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THE STATEMENT

i) Spectator & Exhibition

The spectator of an art exhibition is socially conditioned to engage with the exhibition, which is conceived as an elaborately constructed socio-aesthetic event. This engagement takes the form of a carefully choreographed perceptual experience that unfolds within a specially defined architectural space generically referred to as a white cube. Although exhibitions take many forms that may or may not be directly associated with the metaphor of a white cube—some even function in opposition to that metaphor—the image does capture the essence of the model that informs the concept of an exhibition as it developed during the second half of the twentieth century and the opening decades of the twenty-first century. This model is also valid, by default, for alternative and anti-exhibitions, as they, too, are geared for spectatorship, whether conceived as passive or active (whether participative or interactive). Such counter-exhibitionary strategies cannot short circuit the distance and concept of witnessing implicated in a spectator's social function. They simply minimize the function's attributes, and thus its visibility. They reduce these attributes to a minimum, the remainder to be clothed in a cloak of invisibility that the artist has woven in terms of an anti-exhibitionary narrative and its props. A visitor is still a visitor.

Exhibitions are places that one visits in order to inspect and experience a special category of human artefact; to engage with their different languages, parameters, and limits: spectator, from the Latin *spectare* to view, to watch; visitor, from the Latin *visitare* “to go to see, come to inspect,” frequentative of *visere* ‘behold, visit’ (a person or place), from past participle stem of *videre* ‘to see, notice, observe.’”¹ Exhibition spectatorship is predicated on visitation rights—rights of passage that are often, so it is claimed, democratically guaranteed, and sometimes bought.

The spectator expects to see an exhibition—a calculated deployment of works of art in space, a visual proposition mapped out according to spatial juxtapositions and sensory interactions—when he or she enters an exhibition environment. This observation might seem to be pedantic, even somewhat banal, until one remembers Yves Klein's 1958 exhibition *Le Vide* at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris (an almost perfect example of the white-cube model, had it not been for an empty display case and curtains that remained in the vacant space), or Robert Barry's *Closed Gallery Piece* of 1969, in which the act of seeing and expecting, of engaging with artworks, was effectively negated. Finally, there was Barry's *Invitation Piece* of 1972–73, with its closed-circuit logic and total eclipse of the traditional exhibition space and the exhibition's transmutation into a sequence of printed invitations. Whereas *Le Vide* proposed an experience of seeing an exhibition that was reduced to a minimum and triggered the negation of an expectation and the pleasure of aesthetic acculturation, *Closed Gallery Piece* reduced the visual engagement and aesthetic experience that were traditionally promoted in an exhibition to a simple text-based conceptual non-event. *Invitation Piece* simply relocated the idea of the exhibition to a set of invitations to be mailed out to potential spectators, who would never see anything more than the printed cards.

Exhibitions are designed to acculturate citizens by transforming them into spectators. A spectator is produced by a work of art and by a person's desire to engage with it in the context of an exhibition. The spectator is a collective public product. There are no spectators produced in private spaces. Whether the spectator is professional or amateur, expert or novice, the exhibition treats everyone, theoretically at least, on an equal basis, according to its underlying hypothesis of democratic access. However, if one pays to enter an exhibition, as often one does, one is acknowledging the implicit existence of a social filter designed to control access to a specific arena of cultural experimentation and sensory experience. For to enter an exhibition on the basis of a monetary contract is to publicly recognize and confirm the spectator's acceptance of and implication in (and integration into) a more esoteric dimension of capitalist society and culture. For, we must not forget, art exhibitions have never been conceived to function as all-inclusive democratic events, even if they actively promote this idea. They are specialized rituals created for the intellectual and aesthetic acculturation (and enjoyment) of members of an amorphous yet dominant social class composed of residues of the old bourgeoisie, the nouveau riche, and, lately, the ultra-capitalist hyper-rich. This class can conveniently be described from economic and political points of view as the "establishment." Its subalterns, drawn from different creative and managerial subgroups (artists, curators, museum directors, and others), are diligently nurtured for its own aesthetic entertainment, sensory pleasures, intellectual evolution, and edification.

To consume an exhibition and its quotient of culture is to augment one's knowledge and social experience of the culture associated with that dominant class and its tastes, aesthetic values, and concepts of socio-cultural experience. It is to be trained to see, to appreciate, to acknowledge, and, ultimately, to revere what one has seen in terms different from those associated with other major (or minor) cultural, social, or political events (produced, for example, according to the entertainment model promoted by cultural industries): a highly refined and specialized experience that has been proposed through the exhibition's thoughtful, or sophisticated, spatial deployment of artworks and through its textual framing of those works. To experience an exhibition is therefore to strengthen one's adherence to a specific model of society and culture. Increasingly, it is also to be acculturated to the world of speculative finance and the mechanisms and populist aesthetics of a broader industrialized culture manufactured by cultural industries in which so-called high art and the products of a culture of popular entertainment are artificially hybridized through speculative, financially motivated, profit-based contact.

