Public Access to the Contemporary Art World: Exhibition Documentation

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Abstract In Museums and the Public Sphere, Jennifer Barrett says that “the museum, it is claimed, is not only a public space, but a place where public discourse takes place.”¹ The idea of “a place where public discourse takes place” can be realized within a museum only when the documentation of artworks is available to the public. Contemporary artwork, especially time-based media art, is displayed in various ways within an exhibition, and knowledge of the different methods of display is important for the public to understand the meaning of the artwork; this creates public discourse. Therefore, this paper will examine the importance of public access to exhibition documentation using two case studies: firstly, Joan Jonas’ exhibition Timelines: Transparencies in a Dark Room, which offers limited information to the public; and secondly, Christian Rattemeyer’s book Exhibiting New Art, which is a literal reinstallation of two exhibitions that occurred in 1969, Op Losse Schroeven (Situations and Cryptostructures) and When Attitudes Become Form, based on the exhibition documentation.

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In Museums and the Public Sphere, Jennifer Barrett states that “the museum, it is claimed, is not only a public space, but a place where public discourse takes place.”² While this could be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on context, here, Barrett’s quotation can refer to public discourse on art. The idea of “a place where public discourse takes place” can be realized within a museum only when appropriate documentation about the artworks it houses is publicly available. Contemporary artworks, which often include temporal components that depend to a large extent on the concept of temporality, can be displayed in various ways depending on the context of an exhibition. For the public to understand an artwork’s meaning, they must have access to information about the different display methods that are being used; when this is done successfully, it can generate public discourse about art.³

This paper will examine the importance of public access to exhibition documentation using two case studies: firstly, Joan Jonas’ exhibition Timelines: Transparencies in a Dark Room, which offers limited information to the public; and secondly, Christian Rattemeyer’s book
Exhibiting New Art, which is a literal reinstallation of two exhibitions that occurred in 1969, Op Losse Schroeven (Situations and Cryptostructures) and When Attitudes Become Form, based on the exhibition documentation.

Major contributions to the study of public access to art documentation have been made by Glenn Wharton. In Wharton's discussion of the importance of sharing museum archives with the public, he revealed that contemporary art cannot be fully understood by the public through in-person experience alone. However, research into the need for transparency around exhibition documentation is still in its early stages, as the brevity of the bibliography on this topic attests. Most literature focuses instead on discussions of how documentation is shared with conservators or how one should document variable artworks. Following Wharton's study, therefore, this research seeks to discuss why we need better public access to exhibition documentation, how people might interact with this documentation, and what this documentation can offer them. To do this, contemporary art and museum research will be used, focusing in particular on Arthur Danto's “The Art World,” published in 1964. Other articles will be reviewed that specifically argue for the importance of documentation in terms of contemporary art, which often has a fluid nature that is hard to anchor to one condition.

The Art World: Who Can Access It?
Art museums are understood as public museums. But questions of access remain: Who represents artworks to the public? How do museums deliver the value and meaning of art to the public? How much does the public engage with this process?

It seems that art museums have been successful in attracting visitors to their space. Starting in the late 1960s, artists began to display artworks in previously unheard-of ways: by inviting audiences to physically attend the art-making scene. A prime example of this is the 1969 group exhibition When Attitudes Become Form held at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland, which will be explored in a later part of this paper. This exhibition's subtitle reveals its emphasis on process: When Attitudes Become Form (Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information). The exhibition curator, Harald Szeemann, recalled that era was dominated by “the shift of interest away from the result towards the artistic process.”

A more recent example is Rirkrit Tiravanija's Untitled-Pad Thai, which used its audience as a major element in its performance. In 1992, Tiravanija converted 303 Gallery in New York City into a kitchen from which he served free Thai curry and rice to gallery visitors. This landmark piece was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) and recreated as part of their Contemporary Galleries: 1980-Now installation. This work, through the artist and the museum, invited visitors to “interact with contemporary art in a more sociable way.” These are just two examples of how artists and museums have physically opened their spaces to the public through experimental artwork.

