NEW INTERVENTIONS IN ART HISTORY

Exhibition Experiments

edited by
Sharon Macdonald and Paul Basu

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Exhibition Experiments

New Interventions in Art History

Series editor: Dana Arnold, *University of Southampton*

New Interventions in Art History is a series of textbook mini-companions – published in connection with the Association of Art Historians – that aims to provide innovative approaches to, and new perspectives on, the study of art history. Each volume focuses on a specific area of the discipline of art history – here used in the broadest sense to include painting, sculpture, architecture, graphic arts, and film – and aims to identify the key factors that have shaped the artistic phenomenon under scrutiny. Particular attention is paid to the social and political context and the historiography of the artistic cultures or movements under review. In this way, the essays that comprise each volume cohere around the central theme while providing insights into the broader problematics of a given historical moment.

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Notes on Contributors

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Paul Basu is Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Sussex. His research interests center around the relationships between cultural memory, senses of place, and the performance of identities. His recent monograph, *Highland Homecomings* (2007), explores such issues in the context of genealogy and heritage-tourism in the Scottish diaspora. He has participated in numerous exhibition experiments, including designing a community museum/landscape interpretation centre in Scotland.

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city planners and the lived experiences of families moving into new housing complexes linked to the software industry in Kolkata.

Clare Carolin is Senior Curator at the Hayward Gallery. She has curated and organized numerous exhibitions including retrospectives of work by Panamarenko, Malcolm Morley, and Sam Taylor-Wood and thematic exhibitions including *Eyes, Lies and Illusions* and *Fantasy Architecture: 1500-2036*. In 2002 she was responsible for the UK premier of Ann-Sofi Sidén's *Warte Mal!: Prostitution after the Velvet Revolution* at the Hayward Gallery. She has contributed articles and interviews to *Kalias: Revista de Arte*, *La Vanguardia de Barcelona*, *Lapiz*, *Contemporary Magazine*, and *The Art Newspaper*. She is currently developing a Hayward Touring exhibition on the subject of hidden practice, secrets, and code in modern and contemporary art and a major survey exhibition of art from the 1980s.

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Bruno Latour is a philosopher and anthropologist working in Paris. He has written many books on the linkages between science and culture, including *Aramis or the Love of Technology* (1996) and *Pandora's Hope* (1999). Together with Peter Weibel, he curated *Iconoclash* and *Making Things Public* at the ZKM (Center for Art and Media). In 2005 he published *Reassembling the Social.*

Ann Lorimer is Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Reed College in Oregon. Her dissertation *"Reality World": Constructing Reality Through Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry* (2003) draws on fieldwork among museum visitors, staff, and exhibit creators, as well as archival research on earlier Chicago spectacles of capitalism. Her research interests include aesthetics, linguistic practice, material technologies, and political economy. She and her students at Reed are currently exploring the potentials and limits of commodity forms, such as fair-trade or sweat-free goods, that seek to facilitate collective agency.

Sharon Macdonald is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. Her books include *Theorizing Museums* (Blackwell, 1996, co-editor), *Reimagining Culture* (1997), *The Politics of Display* (1998), *Shifting Grounds: Experiments in Doing Ethnography* (special issue of *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures,* 2002, co-editor), *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum* (2002), and *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Blackwell, 2006, editor). She is currently completing a project on post-war cultural policy and Nazi architectural heritage in Nuremberg,

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Griselda Pollock is Professor of the Social and Critical Histories of Art, Director of the AHRC Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History, and Co-Director of the Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds. Her many books include *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (1988), *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Histories of Art* (1999), and most recently *Encounters in a Virtual Feminist Museum* (2006), *Museums after Modernism: Strategies of Engagement* (Blackwell, 2006, co-editor), and *The Theatre of Memory: Trauma, Representation and Life Histories in* Leben oder Theater, *1940–42* (2007).

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Ann-Sofi Sidén is an artist who trained in Germany, Sweden, and the US and whose work deals with themes of social event, vulnerability, control, violence, and surveillance. Her works have been shown at many galleries around the world, most recently in *Speed* at the Galerie Barbara Thuman in Berlin.

Peter Weibel is Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of ZKM, the Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany. Between 1993 and 1999 he was Curator at the Neue Galerie Graz and commissioned the Austrian pavilions at the Venice Biennale. In addition to his activities as an artist and curator, Peter Weibel has published widely on art and media theory.

XPERIMENT! (Bernd Kraeftner, Judith Kroell, Isabel Warner) is a transdisciplinary research group based in Vienna. The members of the working party contribute (in)competencies and skills in fine arts (painting, installations), filmmaking, sociology, medicine, science and technology studies, etc. The members share an interest in experimenting with scientific ideas at the messy intersection of the sciences, health care, politics, publics, and the arts. The group participated with its recent work "What is a Body / a Person? – A Topography of the Possible" at the exhibition *Making Things*

Public curated by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel at the Centre for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany, at the 46. Oktobarski Salon in Belgrade, Serbia (November 2005) and at the exhibition *die wahr/falsch inc.* in Vienna, Austria (June–July 2006). E-mail collective@xperiment.at.

