What Makes A Great Exhibition?

Paula Marincola
Editor

PHILADELPHIA EXHIBITIONS INITIATIVE
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Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative
Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage
1608 Walnut Street, 18th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19103
pei@pcah.us
www.philexin.org

Paula Marincola, Director
Ellen Maher, Program Assistant
Tiffany Tavarez, Program Assistant

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Show and Tell

Robert Storr

It is customary in writing about what curators do to use the singular noun *exhibition* to cover what is in fact a plural category. From this, much confusion ensues in the experience and the judgment of the public. Rather than one form, exhibitions take many, some more, some less appropriate to their timing, their situation, their audience, and above all their contents. None of them is ideal and none exhausts the potential meanings of important art. A good exhibition is never the last word on its subject. Instead it should be an intelligently conceived and scrupulously realized interpretation of the works selected, one which acknowledges by its organization and installation that even the material on view—not to mention those things which might have been included but were not—may be seen from a variety of perspectives, and that this will sooner or later happen to the benefit of other possible understandings of the art in question.

In short, good exhibitions have a definite but not definitive point of view that invites serious analysis and critique, not only of the art but of the particular weights and measures used in its evaluation by the exhibition-maker. That term has only recently come into use, and despite its bulkiness, it is preferable in this context to *curator* to the extent that it acknowledges the existence of a specific and highly complex discipline and separates the care or preservation of art—a curator's primary concern—from its variable display. Many of the best exhibition-makers are freelancers or work for institutions that have no permanent collection. It is the privilege of those who are associated with museums rich in holdings to regularly reconfigure their galleries, thereby breaking the monotony of canonical hangings while demonstrating the polyvalence of the works in their charge. While it is generally agreed that such historical collections should retain a degree of continuity in their basic installation of major works and tendencies, periodic reinstallation of larger or smaller sections of that overall layout demonstrate how works familiar, perhaps over-familiar to both the frequent as well as the occasional visitor, can be seen afresh. To be sure, "churning" collections, like churning stocks, opens up the possibility for gimmicks and frauds. But those overly intimidated by this possibility, or simply too conservative to imagine that the official value ascribed to their favorite masterpieces is but a fraction of their true worth when put into circulation with other works, are not the defenders of important art against cheapening misuse, but instead the ones who most grievously underestimate its enduring importance.

The of-late much debated alternatives of thematic versus chronological installations of museum collections—and neither option entirely excludes the other except in the minds of ideological opponents of change—constitute but two of the subgenres of the larger category of the survey show. It, in turn, is but one of the many variants of the group exhibition in which works by different hands are brought together according to a given premise: an overview of a national heritage, an artistic or cultural tradition, a period, a movement, a style, an aesthetic principle in operation, or simply a roundup of current production. The venue, scale, duration, and primary public for such exhibitions all are factors in their development. However, it should go without saying that the work and the exhibition-maker's grasp of that work is, from start to finish, the decisive criterion in the exhibition's presentation. Concessions made to any other consideration that tampers with the fundamental integrity of his or her basic intention will result in flaws that are unlikely to escape the notice of viewers even if they are unaware of why those flaws occurred.

Declaring that such an absolute standard is impractical is too often a plea for ducking the responsibility held by patrons and institutions for fully supporting the people they have given the task of making exhibitions. Skilled practitioners will use constraints creatively, but when it comes to essentials they will, or at least, should be uncompromising on behalf of the art for which *they* have primary responsibility. It is possible to make a good exhibition with an empty loft space and a couple of thousand dollars. Likewise, one can, without waste, fill tens of thousands of square feet and spend millions to that same end. (Botching both due to a basic lack or a messy surplus of ideas is also easy, but the concern here is with avoidable failures). What cannot be done is to cut corners within the framework of a specific proposition without distorting the meaning of the work. In the final analysis, assessing dangers of that kind must be entrusted to those who know the work best.

Similarly all decisions about the architectural layout and sequencing of works should reside with the exhibition-maker, as well as ultimate decisions about lighting, signage, labeling, brochure, and text-panel design and content, typography, wall color or absence of color, and every other detail, large or small, that substantively conditions the encounter between the viewer and the work. On their own, exhibition-makers have diverse degrees of exposure to and command of these areas, and at some point or another all will need to rely on the expertise of specialists for technical advice, as well as for imaginative solutions to specific problems. The crucial issue here is not input, which is essential, but rather fending off the managerial and sometimes market-driven tendency to put together shows by committee. This leads to a bureaucratic division of labor, with sections of the overall enterprise being turned over to professionals in various fields, design (that is, form) to designers, education and communication (that is, content) to educators and press officers, and so on. Special-

Louise Lawler, *Living Room Corner, Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine Sr., N.Y.C. (Stevie Wonder)*, 1985, color photograph and red type on white mat margin, courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.

ists of this kind may or may not understand the art that that they are in effect being asked to frame and describe for the audience. Many do, but many others do not, and few people at these or any levels of the art system can be expected to appreciate all of the wide range of work most institutions now cover. In this setting, the central role of exhibition-maker derives from just such an in-depth knowledge of the art, and from the vision of the whole that he or she brings to a given situation. (A corollary of this is that exhibition-makers must abstain from dealing with material into which they do not have a superior insight no matter how tempting the job might otherwise be.) In sum, the exhibition organizer occupies, or should occupy a position analogous to that of a film director who works collaboratively with everyone else involved in the process of making a movie, but who is assured, in spite of all contrary pressures, of final cut.

