Thinking about Exhibitions

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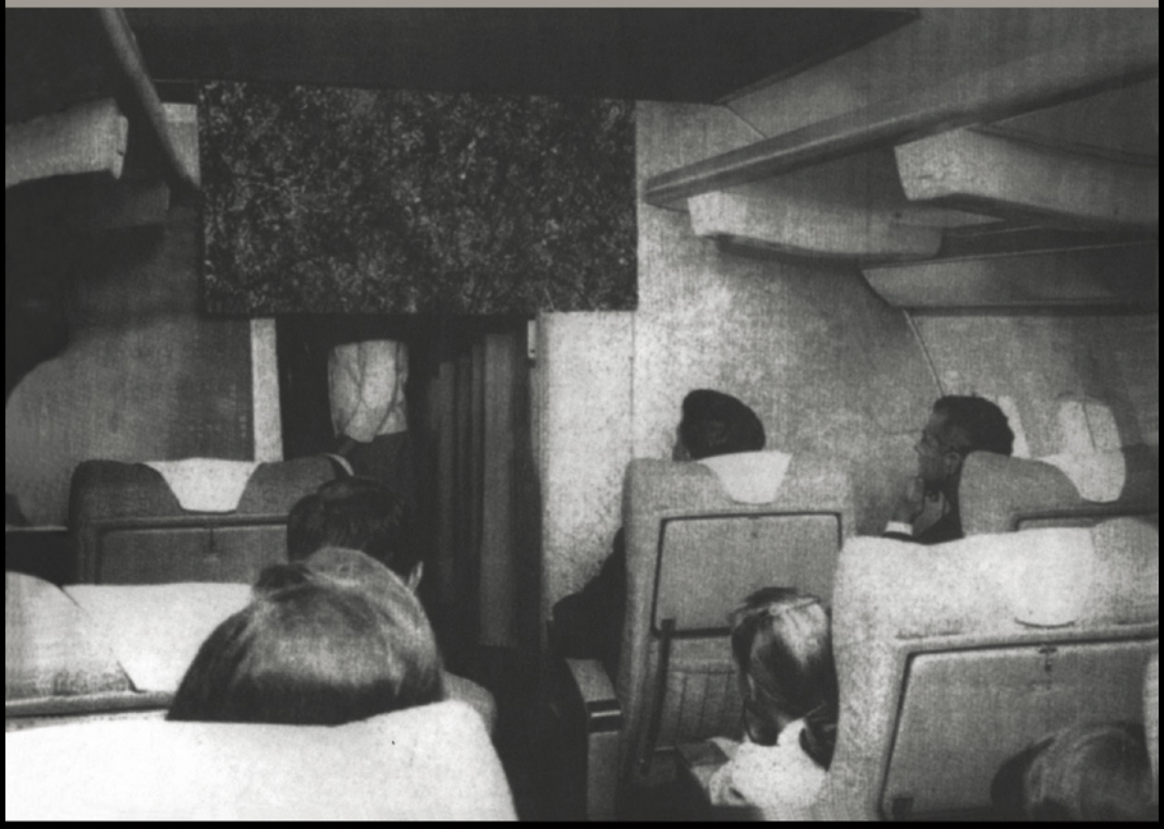

THINKING ABOUT EXHIBITIONS

Exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known. Constantly reshaped by artists and curators, the exhibition has become a prominent and diverse part of contemporary culture. *Thinking About Exhibitions* presents a multi-disciplinary anthology of writings on current exhibition practices by curators, critics, artists, sociologists and historians from Australia, Europe and North America. It marks out the emergence of new discourses surrounding the exhibition and illustrates the urgency of the debates centred on and fostered by exhibitions today.

Texts have been grouped—or installed—in sections which focus on the history of the exhibition, forms of staging and spectacle, and questions of curatorship, spectatorship and narrative. These writings (including case studies and polemical interviews) investigate exhibitions in settings outside of the traditional gallery as well as innovative work in extending cultural debates within the museum.

Thinking About Exhibitions is fully illustrated with over ninety black-and-white photographs and includes a bibliography on the subject of art exhibitions. It is essential reading for anyone involved in exhibitions or their study.

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Edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W.Ferguson and Sandy Nairne

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1996
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Text design: Secondary Modern/Keenan

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-99153-2 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-415-11589-2 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-11590-6 (pbk)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thinking about Exhibitions originated in and is based on the seminars on exhibitions taught by Reesa Greenberg at Concordia University, Montréal, in the 1980s. It is also informed by the two-part symposium organized by Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne entitled *The Politics of Images* held at the Tate Gallery, London and the DIA Foundation, New York in the autumn of 1990. The anthology was formulated as a specific project during the Getty Grant Program Senior Research Fellowship which we held jointly in 1993.

We are immensely grateful to all the contributors who responded so positively to the idea of this anthology. We should like to thank all those who have encouraged and supported our investigations into the changing nature of exhibitions of contemporary art. First thanks go to the Getty Grant Program, and Deborah Marrow and Gwen Walden in particular, for their generous support to our research work. We should also like to thank the following institutions and individuals for their help: Vassif Kortun, Norton Batkin and the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College; Meg Duff and the Library Staff of the Tate Gallery; The Canada Council for the Arts; Claudia Büttner; Laura Down; Kristina Huneault; Miani Johnson; Johanne Lamoureux; Hélène Lipstadt; Martine Moinot; Alissa Schoenfeld; Kitty Scott; Sylvia Sleigh; Barbara Steinman; Sarah Thornton; Lisa Tickner; Richard Wentworth (for the title of Part IV); Robert McGee, Rebecca Pates and Benjamin Caplan for their work on translation. We should also like to thank those at Routledge who have worked on the book including Catherine Turnbull, Sophie Powell and Tamsin Meddings, and especially Rebecca Barden, our commissioning editor.

RG, BF, SN.

INTRODUCTION

There is an intellectual and structural correspondence between the subject of this book and its form. Art exhibitions and anthologies are primary vehicles for the production and dissemination of knowledge today. Both are collections of discrete entities compiled for purposes of validation and distribution. Both usually consist of extant work, although in recent years many more works are commissioned or made specially for the event. With art exhibitions and anthologies, objects and texts are always assembled and arranged according to an arbitrary schema intended to construct and convey meaning. In their mega forms—the blockbuster, the retrospective: collections of complete works or compilations which inaugurate or consolidate a discipline—they lay claim to being exhaustive when they are always incomplete (and often only exhausting). Exhibitions and anthologies are, by definition, selective and exclusive due to the biases of the organizers and the actual or perceived constraints of space, finance and availability of works. The totality which many art exhibitions and anthologies seem to claim to embody is a fiction and even a fantasy.

Art exhibitions and anthologies have become the epitome of recent intellectual and cultural manifestations. They are virtually synonymous with postmodernism's tropes of built-in obsolescence, fragmentation and inherent contradiction. But however piecemeal, and however provocative, there is always an attempt, acknowledged or not, at some form of synthesis and narrative closure. For this reason, art exhibitions and anthologies are frequently used as introductions to specific phenomena. Both have a tendency to be self-referential and didactic and, until recently, relatively unselfconscious and uncritical.

Thinking about Exhibitions adopts the form of the anthology to highlight the emergence and consolidation of a new discourse on art exhibitions as well as to bring into debate a range of issues at play in their formation and reception. We hope to draw attention to the structured elements of an enterprise, the anthology, designed to feature and focus. By way of preventing predictability and forestalling foreclosure, our introductory remarks are brief and deliberately tangential.

Exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known. Not only have the number and range of exhibitions increased dramatically in recent years but museums and art galleries such as the Tate in London and the Whitney in New York now display their permanent collections as a series of temporary exhibitions. Exhibitions are the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed. Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions—especially exhibitions of contemporary art—establish and administer the cultural meanings of art. Yet, despite the growing importance of exhibitions, their histories, their structures and their socio-political implications are only now beginning to be written about and theorized. What work has been done is partial, in both senses of the word, and surprisingly random. While certain lines of enquiry are becoming entrenched (the implications of spectatorship, the deployment of artworks, or the curatorship of international exhibitions), it is too early to deem these definitive.

