

THINKING ABOUT EXHIBITIONS

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## WHAT'S IMPORTANT ABOUT THE HISTORY OF MODERN ART EXHIBITIONS?

*Martha Ward*

What's important to consider in writing a history of the modern art exhibition? As yet, we don't have anything like a comprehensive empirical history of this form, which has dominated the public presentation of art in the modern (post-1750) age. But even in advance of the research that would yield more information, it seems desirable to think about why and how such a history might be written.

It's not surprising that in the work that has already been done, contemporary critical concerns have played a major role. During the 1980s, when the history of exhibitions in my own field of nineteenth-century French art began to be written, much attention was given to universal exhibitions. These provided a proto-history for the blockbusters then so dominant in the artworld, seemingly so revelatory of

how exhibitions could turn into merely entertaining spectacles. Other research at this time on other sorts of exhibitions also tended to be event-oriented, concentrating on individual shows as nodal points in the social history of art. Politics, criticism, audience and painting could be shown to intersect more concretely in exhibitions than perhaps anywhere else. Interpreting a painting in view of the conditions and reception at its first showing came to be accorded a definitiveness that was not extended to any of the other situations – studio creation, auction purchase, domestic display – through which the meanings or values of nineteenth-century easel paintings might be said to have been realized. Exhibitions were also a focus in the 1980s for historians exploring the relations of art and capitalism through the workings of the market, so phenomenally on the rise during this decade. Whether operating with an all-inclusive revisionist agenda or one prizing instances of modernist resistance, these historians looked at exhibitions as promotional sites and at museums as holding out the promise of a (false) refuge from commodification.

Despite the progress of the past decade, I think that a broad understanding of the history of display and its effects still eludes us. We mostly have a patchwork of studies that feature one or another of the purposes served by various exhibitions. If

from 1750 to 1914 in any science or discourse institutions that are not an autonomous space for the case that art install language of its own. Not who mounted exhibitions and so to engineer new seems that they remain our own time of professional. Closer, too, than in the self-consciousness about to exhibit an exhibition disrupting those visual conventionally reinforced the beginnings of history terms of modes of visu

◆ 27.1 Pietro Antonio Martini, *Salon of 1787*, engraving. Courtesy of the Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

the goal is to be able to track the pervasive form of the exhibition and its impact across the modern period, then we need to attend to continuities and ruptures in habits that may not correspond directly to political, marketing or spectacularizing developments. We need to bring into view instead a more expansive, amorphous field, composed from the uneven or incomplete development of practices across this period. Customs of presentation changed but rarely dramatically and never pervasively. Below I pose four concerns around which we might begin to conceptualize the early history of the exhibition of modern art. My topics are not new in themselves. But my hope is that by highlighting the issues and stretching the questions across the breadth of more than a century, I can both expose what we don't know and demonstrate why we need to know more.

Before the outline of these concerns, one long proviso. Most of the examples I'll entertain come from the area that I know best, the mid-eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries in France, and involve temporary art exhibitions rather than museum collections. A more comprehensive account, extending to the present, would surely require some sort of periodization. Without attempting to reflect on these matters systematically, I'll note here that one way to characterize the period

