History Lessons

How the display of art in previous centuries can help us rethink the exhibition industry

Alexander Nagel
It surprised me to learn from Philippe de Montebello — who was a curatorial expert at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1960s before becoming director from 1977 to 2008 — that there was a time when there were no temporary exhibitions at the museum. The Great Age of France exhibition in 1966 was an exception. "The curators' job," De Montebello explained in a seminar I organized in 2009, "was to study the collection and acquire new works."

Things were to change, quickly. From 1958-9, "The Treasures of Tutankhamun" (properly known as "The King Tut Show") went on a seven-city US tour, an astounding coup achieved by Thomas Hoving (who was Director of the Met from 1966-77) who "The exhibition attracted more than eight million visitors and produced untold spinoffs and collateral sales, not to mention riffs on..."

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In the Middle Ages, the holiest images were the ones most aggressively propagated through replicas.

Minimalist artists experimented with multiple productions and a new distribution of authorship: the works were designed by the artists but fabricated by technicians using readily available industrial materials. Video art introduced temporary delay and multiplicity by allowing spaces and experiences recorded in one place to be displayed elsewhere. Performances and Happenings followed scenes that could be re-enacted in various places. In all of these cases, the new multiplicity and extension of the work of art allowed for a certain amount of variation. Art works became ‘nomadic’ but their various intentions were reflected by the circumstances of every new instantiation. Some multiples were more readily reproducible than others. Ed Ruscha produced a number of books whose theme was the serial nature of industrialized life: 36 scarce sites, 34 parking lots, some Los Angeles apartments, etc. The books were small and inexpensive and, importantly, not unique. One copy was as good as another. The idea was that each book would be an ‘open edition’, with new printings produced as needed to satisfy demand.

As a whole, the logic of the art market and of museum acquisition overturned the new sustainability of the art work as imagined by these and other artists. Personally, I am not interested in owning a first edition of any of Ruscha’s books. I just want a copy from any printing, even one made yesterday, as long as it respects the original formatting and print quality. But there is no affordable copy for me to buy, because the last edition was issued in 1995 (when it sold for $114.00). After that, something changed: no new printings meant the ones in existence acquired the status of originals, which now sell for four-digits sum. Likewise, video works by major artists are produced in very small editions — often only three or four copies are licensed. In the world of digital media — where there is in fact no original but rather a perfect
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traces of the trading networks connecting France to Italy and the eastern Mediterranean. Works from different periods and cultures cluster around the relic, creating a context for performances and even miracles.

The medieval idea was that if there were important art or artifacts to display, more art and architecture needed to be made to receive and interpret it. With this approach in mind, today's exhibition organizers might draw up shorter lists of masterpieces to be cascaded from other institutions and lined up on the wall, and instead think more actively about bringing contemporary artistic practices to bear on a smaller number of works, or of using the latest technology to make their works available in new ways. This is not simply to propose mingling the works of contemporary artists with works of older art, a curatorial fashion of the last several years that is now becoming tired. Nor is it a proposal to invite artists to do more curatorial digging in museum collections.

The idea is that contemporary artists should have a role to play in the design, planning and installation of exhibitions of older art. The result would surely be a mixing of kinds of images. In the panel by the Master of St Giles we see a reliquary, a gold altarpiece, textiles and tombs, not to mention performances. In the new, already emergent style of exhibition, works of older art are presented in the context of modern reproductions, video displays and even performances. 'A carousel of staidness!' critics may cry, but let us remember that even the stodgiest show of old master art is inevitably a strange and anachronistic assemblage of works from different places and authors, and often from quite a range of times.

To put on exhibitions of moveable works is to engage in an artificial enterprise, and the time has come to think more imaginatively about the artifact.

The Madrid-based firm Factum Arte, headed by the artists Adam Lowe, has produced startling conjunctions of contemporary methods and older art. In 2007, using new, patented techniques, they produced an elaborately accurate three-dimensional facsimile of Paolo Veronese's Wedding at Cana (1563). The vast Louvre canvas was taken to Paris from the refectory of the Benedictine monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice — where it had hung for 435 years — by Napoleon in 1797. Two-hundred-and-ten years later, the facsimile was installed in the painting's original location, an event that was greeted as a kind of homecoming by the Venetian citizenry. It is clear that the version in Venice is a copy, but in its original location it arguably gives a fuller experience of the work than the original painting, squared between two doors in the Louvre. As Lowe said in 2007: 'Do I think the experience of the facsimile, a facsimile of this accuracy — because it is incredibly accurate — in Palladio's refectory, is more authentic than the experience of the painting in the Louvre? Yes, I do think that.'

The authenticity of the in-situ experience is complicated by the fact that the refectory itself has undergone changes since Veronese's time. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the installation of the copy introduces a new dimension in the relation to the work in the Louvre. Visitors to Venice who see the installation will be inclined to look at Veronese's painting with a better-informed eye than they visit Paris. Conversely, the existence of the facsimile means that visitors to the Louvre are now more strongly encouraged to go to Venice to see what the painting looks like in its monastic setting. The Napoleonische Aufhobung is a fact of history and can't be undone; Veronese canvas should never again be made to move.

More recently, Factum Arte made a copy of Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper (1495–98) — in its current, ruined state — which was installed from December 2010 to January 2011 at the Armory in New York. A perimeter marked out by minimal temporary architecture reconstructed the dimensions of the refectory at San Maria delle Grazie in Milan, where the original work still stands. In the moments when The Last Supper was not being bared by hyperactive lighting effects and music choreographed by Peter Greenaway, New Yorkers were allowed to feel something of the true scale and presence of a work that will never travel, and is, anyway, beyond recuperation. I have always found it hard to see it in its original setting. In New York, I felt like I was getting my first good look at it.

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