

Exhibitionism

What would it mean to speak through an exhibition rather than about it? Could an exhibition posit *exhibitionism* as a form of spatial praxis that curating architecture might assume through the very *form* of the exhibition itself? As things that speak, and things through which others talk, Thomas Demand's "Nationalgalerie," which opened in fall 2009 at Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, is reflexively auratic.

Demand's exhibition coincided with the anniversaries of two pivotal events in German history: the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It comprised 35 photographs, or "crime scenes," billed as composites of collective German memory and its war-torn and politically scarred past where, in Roberta Smith's words, history starts to happen. Uncovered was the half-filled, blue-tiled bathtub in which the notorious, conservative West German politician Uwe Barschel mysteriously died, fully clothed, in 1987. Exposed was Hitler's room in his military headquarters, where he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt. Opened was the door to an office in the Stasi headquarters after the fall of the wall.

Each photograph is an image of a full-scale paper model – what the artist calls a sculpture – that he painstakingly reconstructs from images found in the media. Once photographed, the models are destroyed and the photograph remains the chosen medium through which to present the sculptural work. Hung low, on double-sided, curtained walls that involuted the universal space of the Nationalgalerie, the photographs allowed spectators to clandestinely enter each scene while literally being eschewed by their own reflection in the glossy surfaces. Captions, written by Botho Strauss and printed in the artist's preferred font of Helvetica, were displayed via artist-designed books – which functioned as the exhibition catalogue – enclosed in steel and glass vitrines. The presentation reinforced the objecthood of the text and the caption as a unique work. On the facade Demand hung a blue, lower-case Helvetica, neon sign titling the Neue Nationalgalerie as "nationalgalerie" – thus in one simple gesture, claiming Mies's legendary model of modernism not

as the container of the exhibition but as one form, one full-scale construction akin to the full-scale models that constitute the images of the photographic work; that is, one work among the artist's work as exhibition. This single act created a tautological equation between architecture, exhibition, model, sculpture, and photograph. Mirrored and collapsed, architecture now resided at once inside and outside itself. This equivalence was reinforced by three independent press releases – one each for the building, the exhibition, and the catalogue, none of which credited the curator.

To speak through the exhibition means to see it as a complex, heterotopic, spatial, and temporal mirroring that extends like the Miesian space it occupies: infinitely forward and back, up and down, sideways. Objects and objectivity are no longer seen as an extreme condition of a limiting subjecthood. Rather, what is proposed is a joint epistemic project addressing the historically changing and mutually conditioning relation of “inside” and “outside” knowledge¹ in which subjectivity and objectivity are inextricably linked, and in which each is posited as a limiting condition, inside and outside the other. To speak through the photograph is no longer to see it as an indexical object endowed with significance from a meaning-giving subject, but as considered within contemporary photographic discourse, according to what Judith Butler might term the evidentiary establishment of a truth claim, or what Ariella Azoulay might call “a civil contract” subject to the instability of a truth claim and thus an act (not an object) that is co-constitutive. Object and subject, viewed and viewer, object and frame no longer reside as dichotomous counterparts. Rather they are co-constitutive elements, evidentiary and embodied, a complex, multivalent event registered within the material properties of things in space through which a set of circumstances and forces – political, social, spatial, historic, economic, legal, administrative, regulatory, art and architectural historical – cohere.

Such an apparatus or heterogeneous ensemble has no inside or outside, but is itself constitutive and constituted. It assumes the power of the Heideggerean *Ding*, which lies not in what it reveals but rather in its power to “gather” other elements to it. To be sure, the Heideggerean “thing” is sharply differentiated from the Kantian “object” (*Gegenstand*). While the former is self-sufficient – which does not imply a sort of inertness and is neither captured by its appearance nor by scientific theories about it – the latter is the product of ideas and representations. The “thingness” of the thing participates in Heidegger's theory of enframing (*Gestellen*) that

1. Peter Galison in *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. Lorraine Daston (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 292.