However, outside of the physical spaces, have museums truly opened their spaces—spiritually or theoretically—to visitors? Writing on the Inside/Out website, a blog created by MoMA and MoMA PS1, Rebecca Stokes emphasized that visitors should come to the museum to get food prepared and served by the museum’s restaurant staff: “Laura Hoptman, curator in the museum’s Department of Painting and Sculpture, discusses the work, and visitors share their reactions. But come see for yourself, Thai vegetable curry and rice will be served through
February 8 only, and the original recipe can be found in the installation.” This suggests that, rather than focusing on opening up a public discourse on artworks, museums have been more interested in a superficial level of public inclusion tied to the physical space. This claim is also supported by the increasing numbers of cafes and restaurants inside museums.

We should, therefore, be asking ourselves whether the contemporary museum space is truly a public sphere in any dimension besides the physical. If the answer is no, then museums must do more to invite the public into public discourse about the art world. Contemporary art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto, in his momentous article “The Art World,” claimed that Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes can be an artwork, which is distinguished from the ordinary object, because it is created from “an atmosphere compounded of artistic theories and the history of recent and remote painting…and as a consequence of this his work belongs in this atmosphere and is part of this history.” In other words, the artistic status of an object is established based not only on art theories, but also on the history of existing art. In the same article, Danto continued to argue that people in the art world “cannot help him [the viewer not having knowledge on artistic theories and the history of recent and remote works] until he has mastered the is of artistic identification and so constitutes it a work of art. If he cannot achieve this, he will never look upon artworks: he will be like a child who sees sticks as sticks.” That is to say, if the person viewing an artwork does not have enough knowledge of the art world, that person cannot help but see the object in front them as an ordinary thing, hardly understanding what it means in the context of art.

It appears that contemporary artworks such as Tiravanija’s Untitled (Free) have a different emphasis than Danto’s view on contemporary art: the former emphasizes the physical participation of the public; the latter stresses theoretical participation or recognition of an artwork’s value by people who are deeply engaged with the art world, such as critics, museum professionals, and artists. This indicates that the former concept has a much broader approach, incorporating the public; the latter focuses on a narrower group of people.

This prompts us to ask the same question again: does inclusion from a spatial perspective translate to inclusion in every aspect of art? In Museums as Public Sphere, Barrett provides a clue to the answer to this question:

Inclusion in the public sphere...does not assure equality; it often merely brackets difference. By bracketing I mean tolerating, or including, yet presuming that the difference seen should be modified to comply with the apparently normative conditions of the public sphere—this implies that the counter-public must surrender its difference.10

Merely inviting people into a sphere does not necessarily bring them onto the same page; as Barrett says, it only brackets difference. In other words, regardless of being in the physical space, the public will be able to understand and further engage with art world discourse based on their knowledge of the history of art, exhibitions, and related discourses.

How can discussion of these topics expand to the broader public and away from the narrow field of the art world? The first meaningful step toward this goal would be offering enough
exhibition documentation to the public. As mentioned earlier, artwork no longer has a fixed or stable status; it transforms constantly, taking on different forms in different contexts and being involved in exhibitions with a wide range of themes. In this vein, sharing documentation related to issues such as floorplans, how installations are viewed, and important decisions affecting the appearance of the artwork, could improve the public’s understanding in the context of the art world. If events in the past had been said less, those events are naturally considered less important by people. In other words, without a wealth of documentation of previous events, there will be less discourse among people and the previous events will be forgotten in history. This second point will be discussed further through Op Losse Schroeven, an exhibition which was literally reinstalled in Rattenmeyer’s book. Before that, it is necessary to review some of the literature that already argues for the importance of documenting art, particularly time-based media art.