The same rules apply to other genres of exhibition, most of the rest of which are dedicated to the art of one person. Among them are the commissioned "project" that has become a staple of contemporary museums, Kunsthalles, and alternative spaces. Films, videos, installations, performances, participatory actions or situations, and publications-as-exhibitions are at the moment the most common types in this domain, but ensembles of paintings, drawings, and sculptures also fit this description. In addition there are early- and mid-career surveys of an artist's work, synoptic or comprehensive retrospectives, late-career updates, and posthumous retrospectives, or theme- or time-based reexaminations of an artist's oeuvre.

Each of these subgenres comes with its own opportunities and problems. The commissioned project, for example, requires of the exhibition organizer the utmost in clarity, tact, and firmness. The best such exhibitions result from the artist being able to experiment with previously untried ideas, mediums, and contexts. The worst are situa-

tions where an artist's fantasy comes up hard—but too late—against the reality of limited financial and technical resources, misconceptions about the physical or social "site," or the deferred recognition that the artist's premise simply wasn't substantial enough to produce a work of genuine interest. The exhibition-maker's duty is to calculate the odds of one outcome or the other given his or her research into the artist, his or her work and the givens with which he or she have been asked to contend. Since risk-taking is of the essence, the longing for surefire success is the exhibition-maker's nemesis, and legitimate failures must correspondingly be treated with respect, and valued for what they have brought to light. A case in point would be the huge, toy airplane launching apparatus with which Chris Burden filled the main hall of the Tate Britain in 1999. Very few planes ever made it into flight, but the Rube Goldberg contraption, its painfully obvious travails, and the mechanical frequency of crashes all contributed to a work of greater symbolic significance—a sort of *Titanic* of aviation in the age of NASA—than a clockwork accurate device would have. That said, less experienced artists with less convincing hypotheses have gotten into trouble because exhibition-makers working with them didn't offer timely critical feedback about the basic validity of their initial notion, warn them off patently unfeasible proposals, or simply voice their gut feeling that an artist had somehow gotten off on the wrong foot. Enthusiasm for young or paradigm-breaking artists does not mean passive acquiescence to poorly thought-out schemes. Respect is sometimes best shown by friendly skepticism and disasters are sometimes averted by a plainly stated "no" backed by clearly articulated reasons. In the current climate a significant number of exhibition-makers simultaneously underestimate and overestimate their status in relation to the artist. This confusion is revealing of the present plight of their calling. On the one hand they operate contrary to all that they know or should know as if the artist was always right; and then, having surrendered their authority as specialists, claim in other facets of their activity that, at bottom, they too are artists and deserve exceptional deference. But exhibition-makers are *not* artists, and deference, mixed with envy, is an unhealthy inclination in any dealings based on shared information and passion. When it was said earlier on that exhibition-makers should have what amounts to a filmmaker's final cut, that was not intended to suggest that the result of what they do is comparable in aesthetic terms, only that in both cases a coherent result depends on an equivalence between a holistic conception of what needs to be done and overriding power to assure that what is done matches that conception as much as can be. Perhaps one way of sharpening the distinction between the two separate vocations is this: if a filmmaker blows it, he or she gets a bad review; if an exhibition-maker blows it, it is most likely not he or she but the artist who gets the bad review, and it is more than ever his or her fault if he or she is certain in the first place that he or she chose to represent a strong talent.

In virtually all other instances of the one-person exhibition, the exhibition-maker is working with materials that already exist or will be complete before the show opens. In this respect, errors of judgment fall even more heavily on the shoulders of the exhibition-maker. Insofar as such shows are the means by which the general public becomes acquainted with an artist's work and the basis on which its opinions are formed, vagueness of purpose, lack of criticality, habits in problem solving, an unrealistic sense of what the occasion for the exhibition is, and what its opportunities and constraints are, worsened by any reluctance on the part of the organizer to assert his or her will when necessary, can have severe and lasting consequences for the art. These pitfalls would seem to be self-evident and circumventing them an easy matter, but one needn't look hard to see examples of exhibitions mishandled for one or more or these reasons, and one has only to read the run-of-the-mill exhibition proposal to see early signs of such weaknesses.

Fundamentally, though, since such lapses are rudimentary, the question boils down to two things. The first is never going off half-cocked even as one incorporates into the process of exhibition-making the largest possible margin for tactical maneuver, reconsideration of working assumptions, on-the-spot reactions to art, and on-the-spot invention in the "phrasing" of a show. The second, which follows from the first, is to be as explicit as one can be from the outset about where one is headed and what allowances in time, professional support, and money will be required to get there. This also includes strict understandings about the power of the exhibition-maker and the roles of others involved. Unstated expectations in any quarter, compounded by unspecified lines of authority, are a recipe for misery in doing a show and all but guarantee a bad outcome. Exhibition-makers must know their own mind and then clearly interpret how it works to all concerned, including those who hire them, their colleagues at all structural levels, and, above all, the artist. Like anyone who leads others in a direction of their choosing, they must have, or acquire the capacity to see around corners, to anticipate the effects of what they and others do several moves ahead, and demonstrate the agility to deal quickly with unforeseen challenges in a manner consistent with their agreed-upon aims. They must also have the ability to concede error and to correct their course. These statements would also appear to be axiomatic, but dithering, fitful improvisation, desperate backing-and-filling, spasmodic displays of willfulness and temper, and other signs of unpreparedness and insecurity are rife in the field. They throw everyone off, and, at the risk of excessive emphasis, they are most disconcerting to the artist whose achievement should be squarely in the forefront.

