When Display Becomes Art

Living in Exhibition Design

Mathilde Roman

HATJE CANTZ

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To Philippe Duboÿ (1942–2024),
for his generous passion for the work of Carlo Scarpa
and the Italian rationalists

When Display Becomes Art

"I am desperately in need of the bricks … All we need is bricks, PLEASE."
Barbara Hepworth, 1968

Mentioning exhibition design in the contemporary art world often elicits dismissive reactions and bursts of laughter. For many curators and artists, the design of the exhibition lies outside the scope of their specific creative practice and instead belongs to the world of history museums. Declarations such as "a good artist doesn't need an exhibition designer" or "a curator considers the hanging without the exhibition scenography" can still be heard here and there. They are revealing because they express a distrust of approaches to exhibition-making that place too much emphasis on concepts seen as preceding or taking precedence over the artistic act rather than emerging directly from it: the choice of supports for a work—the frame, the pedestal, the picture rail—the space that contains it—the room, the space, the floor, the ceiling—what renders it visible—the lighting, the atmosphere, or visitor itinerary. Yet to assert that display can itself constitute a work of art is to immediately challenge these reservations: first by recognizing exhibition design as an artistic act, one that is too often reduced to its technical aspects, and second, by including it in the creative process. The title of this book evokes the disruption that occurs when the technical elements of an exhibition become embodied within the artistic process and inseparable from the aesthetic experience, a phenomenon that encourages a broader rewriting of art history. *When Display Becomes Art* seeks to confront such hasty judgments and contribute to a wider revaluation of designing an exhibition as an artistic act, one that is informed both by the little-known history of exhibition design and by the practices of contemporary artists who are reappropriating its mechanisms and tools, thereby foregrounding its conceptual implications. The interviews that follow the historical introduction reveal the extent to which many artists have integrated exhibition design into their practice.

The vocabulary of exhibition design first emerged in the European art world in the 1920s. In France, the term *scénographie* referred both to the technical and conceptual arrangement of works within space and to the visitor's movement through an exhibition; the notion that scenography therefore shaped not only exhibition and museum practices but also the general philosophy of exhibitions. In the English-speaking world, the terms "display" and "exhibition design" were preferred, which established links with architecture and interior design. The term "scenography," meanwhile, is more closely associated with theater history, stage design, and the central, fixed viewpoint of the stage-audience relationship. These associations have contributed to the term being rejected by many artists, who fear its distancing effect and its tendency to overwhelm the polysemy of artworks. Institutions also bear responsibility for this unease, as demonstrated by the recent participation of Grace Ndiritu in the 17th edition of the Lyon Biennale, *Crossing the Water*.[1] She created a richly designed exhibition at the MAC Lyon contemporary art museum entitled *The Blue Room*, which was structured around works from public collections. Inspired by a modernist vocabulary as well as regular spiritual retreats, visions from her shamanic experiences, and sojourns at her grandmother's hut in Kenya, Grace Ndiritu develops work situated at the intersection of multiple disciplines and frequently incorporates living elements such as plants. In *The Blue Room*, the floor, walls, ceiling, and lighting all contributed to an exhibition design that invited visitors to expand their perspective, linger in the space, and combine an aesthetic experience with a spiritual journey. Visitors were asked to remove their shoes, immersing them in a colorful environment that conveyed a meditative energy and emphasized a visual shock meant to be felt directly by the body; the artist also urged visitors to sit, lie on the floor, close their220 eyes, and then reopen them. *The Blue Room* functioned as an exhibition display that was itself a work of art, attempting to resist the consumerist appropriation of art by offering an experience that unfolded over an extended duration. The traditional museum labels accompanying individual works were deliberately omitted in favor of emotional and sensory impact, although viewers could deepen the experience by reading a beautifully designed booklet. There was an introduction displayed beside the entrance to the exhibition, and the English version stated, "Exhibition curated and designed by the artist"; however, the French text read "Exposition conçue et réalisée par l'artiste" [Exhibition conceived and produced by the artist], which changed the meaning by significantly downplaying Grace Ndiritu's curatorial and



Fig. 1 *The Blue Room*, Grace Ndiritu, Lyon Biennale, Musée d'art contemporain, 2024

exhibition design work.[2] The errant translation, even if unintentional, contributed to a devaluation of this aspect of the work, which was too central to the overall project for such consequences not to have been considered. For several years now, I have been vigilant on this point while visiting galleries and museums, and have repeatedly encountered similar forms of disregard toward exhibition design, the artistic value of which remains largely unrecognized.

