The Flows of Space: Exhibition Design & Artistic Practice
Judith Barry and Ken Saylor respond to questions by Helmut Draxler

> Helmut Draxler: Exhibitions are seen more and more as a cultural value in itself. They do not just present works or positions, functioning thus as a pure background for the real event; instead they seem to generate their own forms and formats and to articulate certain cultural conditions within the framework of neoliberal economics and political needs for democratic legitimation. They even seem to define what could be considered the "real event," thus turning curators into the heroes of this age. Why do you think there are so many exhibitions nowadays, mostly taking place within a regular time frame as group exhibitions, thematic or historic exhibitions? And what makes exhibition design in this context necessary?

Ken Saylor: Historically, many disciplines claim exhibition design as a practice, from industrial designers to architects, to graphic designers, to artists and so on. We primarily see exhibition design as a spatial practice and not just an arrangement of objects and texts on walls. We interrogate and research the institutional space and the curatorial intent, the artists' intentions, the relationships among various artworks, the "making" of an exhibition, and most importantly the reception of the works. We use all of this information to produce a participatory experience for the viewer/audience where exhibition design functions as a verb.

In terms of how exhibitions are currently happening, we don't see the current situation so much as a rupture with older forms of exhibition-making but more as an acceleration of so-called global, neoliberal capital. The art, architecture, and design worlds have grown exponentially alongside these new spaces for capital—and especially in the emerging markets. But it had already begun in the late nineteen-eighties in Europe with the concept of the European City of Culture, and, slightly later, Manifesta in various cities, and the simultaneous rise of Biennales in Gwangju, Istanbul, and Johannesburg. And then these exhibitions spread throughout the "developing/emerging continents" as the uses for art, architecture, and design in relation to the generation of culture capital was deemed a valuable export. Simultaneously, as artists' practices transformed into more research-based practices, this meant that artists were willing to spend a considerable amount of time producing work that addresses aspects of these new conditions. For instance, Judith Barry's *Depense: A Museum of Irrevocable Loss* for Glasgow when it was City of Culture in 1990.

Judith Barry: Yes, that project was very much about exchange value. Which reminds us of Manuel Castells's 1989 concept from "the space of flows," which was his attempt to reconceptualize new forms of spatial arrangements in relation to emerging technological paradigms wrought by the internet/computer. Castells is an important reference for Ken in this exhibition, *to expose* ... In addition to producing simultaneous social contiguity without the necessity of territorial adjacency, these new conditions enabled the condensation of capital in very specific places, in emerging markets. These markets quickly recognized that cultural capital has exchange value, not in the older Marxist form where use value is derived based on the material properties of the commodity but in terms of the ways capital and culture are now able to circulate/associate in the digital realm. Exhibitions within emerging market regions are arguably a new form of statecraft. Obvious examples are in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Singapore. The desire of these states and their state-sponsored exhibitions to generate their own formats, as many do, is evidence of their sophisticated understanding of the relationship between nation building, hegemony, and flow of culture and capital. FN needed

K.S.: In many ways some of these curators have shed their traditional roles as scholars and connoisseurs and are now positioned in a new role as curatorial entrepreneurs or impresarios. Thus a new institutional voice emerges. These curators are charged with expressing the zeitgeist for that particular emerging market at a particular moment in time while simultaneously positioning that emerging market on the world stage. The failures, curatorial and otherwise, are revealing—the 2011 Sharjah Biennale, for example, where the director, Jack Persekian was fired due to the incendiary nature of an artist's work, a work which could not be assimilated into the so-called free-speech zone that the exhibition claimed to be producing. I don't think exhibition design would have aided in this particular situation, but I do wonder if a different spatial context could have produced different results. For example, if a real free zone could be legislated as part of the exhibition space.

J.B.: These curators have an impossible task: presenting an exhibition that has a resonant relationship with the local population, wowing the international/transnational art world, and producing enough good buzz so that the cultural event and the capital it generates translates into the economic realm. A single exhibition cannot do this but a sustained program utilizing state capital can—again Singapore comes to mind.