As with the group or thematic show, there are several types and sizes of monographic exhibitions, and, as with the survey, confusion on the part of the organizer about which one is being attempted accounts for many of the problems which arise in the minds of the

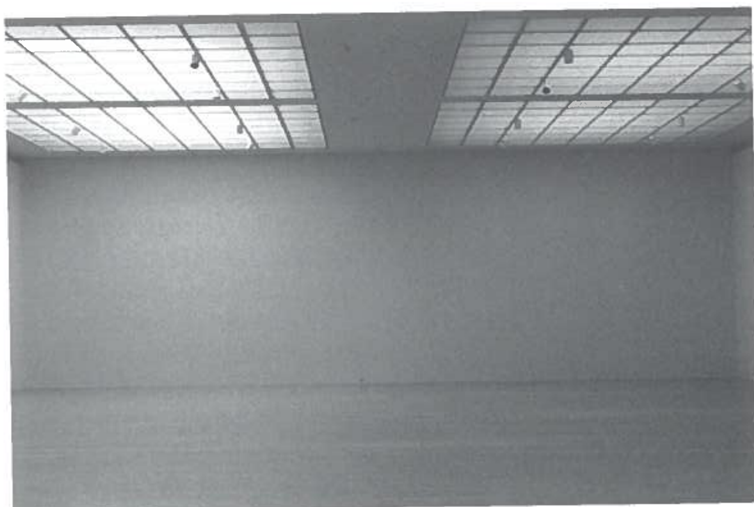
public, the artist, and the critical community. Some of these differences are dictated by the scope and scale of the institution, others are caused by them. Thus, it is often difficult for large museums to mount comparatively small exhibitions of an artist's work without that "smallness" seeming to be a judgment on the artist, prompting the spoken or unspoken response: "If they were really behind the artist, it would have been big," or "If the artist was really good, it would have been big." Meanwhile, it is impossible for a small to medium-sized institution to mount a mega-show. Organizers who function in denial of that fact and cram too much material into a given space in an effort to catch up with bigger institutions in sheer "quantity" may betray the artist out of an eagerness to please him or her. One option—and this is of value to small- to medium-sized spaces in major centers as well as small- to medium-sized cities—is for two or more such institutions to divide up the material and collaborate. Given the varied production of some artists this is an attractive solution in other ways, since it allows for parceling out distinct bodies of work among a variety of situations especially conducive to one or another kind of material. This is commonly done now in big surveys, but little-tested though readily conceivable in the case of the one-person show, if the person in question is flexible and sees the benefits of having his or her work crop up in diverse venues, each with its own distinctive characteristics. Increasingly, thinking in terms of such spatial constellations and institutional alliances will be crucial to the organizers of one-person shows since the number of artists who merit such exhibitions greatly outstrips the number of big museums or Kunsthalles capable of hosting a single-site project of this genre, particularly in the United States. And so far as contemporary art is concerned, this distribution/dispersal of work, while not always appropriate, may prove to be not just a necessity, but an occasion for opening up the format, and positively altering the understanding of such "summary" exhibitions by, in effect, accenting the plurality of an artist's interests and practices, rather than their neatly framed unity.

This said, nowadays many debut museum surveys, mid-career shows, and retrospectives are too big and/or too dense with material by any standard, especially those dictated by the actual magnitude of an artist's accomplishment, the manner in which the work "naturally" unfolds, and the capacity of the audience to absorb it. The pressures in this direction are many. First comes the institutional imperative to create a blockbuster and the closely related desire to fill grand architectural gestures that have, alas, become more important to many people involved with museums than the art they might contain. Second, there is the matter of artistic ego in two common but by no means universal forms: on the one hand there is the self-defeating conviction that more is better based on the equally problematic assumption that everything the artist has made is essentially good; on the other hand there is a competitive instinct that pushes even modest artists to want to equal or surpass peers who have recently

had large presentations, especially when they follow closely on the heels of a peer who, for whatever reasons, has been allowed or encouraged to mount an expansive show. The third concerns the ego of the exhibition-maker who loses sight of his or her role and seeks to make a mark by occupying as many square feet and publishing as fat a catalog as his or her sponsors will accede to. As is true for some artists, competitiveness with a curator whose project has recently preceded his or her own often motivates such miscalculations.

Self-discipline, which is not the antithesis of ambitiousness, but rather the expression of a will to make memorable exhibitions over the long haul, is the only answer to the third category of pressure. One has it or acquires it, or one doesn't. Based on such self-discipline, it is the exhibition-maker's challenge to bring similar discipline to institutions and artists. This does not mean dictating to them but assessing the inherent scope of an artist's work and making a strong case for what that work seems to dictate under the prevailing circumstances. The main factors that determine the outcome include the realistic availability of loans, the possible reconfiguration of galleries, and the degree of exposure the artist has already had. Some major artists have been seriously overexposed and are best served by relatively tight shows while those less familiar sometimes benefit from more ample ones that reveal the full texture of their achievement and a host of other considerations specific to the art in question.

Perhaps the simplest way of looking at the exhibition-maker's relationship to both the institution and the artist is to draw an analogy with the literary editor who negotiates with publishers and writers on behalf of the "best" version of work that can be attained. In some cases, the editor is handed an elephantine manuscript that has been written flat out—a Thomas Wolfe or Jack Kerouac novel to continue with the comparison—and discreetly though fundamentally shapes



Louise Lawler, *You Could Hear a Rat Piss on Cotton—Charlie Parker*, 1987, silver-dye bleach print, courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.

or reshapes it. In other cases the finished work is so complete and self-contained that only minor decisions on the editor's part are required or appropriate. In either case, and in all those that fall in between, the exhibition-maker is the first, most critical viewer in the way that a good editor is the first, most critical reader. He or she must have the artist's trust and can only earn it through the closest scrutiny of what the artist has done and by developing an instinctive sense for all that was involved in its creation. Based on a genuine commitment to the work and an appreciation of the artist's methods and motives, the exhibition-maker gains the right to speak frankly, and contribute his or her expertise to the endeavor without hesitation.

