

QUESTIONING EXHIBIT DISPLAY

Theories, Forms, Perspectives

This book presents the first scientific outcomes of a project aimed at scrutinizing the forms and meanings of exhibition systems from the perspective of display. Due to its inherently cross-disciplinary nature, the display device is a negotiation ground resistant to a univocal approach, transforming it into a strategic agent of crisis for historical, theoretical, and project disciplines.

The objective of this book is to reassess the concept of "expographie" as a suitable cross-disciplinary, by employing the investigative approach of display to intersect various perspectives. Alongside historical and theoretical disciplines, the fields of design, architecture, and exhibit design are involved.

Starting from case studies and methodological inquiries, the essays in this volume revolve around four thematic constellations — Experience, Memory, Engagement, Display in action — where pivotal and, in our view, open points of the display debate converge.

With the contributions of:

Roberta ALBIERO, Fabrizia BANDI, Giampiero BOSONI, Fiorella BULEGATO, Francesca CASTELLANI, Bernadette DUFRÉNE, Mario FARINA, Antonella GALLO, Jérôme GLICENSTEIN, Carlo GRASSI, Anna MAZZANTI, Angela MENGONI, Stefano MUDU, Roberto PINTO, Paul RASSE, Clarissa RICCI, Camilla SALVANESCHI, Marco SCOTTI, Alessandra VACCARI, Angela VETTESSE, Francesca ZANELLA, Stefania ZULIANI.



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F. CASTELLANI, J. GLICENSTEIN, F. ZANELLA



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Edited by

FRANCESCA CASTELLANI
JÉRÔME GLICENSTEIN
FRANCESCA ZANELLA



Questioning Exhibit Display

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RESEARCH GROUP ON “STAGING EXHIBIT DISPLAY”:

Roberta Albiero, Cristina Baldacci, Fiorella Bulegato, Francesca Castellani, Mario Farina, Antonella Gallo, Carlo Grassi, Angela Mengoni, Clarissa Ricci, Marco Scotti, Alessandra Vaccari, Angela Vettese, Francesca Zanella



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COVER ILLUSTRATION: Vittorio Gregotti, Giotto Stoppino, Peppo Brivio, Ludovico Meneghetti, *Caleidoscopio*, XIII Triennale di Milano, 1964. Photo by Giorgio Casali, credits: Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio Progetti – Fondo Giorgio Casali.

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Edited by
FRANCESCA CASTELLANI, JÉRÔME GLICENSTEIN,
FRANCESCA ZANELLA

QUESTIONING EXHIBIT DISPLAY

THEORIES, FORMS, PERSPECTIVES

INTERDISCIPLINARITY
AMONG THE LOGICS OF DISPLAYING.
STAGING AS AN INTERACTION
BETWEEN HISTORICAL
AND DESIGN APPROACHES

Anna Mazzanti

Keywords: Staging; Venice Biennale; Interdisciplinarity; Design.

Abstract: Drawing on personal experience as an art historian actively engaged with exhibition designers, both in the realms of research and metaprojective reflection, as well as in teaching, I aim in this paper to explore potential logics of shared understanding and delimitation between synergistic viewpoints. Examining sources as instruments of interdisciplinary connection, I will focus on historical cases within the context of biennial exhibitions, in line with my areas of expertise and research focus, spanning from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s.

This essay aims to reflect on and account for the effects of interdisciplinary staging practices that historical expertise offers to designers in training. What is the potential of the dialogue established between art and design? What transmission values are created, what methodological reflections emerge in order to outline the roles, their limits and the points of dialogue and interference between the competences of the curator and the exhibition designer? What changes are engendered in the practice of art history through this dialogue and the choice of research topics? Starting from these questions, I will discuss here an interdisciplinary methodological approach, as well as a presentation of the research and didactic strategies I have adopted.

Before being hired at the Politecnico di Milano (2009), I had had the opportunity to study certain environments of life, creation, and exhibition of artists. The events of the research topics were then followed by such incursions, from a historical perspective, into the sphere of museography and the study of spaces.

In these pages, I would like to return in particular to the themes of two research projects that have been activated for some time within the framework of the Venice Biennale.

I will focus on two different view of the Venice Biennale that refer to different historical moments: the origin of the international exhibition in the nineteenth century and the moment of the new course inaugurated by the 1976 Biennale. I have reconsidered both themes from the point of view of the intentions underlying the exhibition, in the light of the tools acquired through interdisciplinary experience gained in a mixed research and teaching environment.

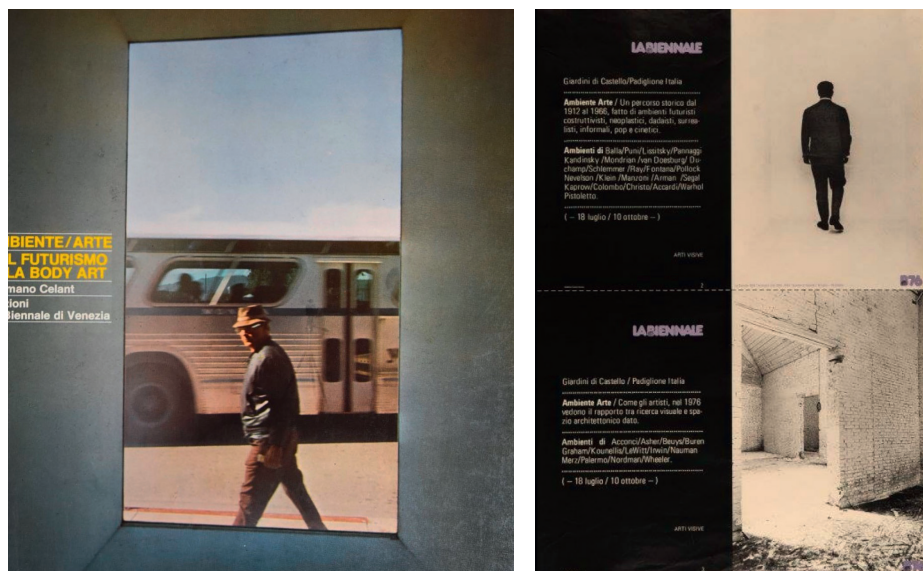
I therefore refer to the nineteenth-century debate on the exhibition model that the nascent Biennale was to adopt, a topic to which numerous studies have been devoted (Lamberti, 1985, 1995; Donzello, 1987; Dal Canton, 1995; Del Puppo, 1995; Martini & Martini, 2011; Mazzanti, 2014, 2017; Romanelli,

1995, 2005; Tavinor, 2021), rehabilitating an origin with a complex process that cannot be generically homologated to the Salon model.

