
History and Aesthetics of the Exhibition

Jean-Marc Poinot

Translator: Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/452>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.452

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2009

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Jean-Marc Poinot, "History and Aesthetics of the Exhibition", *Critique d'art* [Online], 34 | Automne 2009, Online since 25 January 2012, connection on 04 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/452> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.452>

This text was automatically generated on 4 July 2021.

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REFERENCES

Glicenstein, Jérôme. *L'Art : une histoire d'expositions*, Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 2009, (Lignes d'art)

Vides : une rétrospective, Zurich : JRP/Ringier ; Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou ; Genève : Ecart Publications, 2009

- 1 When the first books about the history of exhibitions appeared in Germany and the United States, many an avenue seemed to open up. First of all, it was important to get away from just the chronicle of the 19th century Salons and include this history over a long term, as Georg Friedrich Koch did by situating the beginnings of his narrative in Graeco-Roman Antiquity¹, before Oskar Bätschmann saw therein the signs of a break hallmarked by the appearance of a new type of artist: the exhibition artist², as from the latter half of the 18th century. If some, like Germano Celant, thought that the exhibition had brought on a new type of work with environments³, it was really with the idea that the history of exhibitions could in some way replace that of just the works that the first reference works were published, books like *Stationen der Moderne*, *L'Art de l'exposition* and *L'Avant-garde en exposition*⁴. Since then, monographic studies of exhibitions, curators, and other connected themes have increased in number. The terrain does not seem quite so positively staked out for such recent publications as *L'Art : une histoire d'expositions*, by Jérôme Glicenstein, and the catalogue for the exhibition *Vides* by the Centre Pompidou.
- 2 J. Glicenstein defines his book as an examination of the specific aesthetic relationship represented by the exhibition, and typifies this latter as a form of mediation. The programme is not without interest, successively examining as it does "the exhibition as

fiction" (chapter 1), "as language and as device" (chapter 2), "as event and as parlour game" (chapter 3), then "as art site" (chapter 4), before conjuring up the possibilities of a history of the exhibition. By taking up the old distinction between permanent exhibition and temporary show, Glicenstein introduces mediation in the age of museums, at the moment of their creation (with Alexandre Lenoir, G.W.F. Hegel and his pupil Gustav Waagen), which would subsequently make it possible to keep within the field of his overview the history of mediation in museums, and more particularly so in England and the United States. The evocation of the avant-garde helps to introduce the set, before the emergence, in the 1970s, of the star category of exhibition curator, candidate for the auteur status, just like artists. We realize before very long that by muddling the history of exhibitions with that of museums, certain features of the exhibition would take a back seat, in particular the specifically sociable aspects of the exhibition, where the art critic plays a not inconsiderable role—a sociability that has been appropriated by artists, together with certain forms of institutional criticism⁵. The exhibition as language is based on a great ambiguity, for if the discursive hypothesis of the exhibition was formulated with the cabinet of curiosities or *Wunderkammer*, the author persuaded that mediation stems from the exhibition and not from the work is prompted to develop a history of mediation which leans seriously in favour of the museum, or is aimed at showing the resistance put up by numerous people involved with contemporary art, when it comes to imagining this mediation. So, imperceptibly, we proceed from the exhibition as mediation to the absence of mediation in contemporary art shows, even if we encounter Roland Barthes and John Dewey on the way. The exhibition as event tugs us towards sociology and analytical philosophy, when qualified as an art site; it would seem that it exhausts the objects that it presents in such a recurrent way, and produces a curious effect by turning works conceived as allographic, into autobiographical works (Nelson Goodman, Gérard Genette). Although J. Glicenstein examines many issues where it appears that theoreticians, philosophers and sociologists have not let slip the evolution of the status of artworks introduced by the exhibition, in particular through the interpretations that it updates, he tends, despite a very didactic structure to his idea, to conclude with the not easily tangible dimension of the exhibition. His archaeology of the exhibition, under the distant wing of Michel Foucault, gives only a very partial place to what might constitute the basis of the book, to wit the interactions of philosophy with museum and exhibition alike, for it is forever submerged by a confused and sweeping conception of mediation, shared with Nathalie Heinich.

- 3 Unlike Glicenstein's book, *Vides* is a publication "full" of art which rightly takes cognizance of the mythical character of the empty exhibition since the dazzling feat of Yves Klein in April 1958, in Paris. Imperceptibly, that inaugural event has, for the past twenty years, gone down in the historiography of contemporary art, in the wake of that oh-so-provocative act, the ready-made. If we have doubts about the relevance of the exhibition based on the begged question of having recourse to simple notices in totally empty rooms with no artists' interventions. Co-curator John M Armleder incidentally expresses his own doubts in an interview, while the Centre Pompidou's curators boast about the true subversive dimension of their propositions. It is undeniable that the publication produced for the occasion raises lots of questions. Oddly enough, this book combines ambitions of knowledge with a form of surfing on the wave of myth. Herein lies all its interest. It is far from summing up proposals that have marked this brief 50-years period in the wake of Klein's inaugural gesture, but it does bring together

historical writings, documents, and interviews, in particular with Mathieu Copeland, which construct a fine posterity and above all reinstate a very precise chronicle of the events in question. Between the symbolic dimension of Klein's experiment, the not very poetic materialism of Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin, Robert Barry's speculation about the invisible, the elegant staging of the erasure undergone by many women in the art arena with Laurie Parsons, and the gentle denunciation of incompetence in the management of the Bern Kunsthalle by Maria Eichhorn, there is a canny dosage which informs this fascination with the void and contains subversion, along with the artists' complicity, within the boundaries of good taste. The anthology explains and explores the semantic field of the void and not only of the empty exhibition.

- 4 So Nothingness, the Invisible, and the Ineffable, and Rejection/Destruction are all so many themes of collection. The interest and relevance of this huge compilation have to do with the persistent topicality of issues which traverse both art's reason for being and that of the objects which can render it material. The limits of the undertaking stem from the fact that it is a matter of an overview of topicality and not of a problematic or theoretical approach which should have evoked the *Immatériaux* produced in 1985, a background which has not overlooked "the objectless museum", part and parcel of *Feux Pâles*, an exhibition organized in Bordeaux by readymades belong to everyone[®] in 1991, and even less formalist by saying nothing about what the anti-*Vides* was, namely *This is not a void*, organized by Jens Hoffmann at the Luisa Strina gallery in São Paulo in 2008, in parallel with the Biennial that same year. This latter show was based on the idea that artists could occupy a place that seemed empty, precisely to show something that would not otherwise have been perceptible (www.galerialuisastrina.com.br). Of the two shows in Paris and São Paulo, people will probably remember the Brazilian one, but the myth narrative will be the Centre Pompidou exhibition. It is up to art historians and other interpreters to undertake, based on these materials, a slightly more dialectic interpretation with economics and politics.

NOTES

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