



# The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art

*By Mary Anne Staniszewski*

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## **The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art** By Mary Anne Staniszewski

Art historians, traditionally, have implicitly accepted the autonomy of the artwork and ignored what Mary Anne Staniszewski calls "the power of display." In this groundbreaking examination of installation design as an aesthetic medium and cultural practice, Staniszewski offers the first history of exhibitions at the most powerful and influential modern art museum—The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Focusing on over two hundred photographs of the visually rich but overlooked history of exhibitions, Staniszewski documents and deciphers an essential chapter of twentieth-century art and culture and provides a historical and theoretical framework for a primary area of contemporary aesthetic practice—installation-based art.

Staniszewski treats installations as creations that manifest values, ideologies, politics, and of course aesthetics. Incorporating analysis of display techniques used in department stores, natural history museums, non-Western art galleries, and the international avant-gardes' exhibitions of the first half of the century, she makes visible both the explicit and covert meanings found in exhibitions. Some of the questions she addresses are: What sorts of viewers do different types of installations "create"? How do exhibition designs affect the meanings and receptions of specific objects, images, artifacts, and buildings when they are displayed? How do installations shape the viewer's experience of the cultural ritual of a museum visit? How does an amnesia regarding exhibition design affect art history, the art world, and collective cultural memories?

Among the artists, designers, architects, and curators whose installations the author features are Dennis Adams, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Herbert Bayer, René d'Harnoncourt, Ray and Charles Eames, Hans Haacke, David Hammons, Philip Johnson, Frederick Kiesler, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, El Lissitzky, Adrian Piper, Lilly Reich, William Rubin, Paul Rudolph, Edward Steichen, Giuseppe Terragni, and Kirk Varnedoe.

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**The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art** By Mary Anne Staniszewski **Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #3696848 in Books
- Published on: 2001-10-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: .80" h x 9.50" w x 9.46" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 400 pages

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### **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

"I deal with an aspect of modern art history that has been... officially and collectively forgotten," writes Staniszewski in this maverick analysis of exhibitions mounted by New York's MoMA since its founding in 1929. For Staniszewski, a professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., works of art do not stand alone but get a significant amount of their meanings from the contexts in which we view them. MoMA makes an excellent historical focal point for her study, Staniszewski notes, given its innovative approach to displaying art and its near-obsessive self-documentation (she has drawn most of her 204 often fascinating photos and plans of actual exhibitions from the museum's archives). Among the many influences on MoMA's revolutionarily "aestheticized" installations—their sparsely hung works, pale walls and modern framing were a big break from bunched-up, gilded, "salon-style" exhibitions—were the museum's ties to the international avant-garde (surrealism, the Bauhaus), the tremendous influence of founding director Alfred Barr and the MoMA's pro-democracy "National Covenant" during WWII. Following the rise of conceptual art in the 1960s, the museum became more pedagogical, often "addressing the visitor directly in wall statements and texts that were popular examinations of everyday life." Staniszewski expresses disappointment with the turn she sees MoMA exhibitions taking after 1970, asserting that the exhibitions make art seem too "autonomous" in relation to culture. Throughout, her analyses are cogent, but highly academic and somewhat jargony. While it is unlikely to draw converts to the "forgotten" field, the book will enrich any museum-goer's understanding of the often hidden ideological side to the cultural, administrative and aesthetic media through which art is presented.

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From Library Journal

The visitor to today's typical art museum is accustomed to seeing single paintings (or perhaps small groups of works) hung on pristine white walls. As Staniszewski points out in this fascinating examination of exhibition design at the Museum of Modern Art, these concepts are themselves part of what made MoMA "modern." In tracing key exhibitions at MoMA from its founding in 1929 through the 1990s, Staniszewski shows how the concept of modern installation of art evolved in Europe and was transferred to MoMA. In focusing on a few key exhibitions, she details how the museum worked to educate its audience. The design of museum exhibitions is an art that, when well done, is transparent to the viewer; this does not mean, however, that the manner in which the works are installed does not help to delineate and strengthen the ideas of the curator. A fine revision of the author's dissertation, the book is clearly written with only slight slips into the academic jargon that can mar MIT's art theory books. Recommended for larger art collections. AMartin R. Kalfatovic, Smithsonian Inst. Libs., Washington, DC  
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Review

"Here, art history catches up with the avant-garde in questioning the institutional conditions of its own existence. A fascinating study."

—Susan Buck-Morss, Professor of Political Philosophy and Social Theory, Cornell University

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