This was not always the case. When André Malraux republished *Le Musée Imaginaire* [Museum Without Walls] in 1965, he included a photograph of Carlo Scarpa's exhibition design for the Museo Correr in Venice on the first page of the introduction, opposite a painting depicting a salon-style hanging (*Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in his Painting Gallery in Brussels* by David Teniers the Younger, 1647). Although Malraux does not comment on Scarpa's exhibition design, this iconographic choice nevertheless testifies to the attention he paid to the contribution of modern notions of exhibition scenography to the history of museography. *The New Museum: Architecture and Display* by Michael Brawne, published by Praeger in 1965, catalogued modern museums built in different parts of the world and offered a valuable analysis of their exhibition-design ambitions on both a conceptual and technical level. During the 1960s, questions associated with exhibition display were rapidly incorporated into architectural history and permeated theoretical research; it is therefore surprising that more than seventy years later they continue to encounter such reluctance.

"Living in exhibition design" is a concept that draws its strength from the tension inherent in its impossibility: one cannot literally live in the design of an exhibition any more than one can truly live in the exhibition itself. The linking of these two terms serves to blur the semantic discord, encouraging artists to become an integral part of exhibition design and creating a place for the question of display in the history of exhibitions. The idea of display becoming art is the idea of an invitation to extend the perimeter of an artwork by including the technical and architectural aspects of its environment. The title of this book is also the legacy of *Live in your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, a show curated by Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969 which helped to broaden the vision of art. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, artists, architects, exhibition designers, historians, and philosophers have been encouraging museums to rethink their architecture, atmospheres, and visitor itineraries, all with the goal of reconfiguring interior spaces so they reflect bodies, emotions, and sensations, thereby transforming ways of seeing and perceiving while

connecting exhibition spaces to broader histories of art and thought. This book is based on a genealogy of exhibition design and artistic practices drawn from the long history of museums and temporary exhibitions. It focuses on the years 1930 to 1960 and serves as a continuation of the first part of my research, which was published in French by Manuella Éditions in 2020: *Habiter l'exposition. L'artiste et la scénographie* [Living in Exhibition: The Artist and Exhibition Design]. Taking a historical perspective provides inspiration for thinking about contemporary productions, but also for engaging with them by reconnecting them to a still little-known part of art history. This research examines moments in which the picture rail, the plinth, the museum label, the visitor itinerary, and the lighting have been employed as tools for transformation, reappropriation, and, at times, emancipation—both of the museum and of aesthetic experience itself—by asserting their central role within exhibition design.

In 2022, Tacita Dean dedicated a large part of her exhibition at the Mudam (Luxembourg) to the works she created for the scenography of the ballet *The Dante Project* (choreography by Wayne McGregor and music by Thomas Adès for the Royal Ballet & Opera House in London). Presented without documentation or contextualization in relation to the ballet, these stage backdrops, which were created for each act using a different medium—drawing, photography, film—were displayed alone, thus achieving an aesthetic and conceptual impact that was enhanced because the exhibition setting afforded the opportunity for a more comprehensive viewing of them. Later, when I saw them again on stage at the Paris Opera,[3] the experience was completely different, with the works creating powerful and highly specific atmospheres for each act as they became inseparable from the choreography, the bodies of the dancers, the costumes designed by the artist, the lighting, and the musical score. During my visit to the Mudam with the exhibition curator, Christophe Gallois, I understood how important it was for Tacita Dean to detach her works from their status as scenography and thus affirm the fuller role they played in her own artistic journey, as they were merely one phase of an extended creative project. There is a long history of artists collaborating on set design or scenography for performances, one that dates back to the early twentieth century, so she was following in the footsteps of many other artists. However, by exhibiting her works in a disconnected manner, she affirmed their primary autonomy from the ballet scenography. Nevertheless, as I left the exhibition and absentmindedly read the exhibition credits on the wall, I was surprised to see that the artist was

