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CHANGES IN EXHIBITION DISPLAY STYLES

Working as an assistant curator for the last few years, I started questioning my own practice. A particular issue arose from my personal experience because recently I was invited to co-curate a show by an artist, whose approach was out of my comfort zone. Through phenomenology I detected I need to explore this approach and understand where it is coming from. At the moment, my area of interest lies in determining a shift of an exhibition space from French Salons to a modernist white cube and back to closely hung art works and so-called cluttered walls. I used exploratory research, as I needed to analyse how display strategies changed through time and to examine gallery interiors through a knowledge of world-renowned curators, to be able to proceed in my line of work. In addition, I used methods of observation to look at different gallery displays and will be further applying them to my practice.

THE NECESSITY OF FRENCH SALONS

Looking through available secondary resources, I began to research French Salons from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to be able to understand their influence on today's exhibitions. Being the complete opposite of today's white cube gallery spaces, it engaged my interest, why this Salon-style display came back into fashion. One of the texts that helped me resolve the necessity of Salons in the past centuries was an article in *Artistic Interactions* (Ray, 2004) where the author provides a strong theoretical background on the origin of Salons and philosophical debates surrounding them. Ray explains that:

from a practical point of view the effect of the Salon [...] was to encourage people to express themselves in public who otherwise might not have. The physical conditions of the exhibit itself encouraged this by their "spectacular" structure. (2004, p. 537)



Pietro-Antonio Martini, *Lauda-Conatum. Exposition au salon du Louvre en 1787, 1787*. Available at: http://www.ensba.fr/ow2/catzarts/voir.xsp?id=00101-77986&qid=sdx_q0&n=1&sf=&e= (Downloaded: 11 November 2016).

Another very useful book was *French Salons: high society and political sociability from the Old Regime to the revolution of 1848* (Kale, 2006) where the author states that:

Eighteenth century Salons were able to play such a powerful role in shaping public opinion because they preceded the modern press, parliaments, railroads and the telegraphs. (2006, p. 173)

Additionally when describing the end of an era, he quotes:

The eventual disappearance of the Salon as a public space was directly related to the growth of big cities and the evolution of an array of other intellectual institutions that fulfilled some of the Salon's functions. (Hertz, 1988 quoted in Kale, 2006, p. 173)

DID THE WHITE CUBE EVER EXIST?

Later, I had to use additional sources and a taxonomic approach to learn what a white cube gallery actually is, if I am going to employ this expression daily in my work. I needed to understand the history of the term and how this modernist museum practice is seen today in relation to different eras. O'Doherty coined the term 'white cube' in his essays in *Artforum* in 1976, which are collected in the book *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space* (1999). This is one of the key texts in my research, being the first and main book on white cube galleries. The author defines the term with the words 'unshadowed, white, clean, artificial – the space is devoted to the technology of aesthetics,' (1999, p. 15) while Klonk (2009) argues in her book *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 – 2000* that 'the white cube never existed' (2009, p. 218) and calls O'Doherty's perception a fictitious design.



Chirulescu, M. (2011) *Inside the White Cube: Marieta Chirulescu*. Available at: <http://www.e-architect.co.uk/london/white-cube-gallery> (Downloaded: 11 November 2016).

WHY DO EXHIBITION DISPLAY STYLES CHANGE?

As my research developed, I needed to get extra theoretical background on different exhibition interiors through the centuries, to see the shifts in display styles. I was also interested in how diverse displays affect visitors.

Taylor's chronology of the transformation of different audiences through centuries in *Art for the nation: exhibitions and the London public 1747 – 2001* (1999) shows that the:

Emergence of the public exhibitions coincided with a rise in the status of the painter from a skilled executor of commissions to a person who could operate with more ambitious social or aesthetic ideas. (1999, p. 2)

This notion also corresponds with the shift in public's opinion of art that we still see today.

The aforementioned book by Klonk (2009) is a study that examines the gallery interiors and offers a detailed account of different exhibition displays from Victorian era museums to the twentieth century. She even connects art experience with shopping: 'The uncluttered hanging art on sheer white walls, the hushed tone and silent escalators are by no means unique to the museum' (2009, p. 207) and this style has also been 'hugely influential on designer displays in the commercial world' (2009, p. 208). The author acknowledges that it is only natural that the museum or gallery should have sought ways to address this new, style-conscious post-1945 consumer, though in her opinion the curators have not explicitly embraced the idea. And this could explain one of the reasons Salon-style displays returned.



(2011) *Summer Exhibition*. Available at: <http://blog.visitlondon.com/2011/06/summer-exhibition-at-the-royal-academy-of-arts/> (Downloaded: 11 November 2016).

