Salon to Biennial — Exhibitions That Made Art History

Volume 1: 1863-1959

Conceived and edited by Phaidon Editors and Bruce Altshuler Introductory essay and chapter introductions by Bruce Altshuler



To exhibit is to find friends and allies for the struggle. —ÉDOUARD MANET, 1867

The study of exhibitions provides a fascinating route into art history. Here the social, political, and economic forces that shape artistic production and distribution come together, exerting their various pressures on artists, critics, collectors, dealers, institutional players, and the art-viewing public. The primacy of the individual artist is fundamental to our understanding of artistic invention, but Manet's observation suggests that the social world within which artists work, the groups and interpersonal relationships that they form, is also critical. This social dimension has never been more prominent than in the modern period, a time of avant-garde movements and manifestos, and of the exhibitions that mark their activity.

The standard story of modern art begins with the break from Academic art by such figures as Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet, and it is punctuated by shows of their work outside the conservative Salons controlled by the French Academy. Indeed, Manet made his remark on the role of exhibitions in just such a context; it comes from the catalog for a show of his own work that he organized and presented alongside Courbet's display of his own paintings. Both exhibitions were located in independent pavilions erected between the sites of the Salon and the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris. These self-presentations exemplify the artistorganized exhibitions that would be crucial to the development of advanced art during the next hundred years.

The received model of avant-garde rebellion seems wholly appropriate here, for the 1867 Salon was one of the most restrictive in history, with 2,000 of 3,000 submissions rejected by the conservative jury. Those rejected included Manet, Paul Cézanne, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, and Frédéric Bazille-the most complete exclusion of members of the future Impressionist group ever imposed by the Salon. This across-the-board rejection of advanced painters was not consistent with previous or subsequent jury selections, however. The 1864 Salon had included paintings by all of the above-mentioned artists except Sisley, who seems not to have submitted an entry. In 1868, a year after the mass rejection, Renoir, Manet, Claude Monet, Pissarro, and Sisley were all accepted into the Salon. Presumptions of bias against the new are equally confounded when one considers that in 1855 the government-organized Universal Exposition offered one-person retrospective exhibitions to Eugène Delacroix and Courbet, aesthetic foes of the Academy and of the arch-Academic Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, who was also given such a retrospective. Courbet declined the offer, instead mounting his first independent show just across avenue Montaigne from the 1855

societies; most were relatively conservative but some, such as the Secessions of Vienna and Berlin, were highly innovative on occasion. Preeminent among artist-led groups were the organizations that mounted the two alternative Parisian salons, the Salon des Indépendants (established in 1884), early home of Neo-Impressionism, and the Salon d'Automne (established in 1903), site of concentrated displays of Fauves and Cubists.

Beyond exhibition societies with venues of their own, many artist-organized shows were held in nonart spaces procured for the occasion, a major precedent being The First Impressionist Exhibition, which was mounted in the former studio of the photographer Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) in 1874.14 This tradition is central to the history of the avant-garde, from the Café Volpini exhibition of Paul Gauguin and friends on the grounds of the 1889 Universal Exposition and the two Die Brücke exhibitions held in a Dresden lamp showroom in 1906 to "The Times Square Show" organized by the artist group Colab in 1980.15 Independent siting is characteristic of the artistorganized display of advanced work, but such shows also took place in galleries turned over temporarily to artists by sympathetic art dealers. Examples include some of the best-known exhibitions of modern art, including the first Blaue Reiter show in Munich in 1911, "0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures" in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) in 1915, the Berlin "The First International Dada Fair" of 1920, and the 1938 "Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme" in Paris.

Without minimizing the centrality of the artists and their exhibitions, it is important to make clear that art dealers and the commercial trade were also essential to the development of advanced art. The very idea of the avant-garde-of a series of masters and movements that progresses by repeatedly overthrowing accepted norms and practices-was inseparable from a commercial system of investment and exhibition. In exhibiting and selling Impressionist paintings, dealers such as Paul Durand-Ruel demonstrated that significant profit could be made from the new art, and they carried on by investing in works by Vincent van Gogh, Gauguin, and Paul Cézanne. After the state presented the Impressionists as the height of French cultural achievement at the 1900 Universal Exposition, a series of large retrospective exhibitions at the alternative Paris salons positioned the Post-Impressionists as the next masters in a lineage of aesthetic innovation. Assembled in collaboration with the dealers who had invested in this tradition of the new, these retrospectives-along with the ideology of artistic progress that they representedestablished the historical narrative in which young artists hoped to find a place. New movements-Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism-arose to continue the line, promoted by cultural impresarios such as Guillaume Apollinaire and F. T. Marinetti, and profits beckoned to the dealers