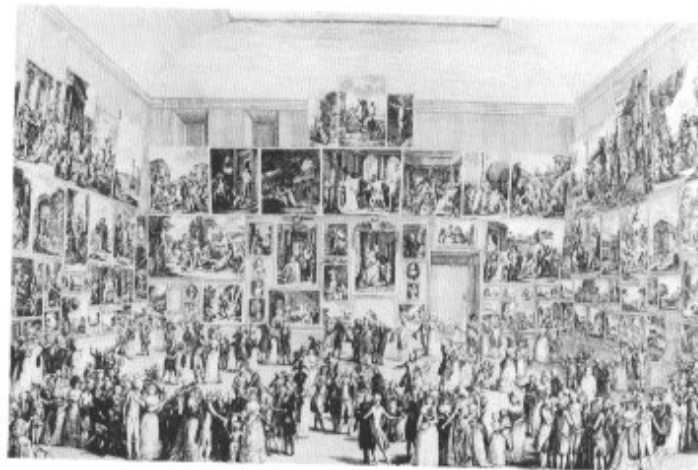


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from 1750 to 1914 in relation to our own is that it occurs prior to the articulation of any science or discourse of display. Despite the appearance during this period of the institutions that are now commonly taken to be synonymous with the creation of an autonomous space for art (museums, art societies, salons, galleries), it's nevertheless the case that art installation was not yet a subject for professional discussion, with a language of its own. Nor did the dealers, administrators, entrepreneurs or artists who mounted exhibitions often aim to create startlingly innovative displays of art and so to engineer new modes of visibility. Such things happened, to be sure. But it seems that they remained, by and large, much closer to the fabric of social life than in our own time of professional curators, exhibition designers and installation artists. Closer, too, than in the time of the 1920s when, as Yve-Alain Bois has claimed, self-consciousness about the effects of installation was such that Lissitsky could aim to exhibit an exhibition, to make a show that would be explicitly directed towards disrupting those visual habits (tactile and optical, temporal and spatial) that displays conventionally reinforced.<sup>1</sup> A range of developments in the early twentieth century – the beginnings of historicized museum installations, distinguishing among epochs in terms of modes of visibility, for instance; and the new American science of



advertising, with its psychologizing of design in terms of attraction and attention – such developments as these brought about a new self-consciousness of how the relationship of viewer and object could or should be mediated through presentation. Before then, “exhibition installation” seems not to have existed, as such, as a subject.

We might accordingly wonder whether displays prior to this period should be pulled away from the dense historical fabric in which they are embedded and made into an historical subject in their own right. By the same token, however, we might question the logic according to which subjects come into focus for historical analysis only at times when they become arenas for innovation or are centered as discursive terms. This question of when installation or even exhibition begins to have a history of its own cannot be flushed out here, though I’ll touch on it again shortly. It is clear from what’s already been said, however, that shows prior to 1914 will necessarily require a differently textured account, one closer to a wide number of artistic and social practices, than many later exhibition designs would invite as an appropriate analysis.

#### ARTISTIC PUBLIC SPHERES?

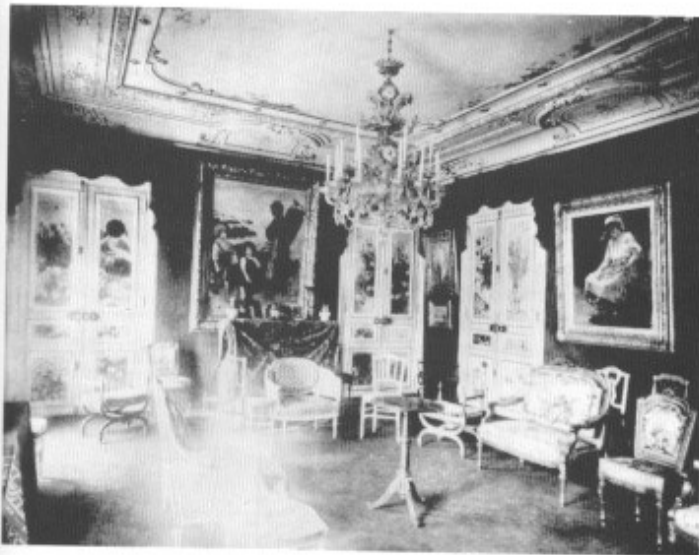
The history that we’re concerned with is one that can be taken to begin in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the exhibition of works for the “public.” The most notable institution of such practice was the Paris Salon, first established on a regular basis in 1737 (fig. 27.1). Of course, paintings and sculpture had previously been displayed in a variety of fashions and for a variety of social groups, but what seems to turn the history of art’s display into the history of its exhibition is precisely the intention to institutionalize the showing of art objects to this collectivity called the “public.”

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were also when our modern usage of the word “exhibition” developed. Though not exclusively used for art, it did refer generally to showing publicly. According to the tenth and final definition of the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a definition accompanied by a quotation from 1797, to exhibit means: “to show publicly for the purposes of amusement or instruction, or in a competition; to make a show of. . . .” Late seventeenth-century definitions of the French verb *exposer* similarly specify the act of putting something on public view; examples in 1690 included the exhibition of the sacred Host during

the Mass, and the exhibition of goods for sale in markets, but not yet, as in the next century, the exhibition of art in shows.<sup>2</sup>

The first dimension of the history of modern art exhibitions unfolds directly from these beginnings, and has to do with how exhibitions have exploited, denied or confounded the view that art, and the experience of art, properly belong to a public arena. As Thomas Crow has argued, the important and persistent tension here is between the notion of the experience of art as individual and private versus the very form of the exhibition itself which allowed for an artistic public sphere.<sup>3</sup>