We have chosen texts which predominantly relate to exhibitions *per se,* in an effort to delineate a difference between thinking about exhibitions and thinking about what Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff refer to as 'museum culture'. Issues in the two spheres overlap but they are not always the same. The literature relating to museums tends to minimize instances of protest or scandal and often isolates the implications of the architectural or spatial surround. The discourse also ignores the increasingly varied sites and forms for constructing, experiencing and understanding exhibitions outside museums. A tendency to stress the seemingly fixed characteristics of permanent displays has deflected attention from the ever growing number and diversity of temporary exhibitions and the structural and historical relationships of these more ephemeral events to long-term displays.

Thinking about Exhibitions can be compared to an international group exhibition of North American and European contributors. This geographic parameter is a response to the strong and active discourse on exhibitions now occurring in several countries. Notwithstanding parallel developments and mutual influences, the desire for reform in the purpose, staging or documentation of exhibitions takes distinct forms in different places. Anglo-American writing has focused on the politics of exclusion and questions of alterity. Discussions of exhibitions in France and Québec have been marked by semiotics, post-structuralism and sociology. German commentators seem preoccupied with documenting histories of avant-garde exhibitions. The Dutch concentrate on the hypothetical and the historical. We have attempted to assemble a variety of approaches both to underscore the specificity of time and place in writing on exhibitions and to emphasize that the questions posed and the alternatives proposed in one place, in one discipline or at one point in time may not be relevant elsewhere. At the same time, we would caution against too simplistic a reading of the 'texts in nationalistic terms and have made our choices both to conform to and subvert the 'national' characteristics so casually proposed above.

The texts have been grouped, or installed, in sections designed to focus on exhibition history and histories, curatorship, exhibition sites and forms of installation, narratology and spectatorship. But, as will quickly be evident, most texts relate to several sections. By way of allusion to the impossibility of confining each essay to a particular category, the titles of several of the sections are intentionally oblique. The choice of texts is designed to create an eclectic mix: exhibition proposals, dialogues, diatribes, position papers, case studies, theoretical analyses, catalogue essays, long and short texts. Together, they are representative of the range of writing on art exhibitions. A number of texts from the 1970s and 1980s have been included either because the issues they raise remain pertinent or because they provide a sense of how the discussion of exhibitions has changed. The majority are recent, an indication that the topic is of increasing interest and that the debates have become more varied and more pointed. While earlier essays were written by curators, artists or critics, more of the recent contributions are by academics and arts administrators.

Writing about exhibitions rather than the works of art within them can be seen as a crisis in criticism and its languages. This tactic may either be a compensatory device, a politicized attempt to consider works of art as interrelated rather than as individual entities, or a textual response to changes in the artworld itself. Just as the growing number of exhibitions increases the respectability of the phenomenon, so also the increase in writing about exhibitions reinforces the respectability of the topic as worthy of study. That more and more writers from an ever greater variety of disciplines focus on art exhibitions is also indicative of the political and cultural urgency of so many of the debates centred on and fostered by exhibitions.

Each essay in this anthology can be seen as part of a continuing dialogue with the existing literature or a critique of established curatorial positions. As the exhibition phenomenon itself comes under closer scrutiny, its failures and fissures become more apparent.

In perusing this anthology those conversant with the literature on exhibitions and museums will be aware that certain important commentators appear only in the Bibliography and not in this selection of readings.

Essays such as those by Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach or Douglas Crimp or Hans Haacke, already well known through reprints or other anthologies, have become building blocks for further work that has followed, including material here. In our desire to introduce unfamiliar figures to an English-speaking or young readership and to provide an interdisciplinary selection of texts, we were unable to include all that we might have wished.

The Bibliography does not attempt to be comprehensive. It is a multilingual selection indicative of the literature generated in the artworld. Limiting the listings to art references resulted in excluding the many theoretical texts from other disciplines that continue to have a profound effect on writing about exhibitions. It is our hope that the listings in the Select Bibliography and the essays included here will stimulate further thinking about exhibitions and will encourage more radical shifts in their making, siting and reception.

RG, BF, SN, April 1995.

PART I

THE FUTURE OF HISTORY

1
THE MUSEUM AND THE 'AHISTORICAL' EXHIBITION
The latest gimmick by the arbiters of taste, or an important cultural phenomenon?

Debora J.Meijers

INTRODUCTION

'The museum is a house for art', according to Harald Szeemann, the independent Swiss exhibition designer, well known for such events as *documenta 5* (Kassel, 1972), *Junggesellenmaschinen* (Bern, 1975) and *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* (Zürich, 1985). Art is fragile, Szeemann continues, an alternative to everything in our society that is geared to consumption and reproduction. That is why, according to him, it needs to be protected, and the museum is the proper place for this.[1]

This is quite a change from the open museum of the seventies, of which Szeemann himself was an ardent proponent, when attempts were made to make social contradictions visible in the museum, on the one hand, and to free art from being sentenced to the museum, on the other hand, by connecting it once more with the world outside.

After this 'museum revolution' of the seventies, Szeemann's statement sums up in a nutshell the notion which has dominated the eighties. The recent museum boom can be directly connected with it: never have so many museums been built or expanded as in the last decennium.

The museum is an institution which plays a decisive part in determining the significance of works of art. It is impossible, however, to say anything about this in general. A more specific question is required. I have therefore decided not to assume the position of an artist who tries to imagine the future significance of her work— after all, I am not an artist. Instead, I shall proceed to a kind of art-historical self-reflection by examining what a number of exhibition designers have done. If the significance of an individual work is determined anywhere, then it is by the place that it is assigned among other works. It is precisely in this field —art in its setting— that an interesting recent development can be detected.

This development is the trend toward the 'ahistorical' exhibition. In spite of all their differences, these exhibitions have in common the fact that they abandon the traditional chronological arrangement. The aim is to reveal correspondences between works from what may be very distant periods and cultures. These affinities cut across chronological boundaries as well as the conventional stylistic categories implemented in art history. The classical classification in terms of material is abandoned too, so that *Einfühling* (empathy) finally makes it possible to connect a fifteenth-century chair with a female portrait by Picasso and an installation by Joseph Beuys. This combination was part of the exhibition which Harald Szeemann designed at the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam in 1988, entitled *A-Historische Klanken* ('Ahistorical Sounds').

Another example is provided by the activities of Rudi Fuchs, from his *documenta 7* in 1982 to the reorganization of the Haags Gemeentemuseum, where he was appointed as director some years later. The

Boymans Museum recently gave another guest curator a free hand with the entire collection of the museum: the film director Peter Greenaway.

Szeemann's exhibition is an exceptionally lucid example of this style of design. The first striking feature is the amount of light and space. The general impression is balanced and carefully considered, despite the fact that upon closer inspection the objects prove to be extremely diverse. Is this visual balance just a matter of good taste, just as antique furniture can fit into a well-designed modern interior, or is there more to it than that?

There is, according to Szeemann's explanatory comments.[2] I want to discuss his ideas on the utopian potential of art, which should find expression in the space between the works, but I shall start with the visual aspect of the rooms, and in particular the way in which he made use of their existing triple division.

A sculpture occupied the central position in each area: Joseph Beuys's *Grond* in the middle, Imi Knoebel's *Buffet* to the right, and Bruce Nauman's *Studio Piece* to the left. Szeemann then proceeded to allow these sculptures to resonate in other works of art to produce a spatial dialogue. In this way he wanted ahistorical sounds to resonate, and so convey today's verdict on yesterday.

But beside this timeless, aesthetic atmosphere, he gave form to three neoBreughelian parables:

The main room—and I am still quoting Szeemann here—is the site of spiritual confusion, a vigorous appeal to human creativity, and suffering and death: Breughel's *Tower of Babel* (confusion), Beuys's batteries and office furniture combined with older pieces of furniture (creativity), and Rubens' *Three Crosses* (suffering).

The right-hand room is dominated by 'the cryptic silence of emptiness and monochrome': Knoebel juxtaposed with *The Adoration of Mary* by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, a silver urn from 1918, Morandi, Broodthaers and van Elk.