Selection is the initial, and, in many ways, the touchiest, stage of this negotiation since it inevitably means stating preferences. But not all differences of opinion in this realm hinge on taste alone, and if they do not, all pit the exhibition-maker against the artist over the issue of what the former doesn't like and the latter promotes or defends. Sometimes, the tables are turned and the exhibition organizer must coax the artist to let others see early or digressive works he or she has turned he or she back on out of embarrassment or frustration. In cases where the artist's work is well known, such persuasion can reopen consideration of his or her achievement in important ways or at least keep the exhibition from looking like a textbook account. By contrast, the artist may sometimes decide suddenly that certain canonical works have been seen too often and push for their exclusion. In such cases it is the duty of the organizer to remind him or her that a large part of the nonspecialist public may *never* have seen these works, and that the only alternative to "decommissioning" the dreadnoughts of his or her career is to surround them with a fleet of other vessels in proportions that diminish their tendency to overshadow everything else.

The misconception that the best one-person show consists more or less entirely of the best-known works by that artist is fairly widespread. For those on the outside looking in, it may indeed seem that the selection of works for such a show is in effect a "no brainer," and that all the exhibition-maker does is to round up the usual suspects. To the contrary, the thing that makes it a "brainer" is first, the foreknowledge that some, if not many of the usual suspects will prove to be out of reach, and second, the awareness that a mere parade of canonical works, as impressive as it may be, sheds little light on the subtexts of the art in question. It is as if one made a film with a thoroughly predictable plot, and only stars doing star turns, in such a situation there is nothing that gives dimension or nuance to works that are supposedly "great" by consensus but may pall when installed cheek by jowl, or tend, as "masterpieces" can do, to blind people rather than open their eyes, because of the fame or glamour attached to that status—factors usually touted and exacerbated by exhibition advertising and thoughtless talk of rarity and cost, that is to say, the discourse of "treasure" hunts. Minor, but substantial works

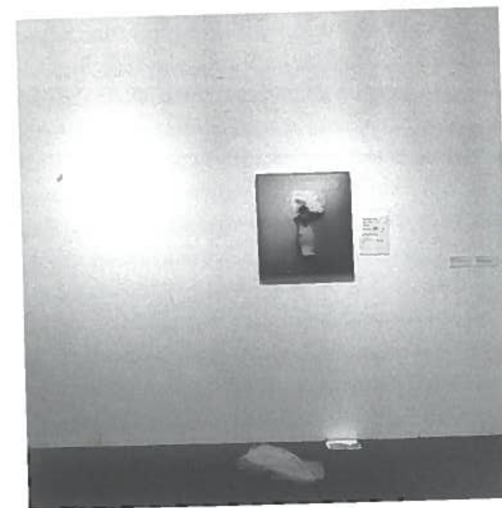
that crystallize key aspects of an artist's sensibility and development are as necessary to the one-person show as indisputably major ones. A scattering of such works often engages the viewer first by virtue of their salient and readily accessible qualities, qualities which, when initially seen in relative isolation, teach the viewer what to look for in more complex or more rarefied works. A surfeit of showstopping art stops the show.

Other questions regarding selection have to do with the vested interests of dealers, collectors, and patrons. More than one recent retrospective has been diluted to the point of terminal blandness by the overstock of works forced on the exhibition-maker by the artist, his or her estate, or his or her representatives. The impulse to use a retrospective to upgrade unsold works, or simply to clear the warehouse, is nothing surprising; but the short-term advantage is likely to be just that—short term—and the ultimate costs to the reputation of the artist can be devastating. The exhibition-maker is not in business, but sometimes a businesslike warning about the dangers of such strategies can help fend off such pressures. If push comes to shove, however, then the exhibition-maker must refuse to give in, and to do that effectively must count on the backing of the institution. If the pressure comes from patrons of the institution in which they are working, then he or she must be assured that a clear separation of powers exists and that regardless of how friendly or insistent the suggestion that he or she include certain works in a show, it is finally up to the exhibition-maker and no one else, to decide. Just as artists may sometimes come to the aid of an exhibition-maker to obtain a loan from a reluctant source, so, too, they may help an exhibition-maker to decline an overly eager one. The intricacies of such dealings constitute the inner workings of art diplomacy, for which there are no reliable scripts. It is worthwhile restating here that under such circumstances, focus, transparency, and candor on the part of the exhibition-maker with respect to his or her overall purpose, are in every way preferable to dissembling and guile in this domain. However, on either side of the never-fixed line between these approaches, agility and humor count. And, as with dealers and artists, accurately assessing the downside of the collectors' getting what they want in situations where, in their own best interests they shouldn't want it, is all in the exhibition-maker's favor. Gently pointing out that a particular work in their possession might look out of place—not to say redundant or lesser—in the company of other works already selected can be a useful argument. Object lessons can be found in exhibitions that have been heavily amended when they traveled to their second and third stops, where local professionals lobbied too successfully to add work that duplicated things already on the checklist, only to find that direct comparison between the work originally chosen and the one tacked on exposed the weaknesses of the latter. Since such comparisons stick in mind, the risk to the proud owner of the good-but-not-best work is hardly worth taking. This holds true

of works belonging to the participating museums that someone may think of substituting for or inserting among those originally in the show. What might legitimately hold pride of place in their collection could well pale next to the top-of-the-line works gathered for a once-in-a-decade retrospective. All in all, it is the responsibility of the exhibition-maker in conjunction with the artist to agree on an irreducible but also uninflatable group of works. After that, any tampering with that selection must be regarded by all parties as strictly out of bounds for the sake of the coherence of the whole, as well as for the sake of those who might wish to wiggle an "extra" in only to find that it stands out like a sore thumb. Exhibition-makers are not always right in their choices, but they are almost always wrong when they yield to special pleading.