Since then, the phase of renewal that the Biennale institution underwent—after passing through and being interrupted by two world wars, the cultural-political regime, the postwar debate between abstraction and figuration, the affirmation of international trends—was in the mid-1970s when exhibition and curatorial practices were revolutionized with the abandonment of traditional exhibition canons, a symptomatic effect of a general sociocultural change.

The 1976 Biennale as a litmus test, reflected a crucial moment of rupture that had been taking place since the end of the sixties, with the beginning of an era of transition from the cultural militancy of participatory and shared processes, even contradictory ones, to the seeds of cultural revisions introduced in the following decade, the eighties (Crispolti, 1994).

This edition therefore welcomed artistic expressions and exhibition models and staging systems, sometimes dichotomous, as in the case of the two adjacent exhibitions in the Central Pavilion. They also partly shared the title through the common word *Ambiente* (Environment). *Ambiente come sociale* was the anthology of site-specific projects of urban and social engagement selected by Enrico Crispolti and reflected in original documentation (Catenacci, 2015; Tanga, 2020). Set up in four large rooms accessible through a secondary entrance to the pavilion, half hidden in a small alley, it found an ideal dialogue with the participatory actions extended to the city outside the Giardini. The prodromes of a more individualistic season, introspective and self-referential, were reflected in the curatorial choices of Germano Celant, who was entrusted with the largest exhibition in the pavilion, *Ambiente/Arte: from Futurism to Body Art*.



Ambiente/Arte. Dal Futurismo alla Body Art edited by Germano Celant.
The Biennale of Venice 1976. Catalogue and poster cover.

Twenty large rooms in the historical section revived former artistic exhibition spaces with the intention of recreating their original aura. Of these, in thirteen, stripped of all superficiality and even of plaster, where the artists ‘sampled’ certain contemporary trends supported by the curator through environmental works specially created in situ (Martini, 2018, 2021; Acocella, 2017). It thus became the “canonical exhibition, the first to historicize installation art” (Martini, 2018, p. 297).

As Altshuler (2010, p. 22) noted, the responsibility for a curatorial message, which Szeemann had already expressed in *When Attitudes Become Form* in 1969 and in *documenta 5* in 1972, took shape in “the increasingly central role of the curator as creative participant” (Altshuler, 1994, p. 255).

Crispolti’s militant stance, while deviating from such curatorial processes, nevertheless has an inherent predisposition to curatorial responsibility and represents an equally important

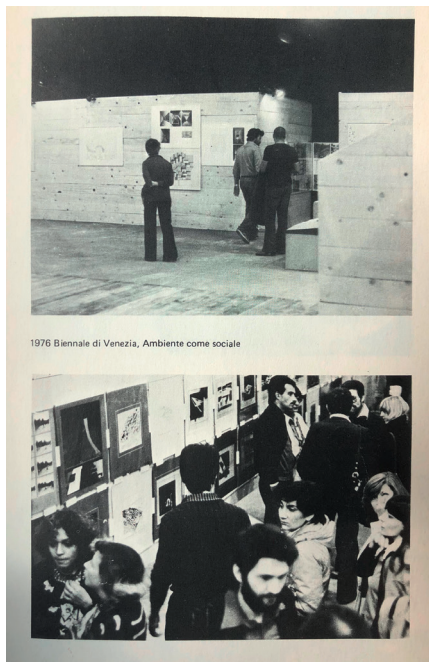
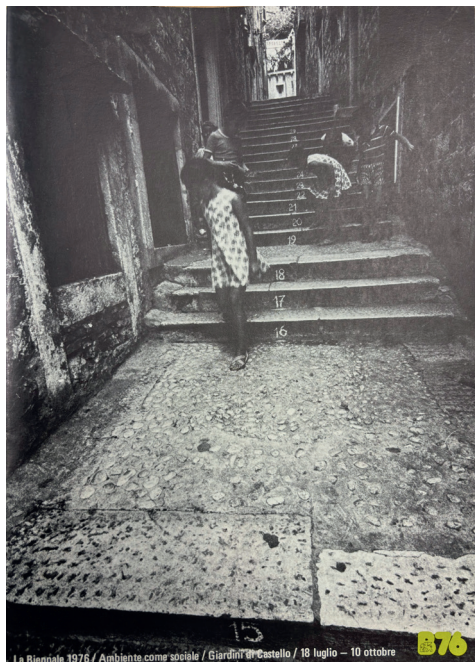
early model, as Tanga observed: curatorial practice as institutionalized criticism¹ (Tanga, 2020, p. 64), which in turn canonizes a different kind of dynamic and flexible exhibition design. The historical photographs in *Ambiente come sociale* return the image of a plural space in which the behavior of the visitors is consequently very different from that of individuals engaged in an experiential relationship with the work (Celant).

The visitors were thus participants in an open laboratory of ideas in which the five thematic ‘hypotheses’ into which Crispolti had divided the projects, were selected and documented in a wide range of materials: maquettes, videotapes, projects, photographic sequences, audio recordings, interviews, and various communication products. They were not arranged in a fixed, linear, narrative sequence², but distributed in an adaptable manner in the installation designed by Ettore Sottsass with his Finnish assistant, Ulla Salovaara, using movable walls made of natural wood, tables, supports, and video stations that could be easily moved as needed. These look like the forerunners of many sustainable solutions that are frequently adopted today. The debate area, osmotic to the exhibition environment, perfectly reflected Crispolti’s interest in of discussion: “In this way, I intend to bring the problem and the experiences within the context of the Biennale in the midst of their debate, so as to allow the Biennale itself to become an instrument of real and creative presence in the current socio-cultural debate,” he wrote in *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale* (Crispolti, 1977, pp. 309-310). “In fact, the

1. The democratic intention of the Biennale chaired by Carlo Ripa di Meana led to Crispolti’s inclusion in the visual arts commission headed by architect Vittorio Gregotti a few months before the opening of the exhibition. See Regorda, 2004, p. 85; Tanga, 2020.

2. Ivi, pp. 64-65, 69-70. Tanga, observing the floor plans kept in the Crispolti Archive, cites the metaphor of the concentric spiral and an information ring as the generative matrix of the layout of the first room, with the return of more immersive themes in the second room through a television circuit.

exhibited contents were directly integrated into the concrete and continuous debate as a never-ending dynamic extension of the projects Crispolti curated and that he used to call “open documentation”³.



