Revisiting Display: Display and Backstage
## Dorothee Richter

In what follows, I use the terms "display" and "backstage" to somewhat loosely describe a particular relationship within the activity commonly referred to as "exhibiting," which is said to hold the promise of disclosing knowledge hitherto concealed. This relationship, which affects all cultural and visual offerings, contains a voyeuristic perspective that foreshadows and discloses, conceals and detracts, thus keeping alive a yearning for images.

The term "display" is fairly recent in the context of exhibitions, first emerging about a decade ago. Its range of meaning encompasses presentation display; display and packaging, advertising and computer display, and refer to new economies and new conceptions of (re)presentation oriented towards a specific "surface," specifically a "user interface." In English, "display" refers literally to a screen and to the visual presentation of factual matter. Its horizon of meaning indicates the primacy of the surface over a complicated, difficult, and incomprehensible background.[1] The term "backstage" thus attempts to grasp those parts of an exhibition apparatus that satisfy – within a specific display – our desire to see and know more within a short space of time. Which part of an exhibition is sold as the hitherto unseen? For that matter, which part of the exhibition apparatus remains hidden from view? The term "backstage" thus by all means implies that exhibitions are part of the culture industry, where it also operates as a metaphor of desire; only access to the backstage dissolves the distance to the imagined star. What are the effects of these backstage moments, especially when they address viewers-as-subjects? Which movement or impetus initiates such moments? Since I am especially interested in the relationship between display and backstage (that is, the relationship between the displayed and the allegedly hitherto never displayed, the effectively concealed) in contemporary art exhibitions, I will first situate my reflections within history.

Mary Anne Staniszewski is considered one of the principal precursors of a critical inquiry into exhibition display. Based on a discussion of exhibitions held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), her study *The Power of Display* reveals a series of paradigmatic exhibition designs and their transformations over time.[2] Staniszewski concludes that in the first decades of the period investigated (1929 to 1970), there was a remarkable cross-section of different exhibition displays, which subsequently became more or less indistinguishable, conventional forms of exhibition.

I will first consider the various kinds of exhibitions that came into existence, in order to thereafter discuss contemporary exhibitions on the basis of the insights gained. My reading of Staniszewski leads me to conclude that three normative kinds of exhibition developed over time: first, the propagandist, emotional exhibition; secondly, the ennobling, elevating art exhibition; and thirdly, or put briefly, the pedagogic, animating design exhibition. For the moment, I refer to the fourth category, futile as a mass media exhibition, as a "self-critical" exhibition.

Staniszewski attributes the normative development of exhibitions to the circumstance that the conventions of museum presentation only arose together with the development of MoMA. While institutional practices stabilised, curators, designers and architects began to develop their professional parameters. From 1953, a permanent exhibition was mounted at MoMA, and exhibition standards thus became determined for a longer period of time. This, however, was not the only factor that led to standardisation. Experimental designs, such as Herbert Bayer's Bauhaus exhibition, were heavily criticised for their inaccessible and disturbing visual language. Bayer's unusual instances of staging exhibits contravened viewing habits and the demand for easily digestible representation.
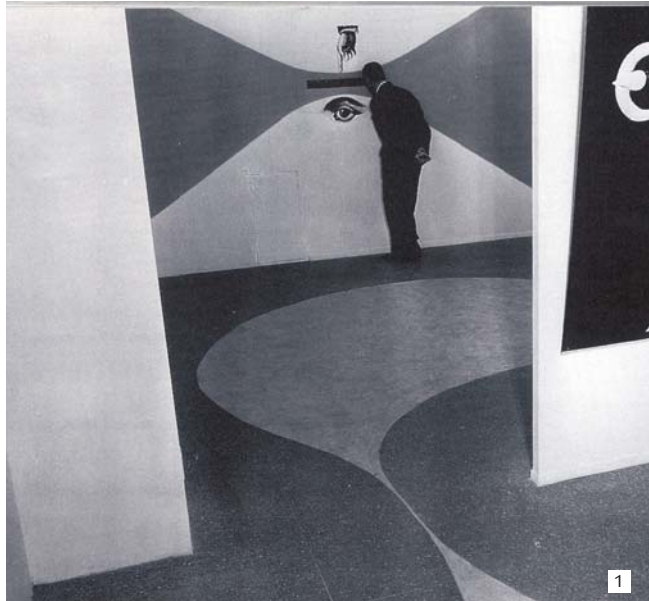
He subsequently revised his hypotheses on exhibition making, and mounted *Road to Victory (1942)*, a show of American propaganda photographs, along the lines of the new criteria. Comparable to the later *The Family of Man*, it marked a new form of the propagandist exhibition (type 1). *The Family of Man* propagated a patriarchal concept of the nuclear family as a universal model. Using a simple language, the exhibition played on the emotional register and established a connection with visitors, who could see themselves as part of a large family (of the patriarchal male?). Thus, the exhibition displayed a global family, without, however, touching upon prevailing economic or political conditions. It suggested that human affinity arises from experiencing similar emotions, utterly irrespective of economic circumstances. The Family of Man travelled the world for years, with the implicit remit to convey democratic values, a Western conception of freedom, equality and fraternity as constitutional principles, and of the nuclear family as the cell of society. It situated the audience as a single, unified international audience, whose implicit structure was the nuclear family.

