

**Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, eds,**  
***Thinking About Exhibitions.* London and New York, Routledge,**  
**1996, 507 pp., 83 illus.**

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don and New York, 1993); Gen Doy, *Seeing and Consciousness: Women, Class, and Representation* (Oxford/Washington, D.C., 1995); and Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (Chicago, 1988).

- 5 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Difference: A Special Third World Women's Issue," in her *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989), 95, eloquently discusses how language can enclose identity and experience; words are "deceiving and limiting."

6 Riley and Haraway are both cited by Naomi Schor in "This Essentialism Which is Not One," in Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, eds, *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), 59, as representing the extreme anti-essentialist position.

- 7 Gayatri Spivak discusses the term "Strategic Essentialism" in an interview with Ellen Rooney in Schor and Weed, eds, *The Essential Difference*, 151.

REESA GREENBERG, BRUCE W. FERGUSON, SANDY NAIRNE, eds, *Thinking About Exhibitions*. London and New York, Routledge, 1996, 507 pp., 83 illus.

The editors of *Thinking About Exhibitions* make the insightful observation in their brief introduction that anthologies and exhibitions are very much alike: from the revealing biases in the selection of contributions, to the assumption of totality and the aura of authority that accompanies the presentation of collected documents, anthologies and exhibitions make use of the same strategies of selection and combination to circumscribe their subject. But as the editors make evident, any closure is illusory:

With art exhibitions and anthologies, objects and texts are always assembled and arranged according to an arbitrary schema intended to construct and convey meaning. In their mega forms – the blockbuster, the retrospective: collections of complete works or compilations which inaugurate or consolidate a discipline – they lay claim to being exhaustive when they are always incomplete (and often only exhausting). ... The totality which many art exhibitions and anthologies seem to claim to embody is a fiction and even a fantasy. (p.1)

A central feature of this introduction, then, is its unwillingness to contain the essays that constitute the anthology. Unlike many curatorial essays of exhibition catalogues, the Introduction does not seek to position its objects (the essays) within a framework already delineated by the curators (editors). Instead, the Introduction serves as a kind of methodological user's manual, exposing the choices made, recognizing the slippage of texts from one section of the book to another, and acknowledging the situatedness of the essays' themes within recent European and North American cultural and intellectual debates. In choosing to outline the process of organizing the anthology's contents rather than attempting a summation of the articles themselves, the editors have written the kind of self-reflexive essay consonant with their interest in the discursive nature of exhibitions.

Organized into six sections, the twenty-seven essays in *Thinking About Exhibitions* cover a broad range, both topically and geographically. The sections formally divide the essays according to questions of history, spectatorship, the exploration of exhibitions in linguistic terms, the expansion of the role of curator, a reading of exhibiting spaces, and an analysis of exhibitionary forms. As the essays argue, the materiality of the display is the crucial feature in the understanding of the exhibition, and thus the placement of essays within this anthology is itself an example of considered display. It is of particular interest in the ordering of essays that a text which asks "What's Important about the History of Modern Art Exhibitions?" should appear in a book about the exhibition of contemporary art, not at the beginning as a historical point of departure, but at the end.

Underlying most of the essays in the anthology is a conception of the exhibition as fiction, an argument which maintains that art exhibitions do not simply present objects as a series of discrete entities within a neutral space, but inevitably construct narratives in the selection, combination and organization of objects for display. The contention that exhibitions have messages is certainly not a novel one. The ideological underpinnings of art and museum exhibitions have been an important topic of discussion in recent decades from a number of fronts. Since the early 1970s, the exclusion of women artists from the permanent displays of most art museums has generated much protest and has raised important questions concerning the construction of art historical canons and the relations of power within the art world that maintain them.<sup>1</sup> Emerging from a similar awareness of an institutional disposition towards entrenching power relations was the move in critical anthropology to expose the recurrence of the salvage paradigm in museum displays as well as in critical texts.<sup>2</sup> While these and other critical moments in cultural analysis have been important in making apparent the constructed nature of exhibitions and the disciplinary formations that underscore them, such critiques have largely remained at the level of political bean-counting: a statistical accountability where