K.S.: Exhibition design or the lack of it often spells the success or failure of the reception of many exhibitions. And there are some notable exhibitions where the exhibition design

delivers, perhaps inadvertently, both the success and the failure simultaneously. For example, the 2013 Prada Foundation exhibition that premiered at the Venice Biennale, *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*. The attempt to reconstruct that exhibition in its original spatial configuration, and the impossibility of being able to reconstruct it convincingly and gather many of the original works, was a perhaps unwitting case study in how an exhibition might present its own success and failure for consideration simultaneously. Within many historical exhibitions and recreations, the inability of the recreation to adequately address the original social or political context makes it often impossible to recover and represent what was often most important within the original exhibition. Without some excavation of the historical moment in which the exhibition initially occurred, manifested itself, and was displayed, that particular history is further displaced and the exhibition often seems to produce a lack of affect.

J.B.: One reason for this is possibly that there is an assumed universality of the image/object, *sans* language, that the image or the visual can function as a common currency, across cultures, and without the need for translation. Of course, this is not the case—remember *Magicians de la Terre* (1989)—but the hybridity of the language that a work of art speaks—its ability to perform its own translation for acceptance/understanding by an assumed "univocal" art audience—is precisely what exhibition design is able to aid in making discernable across many different registers and in ways where the mechanics of how this becomes visible goes unnoticed by the majority of exhibition visitors.

K.S.: Exhibition design is precisely about attempting this translation. It does this by making the context of the artworks visible, by creating a dialogue among the artworks, the curator's thesis, and the space of the exhibition. And, it does it in such a way that for the viewer something happens; perhaps a moment of discovery occurs.

J.B.: As an artist, I employ a similar process as Ken describes above when I develop my artworks, and use the same methodology for designing exhibitions as well, including the collaborations with Ken. We both consider the language of architecture and design, alongside other relevant disciplines and their methodologies, part of our research process. Ultimately, all of this is factored into what we produce.

> H.D.: Both of you have been interested in exhibition design for a long time, coming, however, from different backgrounds. What motivated each of your approaches and what defined the common trajectory?

J.B.: Both K and I share art and architecture as a background. Initially, I worked in a large international corporate architecture firm when few opportunities for women in architecture existed. I also designed theme parties for a San Francisco hotel while I was in graduate school. Other influences include socially inflected art/architecture such as that by Archigram and the Independent Group, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, Aldo Rossi, Manfredo Tafuri, Friedrich Kiesler and the work of many others, including many artists. And my background in dance, art, cinema studies, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and literary theory led me to a research-based practice as a way to combine all my interests while producing installation as a way of spatializing a multiplicity of ideas as I alluded to above. Just as research-based practices blur the boundaries between disciplines in the social sciences and art, so too might exhibition design be seen as blurring the boundaries between artists, artworks, curators, and institutions into something that might be seen as transdisciplinary, where ideally new forms for thinking through the question of what art *is* and what the social space created through the exnibition is.

K.S.: I share many of the architecture references Judith mentions although my background is less academic and more practice-based, informed over the years by textual and visual research. I would have to personally add to the previously named references the work of the Russian avant-garde, Herbert Bayer, Richard Hamilton, the Situationist International, and, of course, being from Los Angeles, the work of Charles and Ray Eames and Craig Hodgetts.

I worked as an installer while I was a student for Cal Tech's Baxter Gallery. One notable exhibition, the Gilbert & Lila Silverman's Fluxus collection, was an early encounter I had with contemporary art where I realized that it was the design of the exhibition as well as the social aspects and the collaborations among the Fluxus artists that made me question many of my assumptions about contemporary art and about how exhibitions are mediated and collaborations are formed. As we know, Fluxus work is often unconventional, and what struck me was that the presentation was so rigorous and conventional that it made comprehensible both the individual artist's works and a historical art movement. It was presented as an archive and it was its ingenious classification and display system that made it legible. It was one of the first experiences I had with an exhibition where I realized that exhibitions are by definition mediated. An exhibition already has quotation marks around it as an activity because of its status as an exhibition.

I also collaborated with many of my artist colleagues on their exhibitions and began to understand how a multidisciplinary or alternative practice (as they were called at the time) might be possible in opposition to the formalism of my architecture education.