Exhibitions are meant to be readable and acceptable. MoMA's exhibition policy thus appealed increasingly to a certain kind of visitor, that is to say, in the manner of addressing and creating such a visitor. It was paradigmatic for "successful" MoMA exhibitions to create spaces that enhanced the sense of the viewer's autonomy, especially in art and design exhibitions, as Staniszewski argues (type 2). It is important to realise that among all imaginable kinds of possible presentation modes precisely those emerged as ritualised forms that made one forget their ideological character, thus preventing viewers from recognising their own voyeuristic perspective. Staniszewski observes that this mode of presentation enhances the

autonomy of the object and the viewer's notion of automony through their one-to-one confrontation and through situations providing a general overview.[3]

While design exhibitions (type 3) take up the ennobling gestures of art exhibitions, their modes of presentation relate to viewers' everyday environment. Good design was readily displayed in stylish living rooms or in spaces intimating sales situations, thereby subtly implying the pedagogy of consumption and gender roles. Besides these three well-known kinds of exhibition (which obviously also exist in blended or hybrid forms), early experimental exhibition concepts (type 4) and exhibition designs to this day present new formats and ideas, which are currently the subject of inquiry and reappraisal also in art installations. The reason for this might be that it is precisely those kinds of exhibition and designs that have not enjoyed mainstream success that today provide us with material to reconsider presentation modes and thus to discuss the conception of display not only in terms of surface but also as a visual proposal. Seen thus, exhibitions proving more difficult to read, and moreover dealing explicitly with viewer positions, represent a fourth category; they include, among others, Kiesler and Barr's experimental exhibition designs, where the viewer's position taken into account in a visually recognisable manner.

Types of Exhibitions in Contemporary Art

Recently, artists have once again began to present extremely emotional scenes, thus referring back to the first kind of exhibition. In 2008, such exhibitions included Christoph Schlingensief's at the Zürich Migros Museum[4] and Kai Althoff's at the Kunsthalle Zürich.[5] Both exhibitions consist of a multi-layered, multiply connoted conglomerate of artefacts, materials, and media. Especially Althoff works with references to images disseminated by the media. The press release for Althoff's exhibition determines a specific way of reading the exhibition: "Narrative elements shape his work and make a personal, direct and inescapable demand on the viewer's involvement. The artist's place of presentation for his works is never a white cube, but always an all-encompassing locality that Kai Althoff has transformed into an area for a 'private' experience of his works composed of everyday materials: carpeting, wall hangings, draperies, partitions, atmospheric colouring, smells and intimacies. It is as if we were suddenly granted access to the long locked chamber of an individual obsession."