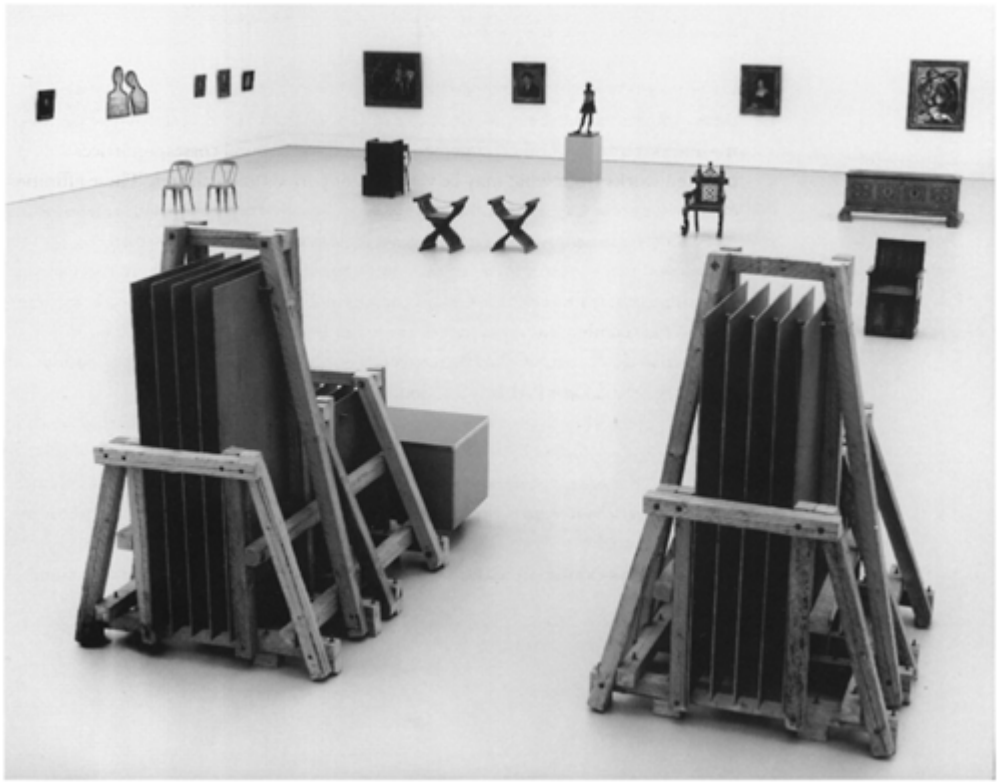
Finally, to the left we find 'the sacral elevation of the apparently trivial': Nauman in combination with Rothko, Hieronymus Bosch, Saenredam, Mondriaan and a Venetian glass dish from the sixteenth century.

Kandinsky's *Lyrisches* hangs in a central position, as if to accentuate the leitmotiv of this visual composition: the painting refers to the same 'urge toward the *Gesamtkunstwerlk*' which Szeemann always finds in himself, his tendency to seek constantly for the essential link between the different arts, as a reaction to the penchant for classification which dominates the practice of museums.

Is this all obvious to the visitor? I do not think so, except for the initiated. Perhaps you should surrender to the direct visual impact of the exhibition, which was powerful enough and full of surprises. But then we run up against the following issue.

Various critics have drawn attention to the emergence of a new type of arbiter of taste coincident with this type of ahistorical exhibition. Particularly in the world of modern and contemporary art, museum directors and some freelance exhibition designers have sometimes acquired an unassailable, guru-like status. This phenomenon recently came in for some sharp criticism from the Belgian art critic Frans Boenders in his *kunst zonder kader, museum zonder hoed (Art without a Boundary, Museum without a Hat),*[3] a booklet whose title pokes fun at Jan Hoet, the Ghent museum director and *documenta* designer. According to Boenders, arbiters of taste are only interested in an egotistical show: they are not really interested in the art that they display. The artists they select form their coterie; and there is absolutely no form of scrutiny of the criteria for the choice of items collected and put on display in this way. Arbiters of taste like to justify their choices as intuitive, and this, Boenders says, guarantees their omnipotence.

Are these critics right? And to what extent can the genre of the ahistorical exhibition be considered as an instrument in this power game? Or is there more to it than that, and is this an important cultural phenomenon?[4] I would like to set these questions against the background of a number of moments in the history of the art museum, for the present trend has its roots in this history. It harks back, for instance, to the



1.1 Harald Szeemann, *A-Historische Klanken,* view of exhibition curated by Harald Szeemann, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1988. Photograph by Jannes Linders, courtesy of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

impregnability of the aristocratic maecenas; to the classical Academy as the site of untrammelled artistic exchange; and to the 'mixed' eighteenth-century gallery. We can also note the affinities with the sacralization of the museum room as a 'white cube' in the twenties; nor should we forget a type of exhibition that appeared in the first decennia of this century, in which non-Western, 'primitive' art was combined with abstract Western art. What kind of new phenomenon is being created from these fragments of museum history?

MUSEUM HISTORY AS TOOL-SHED

If we are to understand the end product better, we have to scrutinize the ingredients more closely. First of all, there is the ideal of the aristocratic maecenas. In the early eighties Douglas Crimp published an article entitled 'The art of exhibition', in which Rudi Fuchs's 1982 *documenta* came in for heavy criticism.[5] The points made by Crimp resemble Boenders' objections to the arbiter of taste, but they are more specific. For instance, Crimp draws attention to the official postcard of *documenta 7* showing the Neo-Classical statute of Landgrave Friedrich the Second of Hessen-Kassel. The statue of the man who commissioned the museum around 1770 stands in the square in front of the building. Here, however, he is portrayed in all his power

and isolation. It is as if Fuchs wanted to rehabilitate this isolated figure silhouetted against the sky, turning him into a mascot for his own enterprise.

There are more levels at which Fuchs referred to an aristocratic past. In his own words, he wanted to see his *documenta* as an academy, that is 'not as a school, but as one of the magnificent institutions which existed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before they became stupid and doctrinaire. They were the meeting place for great minds, with distinct characters and traditions; they joined in the search for overlappings and differences, and in this way they endeavoured to define their cultural moment'.[6]

Following the example of an academy of this kind, Fuchs wanted to make what he called the different dialects of 1982 confront one another. That is why he did not opt for an arrangement according to styles, which was the usual practice. He stuck to the year 1982 and combined hardly any works from different periods. It is a small step, however, from the combination of different styles to the combination of different periods. This is the step that he took soon afterwards in Eindhoven, as we shall shortly see.

Szeemann too harks back to the period before the nineteenth century. He too refers to the Academy in connection with his Rotterdam exhibition, and he follows Fuchs in viewing this traditional institution as a place where styles can be combined without being reduced to one another. His arguments are more complex, however, and are of a strongly utopian kind, as I have already mentioned. He is searching for the essence of the work of art, that is its timeless dimension, which can be traced in the visible form. That is why he displays the works in such a spacious and balanced way, so that 'a genuinely free zone is created between them, and in each individual work as well'. This is his way of approaching the utopia of art, that is revealing art's utopian potential: art whose dream of total freedom offers a counterweight to the unfree nationalistic state.[7] In his quest for the ideal, inner distance from the other works and from the whole, he explores the autonomy of the work, which is where he locates the utopian force of art. This is the zone where the utopia of an ideal society can acquire form, in the form of an academy where things are combined without being reduced to one another. That is how Szeemann sees it.

In terms of art theory, this association has its interesting points. After all, the seventeenth-century Academy was originally conceived to facilitate a confrontation among different artistic characters and traditions, and it is thus no coincidence that there is renewed interest in this eclectic theory of art in a postmodern era. All the same, when *eklogè,* a positive kind of eclecticism, is propagated in the academies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this selection of the best features of the various schools takes place within a well-defined context: there was a fixed range of variants which could be portrayed in art, and the only innovation lay in perfecting existing forms. In this sense the Academy was already doctrinaire and totalitarian from the seventeenth century on, despite the claims of Fuchs and Szeemann. Their nostalgia is selective, since a fixed artistic order is precisely what they do *not* want.

These considerations bring me to a second source of inspiration, the 'mixed' gallery of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although Fuchs and Szeemann do not refer explicitly to the arrangement of this traditional gallery of paintings, it still constitutes one of the sources of their ahistorical approach. The aristocratic maecenas and the classical Academy stood for a kind of art collection in which the works were not yet arranged geographically and chronologically. There was certainly an awareness of the possibility of such classifications in terms of schools, but no one felt the need to put them on show in exhibition rooms or galleries. On the contrary, the schools were mixed to facilitate comparisons between the various paintings and to enable art to appear in all its diversity.