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction: Experiments in Exhibition, Ethnography, Art, and Science

Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald

"*Nullius in verba*," "On the word of no man." In the 1660s, with these words taken from Horace, the scientific age was inaugurated. Adopted by the newly established Royal Society, this motto declared a break from Aristotelian epistemologies based on doctrine, rhetoric, and the authority of accepted truths which had dominated the scholastic world of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. What the new academicians proposed was a commitment to empirical evidence as the basis for knowledge, a commitment to establishing truths about the world through the staging of experiments. The experiment, meaning "from trying," thus became synonymous with the scientific method. Indeed, the popular image of the scientist remains that of a white-coated figure, surrounded by laboratory apparatus, peering into a test tube.

Historians of science have discussed the concept of the experiment at length. Like other disciplines, the natural sciences have had their reflexive turn and authors including Hacking (1983), Latour (1999), and Shapin and Schaffer (1985) have turned their critical attention to the experimental processes through which scientific knowledge is produced. While they have pointed out the heterogeneity of types of experimentation historically (especially Hacking 1975; see Schaffer 2005), central to many

characterizations is that experiment is regarded as a knowledge-generating procedure – "experiment is the *creation* of phenomena" as Ian Hacking puts it (1983, p. 229, emphasis added). Via the assembly of particular apparatus and methods performed in a context that was at least theoretically open to the public, experimentalism was, according to Thomas Hobbes's critical account of 1660, an empirical intervention that aimed to "procure new phenomena" (see Shapin and Schaffer 1985, p. 115). Experiment thus entails the "systematic production of novelty" (Pickstone 2000, p. 13). Or, as Bruno Latour (1999) has explored, experiment can be seen as a transformative process – for the people as well as the materials involved. (For example, the experimenter is transformed by the experiment into an expert.) As we hope to demonstrate, such conceptualizations resonate in the chapters of this book, which are concerned not with scientific experiments so much as with experiments in exhibitionary practices.

Indeed, the realms of experiments and exhibitions are perhaps not so distinct. Shapin and Schaffer argue that the purpose of scientific apparatus is "to make visible the invisible" – in other words, to exhibit, to "hold out," to display. In the seventeenth century Robert Hooke, we might note, was the Royal Society's first *curator* of experiments. (The word "curator" was first used to refer to an officer in charge of a museum collection around the same time as the founding of the Royal Society.) Furthermore, the world's first university museum – the Ashmolean, which opened its doors in 1683 – was also a venue for the public demonstration of scientific experiments. The exhibitionary quality of public experiments – their drama, spectacle, and shock value – has been revived more recently in the gory showmanship of Gunther von Hagens, his hugely successful *Body Worlds* exhibition and televised autopsies.

If the contributors to this volume are agreed on one thing, however, it is that contemporary exhibitionary practices cannot be conceived merely as means for the display and dissemination of already existing, preformulated knowledges (the Aristotelian model rejected by the scientific experimentalists). Arguing that contemporary exhibitionary practice is – or should be – also an experimental practice, the contributors to this volume insist that exhibition, too, is a site for the generation rather than reproduction of knowledge and experience. In the following chapters, exhibition is thus conceived as a kind of laboratory, in which, to use the language of actor network theory (Law and Hassard 1999), various "actants" (visitors, curators, objects, technologies, institutional and architectural spaces, and so forth) are brought into relation with

each other with no sure sense of what the result will be. The exhibitions discussed are, it might be said, experiments in meaning-making.

Initiating our Experiment

As editors, our experiment has been to bring together a diverse group of contributors – curators, artists, anthropologists, and other academics – to reflect on their own or others' exhibitionary experimentalism. Our experiment began with an open call for papers for a panel entitled "Exhibition Experiments: Technologies and Cultures of Display" at the *Anthropology and Science* decennial conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists held in Manchester in 2003.[1] The abstract for the panel invited contributions on experimentation with exhibitionary form, media, and technologies of display and suggested that presentations might reflect upon the motivations, effects, potential, and limitations of exhibitionary experimentation and also possible parallels with, or differences from, ethnographic experimentalism (discussed below). Papers were selected which best met with this remit and that collectively offered a broad range of examples, so that ideas could be investigated across diverse contexts. The panel drew a large audience and produced lively discussion. This discussion then fed into the second phase of our project in which we reviewed the knowledge generated so far, further refined our remit to focus more specifically on cases which involved a substantial element of experimenting with the idea and practice of exhibition itself, and then – following leads from the conference debate, from our panellists and others with whom we discussed the ideas – invited further contributions, from a wider array of disciplines, in order to open up the experiment for a second time.

As with the exhibitions discussed in this book, our experiment involved gathering contributions without sure knowledge of what the outcome would be. Certainly, we were aware that there seemed to be a good deal of exhibition experimentation going on and had noted some apparently shared themes, but the extent to which such diverse experiments would be motivated by like concerns, would share similar ideas, or would be subject to related reflections by those involved was open to question. What we were interested to find was that, despite the diversity of the contributors' professional backgrounds and the contexts of the exhibitions they write about, there was a remarkable consistency in many aspects of their