Another informative influence was a remarkable early eighties' lecture series while I was a student at Sci Arc that included numerous nineteen-seventies' Conceptual artists, all men of course. In looking back on this, I wish Yvonne Rainer or Denise Scott Brown had been there to take them all to task!

Increasingly a Conceptual and social framework for considering the questions that architecture raises became important to me. And that is when I moved to New York City in 1985 to attend the Whitney Independent Study Program. I think that I was the first architect that attended the program. While in NYC, I have designed numerous artists' lofts and workspaces, commercial gallery spaces, domestic interiors, and showrooms, each of which can be considered a space of display.

As I hope is clear, there are multiple trajectories where our interests coincide and in which we have strengthened our personal life together and our individual practices and collaborations through never-ending shared curiosity and conversation.

> H.D.: Would each of you see specific methodologies and skills at play within your practice as exhibition designers, or a more general conceptual or artistic approach towards a given problem or situation? And how could the relation between the specific skills and the conceptual approach be described?

J.B.: I may have a deeper involvement in theory as I spent years at UC Berkeley pursuing a PhD and then have extended some of those interests within my projects, artworks, and exhibition designs. I would say that we complement each other's skill sets while recognizing the differences in our approaches. One issue we share is an understanding that almost all contemporary artworks and exhibitions are some form of collaboration. We also both share an interest in narrative forms within architecture, and as Ken has remarked, exhibition design is an ideal space in which to produce narrative as it is difficult to get at this in architecture. We often try to tell a number of stories simultaneously when we work on an exhibition design.

K.S.: I bring much more experience in the fields of architecture and design. I worked in many offices as a student and young architect and have been practicing as an architect and designer for many years. An architectural methodology has proven to be very useful for both of us. An architectural problem is often developed through a number of stages, the first being program analysis and research. An architectural program might be said to describe the functional as well as the conceptual problems that need to be solved. This leads to concept and/or schematic design, where ideation from the research phase begins

to take form and become something tangible. This is the place where ideas are interrogated and where everything is under consideration. For an exhibition, conceptual design allows you to look at the forces that will shape the project by allowing the material conditions, the subject matter, the artworks, or other kinds of work to call the conventions of exhibit-making into question. Schematic design and concept development begin to describe the conditions more clearly as we begin to understand the needs of the program in relation to the solutions we are positing. These take many forms from sketches and diagrams to written analyses, to early study models and computer models.

J.B.: For us it is important to be able to work back and forth between the computer—which wants to make solutions for you—and the kind of thinking that a more traditional ideation allows for—as each uses a different set of skills.

K.S.: Design development is where you hone your solutions and fully develop the ideas, and where the project's direction becomes clear and solutions are fully developed. By the end of this stage, hopefully the project is fully developed. Finally, production drawings are produced that describe the fabrication methods necessary to actualize the work and aid the administrative function of on-site installation. Remembering of course that over the entirety of this process questions of control, mediation, and autonomy are at stake! Contemporary exhibition design is contingent, it is messy, and it relies on dialogue and negotiation between multiple actors, each of whom may claim agency ...

> H.D.: Do you understand your work in exhibition design as being part of an educational or otherwise functional contribution toward an exhibition, or as an element featuring content and meaning in itself?

J.B.: I don't see it as either/or, but both/and ... I try to construct as many points of access to the work as possible—whether in exhibition design or in my own work—such that there are numerous points of entry, and where as many meanings are teased out as possible, even if the sense of these meanings has to be somewhat hierarchical in an exhibition design as it serves the overt program of the exhibition itself. The aim in either an artwork or an exhibition is that the viewer will discover something new with each viewing and as such that the work or the exhibition can bear repeat viewings. And this experience of the exhibition can be both functional and educational, also because exhibition design functions through the accretion of meanings, in other words you construct the meanings as you engage with the work and as you put the works together, then in that way the exhibition design does become a thing in itself, hence it produces

content and meaning that exceeds the sum of its parts—and that might be latent in another context.

