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## *(Re)producing the Exhibition, (Re)thinking Art History. On the Visual Archives of Primary Structures*

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# *(Re)producing the Exhibition, (Re)thinking Art History. On the Visual Archives of Primary Structures*

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Every year, the Centre national des arts plastiques (CNAP) awards research grants in theory and art criticism to several researchers who are involved in work that is at once exemplary and necessary. In partnership with the CNAP, *Critique d'art* offers one of these researchers the chance to promote his or her research project by publishing an essay in the review, which gives both researcher and work increased visibility, while at the same time helping to publicize policies supporting theory and art criticism in France.

The seven researchers receiving grants in 2016 are: Bruno Fernandes, devoting a research project to the use and territoriality value of the nude, in its spectacular depictions in Japan during the years of postwar growth (1945-1989); Erik Bullot, who is working on film and its double at the crossroads of ventriloquism, patter and performativity; Emma Dusong, who is interested in the links between song and contemporary art in the American scene, and Mériam Korichi, who returns to philosophy after art; Cédric Vincent, exploring the archives of the First World Festival of Negro Arts; and Judith Ickowicz who, in the continuity of her work on the law after the dematerialization of the work of art, is editing an anthology composed of texts acting as legal sources in the history and theory of design. And last of all Remi Parcollet, whose research focuses on photographers taking exhibition views in Europe and the United States between 1960 and 2000, thus broaching both the history of exhibitions and the history of exhibition curating studded with images.

Alexis Vaillant

- 1 These days, the view of the exhibition seems to be an obligatory way of dealing with the relation between art and photography. Over and above a praxis, it is nothing less than a photographic paradigm. Artists and curators, who are increasingly involved in the way their work is received and visualized, use this documentation like a tool not only for thinking about spatial arrangement, but also for re-thinking the history of the art on view.<sup>1</sup> Access to this rich material to do with the science of archiving is part and parcel of a growing interest in the history of exhibitions,<sup>2</sup> to which it is no stranger.
- 2 Certain exhibitions stake out the history of art, one such being *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors*, in particular.<sup>3</sup> Devised and then presented by Kynaston McShine from 17 April to 12 June 1966 at the Jewish Museum in New York, this exhibition is studied today as a ground-breaking show introducing Minimalism, a tendency that was coming to the fore at that time in the United States, as a reaction to the “triumph” of Abstract Expressionism, and as such displaying an aesthetic construct that contrasted with Pop art. In that show, and for the first time, the works of Carl Andre, Richard Artschwager, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, John McCracken, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson and Anne Truitt were all exhibited together.
- 3 In 2014, Jens Hoffmann, recently appointed Deputy Director at the Jewish Museum, put on a two-part exhibition titled *Other Primary Structures (Others 1: March 14-May 18, 2014 ; Others 2: May 25-August 3, 2014)*, stating his decision to re-visit that decisive moment in art history, almost 50 years earlier. Taken from the Jewish Museum archives, enlarged views of the original show covered most of the museum’s walls; so the place as History was thus endlessly duplicated, *mise en abyme*-like. There was a new encounter between the 1:1 representation of the 1966 exhibition in black and white, and the new arrangement consisting of other works produced in the same period by artists whose only connection was that they were neither American nor British. What was involved there: the sequel to the McShine show or a re-writing? The New York critics were very swift to interpret Jens Hoffmann’s curatorial proposal as “a very hands-on form of study: exhibitions that are themselves re-creations of –or responses to–past exhibitions”.<sup>4</sup> The use of the exhibition’s visual archives lay at the root of the scientific project. It underwrote the study and analysis of it, with Jens Hoffmann defining his project as an invitation to think about the history of art. So to what extent can his approach be compared with a historian’s? Does a curator who uses the exhibition as a medium take part in the writing of the history of exhibitions? In October 1965, in the magazine *Art in America*, Barbara Rose published an article about the trend she was seeing among several artists exhibiting their work in New York, which she described by the term “ABC Art”. That same year, in his essay “Specific Objects”, Donald Judd laid claim to an art where: “The three dimensions are the real space. This does away with the issue of illusionism and literal space, the space which surrounds or is contained within signs and colours [...]”.<sup>5</sup> This approach, encompassing different artists with shared concerns, was thus observed by both Lucy R. Lippard and Kynaston McShine. The exhibition project assumed a tangible form when the latter was appointed to the Jewish Museum, an institution acclaimed for its contemporary art shows. In deciding to associate artists working in New York with Californian and British artists,<sup>6</sup> Kynaston McShine came up with a radically new approach to a medium in the context of an art scene, in this case the Anglo-Saxon one. This decision was clearly asserted by the show’s subtitle: “younger American and British sculptors”.