“issues forth” a coming to *presence*. Such “things,” in the thinking of Bruno Latour, maintain the status of the *quasi-object*. Neither a fact – an absolute certainty which can be used as a hammer to break away all the delusions of belief – nor a fetish – an empty stone onto which meaning is projected – quasi-objects are more threadlike, more fragile, more complex, more richly vascularized, more fully able to generate than either the fact or the fetish. Such hybrids, or *factishes*, Latour calls a “ventriloquist phenomenon.” They are “sturdier, much more reflectively, richly invested within a collective practice, reticulated like blood vessels. Reality, not belief, is entangled in its filaments.”²

2. Bruno Latour, “A Slight Surprise of Action: Facts, Fetishes, Factishes,” in *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 272–3.

3. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

4. Latour, “A Slight Surprise of Action: Facts, Fetishes, Factishes,” 281, 288.

Within the modern curatorial lineage of the white cube’s autonomous formalism of the object, what are the implications of *things* as co-constituted, as a richly vascularized assemblage, on curating architecture? Ironically, the question returns us to the very unstylish consideration of origins. *Curate* etymologically derives from one invested with the care (*cura*) of souls, which becomes one invested with the care of objects and whose practice engages in *objectivity* – a knowledge that is unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving.³ How should we collect and value things instead of objects, if they are far from the Platonic object of Philip Johnson’s “Machine Art” and “International Style” shows? How should we classify things if not as autonomous drawings or models, collected and exhibited as artwork within, and separate from, the frame of the institution and exhibition space? How should curators practice if no longer objective?

Latour suggests that a concrete assemblage is a peaceful passage between subject and object. Instead of *breaking* the subtle language of practice within the intimidating choice “is it real or is it fabricated,” for Latour, “things provide a different move, a different register for practice, the *passing shot* or the dialectic repair between object-subject,” what he calls the *fait-faire*. As he writes: “There is no object, no subject, no contradiction, no *Aufhebung*, no mastery, no recapitulation, no spirit, no alienation. But there are events. . . . Action is not what people do, but is instead the *fait-faire*, the making do, accomplished along with others in an event, the specific opportunities provided by the circumstances. These others are not ideas, or things, but nonhuman entities, or as I called them . . . propositions.”⁴

The proposition *exhibitionism* suggests a possible future direction in curating architecture. Initially I saw exhibitionism as reflexive wordplay on the fevered fetish of exhibition

making over the last 20 years – what Hans Ulrich Obrist calls the curatorial turn evident in Jean-François Lyotard’s “Les Immatériaux” as early as 1985 – and an *act* of display that is no longer complicit, but shocks as it denudes, disrupts as it challenges norms. It proposed not an ontological position – as its *ism* might belie – but an open project, a methodological approach and reflexive position, inscribed within the etymology of the term itself.

The term *exhibition* derives from the Latin *exhibere*, meaning to display. The term *exhibitionism* was coined in forensic psychology in 1877 by Professor Ernest Charles Lasègue in his classic article “Les Exhibitionistes,” published in *L’Union Médicale*. Defined then as “the sudden urge to display one’s genitalia in a public forum,” today exhibitionism conjures up the male flasher in the khaki raincoat. Medically, it refers to a range of flamboyant behaviors, as the “willful” display of oneself and one’s person, psychological extremes and paraphilias formerly known as “sexual deviations. Clinically, it encompasses the tendency to act rather than to verbalize internal conflict; it is the externalization of conflict through noncontact.

The moment the flasher opens his raincoat is the moment I witness an event that unfolds in space and around which it gathers, in Heidegger’s terms, an infinite number of elements; or in Jacques Rancière’s terms, the sayable and the unsayable, which exist at the limits of our perception. For in this one instant, political and social forces converge *through*, and in, a body on display – social norms and codes of behavior; the juridical boundaries of moral, criminal, medical, and psychological discourses and practices; legalities of social contracts; issues of policing, capture, and circulation; the co-constitution of subject-object; the social enactment of anger, fear, and violence; structures of gender, identity, and power; forms of communication. Indeed, the exhibitionist can only be named as such if there is someone to witness and validate the act. The viewer is thus invoked as both accomplice, albeit unwilling, and witness, victim and facilitator, where the body in each case remains evidentiary, both as witness (the seeing subject or the gaze of the other) and as object (the genitalia and perpetrator now exposed). In a certain sense, the victim, as in Judith Butler’s photographs of atrocity, is built into the case for truth; that is, there can be no truth without the *other*, or in this case, the victim as witness. To conceive an act of *exhibitionism* within contemporary architecture, or in photographic, scientific, and even legal theory⁵ as a set of largely unwilling interdependencies congruent to architecture,

