Topos

Exhibition/Non-Exhibition is the title for a symposium that takes place on the evenings of Saturday 30th and Sunday 31st of May at the 1st Research Pavillion in Venice. Under this heading artists, curators, students, educators and researchers will gather together in semi-formal dialogue to conduct an exploration of the dynamics of the "exhibitible" and the construction of publicness in the spirit of Robert Smithson’s dialectic of "Site/Non-Site" as transposed to the coupling "Exhibition/Non-Exhibition".

The goal of the symposium is to think through the possibility of The Non-Exhibition, not as a simple refusal or blank negation of The Exhibition, but rather as a means of re-considering the dynamics of the exhibitible; the problems and potentials of the work of Non-Exhibition, of disappearance, of metaphorical replacements; and the political imaginaries of exhibitionists. This thinking is playful but not innocent. In a para-citing of Smithson's work we could say that: “This little topic is tentative and could be abandoned at any time. Topics like things are also abandoned. That topics are eternal is doubtful. Vanished topics compose the strata of many forgotten exhibitions. From non-site to site, from non-exhibition to exhibition what is the topos of exhibition /non-exhibition in the crowded moments of mega-exhibition?”

Speakers

Paul O’Neill (BARD Centre for Curatorial Studies, USA), Niclas Östlind (Valand Academy, GU, Sweden), Michelle Sommer (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil), Mick Wilson (Valand Academy, GU, Sweden).

Some prompts for the discussion

The Non-Site (an indoor earthwork) is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site in N.J. (The Pine Barrens Plains). It is by this dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it - this The Non-Site. ... Between the actual site in the Pine Barrens and The Non-Site itself exists a space of metaphoric significance. It could be that "travel" in this space is a vast metaphor. Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions. Let us say that one goes on a fictitious trip if one decides to go to the site of the Non-Site. The "trip" becomes invented, devised, artificial; therefore, one might call it a non-trip to a site from a Non-site.

My Nonsites take the outdoors and bring it inside in containers. This starts a dialectic. These photo-markers do the reverse. I am using the environment to frame something artificial. In the gallery, History frames time. Here the reverse happens. Robert Smithson cited in John Perreault’s “Nonsites in the New” 1969.

Dialectic was indeed one of Smithson’s favorite words or, I would more correctly announce, one of his favorite concepts — as was entropy. But his sense of the dialectical was not academic or rigidly Hegelian or Marxist ... He wanted to get at interrelationships, as opposed to dualistic oppositions. He was not an either/or type of guy. How would I characterize the Smithsonian Dialectic? Thesis and antithesis are always clearly presented, but the synthesis is free-floating, elusive, anxious. John Perreault in “Nonsites in the New” 1969.

The subject of exhibitions tends more and more to be not so much the exhibition of works of art, as the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art. Daniel Buren in "Exposition d’une exposition" ("Exhibiting Exhibitions") Documenta V Catalogue, 1972.

The Exhibitionist does not aim to supplant artistic practice with curatorial practice, nor is it meant to consolidate the power of the curator. This is not an either/or proposition. Close readings of exhibitions by those who make exhibitions only makes us more accountable for the work we show and our motivations for showing it.

Jens Hoffmann and Tara McDowell in “Reflection” The Exhibitionist #4, 2011

The contemporary art exhibition has become a sort of meeting place for different kinds of specialized discourses. As such, it is specialized in the sense that it produces a specific meaning or knowledge, yet at the same time it is (or at least claims to be) expected to be accessible to a general public – unlike the university, for instance, which is not required to open its discourse to a broader public. Dorothea von Hantelmann cited in Georgina Jackson’s "And the Question is..." in Curating Research, 2014.

Sometimes referred to in shorthand as “mega exhibitions” or “biennials” (even those that do not, strictly speaking, occur biannually), these various large-scale international exhibitions distinguish themselves from typical group shows staged in museums, art centers, or Kunsthallen in large part through their lineage to the Venice Biennial, the first perennial international salon of contemporary art inaugurated in 1895. This parentage implies a temporality and spectacularity that is their own: These punctual manifestations recurring every two or three or even every five years, as is the case with Documenta, lack real visibility beyond the duration of their exhibitions; they have an explicit ambition both to represent their region, host city, or nation and to display a decidedly international panorama of contemporary production, an ambition that influences the scale and general circumstance attached to the event; and they often are dispersed over multiple public spaces and institutional sites. If these relatively basic features unite large-scale international exhibitions and biennials, an ocean of differences can separate their tenants and histories. A number of them find their origins in contexts of profound political and cultural transition, for example, the globally disparate Documenta and German post-war reconstruction, the Gwangju Biennial and the democratization of South Korea, the short-lived Johannesburg Biennial and the end of apartheid, or Manifesta, European Biennial of Contemporary Art and the fall of the Berlin
Wall. These and others have used the particularity of their historic, cultural, and geographic situation to define an institutional focus, a striking example being the Havana Biennial’s ongoing engagement to offer a platform for artists from the “Third World.” Whatever their individual histories, however, the ambition to be a counter model to the museum and its traditional exhibitions is a significant defining feature of such events.


