

1. INTRODUCTION

The goal of this thesis is to trace the genealogy of the thematic contemporary art exhibition in Italy in the late 1950s as a key element in understanding the coming-of-age of curatorial practices. It is within this model that contemporary curatorial practice – although not professionalised until the 1990s – emerged as distinct from the position of the museum curator, primarily devoted to inscribing contemporary production within an art historical narrative. Taking into account the recent development of curatorial studies and twentieth century exhibition research, my contribution aims to enrich both fields by providing an historical contextualisation of *Vitalità nell'arte* (1959), *Dalla natura all'arte* (1960) and *Arte e contemplazione* (1961), the three exhibitions organised by the Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume (from now on CIAC) at Palazzo Grassi in Venice, that constitute my case study within Italian exhibition-making between 1932 and 1961. The thesis addresses the following questions: *From which historical and cultural conditions did the thematic contemporary art exhibition emerge? How did each of these conditions develop throughout the timeframe analysed? What was the position which this new model in exhibition-making assumed in respect to the museum? What role did artists and architects play in the affirmation of the new model? How can looking at this experience help in understanding the emergence of the professional curator, traditionally situated in the 1990s?*

The narrative I have retraced aims to question the accepted boundaries of both curatorial studies and exhibition history in relation to chronology and the breadth of their respective fields, by addressing curatorial practice within Italian exhibition culture of the 1950s, and integrating within its area of enquiry political propaganda, architecture, design and the world of commercial production, all linked to Italian exhibition history since 1932. I believe that the role of the contemporary art curator emerged at the point when the public presentation of contemporary art was inscribed within thematic exhibitions that were no longer connected with an art historical discourse. Since the 1920s, exhibitions provided avant-garde movements with an arena in which to situate contemporary artistic production within the fields of political propaganda and commercial production, calling into question the notion of the autonomy of the art object as affirmed, in contrast, by the newly opened Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Within this framework, my chapters present the appropriation of the avant-garde international experiences in exhibition-making pursued by architects and artists in Italy from 1932 on, its autonomous development during the 1930s and its outcomes in the 1940s and 1950s. Finally, I identify in the CIAC – an institution with a shifting profile in respect to the presentation of

contemporary art within an art historical framework – the conditions for the emergence of the contemporary curator *avant-la-lettre* and the development of the thematic contemporary art exhibition.

When I began researching this thesis, my initial goal was to understand if contemporary curatorship could be repositioned within a different, and more autonomous, cultural framework from the one provided by the discursive construction collectively composed by curators, sociologists and art historians since the 1990s.¹ This discursive construction on the one hand contributed to the formation of an outline of the professional profile of contemporary curatorship, and on the other hand defined it as a response to the historical conditions that emerged in the 1990s with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the advent of the global economy and the calling into question of the Western art historical canon.² The main subject of this narrative was identified as the figure of the independent curator, with the group exhibition considered as his/her privileged medium of expression.

The independent curator occupies an alternative position in respect to the one traditionally maintained by the museum curator, whose duties focus on the preservation of works of art and the development of art historical research.³ Historically, this new

¹ Among the literature of the time that contributed to building up this narrative, please see Ute Meta Bauer, (ed.), *Meta 2: The New Spirit in Curating*, Stuttgart:Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, 1992, one of the first publications on this theme; followed several years later by Peter White (ed.), *Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future*, Banff, Canada: Banff Centre for the Arts, 1996; Anna Harding (ed.), *Art and Design Magazine: On Curating – The Contemporary Art Museum and Beyond*, n.52, London: Academy Editions, 1997; Mika Hannula (ed.), *Stopping the process: Contemporary Views on Art and Exhibitions*, Helsinki: Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, 1998; Barnaby Drabble and Dorothee Richter (eds.), *Curating Degree Zero, An International Curating Symposium*, Nuremberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 1999; Catherine Thomas (ed.), *The Edge of Everything: Reflections on Curatorial Practice*, Banff, Canada: Banff Centre Press, 2000; Gavin Wade (ed.), *Curating in the 21st Century*, Walsall and Wolverhampton: New Art Gallery Walsall / University of Wolverhampton, 2000; Susan Hiller and Sarah Martin (eds.), *The Producers: Contemporary Curators in Conversation (Series 1-5)*, Newcastle: Baltic and University of Newcastle, 2000–2; Carin Kuoni (ed.), *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, New York: Independent Curators International (ICI), 2001; Carolee Thea (ed.), *Foci: Interviews with Ten International Curators*, New York: Apexart, 2001; Paula Marincola (ed.), *Curating Now: Imaginative Practice? Public Responsibility*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2001.

² As expressed by Okwi Enwezor in his interview with Paul O'Neill: '...[the] contemporary curator was much more attentive to all the theoretical issues that came out of post-structuralism, postmodernism. As much as we want to deny that, all this has helped shape the very work of the contemporary curator and I believe that my work is part of this trajectory.' In 'Curating Beyond the Canon. Okwui Enwezor interviewed by Paul O'Neill', in Paul O'Neill (ed.), *Curating Subjects*, London: Open Editions, p.111.

³ Tellingly, the first effort to identify, define and historically position the independent curator as a new professional figure within the art system came from the sociologists Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollock, who summarised their research in the essay 'From Museum Curator to Exhibition *Auteur*', in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (eds.), *Thinking About Exhibitions*, New York: Routledge, 1996, pp.231–50. Heinich further addressed the topic from a historical point of view by interviewing Harald Szeemann, who positioned himself as the first independent curator: Natalie Heinich, *Harald Szeemann, un cas singulier. Entretien*, Caen: L'Echoppe, 1995.

profession appeared at the end of the 1960s, a fact explained by the literature on curating as a consequence of the radical changes in artistic production at that time that required a mediating figure for its public display.⁴ The independent curator re-emerged in the 1990s thanks to the international diffusion of the biennial and the boom of not-for-profit spaces (often run in collaboration with artists).⁵ Both biennials and not-for-profit spaces constituted an alternative to more static and traditional institutions such as museums, against which contemporary curatorship tended to be positioned. By taking such an oppositional stance, contemporary curatorship aligned itself almost naturally with the theoretical framework provided by the discourse around institutional critique, enjoying its third wave in the 1990s and with an already established theoretical background.⁶

This mainstream narrative on contemporary curating has been recently systematized by Paul O'Neill, who reconstructs its different developments in his publication *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*.⁷ In particular, he sees in the goal of Seth Siegelaub to demystify the art system in the late 1960s, the principle characteristic of curatorial practice. In this way, O'Neill unites the discursive narrative produced in the 1990s with the experiments in exhibition-making of the late 1960s, which appears almost as a pristine 'year zero' for curating. In his analysis, O'Neill points out how, at the end of the 1980s at the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art of New York, Benjamin H. Buchloch, Hal Foster and Andrea Fraser reframed the relationship between art and the institution, assigning to the curator (since the 1980s a less independent figure more involved with the institution) the role of the 'vital insider' whose role was to protect art within the institution.⁸ It is my assertion that the

⁴ In particular, Bruce Altshuler in his pioneering volume *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition. New Art in the 20th Century*, New York: Harry N Abrams, 1994 p.236; Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998, p.286 and Claire Bishop, "What Is a Curator?", *BE Magazin*, no. 15: "auteur", pp. 120-39.

⁵ As positioned by Michael Brenson, 'The Curator's Moment: Trends in the Field of International Contemporary Art Exhibitions', in *Art Journal*, year 57, n.4 (Winter 1998), pp. 16–27, republished in Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal, Solveig Øvstebø (eds), *The Biennial Reader*, Germany: Hatje Cants Verlag and Bergen Kunsthall, 2010 and by Mika Hannula (ed.), *Stopping the Process: Contemporary Views on Art and Exhibitions*.

⁶ For a history of the perspective of institutional critique, see Albert Alberro, Blake Stimson (eds.), *Institutional Critique, An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 2009. Recently, the equation between contemporary curating and institutional critique has been reinforced by Simon Sheikh, who recognises the approach of New Institutionalism, developed since the early 1990s by curators such as Maria Lind and Charles Esche as belonging to the genealogy of institutional critique. Simon Sheikh, 'Burning from the Inside. New Institutionalism Revisited', in Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski (eds.), *Cultures of the Curatorial*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012, pp.361–72.