Now to the basics. The primary means for "explaining" an artist's work is to let it reveal itself. Showing *is* telling. Space is the medium in which ideas are visually phrased. Installation is both presentation and commentary, documentation and interpretation. Galleries are paragraphs, the walls and formal subdivisions of the floors are sentences, clusters of works are clauses, and individual works, in varying degree, operate as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and often as more than one of these functions according to their context. Ordinary people are sensitive to their surroundings and what is in them if you let them be. Based on that basic aptitude they are or can become visually literate if you lead them into and through spaces filled with things in a manner that encourages them to heed the clues they are consciously or subliminally picking up, clues that the exhibition-maker has left for them.

People are generally afraid of things that are unfamiliar to them, and when it comes to art they are most afraid of the embarrassment of appearing not to get it. This is normal, but it should



Louise Lawler, *I Don't Have a Title For It, Maybe We Should Have a Contest?*, 2002/2003, silver-dye bleach print (museum box), courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.

not cause the exhibition-maker to underestimate their basic intelligence or their ability to learn. Neither should the exhibition-maker forget that the reason people come to a museum or exhibition is to expose themselves in measured doses to just this sensation of not knowing for sure what things are, or what they think of them. In short, they like the estrangement that art precipitates so long as they are not needlessly caught off guard. The exhibition-maker's job is to arrange this encounter between people and what puzzles them in such a fashion that they will derive the maximum benefit and pleasure from it—that is, from the particularities of the work, their own uncertainty, and their innate drive to exploit to the fullest extent their own imaginative and intellectual resources—and make something out of new experience.

Honoring their audiences' needs and desires, exhibition-makers should refrain whenever possible from preempting that process—which is never a matter of just one visit to an exhibition-event-entertainment in which all is accounted for—by explaining the work away before viewers have had a chance to see it with their own eyes, and engage it with their own minds. If people read labels instead of looking at the work, it is the exhibition-maker's fault, not theirs; he or she has made the labels too prominent, too plentiful, too wordy, too graphically arresting, or in any other way too "interesting" in the general field of vision. We have all witnessed people in museums running up to read a label before stepping back to look at the work beside which it has been affixed, and then move to the next object before ever really seeing the first one for themselves. And if the behavioral pattern holds, they bob from stop to stop through room after room of art which is experienced largely as a vista rather than as a series of specific discoveries. Curators should do nothing to encourage and everything to interrupt this is information-gathering, art-obliterating choreography.

Correspondingly, audio guides have become the bane of exhibitions by unfairly competing for the attention of the viewer by piping words into their ears when they should be using their eyes. In a gallery context, sound almost invariably trumps sight. Moreover, inasmuch as audio guides function by directing the listener to duly marked "key" works in a gallery, they cause crowds in front of these works, making it impossible to examine them in any careful or sustained way. Worse, they spur the crowd to skip everything in between. No compelling sequence of works can overcome this herding effect, which means that there is little chance that the viewer can "read" the installation as an ensemble of discoveries, the positioning and pacing of which inform each other and instruct the viewer by example in how to "read" the whole of the exhibition. Meanwhile, the audible whispering of such guides substitutes itself for conversation and arguments among viewers, and the taped voice of authority—whether art expert or mellifluous actor—drowns out the voice in the viewer's head that struggles to articulate its own ideas and feelings.

The case made for audio guides is that they help members of the public to enter into the artist's world, but the fact is that they are more likely to keep them out, obscuring not only the work but the viewers' spontaneous reactions. Ostensibly democratic devices, they are the opposite insofar as they once and for all interrupt the crucial first acquaintance with art and assign the job of synthesizing sensation and thought to a disembodied interpreter. One can take and consult a brochure or information sheet at one's discretion and in one's own good time; an audio guide sets its own agenda and mesmerizes the person carrying it, by being so "user friendly" that to abstain from using it seems like a waste. The combination of sound and moving images upstages every other kind of image, such that interactive video screens in the gallery become the unavoidable centerpiece of the room, a little like a TV in a living room or a bar. Information is essential to understanding art, but firsthand experience precedes it and also reasserts it powers where didactics surrender their claim on the public's attention. Experience is, in fact, the subject of art and establishes the subjecthood of the viewer. Anything that supplants it, regardless of how valuable in its own right, or how well-intentioned on the part of the provider, is, ultimately, art's nemesis.[1]

Sequencing of works in the first rooms of an exhibition becomes a primer for learning how to read other, perhaps more complex material that follows. Cacophonous beginnings or stately and contemplative ones set a tone for the whole installation that may be borne out by what comes after, or contradicted by it. However, once that tone is set in the viewers' minds it will condition the way they see everything else. Varying the density of rooms sets a cadence; breaking that rhythm by placing critical works in unexpected or dramatic spots accents certain aspects of what is on view. That said, it should be possible for the viewer to circumambulate a room in more than one direction rather than follow a lockstep progression of displays. Wherever architecture allows, it should also be possible to enter a gallery from more than one angle and still grasp its contents, indeed, as a result of tracing these alternate paths, to grasp them in different intersecting ways. Neither in its chronological or formal unfolding should the installation of a room or suite of rooms ever point exclusively forward, nor should the viewers ever feel that they are in a regimented progress from one thing to the next. Indeed, to the extent that most intricately nested exhibitions tend to resemble mazes, then, like Theseus hunting for the Minotaur in the labyrinth, the viewer should have the means to retrace his or her steps at any juncture. However, it is the exhibition-maker's responsibility, not the viewer's, to lay the string that marks a trail in and out. Or, to revert to the movie analogy, viewers ought to be able to rewind the exhibition at any point, pick up the thread of "the story" not previously dwelled on, or savor the effects of a few frames, and then fast forward at will to resume their experiences of the exhibition's main flow. From any gallery there should, if at all possible, be something to see in the gallery before it as well