Ambiente come sociale by Enrico Crispolti. The Biennale of Venice 1976. Catalogue cover.
Two views of the rooms set up by Ettore Sottsass.

Visitors found themselves actors in the problematic fluidity of “hypotheses,” with the possibility of reproducing and thus acquiring the documents on display using the photocopier in Room 3, the “study room,” and thus generating a personalized

3. The debates and meetings organized during the Biennale were recorded and transcribed with the idea of producing a volume that remains unpublished.

catalogue⁴. This activity in the context of the exhibition reflects the definition of *curatore-operatore culturale*, which embodies Crispolti and Mino Trafeli's definition of their role as curators-animators-activators. Together, they had been the driving force behind *Volterra 73*, and on the model of a similar laboratory cell, Crispolti then supported Ico Parisi's utopian experience *Operazione Arcevia: ipotesi di comunità esistenziale*, including it among the exemplary projects of *Ambiente come sociale* at the Biennale, without having yet lost hope of maturing into concrete and corrective developments (Mazzanti, 2024).

Although it is not an absolute assumption, it is nevertheless confirmed that "art history is written by exhibitions," especially those of long duration such as the Venice Biennale, which can significantly represent this art history (Castellani, 2018) through the dialogue between artists, organizers, curators, audiences, and actors who find a point of contact in the narrative devices of the exhibition.

In order to retrace these stories, it is essential to know how to interrogate the archival repository of news, physical traces, clues. It is no coincidence that this outstanding moment of the 1976 Biennale also marked the birth of the Biennale's Historical Archive, ASAC, at Ca' Corner della Regina (Romanelli, 2005; Mazzanti, 2024). A line of research aimed at the linguistic value of the archive and its internal narrative systems, reminds us how much this essential source represents a universe of indications and an organism with its own internal expository logic to be read, and how much this can contain an unexpected potential of information (see Zanella in this volume), from creation to mediation, from curatorship to staging. Writings, projects, photographs are indispensable sources for historical research, as well as for layout and cross-referencing with satellite archives. My

4. This practice, as Crispolti recalled, was unfortunately often prevented by the complicated functioning of the equipment of the time.

interdisciplinary work and cross-disciplinary teaching have increasingly led me to consider these parallel and sometimes coinciding practices. Since the 1970s, however, exhibition design has come under the control of the curator as a practice absorbed by the curator himself, who increasingly plays the role of *curator-as-author* or *curator-as-artist*, according to what we might call the Harald Szeemann model, as well as cultural operator, as we have seen in the case of Crispolti, or artist in the position of artist-curator. Today, the Fondazione Prada is engaged with this hybrid concept, presenting, for example, *L'image volée* by Thomas Demand (2016), or *The Spitzmaus Sarcophagus and Other Treasures*, an exhibition project conceived by the artist and film director Wes Anderson with his graphic designer wife Juman Malouf.

Another example is the complex re-enactment of *Live in your head. When attitudes become form* (2013) at Ca' Corner della Regina, in the Venetian headquarters of Fondazione Prada. Celant's collaboration with Rem Koolhaas and Demand, in a provocative appropriative resemblance to Szeemaa's historical innovative model, explored the unrepeatability of the situation, the choice of "re-enacting just one small vector of that complex relational machine by Szeemann: space" (Gravano, 2013).

From this point of view, between theory and design practices applied to the valorization of contemporary art, my meta-projective reflections matured during the Design Workshop for Exhibitions and the Contemporary Art course. The goals were to investigate the role of the curator and exhibition designer in their possible relationships and contamination of roles, understanding the exhibition "*comme langage et comme dispositif*" (Glicenstein, 2009; Poinot, 2009).

The interdisciplinary approach allows students to explore new exhibition systems measured by an ethic of transversal roles, in order to exhibit their own curatorial idea, according to a kind of "Szeemann model." This inevitably adds interpretative content to the works in the exhibition, to the

point of provoking “changes in the status of artworks,” and challenging the mediation of content that is difficult to grasp.

This leads to the creation of behavioral guidelines for students to test their resilience in a harmonious installation, in close dialogue with the thought that drives it, fully respectful of the work and at the same time capable of enriching it with meaning, expressive possibilities or aesthetic revelations (Trocchianesi & Mazzanti *et al.*, 2021).

This aspect constitutes an essential starting point that a new exhibition designer must be clearly aware of, but the acquisition of this process, of acting with critical judgment, leads to the recognition of the ‘improper actions’ of curatorial and exhibition appropriation of works and their inherent messages and meanings, at the ambiguous limits of theft. It leads us to understand the extent to which the effective, propositional and prospective holding of the curatorial structure, and the content that the exhibition introduces, are the result of an intense and “active” dialogue with contemporary works and artists, and thus present similar design challenges to those of exhibition spaces. Understanding the different tasks is crucial to shaping the responsibility and awareness of the roles of curator, exhibition designer, and storyteller of cultural heritage.

The “Szeemann method” is conducive to the maturation of this knowledge, to the observation of the status of *curator-author* of which he was a forerunner, with his attitude not as a writer, nor as a critic or historian, but as a *curator-arranger*. He presents interesting practices of reflection for the exhibition designer, without prejudice to the curatorial identity in its poetic intention of a vision of art capable of creating synergy with artists and thus renewing a vision of the world as a generative matrix (Stazzone, 2019, p. 16).

To this end, the “exhibition as a means of expression” recognized by Szeemann (Ivi, p. 19) represents a series of design considerations that are also enlightening for the designer, who tries his hand at reflecting on attitudes, roles, experimenting with languages and exhibition scenarios, and with

new exhibition systems prompted by the content identified during the educational workshop.

The pedagogical intention is therefore to learn to consider the setting never as an end in itself, but as an instrument of dialogue between the works and the space, and between the works themselves, guaranteeing adequate distances to encourage a sensorial and intuitive perception of art and the “feeling of space” (Szeemann, 1981, p. 20) thus aiming at the “creation of an atmosphere,” a narrative choice that measures the exhibition environment, visualizing otherwise invisible or integrative relationships, as it happens in the famous settings created by Szeemann: atmospheric environments, capable of broadening the perception of properly lit works.