⁷ Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 2012.

⁸ Ibid., p.28. Central to O'Neill's reflections are the texts by Benjamin Buchloch, 'Conceptual Art 1962 to 1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', in *October*, n.55, Winter 1990,

discourse on contemporary curating, being bound up with this institutional critique, could firstly acknowledge and deal with the power relationships at play within traditional institutions, such as art museums, towards the different groups with which they are involved (such as artists, curators, works of art, visitors). Secondly, it called into question the conventional, Western, art historical framework traditionally associated with art institutions; thirdly, it could support less conventional artistic practices based on conceptual strategies, the moving image or more ephemeral strategies such as performance and participatory projects; fourthly, it could embrace the position of artists, with the curator becoming a mediator between their practice and the institution; and finally, it could guarantee that works of art would retain their integrity and independence despite the fact that the institutions were inscribed within an economic structure. Although I recognised the benefits of inserting a profession, apparently without any roots, within the framework of a debate that has been ongoing since the end of the 1960s, at the same time I realised how this move also had its own limitations and could be applied only to a very restricted notion of contemporary curating.

At the end of this first phase of research, I understood on the one hand that adopting the perspective of institutional critique resulted in the subordination of contemporary curating to more established art historical categories, narratives and debates (such as questions of artistic authorship and the autonomy of the work of art) and, at the same time, prevented the formation of an independent field of research around curating. On the other hand, it also failed to provide a framework broad enough to encompass contemporary curating projects that did not directly address (or even present) contemporary art, falling into an inescapable contradiction: the moment a curator aimed to extend his/her projects beyond the realm of contemporary art, they immediately conflicted with the boundaries set by institutional critique, becoming difficult to understand and undermining the role of the artist. This is evident in the case of *Documenta 5*, Kassel 1972, where independent curator Harald Szeemann conceived an articulated thematic contemporary art exhibition, in which a series of objects and images (drawn from both popular and folkloristic cultures) sat alongside contemporary works of art, exploring how images influence our perception of the world around us. The exhibition stirred up a range

pp.105–43, and Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', in *Artforum*, year 44, n.1, September 2005, pp.278–83.

of hostile responses from participating artists, among which the most articulated were those of Robert Morris, Daniel Buren and Robert Smithson.⁹

At this stage in my research, I recognised in the entanglement of the museum with the production of art, a factor highlighted by institutional critique, a key element deserving further consideration, since its main consequence was the eclipsing of any alternative form of agency for both the institution and the contemporary curator. Prominent art historian Rosalind Krauss, in an article written in 1982, problematizes the normative function of the museum as responsible for assessing what qualifies as belonging to art history. Krauss states:

The complex collective representations of that quality called style – period style, personal style – are dependent upon the space of exhibition; one could say they are a function of it. Modern art history is in that sense a product of the most rigorously organized nineteenth-century space of exhibition: the museum.¹⁰

Krauss used photography and its technical reproduction of works of art to question the museum's traditional role of imposing art historical categories and narratives based on aesthetics to any of the exhibits housed within its walls. Although the essay was written in the early 1980s, and since that time museums have undergone a series of transformations in their relationships with the discipline of art history (itself dramatically changed), it is significant that Krauss stresses the bonds existing between the museum and the discipline of art history and between the museum and its formative status in respect to what could and should be considered 'art.'¹¹

If it is true that contemporary curating does not operate according to the traditional museum framework (a fact about which Krauss expressed her concern), it does not

⁹ Szeemann was accused by Morris of using works of art to 'illustrate misguided sociological principles or outmoded art historical categories'; by Buren of trying to achieve his own work of art through the exhibition of works by others; and by Smithson of creating a framework in which he culturally confined works for the period of the exhibition. Robert Morris sent his letter of complaint to Giancarlo Politi, *Flash Art* editor, on 6 May 1972, while the texts by Robert Smithson, 'Cultural Confinement', and Daniel Buren, 'Exhibition of an Exhibition', were both published in the Documenta 5 exhibition catalogue. The three texts have been reprinted in Phaidon Editors and Bruce Altshuler (eds.), *Biennials and Beyond – Exhibitions That Made Art History, 1962–2002*, London: Phaidon Press, 2013, p.158 and pp.171–2.

¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography's Discursive Spaces', *Art Journal*, n.42, Winter 1982.

¹¹ Krauss' argument aimed to reclaim for art history a more independent field of research than the one provided by the museum and its normative stance, problematic for the author especially if one considers the entanglement between the museum and the market, as highlighted already by Lawrence Alloway, whose articles and essays published in the 1970s on the topic were assembled in *Network: Art and the Complex Present*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Researcher Press, 1984.

necessarily follow that the only discursive option deriving from it should confine it to an antagonistic position in relation to the art institution, as maintained by institutional critique. It was at this stage of my research that I decided to focus on the theme of the group exhibition, which, as mentioned above, is considered the distinctive medium of contemporary curating.¹² It is possible to identify two main tendencies in contemporary curating in respect to the group exhibition: the first is concerned with setting new conditions for the visibility, production and distribution of contemporary art by reconfiguring and taking into consideration the context in which curators operate (this could be the case with the practice of Seth Siegelaub and Germano Celant, for example).¹³ This is the type of exhibition that fits better within the perspective of institutional critique assumed by mainstream curatorial studies. The second, instead, is interested in developing thematic contemporary art exhibitions (that can include non-artistic exhibits), by capitalising on the possibilities that open up for an institution once it dispenses with art history as its primary frame of reference. It is particularly this second tendency that I believe requires further research in order to enrich the fields of both curatorial studies and the history of exhibitions.

The context of the thematic contemporary art exhibition allows contemporary curating to put aside the traditional ties that museums have both with the discipline of art history and with the past as its principle temporal framework. In this way, the thematic contemporary art exhibition produces a changing and more flexible definition of the aims and objectives of an institution, with the contemporary curator assuming the role of cultural producer using the institution as his/her primary medium. If the curator operates outside the museum's traditional relationships with art history, then he or she, besides organising the exhibition, has to rethink the institution's goals in respect to its contents and to the relationships with its context and interest groups.

This dissertation recognises the thematic exhibition as a distinct genre within exhibition-making. Since their inception, exhibitions successfully addressed specific subjects or topics, this approach reaching its peak in the first half of the twentieth century,

¹² Since the 1990s, though, curatorial practice extended far beyond exhibitions as the privileged medium of the profession, to the use of other contexts, media and mass-media, such as books, radio and television.

¹³ Germano Celant presented the *Arte Povera* group in different contexts; the most unusual was probably *Arte Povera + Azioni Povere*, Amalfi, 4–6 October, at the old arsenal and its surrounding area. Although inappropriately described as an independent curator, a position he never claimed for himself, Seth Siegelaub curated landmark exhibitions such as *January 5–31, 1969*, New York City, 5–31 January 1969, organised in an office in Manhattan. Both exhibitions are discussed in Phaidon Editors and Bruce Altshuler (eds.), *Biennials and Beyond*, pp.65–92.

particularly in the commercial realm. In general, the context within which an exhibition subject was developed provided nation-states with opportunities to further their propagandist goals. In the case of fine art exhibitions, the exhibition subject would relate to a genre or topic inscribed within the discourse of art history.

The emergence of the thematic exhibition, instead, coincided with an interest in addressing the exhibition itself as a medium, and potentially a mass medium, through which to develop a concept and share its experience with the wider community, to allow the development of a critical judgment in relation to the topic addressed. Architects, artists or museum directors developed themes born out of personal interest or research mirrored either in artistic or popular culture. Despite their popularity and at times mixed success in the realm of fine art in the post-war period, thematic exhibitions originated in the world of commercial production, and were further nurtured by the propaganda exhibitions developed in Europe in the 1920s. In the case of Italy, Fascist propaganda had a major influence on the appearance of the thematic exhibition. It is for this reason that, in order to retrace its migration to the fine art sector in the period following the Second World War, this dissertation analyses the exhibition culture developed in Italy from 1932 onwards.

