

The Exhibition as Collective

The transformed status of exhibitions is one of the central questions in current discourse on the curatorial. Exhibitions have evolved from a tool, medium, and pedagogical form employed to make art and culture public to become autonomous works of their own. They have abandoned their seemingly auxiliary neutrality in order to emerge with their own logic and structure of production, presentation, and distribution. This shift has many consequences insofar as it opens for debate the traditional qualities, functions, and status of what appears in an exhibition as well as the activities employed in its context, and ultimately of the various people involved as well. How do exhibitions and exhibits relate to each other when the distinctions begin to break down between the coherent installation as work of art, the presentation of several works of art in the format of a retrospective or group exhibition, the artistic presentation of fellow artists, and the treatment of exhibitions with an emphatically subjective perspective? Are there methods and techniques constitutive of and specific to exhibitions? Based on which premises can they be adopted? This shift is the essential foundation in the controversies between artists and curators concerning claims to subjectivization, the power to create meaning, and the social privileges of authorship but also the creative aspects of creating exhibitions.¹ The intensity of this debate, especially over the past ten years, threatens to overshadow the discussion of exhibitions and their qualities, functions, and potential. Emotionalized professional alliances and naturalized attributions of tasks, roles, and positions result from such suppression and ultimately block of the prospect of the social significance of exhibitions.

In order to reorient this debate, the following discussion will focus primarily on two qualities of exhibitions that derive from their fundamentally temporal character: their performative layout, on the one hand, and their collective structure, on the other. Analogous to film and the performing arts, the performative character of exhibitions as well as the many participants involved and the dynamic of the relationships between them all come to the fore. The works in an exhibition seem like actors or dancers who establish ever new relationships to one another and to the other objects that make up the set of their performance.² Within these flexible relations that reform with every new constellation, the meaning of the things is constantly reconstituted. Susan M. Pearce speaks accordingly of "objects in action."³ Whereas Pearce's characterization is limited exclusively to the works exhibited, my argument that follows will emphasize that the exhibits share the space of the exhibition with a series of other elements that are, in turn, integrated into

the processes of becoming as a consequence of the changing relationships that they build up, adopt, and articulate.

If one takes the spatiotemporal structure of the exhibition seriously in its performance mode, it expands the circle of the elements that come together to form an exhibition. Not only does this bring into view alongside the exhibits—the works of art and the artifacts—the various means of display and the exhibition space with its aesthetic and functional qualities, the people who relate to these elements—visitors, curators, and critics, for example—are just as much part of the exhibition situation. Those who enter such a situation—whatever their personal or professional background and interests—relate to the space and to the objects they encounter there both as viewers and participants. To put it another way, in the spatiotemporal social arrangement that constitutes the constellation created by an exhibition, people adopt along with all the other components—such as exhibits, spaces, information—tasks and roles in relation to one another. Beyond the “actors,” understood in a sociological sense, an exhibition situation also includes things people have helped shape; Bruno Latour calls these things “actants.”⁴ Because these relationships exist in a continuous process of shaping, the exhibition becomes a spatiotemporal social fabric that negotiates the goods and values that are at stake within the artistic field and makes this negotiation visible and comprehensible. Since the question of this essay is focused on integrating all the participants into the process of the exhibition as a work and on the changes of their relationships to one another, I will examine it using the example of the exhibition “Raumvermittlung” (Mediating Space, 2006), in which I also took part.⁵

As part of the /D/O/C/K project space at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig (HGB), Dorit Margreiter developed the project “Raumvermittlung” in 2005/6, which led to an exhibition of the same name in Leipzig that ran from June 9 to July 15, 2006.⁶ The presentation of spaces with, in, and through exhibitions was the focus of this ten-month joint effort. At various times, a number of different participants was involved: students of art, cultural studies, art history, and sociology at the HGB and the Universität Leipzig; teaching staff from the fields of visual arts, graphic design, and visual studies at the HGB; artists and scholars from Hamburg, Munich, and Bremen; and various circles of participants that were addressed by and integrated into the working process. For the program that made this work public for five weeks in the summer of 2006, the academy’s gallery space was transformed into a presentation space with a continuously

changing look. Different sequential or interlocked forms of presentation dramatized architectural, aesthetic, social, political, functional, and institutional relationships, and conditions and potentials of the space. Individual and group presentations, workshops, meetings, screenings, performances, and guest lectures bestowed repeatedly changing functions on the gallery space over the course of the exhibition. As a consequence, the participants, the various contributions they made, and the spaces they used, designed or referred to constantly changed relationships to one another.

