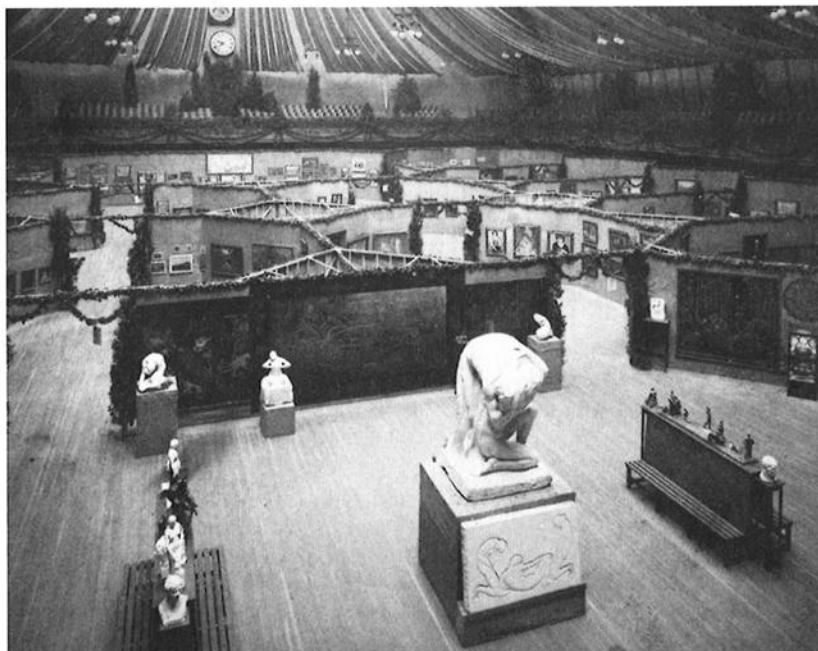


A Canon of Exhibitions



Discussion of an exhibitionary canon is something new. And it is new because the serious study of exhibitions is something new, or at least relatively new. Two factors have driven recent research and publication on exhibitions: the changing landscape of art history, with its expanding interests in social and institutional histories, and, perhaps more importantly, the curatorial boom of the late 1980s and 1990s. With the latter has come interest in historical exemplars, along with the creation of academic programs in curatorial practice that demand his-

torical cases to study. Certainly there had been books that presented the history of particular exhibitions, such as Milton Brown's volume on *The Armory Show*, or histories of a group of exhibitions, such as Ian Dunlop's account of seven important modern art shows.¹ But these studies were relatively few in number, and the remaining literature, which was not large, was found primarily in academic journals and volumes aimed at a specialist audience.²

It was this scarcity of information that prompted my own research on exhibi-

NOTES

1—Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988); and Ian Dunlop, *The Shock of the New: Seven Historic Exhibitions of Modern Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972). An earlier example is Kenneth W. Luckhurst, *The Story of Exhibitions* (London: Studio Publications, 1951).

2—A scholarly resource of particular significance is Donald E. Gordon's *Modern Art Exhibitions: 1900–1916*, 2 vols. (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1974), a monumental effort seeking to list every work shown in exhibitions of modern art during these years. Among specialist works on early modern exhibition history, exemplary are those of Patricia Mainardi and Martha Ward; the work of Walter Grasskamp on Documenta is an important precedent for research on more recent shows. A noteworthy exception to the lack of material available for both specialist and general public was the 1988 exhibition at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin and the accompanying publication, *Stationen der Moderne: Die bedeutendsten Kunstausstellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland* (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 1988), which documented twenty exhibitions held in Germany from 1910 to 1969.

Armory Show interior view, New York, 1913. Courtesy Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



3—Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994). Appearing a few years earlier was an anthology of essays by scholars and curators on selected exhibitions: Bernd Klüser and Katharina Hegewisch, eds., *Die Kunst der Ausstellung* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1991).

4—Michael Brenson, "Is 'Quality' an Idea Whose Time Has Gone?," *New York Times*, July 22, 1990.

5—Gill Perry and Colin Cunningham (eds.), *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 12.

6—Robert von Hallberg, "Editor's Introduction," *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (September 1983): iii–iv.