**Time-Based Media Art**

Starting in the late 1960s, artworks were being created in situ, rather than being shown as a completed work placed in an exhibition: “Works of art were no longer necessarily finished artefacts to be transported from studio to exhibition space; they were now increasingly being made in situ, either directly by the artists or to their instructions.”

Contemporary art after the 1960s continued to become more and more transformative, able to be displayed within a variety of different contexts.

Time-based media installations are “works that incorporate a video, slide, film, audio or computer-based element” and which do not have a fixed status. This new concept of contemporary art does not fit into the understanding of object-based traditional fine art. Pip Laurenson sees time-based media installations as a category “somewhere between performance and sculpture,” because “in the case of a time-based media installation, the work must be experienced as an installed event, which again has parallels with a performance.” Given its variability, recognizing the changes and decisions on those changes of artworks have taken an important role in terms of understanding the context of artwork.

> Each occasion a time-based media work is installed...decisions are revisited and sometimes remade as to what aspects of the work are significant to its identity. In the case of time-based media works, display equipment often represents the strongest link to the time in which the work was made and it is often difficult to determine the relationship of the display equipment to the identity of the work...Subtle details of an installation can be of vital importance.

Time-based media artworks, therefore, have behind them a significant history of decision-making processes in terms of displaying the work. Joanna Phillips’ “Iteration Report” concept, which notes the names of all the decision-makers who have impacted the appearance of the artwork as well as their explanations for their decisions about different elements and concepts involved in that iteration of the work, addresses this issue. By tracking all “these individuals’ reasoning behind their aesthetic, conceptual, practical, or economic decisions,” Phillips says, “Iteration Reports help generate a deeper understanding of the behaviors of an artwork under
different circumstances.” Although she is focusing on the conservators’ role here, Phillips also emphasizes how recognizing and understanding an artwork changes across iterations or contexts. In their article “Reflections on a Biographical Approach to Contemporary Art Conservation,” Renée Van De Vall et al. also proposed the concept of a biography of an artwork, in order “to use a biographical approach to investigate and compare the histories of artworks.” This literature engages with the elusive nature of contemporary art and uses documentation as a means of recognizing how artworks change over time.

Nevertheless, the variable nature of art is not always considered by the public. While pointing out that the art world often shows only the outcome of conservation discussions on the museum floor, ignoring the behind the scenes context, Vivian Van Saaze also claims that, sometimes, conservation activities are seen as devaluing the monetary and subjective value of artworks, because they transform the work from an original to something other than original. In other words, without some recognition of the works’ trajectory, the public will only consider superficial aspects of artworks, which are often linked to their “mythical” meaning or fixed status.

Exhibitions are of central interest when it comes to an artwork’s trajectory and its changes over time. The time-based media mentioned above all require some kind of transformation when they are required to be displayed in different time periods and contexts. This is evident when considering the obsolescence of older technologies used for the “original” artwork; as time goes on, technology changes and is replaced with newer technology. Furthermore, where and how an artwork is displayed at the time of exhibition can also play a pivotal role in understanding its meaning, as we will discuss in the case study of Richard Serra’s artworks Op Lasse Schroeven and When Attitudes Become Form.

Two Activities in Timelines: Transparencies in a Dark Room
The author works with the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base (JJKB) project, building an open database for future curators, conservators, and researchers interested in Jonas’ work. Of particular interest was an exhibition titled Timelines: Transparencies in a Dark Room, which was held at the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) and the Geneva Contemporary Art Center (Geneva Center) in 2007 and curated by Bartomeu Marí.