5. For example: Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008); Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010); Lorraine Daston, *Things that Talk*; Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*; Alain Potage, “Normative Models,” paper presented at Goldsmiths, Centre for Research Architecture, spring 2010.

implies that the ontology of the subject is inseparable from the ontology of the object. Vision and gaze produce, and are produced by, evidence, in which the truth claim is unstable, inclined to complex, often contradictory, and often irreconcilable accounts. Evidence is what we see, what is exposed or obvious to the eye. “It exists,” as Tom Keenan writes, “against the backdrop of a contagion and proliferation in the field of the visible and evidential and takes us on towards the techniques and regimes of vision.” As Butler argues: “It [evidence] is not just a question of two categories which overlap, but a co-constitution that implies the need for a reconceptualization.”⁶

6. Butler, *Frames of War*, 76.

Exhibitionism was inspired by a shift architecture began to take between 2002 and 2004, away from technology as the content of architecture – often manifested as specular and spectacular form – and toward a more engaged, political practice and expanded, even immaterial, spatial field. Embodying such shifts were Eyal Weizman, Philippe Rahm, and Teddy Cruz, to name just a few. Far from “Folds, Blobs, and Boxes” (1999), “Architectures non standard” (2003-04), or “Tall Buildings” (2004), architecture was posited not as an object in space but as a multivalent spatial apparatus in myriad guises, collectively authored, constitutive, and constituted by space. Conflict was seen not as something merely registered in formal geometries, such as in the work of Preston Scott Cohen, nor contained in space, but theorized as productive of, and produced by, space. Politics and “agency” of practice and things were taken up by, among others, Alejandro Aravena in his “Elemental” project and Alejandro Zaera-Polo in his work on the envelope.

Shortly thereafter, between 2006 and 2008, a death knell was dealt to representation in the exhibition of architecture: My “OMA in Beijing” (2006) at MoMA was an immersive installation designed by OMA. It exacerbated architecture’s visual fetish and claimed that an installation should presence architecture and be conceived *as* a work of architecture. The 2008 Belgian Pavilion, “After the Party,” at the 11th Venice Architecture Biennale displaced the entry with a new construction and hung nothing on the walls save captions. Congruent with this, Henry Urbach’s inaugural “architecture” exhibition at SFMOMA (2007) opened with an artwork by Olafur Eliasson. Carson Chan and Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga’s gallery Program in Berlin eschewed any form of architectural representation, showing “Two Point Five” (2008) by choreographer Margrét Bjarnadóttir and artist Elín Hansdóttir, whose time-bound installation of light and

shadow effectively drew our attention to the room around us, as well as attention to exterior light and shadow.

Congruent with these shifts in architecture were other shifts in art: Eliasson's *Weather Room* (2003) presaged the environment as a pressing issue and argued that architectural principles and the spatial environment could perhaps be better exhibited through architecture's alterity, as an environmental installation. Anthony Gormley's *Blind Light* (2007), which likewise dematerialized the object, immersing and disorienting the spectator in a fog room, did the same, perhaps even more convincingly. Architects working as artists, such as Alex Schweder or Tomas Saraceno, invoked the space of the exhibition as a place of experimentation for architecture, often producing what could be termed "bastard" objects. Artists Karen Mizra and Brad Butler created the *Museum of non-Participation* – part of which is simply a banner that travels around, literally creating a forum for discourse and thus opening a propositional space that is inherently architectural. In short, the practice of architecture had become as unstable or open as the object itself. And both were further called into question by the economic collapse in 2008.

