A CANON OF EXHIBITIONS (excerpts) published in Manifesta Journal 11: The Canon of Curating, 2011

Discussion of an exhibitionary canon is something new. And it is new because the serious study of exhibitions is something new, or at least relatively new. Two factors have driven recent research and publication on exhibitions: the changing landscape of art history, with its expanding interests in social and institutional histories, and, perhaps more importantly, the curatorial boom of the late 1980s and 1990s. With the latter has come interest in historical exemplars, along with the creation of academic programs in curatorial practice that demand historical cases to study. Certainly there had been books that presented the history of particular exhibitions, such as Milton Brown’s volume on The Armory Show, or histories of a group of exhibitions, such as Ian Dunlop’s account of several important shows. But these studies were relatively few in number, and the remaining literature, which was not large, was formed primarily in academic journals and volumes aimed at a specialist audience. It was this scarcity of information that prompted my own research on exhibitions while working at Zabriskie Gallery, New York, where I found my curiosity frustrated during our show of surrealist objects from 1936. That year was marked by three important exhibitions of Surrealism, shows mounted by the New Burlington Galleries in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Galerie Louise Leiris in Paris. Individual artists who were often mentioned in discussions of Surrealism, I was unable to find detailed information on them. My interest in these exhibitions and others, prompted by the gallery’s turn of its attention to the work of the French Nouveaux Réalistes, eventually led to my writing a book on twentieth-century art presented through accounts of major exhibitions. And in publishing The Avant-Garde in Exhibition, unbeknownst to myself, I was participating in the creation of a canon of exhibitions. [...] The idea of a canon is that of a standard against which objects of a given kind are measured or evaluated. But before discussing why a show would, or should, be included in an exhibitionary canon, it is important to consider how such a canon is used, to consider the purposes of designating certain exhibitions as canonical. And when we consider purposes, we must consider purposes for whom. In 1983 the editor of an issue of Critical Inquiry that was devoted to the literary canon identified a number of ways in which canons would be discussed: as determined by artists through choice of stylistic models and figures of emulation, as constructed by literary and academic critics, and as governing intellectual and scholarly study. These perspectives are not unrelated, as we see in the stimulus that the establishment of curatorial training programs has given to the historical study of exhibitions. But just as artists look at artworks from a different angle than do art historians—not ignoring what historians note and appreciate, but thinking also about how they can employ what they see in their artistic practice—so curators are concerned to take from the experience and study of exhibition ideas to be incorporated in their curatorial work. In considering a canon of exhibitions, then, a given exhibition is examined as canonical not in the sense of being a model of excellence to which other exhibitions are compared, but in terms of how it was used as a model by others, either contemporaneously or later. An exhibition can be thought of as an object that can be canonized, and if so, it would have been discussed as such in the past. Here exhibitions are evaluated in terms of their status as what we would call art, no less than as research objects in a field of scholarship. An exhibition is a text, as it were, an artifact that has a social and cultural purpose. Like exhibitions, they are nodes in structures of transaction and value. And constructing canons, their identification taking the form of absolute judgments but functioning also as springboards to further conversation and inquiry. Like exhibitions, they are nodes in structures of transaction and value, and the study of the canons, of that of exhibitions, has much to teach us about the systems of which they are a part. But that is another story.

This is for the simple reason that if we are to teach courses about exhibitions, if we are to include their study in a broader art and cultural history, then we must select particular exhibitions on which to focus. Exhibitionary site (First Gutai Outdoor Exhibition, Ashiya, Japan, 1955, and Seth Siegelaub’s ‘catalogue exhibitions’ of 1968–1969), to temporal structure (Hans Ulrich Obrist’s Move, Move, Move, 1997–1999, and Okwui Enwezor’s multiple platform Documenta 11, 2001–2002), and to the curatorial process itself (Andy Warhol’s 1970 indiscriminate mining of the storage rooms of the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art for Raid the Icebox, and Francesco Bonami’s delegation to others the curating of the non-national section of the 2003 Venice Biennale). And some exhibitions, for example the 1920 Berlin Dada-Messe (Dada andós can be characterized as a curatorial and curatorial-referential art historical and curatorial reasons. Since I began writing about the history of exhibitions, and especially while selecting shows to be documented in the two volumes of Salon to Biennial, I have been asked about my reasons for focusing on these particular cases. While I recognize that my work has contributed to a process of canon formation, I am unable to construct a fixed set of criteria for designating an exhibition as canonical. Because exhibitions function across multiple dimensions, linking individuals and objects that play diverse roles within many complex networks, it is possible that a more serious study of exhibitions is something new. And it is new because the serious study of exhibitions is something new, or at least relatively new. [...] The idea of a canon is that of a standard against which objects of a given kind are measured or evaluated. But before discussing why a show would, or should, be included in an exhibitionary canon, it is important to consider how such a canon is used, to consider the purposes of designating certain exhibitions as canonical. And when we consider purposes, we must consider purposes for whom. In 1983 the editor of an issue of Critical Inquiry that was devoted to the literary canon identified a number of ways in which canons would be discussed: as determined by artists through choice of stylistic models and figures of emulation, as constructed by literary and academic critics, and as governing intellectual and scholarly study. These perspectives are not unrelated, as we see in the stimulus that the establishment of curatorial training programs has given to the historical study of exhibitions. But just as artists look at artworks from a different angle than do art historians—not ignoring what historians note and appreciate, but thinking also about how they can employ what they see in their artistic practice—so curators are concerned to take from the experience and study of exhibition ideas to be incorporated in their curatorial work. In considering a canon of exhibitions, then, a given exhibition is examined as canonical not in the sense of being a model of excellence to which other exhibitions are compared, but in terms of how it was used as a model by others, either contemporaneously or later. An exhibition can be thought of as an object that can be canonized, and if so, it would have been discussed as such in the past. Here exhibitions are evaluated in terms of their status as what we would call art, no less than as research objects in a field of scholarship. An exhibition is a text, as it were, an artifact that has a social and cultural purpose. Like exhibitions, they are nodes in structures of transaction and value. And constructing canons, their identification taking the form of absolute judgments but functioning also as springboards to further conversation and inquiry. Like exhibitions, they are nodes in structures of transaction and value, and the study of the canons, of that of exhibitions, has much to teach us about the systems of which they are a part. But that is another story.

