



# Towards an Ethics of Recuration:

## When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013

Recurating, Remaking, Redoing  
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The following comments by Tara McDowell introduced the panel discussion, “Recurating: When Exhibitions Become Reified,” with Rebecca Coates and Terry Smith, at Motto Melbourne in December 2013.

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Last year, an extraordinary event took place in Venice. At the Fondazione Prada, a curatorial team comprising an artist, Thomas Demand; an architect, Rem Koolhaas; a curator, Germano Celant; and a patron, Miucca Prada, restaged *When Attitudes Become Form*, an exhibition first held in 1969 at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland. The Bern exhibition has become well known for its pivot from modern to contemporary art; for the sheer amount of work—anti-form, *arte povera*, conceptual, postminimal, process-based—made on site by now well-established artists; and for the promotional efforts of its curator, Harald Szeemann, then director of the institution. As an event, last year’s act of reuration is extraordinary due to a confluence of factors: its centrality in Venice during the biennale; the vast resources available to dedicate to the project; the prestige of the individuals involved; and, of course, its subject, which is among the most canonical exhibitions in modern history. The Venice version also registers as a spectacular culmination of *en vogue* topics such as exhibition histories, the curatorial, the archival and historical, and reenactments and reperformances of all stripes. It is not the first reurated exhibition, and it certainly won’t be the last.

The organizers decided very early on to present as faithful a replica as possible of the original exhibition. The eureka moment, as relayed in the catalogue, occurred when a scale floor plan of the Kunsthalle Bern was placed on top of a scale plan of the eighteenth century palazzo that is Fondazione Prada’s Venice home. Bern fit just inside the palazzo. Curatorial decisions followed, namely, to replicate the white cube of the Bern space within the existing baroque architecture of the palazzo. The walls, moldings, tile floors, and parquet floors were all recreated. Even the radiators from Bern were faithfully replicated. Ceilings, however, were left untouched—a total simulacra, Demand explained, would have been too Disneyfied.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, artworks were borrowed or, if not available, exhi-

bition copies were made. In instances in which the Bern version couldn’t be procured or remade, dotted lines indicated where the absent work would have been installed, and a small photograph of the work was placed next to the vacant space.

The result has been highly controversial, alternately praised for both its intended and unintended revelations, and criticized for a problematic striping away of cultural and historical context, as if an exhibition could be plucked from time and place and reinstalled anywhere. In this reading the exhibition becomes just one more endlessly circulating commodity, and its manifestation in Venice an only slightly warped example of capitalism’s annihilation of space by time, in Marx’s memorable turn of phrase. Not for nothing does Celant repeatedly refer to the exhibition as a *readymade*.<sup>2</sup> And yet, many curators insisted to me how pleasurable it was to see these works together for the first (technically, second) time, how revelatory Szeemann’s use of space was, or how educational the archival materials on the ground floor were. And I enjoyed the exhibition, however reluctantly, and the *jouissance* of time travel that it proffered, however



provisional. Who wouldn't want to visit Europe in 1969, and be immersed in that moment's massive outpouring of artistic, political, and social energies that we are still prying apart? If contemporary life has reached the end of history, and is now marked by "accelerated forgetfulness and the wholesale outsourcing of memory," as Dieter Roelstraate put it, then rather than look to the future, we turn to the past.<sup>3</sup> Don't make it new. Just remake it.

The project is a watershed event for reuration, purposefully so. It is not unlike the way *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*, the artist's 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, aimed to set the terms for institutional treatment of performance art. In his essay for the *When Attitudes Become Form* catalogue, Terry Smith calls the project "the test case for the possibilities of reuration," and concludes, "there are important responsibilities here."<sup>4</sup> He stops short of saying what those responsibilities are, but the question is worth asking, and worth asking seriously: What are the responsibilities in restaging exhibitions? Is there an ethics to be teased out here? Must we fall back on authorship and authenticity as imprimaturs of ethical access and intent for a *remake*, of all things? I was there. It was my institution. My work was in the show. I've received *permission*.

I want to argue that the controversy in Venice stems from the deep ambivalences, even contradictions, that are structural to the project itself and made visible in every perfectly cut gap between Bern and Venice. The critical response thus mimics and reinscribes the ambivalences of the project, just as Szeemann, others have noted, mimicked artists' practices in his curatorial strategy for *When Attitudes Become Form*. Mimicry and desire are very much on view in any remake. Consider, for example, the tension between copy and original: What was on view in Venice was a *copy* of an exhibition, filled with *original* artworks. Moreover, those artworks were nearly all made on site in



Bern in 1969, which was hardly the case in 2013. Indeed, we have been looking at many of these works (though not all of them) for over 40 years now. Richard Serra spoke of the artists in *When Attitudes Become Form* as united by a "forward momentum."<sup>5</sup> Yet nothing could be more different in Venice, with its resolutely backward-glancing gaze. The massive catalogue for the Venice show begins with more than 300 pages of archival images of the artists making and installing work on site in Bern. What was on view in Venice was archeology, not process.