Although Fascist mass exhibitions were conceived so as to deny visitors any critical detachment from the themes presented, they provided architects and artists with platforms to experiment with new exhibition design. It was at the 1936 Milan Triennial, with the *Sala della Coerenza* designed by the studio BBPR – a group of four young architects based in Milan – that the thematic exhibition affirmed itself as a way to unfold before its visitors an argument about architecture, through architectural means, rather than as a medium for propaganda or commercial aims. This approach was further developed in the post-war context at the Milan Triennial in a series of exhibitions such as *Architettura. Misura dell'uomo* (1951); *Mostra degli studi sulla proporzione* (1951) and *Sezione di Museologia* (1957). Rather than being dictated directly by the objects on display, which make the exhibition's theme self-evident, the thematic exhibition emerged instead thanks to the careful and subjective selection of apparently disparate objects presented in ad hoc installation designs by architects. This approach was influenced by the desire to achieve a synthesis of the arts, by the recognition of exhibition design as a separate architectural genre and by the wish to exploit the potential recognised within an institution such as the Milan Triennial to present displays about concepts and ideas as much as individual objects. At the end of the 1950s, the emergence of thematic contemporary art exhibitions tended to substitute installation

design conceived by architects with a narrative unfolded by *avant-la-lettre* curators. This shift is visible for example in the *Cycle of Vitality* organised at Palazzo Grassi by Paolo Marinotti and Willem Sandberg between 1959 and 1961.¹⁴

The research into thematic contemporary art exhibitions required me to extend the chronological framework and the range of contexts usually covered by curatorial studies. The model of the thematic exhibition flourished in the context of political and commercial shows, particularly developed since the 1920s through European avant-garde experiments in exhibition design. Mary Anne Staniszewski was the first to recognise the importance of retracing these avant-gardist experiments, to which she dedicates the first chapter of her book *The Power of Display*.¹⁵ Interestingly, the chapter ends with a few key examples taken from Italian experiments in installation design of the 1930s, such as the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932 and the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana*, Milan, 1934, both heavily influenced by European avant-garde examples.¹⁶ Since the rest of Staniszewski's book focuses on the history of MoMA's installation design, I decided to research further the Italian experiments in exhibition design, since they played a crucial role in the development of the Italian model of the thematic contemporary art exhibition that emerged in Venice between 1959 and 1961.

The timeframe of my research spans the period between 1932 and 1961. During this period, Italy provides a distinct critical mass on exhibition-making through which to analyse the emergence of the model of the thematic contemporary art exhibition and, subsequently, to address from a new perspective the issues around contemporary curating. In order to pursue my research, I explored three areas of knowledge closely related to each other and traditionally overlooked by curatorial studies and exhibition history, despite their pivotal impact on exhibition-making: the debate on history developed in Italy in the first

¹⁴ Among the few texts reflecting on thematic exhibitions one of the most inspired is by Harald Szeemann titled 'Oh Du fröhliches, oh Du seliges thematisches Ausstellung' and published in Paul Kaufmann (ed.), *10 Jahre steirischer herbst*, Graz: steirischer herbst, 1977, pp.239–41. In his text, Szeemann defines the thematic exhibition as a 'communication of intentions', particularly referring to artistic ones. Written in 1977, and therefore influenced by the cultural debate of 1968, Szeemann points out how museums could benefit from thematic exhibitions, their inherent freedom (if compared to theatre or cinema) and their inner relationship with the tradition of the *gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). Although a supporter in 1977, at the end of the 1970s Szeemann abandoned his principal commitment to thematic exhibitions, for him epitomised by his project on the triad of bachelor machines, the mother and the sun. In fact, of the three themes, only the first one had an exhibition as an outcome. Italian art historian Pietro Rigolo argues that this mainly happened because at the time Szeemann was suggesting a cultural action and a professional position that was unsustainable and impossible to promote within and by the art world. Pietro Rigolo, *La Mamma. Una mostra di Harald Szeemann mai realizzata*, forthcoming essay.

¹⁵ Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.50–7.

half of the twentieth century by philosophers Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile; the study of exhibition design developed by architects and historians of architecture; and the role played by exhibitions in the marketing strategies promoted by the Italian commercial sector (both public and private).

Italian historian Claudio Fogu brought together these three areas of research in his analysis of what he calls the ‘historic imaginary’, promoted by the Fascist regime since 1932 with the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, which gave ‘visual form to a unique historic vision of history’ thanks to the participation of artists and architects belonging to both modernist and conservative tendencies.¹⁷ Concerning the historic imaginary, Fogu states:

I define [the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*] vision as ‘historic’ because it mobilized and reified the discursive distinction between the popular-cultural notion of *historicness* – referring to epoch-making *events* belonging to the transtemporal presence of consciousness – and that of historical-ness – referring to *facts* belonging to the past – by appropriating the former and rejecting the latter. Specifically, Fascism transfigured the idea of historic eventfulness into the mental image of fascist historic agency. That is, it conceived and presented itself as a historic agent whose acts possessed the qualities of immediacy and unmediated signification we commonly attribute to historic events. Just like a historic event, the fascist act of representation was aimed at giving presence to the past in the mind of the observer, thereby eliding the medium of narrative between historical agency and consciousness. In fact, Fascism celebrated its historicness by institutionalizing a historic mode of representation at all levels of visual and ritual mass culture.¹⁸

According to Fogu, in giving presence to the past in the mind of the observer, the exhibition fully realised the actualist theory of Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile, whilst at the same time being able to transcend it. The *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* was divided into two parts; the first presented diachronically those events that, between 1914 and 1922, allowed the coming-of-age of the Fascist revolution, while the second celebrated synchronically the maturing of the revolution into a stable regime, by projecting a future of endless dictatorship onto the present. The first part, by relating Fascism to the traumatic events of the First World War, embodied Gentile’s idea of actualism. Gentile’s actualism, schematically summarised by the sentence ‘history belongs to the present,’ recognised how

¹⁷ Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary Politics of History in Fascist Italy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003, p.9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp, 9–10.

‘we always make that past *attuale* (actual) by thinking its content within “our present awareness of thinking ourselves thinking the object”.’¹⁹ For Gentile, it was during the First World War that the Italian populace became aware of being itself an agent of history through its resistance to the threat posed to the motherland by the Austrian invasion after the defeat of Caporetto in 1916.²⁰ As pointed out by Fogu, Gentile believed that in order to react to the events at Caporetto, the Italian army ‘had actively internalised the historiographical image of the [First World War] conflict as a “fourth war of independence”’, bringing in this way a notion of the past into the present.²¹ Once the war was over, Gentile recognised in Fascism the new political agenda born from this re-orientation of history as belonging to the present rather than to the past, perceived for the first time by Italians on the battlefields of the war.²²

As further discussed in chapter one, however, in the second part of the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* Fascism was no longer presented as a revolution related to Italian history (as in the first part), but as a stable regime willing to bring the ‘imaginary’ of the future out of the past into the present. This was achieved by presenting visitors with a vision of an era of stability, under the aegis of Mussolini, and exemplified by the loyalty of the Italian populace to Fascist values. The reorientation of the exhibition’s temporality towards the future responded to the mutation of the historical conditions that had occurred in the regime by the early 1930s. Gentile envisioned Fascism as the subject of a totalitarian ethical state towards which the individual was considered responsible and in which he/she was called to participate actively. Mussolini, once the ‘Fascistization’ of Italy had been completed at the end of the 1920s, needed a system of myths, rituals and ceremonies that could consistently position Fascism as a historic agent before the Italian populace.²³ By

¹⁹ Ibid., p.38.

²⁰ At the time, Caporetto was a small Italian town on the border with the Austro-Hungarian Empire (belonging since 1947 to Slovenia) where, in 1916, the Austrian army broke the Italian lines, forcing them to retreat. Since the Italian command had not previously arranged a defensive line to protect the country, the enemy was able to invade Italian territory as far as the river Piave, near Venice.

²¹ Ibid., p.42. The first three wars of independence constitute the pinnacle of the epic of the Risorgimento, the historical period that led to the constitution of Italy as an independent state free from the foreign domination of the nineteenth century. Until the Second World War, the Risorgimento played a substantial role in the conscience of the Italian populace, although its heritage constituted an ambiguous area exploited by the different political forces according to the different historical contexts.