credited for the exhibition design in collaboration with Polaris Architects. Through the exhibition, the work lost its dimension as scenography, yet Tacita Dean nonetheless asserted that she had designed the exhibition, a practice often neglected by artists. While these were not works of traditional scenography, even though they were able to fulfill that function for the ballet, from the French perspective, the artist had still carried out the action of "scenographing" the exhibition, and the shift from the passive noun "scenography" to the active verb "scenographing" is significant. It is a question of naming an artistic dynamic whereby the design of the display contributes to the enhancement of the spatial and temporal aspect of the exhibition within the broader creative process, including considerations that have often been overlooked, such as the visitor's itinerary, lighting, seating, wall texts and museum labels, exhibition maps, and, of course, the picture rail in a larger sense. When creating an exhibition design, the artist sometimes consults with scenographers, and always works with production managers, technicians, and the entire on-site team in order to produce artistic elements in a format suitable for exhibition.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, museums have attracted considerable criticism. One especially virulent example was that leveled by members of the Futurist movement, who notably rejected bourgeois archetypes arising from the cabinet of curiosities and the religious temple, which led to exhibition formats that distanced the viewer from the emotions aroused by the artistic experience and reinforced the notion that art should be disconnected from everyday life. However, as Pamela Bianchi points out in *The Origins of Exhibition Space*,[4] along with being displayed in curiosity cabinets, private collections in Venice and the Netherlands were also hung in corridors, staircases, and entrance halls, and the choice of paintings and sculptures was part of a scripted social journey for guests through the domestic space and served as a form of self-representation for the hosts. By placing art in conjunction with the specific uses of a space, the arrangements explored the idea of living with the exhibition and took into account the body of the observer. Pamela Bianchi quotes William Sanderson (1586–1676), who gave advice to his contemporaries on how to choose paintings to hang in the entrance hall or on the staircase, as "the grace of the Painting invites your guest to breathe, and stop at the ease-pease" before allowing them to continue onward to other states of aesthetic pleasure that will mark their progress through the home.[5] The description of the physical and emotional journey of works hung in different spaces of the collector's house

broadens the cabinet-of-curiosities approach, revealing similarities between this historical context and a contemporary vision concerned with creating open relationships between works, bodies, and places that are permeable to the realities of everyday life. Museums have never stopped trying to reinvent themselves by reflecting on their role and status in society, their capacity to contextualize social upheavals, and, according to Michel Foucault's analysis, their ability to produce heterotopias linked to the accumulation of time as well as the accumulation of spaces and bodies.[6]

In a museum, we are multiple bodies, engaging with sixteenth-century artworks in a wholly different manner from contemporary environments and installations;[7] museums, however, have long forgotten they are dealing with human bodies and have given these bodies little consideration in the design of their spaces. As a repository of memory, the museum is first and foremost a place of refuge, a space designed to welcome and collect, preserve and research, but it is also supposed to accomplish a monumental and Sisyphean task of curation in the face of the immense volume of artistic production. Reflecting on this produces the same feelings of anxiety that assail the viewer when watching Alain Resnais's *All the Memory in the World* (1956). This film plays with the conventions of documentary filmmaking to present the work of the French national library, exposing its dystopian dimensions: the corridors, elevators, the aisles of shelves, and the acts of sorting, preserving, and consulting are imbued with an overwhelming sense of responsibility that evokes nightmares and prisons rather than the peaceful haven dedicated to study and knowledge. Also divided into sections and periods, the museum is a segmented space that can be traversed room by room, in a journey punctuated by passageways, corridors, stairways, and elevators. Its carefully controlled organization of spaces open to the public attempts to distract from the invisibility of the works kept in the darkness of the museum's storage rooms, some of which have not seen the light of day since their acquisition.

