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PART I — CURATING

01

INSIDE THE COVER

JIMMY LIMIT

words by
Christopher Schreck

44

PORTRAITS IN THE

EXHIBITION SPACE

FREDERICK KIESLER'S

ENDLESS EXHIBITION

by Lorenzo Benedetti

54

SPACES—STUDY CASES

ZASHA COLAH AND SUMESH

SHARMA — CLARK HOUSE

INITIATIVE by Vincent Honoré

62

TALKING ABOUT

THE NOVEL AS AN

EXHIBITION, THE

EXHIBITION AS A NOVEL

by Jean-Max Colard

PART II — EXPLORING

66

SPOTLIGHT

DAVID DOUARD

in conversation with Ruba Katrib

designed by David Douard

76

LAB

ROCHES MAMMIFÈRES

DISSIMULAITS

THE PTOHOGRAHPIES

82

SPOTLIGHT

NICOLAS DESHAYES

in conversation with

Isobel Harbison

94

LAB

a project by N. DASH

text by Matthew Higgs

106

SHOW AND TELL

ANDREA BÜTTNER

by Cecilia Canziani

116

SPOTLIGHT

MAGALI REUS

in conversation with

Nicoletta Lambertucci

124

LAB

a project by B. INGRID OLSON

text by Andrew Blackley

134

THE EXHIBITION ROOM

FICTION ON DISPLAY

A COLLECTION OF

COLLECTIONS

by Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk

visual commentaries proposed by

France Fiction

142

THE EXHIBITION ROOM

CONVERSATION AS

A TURING TEST

by Valentinas Klimašauskas

The Novel as an Exhibition, the Exhibition as a Novel

BY JEAN-MAX COLARD

It is now accepted that every exhibition, even the most objective, museum-like, historical, retrospective, through its own path and the set of works it offers, is fiction. Or counter-fiction, designed to deconstruct a history of art which is too restricted, and thus to propose a new version of it. It is a spatialized tale which is made, or can be inferred, through a display of diverse works and varied media. The exhibition is a trap: masked as a spatial juxtaposition of elements, it is also a fiction factory, a place of ‘storytelling’. We should therefore not be surprised by the exhibition and the novel inevitably getting closer to each other. For a long time, these two media were far apart. Contemporary art preferred relationships with experimental, audio, visual, performative or “plastic” poetry, and the exhibition would tend towards the language of the essay, towards theory or anthropology. As for the novel, its absolute domination in the world of publishing has meant that it preferred to compete with major and more diffused form of art represented by cinema, rather than with contemporary art. The current convergence between exhibition and novel is therefore the clue to a cultural repositioning: while cinema is threatened in its supremacy by other image-based setups, the art exhibition has, for its part, reached a level of consciousness never reached before, cynically supported by a flourishing economy of art in a world in crisis. In addition, its relationship with the novel contributes to the legitimacy of a curatorial practice.

I. Novel-Exhibitions

The phenomenon involves several aspects: first, it is worth stressing the reversibility of this relationship. In fact, the exchange works in both directions. Let’s start with exhibitions which are adaptations from novels, fairly plentiful in recent years: for example, Jens Hoffmann had included in his project for the CCA Wattis a series of four exhibitions respectively adapted from Jules Verne (*Around the World in Eighty Days*), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (the children’s novel written by L. Frank Baum, which also became a famous film by Victor Fleming), Melville’s monumental novel *Moby Dick*, and finally *The Adventures of Huckle-*