- 4 With Minimal art, the form of the work no longer resided solely in the object. Its integration in a specific space introduced a new relation with the viewer. The presentation context turned out to be quintessential. The works were thus revealers of the surrounding space, consequently re-packaging their documentation through photography. Rudy Burckhardt's photographs of Robert Morris's exhibitions, held in 1964 (*Plywood Show*) and 1965 (*Mirrored Cubes*) at the Green Gallery, specifically described but also commented upon the relation of the pieces between them and with the venue. In particular, the photographers Eric Pollitzer and Geoffrey Clements would use the spatial configuration to construct their image. The configuration of the works and, more particularly, their arrangement in space clearly led to the photographic shot. The document confronted the photogenic quality of the work on view. Given their ephemeral presence, works only existed for as long as the exhibition lasted, so from then on the exhibition view became an especially conceptual and essential document for studying the art praxes of that period.
- 5 What is left of *Primary Structures*? Today, study of the historical arrangement that it influenced<sup>7</sup> is constructed from the angle of the photographer Ambur Hiken, author of the documentation for this show.<sup>8</sup> Ambur Hiken worked regularly for the Jewish Museum in those years. He also photographed Nicolas Schöffer's 1965 exhibition, and reproduced works and documents in the museum collection. Well-known for his photographs of artists' houses and studios,<sup>9</sup> he excelled when it came to views of interior architecture. In a way, and ahead of his time, Ambur Hiken illustrated the consequences of Minimalism on design. The general view he took of *Primary Structures*, often reproduced, has become a cliché. But there is another view of that room, showing another way of seeing things. That photograph taken by Rudy Burckhardt, New York's eye, was commissioned by Leo Castelli who wanted to be able to remember the installation of the works in the show organized for two artists represented by his gallery, Robert Morris and Donald Judd. The viewpoint was much the same, revealing not only the photogenic nature of the works but also their arrangement. A different focal distance enabled Rudy Burckhardt not to "cut" the works, but associate them, with a composition playing on geometry. The lighting method also singled out those two images, for Rudy Burckhardt used several sources of light, among others on the ceiling, in order to balance the contrasts, reduce the shadowy areas very present in Ambur Hiken's photography, and amplify the material nature of the works by the way the textures and highlights were rendered. That photograph, whose negative is held in Rudy Burckhardt's archives,<sup>10</sup> was never published, but the curator Lucy R. Lippard owned a print.<sup>11</sup>
- 6 Since a major renovation project got under way at the Jewish Museum between 1989 and 1993, the galleries which played host to *Primary Structures* no longer exist. Jens Hoffmann's idea to re-mount the exhibition in the venue where it was initially shown was a seductive one, but he duly had to make use of a model of the building to reproduce the original arrangement in its relation to space. For the curator, the idea of using archival images by enlarging them in an immersive way to the size of the wall, in order to incorporate the old exhibition into the new one, was a twofold one. It took into account the original exhibition system, and offered the possibility of passing through the original show by way of the eye. According to Jens Hoffmann, those images were "a documentation of the experience of the exhibition".<sup>12</sup> It subsequently permitted a contemporary reading of the period in the spirit of an overall perspective. Jens Hoffmann, who studied theatre and dramatic art in Berlin in the early 1990s, literally stages a

confrontation between archival views of the historical exhibition and of other works.<sup>13</sup> The photographs are not affixed in the manner of a “mural photo”, as we can find for other recent reconstructions of hangings, but either laid on the floor, or leant against the walls. There is a desire to create a stage-like illusion like a set in a classical theatre, and reveal its tricks.<sup>14</sup> For Jens Hoffmann, these photographs represent the “canons” of art history that he is keen to question. They show the construction of the set, as well as the way in which the works are incorporated in the History of art. He regards these archival documents as contextual elements. Because their place is usually in catalogues and archives, Jens Hoffmann includes them in the exhibition itself in order to create an immersive environment, and form a new level of information. He emphasizes the conceptual nature of institutional introspection represented by *Primary Structures*, and its relation to history (curating history) for this fourth “remake” of the exhibition he is organizing: “This time it’s about research into an exhibition that represents an important point in art history [...]. It was also important for me to start my work in the museum as a curator with a backward look at the museum’s most significant exhibition, while at the same time including my own interests with regard to our post-colonial situation and the subjective nature of history”.<sup>15</sup> The scientific idea consists essentially of the set: the confrontation between a choice of works and photographic documents.

