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'Repetition: Summer Display 1983' at Van Abbemuseum

**Or, What Institutional Curatorial Archives
Can Tell Us about the Museum**

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ABSTRACT: The reactivation of Rudi Fuchs' 1983 exhibition 'Summer Display' took place in 2009 as part of the collection series, 'Play van Abbe part 1: The Game and the Players', and was entitled 'Repetition: Summer Display 1983'. The reconstruction questioned the codes and systems used within (but also consciously and unconsciously outside) the museum and raised several questions, including: what story did the original composers want to tell, and how can this piece of history be understood today? Is the new presentation a separate exhibition entirely or a copy of the 'original' one? What is then the difference between the idea of copy, repetition, and reenactment? And what is the role of the museum's archive in the process of restaging? What can curatorial institutional archives tell us about the museum itself?

KEYWORDS: curatorial archives; curatorial practices; exhibition reactivation; Charles Esche; Van Abbemuseum

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‘The world does not exist’ – Faust concludes when the pendulum reaches the other extreme – ‘there is not an all, given all at once: there is a finite number of elements whose combinations are multiplied to billions of billions, and only a few of these find a form and a meaning and make their presence felt amid a meaningless, shapeless dust cloud; like the seventy-eight cards of the tarot deck in whose juxtapositions sequences of stories appear and are then immediately undone.

Italo Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*

Italo Calvino’s 1973 novel *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* can be considered both as an exploration of how meaning is created through words or images and as the expression of the several levels of interpretations and readings of a story.¹ Just like the tarots in Calvino’s

1 Italo Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, trans. by William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

novel, archival images and documents can be used to do and undo equally valuable narrations and assist in layering them. Archives (curatorial and, in relation to the case presented here, especially institutional ones) are key places where multiple stories are produced and delivered. A plurality of sources often guarantees a plurality of choices: decentralizing the understanding of knowledge at the core of the archive creates the conditions for other stories to be told. Other stories can arise, for instance, from the replica of an artwork, or a past exhibition, in order to observe and critically analyse the product of a similar or different context than the one being considered.

According to Markus Miessen, the new curatorial urge to revise past exhibitions is indicative of a Western obsession with memory:

The increasing number of exhibitions that remember past exhibitions attests to the importance of the exhibition phenomenon in today's societies and points to a growing interest in the history of exhibitions, collective exhibition memory, and intersections of past exhibition theory and practice with contemporary concerns [...] The emergence of the 'remembering exhibition' is a manifestation of Western culture's current fascination with memory as a modality for constructing individual or collective identities. How we remember exhibitions and our need to remember them are very much part of recent exhibition culture.²

Terry Smith reinforces this point too: 're-curating past exhibitions can be considered as the 5th paradigm of curating, and this may give a sense of how important the phenomenon has become, under its different definitions, in the art system and history.'³

So far, a number of historical surveys have included reconstructions of famous exhibitions, or rather bits of them. The reactivation of Rudi Fuchs's exhibition 'Summer Display' at Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven serves as a crucial case study.⁴ It is definitely one of the most interesting exhibition reactivations and one of the first, to our

2 Markus Miessen, 'Safe Haven', *Volume Magazine*, 15 (April 2008), n.p.

3 From an unreleased interview with the author on 11 February 2016.

4 'Summer Display of the Museum's Collection', Van Abbemuseum, curated by Rudi Fuchs, 2 July to 21 August 1983, with new works by Georg Baselitz, Alighiero Boetti, Daniel Buren, Gino De Dominicis, Luciano Fabro, Gilbert & George, Roni Horn, Anish Kapoor, Hermann Nitsch, Sigmar Polke, Lawrence Weiner, Fred Wilson.

knowledge, that does not consist of the reactivation of a single artwork or of a smaller part of an exhibition (for that has a longer history) but of a whole show as a system, with its own codes and autonomy.

Charles Esche has been the director of Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven since 2004. Previously the director of Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art in Malmö (2000–2004), he has participated in the conception and development of a sociological and critical approach towards institutional dynamics, defined as New Institutionalism. ‘My policy to combine radicalism with hospitality’, he explained, ‘is a way not to bend to populism but to show the most challenging and *avant garde* of contemporary art practice while building up a good and meaningful relationship with our audience.’⁵ His directorship at the Van Abbemuseum has been inspired by a qualitative effort to understand the impact of the public on the institution and vice versa.

