

6. CONCLUSION

This dissertation has sought to propose a possible genealogy of contemporary curatorial practice by retracing the emergence of the thematic contemporary art exhibition in Italy at the end of the 1950s. As demonstrated, the thematic contemporary art exhibition stemmed from the more general thematic exhibition, the outcome of conflating three elements: the questioning of the museum as an institution functioning in relation to a historical discipline, the attempt to realise the synthesis of the arts, and the coming-of-age of exhibition design as an architectural theme. In general, the thematic exhibition allows for the display of contemporary works of art simultaneously with a range of objects and ephemera, as well as more historical artefacts, in order to explore a specific issue and clearly convey a message. Therefore, the thematic exhibition functions both as a medium and as a mass medium: its installation design needs to reach out to its public and to reinforce its communicative goal as a mass medium. According to this premise, the CIAC developed these features of the thematic contemporary art exhibition by substituting the institutional context for installation design. This happened because of the transformation that took place in artistic production from the 1950s onwards with the growth of immersive environments, paralleled by the curator's need to take full control of the communicative tools at his/her disposal. Therefore, one could say that if the thematic contemporary art exhibition functions as the mass-medium of curatorial agency, then the institution functions as the curator's medium. It is for this reason that curators needed to detach contemporary works of art from their art historical or critical framework, destabilising the institution from within.

Curatorial and exhibition studies constitute a relatively recent field of academic research. This thesis presents an alternative path in respect to more traditional areas of enquiry that recognise exhibitions as an instrument through which to understand art history and the evolution of artistic practices. However, this approach has aimed to emphasise how, by separating the notion of curatorial practice from the art historical framework in which it is usually located, it is possible to arrive at a better understanding of the exhibition as a mass-medium and moreover of how curators function as cultural agents who question contemporary habits by exposing their contradictions, rather than denying them. From this point of view, the case study of the CIAC in the 1950s and early 1960s is significant for highlighting the different agendas coexisting within curatorial practice. It is able to provide an explanation for the shift in the role of the curator, from being an expert

in art history to becoming a cultural figure engaged with art and its institutions as a medium of communication. This perspective is missing from the mainstream narrative on contemporary curating, which locates the emergence of the independent curator at the end of the 1960s, with the return of the role in the 1990s, this time as a 'vital insider' within the institution, as argued by Paul O'Neill. Rather than positioning Harald Szeemann, Seth Siegelaub and Lucy R. Lippard in a pristine 'year zero' of curating – where artists and independent curators collaborate against market driven institutions pre-dating the approach of the 1990s – this dissertation argues that a more historically grounded and challenging perspective allows a full understanding of the original position of the contemporary curator as a cultural producer.

From this approach, contemporary curatorship is understood as a profession defined less by its self-referential position within the art system – as the mainstream narrative tends to imply – and more as a reaction to the cultural transformations that took place in the twentieth century. For this reason, curatorial studies need both to extend chronologically their areas of enquiry to the 1920s (when exhibition models radically changed) and to include further disciplines able to provide a more complex framework within which to analyse curatorial practice. Crucial to this position is the interplay between the contemporary curator and the institutions dedicated to the display of art that, since 1945, became platforms for a cultural engagement with the present, rather than being devoted to presenting the outcome of art historical research.

This shift happened thanks to the thematic contemporary art exhibitions that allowed institutions to articulate a set of discourses not necessarily related to the discipline of art history, transforming the museum's meanings and agenda from within. From being an instrument of art history, the institution became a medium and a mass-medium at the disposal of any political subject. In contrast to the clearly anti-market and anti-institutional position of the mainstream narrative, this argument transforms the genealogy of the contemporary curator into a rather uncomfortable fact to confront. There is no such thing as an a priori model of the ideal curator working against the system, but the exhibitions, publications, discourses they produced depends on their individual political and social engagement. The commitment of artists such as Walter Gropius or El Lissitzky in confronting both political propaganda and industrial production to provide utopic visions in the present became – once translated into the Italian context by Fascism and

commerce's collaboration with artists and architects – a perfect machine to systematically intrude into the everyday life, whether public or private, of Italian society.