- 4 The jury of the Salon, Paris, 1903.
- 4 © Cubist installation, Room 11, Salon d'Automne, Paris, 1913.
- Deband Manch retrospective, International Exhibition of the Sonderbund, Cologne, 1912.
- Works by Willi Baumeister, Oskar Schlemmer, Läszlö Moholy-Nagy, and Hans Belling, National Gallery, Crown Prince's Palace, Berlin, 1930.
- 35 Works by Piet Mondrian, Mies van der Robe, and others in El Lissitzky's Abstract Cabinet, Landesmuseum, Hanover, 1927–28.











and collectors who supported them. It would be wrong to characterize their motivations as wholly venal, of course, for engaged dealers were committed to the new art and often made sacrifices to support it.

Large exhibitions outside France exported the process begun in Paris, displaying both modern masters and new candidates for the lineage. In 1910 Roger Fry named the newest canon with his controversial exhibition at London's Grafton Galleries, "Manet and the Post-Impressionists." That same year the second exhibition of the Munich New Artists' Association presented a comprehensive view of what was being done in Paris, including paintings by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who refused to display their work in the huge French salons, (Munich in 1910 also hosted shows of works by Gauguin and Henri Matisse, plus a major exhibition of Islamic art that drew visitors from across Europe.) The most impressive of the prewar pan-European exhibitions was the International Exhibition of the Sonderbund, held in Cologne in 1912, which included significant retrospectives of van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Edvard Munch, as well as a large survey of current painting focusing on French and German artists.¹⁸ Soon this combination of historical narrative and contemporary report would transform the American art world, when the organizers of the 1913 Armory Show in New York attempted a version of what one of them had seen in Cologne, complete with a display of Post-Impressionist masters.

In addition to artists and dealers, as well as the critics and collectors who were so crucial to the system, museums became increasingly important. But while artists and the art trade were in the business of presenting the new, this was a conceptual challenge for museums, which were viewed as institutions dedicated to collecting and displaying works that had withstood the test of time.19 As Gertrude Stein allegedly stated, something could be modern or it could be in a museum, but it could not be both. Although museums had collected works by living artists throughout the nineteenth century, after the advent of modernism, art that was new in fundamental conception as well as in chronology was largely excluded. In 1818 the Luxembourg Palace was converted to the Museum of Living Artists and charged with holding works that might someday ascend to the Louvre. The government purchased paintings and sculptures from the Salon for the Luxembourg and for a growing system of provincial museums, but not until 1896, after much controversy, did a group of Impressionist works enter the collection, the result of a compromise accepting a portion of Gustave Caillebotte's gift of his collection to France.

That same year, Hugo von Tschudi was named director of the National Gallery in Berlin, an event that heralded the leadership of German museums in collecting and displaying contemporary art.⁵⁰ (In 1912 Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc dedicated the Blaue Reiter Almanac to his memory.) Tschudi's acquisition of modern art in Berlin, and then in Munich at the Neue Pinakothek, was carried on by other museum directors throughout the country. By the 1920s they were bringing in the work of the international avant-garde in substantial numbers and, in the process, providing significant support to progressive German artists. Only with the Nazis' removal of close to sixteen thousand artworks from state museums would the extent of their purchases become clear. In 1937 the German public was able to see a selection of this confiscated work brutally presented in the "Degenerate Art" ("Entartete Kunst") exhibition, whose attendance, ironically, was the greatest of any modern art show of the century.

Museums were important not only for their growing role in supporting and confirming contemporary artistic developments and placing them within an art-historical narrative, but also for the creation of new display strategies. In this respect, too, the German museums of the 1920s were innovators, with El Lissitzky's 1927-28 Abstract Cabinet, a gallery designed for the Landesmuseum in Hanover, garnering the most attention. Commissioned by pioneering museum director Alexander Dorner, the gallery, created specifically to house abstract art, featured metal-slat walls whose color shifted with the viewer's position and a sliding frame system that allowed for paintings to be readily changed." Dorner, like Tschudi, wanted museums to reflect the dynamism of modern life rather than function as mausoleums of past achievement, and he saw the presentation of experimental work in an interactive setting as critical to that mission. But the most influential installation model to emerge out of Germany moved in the opposite direction, toward a purist, decontextualized space in which artworks are isolated from the world in which they originated: the "white cube."22