²² Gentile develops his argument mainly in two publications: Giovanni Gentile, ‘L’esperienza pura e la realtà storica’, 1915 and ‘Politica e filosofia’, 1918 now collected in Hervé A. Cavallera (ed.), *Giovanni Gentile. Opere. Frammenti di estetica e di teoria della storia*, voll.47–8, Firenze: Le Lettere, 1992.

²³ Although not proper English, I am using the word ‘Fascistization’ as it has been employed by historians such as Marla S. Stone in ‘Staging Fascism, the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution’, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.28, No.2., April, 1993, p.230, and Jeffrey T. Schnapp, in ‘Fascinating Fascism’, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.31, No.2, Special Issue: The Aesthetics of Fascism, April, 1996, p.241.

bringing the future, rather than the past, into the present, Fascism aimed to perpetuate its own mythology, projecting it into the decades to come.

A modernist aesthetic played a crucial role in the entire *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* since it provided the regime with the tools to redirect the traditional temporality of historical display that had been handed down by the nineteenth-century museum (it should not be forgotten that the exhibition was a historical one, that is with history as its theme). Rather than bringing the present into the past, by displaying artefacts either in ‘period rooms’ or according to a more rigorously philological display, modernist artists and architects played with the temporality of the museum through the exhibition design itself, in accordance with the wishes of Mussolini, the *deus-ex-machina* of the exhibition, and his collaborators. From this event on, artists and architects inaugurated a series of experiments in installation design that found in exhibitions – both historical and commercial – the most fertile ground. In particular, it is in exhibitions relating to the commercial sector, supported by private companies, that Fogu recognises the persistence of the historic imaginary pursued by the regime since 1932, and especially after 1936 when Fascism toned down its engagement with the modernist aesthetic expressed in its exhibitions due to the development of the *stile littorio*, a style more attuned to its new rhetoric of (Roman) empire.

While I believe Fogu provides an original contribution to the analysis of exhibitions by focusing attention on the historic imaginary and its influence on both the political and commercial sectors, at the same time he does not sufficiently develop the autonomous positions that architects and artists assumed during the 1930s in respect to the dictatorship. In focusing specifically on Fascism and on the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Fogu misses the opportunity to explore the debate occurring among artists and architects and their reinterpretation of the international debate on functionalism and the experiments of the avant-garde. Furthermore, Fogu does not address the wide range of positions (sometimes loyal, sometimes far more ambiguous) maintained by architects and artists towards the Fascist agenda. As a result, it becomes difficult to understand how certain habits and strategies moulded themselves under Fascism and how they further developed after the Second World War, under the newly proclaimed Italian Democratic Republic.

In post-war Italy, it was the philosopher Benedetto Croce who provided an innovative temporal perspective on Italian display culture in relation to the one pursued in

the 1930s.²⁴ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Croce shared with Gentile the impulse to question the prevailing positivist, idealist and historicist traditions, in an attempt to rethink the role of the individual in the new secularised modern world. Both philosophers believed that at:

every moment the world is in some particular way – has become *some* particular way –the result of all history so far. The responses of individuals to that world endlessly coalesce to produce some new totality, some new finite, particular world, which then elicits a new round of human response. In that sense the world is continuously coming to be in history through human response. Thus we at once belong to history and make history; thus the need to conceive human activity and history as two sides of the same coin.²⁵

But if Gentile, since 1913, had evolved his theory towards the idea of a totalitarian ethical state, (finally resulting in his support for Fascism), then Croce remained sceptical of such a position and its potential risks (as later demonstrated by events). He laid out his perspective, attacked by Gentile as being melancholic and contemplative, in his publication *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, 1938, ‘history as thought and action.’²⁶ For Croce, historical knowledge provides the basis for further action and, at the same time, it is through such action that it is possible for the individual to reorient and transform the world at any moment. It is in his book *Teoria e storia della storiografia* of 1915, that Croce for the first time states that ‘all history is contemporary history,’ highlighting the crucial role *of* the present and *for* the present in any definition of history.²⁷ By recognising how the issues of the present are those that determine what events in the past needed to be addressed in order to understand both the past and the present, Croce acknowledged the role played by history in respect to contemporaneity. As analysed in chapter two, this became a central element for those Italian architects involved in the refurbishment of fine art museums, in questioning the role of tradition in the present and the future.

²⁴ Croce’s position in the intellectual post-war debate (both national and international) is ambiguous. Although he was one of the leading international intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century, his reputation further reinforced by the anti-fascist position he had publicly declared since 1925, his ideas were rapidly becoming considered obsolete and passé. Moreover, since he did not actively engage in a cultural fight against Fascism, he became the model of the intellectual closed off in his ivory tower and detached from reality. On Croce’s position in Italy and in the U.S. context and his relationship with Gentile, see David D. Roberts, *Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.12.

²⁶ Benedetto Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, Bari: Laterza, 1938.

²⁷ Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, Bari: Laterza, 1917, reprinted by Milano: Gli Adelphi, 2001, p.14. My translation.

This introduces the second area of research in which I develop my argument on the role played by, and discussion of, exhibition design among architects. Modernist artists and architects played a crucial role in Italian exhibition culture, in that they embraced the manipulation of temporality conceived by Fascism in the 1930s as an alternative to the one traditionally adopted for museum display. This was supported by the fact that functionalism started to address the temporal-spatial dimension of an architecture that was designed to be experienced. At the end of the Second World War, architects such as Franco Albini, Carlo Scarpa and the BBPR studio refurbished a number of Italian museums by rethinking their experiences of exhibition design in the 1930s. Of primary interest for them was the educational role of the museum from an aesthetic, civic and moral point of view. In order to achieve this goal they strived to find ways to design spaces able to provide the best conditions for the encounter between the visitor, the work of art and the museum. For this reason, although they collaborated with the museum directors – all art historians – at the same time they did not prioritise the art historical narrative usually expected by these institutions, being more interested in guaranteeing the best conditions of display for the exhibits. This resulted, where necessitated by the exhibition design, in the disruption of any chronological, geographical, or medium-based organisation of the museum collections. Although this was not intended as a mark of disrespect towards art history, it clearly signalled a different conception of the museum, which rather than being a function of art history was becoming a function of its urban context and its community, to which architects guaranteed a unique experience of the works of art regardless of social or intellectual status, by concentrating on providing the best conditions for the encounter.

I believe architects constituted the first profession in Italy willing to call into question the close relationship between the museum and historical disciplines. Through their approach to exhibition design, architects could reframe the link between institutions and the exhibits displayed in them. In this way, they opened up the possibility for fine art institutions to become cultural producers, involved with different fields of knowledge and alternative narratives to the art historical one, and thus becoming both a medium and mass medium in themselves. For this reason I have incorporated in this thesis an analysis of exhibitions and exhibition designs developed by Italian architects and historians of architecture.

Staniszewski lamented that at least until the 1990s art history overlooked the avant-garde exhibition design experiments of the 1920s and early 1930s.²⁸ This amnesia did not hold true among architects and historians of architecture, for whom exhibition design is considered a distinct area of architectural practice. Italy exemplifies how, since 1932, exhibitions became the objects of thorough analysis and the subjects of architectural experiment. From 1941 until today, it is possible to retrace an ongoing body of literature that systematically addresses exhibition design, keeping the debate on this topic constantly alive.²⁹ By bridging curatorial studies and the history of architecture, this thesis aims to address the amnesia of curatorial studies towards the role played by architects in exhibition-making, at least until the early 1960s. The subsequent diminishing of the preeminent role of the architect in exhibition design coincided with the emergence of a generation of curators *avant-la-lettre*, anticipating the later affirmation of curators as the main producers of thematic contemporary art exhibitions.

