ITALIAN SOURCES FOR THE DISPLAY OF DOCUMENTA 1955 IN KASSEL AND AN UNREALISED REFORM OF THE ART MUSEUM

In an effort to rehabilitate modernism in the eyes of the mainstream art public, rebalancing its repression as ‘degenerate art’ during the ‘Third Reich’, the documenta 1955 was a singular attempt to redefine the cultural climate in post-war Germany. While the choice of artists and artworks was largely retrospective, their radically modern display in the provisional setting of a war-damaged historical museum building essentially contributed to its perception as an epitome of the ‘contemporary’¹. Until recently, the many accounts of this display have not conclusively identified the possible sources of this innovation. The paper discusses to what extent innovative Italian museum displays of the post-war reconstruction period were an inspiration for German exhibition designers. It also identifies how these sources were transmitted, and situates the temporary result within a discourse of museum reform during the 1950s.

Special circumstances of the post-war period have made the medium-sized industrial city of Kassel on the eastern periphery of West Germany a regularly recurring venue for one of the most important exhibition institutions for contemporary art¹. When planning its first edition in 1955, this attribution and the later serial repetition of the documenta was by no means foreseeable even for its enthusiastic organizers on site. As a programmatic attempt to rehabilitate modernist fine arts in the eyes of a broad German audience that had experienced its repression as “degenerate art” during the Nazi regime, the first documenta exhibition was initially an unrepeatable individual event³. The exhibition in 1955 also differed from all subsequent editions in that it was by no means designed as a panorama of predominately contemporary art. But rather it presented a retrospective overview of the European avant-garde movements in art from around 1900 to that day, to convince the public of the legitimacy of aesthetic modernism, which had been fundamentally called into question by Nazi propaganda. While the selection of the works of art thus partly followed the museum canon before 1933, the radically modern appearance of their staging in a war-damaged, only provisionally restored museum building contributed significantly to the impression the documenta made on its visitors as an epitome of the ‘contemporary’, including those viewers who remained sceptical of modernism. Research has dealt intensively with the first documenta and has repeatedly referred to its display, but has not yet succeeded in convincingly explaining the availability of this exhibition aesthetic, which in essential aspects is not found in the practice of German exhibitions of modern art of the period before 1933, or had a direct parallel in the art world of the Federal Republic since 1949⁴. Despite its key function for the perception of the project, the staging of the documenta 1955, for which the artist and designer Arnold Bode is held primarily responsible, lacks a reconstruction of its genesis or at least an identification of relevant sources. The following contribution aims to remedy this deficit by focusing on the innovative museum practice of avant-garde architects during the reconstruction of the Italian museum landscape after 1945, from which Bode and his collaborators received suggestions that made their display of the exhibited paintings and sculptures different from the ordinary presentation concepts in Germany at that time⁵. This new Italian museum culture was discussed very controversially internationally in the first decade after the war, so that it was familiar to the protagonists in Kassel in 1955, whose special relationship to Italy will be discussed in more detail later⁶. But it is not just the adoption of the aesthetics of empathy and individual design motifs or the identification of mediating instances that are important in the reconstruction of this process of appropriation. Post-war modern Italian museology was the expression of a comprehensive cultural-political reform of the museum as an institution. Ultimately, it aimed at integrating non-bourgeois audiences into high culture as a response to the experience of Fascism. The translation of this new museum practice into the very different West German context, however, went hand in hand with its detachment from the political implications associated with the reinvention of the art experience in Italy. In this respect, the German re-interpretation of Italian exhibition practices corresponds to the often-noted decoupling of radical political connotations from the reception of the artistic avant-garde, which characterized the way West German society dealt with modernism after 1945 and which documenta 1955 embodied in an exemplary manner⁷.