A distant echo of this principle can be heard in Fuchs's 1983 arrangement of the collection of the van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in groups which enables the works 'to engage in mutual dialogue'. For instance, he confronts Chagall's *Homage to Apollinaire* (1912) with Luciano Fabro's *The Judgement of Paris* (1979). Through this confrontation of works which differ considerably in terms of material, style and period, their

characteristics become clearer, and affinities can even be detected. For example, Fuchs sees the same fragility and vulnerability in the skin of the painting and of the terracotta sculpture. He also detects a thematic affinity: 'Fabro gives prominence to an item of Greek mythology which has continued to operate over the centuries. Chagall has a Russian background, but that is connected with a basic story too. They are both concerned with essential things in life, the charged nature of history'.[8]

Such 'essential things' transcend art-historical classifications in terms of style and period. While Fuchs *no longer* uses that classification here, in the galleries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it did *not yet* exist. At the same time, however, he considers it important that works like those by Chagall and Fabro, with their enormous differences in terms of material, style and period, retain their self-sufficiency. This is the same aim as that of the Academy and the mixed gallery, namely the combination of styles without reducing them to one another. But that is as far as the parallel goes.

In the last resort, the modern ahistorical comparisons have a different aim from their precursors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In those days the comparative mode of perception was part and parcel of the vital, practical function which art collections had for the artists of their day. As I have already mentioned, artists were expected to implement the *eklogè*—the selection of the best aspects propagated by the Academy—in the mixed gallery. Through inspection and comparison on the spot they were expected to determine to what extent each work approached the highest form of beauty. The norms for such an evaluation were still the Italian Renaissance masters and, fundamentally, classical antiquity. The mixed arrangement of the collections served a fixed canon of beauty, just as was the case with the confrontations between representatives of different 'styles' within the Academy. These galleries enabled visitors to see that Raphael and Rubens were both near-perfect, but that they had achieved this end using very different painterly resources. The spectator could then examine how his own contemporary Mengs had best approached the qualities of Raphael (linearity, for example), or a painter like Dietrich had successfully appropriated Rubens' use of colour. The gallery was the immediate training ground for the artist, which is why no one hit upon the idea of arranging the paintings by school or period before the end of the eighteenth century.

Neither our contemporary, 'postmodern' arrangement of art nor the eighteenth-century arrangement exhibits the works in terms of stylistic evolution. In the eighteenth century it is *not yet* done; in the contemporary exhibitions it is *no longer* done. The eagerness to abandon an evolutionary view of art history evidenced by Fuchs and Szeemann has its interesting aspects, and I shall return to them in my concluding remarks, but they cannot simply relive the vital function of *eklogè:* observation, comparison and emulation. Neither the Academy nor the museum can still fulfil Fuchs's dream of a meeting place for great minds. This function disappeared along with the fixed canon of beauty. Since the Romantic era artists are no longer expected to submit to tradition, they are no longer modest enough to consider the work of their great predecessors as necessary exemplary material. They have to be original—and I think this is still the case with postmodernism, in spite of its recycling of historical forms. They consider it more important to express their originality in their work than to mark a place for themselves in the existing artistic family tree. As a result a tension developed between traditional art and modern or contemporary art, which the conventional classification of museums directly and tangibly shows.

So when Fuchs and Szeemann re-establish contact between these areas, they are doing something different from what was going on in the eighteenth-century museum. Here too their nostalgia is selective. They are not concerned with showing that 'modern' artists have learned from 'past masters' how to make the best use of the timeless resources of art. This eighteenth-century, more technique-minded approach has given way to the romantic, Baudelairean themes of affinity, correspondence and resonance. Thus Szeemann sees an affinity between Imi Knoebel's *Buffet* (1984/5) and Geertgen tot Sint Jan's *Adoration of Mary* (late

fifteenth century). He detects a correspondence in the intimacy and restraint of both religious sensibilities: he sees an affinity between the miniaturist, private altar piece and the modern buffet which could also be a domestic altar. Those who share this subjectivity can share exciting and new visual experiences. Those who do not may well be annoyed.

Fuchs does something similar when he lets the works by Chagall and Fabro reflect one another, as we saw. Although Fuchs's enterprise is more down-to-earth than Szeemann's and follows the perceptible qualities of the works more closely, they are both characterized by a romantic form of the quest for the essence. The works acquire a role in the communication of a message. Szeemann calls it 'the victory over materialism,' while Fuchs situates it in his general struggle 'against modern decay' (advertising, low-quality pop music, etc.). The centre of these exhibitions is occupied by the exhibition designer himself; in fact, he has now turned artist.

We have just seen that this ahistorical approach is unable to breathe new life into the artistic theory of the premodern period, but inevitably remains trapped in the modern concept of art inspired by Romanticism. However, besides the romantic notions of 'affinity', 'correspondence' and 'resonance', we can refer to a specific type of exhibition which prepared the way for the ahistorical approach. This style of exhibition, applied to a particular field, emerged during the first decennia of this century. The growth of interest in non-European art on the part of artists themselves coincided with the first experiments by a few progressive collectors and museum directors to arrange parts of their collections in a 'mixed' way. They did so to demonstrate the parallels between (expressionist) modern art and the sculptures of so-called primitive peoples. Ethnographers and art historians gradually came to regard these artefacts as works of art. This cleared the way for the ad lib establishment of connections between visual representations from the most diverse places and periods. The aim was to show that expression and instinct were characteristic of genuine, that is non-bourgeois, art in all times and places. This disregard for time and place presupposes that the objects are treated as fully autonomous works of aesthetic value, a process recorded by André Malraux in his *Musée imaginaire* (1947).[9] Malraux provides a convincing description of the instances which have played a major role in this process: the actual museum and the imaginary museum, that is the unlimited archive of images which could be compiled once photography had made it possible to reproduce everything.

As well as being a description of this process, Malraux's book is itself its hyperbole, as Douglas Crimp calls it.[10] Malraux confirms the tendency and takes it to extremes, because he sees this international visual archive of art as a liberating force. According to him, it enables us to bypass the material properties of the objects in order to arrive at what he regards as genuine, non-bourgeois art: Rouault's *Old King* finds its echo in the ancient mask of Agamemnon, the movement of a Degas horse is related to a primitive plaque, to say nothing of the timeless, pure image of woman, whether created by the artists who decorated the Greek temples or by Vermeer. This is not a question of mutual influence: the works are filled with the same spirit, independently of one another.

The mobility which 'world art' had gained when it lost its materiality through photography, however, had consequences for the treatment of the objects themselves. Various exhibitions were held from the beginning of this century reflecting Malraux's principles. Max Sauerlandt juxtaposed Expressionist woodcuts and linocuts with Greek red-figure and black-figure vases in the Hamburg Kunsthalle. A better-known example is that of Karl Ernst Osthaux, who was already combining European and non-European art in the Folkwang Museum in 1912. This approach was continued in the arrangement of the new premises in Essen (1929), where paintings by Emil Nolde, African masks and figures of ancestors from the South Sea islands were put on display in the same room. In the Netherlands this thread was picked up by Willem Sandberg. He organized the controversial exhibition *Modern Art Old and New* in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1955, where Cobra paintings alternated with African masks and sculptures by Lipchitz and others.

These exhibitions were all designed to display obvious formal affinities. Robert Goldwater, the author of *Primitivism and Modern Art,* went a step further by using the principle of 'affinities' in a similar way to its use in the ahistorical exhibitions of the eighties. In 1957 he designed the interior of the Museum of Primitive Art in New York in a novel way. A correspondent of the Swiss periodical *Du* referred to an 'assoziatives Zusammenklingen der Formen und Farben im Sinne von *l'art pour l'art* (an associative symphony of forms and colours in the sense of art for art's sake).[11] It sounds like Szeemann. Indeed, the writer anticipates Szeemann in evoking an extra sense to describe the new experience: hearing. Goldwater, the correspondent of *Du* continues, takes no notice of the persistent and often highly restrictive ethnographic usage of the term 'culture area', but he dares to combine a pre-Columbian deity with an Easter Island sculpture.

Besides associations with the enterprises of Fuchs and Szeemann, one might also consider the more recent form of 'global village', as expressed in *Les Magiciens de la Terre,* the large-scale exhibition held in Paris in 1989. But while the fifties quest was for a basic language of forms which was assumed to be universal, it is now the formal *differences* which are stressed. Artists from different cultures could do what they liked in Paris, and the results were extremely diversified. However, the very idea of organizing an exhibition of this kind must be based on the supposition that there is some connecting thread, despite all the differences.

