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The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art

Mary Anne Staniszewski

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Art historians, traditionally, have implicitly accepted the autonomy of the artwork and ignored what Mary Anne Staniszewski calls "the power of display." In this groundbreaking examination of installation design as an aesthetic medium and cultural practice, Staniszewski offers the first history of exhibitions at the most powerful and influential modern art museum—The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Focusing on over two hundred photographs of the visually rich but overlooked history of exhibitions, Staniszewski documents and deciphers an essential chapter of twentieth-century art and culture and provides a historical and theoretical framework for a primary area of contemporary aesthetic practice—installation-based art.

Staniszewski treats installations as creations that manifest values, ideologies, politics, and of course aesthetics. Incorporating analysis of display techniques used in department stores, natural history museums, non-Western art galleries, and the international avant-gardes' exhibitions of the first half of the century, she makes visible both the explicit and covert meanings found in exhibitions. Some of the questions she addresses are: What sorts of viewers do different types of installations "create"? How do exhibition designs affect the meanings and receptions of specific objects, images, artifacts, and buildings when they are displayed? How do installations shape the viewer's experience of the cultural ritual of a museum visit? How does an amnesia regarding exhibition design affect art history, the art world, and collective cultural memories?

Among the artists, designers, architects, and curators whose installations the author features are Dennis Adams, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Herbert Bayer, RenÃ© d'Harnoncourt, Ray and Charles Eames, Hans Haacke, David Hammons, Philip Johnson, Frederick Kiesler, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, El Lissitzky, Adrian Piper, Lilly Reich, William Rubin, Paul Rudolph, Edward Steichen, Giuseppe Terragni, and Kirk Varnedoe.

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