Exhibition views of *Magiciens de la Terre*, Centre Pompidou Paris, 1989. Photo K. Ignatiadis © Bibliothèque Kandinsky

tions while working at Zabriskie Gallery, New York, where I found my curiosity frustrated during our show of surrealist objects from 1936. That year was marked by three important exhibitions of Surrealism, shows mounted at the New Burlington Galleries in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Galerie Charles Ratton in Paris. But while these shows often were mentioned in discussions of Surrealism, I was unable to find detailed information on them. My interest in these exhibitions and others, prompted by the gallery's turn of its attention to the work of the French Nouveaux Réalistes, eventually led to my writing a book on twentieth-century art presented through accounts of major exhibitions.³ And in publishing *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, unbeknownst to myself, I was participating in the creation of a canon of exhibitions.

Of course there was little excuse for my ignorance concerning issues of canon formation, for the 1980s were filled with discussion of the validity or illegitimacy of literary and artistic canons. Prompted by postmodern questioning of grand narratives, by postcolonial studies, and by multiculturalist demands for inclusion of the

previously excluded, numerous critics and academics interrogated existing sets of canonical works and artists and the notions of quality on which their selection was based. In fact, it was in response to the groundbreaking 1989 exhibition in Paris, *Magiciens de la Terre*, that *New York Times*-critic Michael Brenson wrote an extensive account of current art-world controversy centered on the concept of quality.⁴ However, Brenson's article did not arise from a concern with the quality of this exhibition *qua* exhibition but with that of the artworks that it contained. And it is essential to distinguish between evaluating the works displayed in an exhibition and assessing the importance of that exhibition, although certainly exhibition content is not irrelevant to an exhibition's significance.

The idea of a canon is that of a standard against which objects of a given kind are measured or evaluated.⁵ But before discussing why a show would, or should, be included in an exhibitionary canon, it is important to consider how such a canon is used, to consider the purposes of designating certain exhibitions as canonical. And when we consider purposes, we must consider purposes for whom. In 1983 the editor of an issue of *Critical Inquiry* that was devoted to the literary canon identified a number of ways in which canons would be discussed: as determined by artists through choice of stylistic models and figures of emulation, as constructed by literary and academic critics, and as governing intellectual and scholastic study.⁶ Here we find ourselves with two perspectives of use, that of practitioners and that of those who research, analyze, and evaluate what practitioners create. When applied to the creation and study of art exhibitions, these are the viewpoints of curators and of historians and critics.

These perspectives are not unrelated, as we see in the stimulus that the establishment of curatorial training programs has given to the historical study of exhibitions. But just as artists look at artworks from a different angle than do art historians—not ignoring what historians note and appreciate, but thinking also about how they can employ what they see in their artistic practice—so curators are concerned to take from the experience and study of exhibition ideas to be incorporated in their curatorial work. In considering a canon of exhibitions, then, a given exhibition might be marked as canonical for, say, exhibition-makers as practitioners but not for those assessing these shows as historians or critics. Here canons would be viewed as relative to the uses to which they are put, with different canons constructed to serve different interests, just as it has been suggested that there could be separate feminist, Marxist, or postcolonial canons of art.⁷

This point about use complements the distinction between exhibitions taken to be canonical in terms of their art historical significance and those that are judged to be canonical with regard to curatorial innovation.⁸ One natural way of making this distinction is to view the former as central to the history of art in their presentation of noteworthy artworks; such exhibitions often are connected with the introduction to various publics of works by particular artists or of new kinds of artistic practice.⁹ One thinks immediately of such classic group shows of modern art as the concentration of the Fauves in room seven of the 1905 *Salon d'Automne*, the first Blaue Reiter exhibition in Munich in 1911, the 1913 *Armory Show's* presentation of European modern art in New York, Chicago, and Boston, and *O-10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures*, which included distinctive displays of Malevich's

Suprematist paintings and Tatlin's corner counter-reliefs, in Saint Petersburg (1915); one then also thinks of later exhibitions such as, to mention only some New York postwar examples, Dorothy Miller's *Sixteen Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1959, which introduced Frank Stella's black paintings, Kynaston McShine's *Primary Structures* at the Jewish Museum, Lucy Lippard's *Eccentric Abstraction* at Fischbach Gallery in 1966, and Douglas Crimp's 1977 *Pictures* exhibition at Artists Space. And of course many single-artist exhibitions fall into this category. Shows that are judged to be canonical with regard to curatorial considerations, on the other hand, are marked as important for introducing

7—Keith Moxey, "Motivating History," *Art Bulletin* 77, no. 3 (September 1995): 400.

8—I thank Claire Bishop for emphasizing this distinction in conversation.

