of women artists by women artists. The inaugural exhibition was therefore instrumental in exposing as arbitrary not only the male dominance in art history, but also the underlying premise of a linear historicization and undermining it in the process. Surviving exhibition reviews emphasize this revisionist aspect. The counter-hegemonic art-historiographical interpretation also seems plausible in the light of radical-separatist views of the time. Feminists like Carla Lonzi explicitly sought to break away from linear – chronological or dialectical – philosophies of history as being implicitly male (Zapperi 2017: 178–188).

7 Original text: “presentare il lavoro di donne artiste, che operano e hanno operato nel campo delle arti visive [...] studiare, raccogliere e documentare tale lavoro”. Declaration of the Cooperative in self-designed postcard format, 1976, Fondo Suzanne Santoro, Archivia, Casa internazionale delle donne in Rome.

Fig. 3: View of the inaugural exhibition of the Cooperativa Beato Angelico, Rom, 8 April 1976, from Bremer 2020: 487.



Method reflection

The art-historiographical exhibition analysis proves to be particularly effective with regard to a certain “[m]od[e] of making exhibitionary meaning” (Smith 2021: 47), namely when the curatorial proposition is implicitly or explicitly grounded in art historiography. This art-historiographical, usually revisionist mode can appear in various, but not in all exhibition genres, for instance in thematic, period- or media-related overview exhibitions, retrospectives on artists or movements, art-historical thematic exhibitions or temporary presentations of collections. For analyzing such topics, the art-historiographical method depends on the availability of sufficient sources, which limits the range of the material to be examined in both historical and institutional aspects. The simultaneous investigation of academic and exhibitionary art-historiographical narratives and the reconstruction of the selected exhibitions also requires a time-consuming review of primary and secondary literature, possibly also particular social and linguistic skills, a steady eye and hand coordination as well as spatial thinking.

Besides these research premises, it should be kept in mind that the method primarily responds to a self-referential spectrum of questions concerning the discipline of art history. Its added value lies in the fact that it connects areas of exhibition history and curatorial studies in order to expand our understanding of how art

history is constructed and of the circumstances that prompt the assumptions and foundations of the field to be renegotiated. This method takes a fresh look at art-historiographical approaches that have emerged in exhibitions, neither explicitly in written form nor necessarily completely congruent with academic art history. It is not the long-term transmission or broad impact of the exhibitionary propositions that makes them worthy of investigation, but rather their quality. This helps to counteract notions of a uniform development of the discipline. It is in and through exhibitions that we can retrace established narratives of art history and also bring to light untapped and resistive art-historiographical potentials.

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