NOTES
2. A scholarly resource of particular significance is Donald E. Gordon’s Modern Art Exhibitions: 1900–1916, 2 vols. (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1974), a monumental effort seeking to list every work shown in exhibitions of modern art during these years. Among specialist works on early modern exhibition history, exemplary are those of Patricia Mainsardi and Martha Ward; the work of Walter Grasskamp on Documenta is an important precedent for research on more recent shows. A noteworthy exception to the lack of material available for both specialist and general public was the 1978 exhibition at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin and the accompanying publication, Stationen der Moderne: Die bedeutendsten Kunstausstellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland (Berlin: Berliner Galerie, 1988), which documented twenty exhibitions held in Germany from 1910 to 1976.
4. Appearing a few years earlier was an anthology of essays by scholars and curators on selected exhibitions: Bernd Klüser and Katharina Hegewisch, eds., Die Kunst der Ausstellung (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1991).
9. Here I focus on exhibitions of contemporary art, ignoring historical exhibitions that have been important to the field of art history by assembling older works never seen alongside one another or not united for many years, exploring particular influences, displaying artworks previously unknown or little known, and so on. 
10. While I have discussed this idea in the curatorial realm, of course, must be distinguished from those of artists who have employed the exhibition as an artistic form, such as Marcel Broodthaers’s Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles (1968–1972), Douglas Blau’s Fictions (1987), and Fred Wilson’s Mining the Museum (1992–1993).
11. Many exhibitions that fall into both of these canonical groupings employ a form of display that is related in a particular and institutional way to the works presented. On such shows, see my introduction to Salon to Biennial, Volume I: 1863–1959 (London: Phaidon, 2008), 18.
BRUCE ALTSHULER
Currently director of the Program in Museum Studies at New York University, since some years Bruce Altshuler has focused his interests on the history of exhibitions and on analysis of the best practices of museum management.

After earning a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Harvard University, in the 1980s is introduced into the world of contemporary art as associate director of the Zabriskie Gallery in New York. These are the years when Altshuler consolidates his knowledge of art history in the twentieth century, a quality that leads him first to become a member of the Board of Directors of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and later director of the museum until 1998.

From 1998 to 2000 he hold the position of Director of Studies for the Graduate Programs and Vice President of Christie’s Education in New York, and in the same period he is Member of Board of Directors for the International Association of Art Critics / United States Section.

During his professional activity he has initially concentrated his researches on both historical avant-garde movements and postwar American art, although in these last years he devote more attention to curatorial issues and museum studies.

Especially relevant his close examinations on exhibition that have made the history of the ‘900, which was inaugurated with the release of the volume The Avant-Gard in Exhibition: New Art in the Twentieth Century (N.Y., Harry N. Abrams 1994, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998).

The book published by Phaidon in 2008 Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions That Made Art History, Volume 1: 1863 -1959 is the starting point of a story that will come to some crucial moments of our days. Few years before, in the volume Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art (2006, Princeton University Press), Altshuler’s attention is focused on the challenges of museums to acquire and preserve contemporary art.

These issues are also briefly explored in several essays in some magazines, such as Manifesta Journal and Tate Etc.

This presentation will discuss the idea of a canon of exhibitions and of the curators who create them. First Bruce Altshuler will distinguish between exhibitions that are canonical for reasons of their art-historical importance and those considered canonical for reasons of curatorial innovation. The coherence of this distinction then will be questioned by looking at the history of exhibitions as an essential part of Art History, and by considering the way in which exhibitions play into broader accounts of culture and politics. With respect to the history of curating, and the construction of a set of canonical curators, Bruce Altshuler will sketch a general account of curating in the 20th century, and discuss the way in which curatorial practice is influenced by awareness of moments of this history. Finally, he will discuss ways in which exhibitions and curatorial activity might be evaluated for possible inclusion into a fluid canon.