The tensions between the public and the private, between the collective and the individual, evolved in what seems a quite ragged fashion over the course of the nineteenth century, ragged because of the uneven development of those various spheres – civic, commercial and social – that each came to have a stake in displaying art. Yet it's not hard to see that by the end of the century, with the maturation of the art market and of a consumer culture, the concept "exhibition" had quite lost any specificity it might once have had as a civic form or public arena. Consider that the dealer Durand-Ruel opened his apartment, hung with Impressionist paintings, as an exhibition for Paris tourists, and this, according to guide books, in 1900 (fig. 27.2).<sup>4</sup>

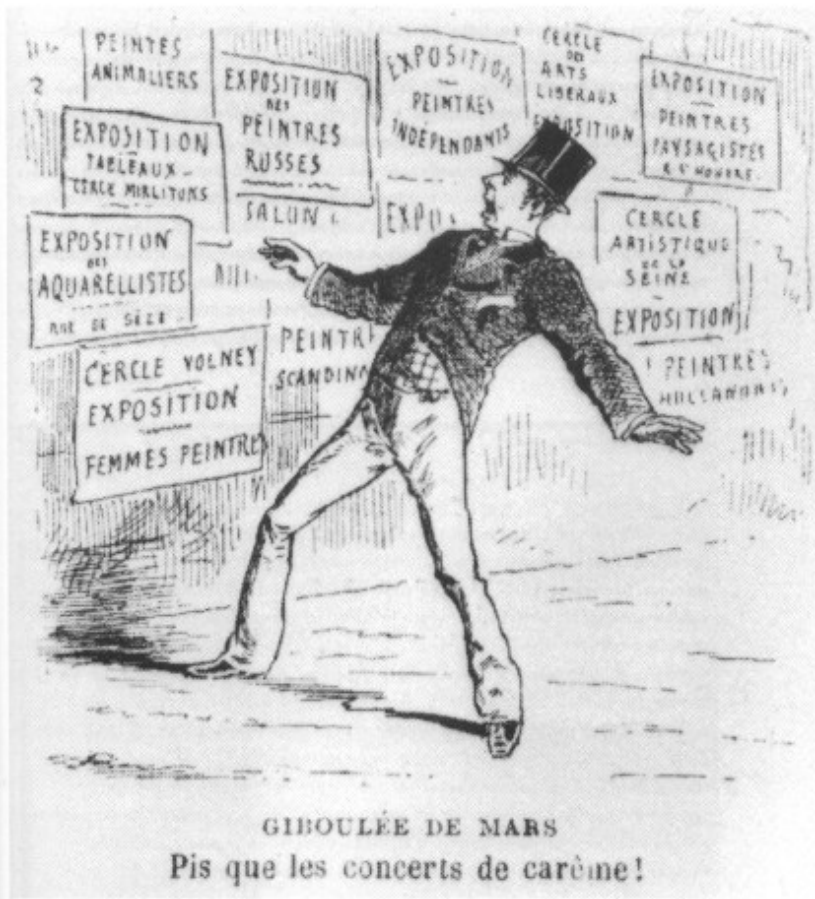


The dealer had obviously deemed that one of the best ways to show these works was to appeal to the domestic imagination, to mount an exhibition within a house, with the blinds drawn against the public life outside. As exhibitions transgressed that wall in bourgeois life between public and private, societal and domestic, becoming seemingly all pervasive yet also increasingly differentiated, what needs tracing are the consequences this had for the experience of art as a commercial, individual or critical engagement.

As a form, the temporary exhibition typically involved assessing unfamiliar objects in a provisional context. The exhibition form separated the sites of presentation and reception from those of production and often from those of use and ownership as well. It offered instead a unique field for comparative contextualization, one often claiming to make visible for its audience some more consequential or enduring entity than its own provisional nature and limited contents: for instance, at the Salon, the state of contemporary art in France; or at an artist's retrospective, the highpoints of a lifetime of painting. Criticism, the genre of writing that came into being alongside the public art exhibition in the eighteenth century, often operated precisely in this unstable domain of the temporary show and

its claims to significance and consequence. Yet forms of criticism, tied closely to the history of the press, and those of presentation did not necessarily evolve in tandem over the century, and their interrelationships are difficult to generalize. Consider, for instance, that when critics were invited in the 1870s to the new circle and society exhibitions that featured recent works by member artists, some professed discomfort at the prospect of reviewing the displayed pieces because the privacy of the setting seemed not to allow for the "public" discourse of criticism. Intimate exhibitions with intimate works seemed to call for a different sort of social exchange and evaluation, and it was not clear in these cases what the greater significance of the show and thus the purpose of criticism should be.<sup>5</sup> Moments such as these disclose the considerable tensions that occurred in the development of the modern art world over the appropriate role of criticism, over the proper functions and audiences for exhibitions, and over the desirability of shows being taken to signify something more than an occasion for looking at art.