Exhibitionism is one way to respond to these shifts. By definition it connotes a display that acts, conflict as productive, and an aberrant mode of behavior. It embodies the profaned and the evidentiary, a category of *things* that collide in the quasi-object in which use-value and aesthetic-value are often conflated. Could this aberrance and conflict as a performative act provide a way forward? Could aberrance suggest categorizations for collecting architecture that no longer rely on the pure, autonomous, modernist divisions of media such as painting, sculpture, photography, drawing, architecture, and film to posit a spatial aesthetics that is implicitly, qua concept, propositional, political, and instrumental; that is appropriate for a local context in which multiculturalism, transnationalism, and globalization are central? Could it address and propose alternate categories, those of the spatial environment, through weather, contagion, catastrophe, accident, institutional critique, spatial tactics, border crossings, heterotypologies, choreographic objects, that are best articulated through things, those *quasi-objects*, that now maintain a hybrid status – part art, part architecture, no longer representational, but presentational, propositional? Could 1:1 bastard objects command a value equal to that of other objects? Could these things be considered, collected as unstable discursive elements – those things through which others speak, that form an excuse for discourse – enable a sort of curatorial

agency as part of a collective spatial practice? Could they be collected relationally, archivally as such? Could they suggest the gallery as a place of experimentation, an alternative form of looking as productive, that exposes instead of displays, that acts, proposes? Could such a method and forum suggest a practice that is both documentary and propositional, performative and productive *as* architecture?

Exhibitionism as a method and open project proposes a mode of praxis involved in the creation of the sensible. It proposes architecture and the architecture curator as a spatial practitioner within a broader spatial aesthetic discourse; that as architecture, the exhibition should not *represent* architecture within the space of the gallery but should presence or produce architecture within the space that is architectural; and that architecture is often best presented through its alterity or *other*. It considers where and how the political enters as a common stage to hear the low man speak, in Ranciere's terms, be it to elevate the value of architecture through reconceiving the thing akin to that of painting and sculpture, or to consider the exhibition and curator as somehow instrument and agent, beyond branding or even knowledge production. To look at architecture in this way is to posit architecture as part of a broader spatial-social-political-aesthetic discourse, at once inside and outside itself. It is also a reflexive position that argues the display of architecture should be congruent with the most recent practices. To say as much means that the exhibition is no longer contained in space, but is constitutive of, and constituted by, space. Exhibition as architecture, architecture as exhibition. A reflexive mirror that proposes what Foucault calls a heterotopic space.

Since its "turn" in 1985, curating has run the gamut from the amassing and display of dead objects to the assemblage of people, practitioners, and relations, and from curator as institutional demigod to independent public intellectual to Hollywood film star. What *exhibitionism* cogently proposes is that this turn leaves us with an open model – the flash between the two sides of the raincoat – for a possible future direction. This is not to say a middle road. Nor is it to override or discount one form for another. It is not to say there aren't those who might be out there doing this already in practice – for showing architecture outside architecture, in its alterity, is all too common these days. Rather, it is to involute what has become the paradigmatic way to talk about objects and disciplines (practices) in terms of the media they adapt and to add another layer onto the contemporary project in which curating architecture cogently reflects and mirrors

a form of architectural practice itself. Hence part of this agenda is strategic and lexical, involving a kind of semantic laundering within the curatorial discourse, which, when circulated, could become operative in order to shift what have become norms and to naturalize an alternative discourse; part of it is physical; and part is disciplinary, to consider the curator as a spatial practitioner when all, it seems, are eager to claim themselves as curators.

Like Demand's work, in which photography acts merely as a medium through which to present his sculpture, the gallery or exhibition hall becomes one discursive element within a spatial practice that mobilizes architecture within and outside the institution. Thus Demand's exhibition presents only half the story. If reason works when it exposes and yet still informs the Enlightenment position behind art, the difference here is that architecture proposes: it acts. If our own era is that of space, of juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered, as Foucault writes; if the most pressing political issue of our day is the environment; if the exhibition has entered as the primary and artistic spatial construct of our day; and if the curator's medium is now space and *things*, then perhaps the most pressing curatorial question of the day is not what can be exhibited but what can be done. In architectural terms: What does one propose?

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