The artist is expected and conditioned to produce works the objective of which is that they can be seen by a public that has taken the social form—or guise—of spectators: social actors who have also been conditioned, it is important to reiterate, to experience works of art in terms of a language of unique experience that is conjured up in the form of an exhibition. Although the route between production and consumption is mediated by other cultural figures and social forces (teachers, professors, curators, critics, museum directors, museum trustees, local and national governments, and the cultural industries in general), the basic binary structure upon which art and the art exhibition are founded is that of artist–spectator. Without the artist, there is no spectator.

Without the spectator, there can be no artist. Within the context of an exhibition, the two actors—or, increasingly, economic functions—are co-dependent in their socio-ritual functions and historical evolution.

The artwork reaches out in the context of an exhibition. The spectator reaches out in the context of an exhibition. Artwork and spectator meet in a situation of first contact. Contact generates corresponding social functions through a mutual contract that acknowledges physical existence and, in case of the artwork, socio-cultural value: I see you and you are there specifically for me to look at, to confirm my status as observer and witness to your existence. And because we exist together in a special kind of relationship within a special kind of space, I consider you to be socially, aesthetically, and economically significant (have cultural value), and you guarantee, in turn, my new provisional identity of spectator (an appreciator, or potential appreciator, of art). For I can only exist as spectator in your presence. Together, we ensure that art continues to exist, continues to be of social value and pertinence.

What happens if the artist decides simply to present a proposition for an exhibition, but nothing more? What happens when the physical characteristics of an exhibition are reduced to their more minimal ritual function, when the ritual's transformative powers are in suspended animation; when its overarching epistemological, socio-political, and aesthetic powers are stillborn and the infrastructure upon which it relies to take its ultimate public form is rendered skeletal? What happens to the spectator's expectations, desires, and quest for knowledge, pleasure, or entertainment? What happens to the artist's social function and cultural ambitions? If Yves Klein posed these kinds of questions in 1958 in the context of an existing exhibition space, and Barry proposed to step outside of the ritual space itself but not outside of the exhibition's social functions—thereby sidestepping the necessity of answering such questions in a concrete manner—then there appears to be nothing left to question about the relationship among artist, spectator, and exhibition space.

This is, however, not the case. For there is one basic question that remains active. Since Klein and Barry targeted the art exhibition in terms of its specific spatial function of physically hosting works of art, is it possible to explore the relationship between spectator and artwork in a different manner? And what would this imply in terms of the complex socio-aesthetic and socio-economic relationships between spectator and artwork?

This exhibition engages with these two questions. Spectators are invited to seek out their own answers in terms of their own experience of the exhibition.

ii) Artwork & Exhibition

The exhibition's economy of production begins with the artist and ends with the spectator. The artwork's movement within this economy traces a route from producer to consumer. As in the case of the spectator and exhibition, the route from production to consumption is mediated by other cultural figures (teachers, professors, curators, critics, museum directors, museum trustees), and major economic players and forces. The latter include basic financial players (collectors, auction houses, and others), local and national governments, and the cultural industries in general. The actions of these figures and the deployment of these forces are invariably modulated by ubiquitous, often insidious social ambitions and short- or long-term monetary objectives. If the basic binary structure upon which art and the art exhibition are founded is that of artist and spectator, then one can also claim that it is in the *displacement* of the artwork between these two indispensable actors that another key, but less visible, relationship is revealed. The relationship between the artwork and its context of presentation, the exhibition, is predicated on an important document: the exhibition proposal. This document serves as a passport that allows artworks to travel from the domain of creation to the space of consumption, from private to public space: from the studio (or, increasingly, the computer) to a physical exhibition environment. Most often printed, the proposal can also simply take the form of a verbal agreement, akin to a traditional symbolic handshake. The exhibition proposal serves as a foundation for an official contract that, once signed, binds the artist and representative of the exhibition environment together—a bond based on a common objective: to produce an exhibition of the works presented in the proposal. Often, however, the content of the proposal can change, works can be added or replaced, conceptual frames can be modified. What is proposed might never be presented because it is replaced by a more advanced proposition, or, more rarely, by an alternative or new proposition.