After the Second World War, at least in the part of Germany occupied by the Western Allies, classical modern art gained a status of martyrdom, as a result of previous repression during the Nazi regime. Its public recognition, which also had strong government support, is reflected everywhere in the program of exhibitions of contemporary art, and in the build-up of museum collections and the art criticism of the first post-war decade⁸. The documenta was part of this state sponsored rehabilitation of the aesthetics, which had only recently been defamed as “degenerate art”. This intention was linked to hopes of reintegration into the We-


7 The display of the 1926 International Art Exhibition in Dresden has also been suspected: curtains in front of the windows on the inside facade of the exhibition building, which then shone through as opaque areas of light and gave the sculptures presented in front of them a silhouette-like effect. But here, again, it is only a question of a single motif that is hardly able to explain the exhibition aesthetics of the documenta 1955 in its entirety, since it gains its special profile above all in contrast to the way of presentation that was widely used in Bode’s generation. A new standard for the display of fine arts had already been established in the Weimar Republic, which was referred to in contemporary discourse as the simulation of a modern artist’s studio, while in today’s terminology it is known as the white cube. Wall surfaces that were consistently painted white or light grey were then seen as a neutral background in terms of aesthetics of perception, which was also praised for its flexibility in dealing with changing exhibit combinations. In front of this seemingly ‘invisible’ background, the individual works of art were separated from one another by wide empty zones under natural light that was as uniform as possible and thus also switched off from conscious perception. Typical was the hanging of the paintings in a row at eye level, interrupted if necessary by the placement of sculptures on as simple, uniform pedestals as possible at the same height along the same wall. This practice of simulating the studio space can be found around 1930 in temporary exhibitions for contemporary art as well as in new museum facilities for historical collections such as the Städtisches Kunstmuseum in Düsseldorf or the Neue Staatliche Gemäldegalerie in Dresden. It became a matter of course for art exhibitions and museums during the Nazi dictatorship and also characterized the temporary and permanent presentation of art after 1945, for example when the West German museums were re-installed after the end of the war.
In view of the general recognition of this standard, apparently unaffected by the political regime changes that had taken place in the meantime, it is obvious that Arnold Bode pursued an alternative strategy in 1955: instead of making display measures psychologically imperceptible to the viewer, he relied on strong effects to support the desired reception of art. This can hardly be understood as an intuitive reaction on the part of the exhibition designer to normal operations, because during the preparations Bode was in contact with the art historian and theatre director Hans Curjel, the most outspoken critic of the white cube in the German-speaking public at the time, whom he even asked to participate in the documenta, which, however, did not happen for unknown reasons. Shortly before, Curjel had called for a fundamental reform of exhibition practice in the magazine Das Werk, the organ of the Swiss Werkbund. There, in 1953, instead of a row of conventional rectangular gallery spaces with immovable walls, he imagined a hyper-flexible “empty space” that could be adapted to any imaginable room layout.

Installations of the most varied kinds can be placed in such neutral spatial structures, which can unfold freely without danger of collision with existing stable spatial forms: walls of any kind, screens, vertical latticework, fabric subdivisions or geometrically cubic structures as spatial accents. They are the prerequisites for organic subdivisions that can be developed from the material to be presented without being tied to any immovable rectangular definitions. This, in turn, opens-up possibilities for lively accentuations, for spatial balances and rhythmic sequences, in which the material can be placed on the basis of the inner connections within it. Supported by accentuating lighting, which would have to be different in each section of the room instead of being distributed uniformly as before, this new exhibition space would also enable a different approach to the art presented in it. While concentrated viewing of the individual work of art could previously only be brought about by limiting the number of exhibits on a wall and the distance between them, in the spatial continuum Curjel envisioned the forced community between the work of art and the wall itself would become obsolete:

The predominance of walls […] is by no means self-evident. Certain other works of painting (altar-pieces) are not made to be pressed into walls. But even the easel painting is created in free space and not bound to the wall. The space behind the painting gives it a kind of breathing space that is denied it on the wall. […] In view of these different contexts it is understandable that efforts have been made to eliminate the dictatorship of the wall. In practice, this can be done with the help of various methods: by lifting the picture out of the wall in plane-parallel manner, creating an airspace of any size behind the picture […]. However, radical solutions have also been attempted by freely hanging pictures in the space, which can result in an organic marriage of picture and space.

In a 1955 supplement, which, however, was not published until after the documenta, Curjel also referred to the example of the device used by Gian Carlo Menichetti for the Picasso exhibition in Milan in 1953, where paintings were mounted on vertical steel supports that were clearly set away from the wall and allowed positioning the images at different angles to the viewer.