K.S.: We both are interested in aiding the curator and the artists in an exhibition by presenting their work in such a way that individual artworks are understood as completely as they can be within the context of the exhibition while also respecting the integrity of each individual artwork as a stand-alone artwork. Again, it is collaborative. Often this takes the form of an analysis of the works in an exhibition and the exhibition program brief as well. This is the methodology I am using in *to expose ...*

J.B.: We try to uncover other meanings not necessarily accounted for within the curator's exhibition concept itself. A kind of inter-textuality is continuously in play as we interrogate the curator, the artists, and the exhibition brief, the display methods for the works, and the exhibition space itself as well.

K.S.: A question I continuously raise with my collaborators while producing an exhibit design is: How might we further visualize the work, textualize the work, and spatialize the work to determine how it communicates? But also how well is the exhibition design communicating to a viewer in terms of making the relations between the works and the exhibition design clear and multivalent? We try to find the appropriate form for the individual works in terms of the way they are represented in the exhibition alongside the development of the space of the exhibition including the exhibition architecture. Along with an architectural method, I also perform a closer reading—or a meta-reading or a mis-reading of the work. All of this leads me to the final form that the work will take within the exhibition, both on the level of the exhibition design and in terms of how the level of detail, craftsmanship, and the making of the exhibition might be implemented. Hence the function of the exhibition format is to perform as a social and discursive medium, to both produce and share knowledge, and to simultaneously create a site for critical reflection.

J.B.: It is this constant interrogation as described above that produces the experience of the exhibition; an exhibition that would in most cases be a very different experience without exhibition design. I call the making of particular spaces for the viewer to occupy "subject positions." These are actual spaces that the viewer can discern within the exhibition that produce spatial encounters for the viewer and which allow the viewer to discover potential meanings while simultaneously spatializing concepts within the exhibition.

H.D.: How would you understand your relationship in exhibition design toward the curators, artists, sponsors, the staff and the workers, and finally the audiences? Are there different conditions, situations, or demands that make certain aspects of these relations peculiar and meaningful or stressful?

J.B.: As mentioned above, I think we both see exhibition design as first and foremost a collaborative process, but often it is the culture of the host institution that drives this process. Under Marcia Tucker, at the New Museum, we collectively and separately realized several exhibitions. The New Museum's approach in the past was extreme collaboration—everyone, including the security guards, was invited to discuss the exhibition and its design. Other institutions are much less collaborative. Staff and working relations are extremely important to us as, at minimum, they are the custodians of the exhibition and you want them to take ownership, so to speak, and to be invested in the success of the exhibition with its audiences.

K.S.: The social relations with the multiple hierarchies and actors that it requires to complete a project are, for me, the most pleasurable part of working publicly. The social engagement, exchange of knowledge, collaborative analysis, critique, and conversation in the planning and production process with people from a variety of viewpoints can often come together to produce remarkable outcomes and further dialogue. There is a lot to be said for working and thinking together if everyone understands that solitary thought and the time it takes for production are fully understood. At this accelerated moment, Skype is both a curse and a blessing!

In terms of addressing an audience, I hope that the work is performative as I have made a promise in the form of an exhibition design that implies an act or action ... along with the promise of the curatorial - that the work will deliver on the promise of an exhibition and all that that suggests.

J.B.: With collectors playing a greater and more acknowledged role within institutions, sometimes their desires become visible. My earliest experience of this was in the *Damaged Goods* exhibition, which I designed as my artist contribution to it. As an artist, I saw my role very much as collaborating with each of the artists in the exhibition. For Allan McCollum's *100 Perfect Vehicles*, I was able to convince Allan that Perfect Venicles would have a much greater presence in the exhibition if instead of being displayed on a big table in the back corner of the museum, that the "perfect vehicles"

could be used to activate the space as a procession of pedestals that fanned out into the main area of the exhibition—effectively providing the exhibition architecture throughout the space. In order to build these pedestals, Brian Wallis and I located a collector who agreed to pay for the construction of the twenty pedestals. With Justen Ladda, we received some funding from another collector for the construction of his pedestals as well.

> H.D.: How would you situate your practice in a historical perspective? As a special discipline within the history of design or as a particular artistic or even architectonic approach? To which traditions would you relate your own approach?

J.B.: I would situate my practice in all three of the categories you mention. I don't distinguish between these categories in terms of how I approach my work. On my CV I list exhibition designs the same way I list artworks.