The development of modern modes of display is not unrelated to the shifting economic conditions connected with the emergence of the avant-garde. The traditional salon-style presentation, characterized by walls hung with paintings floor to ceiling, had developed in eighteenth-century France and spread throughout Europe, Russia, and Great Britain. Its visual chaos made much of the work difficult to see, and artists were particularly unhappy when their paintings were "skied" high up the salon walls. This exhibition model, however, was designed not for the artists' or visitors' pleasure but to display the paintings toward which the patronage system was geared: large-scale works meant for aristocratic and public settings. With the development of a market of buyers seeking artworks for less grandiose private homes, it became important for smaller paintings to be seen well, and it made commercial sense for art to be shown in something like a domestic environment. Nineteenth-century Parisian dealers such as Durand-







"Modern Works of Art: Fifth Anniversary Exhibition," Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1934.

e ∈ "Bloodflames," installation designed by Frederick Kiesler (right) and curated by Nicolas Calas (left), Hugo Gallery, New York, 1947.

eve "January 5-31, 1969," curated by Seth Siegelaub, 44 East 52nd Street, New York, 1969, with works by (left to right) Douglas Huebler (papers on the windowsill), Lawrence Weiner (stain on the rug near window), Robert Barry (labels on wall near the door), and Joseph Kosuth (newspapers on wall).

↓ Bruce Nauman's video work Good Boy Bul Boy (1985), installed in a private home as part of the exhibition "Chambres d'amis," Ghent, Belgium, 1986. Ruel and Georges Petit and establishments like London's Grosvenor Galleries presented their wares in luxurious interiors that felt far more domestic than the clamorous public salons.

Artists were not immune to such concerns in the display of their own works. Edgar Degas proposed that paintings be hung without crowding in two horizontal rows, and this arrangement was used for the first of the eight artist-organized Impressionist exhibitions.41 The Impressionists showed their work on subtly colored backgrounds instead of the strong red walls of the Salon in an effort to enhance aesthetic appreciation and encourage the purchase of paintings for domestic spaces. In their fifth exhibition (1880) the walls were tinted to coordinate with the paintings that hung on them, and in the sixth exhibition (1881) Pissarro's frames were in colors complementary to each work. (James McNeill Whistler pioneered this emphasis on decorative presentation in his first one-person exhibition in London in 1874.14) Opposing what was viewed as the highly commercial look of the Salon, these artists employed a decorative aesthetic and domestic associations to achieve their own equally commercial ends. Soon the Neo-Impressionists, appearing together in their own room at the Salon des Indépendants, replaced the red wall coverings of the rest of the show with a neutral gray; they also used white and gray frames to emphasize the autonomy of their paintings from the surrounding environment. Here we find ourselves on the road toward the modernist white cube, whose stripped-down character and striving for neutrality also suggest an invitation to aesthetic autonomy.

The adoption of the white cube as an international standard for the display of modern and contemporary art can be credited largely to the exhibitions mounted during the 1930s at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. But it was on a study trip to Germany in the late 1920s that Barr came upon the kind of display that he would adapt for MoMA when it was established in 1929.15 There-in Dorner-installed galleries at the Landesmuseum in Hanover and at the Folkwang Museum in Essen-Barr and his future architecture curator, Philip Johnson, saw pictures widely spaced and hung at eye level on a neutral background, rather than stacked salonstyle on dark walls. Beginning by hanging works on off-white "monk's cloth" and later moving to walls painted bright white, in a clean architectural setting with no decorative elements to distract the eye, Barr presented modern painting and sculpture in a way that highlighted their formal characteristics and relationships. Thus displayed, these works could readily be set within the developmental story of modern art as a path toward abstraction, a narrative whose classic statement he presented at the museum's 1936 exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art." But the white-cube exhibition space has long outlasted the modernist world picture with which it is associated.



And even though there have been noteworthy exceptions—such as the biomorphic installation spaces and evocations of the unconscious in Surrealist display—the white cube has remained the norm for presenting every variety of artistic expression.³⁶

The visual purity of the white-cube gallery relates as well to the geometric abstraction of the 1920s and '30s frequently shown in such spaces, and often the form of an exhibition correlates with salient features of the art on display. For instance, when Kasimir Malevich introduced Suprematism at the 1915 exhibition "0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures," his paintings were dispersed on the walls in a way that reflected the asymmetrical balance and spatial dynamism of the forms within many of the works themselves. Classic Dada and Surrealist exhibitions made deeper connections in the matching of installation and artwork. The German Dadaist mockery of the fine art tradition was as well represented by "Early Dada Spring" "Dada-Vorfrühling")-a 1920 exhibition in Cologne set in the courtyard of a beer hall and entered through a urinal—as it was by Max Ernst's wooden sculpture, which he invited the public to destroy with an axe. And the political anger of Berlin Dada was as clearly conveyed by the form of "The First International Dada Fair" a few months later, with its cacophonous installation featuring posters screaming radical slogans and a mannequin of a German officer with the head of a pig hung from the ceiling, as it was by such works as Otto Dix's painting of men crippled in World War I, 45% Ablebodied. The dreamlike and nightmarish installations created by Marcel Duchamp, André Breton, and their colleagues for the 1938 "Exposition Internationale du Surrealisme" evoke the imagery and emotional tone of many of the paintings and objects displayed, as well as that of Surrealist writing. And the biomorphism of Frederick Kiesler's 1942 design for Peggy Gaggenheim's Surrealist Gallery at Art of This Century echoes the form and feeling of much of the work shown, as did his 1947 assallations of the "Bloodflames" exhibition at New York's Hugo Gallery and the important Surrealist exhibition at Galerie Maeght in Paris.