In *The Hidden Conference* (2023), Rosa Barba creates a dialogue between three installations that she filmed in the storage rooms of different museums: the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, the Tate Modern in London, and the Musei Capitolini in Rome. The camera slips into the basements, pausing on works hung on racks or placed on shelves, regardless of whether they are immediately recognizable masterpieces or little-known paintings; these works become characters and the film becomes a receptacle for their conversations in the

darkness of the storage rooms. The multiple viewpoints enabled by the projections and the complex editing, which integrates the museum architecture, create a contemplative, somewhat melancholic atmosphere, reinforced by the brutalist Tanks exhibition space within the Tate Modern (former oil storage tanks dating to when the building was a power station) where the film installation was presented in 2023. This work powerfully evokes the ambiguity of preservation, which renders the majority of conserved works invisible. The museum is a protective space, ensuring a constant temperature and moderate light, but these preventive conservation strategies also impose constraints that limit the movement of works and undermine atypical exhibition scenarios that are unable to ensure atmospheric stability. The intense summer heat, which is becoming more pronounced every year in Europe, further complicates exhibition projects outside major museums, despite the fact these spaces often have architectural qualities and decentralized locations that make them ideal venues for presenting art from the past.

Cyprien Gaillard's work[8] is permeated by a similar reflection on the conflicting desires to preserve artworks and preserve humanity, with the fates of both directly impacted by the permanent air conditioning used in museum spaces. In 2022, the artist was offered a major carte blanche exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. He chose to create a dialogue between his own pieces and the works of historical figures. From the outset, he sought to include a painting by Giorgio de Chirico, but the display conditions imposed by the potential lenders were clearly not possible given the exposed architecture of the Palais de Tokyo, which regularly struggles with leaks and cannot guarantee a stable environment. For another work by Giorgio de Chirico, the 1928 charcoal drawing *Oreste e Pilade*, which depicts two human figures merging with architectural structures, Cyprien Gaillard devised his own solution. In collaboration with the technical teams at the Palais de Tokyo, he transformed a glass display case from the reserves of a Parisian museum into a customized display unit to exhibit the climate control equipment necessary for the proper conservation of the drawing. The display functions as a work of art by creating a potent ensemble that both provides the necessary quality of atmosphere and questions its necessity. The museum label ironically points out that the drawing had to be placed "on life support," referring both to the artist's conceptual and political gesture and to the work's very human fragility, as well as our inability to come to terms with this reality; we prefer to transform a drawing into a sculpture, and thus undermine its visual presence, rather



Fig. 2 *Oreste e Pilade*, Giorgio de Chirico, 1928, exhibition view *HUMPTY | DUMPTY* Cyprien Gaillard, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2022

than expose it to an uncontrolled atmosphere. Museums are places of conservation that, due to increasingly demanding protective measures, also risk preventing the free circulation of the works in their collections. By inventing a specific device for the exhibition design, Cyprien Gaillard produced a visual effect with powerful narrative force.

This work by Cyprien Gaillard ironically evoked the question of the display case and the pedestal, two central elements of exhibition design conceived as tools for presenting and protecting works of art. Most often integrated into the aesthetics of the white cube, they reinforce the aura of the museum and contribute to distancing the work through a uniform visitor itinerary created by an overall exhibition design plan. However, many artists prefer to integrate pedestals and display cases into their work as a way to intimately link form and support. Constantin Brancusi's explorations into the relationships between the pedestal and the sculpture and the interplay of stacking and assembling different support materials continue to inform this approach, and the artist's process is still very visible today thanks to the preservation of his studio, which was bequeathed to the Centre Pompidou.[9] Brancusi devoted the last years of his life to completely rethinking and analyzing his sculptures as they existed in space. During this period, he no longer produced new pieces and created plaster casts of sculptures that had been sold. His work as an artist then focused on the arrangement of his works in relation to each other, on the creation of compositions, and on the observation of the effects of natural light. The wooden pedestals could become stools for guests, but they could also be combined with stone pedestals in stacks that did not seek any type of uniformity to hold a sculpture. In the photographs and films he made in his studio, Brancusi also interspersed tools and workbenches with sculptures, choreographing their presence. Far from the dominant viewpoint offered by museums, he revealed the full potential of using the design of the display to connect works with elements from a life devoted to art. When he sold a sculpture, he also sold the pedestal, which was often composed of several pieces and combined different materials. While the sculpture maintained its own unified identity that was clearly distinct from the vocabulary of the pedestal, the pedestal was treated as a sculptural element in its own right.