On its website, the museum describes its mission as follows:

We challenge ourselves and our visitors to think about art and its place in the world, covering a range of subjects, including the role of the collection as a cultural ‘memory’ and the museum as a public site. International collaboration and exchange have made the Van Abbemuseum a place for creative cross-fertilization and a source of surprise, inspiration and imagination for its visitors and participants.⁶

The first years of Esche’s directorship have been particularly linked to understanding the history and legacy of the institution by mining the archive and bringing it out of the closet. The archive of the Van Abbemuseum contains documentation about the history of the museum, its exhibitions, and the collection of artworks that was started in 1933 and continues to this day. Exemplary for raising awareness of the ways in which archives determine the writing of art history, the Van Abbemuseum’s institutional archive has been at the core of many exhibition projects. One of them was the ‘Living Archive’ (2005–2009), which displayed works of art from the museum’s collection in close relation

5 Charles Esche, museum director, unpublished papers, collected in the Van Abbemuseum’s archives.

6 From the self-description of the Van Abbemuseum’s on the publishing platform Art & Education (from *e-flux* and *Artforum*): ‘Directory Entry Van Abbemuseum’, Art & Education <<https://www.artandeducation.net/directory/82357/van-abbemuseum>> [accessed 11 March 2021].

— both conceptually and in terms of display — with the historical papers that documented their acquisition and management. As noted in *Folding the Exhibition*, a volume produced by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona on archiving exhibitions, 'This active project of the archive functions to activate memory, giving new points of view on the exhibitions and offering a new way to access the documents that connect with the general public, and not only researchers.'⁷

The reactivation of Rudi Fuchs's 1983 exhibition 'Summer Display', part of the Play van Abbe project,⁸ followed a similar approach and was a response to the challenges of various disciplines, including art, art history, cultural studies, and sociology:

[It] investigates how to position a museum as a knowledge institution that tries to preserve a 'collective cultural memory'. It seeks to surprise and inspire a public while promoting critical, long term thinking about art's role in the contemporary world. [...] [T]he museum will focus on the stories of artists and exhibition makers. ['The Game and the Players'] is about positioning an art museum— today and in the past — and rethinking it as both a productive environment in which stories unfold and a site for presentation in which things are seen.⁹

What is particularly interesting about the reactivation of 'Summer Display' is that in 2009, twenty-six years after the 'original' show, it became a tool to physically compare the present and past directorships of the institution, as well as to question the codes and systems used by the museum. The reconstruction of the exhibition conformed as closely to the original as possible. The same works were displayed in the same rooms in which they were displayed in 1983. According to Reesa Greenberg, this has become a very common format in the making of exhibitions, namely the replica or 'remembering exhibition'. She explains:

7 Núria Gallissà, Maite Muñoz, and Marta Vega, *Folding the Exhibition* (Barcelona: MACBA–Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2014), p. 21 <<https://www.macba.cat/en/learn-explore/publications/folding-exhibition>> [accessed 11 March 2021].

8 'Part 1' of the exhibition, titled 'The Game and the Players', took place from 28 November 2009 to 21 March 2010 <<https://vanabbeuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/play-van-abbe-part-1/>> [accessed 5 July 2021].

9 Quoted from 'The Game and the Players', exhibition press release, Van Abbemuseum, museum website <<https://vanabbeuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/play-van-abbe/>> [accessed 11 March 2021].

This approach seeks to re-assemble as much of the art work displayed as possible, either as originals or reproductions, in a stand-alone single exhibition or sequence of exhibitions that may or may not employ the initial installation schema and may or may not be held in the original location. In what I term a ‘repeat remembering exhibition,’ all the original contents of an earlier exhibition are re-assembled in the same, unchanged space in the same arrangement as before.¹⁰

However, in the twenty-six years that passed between the two exhibitions, the venues changed slightly; the artworks travelled and were displayed in different compositions and contexts. Some works became world famous; others were forgotten. This discrepancy between the ‘original’ show and its reconstruction opens up several questions: what story did the first curator want to tell, and how do we experience the past exhibition in the present? What is the role of the archive in this process?

Understanding the influence of the directorship on the Van Abbe museum vision and strategies through examining the archive, especially the director’s files that were used to reconstruct the exhibition, is one of the main points upon which I have based my research on personal and institutional archives at the museum. This practice seems to diverge from the one adopted for the restaging of ‘When Attitudes Become Form’ at Fondazione Prada in Venice in 2013, one of the most often cited examples for the cultural phenomenon of exhibition reconstructions. The goals and efforts made to reactivate ‘Summer Display’ seem to be less about understanding the ‘logical and creative identity’ of curators — as Germano Celant declared while curating, together with architect Rem Koolhaas and artist Thomas Demand, the reconstruction of Harald Szeemann’s 1969 most celebrated exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Bern — but instead about discretely revealing the logics of power and the non-objective value produced by the subject/curator/director.¹¹ In fact, the restaging of ‘Summer Display’ served as a witness to the ideology of the museum as a public

10 Reesa Greenberg, “‘Remembering Exhibitions’: From Point to Line to Web’, *Tate Papers*, 12 (Autumn 2009) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/remembering-exhibitions-from-point-to-line-to-web>> [accessed 11 December 2019].

