

Dissenting Spaces

'Space: That which is not looked at through a key hole, not through an open door. Space does not exist for the eye only: it is not a picture; one wants to live in it.'

El Lissitzky, *Proun Space* 1923

In his manifesto for the *Proun Space* installation at the Great Berlin Art Exhibition of 1923, El Lissitzky related his function as an exhibition designer to his artistic practice and to his desire, in the Proun series, to establish an 'interchange station between painting and architecture ...to treat canvas and wooden board as a building site.' From these early investigations (later somewhat transformed by the Revolution), Lissitzky developed an approach to exhibition design that sought to problematize the role of the spectator, to create 'by means of design' an active participation rather than a passive viewing.

In one of his most famous exhibition designs - the *Demonstration Room* for the International Art Exhibition in Hannover and Dresden in 1926 - Lissitzky was faced with the problem of how to display an overwhelming amount of work in a rather small and intimate space. His solution involved the use of thin wooden strips attached to the wall at 90° angles and in vertical rows; these strips were painted white on one side and black on the other and mounted against a grey wall. From one vantage the wall appeared white, from the other side it appeared black, and when viewed from the front it seemed to be grey. Thus, according to Lissitzky, the artworks were given a triple life. In addition, the paintings were double hung on a movable panel system so that while one of the two was visible, the other could be partially seen through the perforations of the sliding plate. In this way Lissitzky claimed to

have achieved a solution whereby the specially designed room could accommodate one and a half times as many works as a conventional room. At the same time, only half of the works could be seen at any one time.

We might compare Lissitzky's method to that other exhibition/display system which reached its apogee in the 1920s: the life-size diorama. Most notoriously instituted in the Museum of Natural History, New York, the diorama is perhaps best characterized by Carl Akeley's famous gorilla group diorama completed in 1926. There the spectacle itself (in this case the spectacle of 'nature' and 'wildlife') must be duplicated and recreated in such a way that the viewer might experience simultaneously the power of domination as well as the surrender of belief. At the same time, the quest for greater and greater versimilitude had already culminated in the development of the cinema apparatuses, so that in one sense at least the dioramas of the Museum of Natural History point to a relative loss of power instilled in the object.

Previously, the Victorian era - the historical juncture of both industrialization and psychoanalysis - had produced a fetishization of the domestic object leading to the design of specific cabinets enclosed in glass for display. But the exotic and fetishized objects, often collected from foreign lands, also referred to another tradition of display: the spoils of war. In 'Greco-Roman' times, displaying what had been taken in conquest had taken on various meanings since 'bounty' was exhibited not only to nobility, but also to commoners and slaves. Those who lined the streets gazed in awe at power conquered, brought home through possession, and served up as symbolic consumption. This dramatic exposition of the conquered object, surely the beginning of fetishism as developed in Freud's reworking of the myth, leads to a reconsideration of possession: as in, who is possessed and who is not. The numinous object lies in waiting, ready to grab hold, to snare, anyone who will dare to look. Medusa's head or Eurydice or the Gilded Calf: one can come close only to transgress.

But possession can take another form. That of a refusal or denial as in the case of functionalist design. Most utopian movements in design have tried to strip the object of its symbolic powers, as though the power of utility could somehow restrain the object's power over us. But, as Robert Venturi points out, functionalism was only symbolically functional: 'It represented function more than resulted from function.' Exhibition design, particularly in relation to objects, is deeply symbolic - it can rest on no other ground.

So we have the two poles of exhibition design: the theatrical, as in Akeley's

gorilla group diorama: and the ideological, as in the constructivist *Demonstration Room* by Lissitzky. Both reflect a desire to present situations in which the viewer is an active participant in the exhibition, and as Benjamin Buchloh points out, historically this incorporation of the viewer was symptomatic not only of a crisis in the representation(s) of the modernist paradigm, but also a crisis of audience relations 'from which legitimation was only to be obtained by a re-definition of its relations with the new urban masses and their cultural demands.'

Increasingly, these cultural demands were resolved under the sway of another kind of exhibition design, one designed not simply for display, but specifically for consumption, to cause an active response in the consumer, to create an exchange. This is the situation of the retail store. For it is in these spaces, in which one lives and works and through whose media apparatuses one is enculturated, that we find the congruence of the theatrical and the ideological, to my way of thinking, the culmination of exhibition design.

To develop this practice to be something other than just a way to move the eye through space, to make the spectator actually inhabit the space, Lissitzky had to produce an architectural effect. But for Lissitzky this was only an effect (as Buchloh notes, a shift in the perceptual apparatus), without a call to action, without a change in the social institution itself.

On the other hand, Maurice Blanchot, writing in *L'Espace*, declaims that space is discontinuous—the product of the engagements of forces, the void through which threatening gestures must be exchanged. Yet all resistance does not necessarily occur in space; rather it takes place through the agency of discourses that mark, channel, and position the body through and in other perspectives (read as representational systems). One challenge, then is to confront the supremacy of the eye/I (no accident that homonym in English!).

How to force a confrontation? If architecture embodies our social relations, then presentational forms (including staging and lighting devices from the theatre, opera and Las Vegas, as well as more obvious museological techniques) must refer to ways in which we wish to experience these relations. One confrontational tactic yet to be tried is the subversion of the wish for closure, possession, and gratification. One way to do this might be to make threatening the assumed neutrality of the exhibition space itself.

This need not be yet another call for 'the end of art' (as we know it) but more a further acknowledgement of the ways in which, to paraphrase Tony Smith's remarks at the beginning of 'Minimalism', 'it is the experience that is important. An

experience that is mapped out, but not socially recognised.' Minimalism allowed for the spatialisation of experience. Numerous other contemporary discourses produce different subjects within spaces that are ideologically coded. In exhibition and museum design, it is precisely these relations that need further elaboration. Given these conditions, the exhibition becomes the set for a play with objects describing various possible subject positions and making the viewer spatially as well as visually aware.

Damaged Goods, 1986
Exhibition at New Museum, New York

