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The contemporary art exhibition as artistic *medium*

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

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* The title of the subchapter is a reference to Heinich and Pollak's "From Museum Curator to Exhibition Auteur: Inventing a Singular Position," in Greenberg, Reesa, Ferguson, Bruce W. and Nairne, Sandy, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London-New York, Routledge, 1996.

Can the exhibition be considered an artistic *medium*, and if so, under what circumstances? But is the concept of medium still relevant for contemporary art? And what are its current theoretical meanings? These are the fundamental questions from which my research starts. It began with an exclusive focus on artistic practices. Along the way, I decided to dedicate part of the research time to curatorial practices, since the exhibition is, after all, their privileged medium, and references to exhibition as medium are most frequently found in this discursive space, with several meanings and, I felt, insufficiently grounded or made theoretically explicit. Therefore, in the first of the three chapters in which I structured the paper, I deal (mainly) with curatorial ways of working with the exhibition, although my analysis supports the convergence of practices in contemporary art. The other two chapters are devoted to artists' work with the exhibition as a medium, in three types of spaces: the gallery, the museum, and the biennial pavilion.

The objectives that shape my research are to identify and define: the means of constructing and conveying meanings within the exhibition (chapter 1); the elements of the exhibition apparatus that contemporary artists incorporate into their work in order to create content (chapter 2); the mechanisms by which they give the exhibition its function as a support for the artwork (chapter 3); and, finally, through what kind of supports (and techniques) artists manipulate the exhibition (chapter 3).

The first chapter, which problematizes ***The transformative exhibition or How the exhibition generates meaning***, is guided by a few central questions. Firstly, it is the question suggested by the title of the chapter: how *does* the exhibition generate meaning? Specifically, if the exhibition is a medium through which meaning is created, what are its signifying devices? And how are they used? What are the curatorial techniques, strategies

and practices and what role do they play in constructing meaning within an exhibition? Are curatorial acts capable of producing new meanings, and if so, how do curatorial positions relate to artistic ones?

The first part of the chapter, *Technologies of juxtaposition*, proposes juxtaposition as a signification device within the exhibition. In section a. *Modes of address and discursive acts* I follow Ivan Gaskell who, starting from the exhibition scenario created by Christopher Brown at the National Gallery in 1996, discusses two curatorial issues raised by juxtaposition and the placing of works in a display scenario: the *mode of address* refers to the dynamic relationship between works and viewer in the exhibition space and privileges the experience of the audience, while *discursive statements* determine, starting from the curator's concerns, the themes to which the curator directs the visitor's attention and the manner of relating the works.[1] Relating artworks to each other in a particular presentation scenario [display] communicates the curatorial discourse, which positions juxtaposition as a nonverbal mechanism for articulating discourse and as one of the principal means of curatorial visual argumentation. Building on Tiffany Sutton's argumentation, the second section, b. *Curatorial acts: the locutionary and perlocutionary modes*, offers a reading of curatorial acts as *communicative acts*. Both modes (*locutory and perlocutionary*) transform the perception of the works, with powerful effect on the audience: the former engages the features observed in the works, while the latter is distinguished by the attention it offers to the relationship with the context. [2]

The selection of works, their juxtaposition and placement in space create interpretative frameworks of the exhibits and art history. This constitutes the subject of section c. *The power of presentation*, *the power of placement*. *Interpretive frameworks*. Curators place the works in a "regime of mutual interpretation" in what Christopher Whitehead calls *meta-frames*, such as the evolutionary (chronological) frame, and the transhistorical frame, based on conceptual and thematic affinities — the latter creates a dialogue between works from

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[1] Gaskell, Ivan, *Vermeer's Wager: Speculations on Art History, Theory and Art Museums*, Reaktion Books, London, 2000, see the chapter „Objects."
[2] Sutton, Tiffany, "How Museums do Things Without Words," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61, nr. 1 (Winter, 2003).

different periods and geographical spaces — or a refined combination of the two through non-linear and multi-directional chronological trajectories.[3]

The main directions of analysis in the first chapter comprise the means of constructing and conveying meaning, that I have singled out in the exhibition: juxtaposition, selection, narrative, theme, and discourse. I have argued that the juxtaposition of works and their placement in a display scenario communicates the curatorial messages without words, which can take complex forms, similar to argumentative approaches in which meaning is constructed gradually through layers and frames of interpretation. Despite divergent positions (favorable or critical) regarding the curated exhibition, curatorial methodologies have a transformative impact on individual works and the exhibition as a whole.