Exhibition design has a long history, culturally speaking, if we look at the relationship of the procession to stagecraft and statecraft as early as the Greco/Roman period. And while this is most associated with the celebration of the spoils of war and triumph of religions, its importance should not be underestimated as it is still extremely visible, albeit in different built and media forms today, as I mentioned above around the issue of how cultural and other forms of capital now circulate.

K.S.: More recently, in art and especially in modern art, and until relatively recently in contemporary art, design was that which cannot be named even though design figures in all the major movements from Arts and Crafts onward ... Its presence is not enunciated as design. Yet when you "read" those movements visually, the design elements are just as important as the art elements ... In your article "Letting Loos(e): Institutional Critique and Design" you describe how design and architecture were separated from the Beaux-Arts tradition after World War II and this is something we both think would make an interesting book, especially considering the visibility of contemporary design within current art practices.

J.B.: Helmut, also in that same article you discussed Dan Graham's article on design, but we wondered if you knew about this series at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, in 1982 that was an entire year of programming devoted to architecture. Michael Newman's exhibition *Artists' Architecture* in that series was another instance where a curator deemed exhibition design important. I was invited into that show as a young artist

to design a context for artists' architecture showcasing British art and architecture. I had complete freedom to focus on whomever I wanted to include. I produced three peep-show architectural models: one on Archigram, one on the Independent Group, and another on the history of the ICA as an exhibition space. The latter, the ICA model, was interactive. LED lights lit up a variety of photo histories of some of the twenty-two exhibition spaces the ICA had created since its inception.

K.S.: In terms of architecture, design has always been subsumed to it, but at least it can be discussed as design and is clearly separated from architecture although often the boundaries between the two are blurred. This is arguably even more pronounced now as the computer has entered the equation especially as 3D and parametric modeling has become overtly formal and dominates visual design strategies within architecture. My own practice is always in transformation, given the subject matter that I am engaged with, the people and institutions that I work with, and an economy of means. Sometimes the sky is the limit and other times I am working subterraneanly ... A hybrid and meta-disciplinary practice come to mind and there are many historical examples across the disciplines of architecture, art, and design to be found.

> H.D.: How would you describe the specific qualities from these different traditions? Are they melting into one or is there still a tension palpable within the process of realization?

J.B.: For me the differences between art, architecture, and design are important to consider as the collapse between these disciplines renders the social experience of engaging with them, particularly in art exhibitions, less fruitful as much of the meanings (plural) that their differences would call up are subsumed when they are considered to be similar. While Theodor Adorno's concept of dialectics as a methodology might seem outdated to some, his ability to place several terms in dialogue as a meta-critique is still useful. I am reminded of this especially in thinking about this exhibition *to expose* ... as the time frame of this exhibition coincides with the collapse of the differences between high art and popular culture. And to some extent what was interesting about the differences between high art and popular culture has been forgotten. In "The Turn from the Turns" you discuss art "as a differentiated social sphere and also call for its negotiation based on specific discursive and exhibitionary conditions where mediated social space needs to be acknowledged as a term, and where art poses questions and not solutions, and where it is the space between art and various histories that must be explored." In this sense, we see exhibition design as a methodology in which the

exhibition designer can enact the differences among a variety of terms by providing the contexts in which to do so—where each set of terms is constantly being interrogated and where the viewer can discover particular relations among the terms as spatial relations. Exhibitions can stage these relationships and make them visible—as can installation art—as a form, which in my case is why I am drawn to installation as a form.

K.S.: That reminds me of the exhibition design for Josh Decter*'s "a/drift"*, one of the first exhibitions that showcased how completely the divide between popular culture and art had dissolved. Artists were using popular cultural materials as just another medium, like a raw material, and transforming it into something "new," except popular culture is not homogeneous and has very different material properties than most artist materials ... But that is off topic ...

In thinking specifically about the history of design in art as we were discussing earlier, it also seems to me that the history of art in relation to design has yet to be written as a history of different experiments, especially in relation to specific artists and movements —from Jugendstil, Art Nouveau, Futurism, Dada, and all the way up to the present; maybe such a history would go back even further, again to the Arts and Crafts and Aesthetic movements. While this history exists broadly in relation to the "industrial revolution" in its many guises and its effect on art practice and movements, it has not, to my knowledge, addressed the specificity of various artists' practices alongside what was happening simultaneously in architecture and design. So, two books, not just one, for you to write!