Althoff's installation is situated as the turning inside out of one or several pathologised subjects. Nightmarish scenes, sexual "perversions," childlike assertions find visual expression in an exuberant overall design that envelops the visitor, namely the hell of private life. Thus, a central mechanism of contemporary culture is translated into art, specifically the displaying of intimate relations and a kind of intense exhibitionism, as well as the viewer's vampiric greed for the details and

images of celebrity life. The hidden and intimate part of a personality reveals itself to us, and the display seeks to make public a persona's "backstage." The exhibition backstage, that is to say, the doors, offices, rear stairs, storage rooms, and political dependencies and subtexts are, however, denied all the more persistently, for everything must be subjected to the staging of an overwhelming machinery of impressions from which the visitor cannot escape. The exhibition thus becomes a total-environment experience space, and this "matrix" both encompasses and appropriates visitors. The press release for the Althoff exhibition makes it clear that these scenarios, and their visual and scenic opulence, are nevertheless concerned with political constellations: "Kai Althoff's works revolve around fantastical, mytho-logical and dream-like scenarios on the forms that friendship and sex relations take, the integration into dubious social groups such as religions, 'Burschenschaften' (fraternities), political radicalism, the bourgeoisie or subcultures."

In a press conference, Schlingensief also made a political reference when he observed that he considered his art to be a reaction to his family's entanglement with the Nazi regime. But are we as viewers thus not drawn into political reflec-tions situated only within the personal sphere? And does this not lead us into an impasse, which excludes political action? Which spheres of action are thus opened up?

Visitor Appeal – Exposing the Desire of Viewers?

Such theatrical staging's seldom reach that level of appeal that plays on an emotional register, only to then to mock it. Christoph Büchel's London show *Simply Botiful* managed to do this.[6] The well-to-do audience had to ask for directions through a maze-like section of run-down streets in London's East End to find the utterly inconspicuous entrance to the exhibition. Once inside, visitors stepped into a house that had adopted the look of a hastily abandoned refugee camp or of a derelict hotel. This way through (their itinerary) ended on a balcony overlooking a huge warehouse filled with pieces of scrap, haphazardly stacked old refrigerators,

piled up containers, and street noises in the background. This setting was only loosely closed off from the shabby East End streets outside. Visitors paused for a moment; unsure whether this belonged to the production or to the surrounding flea market stalls selling precisely the same kind of discarded objects as those displayed. The hall, however, could be entered and "explored," and the word spread among visitors that secret passageways and subterranean caves could be discovered. In groups of three, visitors clambered through claustrophobic burrows and excavations to discover a giant earthen mound with a protruding tusk. So far so good. Diedrich Diederichsen's dictum, "participation is the new spectacle" comes to mind.[7] On stepping back out in the shabby East End streets, reality shifted all at once: visitors suddenly saw themselves as intruders in the nightmare of these parallel worlds, of fragmented everyday lives on the edge, through entering an impoverished part of London amid a heart rendering flea market. This induced a breakdown of categories: what was staged and what was real? Which of these worlds was real, and who was taking notice of these laughably styled visitors in these surroundings? The reality of the art audience was both rebuffed and made relative, through an outing into a theatrical world on the one hand, and a real yet alien life world on the other. The juxtaposition challenged the notion of reality as such.

Rereading Art as a Frame of Reference

A particular display, however, can also serve to radically question the frame of reference – not only beyond but also within the art system: the Lentos Museum in Linz, for instance, mounted a spectacular inaugural exhibition when Stella Rollig took office as its new director. The British artist Darren Almond laid out a large-scale itinerary through a sequence of video projections featuring excerpts from the deserted interiors of Linz prison.[8] To enter the exhibition, visitors had to cross a threshold comprising an overdimensional digital clock with a precise indication of the local time. Thus, the prison space became mapped onto the exhibition space, in which the uncomfortable sensation arose that otherwise strictly separate social spheres could be related. Both sanctioned social behaviour, and the contingency of one upon the other abruptly imposed itself – both localities now seemed to be sites serving a (political) function. The passage of time, made evident by the digital indication of local time, involved museum visitors in the sense of the simultaneous elapsing of both their own real time – and lifetime – and that of the prison inmates. Not only this unsettled and "arrested" visitors, however, but also the knowledge

that one of the projections was not a canned video but a streaming video broadcast along with ambient noise straight from Linz prison. Which paradigms of viewing did this fluster? In terms of fundamental viewing habits and experience, the projections initially seemed to recall television formats and to superficially resemble "boring" documentary images.