Fuchs and Szeemann, too, want to break through the boundaries of space and time without eliminating the visual differences. The kind of museum space that they choose for the purpose is the sacral, white cube designed in the twenties. This is the last fragment of museum history that I will mention here. Since then this cube has functioned as a neutral area which can thus be filled subjectively, and where the works of art can be constantly rearranged to form new ensembles.

Ahistorical exhibitions of this kind need such a space in order to do justice to the individual works. At the same time, however, the opposite process takes place. The use of white, which has become a traditional feature of the museum by now, acts in the same way as all museum resources: it levels out everything within its preserve, and in a totalitarian way it erases differences to form a single entity.

This white cube has experienced a strong revival over the past few years, along with the other revivals I mentioned: the notion of the archetypal style of the fifties, and the system of aristocratic patronage with the corresponding representations of the classical academy and the courtly art collection where artists of various persuasions could communicate with one another in noble style—a top-heavy utopia!

By comparison, Peter Greenaway's *The Physical Self* is a relief. He too has assumed a perspective within which the traditional classification in terms of periods and kinds of objects is disregarded, but his motives are far more down-to-earth.[12]

While Szeemann's exhibition focuses on the spirituality of art, Greenaway is concerned with its materiality. His theme is the mortal, physical condition of the human body, as evidenced in works of art and functional articles from the Boymans Museum: nudity, the male and female body (not necessarily seen in sexual terms), the stages of youth, adulthood and old age, and the forms of functional articles designed to match the body, such as bicycle saddles, handles and cutlery. These are the categories by which the exhibition is organized. But the most important item is not from the museum collection: the four 'classical' nudes behind glass which serve as markers for the whole exhibition.

Greenaway's exhibition can be seen as the opposite of Szeemann's in every way: while Szeemann's area is spacious, light and meditative, Greenaway's is articulated, it uses light/dark contrasts, and it induces activity. While Szeemann's parabolic arrangement is static, Greenaway's chapter-by-chapter arrangement is narrative. While for Szeemann art is utopia, for Greenaway it is reality. The nudes form a bridge between our own physicality and that of the models used for the works on display.

1.2 Peter Greenaway, *The Physical Self,* view of exhibition curated by Peter Greenaway, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1991–2. Photograph by Peter Cox, courtesy of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

Finally, Szeemann is searching for the essence of art and of the art exhibition, while Greenaway recognizes and appreciates the artificiality of both. He dares to make an exhibition somewhat contrived, for instance by shining spotlights on paintings to suggest fire and rippling water (Cornelis Corneliszn of Haarlem, Rubens). Though both designers break with the taxonomy of the museum, Szeemann does so in order to attain a higher truth, while Greenaway 'recycles' the taxonomy to parody it.

CONCLUSION

To return to the question with which we began: to what extent can the phenomenon of the ahistorical exhibition be considered as an instrument in the power game played by exhibition designers and museum directors? Is this highly subjective manner of arrangement mainly due to a need felt by the new arbiters of taste to make themselves inscrutable and thus guarantee their position of power? That would be an overtendentious conclusion, ignoring the fact that this kind of arrangement is connected with much more general trends. This is already evident in the considerable differences between the practitioners of this 'genre': while the attitude of Fuchs and Szeemann recalls that of the guru, this cannot be said of Greenaway. So there must be something else going on.

There are more general indications today that traditional notions of chronological development and separate styles are no longer acceptable. There are doubts regarding history as an evolutionary process. Who

still dares to state that humanity progresses, and that each stage evolves irreversibly from the previous one? This feeling of a lack of direction runs parallel to doubts about the possibility of describing this process in a scientific way. These doubts find expression in the 'linguistic turn', a blurring of the boundary between the discipline of history and literature. The same goes for art history. An exhibition designer who regards his activity as art is not essentially different from the historian who becomes increasingly aware of the literary dimension of his historical account.

In some art-historical circles, this growing disbelief in the nineteenth-century view of history as an evolutionary process is combined with the simultaneous erosion of the notion of style. Fuchs is right to state that an arrangement by style is no longer relevant: 'style' can no longer be regarded as an indication of the content and position of the work of art. Style used to be regarded in art history as the key to a work, as its expressive idiom, but nowadays every form, material and medium is allowed. The range of possibilities is unlimited and strongly personal. An exhibition based on the assumption of separate lines of development, that is of separate styles, does violence to this diversity.[13]

What Fuchs and Szeemann want to show, on the other hand, is precisely the simultaneity of extremely diverse artistic expressions. It is also immaterial to them whether the objects are derived from different periods. What they are doing is to project the contemporary erosion of the concept of style on to an era when there was no question of such an erosion at all, that is, the era from Romanticism to the 1960s, the grand era of 'isms' and styles. This projection seems disturbing, but is it such an unusual strategy? Were art historians in the nineteenth century not doing the same when they *introduced* the concept of style and then proceeded to view the entire history of art from that angle?[14] These ahistorical exhibitions force us to face up to the fact that the apparently unassailable notions which art historians employ are constructs. But at the same time they try to 'repair' the erosion of the concept of style and the collapse of the notion of evolution by resorting to means of creating a new unity: the 'correspondences' and the idea of an original, universal style, as well as the sacral white area. The works of art are arranged on the basis of new truths which are presented as universals, despite their strong personal colouring. Regrettably, this essentialism closes the door which these exhibitions had seemed to open.

Translated from the Dutch by Peter Mason.

NOTES

This paper was originally published in *Place, Position, Presentation, Public,* ed. Ine Gevers, Jan van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht, pp. 28–40, a collection of papers presented at a symposium held at the Jan van Eyck Akademie, 7–9 April 1992.

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2
BROKERING IDENTITIES
Art curators and the politics of cultural representation

Mari Carmen Ramírez

ARTISTIC ARBITERS OR CULTURAL BROKERS?

The issue of the representation of Latin American art—meaning the arts of Mexico, South and Central America, and the Caribbean—in the United States has been at the core of debates which have been transforming curatorial practices over the last ten years. Since the mid-eighties, we have seen a steady rise in the number of exhibitions setting forth particular notions of identity for Latin American art, as well as a proliferation of exhibition catalogues and critical articles both validating or contesting the various discourses in which these identities have been inscribed. The debates encompassing these exhibitions mark the transformation of the curator of contemporary art from behind-the-scenes aesthetic arbiter to central player in the broader stage of global cultural politics. In this essay, I will consider how the dynamics of identity politics,[1] at both the transnational (global) and the local (multicultural) levels, have impacted on curatorial practices. The case of Latin American art in the United States presents an ideal starting point from which to chart this significant transformation of curatorial agency.

First, however, it is important to situate the function and position of the professional curator in the sphere of contemporary culture. Curators are, above all, the institutionally recognized experts of the artworld establishment, whether they operate inside an institution or independently. More than art critics or gallery dealers, they establish the meaning and status of contemporary art through its acquisition, exhibition, and intepretation. The highly commodified status of contemporary art and the institutions that suppport it in both First and Third World societies, in turn, have placed the curator at the service of elite audiences or specialized groups. To a greater extent than other artworld professionals, curators additionally depend on an established infrastructure to support their efforts. This infrastructure includes institutional networks, such as those provided by museums, galleries, or alternative spaces; financial sponsors, whether public, private, or corporate; and teams of technical or professional experts. Curators are the sanctioned intermediaries of these institutional and professional networks, on one hand; artists and audiences, on the other. Curatorial function is, thus, inherently restricted by the interests of larger or more powerful groups and constituencies. To pretend that any type of alternative field of action exists outside of the web of market or institutionally dominated interests is a fallacy.

In this elite context, curators have traditionally functioned as arbiters of taste and quality. The authority of this arbiter role derives from an absolute—ultimately ideological—set of criteria grounded in the restrictive parameters of the canon of Western (i.e. First World) Modernism/Post-Modernism. Until recently, for instance, the task of contemporary art curators consisted of judging the quality of one picture against another, or of one artist versus another, according to the conventions of rupture and formal experimentation established by the European and North American avant-garde movements. The results, as

we know, often resembled a league championship of winners and losers.[2] The winners usually being artists who readily fit into this tradition; the losers being the art producers of cultures and civilizations outside, or marginal, to it.