1. In making the case against the use, or, at any rate the overuse, of audio guides, I am under no illusion that the practice will cease. In all probability it will grow. Neither am I innocent of having made such guides. As is expected of curators organizing major exhibits, I have written and recorded several and was happier being the one to do that with the option of determining the content and setting the pace as best I could than handing the job over to a media expert or educational generalist. Nor do I wish to disparage the skills of the professional primarily responsible for putting such sound packages together. In fact, my personal experience of those who specialize in the field has been very good, and I respect their seriousness about art and their understanding of the public needs. Nevertheless, in hastening to provide the public with "facts" and "interpretations" in this manner, museums and their collaborators deprive individual viewers of something crucial to their own independent experience of art, namely surprise, wonder, difficulty, and the realization that they can make sense of much of what they see and take active, untutored interest in the things that still puzzle them.

as the gallery beyond, and perhaps from more than one gallery in either direction. And from different vantage points different works should be framed by doors and corridors in relation to what is in the gallery where the viewer is standing. Thus, the subtexts of an artist's work—such as recurrent themes and motifs, or sharp contrasts otherwise smoothed out by the work's gradual evolution—are brought to light by architectural jump-cuts.

Exhibitions are commonly said to tell stories, and in one-person shows they tend to follow a biographical narrative line, or a teleological formal one; first he or she made this then that; or first the medium was developed in this way, and then in that way. In most such cases, the story told telegraphs a foregone conclusion or climax, the triumph (and maybe tragic death) of the artist, or the triumph (as if inevitable) of a governing aesthetic idea. Anything the exhibition-maker can do to arrest the rush toward that denouement, to digress from the main events in order to concentrate on the overlooked aspects of the work's character and, finally, to eschew closure so that on leaving the exhibition the viewer doesn't think so much of how it ended (even in cases where the artist died) but how it might go on or might have gone following not only the further development of dominant traits but also of recessive ones. Artists such as Jackson Pollock are perhaps most subject to being presented in trajectories that emphasize the dramatic finish. Nevertheless, the irony of his case is that the last works he made plainly bespeak someone trying to get traction for a significant stylistic redeparture. In other words, the narrative of his personal misery tells one story, and that of his confused and fitful work tells a related but essentially different one. The former is that of a man in a hellish psychological cul-de-sac; the latter an artist probing for the way out of a creative impasse and finding that he had a variety of choices in front of him. The second, inconclusive story is the one that a Pollock exhibition should tell.[2] The older an artist gets the more the exhibition-maker has to be on guard against mounting an apotheosis, which by implication suggests that the artist's work is complete and that the audience is merely in attendance at the public celebration of fulfilled promise. Good artists always have more work to do, great ones spring surprises. In 1982 the seventy-year-old Louise Bourgeois had a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. In the two decades since, she has had countless other career surveys around the world, most of them weighted equally between old, pre-1980, and new, post-1980 work. Wisely, none of the shows has been predicated on the idea that Bourgeois was summing up, heading in a predictable direction, or ready to rest on her laurels. By virtue of her extraordinarily protean old age, she, more than anyone, has insisted that her shows be open-ended.

2. To its great credit, the most recent Pollock retrospective organized by Kirk Varnedoe did tell this second story.

That is the way one-person shows should be. In all circumstances and at all costs, exhibition-makers should shun the temptation of making exhibitions that purport to draw ultimate conclusions about the work—especially with a living artist, but even with a dead one.

Blockbuster retrospectives most frequently go wrong through hubris. Inflating the size of such exhibitions and making undue claims for their historical importance on behalf of the organizer or host institution is usually the root of such trouble. Viewers should not come with the idea that they are about to have a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but rather think of an exhibition as the beginning of a renewable acquaintance with someone or something it will take a long time to know well and whom one will never know completely. Correspondingly, the viewer should exit exhibitions energized rather than exhausted, and convinced that there is more to be seen, and other ways of seeing it. Thus, the old adage about not overstaying one's welcome applies to exhibitions as it does to social encounters: "leave longing not loathing."

Incidentally, this principle bears on catalogs as well. The editorial equivalent of the blockbuster is the paper brick. While some of these volumes are handsome and informative, in their sheer bulk many are a threat to the forests, and in their glossy, self-consciously designed contents little more than coffee-table books with intellectual pretensions. Art and artists are not well served by books that no one reads. Oversized books that intimidate, and may even physically handicap the potential reader, are a disincentive to genuine engagement. Generally, this is compounded by their being overpriced as well, despite the large subsidies required to publish them, with those subsidies often being a drain on the overall exhibition budget. Accurately reproducing the works in the exhibition, and useful supplementary images are enough, though recently some exhibition catalogs have been expanded to serve as catalogs raisonné to very good effect, mainly because the production was modest as is appropriate to that genre, and the information well researched and cogently and concisely set forth.[3]

3. Edited by Joan Simon, the catalog raisonné of Bruce Nauman's work that accompanied his 1994–95 retrospective organized by the Walker Art Center is a prime example of how this can be done economically and to a high scholarly standard, in a format that is also manageable for the general public.