The French film and media theorist Christian Metz claims that cinematographic projection amounts to a paradigmatic instance of cultural production in our society: "It has very often, and quite rightly, been said that the cinema is a technique of the imaginary. On the other hand, this technique is characteristic of a historical period (that of capitalism) and of a particular state of society, so-called industrial civilisation."[9] For Metz, the foremost quality of the cinema is the construction of a fictional narrative, drawing on the primary imaginary of photography and phonography. The viewer, however, is involved into (intricately imbricated with) the fictional nature of this projection. For Metz, moreover, the cinematic imaginary is complexly intertwined with the imaginary in a Lacanian sense, as an intrapersonal psychic institution. For Lacan, while the imaginary and symbolic are opposed, they are nevertheless constantly embroiled; the imaginary arises as a secondary narcissism in the mirror stage. The mirror stage denotes the fundamental deception of the self in the constitution of the subject, and represents the durable mark of the mirror. The subject therefrom infers the deception of a self-contained person, lying outside itself as it were, which alienates human beings in their own reflection. I long term makes them, as Metz observes, "the double of [their] double,"[10] through their involvement in the process of projecting an imaginary personality onto a "screen." What this process also involves is the subliminal adherence to the exclusive relation to the mother, (which affirms the mirror image), and thus to desire as a pure effect of lack. All this, Metz further observes, is "undoubtedly reactivated by the play of that *other* mirror, the cinema screen."[11] Ordinary film scenes affirm in this manner the imaginary components existing in the viewer's psychic topography. Cinema narratives are at the same time pervaded by social and cultural codes, thus establishing manifold relations between the "cinematographic apparatus" and the symbolic.

Visitors walking through the Linz exhibition were not confronted with a particularly cinema-specific narrative totality, driven by a storyline and characters. On the contrary, Darren Almond's show presented a fragmented narrative, consisting mostly of long and one-dimensional shots, and an extremely slow sequence of cuts. Such a scheme in itself breaks customary viewing habits, since the film-specific imaginary unity is questioned from the outset. As visitors, we wander through the installation in search of the familiarly patterned cinematographic apparatus, since this holds in store multiple affirmations and pacifications. While we begin by looking for familiar characters to grant us a comfortable sense of recognition, instead we behold empty spaces, and only excerpt thereof, and hear unspecific sounds (is that perhaps a door banging?). Owing to the scopic drive, a voyeuristic perspective is part of all cultural and visual offerings. And yet the cinematic situation involves a particular viewing technique. For Metz, the cinema additionally involves the hidden spectator, who experiences the projection as a double distancing, since a film is produced at other sites, the shooting locations and the editing table, in addition to the already removed site of projection. Unlike the theatre, the cinema reaffirms the viewing subject's voyeuristic stance. While cinema spectators assume the actors' implicit agreement, they are also certain that the lack and distancing will be maintained, which in turns motivates and spurs on their desire. "For the voyeurism of the spectator," Metz asserts, "there is no need for him to be seen (it is dark in the cinema, and the visible is limited entirely to the screen). One

doesn't need a knowing object, or rather, no object that wants to know, no object-subject that shares the activity of the partial instinct with the spectators. It is enough, and it must be like this – and this is just as much a specific path of gratification – that the actor should behave as though he were not seen (and therefore as though that he did not see his voyeur); it must have be that he goes about his ordinary activities and continues to exist, just as the story of the film intends him to continues his antics in a closed space, while he is particularly keen to ignore the glass rectangle fitted into one of the walls and that he lives in a kind of aquarium, which simply saves a bit more on its 'windows' than real aquariums (precisely this restraint has its share in the scopic game."[12]

Darren Almond's installation questions all these mechanisms: the narrative is split, the actor's object-subject relation is absent, and the actors' consent is denied. Since one of the screens contains streaming video, the assurance provided by a canned image is also absent; on the contrary, live projection foregrounds the viewer's vampiric voyeurism. What unsettles viewers even more is that they have no knowledge which of the projections is the live stream. The awareness that one of the projections is broadcast live from the prison at once reveals the inappropriateness of the "secret" observation – the projection looks back at the viewers as it were. Viewers see themselves "from outside," moreover in a strange situation, namely as observers of other people's misery, whose lives are contained in a state institution, just as the art museum also functions as a state institution. The installation was powerful enough to induce viewers to reflect on their own positioning in a social construction. Not all visitors appreciated this, however, and the reactions of the local press and politics made perfectly clear that the message had indeed been understood.