From the perspective of the documenta set up two years later, Curjel’s theoretical intervention almost reads like a blueprint for Bode’s exhibition design. Even the Museum Fridericianum, a historical museum building from the 18th century that was used as the exhibition venue, came as close to the “empty space” Curjel demanded as would have been possible without a new building. It was destroyed down to the outer walls during the bombing of the city in the Second World War and the entire original interior layout was missing. Although this ruin was intended to be rebuilt as one of the few historical sources for the display of documenta 1955 in Kassel and an unrealised reform of the art museum Alexis Joachimides
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rical buildings in the city and was provisionally roofed with new ceilings, walls and supports by 1955, in relation to the fixed room layout before its destruction, the new interior offered relatively large open spaces and only a few rooms defined by the supporting architecture (fig. 1)19. In this spatial continuum, Bode was able to arrange specific spatial situations for individual groups of works by means of temporary installations such as free-standing wall panels made of the new dry construction material Heraklith, narrow partition walls made of wood or curtains made of plastic. Bode only deviated from Curjel, who in his essay had suggested intensive colours that changed in each compartment, when it came to the choice of colouring20. Instead, documenta 1955 focused on the sharp contrast of black and white. As the surviving installation shots from the exhibition, which the designer himself commissioned, show, the fixtures followed the principle of dematerializing the surfaces used for the presentation21. In a compartment in which paintings by Max Beckmann were exhibited (room 19), the light grey Heraklith partitions, which did not even reach half the height of the room, stood as picture backgrounds in front of a floor-to-ceiling black curtain, which identified them as free-standing ‘exhibition furniture’ (fig. 2). The wooden partitions were also characterized as weightless insertions by their low height and their horizontal connection by frames or lattices at the level of the upper end of the hanging area. In many rooms, such as in the compartment for Emil Nolde (room 21), the mounting of the pictures went indiscriminately over the massive, lightly plastered and thus still visible masonry outer walls, the smooth wooden panels of the partition walls and the room-dividing, folded curtains, which only were connected by their common white colour (fig. 3). Bode thus followed Curjel’s suggestion of using different surface structures, if not colour, to differentiate the room compartments22. However, the theoretician had imagined a coordination of this means of design with certain groups of exhibits, while the designer used it quite arbitrarily for paintings by the same artist. Elsewhere, however, Bode followed the princi-
ple of connecting sections of space with a monographic group of works by choosing the same surface. Behind the works of Giorgio Morandi (room 7), the plastic curtains masked existing walls as well as the large window openings resulting from the preserved historical inventory, creating a continuous ‘textile’ display surface in front of which the paintings seemed to float almost inexplicably. In addition to the immediate attachment of panel paintings to the dematerialized wall, there is also the installation, which Curjel later mentioned as an example, on vertical steel supports set away at a certain distance from the wall, which can be found in the aforementioned Beckmann compartment (room 19) or in a selection of paintings by Marc Chagall (room 20, fig. 4). But they can also be grouped freely in space, like a compilation of works by Giorgio de Chirico on floating passe-partouts (room 19) and then, like the works by Raoul Dufy (room 28), turn towards the viewer at different mounting angles (fig. 5).

With his exhibition aesthetics, Bode quite obviously followed Curjel’s concern to overcome the “dictatorship of the wall” and shared his enthusiasm for the corresponding Italian models. Not surprisingly, Curjel’s review of the documenta afterwards emphasizes the paradigmatic importance of its staging and thus reinforces the interdependence between the two protagonists:

In this clearly structured spatial ensemble, the works were arranged according to the new exhibition principles, as they have been successfully developed in recent years mainly in Italy. The diversity of materials [...] loosens up the dogmatic rigidity of the walls. Between the pictures or sculptures and the wall materials there is an interplay of extraordinary charm, which intensifies and releases the forces lying in the works. […] The “documenta” [...] realized a new exhibition style that is designed as [...] an artistic method of presentation that corresponds visually and spiritually to today’s artistic being.
The final sentence hints at the point that Bode not only owed a new practice to the models mentioned, but also a new understanding of the reception of art, which Curjel's contributions to museum reform aimed to convey to the German-speaking world. They referred directly to the politically charged aesthetics of empathy that the Italian art historian and museum theorist Lionello Venturi had been developing since 1945. The demand he raised for an “aesthetic education” by the art museum was aimed at a mass audience that was now expressly to include the industrial workforce in order to support the democratic new beginning after the overthrow of Fascism. Venturi wanted to break up the elitist character of high culture by consistently focusing the institution on the principle of aesthetic “contemplation,” understood as an intuitive perception of the visual form of the work of art. For him visual form is not just an abstract configuration, but is based on a collective state of mind that the artist shared as an exemplary member of his own period and that can be reexperienced at any time by anyone, as long as the original design is uncompromised. In contrast, the imparting of art-historical knowledge, and cognitive education in general, should be de-emphasized in favour of an emotional experience, to which even the uneducated would be receptive if they were offered the appropriate perceptual framework. Venturi’s description of Menichetti’s presentation of Picasso’s paintings in the Palazzo Reale in Milan in 1953 sounds almost like a vignette foreshadowing the exhibition aesthetics of the documenta and explains the resonance of this procedure among the supporters of the new Italian museology in Germany (fig. 6).