The pedestal has always been an important consideration for sculptors, whether they decide to include it in their work, as Germaine Richier did by treating it as a sculptural element, or to dispense with it altogether by placing the work directly on the floor, as Eva Hesse did.

Germaine Richier often extended human or animal figures with frames that connected them directly to the bronze or stone pedestal, such as with *La Mante, grande* (1946), where the pedestal accentuates the earthy strength of this insect-like woman. Germaine Richier also played with elements of the exhibition design, including for the work *Torse II (Torse de femme Muhlethaler)* from 1941, where the figure, suspended on metal frames, clung to a picture rail to avoid falling. This arrangement creates a fascinating narrative tension between the work and its display, in a dialogue that is often found in contemporary sculpture. Barbara Hepworth made this a subject of creative experimentation in the 1960s as she reflected on ways to reproduce the poignant relationships her sculptures had in gardens within the spaces provided by museums. In 1965, the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands dedicated a retrospective to her work, displaying her pieces in the pavilion designed by Gerrit Rietveld, which has a broad opening onto the garden. The pavilion was built with concrete blocks arranged to create a visual rhythm in the space that played with the full and empty spaces of the raw materials, thus creating a powerful environment for the artworks. Barbara Hepworth drew inspiration from this experience, as well as from Aldo van Eyck's sculpture pavilion for Sonsbeek Park (1966), also built with concrete blocks but left open to the landscape—a creation we will return to in the discussion with Berger&Berger—to conceptualize her retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1968. She designed it in collaboration with the scenographer Michael Brawne, a professor and architect who was an important figure in the United Kingdom, and whose seminal book, *The New Museum: Architecture and Display*,[10] she had read. Eleanor Clayton[11] recounts the importance Barbara Hepworth attached to the creation of pedestals and how the artist strongly defended her choice to use bricks as a base for some of her sculptures, despite the difficulties this posed for the institution, going so far as to write in a letter to Michael Brawne: "I am desperately in need of the bricks … All we need is bricks, PLEASE."[12] Barbara Hepworth thus created a striking display system that she would later reuse, which was not a reflection on the creation of the sculpture itself, but rather on the exhibition. She made another strong gesture in the exhibition design by asking for plants to be brought into the gallery in order to recreate a garden atmosphere, which she considered the ideal setting for her works.



Fig. 3 *Barbara Hepworth*, Tate, Duveen Gallery, London, 1968

A display, a display, a display![13]

> "Clifford was really clever at that slightly humorous analysis of people and motives which leaves everything in bits at the end. But it was rather like puppies tearing the sofa cushions to bits; except that it was not young and playful, but curiously old, and rather obstinately conceited. It was weird and it was nothing. This was the feeling that echoed and re-echoed at the bottom of Connie's soul: it was all flag, a wonderful display of nothingness; At the same time a display. A display! a display! a display!"[14]

In this excerpt from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, D. H. Lawrence describes Lady Chatterley's husband as an intelligent and witty man, respected for his writings and his clever remarks in society, wielding language with skill and elegance. And yet all this seems futile in the eyes of his wife, amounting to nothing more than superficial effects and strategies for organizing emptiness, and above all, serving as a tool for domination by a man who is certainly physically diminished—having returned from the battlefield an invalid—but who remains entrenched in his position of superiority due to his status as a member of the English aristocracy. The phrase "A display, a display, a display!" is a cry of contempt thrown in the face of a social class locked in its prejudices, incapable of living in reality because it is entangled in structures of representation that dominate the world by keeping it at a distance. D. H. Lawrence uses the term "display" in its everyday sense, describing strategies of presentation and effects of staging, of which language, as a tool for orchestrating and manipulating reality, is an integral part. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a story of feminist emancipation, of the discovery and appropriation of desire, of the adventure of a blossoming romantic and sexual sensitivity that unfolds in the undergrowth, in the humidity, amid that which escapes and overflows. The display is positioned on the same side as the oppressive and frigid patriarchal system, participating in a heavy and futile organization of the world that keeps emotions at bay and that must be escaped. Lady Chatterley frees herself by embracing the intensity of the sensations