9—Here I focus on exhibitions of contemporary art, ignoring historical exhibitions that have been important to the field of art history by assembling older works never seen alongside one another (or not united for many years), exploring particular influences, displaying artworks previously unknown or little known, and so on.





10—Exhibitions instantiating this idea in the curatorial realm, of course, must be distinguished from those of artists who have employed the exhibition as an artistic form, such as Marcel Broodthaers's *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles* (1968–1972), Douglas Blau's *Fictions* (1987), and Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992–1993).

Opening of the first international *Dada Messe* in the bookstore Dr. Burchard in Berlin, 1920. © BPK

or developing new ways in which artworks are presented, and they exemplify different varieties of innovation. Most general are changes in how we conceive of what an exhibition is, such as the notion often associated with Harald Szeemann of exhibitions as creative works in their own right.¹⁰ But curatorial innovation usually is more specific, relating, to mention only a few modes, to forms of display (the *Abstraktes Kabinett* commissioned by Alexander Dorner and designed in 1927–1928 by El Lissitzky for the Landesmuseum in Hannover, and the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in Paris), to expanded notions

of the exhibitionary site (*First Gutai Outdoor Exhibition*, Ashiya, Japan, 1955, and Seth Siegelaub's "catalogue exhibitions" of 1968–1969), to temporal structure (Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru's developing *Cities on the Move*, 1997–1999, and Okwui Enwezor's multiple platform Documenta 11, 2001–2002), and to the curatorial process itself (Andy Warhol's 1970 indiscriminate mining of the storage rooms of the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art for *Raid the Icebox*, and Francesco Bonami's delegation to others the curating of the non-national section of the 2003 Venice Biennale). And some exhibitions, for example the

1920 Berlin *Dada-Messe* (Dada fair), can be considered to be canonical for both art historical and curatorial reasons.¹¹

Just as the canon of art contains both artists and artworks, both Picasso and *Les Femmes d'Alger*, what we might call a "curatorial canon" will include a pantheon of curators as well as of exhibitions—Harald Szeemann as well as *When Attitudes Become Form*.¹² And considered alongside shows viewed as canonical for reason of art historical introduction, the identification of canonical curators highlights the extent to which both aspects of the exhibitionary canon seem open to a similar criticism. This criticism, of course, is that of post-structuralist critique and other strands of postmodernism, which identifies the artistic canon as a mechanism of power and exclusion. With respect to the art historical canon of exhibitions sketched above this is obvious, as these shows have been generated largely