Margreiter participated in the exhibition with a material contribution as well: a wooden wall made of three panels, painted white, measuring 200 x 267 cm in all. The artist left the wall's placement and function open, but she insisted that it be visible throughout the entire span of the presentation and should be reset to its original lined-up three-panel form with every new use. The three panels demonstrated an approach to architecture that reflected the guiding concepts of Margreiter's praxis: to grapple with the means of architecture resulting from different uses in the context of presentation and subjectivization.⁷ In the context of her installational practice the wall figures as the impulse of a potential space that evolves and is elaborated in relation to other elements of the installation and the audience. For the exhibition "Event Horizon" at the Galerie Krobath in Vienna in 2002, she positioned a freestanding wall section in complex interplay with the cinematic and photographic works and with the exhibition space itself.⁸ As a miniature reference to an exhibition wall designed by Rem Koolhaas at the Hermitage Guggenheim gallery space in Las Vegas, the wooden structure commented on the different spaces to which the other exhibits referred. It thus adopted, above all, the forms of subjectivization that those parts of the room offered while at the same time rendered the exhibition space as a space of experience. For the solo exhibition "Analog" (2006), which was shown shortly after "Raumvermittlung" in the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Leipzig, located opposite the academy, Margreiter quoted "Event Horizon." In the context of the gallery's architecture, the path through the exhibition spaces, and the cabinet-of-curiosities-like compilation of works, "Analog" further expanded the earlier reference system of the wood construction. In addition, the artist now projected onto the three-part wall (previously of "Raumvermittlung") the 16 mm film *10104 Angelo View Drive* (2004), thus separately emphasizing its function as a screen and further expanding its meaning, to the extent the film drew attention to the

psychological, social, and aesthetic implications of the interplay of architectural interior and exterior.⁹ Both “Raumvermittlung” and “Analog” addressed what Margreiter described two years later on the occasion of her design for the urban situation of the European Kunsthalle at Ebertplatz in Cologne: the freestanding walls created “a concrete, yet experimentally modifiable spatial framework for contemporary art presentations and events.”¹⁰

In this sense, the three-part wooden construction functioned in “Raumvermittlung” not only as an independent artistic statement compatible with Margreiter’s previous uses but also as a guideline, obstacle, framework, support, enabler, and instigator for all the other participants. It established an aesthetic, discursive, and social system of references, on the basis of which the dynamics of the presentation program evolved. Over the course of five weeks, Margreiter’s wall appeared as a freestanding object, screen, backdrop for a film production, scoreboard, message board, blackboard, partition, barrier and interval signal, bar table, pedestal, and an architectural exhibition design. It also helped to design the respective rooms, which alternated between exhibition space, café, storage space, experimental stage, lounge, cinema, and seminar room—rooms that for their part articulated the surrounding space and their individual relationships to it in new ways. The conditions and functions of the exhibition space—a place of public presentation, education, institutional status, social inclusion and exclusion, and a factor in the cultural economy of Leipzig—were taken up by each installation in a different way, mirroring and commenting on them and contrasting them with alternative models.

For example, “The Studio: Musicals” transformed the exhibition space into a rehearsal space for the production of a musical and a film. The space was open to public view for eight days for anyone interested in coming to terms, via performance, singing, and dancing, with the requirements of arts education.¹¹ As part of the subproject “how to put things we can/not space,” the gallery space became the Café Monopol for one week.¹² It offered, in addition to daily changing menus, a diverse entertainment program that included a table-soccer tournament, screenings of the World Cup, presentations of radio plays and films, workshops, lectures, discussion events, and parties with DJs or live music. In reference to a formerly student-run café at the academy that was replaced by a commercially operated one, Café Monopol both opposed the decision by the academy management and realized the students’ desires for a student-run café. Coming to terms with the political potential of artistic and curatorial action ranged from the students’

self-determination to the artists' self-organization and the implementation of formats for resistance in public spaces.

The boundaries of the exhibition space were put up for negotiation architecturally, institutionally, and discursively when specific works deliberately left the space as it was or connected it to other spaces outside the institution. Bettina Hutschek's photographic trail ran from the gallery space through the academy atrium to the steps of the entrance and out to the street; it only stopped at the American Consulate on the other side—the politically situated institution that, in the wake of 9/11, had installed street blockades and thus made it more difficult to access the HGB. In another instance, the announcement poster for the group POLYFOTO's project connected an axis from the Leipzig exhibition to an exhibition in Los Angeles in which Margreiter was participating at almost the same time. Finally, Hans-Christian Lotz chose Martin Andersen Nexö, a retirement home in Leipzig, as the venue for his exhibition, thus replacing the social and aesthetic conditions of an educational institution with those of a social one.