It should be remembered that the parameters of the work/space relationship are the dominant exhibition theme that artists of the late nineteenth century were already questioning, albeit in a very different historical context, in the context of the debate on the model to follow for the early Biennale.

Thus, the generative matrix of exhibitions depends on curatorial attitudes that over time have manifested themselves over time as models, albeit very different ones—Szeemann, Crispolti, Celant, Obrist....

All of them show a homogeneous process in establishing correspondences by entering into the dynamics of shared reflection with the designer (when this is foreseen), seeking a necessary dialogue as if “the exhibition space were traversed by the flow of discourses” (Stazzone, 2019, p. 21). Another important and useful aspect of the analysis is represented by the content of the exhibition, ranging from these works to the site-specific ones, to the consistency of heterogeneous materials, artifacts, objects, documents, on which, as it has been said, the Biennale has been the first to bet since 1976, when the ASAC was founded.

The submerged potential of archives, the recognized value of the document are among the foundations of multiple curatorial practices without losing the historical value of

the document. According to Hans Ulrich Obrist (2014), this is part of the generative model that characterizes first and foremost the physiognomy of artists' environments, but also the exhibition system cherished by many curators, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. From Szeemaa to Schwartz, many have recognized this as a possible model, a vision of an autonomous, self-sufficient micro-universe.

The exploration and consideration of context is a prerequisite for curatorial construction according to the logic of interpretation and exchange with the work in its identity and as a code of conduct shared with exhibition practices.

For both disciplines—in my own teaching experience—this exercise becomes a generative practice of new narrative exhibitions that enrich the practices of exhibition design, as well as opening unexpected scenarios for the analysis of the contents to be exhibited.

Each year, the theme of the course has presented challenges and questions. Some of these are summarized below, such as the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the *genius loci*, and the site-specific.

Art and its inhabitants. Artistic imaginaries between dwelling and installation is the title of an exhibition theme that explored possible narrative presentations of artistic living and working spaces, from artists' homes to ateliers, sometimes already musealized, eloquent, and privileged environments that can be considered as three-dimensional portraits of the authors and models of analysis, prompting new exhibition stagings and transposing them into temporary settings.

How do we recreate the memory of a particular place, such as the artist's studio and/or home, when it exists elsewhere, or only its memory and documentation remain? In part, the theme of exhibition reenactment comes into play. It is not, however, a matter of mere reconstruction, of reproduction, but of the metaphorical reconfiguration of environments charged with memory, where an atmosphere lives and pulsates, keeping alive the reflection of those who lived and practiced

in the space. Understanding this aura, which then guides the experimentation of exhibition design, is essential.

This theme emerged from the focus of the basic research project D.E.SY acronym for Designing Enhancement Strategies and Exhibit SYstems for the Italian House Museums and Studios (Bosoni & Lecce, 2019; Capurro, Mazzanti & Spagnoli, 2019; Mazzanti, 2019), for which I was responsible and which involved interdisciplinary competences: history, museology, exhibition design, cultural heritage, digital studies.

After the initial mapping phase to identify model cases, which were then subjected to a taxonomic analysis according to recurring features, guidelines for valorization were studied. The associated educational workshop experimented with narrative hypotheses of temporary installations dedicated to the ateliers of certain sculptors and artists (Leonilde Carabba, Salvatore Fiume, Mario Negri, Ludovico Pogliaghi, Arnaldo Pomodoro) and to some designers (Fornasetti), with small exhibitions shaping micro-projects of in situ valorization within a circuit of Milanese stages, partly associated with *Museocity*⁵ (2019).

The *Atelier natura viva* was a trilogy of small exhibitions dedicated to photographs kept in the archives of exhibitions venues in Milan: Fondazione Franco Albini, Fondazione Achille Castiglioni, and the Studio Mario Negri.

The photographs generate integrated narratives that seek an organic relationship with the different exhibition metaphor chosen from place to place. At the Fondazione Albini, it was the metaphor of the frame that guided the layout in accordance with the “diaphragmatic” peculiarities of the famous architect; the unexpected gaze constituted the narrative yardstick for the photographic narrative that, like temporal telescopes, was

5. Association that promotes the enhancement of the Milanese museum network, the synergy between cultural institutions and encourages the opening of extraordinary cultural venues. <<https://www.museocity.it>>.



Atelier natura viva Museumcity, Milano 2019. From left to right:
Franco Albini Foundation, The Mario Negri studio, Achille Castiglioni Foundation.

inherent in the environmental stratification of the paroxysm of objects at the Studio Castiglioni. In the studio of sculptor Mario Negri, the metaphor of the intimate retrospective introduced a journey through time and space of the artist's production, opening up journeys through the various studios inhabited by the sculptor over the course of his activity, through the black-and-white photographic lens of two photographers, Paolo Monti and Arno Hammacher, both close friends of Negri. The photographic insights were fully integrated into the studio, offering keys for reading and access, like a Chinese box, to the hidden meanings of space. The fruits of the project can be found in various publications, awaiting the imminent realization of a systematic and organic publication that takes into account the entire project.

Other exhibition design themes in the university workshops focused on the relationship between art and science, travel as interpreted by artists and designers from various metaphorical angles, such as memory, souvenir, reportage and storytelling, analyzing potential narrative tools such as maps and itineraries, symbolic objects, visual and written diaries. The theme of art and nature, on the other hand, encompassed several focus points, such as the Anthropocene, primary elements,

aesthetics encouraging the designer's virtuous approach to the environment.

This was also the opportunity to outline a mapping of the emerging characteristics of the "natural cube," or nature as a substitute for the white cube, a living container characterized by the spatiotemporal dimension. We analyzed the enhancement of the environmental context through the coexistence of art and nature, integration, the metaphor of the landscape as a theater to represent the visitor's cultural experience, nature as genius loci and source of knowledge and experience, and the role of the mediating artist. The resulting analysis helped to define the research topic for a future workshop, *AMBIENT-AZIONI: exhibiting environmental art. Exhibition narratives from 'place' to 'out-of-place'*.

In this case, the installation design strategy focused on site-specific works in relation to a specific environment that was an integral part of them. This favored the study of mediation processes that find an answer to fundamental questions about the immobility of the exhibition contents, which were presented in a narrative that best respected their meanings, intentions, and perceptions.