There are more structural contradictions. As Rem Koolhaas claims, the curation in Venice is classical, even conservative—a faithful remake by the books (or photographs, in this case)—while the radical gesture of the project is located in the architecture.<sup>6</sup> For Koolhaas, the curating is respectful and appropriate, while his architectural intervention is the exact opposite: disrespectful and inappropriate. Such contradictions also manifest in the language Celant and Prada use to describe their undertaking, variously as an architectural





tear, a fissure, a violent act, and “a dramatic and spectacular graft.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, I want to argue that *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013* dramatizes a collision between two extremely successful, if problematic modes of contemporary life: the image regime and the experience economy. The Bern show is a bonanza of photographic documentation: more than *one thousand photographs* exist of the installation in progress and the opening reception. It is both product and beneficiary of today’s image regime. The transformation that needed to occur was one from archival image to embodied experience. “We had to bring back to life something that only existed in pictures,” Demand explained.<sup>8</sup> Time travel and immersive simulators have long been currencies within the experience economy, from nineteenth century battle panoramas to 1960s Tomorrowland.

Why this exhibition? Why this *Szeemann* exhibition, even? I have no desire to contribute to the staggering hagiography of Harald Szeemann with this text, but I do think that in our study of these exhibitions we should work to demythologize them as much as canonize them. It is important to realize how media savvy Szeemann was—and that we are still in the thralls of his maneuvers. *When Attitudes Become Form* was initiated by a New York advertising agency (notably, according to the catalog, Prada herself initiated the rehang), and it became the first exhibition ever to be sponsored by a private company, Philip Morris. Szeemann hired professional photographers, including Harry Shunk, and had a reporter make a 30-minute television special about the show. This is exhibition history driven by publicity, to paraphrase Julian Myers.<sup>9</sup> Let’s not fool ourselves about this fact.

In recent art history in the United States, after we excavated Robert Rauschenberg and Gordon Matta-Clark, we could turn to Lee Lozano, Bruce Conner, Helio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, and

many others. So there are questions of gender and western hegemony (of the New York-Europe axis variety) in play here (of the 69 artists in Szeemann’s show, only 3 were women). A canon of exhibitions has formed in a shockingly short time frame, although modifications and alternatives are already being put forward. We may now be ready to leave Szeemann behind and consider other practices, for example, the extraordinary and understudied exhibition design of the Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi (this, too, has already been remade) or Ismail Zain’s *Art and Imagery*, which preceded *Magiciens de la Terre* by nearly a decade but employed many of the same strategies. And here it is worth noting how genealogical the remake is, particularly for curators who are writing their own histories as we speak. Thus Szeemann is claimed as historical precursor for a handful of curators working today who see themselves in him. This archeology is self-motivated and, at times, self-serving.

Curatorial practice as such is a new discipline, just twenty years old, and its histories are currently being written. To quote Terry Smith again,

For curators who think *in and through* exhibitions (as distinct from confining discursivity to speech or text, and from thinking primarily in art historical, art critical, or theoretical terms) it would seem natural to revisit past exhibitions by restaging them or by designing a fresh one that reworks aspects of a previous exhibition.<sup>10</sup>

As with nearly all curatorial models, recuration derives from artists’ practices and lags a few years behind. Clear precedents include the recent turn to reenactment beginning roughly fifteen years ago and whose benchmarks (among numerous possible examples) include Pierre Huyghe’s *The Third Memory* (1999), Jeremy Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), and Marina Abramovic’s restaging of other artists’ past performances, *Seven Easy Pieces*, at the Guggenheim in 2005. (Reenactment is closely related to performance.) There have been a number of exhibitions and books of

late exploring this phenomenon, not to mention a burgeoning history of restaged exhibitions that have occurred with varying degrees of success. We have also witnessed a large number of remade artworks, too, which are attended by their own set of ethical concerns. Consider the example of *CC4 Nocagions*, a swimming pool with image and sound conceived by Helio Oiticica and Neville D’Almeida in 1973, which was never made by Oiticica, only realized later by his estate, and is now sold in editions.

Remade artworks and environments also have a history. Mondrian’s interior design for a private lounge never made it off the page during his lifetime, but was constructed by his gallery, Pace, in 1970, and shown by none other than Germano Celant in 1976, within an exhibition filled with remade environments. Playing loose and fast with history may have reached its apogee with the recent appearance of new writings by Walter Benjamin. We may ask ourselves, to let Benjamin have the last word, whether we want exhibitions to be reproducible. And if so, under what conditions would we attempt transposing the ‘there and then’ to the ‘here and now’?

<sup>1</sup> “Germano Celant / Thomas Demand,” in *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, 399.

<sup>2</sup> Germano Celant, “A Readymade: When Attitudes Become Form,” in *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, 390.

<sup>3</sup> Dieter Roelstraete, “Make It Re-The Eternally Returning Object,” in *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, 424.

<sup>4</sup> Terry Smith, “Artists as Curators / Curators as Artists: Exhibitionary Form Since 1969,” in *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, 529.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Esche, “A Different Setting Changes Everything,” in *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, 470.

<sup>6</sup> “Germano Celant / Rem Koolhaas,” in *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, 414.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.klatmagazine.com/art/thomas-demand-when-attitudes-become-form-interview/10322>, accessed January 30, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> These observations belong to Myers, who draws them from his reading of *Harald Szeemann: Individual Methodology*. Julian Myers in conversation with Terry Smith, College Art Association 101st Annual Conference, February 16, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Terry Smith, “Artists as Curators / Curators as Artists: Exhibitionary Form Since 1969,” in *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, 529.