In order fully to understand the emergence of the thematic contemporary art exhibition, I focused the third area of my research, as previously mentioned, on the influence of the commercial sector in exhibition-making. In the case of Italy, a key role in the emergence of the curator *avant-la-lettre* was played by the commercial sector, a hub for thematic exhibitions, with institutions such as the Milan Triennial devoted to promoting crafts, industrial arts, industrial design and architecture. The various anthologies produced by historians of architecture on exhibition design encompass examples from this sector (such as those organised at the Milan Fair) that, alongside the political, constituted one of the most prolific arenas in which architects could develop innovative experiments in exhibition design. In contrast, apart from the Milan Triennial, it is rare for the literature on exhibition culture to address those examples developed within the commercial sector, such as for example the Milan Fair.

²⁸ Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, p.XXIII.

²⁹ Concerning the anthologies on exhibition design, in 1941 the magazine *Casabella-Costruzioni*, n.159–160, dedicated a monographic issue with rich photographic documentation to national and international experiments in exhibition design since 1851. In 1960, Roberto Aloï published a photographic book, enriched by an historical essay on exhibitions by Agnoldomenico Pica, reconstructing the series of exhibition design experiments that started in France and Germany at the end of the 1920s and developed in Italy and Europe through the 1930s and beyond; Roberto Aloï (ed.), *Esposizioni, Architettura, Allestimento*, Milano: Hoepli, 1960. In 1982, the magazine *Rassegna* published a rich anthology of contributions, reconstructing the history of exhibitions in Italy since the 1920s, for the first time addressing together exhibitions organised by fine art institutions such as the Venice Biennial or the Rome Quadriennial, with Fascist propaganda exhibitions, the Milan Triennial and the Milan Fair exhibitions; in *Rassegna*, n.10, year IV, 1982. Finally, in 1988 Sergio Polano published another anthology of images of Italian exhibition design, including its foreign influences, and a selection of the most important texts on the topic produced by architects since 1933; Sergio Polano (ed.) *Mostrare. L'allestimento in Italia dagli anni Venti agli anni Ottanta*, Milano: Edizioni Lybra Immagine, 1988.

It is only recently that researchers such as Jeffrey T. Schnapp or Claudio Fogu have started to explore this context more thoroughly.³⁰ In exhibition history, the commercial area is usually overlooked for its links to the market economy. Yet, at least in Italy, the world of production actively participated in the transition from the avant-gardist experiments in exhibition-making of the 1920s to those that occurred in thematic contemporary art exhibitions of the second half of the twentieth century. The subject of my case study, the Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, maintained an ambiguous position in respect to the issues so far addressed. A private cultural centre devoted between 1951 and 1958 to exhibitions focusing on the history of costume and customs, while not a museum, in 1959 the CIAC turned to organising thematic contemporary art exhibitions without having any art historians to develop its programme, as was traditionally the case in institutions such as museums or the Venice Biennial. Opened as a result of the philanthropic impulse of a tycoon, Franco Marinotti, the CIAC rooted itself within the marketing strategies of his man-made fibre company, the SNIA Viscosa. Although Franco initially inspired the activities of the CIAC, eventually it was his visionary son, Paolo Marinotti who led the institution, constantly questioning its goals and aims.³¹

The CIAC in Context

Chapter One analyses the historical conditions that allowed for the formation of the three elements responsible for the coming-of-age of the thematic exhibition, at that moment not yet related to contemporary art. Primary amongst these conditions is the involvement of artists and architects in designing exhibitions within the context of Fascist propaganda. The landmark event that kick started Italian exhibition culture was the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (from now on MRF), organised in Rome in 1932. An impressive

³⁰ Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary*, pp.184–9; Jeffrey Schnapp, ‘Flash Memories (Sironi on Exhibit)’, in *South Central Review*, vol.21, n.1, “Politics and Aesthetics of Memory”, Spring 2004, pp.22–49; Jeffrey T. Schnapp, ‘The Fabric of Modern Times’, in *Critical Inquiry*, vol.24, n.1, Autumn 1997, pp.191–245; Jeffrey T. Schnapp, ‘The Romance of Caffeine and Aluminium’, in Rana Dasgupta, Nina Möntmann, Avi Pitchon (eds.), *Companion Manifesta 7*, Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2007, pp.95–101.

³¹ In respect to the CIAC, I partially reconstructed the documentation about the centre by consulting different archives, such as those of Franco Albini, Asger Jorn, Jean Dubuffet, Willem Sandberg and Paolo Marinotti, unfortunately full of omissions. In approaching the poetic language of Marinotti, referring to the general use of ‘man’ in his writings, I decided to maintain ‘man’ as the reference to humanity made in his discourse; although I am aware this could create some gender issues, I believe this is the most faithful way to convey Marinotti’s ideas. Following my earlier research conducted from an art historical perspective on the CIAC’s exhibitions between 1959 and 1967, on the occasion of my MA dissertation at the Università Ca’ Foscari, Venice, I published a book: Stefano Collicelli Cagol, *Venezia e la vitalità del contemporaneo, Paolo Marinotti a Palazzo Grassi (1959-1967)*, Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2008. At present, there is no other published research on the CIAC.

organisational effort on the part of the regime to promote its foundational myths and readdress the historic imaginary of the Italian population, for this event Mussolini invited artists and architects belonging to all the different artistic movements in Italy at the time to celebrate its history. This constituted the first time that a dictatorship had resorted to modernist languages, among others, to celebrate itself publicly. It is at this moment that architects realised how exhibitions could constitute a playground for experimenting with a rationalist language that could not find visibility in more permanent commissions. Furthermore, as an exhibition that retraced the history of Fascism, the MRF explicitly called into question through its display both the museum and its traditional relationship with historical disciplines. Finally, by inviting artists and architects to work together, the MRF provided a new platform for testing the synthesis of the arts, an international modernist imperative that found its most recent champions in the experiences of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier, among others. This chapter argues for the impact of the MRF on Italian exhibition history of the 1930s, by tracking on the one hand the propaganda exhibitions organised by Fascism specifically for shaping mass sensitivity to the dictatorship's values, and, on the other hand, the rise and development of both exhibition design and the synthesis of the arts at the Milan Triennial, the institution that (together with the Milan Fair discussed in Chapter Three) most immediately absorbed the regime's openness to the language of modernism. It is in the context of the sixth Milan Triennial in 1936 that the BBPR studio, a group of young architects, with the participation of artist Fausto Melotti, designed the first thematic exhibition dedicated to the coherence of man's approach to designing architecture across historical eras. Thus the theme of the synthesis of the arts at the Triennial allowed artists to interact directly with the architecture of the institution, while the design of the exhibition was developed so as to underline the message of a series of exhibitions that were either related to the promotion of commodities or to proposing architectural topics. A different case was that of the Venice Biennial, which instead concentrated only on presenting already existing works of art, mainly in an art historical framework. During the 1930s, fine art exhibitions did not constitute a locus for experiments in exhibition design. The chapter closes with an analysis of the exhibition designed in 1941 by architect Franco Albini, in which for the first time exhibition design was applied directly to the display of contemporary paintings and drawings, thereby anticipating the evolution of exhibition design after the end of the Second World War.

Chapter Two deals with the development of the three elements which I argue are responsible for the coming-of-age of the thematic contemporary art exhibition in the

Italian context of the Second World War. While Fascism tended to neglect museums, being concerned with developing a new historical narrative suited to its propaganda purposes through temporary exhibitions, the destruction wreaked by five years of war necessitated a new commitment to the reconstruction of these institutions. Given the experience gained in the previous decade in the field of exhibition design, museum directors invited architects such as Albin, the BBPR studio and Carlo Scarpa, to refurbish their institutions. It was at this moment that a split in the meaning and function of the museum occurred: on the one hand, art historians recognised the goal of the museum in its educational function, as the repository of those aesthetic values articulated only by the discipline of art history; on the other hand, architects privileged the direct experience of the works of art in the space and the key role played by display in the evaluation of the exhibits. The organisers of the Venice Biennial invited Scarpa to design some of its most important exhibitions, such as the one dedicated to Paul Klee in 1948. At the time though, the Biennial mainly functioned as a traditional modern art museum, with critics and art historians selecting the works of art and providing critical texts for each solo or group show organised. In the post-war era, the Milan Triennial, instead, continued to develop thematic exhibitions around the topic of architecture and to invite contemporary artists to realise their works within the spaces of its institution under the banner of the synthesis of the arts. But, while during Fascism the synthesis of the arts was synonymous with political propaganda, in the aftermath of the war it became a depoliticised project, primarily at the service of commercial production represented at the Triennial. Finally, it is at the Triennial that the debate on the unity of the arts, alongside the question of the synthesis of the major arts, turned to focus on the relationship between art and technology, when in 1954 the organisers of the tenth Triennial dedicated an international congress, together with an exhibition, to the theme of industrial design.