The selection of works and their inclusion in curatorial narratives, contexts of interpretation and modes of spectatorship are brought together under the category of curatorial ideas.[4] Their value-creating capacity is analogous to that of artistic ideas in the new paradigm of art inaugurated by the Duchampian gesture, that redefines selection and presentation as artistic acts. Consequently, the exhibition takes shape, creates meaning and artistic value through curatorial ideas. In this context, I have argued that the curatorial function is no longer confined strictly to mediating objectives, facilitating access to already existing content. Rather, curatorial practice acquires authorship, and the creation of new meanings and contents occurs through its mechanisms of selection, juxtaposition, and placement in unifying narratives.

The thematic and the discursive exhibition models take their names from the two aspects with powerful effects on the nature of the exhibition. From the rich repertoire of techniques and methodologies that create and convey meaning in the thematic exhibition, I focused on *the principle of thematic juxtaposition*. The discursive model, which currently dominates curatorial practices, has integrated exhibition mechanisms within processes that question representation and meaning-making, and has placed the exhibition in a constellation of *discursive forms* that facilitate debate and social intervention. I sketched the background against which these transformations have taken place. Namely, the phenomenon

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[3] Whitehead, Christopher, *Interpreting Art in Museums and Galleries*, Routledge, London & NY, 2012.
[4] Ventzislavov, Rossen, "Idle Arts: Reconsidering the Curator," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72, nr. 1 (Winter 2014).

in which curatorial and artistic practices have been driven closer to each other to the point of their convergence, and the dissolution of traditional classifications of roles in the field of art. Moreover, I was interested in the ways in which these transformations are grafted onto the exhibition environment. Thus, I have argued that artists' appropriation of the exhibition as a full artistic medium, the reinvention of the curated exhibition as an authorial, subjective medium, one that is conceived, presented and perceived as a totalizing entity or as a whole, as well as its restructuring, by creating dialogue between a multiplicity of authorial positions, establishes the role of the exhibition as the privileged medium through which meaning is generated in contemporary art.

In Chapter 2, ***Thematizing the exhibition: gallery, installation, exhibition,*** I set out to identify and analyze the types of art for which the exhibition space has been an essential resource. Thus, I turned my attention to site-specific practices, institutional critique, and installation art, much of which overlap all three categories or approaches. In the first part of the chapter, *The gallery as object of artistic critique*, my interest has focused in particular on the intense period of gallery probing in the 1970s and its transformative effects. And, in equal measure, on the moment that prompted the shift of attention from the art object to its exhibition context, namely minimalism. The context is included in the work and becomes its content, while the relationship between work, space and viewer is redefined. By looking at art practices from the 1960s and 1970s, I suggested that studying the art production from these decades can provide a deeper understanding of the idea of the exhibition as a *medium*. In other words, the *white cube* and museum gallery become the focus of artists' attention, the object of critique and the space of intervention, arguing that the inclusion of its coordinates in the structure of the work gives it the function of support or *medium*.

I analyzed the shift of artistic interest from the work to frame and what this change of orientation represents for the thesis of the exhibition as medium and its implications for the philosophical categories I operate with, mainly artwork – exhibition – medium. The emerging artistic perspectives of the period are linked to the reconceptualization of the notion of site at the level of practice and theory. I considered it important to address the reconceptualization of *site-specificity*, an endeavor convincingly carried out by Miwon Kwon. In addition, it was fruitful to look at the macro-genre of *situated art* theorized by Elisa Caldarola and Eleen Deprez. Kwon's thesis, particularly the third paradigm of site-

specificity, has had a remarkable influence on artistic and theoretical discourse, conceptually mirroring developments taking place at the level of artistic practice. The site of contemporary art can be categorized into three models, according to his proposal: phenomenological, institutional, and discursive. The phenomenological model corresponds to the investigation of the exhibition space (and the relationship between audience, work and presentation context) by minimalist artists; the institutional model is associated with critical practices that intervene in the institution, and the discursive model unhiges the work from its physical location and places it in an immaterial realm, a field of debate, ideas and knowledge.[5] The redefinition of the site through the three paradigms marks a shift from the concrete, literal meaning of the notion to an abstract, metaphorical one.[6]