coursing through her body as she walks in the forest, dances naked in a heavy rainstorm, and discovers the intensity of erotic exploration. This book on exhibition design will steadfastly examine the ideological tension of display by taking a step back from its effects of domination and questioning its mechanisms from the perspective of an art history informed by feminist methodology.

Although "display" is a common term in English, it has a specific meaning that cannot be translated into French, which explains its use in the field of art, even if its meaning is often rather vague. In his lecture "To display or not to display? That is the question,"[15] Chris Dercon pointed out that the term itself comes from the Latin *displicare*, meaning "to unfold, to spread out" (*aufliegen* in German). These translations clearly convey the idea of opening up, creating dialogues between the works and the space, but also of an expansion. Unfolding a work through display is also a way of stretching its meaning, of multiplying the way it echoes through our senses. As Emma Barker points out in the introduction of the book *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, "However, display itself is just as much an issue here as art. We can put this in focus by noting that display is a verb as well as a noun, active as well as passive: the point being that display is always produced by curators, designers, etc. As such, it is necessarily informed by definite aims and assumptions and evokes some larger meaning or deeper reality beyond the individual works in the display. In short, it is a form of representation as well as a mode of presentation."[16] Display thus describes a conceptual and technical act of exhibition that consists of placing an object or work in a space to make it visible, to make it accessible to the public while managing its effects on the experience. It is an undertaking that combines a theoretical and practical approach and requires an understanding of the aesthetic issues as well as the technical constraints and specificities of the works and spaces. In English, the term also has the advantage of being able to be broadened by combining it with other terms: "display narrative" thus expresses the idea of writing art history through hanging, as the curator Alexander Dorner did at the Landesmuseum in Hanover in the 1930s.[17]

Machine Art

Inspired by his conversations with philosopher John Dewey, who published *Art as Experience* in 1934, as well as by his travels in Europe and visits to Bauhaus exhibitions, the architect Philip Johnson came to understand the impact of museography and exhibition design. Using what he learned, he embraced an exploration of the possibilities of display in 1934 at MoMA with the *Machine Art* exhibition that was dedicated to the aesthetic value of industrial materials. This project was also informed by Johnson's discussions with Alfred H. Barr Jr. (the founding director of MoMA), Henry-Russell Hitchcock (an architectural historian), and Alan R. Blackburn Jr. (executive director of MoMA). These conversations centered on the men's observations on societal changes that were setting aside traditional artisan work in favor of industrial production. *Machine Art* sought to showcase the aesthetic value of industrial objects, sharing the experience of their natural beauty by enhancing them with the display techniques of museography. The displays and lighting were meticulously designed, with the objects presented on pedestals or hung on the walls to emphasize their formal power. The molded walls and ceilings of the building that housed MoMA at the time were covered with white fabric. In one room, a false ceiling made of muslin fabric covered the lighting system, creating a powerful visual impression that enhanced the aesthetic impact of the industrial objects. The hanging reproduced the rhythm and repetition of mechanical movement, but by installing the objects in a state of rest and silence, it removed the pieces from the context of their functionality. Most of the objects chosen—propellers, springs, sets of pans, and glass utensils—were not conceived by designers, and their beauty was therefore unintentional, a product of the needs of the machine, which reinforced their ideological power. Alfred H. Barr's text in the exhibition catalogue highlights a quote from Plato on the absolute beauty of simple forms not related to representations of living beings, such as lines or circles, and suggests looking at industrial objects through this prism: as extensions of mathematical forms produced by the machine. A jury consisting of aviator Amelia Earhart and professors John Dewey and Charles R. Richards awarded prizes to three objects after visiting the exhibition, and the MoMA press release reflects the educational significance of the exhibition. The choice of Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo

non-stop across the Atlantic and a prominent figure at the time, shows how important it was to MoMA to reach an audience outside the art world. The aviator was quoted in the press release as saying: "I think the exhibition as a whole is a great step forward in that I believe people may see the beauty in a machine which so often we think of as only crude or lacking individuality, which isn't the case at all for anyone who has eyes to see."[18] Many of these objects were loaned by stores, and the list in the catalogue even mentions their provenance and retail price (starting at $1), allowing visitors to easily acquire the objects whose beauty they have come to appreciate. But without the aura of the white cube, do these objects retain their aesthetic value? Can the artistic dimension be separated from the scenography?

an Exhibit

In 1957, the artists Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore and the critic Lawrence Alloway, who had formed the International Group and shared their creative research as part of their teaching at King's College (University of Durham), created *an Exhibit* in the university's Hatton Gallery, and then reproduced it at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London. This project explored the mechanisms of exhibition-making, focusing on certain principles of scenography. Richard Hamilton began his career by collaborating with Reimann Studios, a German design studio that moved to London in 1935 and was close to the Bauhaus spirit but with a more commercial approach. He then went on to make models and he continued to attach great importance to exhibition design in his work. In 1951 and 1955, he organized two important group exhibitions at the ICA, *Growth and Form* and *Man, Machine and Motion*, where the curatorial approach was combined with a highly specific exhibition design that incorporated the understanding that the challenge of an exhibition lay in the path the visitor took through it, as opposed to the static position of the reader or filmgoer. When Victor Pasmore visited *Man, Machine and Motion*, he was enchanted by the exhibition design but less so by the photographs on display, which documented human attempts to overcome their physical limitations by inventing machines to improve their ability to move around. He then suggested to Hamilton that they embrace a self-referential approach and create an exhibition where the design itself would be the work of art. They installed a plexiglass

display in the space, which they presented in the invitation card in the following manner:

> **"a game / an artwork / an environment**
> **pre-planned / individuated / verbalized**
> **by**
> **RICHARD HAMILTON / VICTOR PASMORE / LAWRENCE ALLOWAY to be**
> **played / viewed / populated"**[19]

Richard Hamilton later recalled in a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist that this experimental design arrangement could be deployed in any space but it could not be constructed in advance with blueprints and elevations: "Once the first mark was made, by putting a plane in that space, it led to the consequence of placing a second plane, and so on. The whole thing had to develop organically."[20]

As Elena Crippa explains,[21] it was essential for the three artists to give an active role to the viewer in the post-war context of a British society dominated by trauma and deprivation as it sought to rebuild itself by affirming the capacity of each individual for agency. She also addresses Pasmore's approach and his way of thinking about the viewer within a common vision of art, design, and architecture, noting that "as early as 1951, Pasmore asserted that the work was an object that acted on and infected the viewer like nature." While teaching at the university in Newcastle upon Tyne, they used the Hatton Gallery as a place for experimentation. For his part, Richard Hamilton continued Marcel Duchamp's conceptual approach, giving a central place to the viewer and their position as an observer, as deployed in his project *The Large Glass*, also called *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23), which Hamilton studied by creating a diagram analyzing the mental and intellectual participation of the viewer that is brought into play by this work. Duchamp also paved the way for the artist's position as a "generator-arbiter," transforming the exhibition into an irreverent event with his "mile-of-string" installation that stretched highly intrusive threads throughout the space where the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition was organized by André Breton in New York in 1942. Duchamp had a strong influence on Hamilton, particularly on the *an Exhibit* project, which was constructed as a connection between plexiglass panels of different colors that were suspended in the gallery space to create a multiplicity of viewpoints, strata, and visual labyrinths without resorting to any pre-existing



Fig. 4 *an Exhibit*, Richard Hamilton, Victor Pasmore, Lawrence Alloway, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1957

work. The pictorial forms deployed by Pasmore within this installation served as a continuation of these effects without overwhelming them. The gallery visitors were also actively integrated into the installation as the bodies of people, whether static or moving, strongly impacted the aesthetic experience, and numerous exhibition views document this. Hamilton's drawings and paintings from the 1950s onwards reflect this interest in the movement of the gaze in space. The title, *an Exhibit*, evokes the construction of the exhibition and the inherent conventions and functions associated with these undertakings, all while questioning whether the exhibition could become autonomous from works of art or to truly expose its tools.