The students were therefore given tools to deepen their understanding of the artistic subject in order to identify their own catalogue of contents and points of view, and to develop valid narrative inventions for staging them, from forms of conscious and partial "reconstruction" to the display of documentation, analogue or digital material; to the generation of alternative solutions resulting from a mixed (Szeemannian) designer-curator approach; to the envisaging of direct intervention with the artists and new allusive and mnemonic fertility models, as the recent history of curating shows. The poetics inherent in the site-specific works give rise to a dialogue of expansion: analogue restitutions of a poetics of integration, reproduced by other means and with suggestive content. In this case, particular attention was paid to the resource of sound design, the object of the fundamental research to which the course was linked.

In conclusion, this interdisciplinary exercise offers art historians and critics the opportunity to reconsider the neuralgic centrality of the exhibition since the birth of the Biennale, promoted by the philanthropic paternalism of the progressive political class to the diatribes on staging strategy that should have been adopted and, therefore, on the number of works it could contain. This could have been a large and democratic number, or rather a more elitist choice for the environmental care of the content exhibited, the harmonious sequencing and the attention to lighting, all essential for the correct enjoyment of many artistic trends, from Divisionism to late international Impressionism and Symbolism.

To counteract the effect of a uniform exhibition or commercial gallery so uninteresting as to be inaccessible, filled to the brim with works in an unruly hanging of styles and genres haphazardly juxtaposed according to prevailing market demands (Ricci & Tavinor, 2021; Tavinor, 2021), it was necessary to find an alternative. Proposals were adopted, albeit moderate ones, in dialogue with international secessionist visions through which glimmers of reflection on the exhibition methods of the Biennale, then at the height of its international fashion and power, were opened up, in heated discussion within the promotion and acquisition committees (Del Puppo, 1995; Mazzanti, 2017).

Due to space constraints that I have already exceeded, it is not possible here to engage in further reflections on the subject of exhibition display in this context. In this text, I have offered here some indications of an ongoing process of historical reflection as applied to the narrative strategies of the exhibition.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ROBERTA ALBIERO is an architect and Associate Professor in Architectural and Urban Composition at the Università Iuav di Venezia. She is coordinator of the Master's program in Architecture and lecturer at the Allestire Esporre Abitare 1 laboratory and the WAVE summer workshops. She has given lectures, conferences, and workshops at Italian and foreign universities. She is co-author of the book *João Luis Carrilho da Graça. Opere e Progetti* (with R. Simone, Electa, 2003) and numerous studies on twentieth-century Italian architecture, including *Adalberto Libera. Palazzo della Regione Trentino-Alto Adige*, (Unicopli, 2003), in particular on the work of Costantino Dardi, on whom she has published several essays, including "Effimero e perenne. Su alcuni progetti romani di Costantino Dardi" (in M. Doimo, M. Pogacnik, eds., *Fare mostre. Italia, 1920-2020: colpi di scena e messainscena*, Mimesis, 2020), and "Costantino Dardi. L'arte della configurazione" (*Firenze Architettura*, 2018). She curated the exhibition and the book *L'invenzione di un linguaggio. Franco Purini e il tema dell'origine, 1964-1976* (LetteraVentidue, 2021). She has also organized conferences, exhibitions, and installations on these themes.

FABRIZIA BANDI is a postdoctoral researcher in the ERC AN-ICON project "An-Iconology. History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images" led by Andrea Pinotti, at the Department of Philosophy, Università di Milano. She holds a Ph.D. in Philosophical Sciences-Aesthetics and Art Theory (Università di Palermo). Her research interests include phenomenology and aesthetics, with a particular focus on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience and the aesthetics of architecture and art. From 2016 to 2020, she was an Adjunct Professor of Aesthetics at the Politecnico di Milano,

at the Mantova campus. Currently, she is an Adjunct Professor of the Aesthetics of Objects course at the Università di Milano. She is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Studi di Estetica* and is on the board of the *Italian Society of Aesthetics* (SIE). She is the author of the book *La percezione armata: esperienza estetica e immaginazione in Mikel Dufrenne* (Mimesis 2018). In 2022, she was awarded National Scientific Qualification (II fascia) in the field of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Language.

GIAMPIERO BOSONI is Full Professor of Interior Design and History of Design at the Politecnico di Milano. As an architect, he has collaborated with Figini and Pollini, Vittorio Gregotti, and Enzo Mari, which led him to develop an interest in the theory and history of architecture and design projects. He has written and edited some 20 books and published more than 300 articles for numerous international journals. In 1997 he designed the *Museum of Design* exhibition for the Milan Triennale, creating the Milan Triennale Design Museum Collection. In 2009, the MoMA in New York commissioned him as editor of the book *Italian Design*, dedicated to the Italian section of their collection. In 2006, he curated the exhibition *Il Modo Italiano - Italian Design and Avant-Garde in the 20th Century* for the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and MART in Rovereto. He has curated numerous exhibitions, including the major shows at the Milan Triennale *Made in Cassina* (2009), *Tecno. The Discreet Elegance of Technology* (2011) and *Osvaldo Borsani, Architect, Designer, Entrepreneur* (2018), with accompanying books published by Skira. From 2018 to 2021, he was president of the Italian Association of Design Historians (AIS/design), and since 2022, has been co-director of the *AIS/design Journal*. He has been a member since 2008 of the scientific committee of the Franco Albini Foundation; since 2021, of the Gianfranco Ferré Research Center of the Politecnico di Milano; and since 2023, of the Board of Directors of the CASVA Foundation (Centro Alti Studi sulle Arti Visive) in Milan.

IORELLA BULEGATO is a graduate architect and Associate Professor at the Università Iuav di Venezia. From 2010 to 2014, she was a researcher at the Università degli Studi della Repubblica di San Marino. Her areas of interest include history and design criticism, as well as aspects related to the conservation and archival-museum valorization of the heritage of communication design. She has written numerous essays and articles for professional journals, and was an assistant editor for the online journal *Ais/Design. Storia e ricerche* (with M. Dalla Mura and C. Vinti, 2013-16). Since 2004, she has published several monographs, including *Salvatore Gregoriotti. Un progetto lungo cinquant'anni / A fifty-year project*, with A. Bassi (Skira, 2017); *Il design degli architetti in Italia 1920-2000*, with E. Dellapiana (Electa, 2014); *I musei d'impresa. Dalle arti industriali al design* (Carocci, 2008); *Michele De Lucchi. From Here to Here and Beyond*, with S. Polano (Electa Architecture-Phaidon, 2005); and the index and complete list of works in S. Polano, *Achille Castiglioni: Complete Works 1938-2000* (Electa Architecture-Phaidon, 2002).