Italian theorist Elisa Caldarola proposes the concept of *situated art*, a macro-genre that extends from artworks that have a weak relationship with space, to works for which the site constitutes an inextricable part.[7] Caldarola's reconceptualization of site includes an extremely detailed taxonomy, exemplified by installations by several contemporary artists. I pointed out that there is an affinity between the two proposals for redefining the site; they share an essential feature: *site-responsive art* (Deprez) or *situated art* (Caldarola) uses it as a creative means of conveying artistic meaning. The terminological and conceptual developments of the notion of *site* provide the tools for differentiation based on the features that are emphasized in the works chosen as the object of study. Finally, a deeper understanding of the current meanings of the site facilitates the examination of the various ways in which it is treated as a support for artworks, as a resource, in short, as a *medium*.

The reconceptualization of the site opens up broader issues, proposed for reflection in the section *Discourse as site, autonomy of art, and installation art*. Here I discuss Jason Gaiger's critical position towards the third model of the site, as well as the alternative proposal he offers. The British philosopher invites us to look at the same phenomenon from a different perspective, one in which the transformation has less to do with a metaphorical becoming of the site, in which the works (re)acquire a delocalized and nomadic quality

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[5] Kwon, Miwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. & London, 2002.

[6] Gaiger, Jason, "Dismantling the Frame: Site-Specific Art and Aesthetic Autonomy," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49, nr. 1, (January 2009): 43–58.

[7] Caldarola, Elisa, *Filosofia dell'artecontemporanea: installazioni, siti, oggetti*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2020.

(reminiscent of the modernist model), and more to do with the phenomena that have altered the concept of art in the period to which Kwon refers. [8] According to Gaiger's theory, the site-specific artistic practices analyzed by Kwon places art back in its social context and challenges the separation between art and other fields of activity, dictated by modernism.[9] Gaiger's position captures the anxieties caused by the desire to preserve the critical capacity of site-specific practices in the context of the spectacularization of its social expansion and, in this sense, moves forth the question of the autonomy of art.

In the second part of the chapter, *Exhibition as installation art*, I set out to answer a question that frequently comes up in the analysis of site-specific installations that use the exhibition apparatus as a resource. Namely, is it still possible to distinguish between the works of installation art and exhibition installation (or, more simply put, between installation and exhibition) in the context of the convergence of the two installation forms? In this regard, I discussed several criteria of differentiation theorized recently by Boris Groys, Claire Bishop, Eleen Deprez and Elisa Caldarola, and argued that the distinction is possible and important even in the context of converging practices. However, given the goal of the present research, I focused more on what Deprez terms the "shared ground,"[10] of installation and exhibition, and on delving into an emblematic type of art, that of exhibitions resulting from artistic interventions in museums. I refer to established examples from the history of exhibitions, from 1970-1990, by Andy Warhol, Hans Haacke, Peter Greenaway, Fred Wilson, and Andrea Fraser. These artists, whether exploring, hijacking, subverting, parodying, critiquing or simply appropriating institutional practices, thematize the mode of presentation [display] and museological principles, doubling as elements that convey meaning in the exhibition. In other words, the museum is a medium for these artists whose dual-form installations respond to the museum site and context.