## EXHIBITION AS REPRESENTATION

Closely related to these issues is that of how exhibitions have functioned to represent some totality or entity greater than themselves. What interests me might, on one level, be described as a history of both the intuitive and explicit concepts around which art exhibitions have been organized and their contents selected, reviewed, promoted. Put otherwise, this is a history of the notions that have governed inclusion, exclusion and value.

Here the period we're considering is restlessly experimental. Two of its most innovative formats went on to become staples of twentieth-century modernism: (a) the monographic or retrospective show, in place by mid-century and quite common by 1900, and (b) the art-movement show, less common but already familiar by the 1890s.

Among the wide range of nineteenth-century exhibition types, others have only recently come back into their own. A once viable enterprise was the combination of thematic show and charitable/political cause as, for instance, in the exhibition mounted in support of the victims of the Greek War of Independence, held at the

Galerie Lebrun in 1826, where Delacroix displayed his *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi*. By the 1880s, as can be seen in a contemporary cartoon recently republished by Tamar Garb (fig. 27.3), there were specialized exhibitions in Paris that invited readings of their contents in terms of ethnic, national or gendered traits. Amid the signs for watercolorists, independent artists and animal painters in the cartoon there are announcements for exhibitions of women artists, Russian painters and Scandinavian ones.<sup>6</sup> Seen from this perspective, the culturally specific show appears not to be so much a post-modern creation as a modernist suppression.

We should not only chart the appearance (and disappearance) of such exhibition categories on a descriptive level, but try to figure how art exhibitions expressed the entities they were taken to evoke. How did one go about representing through exhibition an artist's career in 1885? Or an ethnic or national identity? What was the relationship between the assertion of a dominant term and readings of the show? Did visual presentations and critical texts each have their own modes of narrating or essentializing such matters? We might begin in this manner to bring the analysis of art exhibitions closer to the level of work that has been done on other types of displays. For it seems that nineteenth-century art exhibitions have not, as a lot, been

subject to anything like the sophisticated work that, say, Stephen Bann has done on how museums represented history and memory, or that Timothy Mitchell has done on how universal expositions represented colonial societies.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, it might be worthwhile to examine how and when exhibitions came to be portrayed as historical actors. In the period just before World War I, art exhibitions were promoted as events that would leave in their wakes transformed viewers and revolutionized artists. The Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne in 1912, the Post-impressionism shows in London in 1910 and 1912, the Armory Show in New York and Chicago in 1913, all were cast in the role of bringing modernism from foreign shores to their respective cities. Such representations of the exhibition's transformative power and historical mission were obviously related to the claims that had already been made for more than half a century on behalf of the progress embodied in universal exhibitions, but now these claims were accelerated for the distribution of modern art by an entrepreneurial avant-gardism. The precise examples are less important here, though, than the largely unexplored questions they raise, questions of how shows were seen to function in relation to everyday life and the roles they were accorded in promoting artistic and social developments.



## VIEWERS IN THE EXHIBITION'S IMAGE?

The third dimension of this history entails an analysis of spaces and installations, and of the experiences – both social and phenomenological – they prepared for the visitor. It asks how physical arrangements and methods of presentation sought to turn visitors into good viewers, and whether exhibitions could create through these means viewers in their own image.

Obviously here would be the place to describe those customs that guided art's display in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – such things as frames, wall colors, picture hangs, room sizes, sky lights and potted plants – all those things that seem rarely to have been described at the time and whose selection must have simply been guided by habit, good taste, common sense. These were arrangements that worked no doubt to suggest who was the socially appropriate viewer, what sort of environment art required, where one should stand, even how one should regard the works. Consider, for example, the emphases in this representation of a show put on by a Paris art circle in the 1860s (fig. 27.4) where the disposition of works on a single or double level in an intimate setting seems to invite close inspection, exemplified by

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◆ 27.5 Honoré Daumier, "Don't you think, my dear, a person must be a bit touched to have her portrait done like that?", from *The Public at the Salon*, 1852.

the actions of the standing and seated figures.