With the international surge of exhibitions and collections based on notions of group or collective identity, however, we have seen the gradual displacement of the art curator's role of arbiter and its substitution with that of cultural mediator. This new role, for which I will use the term "broker," implies exchanging the authority of curatorial arbitrage for the purportedly more neutral standard of group ethnicity or identity. Curators who act as cultural brokers are not limited to discriminating artistic excellence. Their function, instead, is to uncover and explicate how the artistic practices of traditionally subordinate or peripheral groups or emerging communities convey notions of identity.[3] In contrast to the elite role of arbiter, the widespread assumption of the cultural-broker function *appears* to have radically shifted the focus and field of action of contemporary-art curators. By selecting, framing, and interpreting peripheral art in exhibitions and exhibition catalogues, for instance, art curators can claim to be shaping a more democratic space where specific cultural groups can recognize themselves. This shift of curatorial function, in turn, seems to have opened up new venues for the distribution, acceptance, and appreciation of previously marginalized art.

Before weighing further the benefits or shortcomings of this new curatorial role, it is important to elucidate how such an institutionally oriented figure was catapulted from his/her elite niche to the para-institutional centerfield of the global or multicultural arena. The explanation goes hand in hand with the transformations which peripheral art markets—exemplified by Latin American art—have undergone in recent years as a result of transnational economic trends. As Ulf Hannerz has established in the case of West African cultures, the only way this type of market structure can succeed is through specialists with a strong base in the global centers who can move and disseminate meanings in exchange for material or other forms of compensation.[4] When the art originates in peripheral regions, the rewards can be expected to be greater. Curators who champion artists from these marginal areas can thus claim to have pushed the borders of contemporary art, reorganized cultural frontiers, and charted out new identities for previously marginalized groups.

When linked to this type of market scenario, the role of cultural broker, rather than effectively expanding the parameters for the evaluation and presentation of contemporary artistic practices, further complicates them. As the debates of recent years have shown, "identity" is not an "essence" that can be translated into a particular set of conceptual or visual traits. It is, rather, a negotiated *construct* that results from the multiple positions of the subject vis-à-vis the social, cultural, and political conditions which contain it. How, then, can exhibitions or collections attempt to *represent* the social, ethnic, or political complexities of groups without reducing their subjects to essentialist stereotypes? In either one of these contexts, the criterion for dealing with issues of identity reveals itself as even more autocratic than the "trained eye" or "taste" which originally guided the artistic arbiter.

This situation places the cultural broker at the very core of a contradiction: on one hand, she/he can be credited for helping to tear down artworld hierarchies, seemingly democratizing the space for cultural action; on the other hand, in a market scenario where "identity" can only be a reductive *construct,* the framing and packaging of images of the collective self can only result in a highly delusionary enterprise. The tensions of this contradiction confront art curators with a dilemma: where should they position themselves vis-à-vis the identities of the groups they claim to represent? The type of market scenario that holds the representation of Latin American and Latino art in place offers a specific instance to fully engage this question.

THE CULTURAL-IDENTITIES MARKET: LATIN AMERICAN OR LATINO?

Approaching the issue of how Latin American art has been represented in the United States, and the role which curators have played in this process, requires recognizing that whatever is upheld as Latin American art *inside* the United States is invariably a reductive *trope:* that is, a meaningless expression having only minimal relation to the artistic development of the specific countries that make up our continent.[5] The history of the representation of this art in the United States since the forties, and the role which New York has played as center for its validation and distribution,[6] illustrate how the Latin American art trope has traditionally served to legitimate the cultural, political, and/or economic agendas of both North American and Latin American groups.

Whose interests does this construct serve in the nineties? Part of the difficulty of answering this question has to do with the way in which the ideology and politics of multiculturalism have subsumed the complexities of this phenomenon. The majority of the debates surrounding the representation of Latin American art in mainstream exhibitions have been articulated from the perspective of identity politics and the struggle for enfranchisement of Latino groups based in the United States. While according a place to Latin American artists inside North American museums and cultural institutions this situation has, in turn, produced a new *construct* in the form of a "melted" identity for Latin American and Latino artists. The common identity, promoted by both alternative and mainstream curators, is predicated on a shared legacy of Spanish colonialism, geographic displacement, racial discrimination, and marginalization within the hegemonic center represented by the United States.[7] The long-term impact of this process suggests a new form of cultural exchange between the United States and Latin America: one which originates from inside the US-based Latino community and its pressures upon the center of power itself.

In order to understand the forces at play in the representation of Latin American art in the United States, we must therefore distinguish between the pragmatic and ideological demands of the US-based Latino political project, and the specific conditions posed by the phenomenon of Latin American art *inside* the United States. In the first case, the issues center on the struggle of Latino artists for equal access to art markets and institutions; in the second, what is at stake are the workings of an expanding transnational market of Latin American art. Despite the commonalities of language and culture between both groups, the divergent interests that guide them do not necessarily make for a natural alliance. I will thus approach "Latin American" and "Latino" as separate categories in order to understand how and why they differ, and if a common ground exists. To be effective, this task must be undertaken from the simultaneous perspective of "inside—outside"; that is to say, a perspective that takes into account the Latin American point of view inside and outside the United States, inside and outside the contested ground of multiculturalism.

From this bifocal perspective, the surge of Latin American art exhibitions and market activity since the mid-eighties can be seen as the result of tensions generated by two seemingly separate and contradictory processes: on one hand, the dynamics of global integration that are altering relationships between Latin America and the United States (as well as Latin America and the rest of the world); on the other, the politics of identity and multiculturalism that are transforming the United States itself. Despite their apparent contradiction, these processes are interdependent. Their interdependence is part of the way in which the demands of global market capitalism are impacting old and new concepts of identities. Contrary to a generalized fallacy, late consumer capitalism does not operate through cultural homogenization, but through the marketing of the appearance of "difference" and particularity. This consumer-capitalist logic is responsible for new notions of identities which result from an alternating process of adaptation/resistance to the complex demands for cultural symbols of consumer markets.[8]

The key to this process is the notion of a transnational market driven by nationalist or ethnically grounded images and symbols in the form of artistic commodities that disseminate meanings. For instance, the efforts

undertaken in the last decade to integrate Latin American countries into the dynamics of a new world order have necessitated the exchange of cultural capital for access to financial and economic privileges.[9] One of the unacknowledged forms in which this exchange has taken place has been through art exhibitions, which under the semblance of collective representation have functioned to mask the complex process of validation of Latin American countries in global financial centers represented by New York. Further complementing this flow of identities from Latin America into the United States has been the presence of a post-civil-rights Latino political and artistic movement acting within the broader parameters of multiculturalism. As George Yúdice has established in his investigations of the US multicultural phenomenon, the emergence of the Latino movement, as well as of other multicultural groups, both coincided with and was assisted by the rapid expansion of a consumer-oriented market of cultural symbols.[10] It was precisely the mainstream's omnivorous demands for symbols of Latin culture to placate the more radical demands of Latino groups that paved the way for the acceptance of Latin American art and identity in the United States. This fact suggests that the conflation of identities between Latin American and Latino artists registered by the recent exhibition boom, instead of presenting an alternative to the transnational flow of identities, is an expression of the same demand for easily marketable and consumable cultural symbols. As a result, curators who serve to broker the exchange between transnational and multicultural interest groups will not only have to confront the reality of competing notions of identity but will eventually be forced to choose between them. As evident in the case of Latin American versus Latino representation, what is gained by one group is lost by the other.

MAINSTREAMING IDENTITIES

The characteristics of the cultural-identities market, which supports current curatorial practices, further reassert that what is at stake in the representation of Latin American and Latino identity is a fallacious *construct*—a *mise en scène* of identity—at the service of specific interest groups. These groups include Latin American political or cultural elites, mainstream museums, specialized art markets, Latino activists, and consumer-oriented markets. The impact of these manifold groups on the transformation of curatorial roles will be outlined here by reference to key points in the history of the representation of Latin American and Latino art in the United States. Such a sketch will provide a historical perspective—thus far absent from considerations of this topic—which should serve to clarify the particularities of the present period. In doing so, however, a further distinction needs to be drawn. This involves separating the representation of Mexican art from that of South and Central America.