Furthermore, the thematic contemporary art exhibition provides a framework within the institution where the definition of the artistic status of an exhibit is not necessarily at stake. This explains why, since 1945, contemporary curatorship has often been practiced by graphic designers, entrepreneurs, philosophers, artists, directors, architects who did not necessarily want to carry out their activities within the framework of art history. Firstly, the notion of authorship, understood mainly as the production of works of art, becomes less relevant and interesting for this debate, with curators traditionally taking great care to negotiate their positions with practitioners such as artists. Secondly, those curatorial events that happen within an institutional framework are not always of relevance to the discipline of art history. At the same time, this does not mean that there are different categories of curators, with the museum curator only dedicated to art historical presentation and the more creative curator engaged with thematic contemporary art exhibitions, but that curatorial projects should be addressed on a case by case basis. This apparent contradiction is explained by the fact that curatorial practice may have detached itself from an art historical narrative, while at one and the same time art historical methodologies constitute one of the main frameworks through which curators assess and understand contemporary production (whether artistic or not). The formalist approach used by architects and the CIAC in the 1950s, as much as the post-colonial and the post-structuralist ones used, amongst others, by contemporary curators in the 1990s, constitutes a different methodology of art history that is used as a means rather than an end when presented in curated projects.

I am aware that there are several significant risks in my chosen approach, which predates any recognised turn in the development of curatorial practice. But I believe the arguments presented here help us to understand how curatorial practice is based neither on essentialist qualities nor on the transformation of contemporary art. It depends, rather, on the appearance of the thematic contemporary art exhibition that became the optimum medium for cultural producers to convey their own ideas and agendas. The narrative presented here follows a generation of architects through three decades, highlighting the continuities and disruptions of an exhibition culture influenced by the inter-war international avant-garde, but also by Fascism. In the Italian context, Fascism radicalised the exhibition as a medium and as a mass-medium against the museum as the repository of

historical disciplines counter-productive to a Fascist narrative concerned with the present and the future. In this context, architects and artists played a key role in the design of exhibitions, seen both as an autonomous field for architectural practice and as an arena for the realisation of the unity of the arts. In the post-war context this developed into applying exhibition design to the refurbishment of museums, using the unity of the arts in a depoliticised way and initiating the disengagement of displays from a strictly art historical framework. The SNIA Viscosa's propaganda activities – at first as an ally of Fascism and then through the CIAC – allows for an understanding of how the world of production contributed to reinforcing the thematic exhibition and the further erosion of the museum as the only institution devoted to the presentation of contemporary art due to its academic art historical profile. With the transition of the CIAC to contemporary art, a new authorial figure emerged, definable as the curator *avant-la-lettre*. Not trained as an art historian but responding to the impulse to use contemporary art to create a rupture in everyday habits and to communicate his own vision of the present, this new figure came to dismiss the architect by prioritising the role of the institution.

Although this research does not claim to locate the origin of curatorial practices in Italy, it has sought to propose a different perspective from which to readdress this theme, underlining the need to expand the area of enquiry in order to encompass other subjects, situations and forces responsible for the making of exhibitions, and which have not been traditionally related to the fields of research of curatorial studies and exhibition history. In this way, it is also possible to overcome the amnesia still affecting the history of exhibition design and to consider the role of the architect in the re-contextualisation of artworks outside the traditional disciplinary machine of art history.