FRANCESCA CASTELLANI is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art at the Università Iuav di Venezia and in the Ph.D. program in the History of Art at Ca' Foscari-Iuav, Venice. She coordinates the research group BiTES-Biennial Theories & Stories. Since 1995, her research has focused mainly on the history of the Venice Biennale as a paradigm of exhibition history. In this field, she has organized conferences and seminars, including "Lo Scrittoio della Biennale" (Venice, 2009-present), "Staging Exhibit Display" (Venice, 2022-2024), and "Esposizioni/Exhibition" (Parma, 2017). She has published numerous essays and co-edited several volumes, including *Esposizioni/Exhibition (Ricerche di S/Confine*, 2018), *Crocevia Biennale* (Scalpendi, 2017), and *Lo Iuav e la Biennale di Venezia* (Il Poligrafo, 2016). Forthcoming publications: "Venice Biennale 1948: The Mostra degli Impressionisti at the German Pavilion and its Politics" (*OBOE Journal*, 5, 1, 2024), *Sulla Biennale. Storie da un cantiere di studio* (Postmedia, 2024), and *1863. Manet refusé* (Bolis, 2025). Her research interests also include the history of European art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a focus

on its cultural and projective dimensions, including Orientalism, Revivalism, French and Italian Impressionism, and the intersections between art and literature.

BERNADETTE DUFRÈNE is Full Professor of the History of Heritage and Museums at the Université de Paris 8. Her two main areas of research are the history of twentieth-century museology and the cultural heritage of North Africa. She is the author of two books on the history of the Centre Pompidou (*La création de Beaubourg*, PUG, 2000, and *Centre Pompidou, 30 ans d'histoire* [ed.], Centre Pompidou, 2007) and numerous articles on international exhibitions. Together with Jérôme Glicenstein, she also co-edited *Histoires d'expositions/Exhibitions' stories* (Hermann, 2016). Another part of her research focuses on the history of Maghreb heritage and the exhibitions that have brought it to the forefront, and ways of building museum collections.

MARIO FARINA is Associate Professor of Aesthetics at the Università Iuav di Venezia, where he has been a researcher since 2020. Between 2014 and 2019, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Università di Firenze. He has conducted research at the Universities of Cologne, Bochun, and Frankfurt, University College Dublin, and Boston University. His research interests include classical German philosophy, critical theory, philosophy of literature and art theory. His publications on these topics include the monographs *Critica, simbolo e storia. La determinazione hegeliana dell'estetica* (Ets: Pisa 2015) and *Adorno's Aesthetics as a Literary Theory of Art* (Palgrave Mcmillan: Cham 2020).

ANTONELLA GALLO, architect, is Full Professor of Architectural and Urban Composition. Since 2003, she has been a member of the Doctoral Program in Architectural Composition at the Università Iuav di Venezia. Her research focuses on the form, construction, and character of architecture in the works of certain modernist figures and in the expressions of modernism in Latin America, with particular reference to the work of Lina Bo Bardi. The critical analysis

in her research aims to reconstruct the design processes that endow high-quality architectural works with a specific but simultaneously generalizable and thus transmittable reality. She participates in conferences and seminars at both Italian and international universities and is involved in project consultancy for national and international competitions. Her publications include “Teatro/Architettura” (in L. Scala ed. *Teatro e scena urbana: Ricerche e sperimentazioni spaziali dell'Avanguardia russa*, LetteraVentidue, 2021) and *Indistinti confini. Tra ricerca e progetto* (Il Poligrafo, 2018); “La tradizione del saper fare,” in: A. Gallo & G. Marras, eds. *Invenzione della tradizione. L'esperienza dell'architettura*, (Il Poligrafo, 2017).

JÉRÔME GLICENSTEIN is Full Professor at the Department of Fine Arts at Université Paris 8 and specializes in contemporary art and exhibitions, on which he has published several books: *L'Art: une histoire d'expositions* (PUF, 2009), *L'Art contemporain entre les lignes* (PUF, 2013), and *L'Invention du curateur* (PUF, 2015). He co-directed a project for the “catalogue raisonné” of the Centre Pompidou's exhibitions (2010-2014), which included co-editing with Bernadette Dufrêne *Histoires d'expositions/Exhibitions' stories* (Hermann, 2016). He is also editor-in-chief of the academic journal *Marges* (PUV). His most recent book is *Insaississables valeurs. L'économie en trompe-l'oeil de l'art contemporain* (Hermann, 2023). Forthcoming books include *La Globalisation de l'art contemporain* (PUV, 2024) and *Qu'est-ce qu'une exposition? Écrits critiques (2000-2022)* (La lettre volée, 2026).

CARLO GRASSI is Professor of Sociology of Culture and Communication at the Università Iuav di Venezia. Among his most recent publications are *La macchina e il caso. Sociologia del dispositivo fotografico* (Postmedia, 2020); *La facoltà di giudicare. Sociologia dell'azione normativa* (Inschibboleth, 2021; French edition Kimé, 2022.) He edited and introduced *Jean-Luc Nancy, Dies Irae* (Westminster Press, 2019); *Dominique Wolton, Viva l'incomunicazione. La vittoria dell'Europa* (Armando, 2022); and *Sociologia della cultura* (Editoriale Scientifica, 2023), in collaboration with Dominique Wolton and

Davide Borrelli. He is a member of the editorial board of *Hermès France* and scientific director of the journal *Hermès Italia*.

ANNA MAZZANTI is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art at the Politecnico di Milano, Department of Design. Her research interests focus on the history and criticism of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, environmental art, the relationship between art and space, with particular reference to the sites of creation and the history of the staging of art. She was responsible for the interdisciplinary research group DE.S.Y. (Designing Enhancement Strategies and Exhibit Systems for the Italian House Museums and Studios). She is part of the BiTES research unit and a member of the Archivio Enrico Crispolti, Rome. She is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Daniel Spoerri Garden Foundation and an advisor to the Region of Tuscany, Contemporary Art Department. Her recent publications include “Operazione Arcevia. Existential Community. The Reality of the Experience and the Utopia of the Vision” (in F. Zanella, *et al.*, eds., *Multidisciplinary Aspects of Design. Objects, Processes, Experiences and Narratives*, Springer, 2024); “La Committenza difficile. Enti pubblici e l’arte contemporanea, 1980. Crispolti, Fagone, Zingarelli. Impegno e riflessioni sulla contemporaneità” (in Ministero della Cultura, DARC & Fondazione Scuola dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali, eds., *Arte e spazio pubblico*, Silvana, 2023).