A series of special factors distinguish the Mexican case from that of its Latin American neighbors. The first, of course, is its strategic 2,000-mile border position. Next-door-neighbor status has produced a long uneasy history of conflict tempered by the fascination of Mexico's exotic culture to the North American imagination (a fascination that—incidentally—has been absent in the case of Canada, if we compare its relative invisibility in North American cultural circles). A second factor can be traced to the dynamics of cultural nationalism in Mexico. The 1910 Revolution forged an alliance between artists and the state which translated into an aggressive promotion of the arts on the part of the Mexican government. The combination of these two factors accounts for the long history of representation and self representation of Mexico in the United States.[11] A third factor is the active legacy— whether recognized or not—of the Mexican Muralists and their school to at least two generations of North American artists. This legacy resulted from both the physical presence of *Los Tres Grandes* in the United States in the 1930s as well as from the active embracement of their political and artistic model by the Chicano movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Lastly, with the flurry of cultural exchange that preceded the approval of NAFTA, we have seen a new surge of

exhibitions of Mexican art and artists which have once again repackaged the Mexican image for North American audiences. In the present climate of multiculturalism, however, the new image of Mexico has shed most of its exotism in order to become the expression of a hybrid border culture, a culture that owes as much to the Mexican nationalist past as to the interface with North American, Chicano, and Latino art.

The case of South American art is different. Until the recent end of the Cold War era, North American interest in the arts and culture of the southern continent was dictated almost exclusively by the demands of "Big Stick" foreign policy. We can cite at least two waves of exhibitions and collecting activity that establish important precedents for the eighties boom. The first wave took place between 1940 and 1945, at the peak of World War II. It was directly related to the United States' concerns about Latin American sympathy for German, Italian, and Spanish fascism and their potential infiltration of the Western Hemisphere.[12] In its role as the "latest and strangest recruit in Uncle Sam's defense line-up" the Museum of Modern Art organized eight exhibitions of Latin American art and began collecting efforts during this five-year period.[13] Similar concerns over Latin America's potentially subversive role surrounded the founding of the Pan American Union's exhibition program in Washington, D.C. in the mid-forties. The establishment of this program, which Eva Cockcroft characterized as "the beginning of the 'ghettoization' of Latin American art" functioned as the major gateway of Latin American art into the United States, until well into the eighties.[14]

Curatorial involvement with Latin American art during the war period was predicated on open acknowledgment of the state of emergency and the ensuing necessity of strengthening relations with neighbors to the South. Alfred H. Barr, the influential chief curator of the Museum of Modern Art, observed how this political bias mediated any discussion or appreciation of Latin American art in North American circles.[15] Barr himself, describing his own curatorial efforts on behalf of Latin American art, referred to them as "minor interventions," consisting of "a brief visit, some genuine interest, and few purchases for little money."[16] As a result, the representation of Latin American art that ensued from this interventionist policy was a mixed bag which attempted cautiously to reconcile artistic products that were "*international* in style or character"—that is, whose quality could be measured according to the standards of European and North American Modernism—with the more problematic art based on "national or local values," generally thought to be conveyed in forms of "provincial realism."[17]

The second boom of Latin American art exhibitions took place between 1959 and 1970. This period establishes a closer precedent for the representation of Latin American art in the United States today. With the escalation of the Cold War, the upsurge created by the Cuban Revolution, and the emergence of the United States as economic and political superpower, Latin America's strategic importance intensified. Throughout most of the sixties, the amount of US investment in Latin American countries grew to unparalleled levels. Significantly, a larger portion of it went to cultural projects, including the private support, through the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, of important institutions dedicated to the promotion of avant-garde art in Buenos Aires (i.e. the Instituto Torcuato di Tella) and Santiago de Chile.[18]

Latin American art and artists were once again brought to the attention of the North American public. More than thirty exhibitions of Latin American art took place in the United States in places as far ranging as Boston, New York, New Haven, Minneapolis, Dallas, Houston, Austin, and Lincoln (Nebraska).[19] Artists from all over Latin America (but mostly South America) were awarded Guggenheim Fellowships to spend time in the United States. A number of South American artists moved to New York, signalling the first of several subsequent artistic migrations. At the same time, important collections were initiated, such as the University of Texas at Austin Collection, complemented by important acquisitions on the part of mainstream institutions, namely the Guggenheim Museum. An international circuit was set in place, very similar to the one we have today, which facilitated artistic exchange.

These circumstances also signal the emergence of the curator as the central figure of an international network dominated by the growing power of private foundations, corporations, and elite business sectors. Lawrence Alloway, Thomas Messer, Stanton Catlin, Sam Hunter, José Gómez Sicre, and the Buenos Aires-based Jorge Romero Brest—assisted by occasional curious forays on the part of Clement Greenberg—shuttled back and forth between New York and the leading South American capitals *charting* the "internationalization" of Latin American art. Couched in the "'modernity' versus 'roots'" debate, the representation of Latin American art that resulted from this newly established artistic network was predicated on the absorption of the particular traits of Latin American identity into the homogenizing standard of Euro-American modernism, understood then as Abstract Expressionism and its variants. A regional version of identity was exchanged for access into the "universal" community of modern art.[20] In a similar way, Latin American attempts to gain equal access to the exhibition and market structures that supported this type of artistic exchange soon faltered, due to its strongly biased and artificial nature. An exemplary instance of this failure was Jorge Romero Brest's unsuccessful attempts to stimulate an international market for Argentinean art through the promotional activities of the Instituto di Tella in Buenos Aires.[21]

In most Latin American countries, efforts towards internationalization, simultaneously met with strong resistance from the local intelligentsia who supported alternative models of political and cultural development. In this context, the first attempts to elaborate a critical curatorial practice that would take into account the Latin American point of view began to take shape. During the sixties, critics Marta Traba and Raquel Tibol, in the absence of the "professional" curator role, straddled the terrain of both.[22] Traba's assertion that "Today no Latin American exhibition is charged with meaning of its own. It is, or is not important to the extent of its relation to, and derivation, from, artistic forms alien to the continent,"[23] is indicative of the heated debates which sought to establish art and culture as the site of resistance to US imperialism. As a result of this critical legacy, and until very recently, the United States was not a focal point of cultural interest for Latin American artists.

By the early seventies, the conditions that facilitated this type of artistic exchange between Latin American countries and the United States disappeared as a result of political dictatorships that sealed off a number of the most important South American countries from the rest of the world. It was not until the mid-eighties, when the third wave of exhibitions and market activity surprised the North American artworld, that Latin American art again captured the attention of North American cultural circles. What is unprecedented about this third period, however, is that by this time, the economic and political factors that had made Latin America attractive to the United States appeared to have considerably diminished. That is to say, with the thawing of the Cold War, the dissolution of authoritarian regimes, and the huge foreign debt, Latin America does not hold the same strategic appeal for the United States. Therefore, the parameters of foreign policy alone do not dictate cultural interaction.

Thus, we are back to the question posed at the beginning of this essay: how can we explain whose interests the Latin American art *construct* served in the eighties and nineties? The usual explanation points to the unpredictable whims of an art market overinflated with European art and attracted to the cheap prices of Latin American art.[24] While there is an element of truth in this explanation, it leaves aside important developments that were already in place. It is important to understand that, by the mid-eighties, the most important countries underwent a series of political and economic transformations associated with the re-establishment of democracies and the coming to power of neo-liberal governments. The neo-liberal emphasis on privatization, free markets, and regional trade agreements, in particular, led to the substitution of traditional subsidies for art and artists with a more active market structure that significantly opened up the cultural spheres of these countries to the dynamics of transnational, global exchange.

Neo-liberalism has accorded an important, if not yet fully recognized, function to the visual arts. This new function has, in turn, created a very complex space for their production and distribution. I dare to characterize this new domain in terms of three interrelated factors. First, contrary to the fixed locale of the nation-state, this space is no longer circumscribed or determined by national or regional borders. Instead, it consists of a fluid transit of artists, exhibitions, curators, private sponsorship, and a novel breed of entrepreneurial collectors who circulate between the international art centers and the Latin American capitals. Here, it is important to stress that while some of these transformations have been taking place since the sixties, the intensity with which they are unfolding today is unprecedented. The second characteristic of this flexible space is that it is largely controlled by the promotional and financial interests of neo-liberal private sectors which, since the late seventies have increasingly taken over the role of art patronage previously held by national governments. Thus, whereas, in the past, the visual arts functioned as banners of prestige for nationalist states, today they can be seen to embody a type of marketing tool for Latin American neo-liberal economic elites.[25]

A third factor is one that I think has gone largely unnoticed. It refers to the active role which Latin American financial interests have played in promoting the third exhibition and market "boom" of Latin American art. It is time to recognize that this boom was not so much an imperialist plot to co-opt Latin American art—as it is too fondly portrayed—but a phenomenon directly or indirectly associated with the self-promotion of Latin American economic interests (particularly Mexican, Colombian, Venezuelan and Cuban-American economic elites) in the United States and Western Europe. It is not by chance that the most sought after Latin American artists in the auctions held by Sotheby's or Christie's are all indigenous to these countries, where the strongest accumulation of Latin American capital is located. The nature of the boom itself serves to support this point. Unlike the phenomenon of the sixties, which concentrated on contemporary art, the exhibition and market boom of the eighties was strongly focused on the work of established "masters" active largely during the decades of 1920–40. This period, as we know, saw the consolidation of the national state throughout most of Latin America, and therefore represents the point of origin for Latin America's modernizing elite. The erasure of the conflict-ridden sixties and seventies from the ensuing mainstream account of Latin American art can only suggest two things: first, the neo-liberal elites' search for legitimation of their origins in an essentialist, ultimately reductive, account of the cultural achievements of the twenties and thirties; second, the recognition of the positive achievements of their modernization project.