- 7 Germano Celant did not sidestep the use of visual archives for his reconstruction in 2013 of the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, previously shown in Bern in 1969. The OMA architectural agency, which was associated with the project, also made use of the theatrical paradigm as a curatorial solution for this ‘remake’ in a Venetian palazzo of an exhibition originally devised for a Kunsthalle. The photographs taken by Balthasar Burkhard<sup>16</sup>, the Shunk/Kender twosome, Claudio Abate, Dölf Preisig, Sigfried Kuhn, and by Albert Winkler were used to re-create the works, the place’s architecture, and the original exhibition layout. Jens Hoffmann also re-mounted that show.<sup>17</sup> The outstanding wealth of the exhibition’s visual archives, and then the acquisition in 2011 and the digitization of the exhibition views in Harald Szeemann’s archives by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, very definitely explain the tendency of these different reconstruction/re-creation operations. The way that exhibition became an image favoured Szeemann’s celebrity and as a result his role and place in the History of art. The archives of exhibition curators, like those above-mentioned of Lucy R. Lippard, are often made up of photographs, not only of reproductions of works which they have exhibited or which they wanted to exhibit, but also of views of those works in different exhibition situations. The case of Harald Szeemann’s archives is especially interesting. Exhibition views are useful both for illustrating the work of the exhibition designer and for devising upcoming hangings. Jens Hoffmann is quite clear about this aspect: “About the curator archives, the installation photography for me is the most important part of the archives”. He continues: “I think that the emergence of the independent curator like Szeemann necessitated a different type of documentation because the exhibition became the medium”.<sup>18</sup>

- 8 As a result it is not insignificant that “exhibitions of exhibitions” should themselves be documented. The two parts of *Other Primary Structures* were photographed by two freelance photographers: David Heald, an architectural photographer, who has been working for the Guggenheim Museum for 30 years, for the first part, and Kris Graves, a photographer in his crew, for the second. Jens Hoffmann steers and has drastic control over the shots, going so far as to anticipate them during the set design stage. According to

David Heald, a certain number of restrictions are always inherent in the exhibition view operation, one such being the light, which he never wants to alter.<sup>19</sup> As far as the most widely broadcast view is concerned, the first one in the sequence, the difficulty was associating an image and a space. David Heald explains how he constructed it on the basis of the photomural, to avoid putting the image's surface in perspective. This latter is presented head-on, with a sufficiently wide framing to enable the arrangement of the surrounding sculptures to underscore the different planes and reinstate the depth of the exhibition venue. The views of each room emphasize the relation between the enlarged photographs, often in the middle, and the works. The documentation of Minimal art already involved a construction of the image guided by the structure and arrangement of the work, with the duplication—*mise en abyme*—amplifying this documentary technique in the direction of an aesthetic form. More than the experience of the exhibition itself, the immersion effect is accentuated by these new views. The confrontation between works and archival images is amplified; the photographs crystallize the curatorial procedure.

- 9 'Art history is a child of photography'.<sup>20</sup> It is often written on the basis of photographic reproductions (Heinrich Wölfflin, Erwin Panofsky, Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, André Malraux...). Visual archives lie at the root of the history of exhibitions, but because exhibition views combine space and time, they are not, however, reproductions. These days, curators use art history like a material, and visual archives like a tool. In the postmodern context, the present-day recurrence of exhibition reconstructions attests to this. But these exhibition designers do not take into account the subjectivity of the way in which the authors of these documentations see things, and once their environment and their production and reception conditions have been retraced and examined, these latter are filters, and they too insidiously become critical viewpoints.
- 10 By putting works in perspective between them and with the venue, and by showing the specific nature of a particular hanging,<sup>21</sup> the exhibition view photograph is the outcome of a viewpoint, well beyond any form of reproduction, and the result of the eye of an author, whether he be a photographer, artist, curator, critic or historian.<sup>22</sup> Questioning him as such opens up a particularly fruitful avenue of research, leading to restoring to the authors their fundamental contribution to the history of art, and better revealing a creeping effect involving works being rendered patrimonial by exhibitions.<sup>23</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Parcollet, Remi. "Figures du "photomural" exposé", *artpress 2*: "Les Expositions à l'ère de leur reproductibilité", no.36, February, March, April, 2015, p. 48-54
2. Parcollet, Remi. Szacka, Léa-Catherine. "Writing Institutional Exhibition History: On the Centre Pompidou's Catalogue raisonné", *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, June 2015, p. 264-284, and Parcollet, Remi. Szacka, Léa-Catherine. "Ecrire l'histoire des expositions", *Revue Culture et Musées*: "Documenter les collections, cataloguer l'exposition", no.22, January 2014, p. 137-162
3. Altshuler, Bruce. "Theory on the Floor: Primary Structures The Jewish Museum, New York April 27-June 12, 1966", *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, New York : Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1994, p. 220-235