Chapter Three introduces the CIAC by chronologically bridging the narratives of the first two chapters. When the CIAC opened in 1951, it was the end result of Franco Marinotti's entanglement with Fascist propaganda during the 1930s. This chapter analyses how in the 1930s private companies agreed to link the advertising of their products to Fascist propaganda in exchange for the state's support in their national and international distribution. Due to the particular position historically held by the textile industry in respect to the hailing of nationalistic values, Marinotti's SNIA Viscosa perfectly fitted the regime's narrative. In particular, since SNIA Viscosa produced man-made fibres using Italian natural resources, the company became for Mussolini exemplary of Italy's capacity to be

economically independent from other nations and superior in its research capability. Alongside mass exhibitions organised by Fascism, the SNIA Viscosa developed marketing activities and could count on the Milan Fair, where modernist architects, at least until 1942, had the opportunity to experiment with a modernist language. With the end of the Second World War, and the sudden disappearance of such a complex network of economic and propagandist support, the CIAC became a refined solution through which to cast new light on the advertising of man-made fibres. No longer promoted as the preeminent nationalist product, man-made fibres were rebranded as belonging to a longer development within the thousand-year old history of textiles. The CIAC proposed itself as a cultural centre dedicated to the study of customs and the history of costume and textiles. On the one hand, it had a permanent research group dedicated to the study of these topics and the formation of a library. On the other hand, it organised exhibitions on specific topics, always related to textiles and costume, together with a series of events such as plays, dance shows and fashion weeks organised in a small purpose-built theatre near to Palazzo Grassi. The CIAC constituted an original cultural institution in the Italian context, since it was not dependant on a given historical discipline, like museums were, but rather aimed to define its own core disciplines through its activities. At the same time, architects who contributed to the development of its historical exhibitions on costume, such as Marcello Nizzoli, Angelo Bianchetti, Cesare Pea and Albini, had all trained in the 1930s either at the Milan Triennial or on mass exhibitions, with the first three actively collaborating in the SNIA Viscosa's propaganda. The chapter ends with an analysis of the conference-workshop dedicated to the concept of *costume*, an Italian word meaning both costume and custom, from which emerged Marinotti's interest in redirecting the activities of the CIAC towards socially-based actions which would be able to create a new set of customs. It is within this forward-thinking dimension, in the attempt to impact on present-day society, that the CIAC moved towards organising thematic contemporary art exhibitions.

Chapter Four focuses on the *Cycle of Vitality*, the three thematic contemporary art exhibitions organised by Paolo Marinotti and Willem Sandberg (director of the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam) with the help of Asger Jorn, the Danish artist who at the time was a member of the Situationist International (SI) and often resident in Italy. It is within these exhibitions that the questioning of the museum's relationship with history, the unity of the arts, and exhibition design as an autonomous architectural field of practice – that is, the three elements that contributed to the coming of age of the thematic exhibition – were stretched to their limits. Through an analysis of the cycle, in fact, it is possible to

understand how the alternative structure to the traditional art historical presentation provided by architects was suddenly superfluous. In fact, it was the institution, rather than exhibition design, that provided the alternative to the display of works of art and exhibits outside the art historical framework traditionally provided by the museum. This was possible because the CIAC was an institution independent of the discipline of art history. Marinotti found in Sandberg, already engaged in developing his anti-museum at the Stedelijk Museum, and Jorn, at the time questioning the role of contemporary art in respect to industrial production, two unrivalled supporters of his attempt to articulate contemporary art within a new institutional framework. Adopting the concept of vitality as the thematic umbrella under which to organise the cycle, Marinotti opened his exhibitions *Vitalità nell'arte* in 1959, *Dalla natura all'arte* in 1960 and *Arte e contemplazione* in 1961. It is likely that Sandberg suggested the term vitality to Marinotti via Herbert Read, the critic who in 1957 argued that the aesthetic principle of vitality regulated *art informel*. Already the mainstream international tendency of the time, *art informel* was introduced by CIAC as a potential force that could transform society, although not with the intention of presenting the art movement per se. In the same way, Marinotti and Sandberg stripped the very notion of vitality of any aesthetic reference (in Read's sense), recognising it instead as a historic force able to intervene in the consciousness of visitors. While various artists loosely ascribable to *art informel* participated mostly in the first and third exhibitions, the second one, dedicated to the relationship between art and nature, was more diverse in the art it displayed. This second exhibition particularly attests to the strong influence of previous mass and commercial exhibitions in the genesis of the thematic contemporary art exhibition. This was also the last exhibition in which Marinotti involved an architect. The chapter ends by drawing a parallel between the new trajectory in presenting contemporary art outside the framework of art history as a discipline, and a text by Umberto Eco, published the same year as *Arte e contemplazione*, that readdresses Read's application of the concept of vitality to informal art and to Eco's notion of 'open work'. In recognising in the attitudes of Marinotti, Sandberg and Jorn a curatorial approach that I believe positions them alongside a genealogy of curators *avant-la-lettre*, I do not make a claim for them as the 'first curators', for a number of reasons. First, because I believe the CIAC's exhibitions had significant weak points, especially from an intellectual point of view. Second, because this research concerns the Italian context and does not compare the Italian situation with other international experiences in which curatorial practices may have emerged at different times and in different situations. Third, because I am not concerned with investigating the 'origins' of curatorial practice, but rather propose to cast new light on curatorial studies

which, rather than taking up an oppositional stance against either institutions, the market or the discipline of art history, established instead a different field of both practice and knowledge. So far, the literature on curating lacks this perspective and a properly historical approach to understanding how and under what conditions the contemporary art curator emerged in the twentieth century.

History of curatorial practices

Curatorial studies and the history of exhibitions are relatively recent fields of research, both developed since the 1990s. In the past they have often been conflated, since both tended to be addressed from an art historical point of view. This is because art historians such as Bernd Klüser, Katarina Hegewisch or Bruce Altshuler tended to analyse historical exhibitions as material that expanded the art historical narrative, since exhibitions provided the context for the presentation and production of works of art, often depending on the temporal and spatial conditions set by those events.³² Obviously, exhibitions constitute an exceptional arena for all those with a vested interest in them (artists, dealers, critics, curators, visitors) to both write art history and to make art history. This mainly art historical perspective, though, by interweaving curatorial practice with art history, had three main consequences: first, the contemporary curator (initially independent, and distinct from the museum curator, then since the end of the 1980s a ‘vital insider’ of the institution) was perceived as a facilitator for artistic production; second, it provided visibility to those curators or exhibitions positioned at critical points in the art historical narrative and third, resulted in a focus only on exhibitions, seen as the privileged curatorial medium.

This approach is demonstrated by the canonisation of Harald Szeemann, Lucy R. Lippard and Seth Siegelaub as the ‘ancestors’ of contemporary curating: all of them operated outside the traditional contexts of the art system (summarised by the triangle of artist’s studio-gallery-museum) and all collaborated with artists and art movements (e.g. Conceptual Art, Land Art, performance, video) that contributed to a paradigmatic shift in contemporary art production at the end of the 1960s. Those institutions or curators that were not involved with keynote events in art history were condemned to oblivion.

³² Bernd Klüser, Katarina Hegewisch (eds.), *L’art de l’exposition. Une documentation sur trente expositions exemplaires du XXe siècle*, Paris: Editions du Regard, 1998. Translated from German by Denis Trierweiler; Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-garde in Exhibition*. Bruce Altshuler is the co-editor of the two anthologies: Phaidon Editors and Bruce Altshuler (eds.), *Salon to Biennial – Exhibitions That Made Art History Volume I: 1863–1959*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2008 and Phaidon Editors and Bruce Altshuler (eds.), *Biennials and Beyond – Exhibitions That Made Art History, 1962–2002*.