11 Shortly after, Germano Celant adds: ‘Like the public exhibition they organize, these people, called curators, have a logical and creative identity that it is time to study “from



Figure 1. Installation view of 'Summer Display of the Museum's Collection', curated by Rudi Fuchs, Van Abbemuseum, 1983.

institution and a critical reflection on the positions adopted by the Van Abbemuseum throughout its history. By reconstructing the 1983 collection display, the Van Abbemuseum wanted to focus on the exhibition as an exhibition, in its performativity and repeatability, and, eventually, on the exhibition as a story and system of codes. Diana Franssen, former Curator of the Archive and Head of Research at the Van Abbemuseum, remarked that it was a way to actually engage with the past and the present on the same level and compare two directors that were equally contested.¹²

Since Rudi Fuchs gradually distanced himself from the established art scene and displayed unconditional loyalty to 'his' artists, his policy in the 1980s received more and more criticism in the media. In a cer-

life", not just through documentation in photographs and films. This can be done only by attempting to reconstruct and remake, as we are now trying to do at Ca' Corner in Venice with a project of re-proposal, revisiting and recreating – "exactly as it was" – of "When Attitudes Become Form," 1969. The intention is to re-examine the relations of the show through its restaging'. Cf. Fondazione Prada Team, Journalists, and Friends, 'Why and How: A Conversation with Germano Celant', in *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, ed. by Germano Celant (Milan: Progetto Prada Arte, 2013), pp. 393–421 (pp. 394–95).

12 Unpublished interview by the author, Eindhoven, summer 2017.



Figure 2. Installation view of ‘The Game and the Players’, curated by Christiane Berndes and Rudi Fuchs, Van Abbemuseum, 2009.

tain sense, that was a logical consequence of his way of working. As he affirmed in 1978, ‘Partisanship is the issue in the art world. You are for something or you are against something. When you are for something you have to propagate it fervently, and the museum is an instrument for this.’¹³ Similarly, the current director, Charles Esche, has used a radical approach at the Van Abbemuseum, which is probably even more difficult for a wider public to accept than that of Fuchs. Actively engaging the public in a reconsideration of the entire historical process underlying the museum and the construction of its tools (i.e., the collection and the archive) is a difficult effort that takes time, to say the least. Franssen believed that having reactivated ‘Summer Display’ and having added the concomitant exhibition ‘Strange and Close’ by Esche to act in dialogue with it was a way to let differences between their respective visions emerge, ultimately to recontextualize Esche’s approach to the museum. In general, the whole project revealed many things about the strategies of the Van Abbemuseum, and was indeed a strategy in itself. For Esche, showing the exhibition ‘Strange and Close’

13 Cf. ‘1975–1987: Rudi Fuchs, Exhibition- and Acquisition Policy’, Van Abbemuseum, museum website <<https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/about-the-museum/building-and-history/1975-1987-rudi-fuchs/>> [accessed 11 December 2019].

next to one of the most important past displays of the collection was also a way to be confronted with Fuchs's past direction.

'Strange and Close' served as a counterpart to 'Repetition: Summer Display 1983' and showed how the geographical area that modern art covers has gradually become broader. As a way of linking the artworks and their story to the wider political, geographical, and economic context, Esche presented a reading of the history after 1989 (the year of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the Tiananmen Square protests in China, and the end of Apartheid in South Africa) and reflected on the effects this historical moment had on the society we live in and in the museum we visit today. The artwork was no longer autonomous and disjointed from its context, as it had been in Fuchs's reading of the collection and its neutral display, immersed in a smooth container, deprived of tensions and conflicts. 'Strange and Close' worked as both a counterpart and an answer to the twenty-six-year gap occurring between the two curatorial manifestations. It demonstrated a shift in collecting and telling: from the autonomous artwork to an entangled variety of objects, archives, (documentary) sources, and stories. The exhibition permitted audiences to think of Fuchs's exhibition in different ways than they would have when it was originally installed; it helped to reflect on how much things had been changing within and outside the museum environment.¹⁴

The past becomes past very quickly, and exhibitions could be a way to prove it. Museum archives could serve as precious tools to bring back the past in a different time and context, serving not as providers of facts but as complex organisms that autonomously bring back as many tales as the questions these tales address. Reactivating exhibitions should be a way to deconstruct the history of institutions and, therefore, the role of art and exhibitions themselves in helping to understand the evolution of society and its codes and rules. As shown in Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, new histories are continuously built out of fragments of past histories. The critical task consists in being able to change perspective anew each time — this is perhaps what makes them worth being told.

14 Cf. 'Strange and Close: Play Van Abbe', project presentation, Van Abbemuseum, museum website <<https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/strange-and-close-1/>> [accessed 16 December 2019].

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