Sometimes the relationship between exhibition spaces and the works in them is more conceptual than visual or emotional. In 1955 and 1956 the Japanese avant-garde Gutai group exhibited in a pine forest sculptural objects that emphasized their own materiality and a connection with nature. Conceptual art impresario Seth Siegelaub's show "January 5-31, 1969," which featured work deemed wholly concommercial, was staged in an empty midtown Manhattan office, well outside the usual precincts of the New York art world. Siegelaub also proposed that an exhibition of Conceptual art could take the form of a caralog, since such artworks were ideas presented as effectively by documentation as by a physical installation. Here the very

form of presentation is generated by reflecting on the kind of entity being displayed.

Some installations do not so much reflect characteristics of the works as express an attitude toward them. At the 1937 exhibition "Degenerate Art," the Nazi disdain for modern art was demonstrated by surrounding works with racist and reactionary texts and by installing them with an unruliness indicating the disorder that they were said to breed. A less vicious example is Duchamp's installation in New York for the 1942 fund-raising exhibition "First Papers of Surrealism." Commentators variously interpreted the web of string with which Duchamp enveloped the entire display as representing the difficulty of understanding modern art, the current state of Surrealism as it wound old ideas back and forth, or the idea that these works were to be treasured like rare bottles of wine emerging from the cellar covered in cobwebs.

As these examples suggest, there is much to be learned by looking at exhibitions analytically, comparing shows from different times, and examining the role and form of particular exhibitions, and exhibitions in general, within the ongoing movement of art history. The two volumes of Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions That Made Art History are intended to provide material for such study, presenting both visual and written documentation with a minimum of interpretation. As a compendium of exhibition documentation, Salon to Biennial does not recount a single narrative; instead it offers a number of concepts to help illuminate the territory. One is the notion of the salon, understood broadly as a report on recent artistic production. Freed from its conservative use by the French Academy, the salon form has been employed throughout the history of advanced art to present and advocate for new developments, from the alternative Paris salons and great international exhibitions before World War I to the Documentas, biennials, and thematic museum surveys of the last third of the twentieth century. Another central area of investigation is the arthistorical agency of major exhibitions, which not only introduce novel and important work but also delimit the artists and movements that become canonical, from "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" in 1910 to "Sensation" in 1997. Insights are to be gleaned as well from scrutinizing the installations themselves, examining the range of relationships between the art on display and the modes of its

One significant feature of many exhibitions in both volumes of Salon to Biennial is that they were organized by artists. With noteworthy exceptions, however, the incidence of such shows would wane after World War II, as public institutions and nonartist exhibition organizers came to dominate the display of the new. The increasing disempowerment of artists in directing the presentation of their work

which was presented by an institution but conceived and mounted by the participants, to represent a tipping point. From this time on, managetion and control would move away from the artists, with even muside-the-box efforts—shows like "Chambres d'amis" (1986), in which artists installed works in private homes in Ghent, Belgium, and "Places with a Past" (1991), where artists worked with local communities in Charleston, South Carolina—being organized by professional curators. Details of such exhibitions, and of the increasing dominance of institutions of display and promotion, must await our second volume. For this installment of Salon to Biennial, it is the artists when are the primary forces.

Artists are central to these exhibitions not only as creators of the warks and organizers of their presentation, but also as viewers. This generally is forgotten in all the attention that is paid to other members of the audience, from critics and collectors to the public whose stong teactions highlight accounts of so many well-known shows.

Exhibitions are where artists confront work that prompts their future production, their responses combining in varying degrees emulation, reaction, creative departure, and the many anxieties of influence.

Among the most important consequences of such exhibitions is the simulation artists derive from what they see there; private responses complement public ones to yield historically significant developments. The documentation assembled in Salon to Biennial reminds us that these shows were events at which real people had new and transforming experiences, the kinds of experiences that will continue as long as seales are assembled and enter the ongoing life of art through exhibition.

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