**Schedule**

---

**Saturday 30th May**

**17:00** Food and glass of wine in the venue

**17:30 Mick Wilson** Opening statement / Introduction of the panel and the issues Short presentation and discussion

**18:00 Paul O’Neill** How the question of exhibition has changed in recent debates? **18:30 Valand student presentations:** Exhibition as Experience / Exhibition as Event

Short presentation and discussion on the exhibition viewing experience of the previous two days

**19:00 Niclas Östlind**

Curiosity, Content & Care: Reflections on the difficulties in exhibiting artist research.

**19:30 Closing discussion with food and drink**

What does it mean to think of Exhibition/Non-Exhibition in terms of Smithson’s Site/Non-site? What kinds of exhibitionary or non-exhibitionary practices does this propose?

**20:00-ish ending**

---

**Sunday 31st May 17:00** Food and glass of wine in the venue

**17:30 Michelle Sommer** Contemporary practices of "errancy" in Brazilian art

**18:00 Valand student group** Opening responses to the question: “What is an Exhibition? What might a Non-Exhibition be?” Short presentations and discussions

**18:30 Mick Wilson 19:30 Closing discussion with food and drink**

Inhabiting exhibitions **20:00-ish ending**
Suggested Readings

1. Robert Smithson "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites" (1968)  
   http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/provisional.htm  
2. Robert Smithson "Cultural Containment" (1972)  
   http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/cultural.htm  
3. Edouard Malingue Galley “Art Basel 'Hong Kong, 2013, Encounters Section 2 Hall 1, Laurent Grasso, Visibility is a Trap” (2012)  
   https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_15/pdfs/enwezor.pdf  
   http://www.curatorial.net/resources/ONEll_Curatorial%20Turn.pdf  
6. Georgina Jackson "And the Question is..." in Curating Research (2014)  
7. Sebastian Loewe "When Protest Becomes Art: The Contradictory Transformations of the Occupy Movement at Documenta 13 and Berlin Biennale 7” (2015)  
   http://field-journal.com/issue-1/loewe  

About the speakers


Niclas Östlind is a curator, writer and head of the research school at the Faculty of Arts at Gothenburg University. He has worked as curator at Liljevalchs konsthall in Stockholm, Gävle konstcentrum and Åmells Fine Art in Stockholm and London. He completed his PhD in photography at Valand Academy in 2014. Among the many exhibitions and catalogues he has curated and edited (often as part of a curatorial team) are: Time’s Slowness & Life’s Swiftness: Cultural Historical Photography and the Archive (2014), The Visible: Contemporary Swedish Photography (2014), Between Realities: Photography in Sweden 1970–2000 (2014), Sophie Tottie: Fiction is No Joke (2007), Art Feminism: Effects and Consequences in Sweden between 1970 and the Present (2005), Helen Chadwick: a Retrospective (2005), Jårg Geismar: The Optimist (2003), History Now: The Present of the Past in Contemporary Photography (2002). He is a member of the board of Bonniers konsthall and Marabouparken in Stockholm, and a previous member of the editorial board of Hjärnstorm and Index – Contemporary Art & Culture.

Michelle Sommer is a PhD candidate in Art History, Theory and Criticism at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, and a Visiting Researcher at Central Saint Martins - University of the Arts London / Exhibition Studies. She has a PhD grant from the National
Council for Scientific Research (CNPq) and Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). As a researcher, independent curator and an architect she has extensively contributed to exhibition projects. She recently curated the 11th edition of “Abre-Alas” at A Gentil Carioca Gallery, Rio de Janeiro, and “Mimetism” at the international colloquium “The Thousand Names of Gaia” organised by Bruno Latour, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Deborah Danowski. In 2013, she was the museography coordinator of the 9th Mercosul Biennial, Porto Alegre. She is currently preparing a book about experiences of errancy in Brazilian contemporary art with an award grant from the 2013-2014 Rumos Itaú Cultural program. She is based in London and Rio de Janeiro.