These conditions and possibilities were also the focus of interventions that adopted the display conventions of exhibitions, such as the aura of the white cube and the social rituals of showing art, and exposed the exhibition space to be an aesthetic and social shell always permeated by interests and power. There were interventions such as the reenactment of an exhibition using only the means of display, while the original exhibits themselves were left out, or the darkening and sacralizing lighting of the exhibition space to dramatize not a fixed object but the viewer in the act of viewing. Interventions also reiterated the rituals of exhibition openings that indicate belonging to a certain social group, demonstrate and affirm existing social positions, and demarcate the event from everyday contexts and lend it a distinctive atmosphere. And they exposed the competitive negotiation over placement in group exhibitions in the interest of increasing one's own visibility.¹³ By recourse to methods and strategies taken from institutional critique since the 1960s, these approaches set the space in motion. Sometimes reacting to one another, simultaneously or as accompaniment, intertwined or literally jammed together, these different articulations created an exhibition as a relational, dynamic fabric of space-oriented counter-sites aimed at making art public.¹⁴

“Raumvermittlung” was, moreover, a joint project, whose collective character changed over the course of its evolution. Begun in the format of a project seminar with theoretical and practical sections, the amorphous and

multiple-event format of the weeks of presentation brought a social dynamic. Initially only a loose association of people who shared an interest but neither the background that informed it nor its institutional or professional requirements, they saw themselves increasingly challenged in their traditional roles as the project developed. Over the course of the exhibition, guests became hosts and students became teachers, scholars took over activities similar to those of mediators or artists, and participants were at once subjects and objects. The different curatorial tasks did not stick to those roles that terms such as “curator,” “artist,” “critic,” “professor,” or even “cook” would suggest in accordance with conventions. Instead, they were accessible to all and were employed accordingly. The power that can be exercised in specific activities and is assigned to individual roles as well as the symbolic capital that is associated with actions and roles and is responsible for the continuation of social exclusions, asymmetries, and hierarchies—these all seemed no longer fixed from the outset. Time management, organization, financing, program content, invitations, selection, and ordering were in the hands of all the participants, whose circle continually grew over the course of the work. A sensible disposition of the limited resources of space, time, and money had to be negotiated continuously.

The different positions and functions that Margreiter’s wall embodied during the different interventions corresponded to the changing social circumstances of those who had begun the joint project as teaching staff but over the course of it found themselves acting as guest speakers, guests at meals, audience members, or participants. Those who had joined as students took over tasks of teaching. The contributions from art, sociology, and cultural studies were part of the overall program of argumentation, independent of the medium chosen for the contribution in question. Modes and situations of production and reception could no longer be sensibly distinguished from one another. The assignment of roles and tasks continually shifted in relation to other participants and thus opened up for discussion the definition of roles and tasks in the curatorial field. The internal dynamics of the roles exposed the conditions of presentation as an analogy to those constituted between existing and created spaces: they revealed social agreements that define requirements for participating in curatorial work such as the various competences, forms, and paths of education, and the forms of knowledge tied to the profession and processes of professionalization. And they illustrated the profits at stake for such participation: institutional association, earning opportunities, and the attribution of symbolic capital in the form of

recognition. During the course of the exhibition, seemingly natural connections between professional roles, tasks, and positions endowed with power were loosened—if not eliminated completely—through redistribution within the participating group.

Margreiter's wall developed a hybrid character in this relational dynamic. Itself oriented toward the surrounding architectural, functional, and institutional space of the academy gallery as well as toward a project about teaching, it functioned as a trigger and as a foil to the various definitions of space adopted in "Raumvermittlung," as described above. It acted both as a screen for participants' projections and as an active counterpart and opponent. Last but not least, it also served as a representative for Margreiter the artist, who had conceived this wall and its use. Building the wall into an installation, changing it, subordinating it to an installation plan or disregarding it in different ways not only implied adapting to the material presence of the wall, appropriating it, and having it at one's disposal, but also dealing with its symbolic value. Beyond her material contribution, Margreiter's status as an internationally recognized artist was the subject of the various presentation formats and contents. To put it another way, the reactions to Margreiter's wall could not be clearly separated from the reactions to Margreiter the artist.

Margreiter's wall thus took on the role of an actant in Bruno Latour's sense. Referring to Michel Serres's concepts of the "quasi-subject" and the "quasi-object," Latour speaks of actants as nonhuman entities in a position to activate subjects.¹⁵ By means of the principle of delegation, in his view, those who were involved as objects or subjects in the artifact in question are perhaps absent at the actual moment in time but are present in the quasi-subject. Because of this presence, the artifact that exists as an actant possesses qualities that are otherwise attributed only to subjects. In the delegation, Latour explains, it is "that an action, long past, of an actor, long disappeared, is still active here, today, on me. I live in the midst of technical delegates; I am folded into nonhumans. [...] The whole philosophy of techniques has been preoccupied by this detour. Think of technology as *congealed* labor."¹⁶ As a representative for a whole series of other artifacts that adopted the role of actants in "Raumvermittlung"—David Scheuch's scaffold, which very gradually built up the space and obscured the other exhibits, or Ronald Kölbel's vitrines, which quoted Pierre Bourdieu's exhibition installation, to cite just two examples—Margreiter's wall can also be understood as congealed labor in this sense. It was, however, a work that encompassed not only the technical steps of the procedure but also those with which Margreiter

accumulated social, cultural, and above all symbolic capital. The artist's social networking, her knowledge as well as her reputation, entered into the wall object in its function as quasi-subject. With Latour, it could even be argued that the types of capital themselves appear as actants and in this develop an active influence. As hybrids—neither on the side of the objects assigned to nature nor of the subjects assigned to the social¹⁷—the types of capital, too, are part of the networks that dissolve the distinction between nature and society established in the modern era and instead mediate between them.