Here, too, would be the place to reckon with the changes that resulted in new desires and values in viewing. A surprising example of innovation that has recently come to light is Jacques-Louis David's use of mirrors in exhibitions, first in a Louvre apartment in 1799 where a mirror was placed at a distance from his *Sabine Women*, and again in a Paris apartment in 1824, where the mirror made his *Mars disarmed by Venus* seem, at first take, to be suspended in mid-air. Dramatizing viewing from near and far, inviting contrasts between surface inspection and disembodied illusionism, serving as a test of compositional coherence, the displays seem to have been designed to introduce a heightened consciousness of the stages of viewing itself.<sup>8</sup> Potentially more revealing for the history of display than these and other relatively isolated examples of innovation during this period, however, is the question of why installation was not more often called upon in such dramatic ways to enhance, enforce or multiply ways of seeing. What was it about painting that left it relatively unaffected in this age of dioramas, panoramas and other spectacular presentational strategies? Were measures of decorum appropriate for the exhibition site and audience made to dictate modes of visibility suitable for the art, or vice versa?

It's often a consequence of speaking of effects of display to assume a normative viewer and to speak as if visitors were all properly situated or instructed, all acted upon in such a way as to become identical to the presumed effect of the exhibition design. But we should also try to arrive at some estimation of those visitors who would not have known to see inside an exhibition custom or to detect an innovation and respond to it as such, those who continued to maintain their own ways of seeing inside the show. The vast majority of such instances are, of course, unretrievable for the history of spectatorship: the perceptions, acts or complaints of individuals who left no record.

Still, we do have vivid representations in caricatures and criticism of aberrant viewing. Consider, for instance, Daumier's print with the caption "A person must be a bit touched to have her portrait done like that" (fig. 27.5). A rough-featured woman looks at the statue before her as if it were a person, rather than apprehending it within the proper conventions: portraits are not nudes, and nudes, not portraits. Ignorant of the categories that separate art from life, the speaker cannot navigate the Salon properly. Moreover, to make the ignorance all the more complete, we assume that it's she, in the print's foreground, who speaks the caption and blunders over



nudity rather than her male companion, close behind. Just as such representations expose the conventions of what is required for good viewing, so exhibitions now become the public tests of spectatorial competency. And in the caricatures, not "getting it" clearly tends to be a matter of class and gender.

In contrast to the caricatures' reduction of the exhibition to a normative "it" to be got, however, the arrangements and conventions of many nineteenth-century shows seem to have permitted and encouraged diverse types of observation. To judge from illustrations and criticism, for example, amateurs seem to have known how to judge works high on the wall of the Salon by exercising a combination of magnification and imagination that brought the *factures* of those works in for close inspection, thus allowing for appreciation as in the studio. Rather than positing a single notion of a good viewer based on the effects or categories of presentation, then, it's probably more productive to consider such shows as functioning complexly in relation to different types of visitors. On the one hand, they set up a field of possibilities, accommodating or soliciting a range of gazes; on the other, they provided for some a set of conventions against which class and gender could be foregrounded, and competency and its exclusions displayed.

#### IMPACT ON ARTISTIC PRODUCTION

We still need to work towards a fuller understanding of what might seem to be the best explored of these dimensions of the modern art show: how exhibition forms and demands have affected artistic production. In what ways did modern art internalize exhibition schedules, formats, modes of unity, of visibility and even of sociability into its own production? Monet's series are as clear an instance as one could imagine of an art that would be inconceivable without the one-person show or more specifically, the one-person/one-room show so popular in the 1890s. Similarly, according to David Cottington, Picasso's annual creation in the early twentieth century of a single large painting summarizing the state of his art was the carry-over of a Salon mode of production, even though most of these works, including the *Demouelles d'Avignon*, were not intended for public presentation at all.<sup>9</sup> In addition to such direct connections which could readily be multiplied across the century, other more oblique relations have yet to be explored, having to do with how works may have been made to anticipate the less objective conditions of their own reception. Many of these conditions I've already touched upon, in discussing the public and private, commercial and critical dimensions of the modern exhibition and its claims to represent a significant entity greater than itself. Seen in its largest frame, interpreting how these developments have been exploited or denied by artists might amount to rewriting the history of modern art from the perspective of its anticipated reception.

I want to conclude on a more modest note by asking what might be the value of such a history for the way that we display modern art now.