Two works, the first from 1968-1972, and the second from 2022, have been the subject of further analysis. In the *Museum of Modern Art – Department of Eagles*, a paradigmatic case in which the two forms of installation merge, Marcel Broodthaers incorporates the institution's display device and repertoire of conventions into the structure of the work. The

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[8] Gaiger, "Dismantling the Frame," 43-58.
[9] Gaiger, "Dismantling the Frame," 43-58.
[10] Deprez, Eleen M., "Installation Art and Exhibitions: Sharing Ground," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78, nr. 3 (June 2020): 345-350, https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12739

Belgian artist imitates the museum installation and parodies it. The art transport boxes, the opening and closing rituals, the professional transport car parked in front of the studio, all these elements used by Broodthaers in his fiction thematize the exhibition apparatus. Described as "the shell of an exhibition," (with reference to the shell motif present in many of his works), the installation focuses attention on the relationship between container and content.[11] The construction brings together, one by one, all the elements that make up the conditions that confine the production and reception of art, which explicitly become a constituent part of the work.[12] In the words of Benjamin Buchloh, "Broodthaers' museum fictions seem to address both the language and the architecture of the social institution within which the discourse of art is framed and contained."[13] Thus, Broodthaers' exhibition medium encompasses the physical, concrete characteristics of the site as well as the intangible, symbolic elements that make up the museum's performative repertoire of social conventions.

"Plunging" into the present, I discuss in a case study the recent exhibition *If You Prick Us, Do We Not Bleed?* at the National Gallery (2022) created by Lebanese artist Ali Cherri, who appropriates the exhibition techniques of selection, juxtaposition, display, and the museum's conceptual, visual, and conventional vocabulary. Cherri draws from the collection and archive held by the National Gallery to create an exhibition that addresses institutional narratives and policies. Cherri treats these components of the exhibition apparatus as symbolic medium in order to create a personal construction. In analyzing his work, as well as Broodthaers', I look at the overlapping of the two forms of installation. Moreover, I investigate artistic strategies and techniques of working with the material (physical and symbolic), the exhibition installation, and museum methodology, thus the way in which the museum is treated as a *medium*.

In Chapter 3, ***The pavilion: an object of artistic intervention***, the analysis "zooms in" conceptually. I set out to answer the question: are there any philosophical tools for a more in-depth analysis of approaching the gallery as a resource? In the first sections of the chapter

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[11] Owens, Craig, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, University of California Press, 1992. 126.
[12] Buchloh, Benjamin, "The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers," Bronson, AA & Gale, Peggy, *Museums by Artists*, Art Metropole, Toronto, 1983, 53-55.
[13] Buchloh, "The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers," 56.

I identify some theoretical devices by which we can characterize and even differentiate types of exhibition interventions based on the artistic mechanisms used. Much of the chapter is devoted to examining the concept of the artistic medium and its recent reconceptualizations in art theory and philosophy. My analysis was motivated by the necessity of defining the main concept of the thesis as precisely as possible, so as to judge its relevance in the context of mostly unfavorable positions towards this notion in contemporary art. I identified the essential terms and distinctions necessary for reconceptualizing the medium, on the one hand, and for analyzing the techniques, the artistic mechanisms of meaning-making in working with the exhibition, on the other. In this regard, I invoked Stanley Cavell, Rosalind Krauss, and Sherri Irvin, who theorize symbolic supports *(automatism, conventions, rules and practices)*; Dominic Lopes and Elisa Caldarola, who propose and, respectively, develop the notion of *medium profile*; Kendall Walton and, again, Caldarola to discuss the mechanisms by which artists encompass the pavilion in the structure of the work *(prop or content oriented make-believe);* Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin, for the study of expressive processes *(literal and metaphorical exemplification)*. I applied these theories in analyzing a selection of works that share the type of exhibition space in which they intervene.

I dedicated Chapter 3 to a more particular type of space, namely the national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and discussed the tendency of contemporary artists to treat it as the object of interventions within the biennale. I selected 3 case studies from 2005-2022: *Relocating a Structure* by Maria Eichhorn, *The Last Land* by Hans Schabus and *I, Impostor* by Mike Nelson. The British artist "sculpted" a 17th-century urban caravanserai from Istanbul inside the British Pavilion in Venice (2011); Hans Schabus buried the Austrian Pavilion under a 40m-high artificial mountain whose exterior resembled a 3D rendering and whose interior was reminiscent of a Piranesian wooden maze (2005); Maria Eichhorn initially planned to move the German Pavilion from the Giardini using a structural relocation technique, only to bring it back, intact, to exactly the same location. In the end, this overly costly conceptual gesture took the form of an immaterial work, just one of the four components of the project, which also gives it its name, *Relocating a Structure*. The material intervention exposed the meeting points between two architectures: the original 1909 building and the monumental extension carried out by the nazis in 1938. For Eichhorn the

pavilion is an object of conceptual intervention, while Schabus and Nelson see it as unity, an almost sculptural material. In remodeling it, the artists include it in the structure of their works as material and symbolic support.