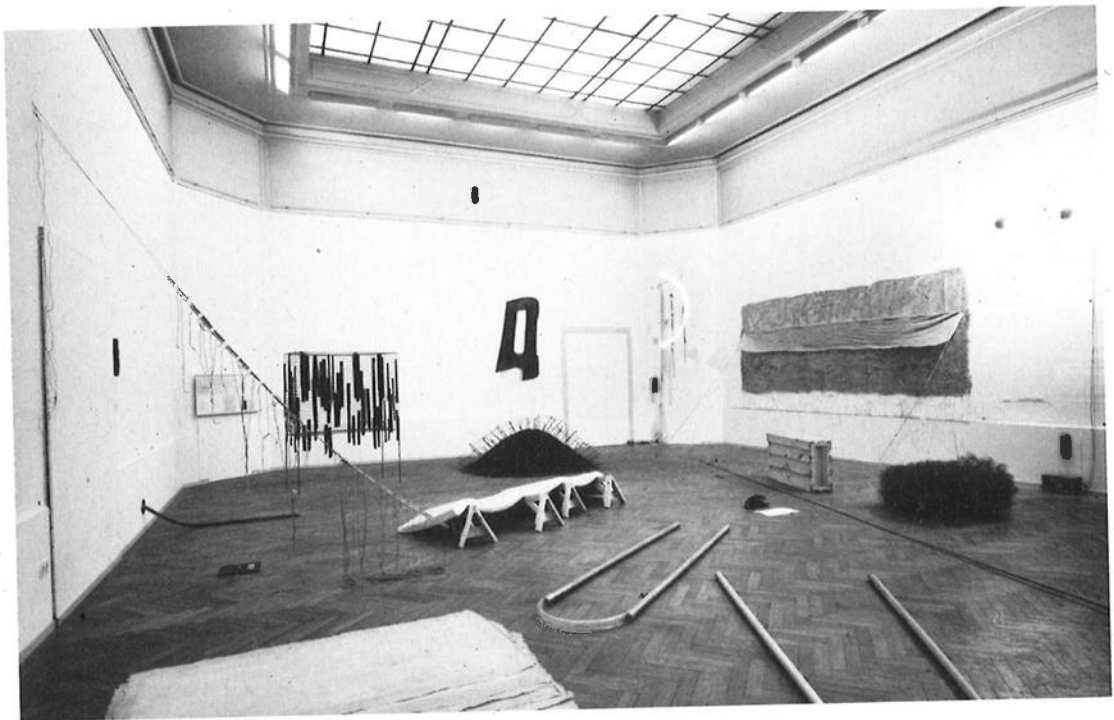


from the standard list of important artists, artworks, and art movements. And regarding the curatorial canon, it is reasonable to think that the recent

11—Many exhibitions that fall into both of these canonical groupings employ a form of display that is related in a particularly close way to the works presented. On such shows, see my introduction to *Salon to Biennial, Volume I: 1863–1959* (London: Phaidon, 2008), 18.

12—Significant here is Hans Ulrich Obrist's project of interviewing and retrieving knowledge of important curators, some of which he has published in *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2008).

¹² Exhibition views of *When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle Bern, 1969. Photo Shunk-Kender © Roy Lichtenstein Foundation



13—The classic statement of this position is Daniel Buren's essay "Exhibitions of an Exhibition," written in response to Harald Szeemann's *Documenta 5*. For the original essay and Buren's update, see Daniel Buren, "Where Are the Artists?," in *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by an Artist*, ed. Jens Hoffmann, http://www.e-flux.com/projects/next_doc/cover.html (e-flux, 2003), http://www.e-flux.com/projects/next_doc/d_buren#.

14—An example of how the study of exhibitions can work to disrupt a canon is *1900: Art at the Crossroads*, mounted in 2000 at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Here curator Robert Rosenblum assembled works that had been displayed in the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris to revise the canonical view of artistic production during this period.

Cover of exhibition guide and exhibition views of *Entartete Kunst* in the gallery building at the Munich Hofgarten, 1937. © BPK Kunstbibliothek/Zentralarchiv, SMB/Dietmar Katz

Historiography

focus on landmark exhibitions selected for reasons of curatorial innovation, especially those from the 1960s on, functions to support the influence of curators who trace their intellectual lineage back to important curatorial innovators of this period. It also reinforces the salience of the figure of the curator, whose position of increasing power within the art world has been a subject of regular complaint by artists.¹³

Contrasting with such concerns, however, is the way in which the study of exhibitions has joined other new directions of inquiry to expand the borders of art and cultural history. Not only does looking at exhibitions reveal previously ignored works and enlarge the cast of characters beyond the established players, it adds to the descriptive and explanatory mix a range of important social, economic, and political factors.¹⁴ And it provides a vehicle for setting the objects of art history within broader regimes of perception and value. For exhibitions are central nodes of intersection of the individuals and institutions whose activity constitutes a complex cultural field, points of overlap among artists,

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dealers, critics, curators, collectors, journalists, historians, museum and other cultural officials, politicians, and members of various art-viewing publics. And the mapping of their interactions and areas of influence moves us away from the kind of narrow art history that has been the object of so





much critique.¹⁵ This is not a matter of rejecting the notion of the great artwork or the great artist, although criticisms of the uses to which such qualitative judgments have been put must be taken seriously. Rather, it is a matter of investigating the larger system of artistic production and distribution, employing the study of exhibitions as a fruitful point of entry and useful locus of research. And while prevailing judgments concerning important figures and movements have governed the selection of most exhibitions that have been studied in depth, new work has been and is being done that extends the art historical field rather than reinforces its limits.¹⁶

Despite the association of the idea of the canonical with much-critiqued traditional art history, and no matter how committed one is to a critical standpoint, a canon of exhibitions is not something that we can, or should, avoid. This is for the simple reason that

if we are to teach courses about exhibitions, if we are to include their study in a broader art and cultural history, then we must select particular exhibitions on which to focus. For in formulating syllabi and curricula, and in encouraging serious individual research and larger research programs, it is important to establish a body of examples through which a rich and compelling discussion can take place, a set of exemplary objects around which the field can be organized and to which practitioners respond. This is not at all to suggest that exhibitionary canons are unrevisable, for as curatorial and art historical interests change, exhibitions will be added and subtracted from groups of cases that are valorized by general consensus. Yet without canonical examples we lack a lingua franca to facilitate common inquiry and productive discussion across what is a very broad field, a discursive zone encompassing both those who create and those who study exhibitions. And as David Carrier has observed of

15—For a fascinating example of such mapping, which serves to connect central art-world players in Europe in the late 1960s and 1970s, see Sophie Richard, *Unconcealed: The International Network of Conceptual Artists 1967–1977; Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections*, ed. Lynda Morris (London: Ridinghouse, 2009).