The exhibition proposal is an interesting archival document and physical artefact. It outlines a conceptual framework, a spatial plan, and a list of works to be shown. If there is no spectator without an artist, and no artist without a spectator, then the proposal maps out this relationship in terms of another figure who can take the place of the spectator at this stage in a project's development: the curator. The proposal implies that, from an institutional point of view, there is no exhibition without the gallery, or museum, and its representative (the curator). Furthermore, there can be no exhibition without the artist. (One does not need a curator to mediate an exhibition's production in a non-institutional space.) However, the proposal acknowledges the existence of a definite relationship of power between artist and curator: a hierarchy. The proposal is just that: an offer directed to someone who is *in a position* to facilitate a transformation from paper to three-dimensional exhibition. The curator is the gatekeeper to that exhibition space.

Of course, we are considering only the art world's dominant institutional economy here. Clearly, the relationships become more ambiguous and complex when one attempts to step outside of this economy—to build parallel or parasitic economies and spaces that might challenge one or more of

these relationships (artist–spectator, artist–curator, artist–exhibition). One must not forget, however, that the art world’s dominant institutional economy and its theoretical and practical influence over the affairs of the art world have become more accommodating and elastic. Institutions have begun to adopt multiple strategies (modifying their parameters, exporting their physical forms and systems of branding beyond their walls, hosting within their walls “radical” practices and critiques, extending material and conceptual aid to facilitate practices that cannot be directly presented within their institutional environments). These strategies are designed to consolidate and even to extend institutional influence and power over such counter-practices. The art world’s establishment projects its institutional presence, its phantasmal influence and invisible authority, over and throughout such alternative conceptual-sensory economies and practices. By working against a white-cube model, artists invariably end up defining themselves and their counter-practice in its terms.

The curator is an institutional representative, but also the representative of a public who will eventually enter an exhibition in the form of spectators. The curator is, in fact, the first spectator of a hypothetical exhibition—the one who enters a proposal’s conceptual space, its theoretical and practical matrix, to inspect works in a virtual propositional setting to look and see through a mind’s eye; to discuss and exchange ideas; to criticize and propose modifications and alternatives. The curator is caught between the institution and its public, the institution and the artist, the artist and the spectator. Even when they are independent of institutional influences, curators often function in their shadows. They are the art world’s powerful gatekeepers. This is perhaps why many artists have decided to appropriate the role of the curator, to clothe their practices in a meta-curatorial logic that allows them to extend their practices to neutralize the political asymmetry that automatically exists between curator and artist. For they also seek a way out of their own limitations by hybridizing themselves with the creative functions of a figure who occupies a key position in the art system’s political economy.

What happens when the exhibition is simply hijacked somewhere along the route of the artwork’s passage from artist to exhibition—for example, at the proposal stage? What happens to the exhibition’s logic and its relationship with the institution and the public when artists become the curators of their own exhibitions? If, for example, the exhibition is presented as an inaccessible politico-aesthetic event, an invisible event in an invisible location, then what is left for the spectator to see in the exhibition space? What is left of the “original” proposition and its skeletal, phantasmal exhibition? Such questions point to the critical function of the proposal in providing an exhibition’s primary or initial frame of reference, even when it may be transformed beyond recognition in the exhibition’s final state of public presentation. In the case of such changes, there is still an exhibition to see. What critical spaces are opened up by the hijacking of the proposal? What kinds of artefacts, if any, now occupy those spaces? And for what reasons? If they are there, is it to reconstitute an exhibition in the image of a proposal? Or to replace it? Are they there to salvage the violence of the initial act of hijacking? Has there been another hijacking? If so, why? The void that now occupies the exhibition environment but that still harbours an illogic of alien presences, uchronic residues from parallel propositions pointing to different futures—the perversions of a Serresian parasite who

has taken the opportunity to jump ship and occupy an empty space—create a room of mirrors, eccentric visual trajectories—sightlines—within the ghostly frame of an absence proposal.

This exhibition engages with these questions and presences. All spectators are invited to seek out their own answers and rationales in terms of their own experience of what they see.

This is not a frivolous game. Content is modulated by the material economy in which it circulates, through which it is delivered to its human recipients. The art world's material infrastructure reduces all information to its logic, whether it claims to be or genuinely is progressive and radical. The art system's succeeding movements have always had to deal with the relationship among artist, exhibition and spectator. This relationship is both structural and structuring. If the curator and the proposal are new features of this system, new elements in this structure, it is because they have evolved into indispensable components of the system and economy upon which contemporary art is founded. To probe these relationships is to expose their functions in the system of art. To expose the relationships between those functions and the system's material and symbolic infrastructure and communicational economy is to open the system up to the possibilities of structural transformation.

1. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=spectator;>
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