The question of what audience (as distinct from market) exhibition catalogs are created for is central and decisive. While some exhibitions are quite correctly intended primarily for aficionados, most are mounted with a general and diverse public in mind. Accordingly, the catalog should reflect that diversity by being written in language the common reader can understand and with respect for what the common reader is likely to know about art coming in. To give priority to such a reader is not populist pandering, it is democratic respect. They have come to see the show and then sat down to learn about what they have seen—which is always better than being lectured or asked to read too much standing up in the galleries, as argued before. Consequently the author or authors should not indulge in exclusive discourses, take any essential facts or theoretical constructs for granted, use this as the occasion to fight intramural battles with other writers without setting the stage for such arguments, or indulge in the professional vice of slinging jargon. On the other side of the equation, the author should never talk down to the reader or oversimplify difficult issues in ways that limit the reader's ultimate grasp of the aesthetic, cultural, or social

complexity that account for them. As the modernist composer and incisive newspaper critic Virgil Thomson said about writing for general circulation publications, "Never overestimate the information your readers have, but never underestimate their intelligence." In the matter of introducing an artist to that public, and to almost the same degree in representing a large and complicated body of work that has heretofore been seen in pieces or chapters, a clear point of view is as essential to a catalog as it is to the exhibition upon which it is based. Often, this means a single author with a distinctive and engaging writerly voice. If the situation argues for multiple authors dealing with differing aspects of a varied production, or tackling contested problems from differing theoretical positions, then the exhibition-maker in conjunction with lead writer or editor (who may be one in the same person, if not the exhibition-maker him- or herself) must convene this symposium or debate in a manner that will permit the reader to grasp its rationale, and otherwise gauge the proceedings against the background of a straightforward description of the art under discussion and of its generally understood place in the world. This is true even if it is precisely that general understanding that the catalog contributors and editor aim at unraveling or superseding.

To insure that catalogs for one-person exhibitions not be, or are not be perceived as being, uncritical testimonials to the art and artist in question, the exhibition-maker and catalog writer/editor should maintain complete authority over its design and contents. They may, if the artist has a gift for bookmaking, enlist him or her in the conception or layout of the catalog, but they must never abandon their role as project coordinator and final arbiter, much less surrender any part of their control on demand. Catalogs are not vanity publications, nor are they made primarily for the aesthetic satisfaction of the artist. Rather they exist to convey in the optimum manner in another medium the basic thrust of the exhibition. Artists may ask for approval of the texts published about them, but they should not be granted it. Nor should catalog writers seek such approval on their own. Friendships between exhibition-makers/catalog-writers and the artists to whom they devote their energies may survive the process of making a show or they may not—in the best case they actually deepen—but the former must insist on a totally professional disconnect in certain areas for the sake of the project's integrity. If required by circumstance, they must be prepared sacrifice easy relations for a better result. If the artist does not trust the professional working on his or her behalf, then whatever personal bond may seem to exist is one-sided or illusory. Given human nature, it is thus unwise to turn essays over to artists in any form prior to publication; a good editor will be on the lookout for facts that need checking and those can be handled by either the editor or the writer on a detail-by-detail basis. It is not the artist's prerogative to pass on opinions and interpretations, or for that matter which facts get attention.[4]

4. A recent controversy over a text I wrote for the retrospective of Lee Bontecou organized by Elizabeth Smith and Ann Philbin highlighted the issues of curators showing artists and their supporters catalog essays prior to publication. In this instance Bontecou and her husband took me to task for not interviewing the artist before drawing comparisons between her work and that of other contemporaries. Bontecou's concern was to eschew such connections in order to emphasis her dependence on nature as a source and her debt to a few friends and her husband. Her husband's attack on the piece seems to have been prompted by longstanding animosities toward the art world and a desire to treat her work as essentially sui generis but for the example of his own and the same few friends. As a critic and historian, my aim was to show that whatever influences she may have felt or exerted on others, her work was of importance precisely because of the way in which it both related to and altered our prior understanding of the context in which it was made. Had the curators not stood their ground on the principle that such exhibitions are not merely the occasion for artists to put forward their interpretation of their work but also the moment for other complementary or even competing views to be heard, the essay would have been removed from the catalog by Bontecou and her husband.

Artist participation in the installation of an exhibition follows much the same guidelines but is a more delicate affair. Some artists are very good, flexible, and creative in their approach to hanging or siting their work. Quite a few are not, but only some of them are aware of it. On the assumption that the exhibition-maker is good at installing, or, alternatively, that he or she has a clear idea about what he or she wants and skilled preparators and designers to realize it, installation should be done solely by the exhibition-maker after having discussed with the artist the strategies proposed for the project, and the principles to be referred to in choosing backup options, or solving problems that inevitably arise when the sketch or model of a show is arranged in physical space. In explaining their plans, exhibition-makers should be mindful of the fact that they know the ins and outs of the architecture of their "house" or venue better than the artist and many of the possible differences between them and the artist may arise from that reality. Clearly, interpreting to the artist the perceptual gestalt and the advantageous or disadvantageous quirks of the spaces in which the exhibition will be located is therefore of great importance. A good exhibition does not ignore the idiosyncrasies of its site: it either exploits them to unexpected effect, or makes them disappear to the measure possible. Not having repeatedly reconnoitered, as well as mapped the galleries prior to making those plans is suicidal for the exhibition-maker, and if special walls, bases, and other structures are being built for the occasion, close supervision—and when necessary, on-the-spot revision—of that construction is, likewise, of the highest priority. Slackening attention on the part of the audience may result from inattention to such matters on the part of the exhibition-maker: for the one as for the other, impatience is in the details.