A common element running through the dissertation has been the attempt by all the subjects involved – dictatorship, architects, artists, entrepreneurs, museum directors and other directors – to create through their exhibitions historic events (and not simply historical exhibitions), able to transform the habits and the thinking of their publics. The range of different agendas again underlines the delicate and contradictory field that characterises exhibition making and, consequently, curatorial practice. Two years after the *Cycle of Vitality* ended, Sandberg stepped down from his position as a director to become a consultant for the museum in Tel Aviv (and later for the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris); Marinotti and Jorn continued to support each other's visions, with Marinotti organising in 1963 the exhibition, *Visione-colore*. Mainly presenting Scandinavian artists of

the second half of the twentieth century, *Visione-colore* partially fulfilled Jorn's aspiration of using the CIAC to re-write the Western art-historical canon based on the influence of Southern and Christian Europe.¹

Franco Marinotti's death in 1966, abruptly transformed the history of the CIAC. Paolo Marinotti organised on his own a last exhibition of international contemporary art still dedicated to vitality, *Campo Vitale*, in 1967, much to Jorn's disdain. *Campo Vitale* introduced Pop Artists from New York alongside artists from COBRA who had featured periodically throughout the entire programme of the CIAC since 1959. After that exhibition, Marinotti did not organise any more exhibitions until 1971, when the CIAC started presenting solo shows of Italian artists (the most renowned being Enrico Baj in 1971 and Michelangelo Pistoletto in 1976) until its final closure in 1978. The move to solo shows was probably due to financial reasons following the death of Franco Marinotti, since solo shows of Italian artists were relatively cheap to stage compared to the international group exhibitions of the 1960s.²

The CIAC's *Cycle of Vitality* permits research into curatorial practice to move down new paths, both in respect of the experiments that preceded the CIAC and those that followed it. Among its predecessors, Alexander Dorner urgently needs to be re-assessed for his willingness to reposition art beyond itself, contextualising art within a situation that is not that of the traditional art historical museum. As for the experiments that followed the CIAC, there are a numbers of practitioners, both exhibition makers and museum directors, that have been neglected and overlooked and who deserve more detailed analysis:

¹ In 1964, one year after having participated in the organisation of the exhibition *Visione-colore* curated by Paolo Marinotti at Palazzo Grassi, where he presented a solo room with a large number of his paintings, Jorn published a short article titled 'Art and Orders' in which he mentioned the reason why he decided to collaborate with Marinotti. Jorn points out that 'the fact that he [Marinotti] as the only person in the world...who has attached the main importance to Danish art, is by no means due to my effort, but to his personal instinctive and intelligent impression that we in the North have something very significant and valuable to give the world on this very point. My knowledge that this was correct, but also my knowledge of our ignorance [sic] of the nature of this valuable contribution, has on the contrary made me extremely cautious and reserved in this collaboration.' From the final comment, it is possible to understand why up until today, the collaboration between Marinotti and Jorn has always been overlooked by scholars. Asger Jorn, 'Art and Orders. On treason, the mass action of reproduction, and the great artistic mass effect', in *Situationist Times*, n.5, 1964, translated in English by NotBored, published in <http://viemoderne2.blogspot.co.uk/2007/02/art-and-orders-asger-jorn-1964.html>. Last accessed 15 February 2014.

² At the end of the 1970s a network of Venetian industrialists bought Palazzo Grassi, presenting contemporary art exhibitions there for a few more years. Then in 1984, the Italian car company Fiat bought Palazzo Grassi, which was refurbished by Gae Aulenti. The first exhibition, curated by Pontus Hultén, was dedicated to Futurism and Futurisms. Finally in 2005, French collector and Fashion entrepreneur François Pinault decided to turn Palazzo Grassi in an international showcase for his collection and for the promotion of contemporary art. Japanese architect Tadao Ando refurbished the palace.

in France, François Mathey and Michel Tapié; in Sweden, Pontus Hultén; in Holland, Jean Leering; in Germany, Thomas Grochowiack, to name but a few. An analysis of contemporary curatorial practice that considers how a curator deals with his/her institution and the impact it tries to achieve on its community could help in further problematizing the role of the curator.

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