The Linz exhibition offered a view of the backstage, locating the invisible part of an art exhibition not in personal history but in a social narrative, of which we are a part. It thus situated us not as vampires of other people's emotions, but thrust us into the scenario. Almond's exhibition made it clear that we are not only observers but also participants, thus reordering the relationship between display and backstage. As the very different exhibition projects *Simply Botiful* and *Live Sentence* show, exhibition displays are currently being actively employed to reverse the line of view. The backstage, poverty-stricken Londoners, and the Linz prison

inmates are all looking backwards in that the exhibition visitors recognise themselves as specks in the staged tableau. Bourgeois exhibition goers become visible as part of a social staging. As visitors and viewers they experience a phase of uncertainty, which can, however, afford them new insights, beyond a voyeuristic dispositive.

Captions

1 Bayer, *Bauhaus 1919-1938,* Ausstellung im MoMA, a photography of Herbert Mayer loooking through a hole, Type 4

2 Image from *The Power of Display,* pp. 212 and 213

3 Christoph Büchel *Simply Botiful,* 2006 Installation View, Hauser [&] Wirth Coppermill, London Courtesy the Artist and Hauser [&] Wirth Zürich London-Hotel corridor

4 Christoph Büchel *Simply Botiful,* 2006 Installation View Hauser [&] Wirth Coppermill, London Courtesy the Hauser [&] Wirth Zürich London

5 Darren Almond *Live Sentence* 14. Mai bis 27. September 2004, Lentos Museum Linz

Notes

1 See Michael Barchet, Donate Koch-Haag, et. al. (eds.): *Ausstellen. Der Raum der Oberfläche* (Weimar 2003).

2 Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition – Installations at the Museum of Modern Art,* (London-Cambridge 1998)

3 Mary Anne Staniszewski: *The Power of Display. A history of Exhibition – Installations at the Museum of Modern Art,* London, Cambridge 1998, pp. 292/293

4 Christoph Schlingesief, *Querverstümmelung,* 3rd November – 3rd February 2008; migros museum Zürich

5 Kai Althoff, *Ich meine es auf jeden Fall schlecht mit Ihnen,* 10th November 2007 – 13th January 2008, Kunsthalle Zürich

6 Christoph Büchel, *Simply Botiful,* 11 October 2006 – 18 March 2007, Hauser [&] Wirth Coppermill, London.

7 Diedrich Diederichsen, *Partizipation ist das neue Spektakel,* unpublished lecture delivered at the MAS Curating, Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), 2008.

8 Darren Almond, Live Sentence. 14th May to 27th September 2004, Lentos Museum, Linz.

9 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema,* Translated by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), pp. 3-4.

10 Ibid. p.14

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., pp. 76/77 and 96.

Dorothee Richter *is head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and co-founder, with Susanne Clausen, of the "Research Platform for Curatorial and Cross-disciplinary Cultural Studies, Practice-Based Doctoral Programme" a cooperation of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and the Department of Fine Arts, University of Reading. From 1999 to the end of 2003, Richter was artistic director of the Künstlerhaus Bremen where she curated a discursive programme based on feminist issues, urban situations, power relation issues, institutional critique. In 2005 she initiated, in collaboration with Barnaby Drabble the Postgraduate Studies Programme in Curating. Symposia: "Re-Visions of the Display", coop. Jennifer Johns, Sigrid Schade, Migros Museum in Zurich.*

2010 "Institution as Medium. Curating as Institutional Critique?" coop. with Rein Wolfs, in 2013 the symposium "Who is afraid of the public?" at the ICA London, coop. with Elke Krasny, Silvia Simoncelli and the University of Reading. Her most recent publication is "Fluxus. Kunst gleich Leben? Mythen um Autorschaft, Produktion, Geschlecht und Gemein-schaft" and the new Internet platform www.on-curating.org which presents current approaches to critical curatorial practice. In 2013 she published a film together with Ronald Kolb: "Flux Us Now! Fluxus explored with a camera."