As Elena Crippa also points out, the years 1945 to 1955 saw numerous experiments in exhibition design for political or commercial propaganda purposes that highlighted the power of display and encouraged artists to question its perceptual and ideological mechanisms. While still a student, Richard Hamilton created exhibition models and worked on the installation and scenography of exhibitions at the ICA, developing an interest and expertise he would later apply to his own projects, such as the highly architectural metal installation *Man, Machine and Motion*. Partly suspended and partly placed on the floor, the installation played with reproductions, projections, and lighting effects while incorporating movements that break through the viewer's gaze. For this project, which was linked to his teaching, he gathered a wealth of resources on exhibition scenography, identifying experimental proposals from different countries in the context of commercial and industrial exhibitions and sharing them with students during screenings. He was thus highly knowledgeable about what design work had already been done in Germany, Italy, and the United States, and could both draw inspiration from these past projects and develop a critical analysis of their manipulative effects on perception.

The participatory aspect of *an Exhibit* attempted to remedy the overly prescriptive nature of conventional exhibitions, which developed strategies for telling stories without allowing the viewer to take an active part in them. An illustrated, fold-out poster-pamphlet available to visitors to the gallery explained the process behind the project, the ideas put forward by the authors, and the technical protocol for setting up the panels in accordance with a conceptual approach (without denying its aesthetic effects), with the actual exhibition just one possible activation among others. Viewers had different ways of participating, either by becoming players or by watching others take part in the game. The pamphlet features highly accomplished graphics and confidently states:

"Visitors are invited not to look for separate works of art or symbols, but to inhabit a real environment for the duration of the game. The meaning of *an Exhibit* now depends on the decisions of the visitor, just as, in a previous stage, it depended on the artists who were the players."[22] On the evening of the opening, the George Brown choir came to sing in the exhibition space, performing a text written by Richard Hamilton in a detached and joyful manner, reminiscent of how Marcel Duchamp had invited a group of children to come and play ball games at the opening of the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition. The chorus of the song, which was titled "An Exhibit Calypso,"[23] combines detachment and a touch of irony toward the enthusiasm of the project's authors, repeating the sentence that Lawrence Alloway had been asked to remove from the pamphlet: "*An Exhibit* is a test and an entertainment; are you maze-bright or maze-dim?"

> **"So everybody's wondering if it's right,**
> **To be maze-dim or to be maze-bright,**
> **But we're sure you'll say this is it**
> **When you see this amazing exhibit."**

The *an Exhibit* project is similar to the experimental work Allan Kaprow was conducting at the same time in the United States, where he was constructing his first "environments," vast assemblages of found materials, texts, and instructions given to the viewer: "Each person must enter the environment, must push their way through, literally, in order to 'see'."[24] In an environment, seeing depends on an action, physical immersion, and penetration into a space, because the image alone is not enough to produce a vision. The participatory challenge is political: it is about freeing the viewer from their submission to the media and encouraging them to be active in their perception, but also in their relationship to knowledge. Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, which he produced in October 1959 at the Reuben Gallery in New York, combines one of his environments with a happening in a staging orchestrated in space and time, while also being open to the interventions of the spectators. The precise instructions sent to participants and distributed to the public create a participatory framework, as do the semi-transparent structures that divide the gallery. The exhibition design is crucial here, as it allows for the creation of a path through the space interspersed with different lighting atmospheres, while also providing supports for the hanging of paintings, words, and objects, thus producing sensations of space