berry Finn by Mark Twain. Last year, at the Consortium in Dijon, Stéphanie Moisdon adapted Houellebecq’s best-seller, *The Map and the Territory*, in an exhibition desperately entitled, in a Schopenhauerian fashion, *Le Monde comme volonté et comme papier peint* (The World as Will and Wallpaper), in which the curator took a lot of liberties in her adaptation: while the novel in question explicitly evokes the world of art, the exhibition was completely ignorant of the plot, the character-artist Jed Martin and his hyper-realist painting depicting Jeff Koons within the art market, to the benefit of a thorough reflection on the world of work and the end of the industrial civilization. In 2008, at the art center Attitudes in Geneva, the Berlin artist Sharyar Nashat staged *Correction*, a novel by Thomas Bernhard¹: through three rooms, akin to three consecutive stages, and three different media (a video, an architectural project, an installation), the viewer could follow the mad and tireless building of a pyramid, called the Cone, by a character in the middle of a forest. In the end the sculpture, unfinished, was taken away from view. In this context, it is impossible not to mention an artist like Liam Gillick, who practices what might be termed self-adaptation: his sculptures and exhibitions are inspired by novels or participate in their very writing, showing how far the British artist has been promoting the equivalence between story and exhibition. Lastly, in 2002 Pierre Huyghe conceived in Bregenz his lavish “*expédition scintillante*”², an actual adventure exhibition inspired by Jules Verne’s novel *The Sphinx of the Ice Fields*, which in turn evokes Edgar Allan Poe’s unfinished story *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. As much as the film adaptation has allowed cinema to explore the uniqueness of its own medium, these “adaptation exhibitions” too belong in the realm of the art exhibition. They also promote the conversion of the curator into “author of exhibitions”. In doing so, they move away from the binary system of the film adaptation, and open up new trans- and inter-media circuits: the novel-exhibition brings together media and other works, but it is also crossed by references to cinema, in particular to the remake concept, transferred from the film industry to the art of display. Other significant examples of this relationship may be the exhibitions involving a fictional character.

Without taking into account the fictitious character of Reena Spaulings, who also gave rise to an eponymous novel published by Bernadette Corporation, we should mention the very novel-like exhibition *Madame la Baronne était plutôt maniérée, assez rococo et totalement baroque* (The Baroness was rather mannered, fairly rococo and totally baroque), organized in episodes by Emilie Renard at the Maison Populaire in Montreuil in 2006. For his part, the writer Jean-Yves Jouannais told many artists of his intention to bring into existence the character of Félicien Marbœuf (1852-1924) at the Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard in 2009.

But the clue which definitely confirms this comparison is the mass of narrative texts, of novel exhibitions that get written, published and exhibited nowadays in the field of art. They may be the work of a writer of science fiction (as in the case of *New Dystopia*, by Mark von Schlegell), of the artist duo Goldin + Senneby, authors of a novel which unfolds in several chapters and exhibitions, or of the art critic Chris Sharp, who associated a narrative with the exhibition *Le Silence*, curated by Simone Menegoi at the Nouveau musée national de Monaco. Beyond renowned literature and on the fringe of traditional publishing, there is a whole production of different narrative texts, varying very widely in form and publication method. A first distinctive feature of these texts is that they do not necessarily include images, and even less so images of works to be exhibited. The “exhibition-novel” is not a catalog – it takes a different direction. There are also more or less free adaptations, “novelizations”³ not of films but of exhibitions. This is about intermedia reversibility: to the ‘exhibition setting’ of an existing story adapted from a novel or an invisible script, there corresponds a ‘novel setting’, a ‘story setting’, a ‘text setting’ of an exhibition which has already taken place or is in progress. According to such reversibility, the terminology proposed by Sinziana Ravini appears fitting: the curator claims to do “novel-exhibitions” along with writing “exhibition-novels”⁴.

II. Intermezzo

Halfway through this article, it is worth recalling an outstanding example of the correspondence di-

scussed here as proposed by Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, Nobel Prize for Literature. Collecting them under the title *The Museum of Innocence*, Pamuk has created three simultaneous works, linked to each other in one single project: a fluid and classic novel, which tells of a love story taking place in Istanbul during the '60s, but also a museum entirely dedicated to this fictional story, a rather rare case of a writer's house. Located in the western district of Beyoğlu, in a building purchased by the writer ten years ago to exhibit the physical equivalent of his fictional work, the Museum of Innocence opened in April 2012. Inside, on different floors, one can look at a number of cases containing objects, each of which describes one of the chapters of the novel, written from the beginning with the idea of giving form to a strange museum, a strange spatialization of a story. In the museum catalog, Pamuk describes the global project, adding comments to each display case and collecting his own memories as an old Istanbul citizen.