Timelines at MACBA was the first retrospective exhibition devoted to the work of Joan Jonas in Spain. According to MACBA’s official website, “the exhibition consisted essentially of four installations that are representative of Jonas’ career. These were exhibited with a series of films, single-channel videos, drawings, and photographs, that between them present a reading of her work that draws a connection between her practice of performance art and the origins of video installation as a genre.” From MACBA’s statement and the list of works found in the exhibition catalog, we can assume that the four installations were: Mirage (1976); Revolted by the Thought of Known Places...Sweeney Astray (1992–2003); Lines in the Sand (2002); and The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things II (2004–2007). Various others works of art included Wind (1968), Organic Honey’s Visual Telepathy (1972), Vertical Roll (1972), Songdelay (1973), Want to Live in the Country (and Other Romances) (1976–1977), and VoicanoSaga (1989). However, despite knowing which works were exhibited, information about the exhibition itself—how and where video monitors and speakers were displayed during...
the exhibition, what the wall text said, and how the public watched the video or installations—was not well documented or released to the public.

A further important consideration is that the information on these two activities—Jonas’ performance of *The Hand Reverts to Its Own Movement* and the workshop *Invisible Miracles*—was limited to a superficial description of each event on MACBA’s website. The site includes only a short message with general information on Jonas’ works, reading: “Joan Jonas’ experiments and productions in the late sixties and early seventies were essential in the formulation of performance, video, conceptual art and contemporary theatre. Born in New York in 1936, she is regarded as a pioneer in those fields, especially video art and performance,”

However, with further research, this activity was revealed to be a performance art event which had previously been performed at the Fondazione Antonio Ratti in Italy in July 2007, when Jonas was a visiting professor at the institute. It was both a work-in-progress collaboration with young artists taking Jonas’ course and a performance that “focuses on the act of drawing, in relation to movement and the projection of images.” This demonstrates that the process of this work is crucial to understanding it. On the Fondazione’s website are photos of the performance, providing a sense of the performance’s scope, its lighting, ambience, and general context (figure 1).

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 1: The Hand Reverts To Its Own Movement**, from Fondazione Antoni Ratti’s website.

The workshop led by Jonas, *Invisible Miracles*, which took place in addition to this performance, appeared to be a similar event. But, Jonas gives a much more detailed plan on MACBA’s website:

*Invisible Miracles* will be part a preparation for the performance which will alternate between solo and group. *Basically I will develop a solo and in the workshop develop*
The artist elaborates on both how the workshop will be conducted and its meaning. In particular, Jonas states that the workshop will play a part in preparations for the performance Invisible Miracles itself, which will alternate between solo and group elements, emphasize the sounds of everyday instruments and noisemakers, and include drawing. Here, it is implied that recording was involved with the workshop; however, since no footage of the workshop could be found on MACBA’s website, the public cannot see what happened during the workshop at the exhibition. While the website offers detailed information on the artist’s workshop plan, it failed to document the workshop itself, the result of the workshop, or the participants’ responses to the workshop.

It also appears that this workshop at the Fondazione Antonio Ratii was held on November 29, 2007, the same year the workshop at MACBA was held between October 15 and 19. On the Fondazione Antonio Ratii’s website, the twenty young international artist participants are listed by name. The information on the Ratii website also allows us to assume that it was connected with the previous MACBA workshop, since this exhibition emphasizes “sound creation with odd objects, and experiencing collective drawing and improvised performance practices; the activities were all devoted to the discovery of what is hidden and somehow miraculous in everyday life, in our memory and history.” Even though these two events are based on one idea from a single artist and created around same time, the public cannot understand the relationship between the two events because there is no publicly accessible information on the earlier workshop at MACBA.

Op Losse Schroeven and When Attitudes Become Form in 1969
What can people do with exhibition documentation? In Exhibiting New Art, Rattemeyer offers a rich analysis of the two exhibitions Op Losse Schroeven, which took place at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and When Attitudes Become Form at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland. These exhibitions were held at the same time, with one starting a week earlier: Op Losse Schroeven from March 15 to April 27, 1969, and When Attitudes Become Form from March 22 to April 27, 1969. They shared a theme, invited a number of same artists to each exhibition, and the former exhibition even referred to the latter exhibition in its catalog. There were also key differences: Wim Beeren curated Op Losse Schroeven while Harald Szeemann curated When Attitudes Become Form; and the exhibitions had two distinct institutional settings. Around fifty years later, When Attitudes Become Form has been recognized as an important exhibition in art history, whereas Op Losse Schroeven has been almost forgotten in global art discourse.