A further example of the above trend is that, for the first time ever, we have seen the presentation in the United States and Europe of a number of monumental and very influential exhibitions organized by Latin American curators or US-Latin American curatorial teams, and underwritten by Latin American financial investment groups. The first of these exhibitions, entitled *Myth and Magic in America: The Eighties,* was organized in 1991 by Mexico's Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey with monies provided by the Monterrey-based Alpha group. It was followed by the Metropolitan Museum's *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries,* an exhibition financed by the television conglomerate of Televisa and a consortium of private interests.[26] Both exhibitions were organized and presented during the hype that accompanied the early negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The notion of Mexican and Latin American identity set forth in these exhibitions illustrates the logic of adaptation to the demands of the new economic order. Based on the same model of "de-territorialization" and elimination of borders predicated by the recently enacted regional trade agreement, *Myth and Magic* presented a mammoth review of eighties painting from Canada, the United States, and Latin America. *Splendors of Mexico,* on the other hand, reverted to the homogenizing survey format in order to present the univocal, linear narrative of Mexico's thirty centuries of artistic history, a history which stopped with the

figures of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, well-known and appreciated celebrities of the art market. In both cases an attractive model of Latin American identity was exchanged for the promise of political and economic privileges. A third instance was MOMA's *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century,* a blockbuster endorsed by the Latin American contingent of the museum's International Council and financed with monies from Venezuela and the United States. This showbiz was the final step in the consolidation and legitimation of what could be considered the bilateral master-framework of the modern art of this region taking shape since the mid-eighties.[27]

The complexities of the present scenario of United States/Latin American relations have had a definite impact on the role of curatorial practices vis-à-vis the representation of Latin American art. The organic vacuum produced by the crisis of oppositional movements in Latin America, the disappearance of the bi-polar framework that articulated practices of resistance, and their substitution by the neo-liberal market framework, has all but displaced artists and intellectuals from their traditional roles in the public spheres of these countries.[28] In their stead, the curator has emerged as the primary agent of a large network of privatized interests. The new conditions have dictated that the curator transform him or herself into "a transnational citizen, responsible for a cartography of the dissolution of cultural frontiers."[29] This has implied exchanging the ethical position of the "resistant critic" for the neutral role of "cultural broker."

The history of the representation of Latino groups in the United States contrasts sharply with that of Latin American art, outlined so far. It is important to remember that like other ethnic minorities, Latinos had been systematically excluded from the North American artworld until well into the eighties, when the Houston Museum of Fine Arts' *Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors* first accorded them an official, if highly reductive and distorted place, in North American art history.[30] In other words, at the time when North American curators were championing the "internationalization" of Latin American art, Latino art was all but ignored by North American institutions. As a result of this extremely biased situation, the representation of Latino art was largely undertaken by Latinos themselves in the contestatary ground of public walls, community art centers, and culturally specific museums. This strategy gave rise to a highly successful model of *self-representation* which went hand in hand with the role played by the art of Latino groups—particularly that of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans—in the civil-rights movement. The existence of this model accounts for the different way in which Latinos have been represented. In contrast to Latin Americans, who have been the facile prey of mainstream curators, the majority of exhibitions organized by Latinos have been organized by artist-activists or educators with strong ties to their communities. Only recently have we seen the emergence of professional curators amongst this group. The results of the present merging of transnational and multicultural agendas, however, has significantly altered the parameters of action of Latino groups. With the increase in demand for Latino art, many artists from these previously marginalized communities have been entering the mainstream. To the extent that this process has implied their appropriation by mainstream institutions, the parameters of the self-representation model have been eroded. This takeover has forced the acceptance of Latino art on the basis of an essentialist "difference" or desirable "otherness," categories which have come to define and institute a new standard of conformity to the parameters of the global system.

The representation of Latin American art encouraged by multiculturalism and exemplified by *The Decade Show,* organized in 1990 by three New York-based alternative museums, is an equally problematic one. Under the category of "Latino/Latin American," *The Decade Show* presented a broad spectrum of works by artists from Central and South America, comparing them as a homogenous block to those of African-, Asian-, Native-, and Anglo-American artists. This type of representational strategy—which pitted Latin American and Latinos in a common front against the dominant white Anglo society—was aimed at legitimizing the art of these groups within the struggle for enfranchisement of US minorities.[31] In doing so,

it only succeeded in masking the fragile and uneasy alliance between the extremely diverse groups embodied in the Latin American/Latino category. This uneasiness originates in the vast differences of class, ethnicity, political, and artistic perspectives that separate these groups of artists. For instance, while the majority of South American artists are of upper- or middle-class origins, Chicano and Puerto Rican artists trace their origins to the immigrant rural or urban working class. Finding a common ground amongst these groups could only imply recognizing their diverging positions and the impossibility of effecting a smooth alignment between them.

One ironic offshoot of this situation has been the "mainstreaming" of Latin American art as "marginal," a term that could only be used formerly to describe Latino art's position with respect to the institutions that exercise power in US society. Such a status, however, is more difficult to sustain with respect to Latin American artists who "make it" in the United States, as they are already positioned in one way or another within the transnational art circuit. (This has, incidentally, given rise to the category of "marginal-international.") The mainstreaming of Latin American art as "marginal" has further complicated the tensions between these groups of artists. For, while Latino art has served to broker the acceptance of Latin American identity in US institutions, it has not gained equal access to them. Mainstream public museums, under pressure to represent Latino artists, invariably manage to displace their responsibility by buying Latin American art, whose value is well established in the market.[32] As a result, attempts to create a real market for Latino art have been slow to materialize. The controversies that accompanied the organization of a number of recent shows—such as the Whitney's 1993 Biennial, MOMA's Latin American blockbuster, and the Huntington Art Gallery's *Encounters/Displacements*— led mostly by Chicano artists, indicate a similar process at work with regard to exhibitions.

For Latin Americans, a further consequence of this contradictory dynamic has also implied their forced acceptance into the US artworld on the basis of "difference." This tendency was clearly illustrated in *The Decade Show,* where the artistic production of each group was presented in terms of exotic cultural attributes and symbols which served as a point of contrast with Anglo culture. The implications for Mexican, South American, Central American, and Puerto Rican artists who do not conform to the new rules, whose art cannot be formally differentiated in any significant way to that of North American artists, are the same as twenty years ago. If, in the past, their work was rejected because it was not in line with international trends, today it is rejected because it does not reflect the new type of "multicultural" art. The new exaltation of difference and particularity that prevails is, in essence, another form of cultural colonialism.

The representation of Latin American art in the United States is the result of contradictory tensions between the drive towards *integration* represented by transnational interests and the democratic aperture exemplified by *multiculturalism*. The exchange between these two interest groups is being brokered through notions of identity, a fact which has created a demand for exhibitions focused on setting up ready-made frameworks of identity for these artistic groups. The dynamics of this phenomenon have placed the curator of contemporary art in the role of cultural broker. Yet curators who choose to act as brokers of this exchange face a no-exit situation, as opting for either model of identity will ultimately contradict or exclude others. Instead of offering alternatives, this situation has only continued to reiterate already institutionalized exclusionary practices. It has also blocked the acceptance of the intrinsic heterogeneity that constitutes the ethnic and cultural experience of each group of artists and the multiple ways in which each group is negotiating its identity with the powers that be. Recognizing this pluralism also implies acknowledging that the differences and antagonisms within each group of artists cannot be easily aligned under one particular representation of group identity.[33]