ANGELA MENGONI is Associate Professor of Visual Semiotics at the Università Iuav di Venezia. She was a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for the Philosophy of Culture at the University of Leuven KUL, and a senior researcher at *eikones - Iconic Criticism: The Power and Meaning of Images* at the University of Basel. She was a DAAD fellow (2018) and a coordinator of the Villa Vigoni trilateral research program “Travelling concepts. Towards a terminological cartography in art theory” (2020-2022). Her research interests in visual semiotics and image theory concern the relationship between image, memory and trauma, with particular reference to postwar European art and biopolitics, and the representation of the body in late modernity. Among her publications: *Pensiero in immagine. Forme, metodi, oggetti*

teorici per un Italian Visual Thought (Mimesis, 2022); “Sémiotique de l’art. L’épaisseur à l’œuvre,” *Actes Sémiotiques*, 127, 2022 (co-edited with S. Caliandro); *Interpositions. Montage d’images et production de sens* (MSH, 2014).

STEFANO MUDU holds a Ph.D. in Visual Culture. In Venice, he collaborates with the Università Iuav di Venezia and Università Ca’ Foscari di Venezia, while he also teaches Media Theory at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Sassari. His research interests focus on re-enactment and other forms of enactment as artistic practice, reactivation strategies in visual culture, and rethinking art history in relation to queer, eco-feminist, environmental and colonial issues. He is the author of the monograph *Spazi Critici. I luoghi della scrittura d’arte contemporanea* (2018) and editor of the volume *Altrove. New Fiction* (2020). He is a member of the transnational research program entitled *A Natural Oasis?* (2021-22), dedicated to the study of artistic scenarios in the Mediterranean. For the last two years, he has worked in the curatorial team of the 59th Venice Biennale, assisting the artistic director Cecilia Alemani in the research for the central exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams*. During this same period, he was also a tutor for the ASAC Biennale college *Writing in Residence* project (2022-23).

ROBERTO PINTO, an art historian and curator, is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art at the Department of Arts, Università di Bologna. He has dedicated many years to theoretical reflection, which complements his curatorial practice, focusing on the dynamics and forms of contemporary exhibition and public art. His recent publications include “Amid Political Commitment and Space of Freedom. The Importance of Being Alternative and Self-Managed” (in *SKANK BLOC BOLOGNA Alternative Art Spaces since 1977*, Mousse Publishing, 2024); “Filiberto Menna and the Analytical Lines of the Contemporary” (in: *Armi improprie. The State of Art Criticism in Italy*, Johan & Levi, 2024); *Nuove Geografie Artistiche. Le mostre al tempo della globalizzazione* (Postmedia, 2012, 2023), and *Le relazioni oltre le immagini. Approcci teorici e pratiche dell’arte*

pubblica (with C. Guida: Postmedia, 2022). He has curated numerous exhibitions in Italy and abroad, including *Stranger Knocking* for the Italian Pavilion at the Melbourne Biennale 1998. He was curator of the 5th Gwangju Biennale, Korea (2004), and the 3rd Tirana Biennale (2005). He is currently the scientific curator and coordinator of the ArtLine project, a permanent sculpture park at CityLife in collaboration with the Municipality of Milan, and serves as the editorial director of the journal *piano b*.

PAUL RASSE is an anthropologist and Professor Emeritus of Information and Communication Sciences at the Université Côte d'Azur. He has published a dozen books and more than a hundred scientific articles on the anthropology of communication, scientific communication, museology, mediation, and cultural engineering. His major works on museology include *Le musée réinventé: Culture, patrimoine, médiation* (CNRS, 2017), *Le projet culturel: conception, ingénierie et communication* (Territorial Editions, 2017), and *Les musées à la lumière de l'espace public* (L'Harmattan, 2000). He is also a member of the editorial board of the journal *Hermès France*.

CLARISSA RICCI is an Adjunct Professor at the Università di Bologna. Her research focuses on the history and networks of exhibitions, biennials, fairs, and contemporaneity. She was a recipient of the Getty/ACLS Postdoctoral Fellowship in the History of Art (2019–2020), and was previously commissioned by the Università Iuav di Venezia (2017–2019) with researching the founding of Arte Fiera in Bologna. She has also been a visiting scholar at Columbia University in New York City, and received a Library Research Grant from the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. The author of *APERTO 1980-1993. La mostra dei giovani artisti alla Biennale di Venezia* (Postmedia Books, 2022), she has written numerous essays, and edited many books, including one on the Venice Biennale entitled *Starting from Venice. Studies on the Biennale* (2011), and, more recently, *Double Trouble in Exhibiting the Contemporary: Art Fairs and Shows* (2020); she also wrote the entries on the Venice Biennale for the *Grove Art Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2018). She is the

founder and editor of the *OBOE Journal: On Biennials and Other Exhibitions*, and editor of *Venezia Arti*.

CAMILLA SALVANESCHI is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow at the San Francisco State University and the Università Iuav di Venezia. Her research focuses on contemporary artists' publishing projects since the early 1980s, with a particular emphasis on the recent evolution of art magazines and the expanded field of arts publishing. She recently co-edited the volumes *En plein air. Minimal Architecture, Maximum Sustainability* (with Sara Marini, 2024) and *The Exposed Body* (with Angela Vettese, 2023). Salvaneschi is editorial member of the US-based *Art Margins Online*, and is the founder and editor of the *OBOE Journal: On Biennials and Other Exhibitions*.

MARCO SCOTTI is a postdoctoral fellow at the Università Iuav di Venezia. He holds a Ph.D. in the History of Art and has been a research fellow and post-graduate researcher at CSAC, Università di Parma. His recent research has focused on the figure of Ettore Sottsass, on the interweaving of art, architecture and design culture, on specific aspects connected to exhibitions and archives in avant-garde artistic practices in the second half of the twentieth century, on the theme of the unrealized in the visual arts, on digital archives and the digital humanities, and on the history of graphics and advertising. He is an Adjunct Professor at Università Iuav di Venezia, where he teaches the history of design, and has taught a contemporary art history workshop at the Università di Parma and a course on video game screenwriting at the Accademia Santa Giulia, Brescia. He has worked as a curator for several institutions, including MAXXI, Fondazione Cirulli, CSAC Parma, and MSU Zagreb, as well as for galleries, awards, and events such as the Biennale Roncaglia and Premio Suzzara, and for several independent projects. Together with Elisabetta Modena, he founded the digital museum MoRE (www.moremuseum.org), an archive/museum dedicated to unrealized contemporary art projects. In the field of communications, he has collaborated with institutions such as Fondazione Modena Arti Visive, Fondazione Cirulli, CSAC Parma, and Novara Jazz. He is a

member of the editorial staff of the online magazines *Venezia Arti* and *Ricerche di S/Confine* and collaborates with the magazine *Zero*.