Throughout his book, Rattemeyer seeks to shed new light on Op Losse Schroeven by documenting in detail all information available on the 1969 exhibition, including the floorplan, installation view, curators’ article list, and artists’ interviews. This reveals that Op Losse
Schroeven was “more closely aligned with the artists’ intentions than generally assumed,” while When Attitudes Become Form “emerges as more attentive to the concerns of the galleries that represented many of them.”\textsuperscript{25} Given all the material on Op Losse Schroeven, it is surprising to discover that this exhibition has been undervalued. In an interview with Richard Serra, one of the artists who participated in both exhibitions, Serra remembers the show at the Stedelijk Museum like this: “To tell you the truth, I liked the show in Amsterdam better. The relationship of the rooms seemed to be more coherent; I thought that the spaces in relation to each other worked better...In Bern the building was very baroque. Also, [Joseph] Beuys had a bigger presence there, so the European aspect seemed more pronounced than it was in Amsterdam.”\textsuperscript{26} This provides the reader with new context on the historical exhibition. Along with these texts, Rattemeyer includes installation photographs, allowing the reader to virtually walk through each exhibition, with meticulous chronological descriptions of how the installations were shaped alongside each photograph.

![Floorplan of Op Losse Schroeven](image1.png)

**Figure 2:** Top, Floorplan of *Op Losse Schroeven*, from Rattemeyer, “Op Losse Schroeven,” *Exhibiting New Art*, 67. Figure 3: Bottom, Floorplan of *When Attitudes Become Form*, from Rattemeyer, “When Attitudes Become Form,” *Exhibiting New Art*, 131.

The floorplans include the artist’s initials, enabling the reader to identify the location of each artist’s works (see figures 2 and 3). Instead of including the locations of artworks displayed...
outside the building within these floorplans, Rattemeyer begins the series of installation photographs of both exhibitions with views outside of each museum building. What becomes apparent thanks to this meticulous historical research is that the different contexts of each exhibition were based on the different approaches taken by the curators and by two distinct institutional settings. *Op Losse Schroeven* reflected the curator Beeren’s interest in developing a new terminology and classification for his observations on new art, closer to those of an art historian, whereas *When Attitudes Become Form* was influenced by Szeemann’s interest in catalyzing artistic production through inviting artists “to replicate their working methods within the space of the gallery.”

Moreover, this sort of careful reinstallation based on documentation enables the viewer to see how the installation of artworks can convey different meanings in different contexts. For example, Serra displayed the same artwork at both exhibitions. *Splash Piece* (1968/69) was made in situ by splashing molten lead against the place where the gallery walls meet the floor. The photograph in figure 4 was taken while Serra and his assistants, Philip Glass and Robert Fiore, were installing the artwork outside the Stedelijk Museum. This work had to be removed after some local artists destroyed it that same day—according to Serra, this was because local artists saw it as American artists defacing the Stedelijk: “The next day [after installing Splash Piece]—or maybe it was overnight—some local artists tore it up, they ripped the lead off the wall and scraped it off the ground. They removed it from the exhibition. Apparently these artists were protesting against the work, they thought we had defaced the building. Apparently they felt the North Americans were up to no good—that we were abusing the institution.”

Meanwhile, the same artwork was installed inside the museum building in the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, a week later, as shown in another photograph.
These case studies suggest that providing the public with a wealth of documentation on any exhibition offers them a better chance of being able to revisit, reimagine, and reevaluate the history of the art world. If museums do more to share their archives with the public, this will also help ensure that historical events and exhibitions are not forgotten.

Questions arise, however, about how best to document and share the documentation of an exhibition of time-based media artworks, which are variable and sometimes even more elusive than Serra’s Splash Piece. Where are we now in terms of documenting such art?