In his essay in the book *Spectacle and display* (Cherry and Cullen (ed.) 2008), McClellan summarizes contemporary critics who argue that 'dramatic architecture contributes to the spectacularization of the museum and diminishes the art on view' (2008, p. 94). He questions the value that museums and galleries provide to society and the quality of people's visit experience.

Dean elaborates this subject even more in his book *Museum exhibition: theory and practice* (1996). He expresses his thoughts on how museums in the late twentieth century have become multi-dimensional organisations that had to adapt to the consumer-oriented world. 'The challenge is to persuade people who have basic resources that the museum is a worthwhile, enriching and even fun place to spend their leisure time' (1996, p. 23). Therefore, exhibition display styles need to reflect people's personal criteria as well as their social needs to make the visit valuable.

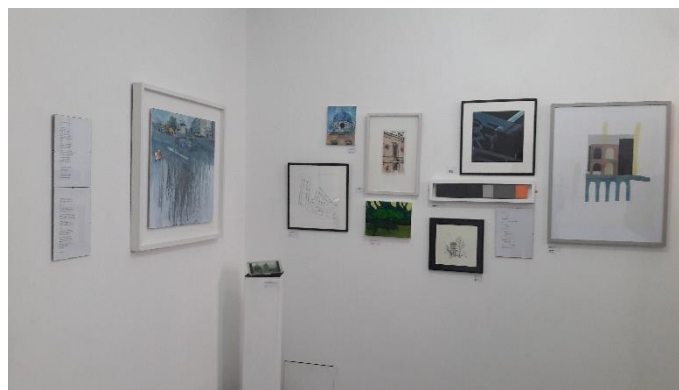
I used additional texts that deal with the craft of exhibition making (e.g. Cherry and Cullen (ed.), 2008; Gali (ed.), 2015; Graciano, 2015). They acknowledge some of the possibilities and challenges of working with the medium of the exhibition and describe the importance of the appearance of exhibitions.

In *Crafting Exhibitions* (Gali (ed.), 2015) Zamecznik challenges current discourses of contemporary art by 'reconsidering the status of an object in terms of its presentation and how craft can take on more radical modes of display' (2015, pp. 28-29). In the same book Adamson says that 'a good curator remembers that even the best display is just a bunch of stuff in a room' (2015, p. 66), partly because critical texts accommodate complexity and argumentation much more readily than do museum or gallery shows. Another essay in *Spectacle and display* (Cherry and Cullen (ed.) 2008), written by Lockyer, deals with the question of presentation:

We linger on what is displayed. We read its message. And we assume that it is motivated; that the producer wants the visitor to go away thinking something in particular; that the objects on display are effectively subordinated to this end; and that the visitors get the point. (2008, p. 98)

The point on what is in front of the audience in a particular exhibition, an important fact for a curator to think about when putting up a show. Graciano takes the subject even further in his *Exhibiting outside the academy, salon and biennial, 1775 – 1999: alternative venues for display* (2015). The book is a collection of essays by specialists in the field who examine the roles, functions and successes of diverse displays of art, which were designed without the sanction of an established art authority (outside of academic context):

the historical record shows that radical exhibition practice by curators was preceded and, until recently, dramatically outmatched by the work of certain artists who reimagined ways to make exhibitions. (Smith, 2012 quoted in Graciano, 2015, p. 259)



Jesih, N. (2016) *Find another Bath* [photograph]. Personal archive.

When researching exhibition displays, one has to be very careful to take into account, who actually produced a certain exhibition. The knowledge of academically trained curators on how to make an exhibition is different from the one of the professional artists, who also put on shows.

Using qualitative research, I discovered the book *What Makes a Great Exhibition* (Marincola, 2014) in which active curators and historians address the issue of an everlasting question of what actually makes a great exhibition. They explore the elements of an exhibition from every angle and which of those need to be present for the displays to be effective. Their assumption is that in order 'to achieve consistent artistic success, it takes a combination of time, intellectual as well as financial support' (2014, p. 168). The premise that funding can affect the choice of exhibition display styles is still much

alive and one of the key elements, among many mentioned in my essay, for every exhibition maker to consider.

As Rattemeyer says in his text 'What history of exhibition?' (2011):

Current curatorial analysis allows the discussion of individual exhibitions and curatorial projects simply on their own terms, without the need to situate them within a larger trajectory of historical development, and thus could ascribe meaning, value, and intellectual power to them without recourse to comparison. (2011, p. 38)

MY FUTURE ACTION

My inductive investigation on different exhibition displays generated many more questions than I anticipated. I will have to deepen my knowledge with additional reading on the subject as well as to further my phenomenological approach. In my visits to exhibitions, I will have to be much more alert as to the type of curator and try to find out why the display style is as it is.

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