Moreover, the exclusive focus on the exhibition as the main medium for curatorial practice did not allow personalities such as museum directors – less directly involved with exhibition-making – to be part of the narrative. Involved in conceptually rethinking their institutions as much as in conceiving exhibitions, museum directors such as Alexander Dorner, Willem Sandberg, François Mathey, Jean Leering have been largely neglected by curatorial studies.

In fact, little attention has been dedicated to the history of art institutions and those involved in their reshaping. Among the few pioneers of this approach are: Lawrence Alloway, who in 1967 wrote a critical (and still unmatched) history of the Venice Biennial; Walter Grasskamp, who carried out extensive research into the Documenta exhibitions and recently conducted a series of interviews with key historical directors of German art institutions (such as Thomas Grochowick or Johannes Cladders); Mary Anne Staniszewski, who addressed the installation design at MoMA from its origins in 1929 until the 1990s; and more recently, Hans Ulrich Obrist with his project ‘A Protest Against Forgetting’, which to date has resulted in the publication of a series of interviews conducted with international directors who were mainly active in the 1960s and 1970s (such as Pontus Hultén, Harald Szeemann, Seth Siegelaub, Lucy R. Lippard).³³

In the past, museum directors such as Alexander Dorner, Willem Sandberg, Pontus Hultén or Harald Szeemann published their own autobiographies, through which they reconstructed both their lives and their careers, highlighting the methodology followed in their profession.³⁴ To date, only Alfred H. Barr Jr. has been the subject of a consistent analysis by historians for his intellectual approach to the organisation of MoMA.³⁵ Most

³³ Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowls*, London: Faber, 1969; Walter Grasskamp, “‘Degenerate Art’ and Documenta 1: Modernism Ostracized and Disarmed”, in Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (eds.), *Museum Culture. Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, London: Routledge, 1994; Walter Grasskamp, ‘For Example, Documenta, or, How is Art History Produced?’, in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (eds.), *Thinking About Exhibitions*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996; Walter Grasskamp, ‘Documenta Art du XXe siècle, Exposition Internationale au Musée Fridericianum de Kassel du 15 juillet au 18 Septembre 1955’, in Bernd Klüser, Katarina Hegewisch (eds.), *L’art de l’exposition.*; Walter Grasskamp (ed.), *Thomas Grochowick*, Köln: Verlag Buchhandlung Walther König, 2009; Walter Grasskamp, *Johannes Cladders*, Köln: DuMont-Literatur-und-Kunst-Verl., 2004; Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*; Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, Zurich, Dijon: JRP Ringier, Les Presses du réel, 2008.

³⁴ On Alexander Dorner: Samuel Cauman, *The Living Museum*, New York: New York University Press, 1958; on Willem Sandberg: Pieter Brattinga and Ad Petersen (eds.), *Sandberg, Een documentaire A Documentary*, Amsterdam: Cosmos, 1975; on Pontus Hultén: Stefano Cecchetto, *Pontus Hultén. Artisti da una collezione*, exh. cat. Milano: Skira, 2006; Tobia Bezzola/Roman Kurzmeier (eds.), *Harald Szeemann with by through because towards despite. Catalogue of all Exhibitions 1957-2005*, Zurich: Edition Voldemeer, Wien: Springer Wien New York, 2007.

³⁵ Sybil Gordon Cantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge Mass., London: MIT Press, 2002.

recently, though, the tendency has clearly begun to be reversed, with Raven Row in London presenting an exhibition dedicated to the research methodology of Seth Siegelaub; or the most recent re-enactment of *When Attitudes Become Form* organised in Venice by the Prada Foundation, in which diary pages and sketches by the young Szeemann were presented alongside a more rigorous display of archival material directly related to the exhibition itself.³⁶

The fact that both curatorial studies and the history of exhibitions emerged at about the same time (the latter anticipating the former by a decade) partly explains why the two have generally been conflated. Moreover, art history was naturally considered as the historical discipline to which they related, providing a fruitful framework through which to address relevant issues such as authorship or institutional power, yet impeding the development of a more autonomous critical assessment of the characteristics of curating. None of this was helped by the fact that contemporary curating is based on a practice that is hard to pin down not only in its professional profile (despite the proliferation of various curatorial courses since the mid-1990s), but also in its chronological limits, as demonstrated by the continuing search for a satisfying definition of the profession.³⁷ The fact that many exhibition and contemporary art curators have very different backgrounds, rarely matching the traditional art historical one expected of all museum curators, further complicates the issue. Finally, since the 1990s, the opening of curatorial courses, the publication of specialised magazines devoted to the subject and the organisation of specialised symposia have all contributed to professionalising the practice, whilst still failing to provide it with useful critical tools.³⁸

Despite these issues, as mentioned above, a line of enquiry exploring the conditions of display conceived by museum directors and contemporary curators has emerged

³⁶ Kate Stancliffe (ed.), *The Stuff That Matters. Textiles collected by Seth Siegelaub for the Centre for Social Research on Old Textiles*, exhibition guide, London: Raven Row, 2012; Germano Celant (ed.), *When Attitudes Become Forms, Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, exh. cat. Milano: Progetto Prada Arte, 2013.

³⁷ As pointed out by Tom Morton, 'The Name of the Game', in *Frieze*, n.97, December 2005.

³⁸ The first course dedicated to curating that opened in Europe was L'École du Magasin in Grenoble (1987), followed by the MA Curating Contemporary Art, Royal College of Art (London, 1992) and De Appel Curatorial Programme (Amsterdam, 1994). In the U.S., the Whitney Independent Study Program shifted from museum studies to curatorial studies in 1987, while the MA in the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College was founded in 1994. Among the magazines on the subject: *MJ – Manifesta Journal of Contemporary Curatorship*, Manifesta Foundation, Amsterdam (since 2003); the on-line magazine *On-Curating.org* (since 2008); *The Exhibitionists*, Archive Books, Berlin (since 2010) and *The Journal of Curatorial Studies*, Intellect Ltd., Bristol (since 2012). The countless symposia on curating started with 'A New Spirit in Curating,' an international meeting organised by Ute Meta Bauer at the Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, 24–26 January 1992 to the 'Rotterdam Dialogues: The Curators,' at the Witte de With, March 2009 and the 'The Bergen Biennial Conference,' organised the same year by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø at the Bergen Kunsthall.

through the literature of curatorial studies. This provides a platform for a more nuanced approach to the subject than the one proposed by the mainstream narrative summarised by O'Neill, as discussed previously. Okwui Enwezor points out in an interview with art historian Carol Becker how for him it was important to 'make distinctions between curating within the canon and curating within culture'.³⁹ Enwezor speaks from a post-colonial position, refusing to perpetuate in his exhibitions the notion of art as qualified by the Western canon. Although post-colonial has become an art historical methodology, helping to call into question the very idea of a canon, nevertheless it is interesting to consider the juxtaposition inherent in Enwezor's comment between a criterion – the canon – of the (art) historical approach and a more general concept of culture able to address art through other different disciplines or contexts.⁴⁰ He returns to the concept in an interview with O'Neill in which he states: 'To curate within culture is to take a space of culture in the present as an open place of working and that means that you have a greater mobility in terms of bringing in procedures of making art that may not yet have a place in the broader context of contemporary art.'⁴¹

In this passage, Enwezor casts light on two relevant features of contemporary curating: the engagement with culture in the present and the engagement with processes of making art not yet belonging to the canon. Therefore, it seems that the peculiarity of curatorial practice lies in the fact that its main concern is not the inscription (or just a further expansion) of the art historical canon. What characterises contemporary curating is the possibility of operating beyond the canon and its narrative. Art history is a discipline composed of different methodologies able to provide a convincing interpretation of a work of art. Since the end of the nineteenth century, art museums functioned as places where the outcome of art historical research was presented, research that provided a system for arranging works in the collection (according to chronology, geography or medium). Contemporary curating, instead, considers art history as a means rather than an end in order to explore those potential functions still inscribed within a work of art that become expressed once it is publicly displayed.

For this reason, art history stands alongside other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, economy, philosophy, to name but a few, in providing a context within

³⁹ Carol Becker, 'A conversation with Okwui Enwezor', *Art Journal*, vol.61, n.2, 2002.