Public Access to Contemporary Artworks: Where Are We Now?
Because contemporary artworks use diverse materials and may be presented in multiple ways, no single method can document their exhibition. In this vein, this article will discuss an institution that offers documentation of ephemeral artworks via the public space of its website: the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City.

Generally, the website of MoMA’s archive provides substantial documentation of the museum’s historical exhibitions, from the earliest date—November 7, 1929, when MoMA mounted the acclaimed exhibition entitled Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh—to the latest exhibitions. Among the latter, the 2018–2019 exhibition Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done was one of the more challenging exhibitions to document because of its content. The exhibition focused on the movement created by visual artists, choreographers, composers, and filmmakers who gathered in Judson Memorial Church in the 1960s.29 It featured not only film, photography, sculptural objects, poetry, and archival materials but also live performance and musical scores. Indeed, a series of performances were presented to the public every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, three times daily, at 11:30 a.m., 1:30 p.m., and 3:30 p.m.

To increase access to these impermanent performances, MoMA’s website provides a great deal of documentation and resources related to the exhibition, including an installation view of the event, a video of a performance, an artist interview, a performance brochure with a schedule and a description of each performance, a series of oral history transcripts, and a performance diary in photographs. The latter element, the performance diary, originated from the curator’s question concerning “the afterlives of historical performances: How do works first created and performed decades ago remain vital and seen? How can we ensure that their integrity is maintained?”30 To that end, the diary offers photographic documentation of a performance that occurred on December 3, 2018, which photographer Jason Riker documented beginning with the scene backstage to the end of the performance. Through its detailed description of the photographs, the performance diary allows the content of the documentation to be passed to future generations and also provides the possibility that the historical performance might be endlessly revived.

However, there remain fundamental and unresolved questions regarding the feasibility of improving public access to exhibition documentation. For example, some obstacles to access include budgetary limitations. One solution might involve using social media services, such as Instagram. A number of galleries already make good use of this social platform to share performance images, and sometimes they even broadcast live performances.
Conclusion

*History is composed of documents, because the document is what remains.*

— Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*

Wharton raised the question of whether, in the future, art will become synonymous with its documentation, and other scholars have already expressed doubts about the stability of artworks, given the increasing elusiveness of contemporary art. These scholars are concerned that art may lose its context and, by doing so, deprive people in the future of the opportunity to fully engage with the meaning of an artwork, although these debates take place mostly among conservators. Making exhibition documentation available to the public can generate a more meaningful discourse about the contemporary art world, and only when that happens do museums merit their status as public spaces that enable discourse about art.

This article explored the need to make public the documentation of exhibitions and suggested ways by which people can engage with that documentation. The case studies suggest one implication of making documentation public: Doing so can shed new light on historical exhibitions that have been almost entirely forgotten, revealing an artwork’s diverse meanings by providing a detailed context.

Granted, artists may restrict the publication of their work online or in a video format, a consideration not addressed in this article. An extreme case is that of Tino Sehgal, who never allows museum professionals or visitors to document his work in any way. Nevertheless, the hope is that these reflections will inspire communication between museum professionals, artists, and scholars on this profoundly difficult yet profoundly important topic.

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Figure 1: *The Hand Reverts To Its Own Movement*, from Fondazione Antoni Ratti’s website.
Figure 3: Floorplan of *When Attitudes Become Form*, from Rattemeyer, “When Attitudes Become Form,” *Exhibiting New Art*, 131.
Figure 4: Photograph of the process of installing *Splash Piece*, from Rattemeyer, “Op Losse Schroeven,” *Exhibiting New Art*, 75.

Notes

1 Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons 2010), 11.
2 Ibid.
3 In this paper, I will use the word “public” to refer to people visiting museums.
7 Ibid.

Ibid.

Barrett, “The Public Sphere,” in Museums and the Public Sphere, 36.

Rattemeyer, Exhibiting New Art, 9.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


References