From this perspective, beyond the exhibits and display techniques, both human and nonhuman beings of material and nonmaterial nature come together in "Raumvermittlung." The discourses on the process of subjectivization of modernist architecture, on the procedure and course of instituting and institutionalizing, and on creativity and asymmetry in the cultural field equally involved participants and the symbolic capital granted in various social fields by those who believe in the game in question. "Each of these monsters," Scott Lash summarizes, "each of these actants, is comprised of subject properties, object (or nature) properties, discourse properties and existential properties. And each is comprised of different measures of each."¹⁸

Thinking about "Raumvermittlung" in this way means attributing to an exhibition the potential of a "collective," which for Latour defines a society extended to include objects and nonhuman beings.¹⁹ The process of the project corresponds, then, to the changing properties of the actants within their network-like associations, which in Latour's conception leads to shifts, medialisations, or translations with every rearrangement.²⁰ This is not limited to Pearce's aforementioned objects in action but rather goes beyond the bureaucratic archives and technical media that were the focus in connection with collectives.²¹ It is this process of qualities that characterizes all the participants in an exhibition as actors and actants.

This integral understanding ultimately goes beyond Latour's own conception and realization of the exhibition as undertaken in "Making Things Public" (2005).²² That conception distinguishes clearly between the organizers (Latour and Peter Weibel), the recipients of the exhibition, and that which was presented in the exhibition (and catalog). Conceived as an "assembly of assemblies," it was supposed to illustrate the differences between the assemblies and encourage the visitors and readers to ask questions as they moved from one assembly to the next: "How do they manage to bring in the relevant parties? How do they manage to bring in the relevant issues?"

What change does it make in the way people make up their mind to be attached to things?"²³ Because of a blind spot concerning his own practice and position, Latour did not see himself or his co-curators and coauthors as part of the assembly, but instead claimed for himself—assuming to a certain extent his own invisibility—the tasks of showing and presenting. His concern with presenting assemblies obscures the possibility of defining the exhibition in which they appear as itself an assembly that sees the viewers, installations, exhibition space, artists, and curators as integrated into the assembly's dynamic fabric.

It is, however, precisely the integration of all the participants into the process of continuous relational redefinition that permits the exhibition to become an analogy for the evolutionary process of society, understood in Latour's terms as a "collective." It is the foundation for a perspective on cultural policy in which an exhibition is defined as a work: only the dissolution of the dichotomy of subject and object that takes place within Latour's collective offers the possibility of evading the commodity logic of exhibitions. In the processual definition of actors and actants, the position of the marketable artistic or curatorial author loses its stable contours as does the final artistic or curatorial product. On this basis the exhibition's relevance and significance for the contemporary cultural field is justified—it exemplifies the fundamental cultural change from a culture of representation to a culture of transmission that Scott Lash works out in his reading of Latour.²⁴ The exhibition demonstrates the perceived increase in the value of mediation over autonomy and immediacy while it counters the exchange relationships and redistributions among actors and actants with demands on the subject of immaterial labor to be more flexible.

If Latour's idea of the collective ultimately aims at getting around the duality of subject/object and society/nature in the spirit of the constant "weaving of morphisms,"²⁵ this is then significant in several respects for the questions raised at the outset regarding the status of the exhibition as a work. In itself venue, object, and mediating participant, the exhibition emerges as the collective and at the same time as its actant. It is woven into its own labor of making connections. Independent of its actual processual character, which has been presented here using the example of the "Raumvermittlung" project, the exhibition is in motion and sets the meaning of the participants, as actors and actants, in motion relationally, turning all of them, including itself, into something in the making—just as for Latour, society is always necessarily in the process of becoming.²⁶ Ultimately, the

exhibition eliminates the confrontational clash between artists and curators. Just as within this collective conception the subject positions are not predisposed, so it is difficult to attribute competences, tasks, and status in an unambiguous and long-term way. Rather, there are temporary manifestations of constellations that reflect the processes of negotiation over the goods in play in the artistic field and those who participated in the negotiations. Rather than fomenting antagonism as the offending object, the exhibition takes over the function of an arena for its negotiation.

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