

The will to influence is at the core of any exhibition.
—Bruce W. Ferguson¹

The making of culture relies on interpretation for its own validity. This seems to be truer today than ever before. The role that interpretation—photography, film, words, and so on—plays in testifying to a cultural event's value, significance, or underlying intentions can sometimes be the only proof that it ever existed at all. Photographic documentation of an exhibition, for instance, possesses its own linguistic character by functioning as a "truthful text."² Such forms of witnessing speak not only to the fact that a work has been made, or that something has been enacted; they reveal the fact that a curator chose to relocate these objects and actions into an institution or gallery and, in so doing, sanctioned their worthiness to compete within a circulation of goods, labor, economy, spectatorship, and historical significance.

Much has been discussed about the systems that determine how works on display accrue value through their transactional participation in museums, galleries, artist-run spaces, and secondary markets. As modes of publicity, press releases and catalogue essays aim to convince new publics of the value and meaning of the work, the creator, and the exhibition on view. Despite their fundamental differences, they are supplemental works in support of, but that often outlast, the first-person experience of exhibitions as material arrangements and events.

To be clear: when using the term "interpretation" I am referring to the way it was used in Susan Sontag's essay on the topic, which she describes as "plucking a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and so forth) from the whole work."³ "The interpreter says," she continues, "Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?"⁴ This type of interpretation is akin to myth-making, and can be understood in the same way Roland Barthes observed that a written text can have a way of naturalizing and neutralizing a thing as "fact." It can make something seem falsely obvious, unveiling a latency within a work.⁵

More than exhibitions of art, architecture exhibitions necessitate different forms of translation. Due to the fact that buildings do not operate as circulating commodities in the same way that art objects can, exhibitions about them (and the ideas that inform their making) rely on interpretation for their legibility and cultural value. It is practically impossible to exhibit an entire building, or even a room—with the specific light conditions, temperatures, patinas, and so on that allow them to live on the site in which they stand. (And sadly, architects seldom use exhibitions as testing grounds for experimental approaches.) The opaque, discipline-specific conventions

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The Interpretation



The Interpretation. Illustration: Andreas Samuelsson/Agent Molly & Co.

of architectural representation also render direct experience—as well as public connoisseurship and collection—prohibitive.⁶ This is perhaps why, amid architecture's curatorial turn and its growing global participation in biennales, design fairs, and blockbuster museum shows, architecture exhibitions rely so heavily on the act of reading in order to be understood.

Sylvia Lavin commented on this textual drive seven years ago in her review of the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale. Although the biennale purported to underscore architecture's relationship to social realities—"the field's moral obligations to the myriad social, economic, and political forces that shape architecture's materializations and collective use"—it did so ironically "by showcasing historical documents, material artifacts, and statistical data as if unmediated and simply 'under a microscope.'" To Lavin's mind, "the piles of documentary materials, endless streams of data, and dossiers of incontrovertible 'facts' on view in Venice ... shows architecture behaving more like art than anything that has been attempted at this scale before."⁷

The fact that architecture exhibitions tend to be dependent on interpretation, even to the point in which text overtakes the objects on display, speaks more to the discipline's relational anesthesia than a millennial penchant for literacy. We have seen such linguistic dependencies before. The art historians Benjamin

Buchloh and Alexander Alberro, for instance, have demonstrated that the dematerialization of conceptual art in the late sixties and early seventies relied on the aesthetics of information and the power of publicity to generate new publics.⁸ One could argue that as a result of its overwhelming entanglements with neoliberal transformations and its entrenchment in the reproduction of inequality, architecture has also undergone a similar dissolution by way of its negligence toward the conditions of its production. The experiential limitations of architecture exhibitions is a symptom of a disinterest with social realities, as well as the discipline's insufficiency to address its failures.⁹

Indeed, what this casts into sharp relief is the history of how architects have depended on exhibitions and museums for the cultural capital they provide, which is in fact promulgated by a labor force not of architects per se, but of discourse workers: curators, publicists, researchers, marketing departments, historians, cultural critics, and journalists. (The exhibition's use-value for these stakeholders is important, too.) Ultimately, however, the exhibition as a multisensory experience or space of alternative knowledge production is of less use and interest to the field precisely because of the discipline's own ineffectuality. When claims of sensory engagement are made by architecture exhibitions as points of emphasis, such efforts are often ocular and in service of experience design to attract ticket sales and audiences,

rather than as part of a broader haptic strategy to articulate the political economy, political ecology, and social impacts of architecture on communities, conditions, resources, and modes of governance.

An architecture exhibition interested in experimenting with collective practices committed to divergent forms of knowledge, such as feeling and lived experience, could instead retool exhibition platforms as opportunities to rip open architecture, its ideas, and its histories. It could do this by inviting embodied, tangible, and real-time exchanges among a diverse range of actors, while sidestepping the canonization of architects and hierarchies of expertise. That is, it could bring alternative material and sensory engagements and, in particular, other voices into the fold: tenants and civic groups, community organizers, storytellers, historical actors, activists, sociologists, anthropologists, environmental experts. In this way, the act of interpretation could lead to a renewed understanding of how a field can better respond to the unequal conditions of our world by implementing an intersectional framework to sense and signification, rather than amounting to rhetorical exercises in promotion and heraldry. Until then, the rhetorical acts of architecture exhibitions will continue to generate myths and meanings that naturalize the discipline's divorce from the state of things as they actually exist.

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Bruce W. Ferguson, "Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense," in *Thinking About Exhibitions*. Edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, 179 (London: Routledge, 1996).

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See Joel Snyder, "Res Ipsa Loquitur," in *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, 195–221, ed. Lorraine Daston (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

3

Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961), 5.

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Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 5.

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Roland Barthes, "Preface to the 1957 edition," in *Mythologies*, trans. Siân Reynolds (London: Vintage, 2009), xix–xx.

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For more on the problems posed by representation in architecture exhibitions, see Carson Chan, "Exhibiting Architecture: Show, Don't Tell," *Domus* (Sept. 17, 2010), <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2010/09/17/exhibiting-architecture-show-don-t-tell.html>.

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Sylvia Lavin, "Too Much Information," *Artforum*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Sept. 2014), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201407/sylvia-lavin-on-the-14th-venice-architecture-biennale-47845>.

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See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October*, vol. 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43; and Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

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See, for instance, my review of the exhibition "The Other Architect" in "Insides and Outsides: The Other Architect," *Journal for Architectural Education* (2017), <https://www.jaeonline.org/articles/review/insides-and-outsides#/page1/>.