⁴⁰ Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History. A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006.

⁴¹ Paul O'Neill, *Curating Subjects*, p.121.

which the various processes of making art can receive public attention, while at the same time being able to share a space with exhibits not necessarily defined as art. A contemporary curator can be defined as a cultural producer addressing issues (political, economic, historical, of popular culture) related to the present, by occupying a position outside of any specific academic field. If exhibitions proved to be an exceptional mass medium, it is in their very existence that curating finds one of its principle media, since they provide the context for the redirection of public expectation, heightening the public's level of attention and receptiveness and further exploring the potential inherent within the work of art. By setting the conditions of display in which to operate, contemporary curating established for itself an independent and original position, eventually professionalised in the 1990s.

Fine art museums having been historically bound up with the discipline of art history and its precepts, the curatorial approach could most easily be detected in those practices that took place outside the context of the fine art museum. It is not just chance that Michael Brenson recognised a turning point in curating in the growing phenomenon of the Biennial throughout the 1990s, and Carlo Basualdo attempted to establish a critical platform from which to address the particular nature of these perennial exhibitions – defined as ‘unstable institutions’ – by contrasting them with museums (and their inherent relationship with art history and market forces).⁴² Basualdo's definition is problematic since it provides no other critical tool with which to substantiate the role of these institutions in the present. Moreover, he positions the Biennial as an institution less related to the market, an assumption that is questionable (as this dissertation clearly demonstrates with the example of the Milan Triennial). Nevertheless, the idea that the curator works with a more unstable model of an institution, insofar as its relationship with an academic discipline is concerned (since Biennials are usually able to count on a stable budget from an economic point of view), provides a useful argument for linking present-day curatorial practice with the experiments of directors from the past, such as Willem Sandberg or François Mathey, engaged in questioning from within the very nature of the museum as an institution working as a function of art history.

⁴² Michael Brenson, ‘The Curator's Moment: Trends in the Field of International Contemporary Art Exhibitions’, in *Art Journal*; Carlo Basualdo, ‘The Unstable Institution’, first published in Paula Marincola (ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, 2006.

This dissertation argues that rather than considering contemporary curators as a by-product of the transformation in the art world that occurred in the 1990s, one should adopt a more in-depth historical perspective, acknowledging the tension that has existed between museums as a function of art history and museums as institutions open to contemporary culture since the point at which contemporary art became institutionalised. What connects curatorial practice of the present with the past is the tension created by siting the presentation of art beyond the boundaries established by both art history and the museum as a function of it. However, it is important to note that this is not done in an antagonistic way, but rather as a response to another approach to contemporary art production that understands it as an instrument in the development of a critical discourse about the present, rather than being primarily interested in positioning it in respect to a set of values that validate it within the art historical discipline.

This approach recalls those historical avant-gardes that were more interested in addressing industrial production and cultural entertainment through their skills, than in defining the nature of art. I am referring in particular to Futurism, the Bauhaus, Constructivism, Surrealism, the heritage of which has been completely excised from the mainstream narrative on curating. This is because curators operate on another level to artists, since they provide a discursive framework for exhibits rather than being primarily engaged in their production. What facilitated the emergence of such a position was the transformation of exhibition culture that took place in the 1920s, thanks to avant-garde experiments in exhibition design. Art historian Charlotte Klonk provides an important insight into these experiments in her book *Spaces of Experience*.⁴³ Klonk argues for two different modes of experiencing exhibition space in the installation designs conceived by European avant-garde artists in the 1920s and early 1930s: the collective, as conceived by Friedrich Kiesler and El Lissitzky; and the discursive, as exemplified by former Bauhaus members such as Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, László Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Bayer.⁴⁴ Both modes call into question the domestic interiorised modality of installing works of art employed in various German museums since the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Avant-gardists proposed a more open space, one that was exteriorised and focused on a more active engagement on the part of the visitor.

⁴³ Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience. Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.108.

⁴⁵ For more information on the interiority and intimacy developed by German museums, see *ibid.*, pp.46–85.

In their exhibition designs, Kiesler and Lissitzky provided visitors with installations that invited a collaborative and collective experience of the space and the works of art, linking the individual's experience of an installation design to their interaction with other people present in the room. The former Bauhaus members followed a different approach, which Klonk describes as discursive. Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, Breuer and Bayer refined the discursive model for the *Baugewerkschaft Ausstellung*, organised in Berlin in 1931. They employed texts, charts, photomontages, banners and peep-hole structures within an open space where visitors were invited to move swiftly and freely from one point to another. In the middle of the space an elevated platform allowed for a view of the exhibition from above as well as providing space for more explanatory texts and exhibits. Thanks to a skilful use of the space and dynamic display techniques, Gropius and his colleagues managed to provide a lively experience for the visitor.

This model further developed the one employed for the first time by El Lissitzky in the Soviet pavilion presented at the *Internationale Presse-Ausstellung des Deutscher Werkbund* (generally known as *Pressa*), organised in Cologne in 1928. Coordinated by Lissitzky, thirty-seven Soviet artists participated in the realisation of the exhibition, which was organised into twenty rooms filled with three-dimensional objects, models, photographs, photo-collages and photo-montages. Film and photography became the media through which to engage visitors with the achievements of the Soviet Revolution in guaranteeing employment, welfare and happiness to its citizens. One of the highlights was Lissitzky's massive photo-frieze, conceived in collaboration with Sergei Senkin to present the conditions of the Soviet population to other European nations, through reports by the mass-media. 23.5 metres long, 3.8 metres high and divided into a series of sections by fabric triangles, the photomontage's varied themes included sports, the army, agriculture, industry and workers' conditions.⁴⁶

Having analysed these avant-garde experiments, Klonk provides a persuasive account of the origins of MoMA. Klonk underlines how Barr, although probably influenced by these avant-gardist experiences, opted for a different model in organising his first exhibitions, inspired by the domestic spaces created by Ludwig Justi, museum director in Frankfurt and Berlin in the 1910s and 1920s. In providing a successful model for

⁴⁶ An overview of Lissitzky's exhibitions can be found in Ulrich Pohlmann, 'El Lissitzky's Exhibition Designs: The Influence of His Work in Germany, Italy and the United States, 1923–43', in Jorge Ribalta (ed.), *Public Photographic Spaces, Exhibitions of Propaganda from 'Pressa' to 'The Family of Man', 1928–55*, pp.167–91, Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2008.

exhibiting contemporary art – the white flexible container (from which the white cube would later be developed) – Barr, according to Klonk, contributed to the eradication of the avant-garde approach to display.⁴⁷ Moreover, by inviting his visitors to enjoy a silent and one-to-one contemplation of works of art, Barr subtly trained and transformed them into educated consumers (as a multi-disciplinary museum, MoMA also exhibited industrially produced objects, such as visitors could buy in shopping malls near the museum).⁴⁸ Finally, Barr provided the archetypal model for the presentation of contemporary art within an institution, inscribing it within a rigorous arhistorical narrative. I argue that it is against this forced inscription that the curators *avant-la-lettre* were working, trying to maintain the public and institutionalised presentation of contemporary works of art outside the discipline of art history, in an attempt to relate art to the present and future life of a community.

It is my view that, rather than being consigned to oblivion as suggested by Klonk, the avant-garde approach to exhibition design found in Italian Fascism the platform that allowed it to evolve and transform, providing an alternative genealogy to curatorial practice able to embrace both (Fascist) political propaganda and the world of production. Both of these agendas are anathema to the clean sheet of the ‘year zero’ of curating and its discursive construction since the 1990s.⁴⁹ Yet if one wants to achieve a better understanding of the role of the contemporary curator, these are issues that need to be addressed.

⁴⁷ Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, p.135

⁴⁸ Ibid. pp.170–1.

⁴⁹ It should be clear, though, that Italians, in taking on and adapting avant-garde experiments to the Italian context of the 1930s, largely misunderstood them. While avant-garde artists aimed to support the world of production so as to ameliorate the conditions of the poorest layers of society, Italian artists and architects put their skills at the service of the Fascist propaganda machine (conservative to the core) that instead aimed to percolate its values through society using a modernist language.