representation is accorded greater importance than presentation.<sup>3</sup> This is not to argue that careful attention to representation – in particular where exhibitions deal with cultures and ways of life that differ from those of the institution – is not a necessary consideration in the organization and staging of exhibitions; however, it is not the only aspect that requires critical attention. As the authors in *Thinking About Exhibitions* make apparent, the mode of exhibition, of presentation, is as central to our understanding of art and culture as are the objects themselves. As a result, the essays that raise questions of cultural representation (by Ramirez, McMaster, Karp and Wilson, Deliss, and Nemiroff) expand the treatment of the issue from the objects themselves to their conditions of exhibition. It could even be argued that the call for attention to representation in museum exhibitions, such as those occasioned by exhibitions of First Nations art in Canada (as occurred in the critical reaction to the Glenbow Museum's 1988 *The Spirit Sings*), can in fact result in museum curators giving serious consideration to the meanings produced in the staging of their displays.

The juxtaposition of recent and older essays is also an important facet of this collection. A number of essays (Alloway, O'Doherty, Buren) date from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s at a time when artworks were prompting a reconsideration of the role of the mainstream art institution and fostering the development of alternative spaces and practices. These essays not only stand as documents of an important time in the history of exhibiting, but surprisingly they also reveal the contiguity of critical writing on exhibitions between the two periods. Although written a decade later, other essays (Greenberg, Nairne, Celant) provide a contemporary view of these historical moments by situating such innovations as "the white cube," Andy Warhol's Factory, and the development of artist-run spaces within the broader framework of the history of exhibitions. Nairne's essay in particular provides an important re-examination of this frequently idealized period of avant-garde rebellion and institutional upheaval by putting the very notion of alternative spaces under review.

The larger portion of the essays in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, however, considers more recent work which specifically addresses the role of exhibitions in the production of knowledge and in the construction of aesthetic and art historical narratives. This analysis takes two forms: 1. the documentation of important exhibitions; and 2. the exploration and analysis of the role of exhibitions (rather than museums or the always vaguely defined "art world") in the dissemination and understanding of (mainly) contemporary art. In the first instance, the documentation of events which are temporally and geographically inaccessible pro-

vides an important background for the discussion of the discursive implications of exhibition with which many of the essays are concerned. The tendency in Europe, in particular, to present mega-exhibitions such as *documenta*, often with "star" curators such as *Von hier aus* (Rudi Fuchs) or *Chambres d'amis* (Jan Hoet), has resulted in a critical interest in the orchestration of objects, texts and contexts that make up these art events, creating parallels between the analytical work of curator and writer most evident in the contributions by Meijers, Lamoureux, Miller and Celant. The effect of such exhibitions in the construction of histories of contemporary art is notably explored in the essays by Grasskamp and Poinot.

Reactions to the apparent power wielded by the curators of these mega-exhibitions parallel an increasingly voiced wariness of theory that has emerged in recent art historical writing, most often in the form of calls for a renewed formalism and a focus on objects. On the one hand, it could be construed that this attention to exhibitionary narratives comes at the expense of the artworks themselves; a fear, in other words, that the critical focus on the "museum's fictions" will detract from the very objects that are the intrinsic utterances of that narrative. On the other hand, the focus on the materiality of the exhibitionary event that is found in many of the essays suggests that the focus on the display remains inextricably tied to a concern for the positioning of "real" objects in "real" space.

It is this issue which is at the heart of debates around the question of the curator as artist, addressed by many of the authors cited above. Whether in the traditional position of building and maintaining a museum's collection, or in the more recent role of producer of temporally specific, thematically focused temporary exhibitions, the curator is ultimately responsible for the selection of objects and for their placement in a specific order. The defining parameters of this function have shifted, as Deborah Meijers suggests in her contribution, from the curator as "arbiter of taste" to that of "exhibition *auteur*." In recent years, curators have taken this role to certain extremes, recognizing the power that they exercise in the orchestration of objects for display and in the creation of narrative texts through their exhibitions. Some have capitalized on this role by considering their exhibitions as artworks in their own right, with an inner consistency and sense of completeness that extends beyond a well-planned display. For artists, this authorial position reduces the status of their artworks to that of base material for another's work, thereby cancelling any artistic status already achieved by the object or the artist. For many of the authors included in the anthology, the reluctance to address the other side in any great depth can in part be rationalized

as an awareness that at the basis of the argument of the exhibition-as-text is the recognition that there exists by necessity an author of that text and that increasingly the author must be perceived not as the institution but as the curator. However, any exploration of the curator-as-artist falls short of endorsing the kind of unilateral power that such an extreme position might entail. Instead, the authorial function of the exhibition designer or curator is seen as one point in the continuum that characterizes the history of exhibition practices.