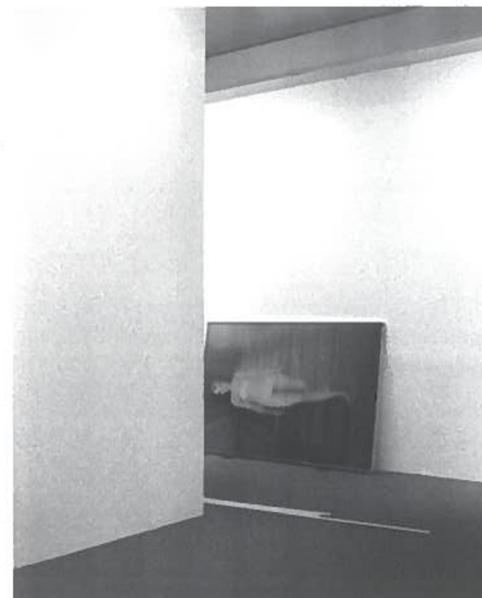
Except where he or she is actively involved in the process of installation at the exhibition-maker's invitation, the artist should politely be told that he or she is not to come on the floor until the show is fully in place and lighted. As a rule of thumb, artists who do participate in installations should be there from start to finish, so that things are not done in their absence that cause incidental friction. In the ideal scenario, the dialogue between an exhibition-maker and an artist in this context is much like that of two musicians exchanging improvised phrases, where agreement or disagreement, proposal and variation are dealt with almost entirely by audible, or in the situation under discussion, visible example. For many exhibition-makers, installation is the true reward for all their other labor. It should not be made an ordeal by the intrusion or second-guessing of other parties, but the greatest pleasure of all is to work harmoniously toward the same goal with the creator of the work. Robert Ryman is an example of a painter who brings his whole being as an artist to bear on the installation of his paintings, but who, as a former jazz musician, thoroughly appreciates the contribution of the exhibition-makers with whom he has collaborated, and the nuanced differences among his

5. I worked directly with Ryman on the installation of his 1992 retrospective at all three of its American venues, and I am aware that some colleagues have had similarly collaborative experiences.

shows are owed to this responsive and cooperative sensibility.[5] In any case, artists should understand that if they agree to do a show they have entered into a contract with the exhibition-maker and his or her institution which cannot be rewritten piecemeal. Artists should not sign on for an exhibition if they lack faith in the craftsmanship and critical orientation of the exhibition-maker. Exhibition-makers should not work with artists who do.

Politics, it is said, is the art of the possible. While not an art form in its own right, exhibition-making is likewise a matter of making the most out of what necessity, opportunity, and canniness allow. If much of the politics of exhibition-making centers on the administrative and aesthetic contracts negotiated between the exhibition-maker and the artist with whom he or she works, the institution which puts its resources at the disposal of the project, and the specialists who devote their expertise to the it, then the most important contract of all exists between the exhibition-maker and the public. It is unwritten, but breaches of that contract are immediately apparent, and their consequences for art and all those committed to it, beginning with the public, cannot be exaggerated.

At stake is the meaning of the work, and who determines it. Not for all time and not for everybody, but in the present tense of the individual's direct exposure to it, and the past and future tenses of his or her changing recollection of what he or she has seen and his or her developing expectation of seeing it again, with the subsequent confirmation or correction of those mental traces. Whereas many people have thought, and some still think, that every work of art has an essential meaning vested either in cultural ideals and conventions, the history of the medium, the materials and their spirit or formal imperatives, or the artist's intention, the fact that this irreducible essence is judged by different constituencies to be located in such different places argues that it is located in all of them to some degree, and none of them absolutely. Whereas adjudicating disagreements about meaning once fell to officialdom—the State, the Academy, university-trained scholars, and self-made men and women of taste who rose to lofty posts in museums or journalism—or was sometimes handed directly to the artist, it is plain both as a practical matter and as a matter of principle that the ultimate decisions are made by the viewer. The job of the exhibition-maker is to do all that can be done so that those decisions will be well informed, rooted in perception and, in a positive sense, inconclusive. To borrow the terminology of contemporary literary discourse, this means granting the reader power equal to that of the author, who is not "dead," as theorists have argued, and therefore should be heard, but who can no longer lay claim to absolute authority over the import of his or her work and should also refrain from standing between it and the reader. Insofar as this shift in balance between creator and audience is staged by the exhibition-maker and hence is itself an act of mediation, it is incumbent on the exhibition-maker to make



Louise Lawler, *Nude*, 2002/2003, silver-dye bleach print (museum mounted), courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.

those interventions as transparent—that is, self-evident, and at the same time as unobtrusive—as possible given the thrust of his or her overall conception of the show. Above all exhibition-makers must not usurp the autonomy of either of the primary parties in this dynamic, or propose to speak to either of them in the name of the other, or in the name of an overarching authority. Exhibition-makers convene the parties and offer proposals for meaning but they must not presume to impose it.

If the art is truly important, it will necessarily have many facets and set off many trains of thought. The responses it may prompt and the lessons that can be drawn from it correspondingly multiply by the number of people who come to look, the number of times they do so, the number of objects offered to them, the number of facets if presents, and the number of angles from which they are encouraged to examine it, as will be the passage of time and changes in the world context. The mathematics are simple; the sum infinite. Exhibition-makers contribute by facilitating this expansion of meaning rather than by containing it. Given that infinity is impossible to contemplate, they assist the viewer by focusing hard on specifics, while reminding that same viewer that they constitute only a fraction of a larger whole. If they do that generously, and thereby increase the viewer's appetite for art by making it keener and more discerning, then they have done a lot.