4. Smith, Roberta. "Minimalist Show", *New York Times*, 11 April 2014
5. Judd, Donald. "Specific Objects", *Arts Yearbook* 8, 1965
6. Involved were former students of the sculptor Anthony Caro, already brought together in the exhibition *New Generation* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery the year before.
7. Altshuler, Bruce. *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions that Made Art History: 1962-2002*, London: Phaidon, 2013, p. 51. The title *Primary Structures* also referred to primary colours. It was in fact a very colourful show, rendered somewhat darker by the black and white photographs of the installation.
8. The photographs of the opening were taken by Fred McDarrah, the Beat Generation's photographer.
9. Alswang, Betty. Hiken, Ambur. *The Personal House: Homes of Artists and Writers*, Whitney Library of Design, 1961
10. Rudy Burckhardt papers, 1934-1990, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC
11. Lucy R. Lippard papers 1930s-2010, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC
12. Parcollet, Remi. Interview with Jens Hoffmann on 22 October 2015 at the Jewish Museum, not published.
13. Selected from South America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. The first part of the show titled *Other 1: March 14-May 18, 2014* presented works produced between 1960 and 1967, the second part *Other 2: May 25-August 3, 2014*, showed works created between 1967 and 1970 influenced by the exhibition *Primary Structures*.
14. Parcollet, Remi. Interview with Jens Hoffmann, *op.cit.*  
Jens Hoffmann: "The photography in my personal case it's like the idea of the prospect in theatre, the background, the backdrop on the stage like in the classical theatre and then you have the actors acting in the front of. It gives you this illusion that you are actually maybe in a forest or in a mountain, or whatever you want to create. But of course there is the artificiality in the same times. So all the photographs are not straight on the wall, there were leaning, so you can see the construction behind it."
15. Gregory, Odette. Interview with Jens Hoffmann, Deputy Director of The Jewish Museum New York, <http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/18219/> Posted on 26 March 2014
16. Parcollet, Remi. "Dialogue entre le commissaire d'exposition Harald Szeemann et la photographe Balthasar Burkhard : la vue d'exposition comme outil curatorial", *Voir, ne pas voir : les expositions en question* (proceedings of the study days held on 4-5 June 2012), Paris : INHA ; Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne ; HiCSA. <http://hicsa.univ-paris1.fr/documents/file/Parcollet.pdf>
17. *When Attitudes Became Form Become Attitudes*, 2012. CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts. We can see a systematic methodology: enlarged exhibition views on the scale of a set, while acting as a scientific guarantee accompanied by a model of the original arrangement. The principle being each time to update the original concept of an exhibition by inviting other artists. For this project, there were 82 international contemporary artists who, in differing ways, followed in the footsteps of Szeemann's legacy.
18. Parcollet, Remi. Interview with Jens Hoffmann, *op. cit.*
19. Parcollet, Remi. Interview with David Heald on 25 March 2016 at the photo studio in the Guggenheim Museum, New York. Not published.
20. Buettner, Brigitte. "Panofsky à l'ère de la reproduction mécanisée. Une question de perspective", *Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne*, no.53, October 1995, p. 45-77
21. Parcollet, Remi. "Voir l'exposition", *Réseau Documents d'artistes*, published on 4 December 2015 sur <http://www.reseauda.org/component/k2/itemlist/category/6.html>
22. Cf. *Prosopographie des auteurs de vues d'expositions*, forthcoming from Les Presses du réel.

**23.** Parcollet, Remi. “Les archives photographiques du Centre Pompidou”, *Cahier du Labex CAP*, Presses de la Sorbonne, no.1, March 2015, p. 183-216