The arrival of this anthology is timely. *Thinking About Exhibitions* brings together a collection of essays which fills in the gap found in much art historical study today between the traditional preoccupation with objects and a free-floating theoretical enterprise that is almost entirely divorced from the art that purports to be its subject. In its focus on exhibitions as discursive events, the editors have shown that the traditional art historical focus on objects and artists – and even the more “left-leaning” exploration of institutional politics – can only be enriched through the attention to the presence, however temporally and site specific, of the object in space. Similarly, current critical approaches to the discursive properties of the art object benefit from the ma-

terial application of their analyses in specific displays. Particularly in its combination of a diversity of cultural and theoretical approaches to the study of exhibitions, *Thinking About Exhibitions* figures as an important contribution to the study of art and, in its focus on the specificity of the exhibitionary event, provides crucial insights into the analysis of cultural discourse as a whole.

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- 1 See for example Carol Duncan, “The MoMA’s Hot Mamas,” *Art Journal*, XLVIII:2, (Summer 1989), 171-8, and various protests in the early 1970s highlighting the lack of women artists in major museum collections.
- 2 See James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Harvard, 1988), and Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City 1908-36,” *Social Text*, XI (1984/5), 20-64.
- 3 This is particularly apparent in such collections as Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds, *Exhibiting Cultures* (Washington, 1991), and Ivan Karp, Steven D. Lavine and Christine Mullen Kreamer, eds, *Museums and Communities* (Washington, 1992).

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ANNABEL TEH GALLOP, *Early Views of Indonesia: Drawings from the British Library. Pemandangan Indonesia di Masa Lampau: Seni Gambar dari British Library*. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1995, 128 pp., \$34.00 (U.S.) paper.

This attractive bilingual publication is the catalogue of 510 early nineteenth-century watercolours and drawings made in Java and today stored in the British Library in London.<sup>1</sup> A set of facsimiles were given to the National Library of Indonesia after the drawings were exhibited in Jakarta in 1995 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Indonesian independence. The essays are informative and well written; the visual material ranges from delightful to interesting to outrageous; and some of it is of exceptional artistic merit.

This is not, however, a scholarly contribution of new materials: most of the drawings have been published and described elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Neither is *Early Views* a critical discussion of the colonial context for and motivations behind the production of these drawings. Rather, when one steps back and looks at the context for its publication, one realizes that this book represents a diplomatic effort between two nations (Indonesia and the U.K.) closely involved for a few years in the international arena of politics in the nineteenth century and now, again, in the arena of economics,

with a limited amount of cultural exchange. It also represents the ongoing process of popularizing scholarship, by commercial and university presses alike, which is part of the new wave of publishing about Southeast Asia for general readerships, both inside and outside of the region.

Whereas books with text in both English and Indonesian used to appear only in Indonesia, *Early Views* is also symptomatic of a new kind of product from western commercial or academic publishers that stress bilingual treatment, a positive trend pioneered in the West by *Modern Indonesian Art*, one of several art books published in connection with the 1990 Festival of Indonesia.<sup>3</sup>

With its many strengths – as the memento of a gift, cementing a relationship of a certain kind; as an informative publication; as a more accessibly packaged and broader selection of reproductions than previously available; and as a guide to newcomers for further reading – *Early Views* also inspires questions in cultural analysts engaged with the interface between printed matter and readers across cultural and regional boundaries, questions regarding point of view and all the important issues pertaining to context not addressed in the book. One basic question that arises during the perusal of this largely visual volume is: what are the parallels and the differences between the economic, political and artistic contexts that originally produced the draw-