> H.D.: In the case of an exhibition about the late eighties/early nineties, the historical approach in exhibition-making meets the specific artistic forms of that time, which were—as in your own work—strongly oriented toward the exhibitionary as a field of practice. But also the discursive dimension became a major feature in artistic practices back then. Is there a possibility to make such conceptual shifts within certain practices visible within the exhibition design?

J.B.: Yes as mentioned above that is what we think exhibition design can do well. Your question also makes me realize how many of my earliest "art installation" projects and performances functioned as proto-exhibition designs. *Display: Museum of Signs* was a project for a shopping mall where the visitor was asked to imagine a different kind of space within the mall. The visitor was aided in doing this by a number of mnemonic devices that were strategically displayed throughout various sites in the mall. While it

was based on the notion of the memory theatre as a mnemonic device, it also incorporated contemporary thinking around questions of desire (psychoanalysis), the construction of subjectivity and gender, the simulacra, use and exchange value, and the simultaneity of shared social space. *Cup/Couch*, while ostensibly a performance, was a series of twenty propositions about the relationship between metaphor and metonymy (rhetoric) and condensation and displacement (psychoanalysis). It staged short vignettes centered on the question: What do objects want? In looking through my *Damaged Goods* archive for this exhibition, I realized how much of my thinking from these two projects in particular, and other early projects as well, informed the exhibition strategies I used for designing *Damaged Goods*.

K.S.: In all of our exhibition design projects and in particular my work from the last several years, the social, the discursive, and what you have termed the "exhibitionary" have all been articulated and sometimes become hybrid forms of display, and discursive and social space, in one way or another. We have often proclaimed that the design of the exhibition is a discursive and/or social space as one of the strategies of our exhibitions . Many of the works in *to expose* ... are research-based, context or site specific responses to specific historical conditions, and require a textual or discursive framework for their reception and comprehension. Many of the artists considered reframing the works for this new situation while others opted to present the work in other ways; as documentation, as a residual object or souvenir from a previous incarnation, or as an object that entered the market and ended up in the museum. We hope that the exhibition design questions each of these strategies while simultaneously displaying textual and discursive references and also that the codification system that refers each work to a library/archive/index contained within the exhibition itself provokes our audience to engage with this exhibition both discursively and spatially. Additionally, throughout the exhibition there are also multiple opportunities to sit down and have a conversation either with an artwork or with other visitors.

> H.D.: When you started exhibition design as an artistic or architectonic practice this approach was fairly new. Nowadays many exhibitions at least try to integrate certain elements of that approach into their trajectories. Do you feel that the context for your work has changed and do you feel the need to react toward this change?

J.B.: I agree that those issues are more broadly understood, and of course research-based practices are also much more prevalent. I am reminded of Hal Foster's 1996 book *Return*

of the Real and Miwon Kwon's 1997 article in volume 80 of *October*, "One Place after Another," and even some of Claire Bishop's more recent writing on installation art ... Each author, in different ways, problematized artists' practices in relationship to their use of disciplines not usually deemed acceptable as part of an artist's purvey.

Hence, I think it is important to mention that it is not just that architecture and design are better known within the art world but also that extra-artistic (including design) disciplines are now more accepted additions to art practices, and vice versa, to exhibition designs as well — such that a successful exhibition (produced through the exhibition design and making use of many disciplines) is able to construct new associations where the visitor learns and/or sees something that they would not necessarily discover if the exhibition had not been designed.

K.S.: Within the context of contemporary art, exhibition design remains mostly suppressed; as the neutral, "white cube" gallery continues to claim its purity and distance from the market or politics, exhibition design often appears as an agent of marketing, branding, or the much-maligned mediation of elite culture for general audiences. Exhibition design departments exist within major institutions, but their role often seems relegated to solving practical and technical questions rather than developing new forms or spaces of display. We have absorbed questions of exhibition design and display within our own work in order to challenge the conventions of art institutions and the conventions of spectatorship in hopefully meaningful ways.

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