Starting from Kendall Walton's theory advanced in the 1990s, and its recent development by Elisa Caldarola (2020), I argued that the pavilion is treated by the three artists as a medium that generates two types of involvement from the audience. Walton proposes and contrasts two *games of make-believe*, with distinct directions: they can be directed towards the support, or they can be directed towards the content of the game. [14] Thus, what we call *supports* are means to imaginative ends, in which either the fictional world that is created matters *(content oriented)*, or the supports themselves are the focus of attention, and their purpose is to provide illuminating ways of describing them and their characteristics *(support-oriented)*. I applied these methodological tools to analyze and differentiate the selected artistic interventions of the biennial. Thus, I argued that in Eichhorn's work, the dematerialized, conceptual component functions as a game of make-believe oriented towards the support (the pavilion perceived in its context), just as for Schabus, who thematizes it as a device for visualizing and representing art. In contrast, the imaginative play in which Nelson envelops us is fictional in nature and consequently content oriented.

Subsequently, I provided an in-depth analysis of the central concept of the paper, the *medium*, and the most recent theories that redefine it, as well as some earlier theories that anticipated or influenced them. In doing so, I have shown that the thesis of the pavilion as medium involves several distinctions: first, the Kraussian one that separates the technical/symbolic aspects of the medium from the material ones; and second, the one between the physical medium and the artistic medium proposed by Timothy Binkley. I detailed the reconceptualization of the medium in Rosalind Krauss's thesis by focusing on the notions that make up her theoretical structure: *automatism, convention, and rule*. Following the development of these notions, I found that they were anticipated by Timothy Binkley and, in particular, Stanley Cavell, to which Krauss would turn to for the terms

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[14] Walton, Kendall L., "Metaphor and Prop Oriented Make-Believe," *European Journal of Philosophy* 1, nr. 1 (1993): 39–57.

automatism and *rule*. I stressed the influence of kraussian thought on current definitions of the concept of medium: for example, the idea of "technique" contained in the concept of "technical resource" prefigures the thesis of the *medium profile* proposed by Dominic Lopes in *Beyond Art* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014). In addition, I have shown that echoes of earlier conceptions by Cavell and Krauss can be felt in Sherri Irvin's proposal to view the *rules of presentation, conservation and participation* as symbolic supports that are part of the medial structure of artworks. Irvin's thesis is in line with the definitions of the medium based on its conventional nature proposed by Binkley, Krauss and Cavell. These notions, the *conventions, rules, and practices* are defined as the main symbolic supports identified in my analysis of the concept of medium, to which recent theories give a structuring function.

In these three case studies, I tested the fundamental research hypothesis: the symbolic supports of the exhibition contribute to the creation and conveying of meaning. The mechanisms of meaning-making defined theoretically – imaginative play or *make-believe*, symbolic supports, and the expressive processes generated by the manipulation of these supports – can be found at the level of artistic practice in the studied works. For example, I have argued that the use of rules and practices as support grants expressiveness to Eichhorn's conceptual work. As an overall view, in the three interventions, the techniques of organizing space and experience place the exhibition pavilion within the structure of the work, treated not only as a physical material, but also as a symbolic resource.

To conclude, in the practices discussed throughout this research, the exhibition becomes an artistic medium. The fact of having been made in the medium of the gallery or exhibition pavilion is a constitutive part of the work. Therefore, the identification of the exhibition as a medium contributes to, or is even necessary for a proper appreciation. The artistic medium, even in contemporary art, is essential for the existence and full appreciation of the works.

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