One way to open up this question, at least regarding the exhibition of nineteenth-century materials, is to reflect on how museums used the history of display in the 1980s. Remember the National Gallery, Washington's recreation in 1981 of a Paris Salon for "Rodin Rediscovered"? Exhibitions about exhibition seemed to make for more adequately contextualized presentations of the works, even to overcome the great divide between the space of the museum and the history of the art. Thus, when Patricia Mainardi critiqued the installation of the Musée d'Orsay, she spoke in the name and defense of "history," arguing that the museum's contents should be arranged as they would have been in nineteenth-century shows. Mainardi took the situation of a work's initial exhibition to be its most meaningful (for her, its most overtly politicized) context and contended accordingly that the Orsay installation should restage the Salon's confrontations – Manet, say, versus the academic painters.<sup>10</sup>

If the goal of simulating nineteenth-century exhibitions was to allow the modern viewer to approximate how the art would have been experienced, what such experiments have tended to produce instead has been a distinctly twentieth-century form of spectacularization. In the nineteenth century, many display practices could still seem extensions of other conventions in social life, not a specialized installation that was itself to be foregrounded. If for this and a number of other, equally obvious reasons our experiences cannot be the same as nineteenth-century viewers', perhaps installation would better be conceived as a bridge from present to past.

An extensive history of exhibitions, one directed less at re-creating specific shows and more at establishing the general horizons of nineteenth-century practices, might be drawn upon for these ends. Rather than aiming to arrest the works and our perception of them at a supposedly conclusive juncture (in contrast to the multiply-situated and on-going histories of the objects themselves), it might be preferable to devise installations that acknowledge the temporal fluidity of the museum space. This is not a proposal in favor of ahistoricity, but rather of a different approach to how display might be historically informed. For as I hope to have suggested here, the exhibition of modern art is a far richer, more uneven, multivalent and consequential set of developments than we know how to trace or conceptualize now. Drawing out the broader issues that this history raises concerning the viewing, making and representing of modern art, both then and now, seems its best use.

For a conclusion, let's back up one step. Before positing any use for its materials, a study of this history might first and foremost provide some needed distance on the present, when exhibition and installation have become both a curatorial discipline

and an artistic medium. We're no doubt too close to this situation as it has developed over the past thirty years to grasp fully its historical significance. Comparison with the past two centuries may be our best and perhaps our only means of throwing into relief the peculiarities of our own practices, thus making them available for critical analysis.

#### NOTES

This essay is adapted from a talk I gave at the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies in March 1994. I have kept the flavor of an informal address but added examples and notes.

- 1 Yve-Alain Bois, "Exposition: esthétique de la distraction, espace de démonstration," *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, 29 (Autumn 1989), pp. 57-79.
- 2 *Dictionnaire universel d'Antoine Furetière*, Hague and Rotterdam, 1690; rpt. Paris, 1984.
- 3 Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven, 1985. For later in the century, see Patricia Mainardi, *Art and Politics of the Second Empire: The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1857*, New Haven, 1987, and idem, *The End of the Salon*, Cambridge, 1993.
- 4 Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, Princeton, 1994, pp. 59-60.
- 5 Martha Ward, "Impressionist installations and private exhibitions," *Art Bulletin*, 73 (Dec. 1991), p. 607.
- 6 For women's exhibitions at this time, see Tamar Garb, "Revising the revisionists," *Art Journal*, 48 (Spring 1989), pp. 62-70.
- 7 Stephen Bann, "The poetics of the museum: Lenoir and Du Sommerard," in his *The Clothing of Cleo*, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 77-92; and Timothy Mitchell, "The world as exhibition," *Society for Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31 (1989), pp. 217-36.
- 8 David also used a mirror in the exhibition of the *Coronation of Napoleon*. For all three instances, see Dorothy Johnson, *Jacques-Louis David: Art in Metamorphosis*, Princeton, 1993, pp. 132-4, 270-1. For a different interpretation of the *Sabine Women*, see Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "David's *Sabine Women*: body, gender and Republican culture under the Directory," *Art History*, 14 (1991), pp. 397-430.
- 9 David Cottingham, "What the papers say: politics and ideology in Picasso's collages of 1912," *Art Journal*, 47 (Winter 1988), p. 353.
- 10 Patricia Mainardi, "Postmodern history at the Musée d'Orsay," *October*, 41 (Summer 1987), pp. 30-52.