ALESSANDRA VACCARI is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art at the Università Iuav di Venezia. Her research and teaching experience focuses on the history and theory of fashion. As a faculty member of the Department of Visual Arts, she has previously taught at the Università di Bologna (2006-2014) and has been a visiting professor at many international universities, including the University of the Arts London, the University of São Paulo, and Stockholm University. Her interdisciplinary work focuses on three main areas: Italian and European modernist fashion; the temporalities of fashion; and the impact of fashion on environmental sustainability and social change. In addition to numerous articles, book chapters, and monographs on fashion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she co-edited the book *Time in Fashion: Industrial, Antilinear and Uchronic Temporalities* (2020). Her most recent book is *Indossare la trasformazione* (2022). She is currently working on the proceedings of the international conference *Earth, Water, Air, and Fire: The Four Elements of Fashion*, which she organized with Anneke Smelik in 2023.

ANGELA VETTESE is Associate Professor of Theory of Art Criticism at the Università Iuav di Venezia and coordinates the Ph.D. program in Visual and Performative Arts, and Fashion. She has taught at numerous art academies and at Bocconi University in Milan (2000-2007, 2010-2013). As an art critic, she has contributed to *Il Sole 24 Ore Domenica* and other international magazines since 1986. She has curated several exhibitions and written essays for international catalogues. Vettese was president of the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa in Venice (2002-2013), director of the Galleria Civica in Modena (2005-2008), and director of the Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro in Milan (2008-2010). She served as Councilor for Culture and Tourism for the city of Venice (2013-2014). She has also worked with the Venice Biennale, co-curating an homage to John Cage (Peggy Guggenheim Collection, 1993), the Venice Pavilion

(2007), and the Norway Pavilion (2011). In 2009, she served as President of its International Jury. Additionally, she has been a member of the scientific committee for Palazzo Grassi-Punta della Dogana in Venice, the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, and the Commissione Monumenti in Milan. She is currently a member of the Scientific Committee of the Museo Madre in Naples and AGO_Museums of the city of Modena. She founded and directs the academic journal *OBOE: On Biennial and Other Exhibitions*. Her research has long focused on the Venice Biennale within the international exhibition system, with particular attention to issues of national politics and identity in the context of de-globalization. She has published numerous studies on this topic, including “L’arte contemporanea e la sua efficacia politica” (*Il Mulino*, 2023); “Preface: Montage in Contemporary Art. A New Technical Tradition Prompting a Non-teleological Philosophy of History” (In C. Baldacci, M. Bertozzi, eds. *Montages—Assembling as a Form ad Symptom in Contemporary Arts*, Mimesis, 2018); and “The National Pavillion at the Venice Biennale as a Form of Public Space” (in G. Urbonas, A. L. Lucas Freeman, eds. *Public Space? Lost and Found*, SA+P Press-MIT School of Architecture and Planning, 2017).

FRANCESCA ZANELLA is Associate Professor of History of Contemporary Art, and teaches History of Architecture at the Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia. She is a member of the scientific committee of CSAC, University of Parma, which she directed from 2015 to 2020, and a member of the scientific committee of the MoRE museum of unrealized projects. Her fields of research are the history of Italian architecture and design in the twentieth century, the history of industrial exhibitions in the nineteenth century, and the history of art exhibitions in the twentieth century (*Dal progetto al consumo*, Parma, MUP; 2011, with V. Strukelj; *Esporsi. Architetti, artisti e critici a confronto in Italia negli anni Settanta*, Verona, Scripta, 2012). She has curated numerous exhibitions, including *Architecture and Advertising* (2005), *Torre Agbar, Communication and Consensus Project* (2006), *City and Light, Phenomenology of the Illuminated Landscape* (2008) and for the CSAC, *Ettore Sottsass. Beyond Design* (2017-18)

(catalogue edited by Silvana 2017), *1968. A Year* (2018-19) and *Design!, Objects, Processes, Behaviors* (2020-21) (catalogue edited by Electa 2023), *Andrea Branzi. Tales of Design* (2023) as well as artist residency projects at CSAC (Luca Vitone, Massimo Bartolini, Eva Marisaldi, Sissi). She also works with contemporary archives, coordinating digitization and enhancement projects for the CSAC (Ettore Sottsass and Enzo Mari), and is currently coordinating a project funded by the MIC with the CSAC in partnership with MAXXI, to create a database dedicated to Pier Luigi Nervi in collaboration with the DHMoRe Center at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, of which she is a member.

STEFANIA ZULIANI is Full Professor of Theory of Art Criticism and the Theory of Museums and Exhibitions in Contemporary Times at the Università di Salerno. Since 2019, she has been the coordinator of the Ph.D. program in Methods and Methodologies of Archaeological and Art Historical Research. In 2018, she was appointed by the MIBACT as a member of the scientific committee of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome; from 2015 to 2020, she was part of the scientific advisory committee of the CSAC. As an art critic, she has collaborated for over twenty years with the Filiberto Menna Foundation–Center for Contemporary Art Studies (Salerno-Rome), for which she has edited catalogues and curated exhibitions. Since 2016, she has also been a member of the advisory board of the Leonardo Sinisgalli Foundation. She has published numerous essays and monographs on the dynamics of the contemporary exhibition system, including *Senza cornice. Spazi e tempi dell'installazione* (Arshake, 2015) and *Torna diverso. Una galleria di musei* (Gli ori, 2022) and the recent articles “‘Economia dell'imperduto’. Gli archivi dell'arte contemporanea tra esposizione e oblio” (in *Archivi esposti. Teorie e pratiche dell'arte contemporanea*, Quodlibet, 2022) and “‘Where is our place?’. L'installazione come spazio performativo” (in *Poesia musica pittura. Riflessioni e performance oggi. Per uno sguardo sulla modernità*, Cacucci, 2021).

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