III. Exhibition-novels

Ultimately, it is quite interesting to read the contemporary literary production from the perspective of an art exhibition. Or even all the literature of the past: *Against Nature* by Huysmans, *Things or Life: A User's Manual* by Perec, *The Atrocity Exhibition* by Ballard, as well as *The Invention of Morel* and the island device which Adolfo Bioy Casares stages, all these writings could be seen as examples of a fully-fledged fictional art of the exhibition. Or of the exhibition as a literary genre. Most recently published are “stories of exhibitions”: tales of exhibition openings (the novel *Sentinelles* by Cécile Wajsbrot collects fictitious opinions of visitors to the major retrospective of a video artist at the Centre Pompidou on its opening night), but also stories of film series', like *The Lost Scene* by the Israeli Abraham B. Yehoshua, in which the main character makes a retrospective of his life and his past loves.

In this short anthology, it is worth recommending reading the novel *L'exposition* by Nathalie Léger: focused on the “overexposed” life of the Countess of Castiglione, a beautiful woman of the Second

Empire who had herself photographed, in scantily clad poses, every week throughout her life up to her death, the novel suggests a reflection on the exhibition, no longer seen as an artistic expression, but as a neurosis, as a psychoanalytic complex.

In these texts the exhibition form is a strongly structuring element. Or rather de-structuring: by virtue of its looking like a collection, the exhibition incorporates the idea of fragmentation, thus allowing the narrative writing to break away from the linearity of the story.

Skipping the forms already established in the 19th century of the catalog novel, of the inventory book, we should draw the attention of potential readers to the “*in situ* writings”: it may be surprising to see how the *in situ* concept, defined and theorized by Daniel Buren as an intervention in and on a site, can become the model of literary works. However, when Perec sits at a table in a cafe to describe what surrounds him in his *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, we are not far from Douglas Huebler's *Location Piece* (1969), in which the artist documents the state of a given place. The road is seen here at the same time as text, as “fabric”, but also as an exhibition space. Perec emphasizes the “specific functions”⁵, somewhat outlining its catalog: “On the sidewalk, right next to the cafe, at three different points by the window, a man, rather young, draws with chalk on a wall a kind of ‘V’ within which appears a sort of question mark (land art ?).”⁶ Furthermore, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* testifies another “exhibition attempt”, of which the writer is not the curator but rather the viewer.

But where Perec gets even closer to a site-specific practice of writing is not so much in the public space as in his personal workspace. So his *Notes on the Objects to Be Found on my Desk* demonstrate a critical awareness of the place which leads the author to examine the context of the production of his own writing: “I spend many hours a day sitting at my desk”, “this setting up of my territory is rarely the result of chance.”⁷ Written in the present tense in his description, in a fictional simultaneity of the act of seeing and that of writing, these meta-textual notes clearly obey the mode of *in situ* writing. Remaining in context, we should remember that the artist's book is a medium in itself, a printed exhibition space, a site-specific work. Sophie Cal-

le's photography novels involve both the object and the exhibition space, again in a relationship of equivalence.

In an audiovisual society, in a time suspended between graphosphere and videosphere, the novel itself has become, just like the exhibition, an “inter-media assembly”. The setting up, the collecting of visual and textual fragments caught from the flow of information, sounds and images, the frequent presence of photographs in the contemporary novel, the emphasis placed by the authors on the interrelation of the fragments of the story collected in their works, all contribute to the novel and the art exhibition getting closer to each other. This process can already be perceived in online, hypergraphic and hypertextual novels, in which the text is associated with a soundtrack or a video sequence, where the reader incessantly switches back and forth into being a viewer, constantly adjusting his sight. This establishes a process in which the writer becomes a curator, an art which displays literature.

1. Shahryar Nashat, *Das Beispiel* (adapted from *Correction* by Thomas Bernhard), Attitudes, Geneva, April-June 2008.
2. Pierre Huyghe, *L'expédition scintillante – A musical*, Kunsthau Bregenz, September-November 2002.
3. On this subject, see Jan Baetens's original analysis in *La novellisation. Du film au roman*, Les Impressions Nouvelles, Brussels 2008.
4. The definition of exhibition-novel also relates to a collective text written in French but called *The Hidden Mother*, published for an exhibition of the same title held at the Rouart atelier in Paris.
5. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, English trans. by John Sturrock, Penguin, London 1997.
6. Id., *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, English trans. by Marc Lowenthal, Wakefield Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2010.
7. Id., *Notes on the Objects to Be Found on my Desk in Thoughts of Sorts*, English trans. by David Bellos, David R. Godine, Boston [1985]2009.