16—The standard art historical canon largely has guided the selection of exhibitions in my own books and this also was the case with the shows selected for *Die Kunst der Ausstellung*. Afterall's new *Exhibition Histories* series extends the field, beginning with Christian Rattemeyer's book that 'pairs the lesser-known *Op Losse Schroeven* (Square pegs in round holes) with *When Attitudes Become*

Form, and has planned volumes on *Magiciens de la Terre*, Lucy Lippard's "number exhibitions" (1969–1974), and the third Havana Biennial (1989). A book in preparation by the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative at the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, coedited by Paula Marincola and Ralph Rugoff, promises to range farther afield in pursuing a focus on innovative exhibition making over the past five decades. Important research has been done on exhibitions in eastern and central Europe under the aegis of the Former West project; see <http://www.formerwest.org>.

17—David Carrier, "Art and Its Canons," *The Monist* 76, no. 4 (October 1993): 530.

18—An analogous case can be made for the Museum of Modern Art's *New American Painting* show of 1958–1959, viewed as an aspect of the US Cold War propaganda machine. For more exhibitions with significant propagandistic functions, see Jorge Ribalta (ed.), *Public Photographic Spaces: Exhibitions of Propaganda, from "Pressa" to "The Family of Man," 1928–55* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2008).

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the art historical canon, "The function of the canon . . . is to provide the basis for potential dialogue, generating enough agreement to make talking profitable, creating enough disagreement to give us reason to keep talking."¹⁷

As art history incorporates the history of exhibitions as part of a richer explanatory matrix, we increasingly will foreground the roles that exhibitions play within larger systems of production, exchange, communication, and power. And this moves us away from matters of art historical introduction and curatorial innovation in assessing the importance of exhibitions. Consider the 1937 exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) in Munich. While *Entartete Kunst* certainly contained major works presented to a very large audience, the largest of any twentieth-century exhibition of advanced art, the exhibition's primary significance derives from the role that it played within the Nazi political program. One also might view the importance of *Magiciens de la Terre* in a similar way, focusing on its ideological use within the cultural politics of the period. This would not deny the artistic merit of the works in *Magiciens* or the significance of Jean-Hubert Martin's decision to bring art from outside the Euro-American centers for display in Paris alongside pieces by well-known international artists. But it would range farther afield to understand why that was important, looking past artistic or curatorial factors for the ground of its canonical status.¹⁸ Such considerations also point us beyond art history to a broader history of exhibitions, connecting the functions and structures of art exhibitions with those of other disciplinary areas, from trade fairs (including the great international expositions of the nineteenth century) to ethnographic, historical, and scientific exhibitions.

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Since I began writing about the history of exhibitions, and especially while selecting shows to be documented in the two volumes of *Salon to Biennial*, I have been asked about my reasons for focusing on these particular cases. While I recognize that my work has contributed to a process of canon formation, I am unable to construct a fixed set of criteria for designating an exhibition as canonical. Because exhibitions function across multiple dimensions, linking individuals and objects that play diverse roles within many complex networks, the attempt to formulate a rigorous system of comparison seems futile. Instead, and simply put, canonical exhibitions for me are those whose study yields the richest narratives. These are the narratives that connect in the most illuminating way interesting and important artworks and institutions, artists and other actors, personal and formal stories, and economic and political structures and events, displaying the centrality of exhibitions in the public and the private life of culture.

While it can be used for purposes of constraint and limitation, the designating of particular exhibitions as canonical is expansive as well. We can see this in the way that accounts of major shows have stimulated research on other exhibitions and inspired creative curatorial efforts. But, in addition, such expansiveness appears when study and new ideation react against an existing canon instead of reinforcing it. For canons are dynamic constructs, their identification taking the form of absolute judgments but functioning also as springboards to further conversation and inquiry. Like exhibitions, they are nodes in structures of transaction and value. And the study of canons, like that of exhibitions, has much to teach us about the systems of which they are a part. But that is another story. ■