Bode knew the Milan presentation from his own experience, possibly motivated by a reference by Curjel, who knew of its paradigmatic importance from his reading of Venturi. But although he took up the principle of mounting on stands, Bode did not follow the form chosen by Menichetti as white posts with a square cross-section, which are supported by two thinner bars spread diagonally from the wall. His much more elegant solution with slimmer, black anodized steel tubes, whose cross-section continued without a break up to the wall with a fork, was more due to the suggestion of the similar exhibition designs by Franco Albini, who had introduced this type of presentation into Italian museology. Above all, his reorganization of Genoa’s municipal art collections in the Museo di Palazzo Bianco in 1949-1951 was discussed in contemporary museum discourse as a highly controversial paradigm of a modern art presentation in line with the new aesthetics of empathy, so that it was presented not only in Italian...
but also in German specialist journals (fig. 7). Yet Bode may even have known this display first hand, since in the summer he regularly went to a holiday resort on the Ligurian coast, which he had to travel through Genoa to get to. There historical panel paintings were found mounted on very slender, black anodized steel tubes, which, due to their base in stone components from the museum’s lapidarium, could be freely grouped in the rooms, where they could occasionally turn towards the viewer on his way (fig. 8). Albini himself and Caterina Marcenaro, the curator responsible for the collection, made explicit references to Venturi’s museology and described their display strategy as motivated by his concept of “contemplation.” In 1955 in Kassel, Bode dispensed with the heavy stone bases in Genoa, which were also not necessary for stands close to the wall according to Menichetti’s principle, but in the case of smaller and lighter works he also used Albini’s method of positioning the works freely in space with the help of shorter steel rods with inconspicuous small cross bases to stabilize them. In Genoa, Bode would not only have been able to get to know the form of supports and their multiple uses, but also the use of grids as a means of structuring space. Used in the Palazzo Bianco only in the public storage, Albini’s designs for temporary exhibitions showed further possible uses, the documentation of which by Richard Paul Lohse from 1953 was probably accessible to Bode soon enough. As in Genoa, Albini used a metal lattice frame in a vertical arrangement in an exhibition of historical goldsmith work at the Triennale in Milan in 1936, while in an art presentation in the Pinacoteca di Brera in 1941 he also used it as a horizontal feature (fig. 9), which returns in the documenta, if not in the same shape of a wire grid, but as a wooden lattice (fig. 3), similar to some of Albini’s interior designs for living spaces. Inspired by such Italian models, Bode was not only able to fall back on a new repertoire of design resources. His own conceptualization of his

32 R.P. Lohse, Neue Ausstellungsgestaltung. 75 Beispiele neu- er Ausstellungsf orm, Erlenbach-Zürich 1953. The copy at the university library in Kassel has a stamp of the Werkkunst- schule from the 1950s, the institution at which Bode taught, cf. Grosspietsch, Where Did It All Go Wrong?... cit., pp. 16-17.
33 Mostra dell’antica oreficeria italiana (Milano, VI Triennale, 1936), in Lohse, Neue Ausstellungsgestaltung... cit., pp. 154-157; Mostra di Scipione e del Bianco e Nero (Milano, Pinaco- teca di Brera, 1941), Lohse, Neue Ausstellungsgestaltung... cit., pp. 167-169. In addition, the second exhibition featured freestanding short steel rods with paintings mounted on passe-partouts, as employed in Kassel in 1955 (cf. fig. 5). For the wooden lattice cf. Albini’s Stanza per un uomo (Mi- lano, VI Triennale, 1936); not in Lohse, Neue Ausstellungsgestaltung... cit., but available in interior design magazines.
exhibition practice, which he later subsumed under the term “art of a second-order” as a necessary mediation between the artworks and the viewer, essentially followed the Italian aesthetics of empathy as formulated by Venturi. As there, the aim was to create an atmospheric perceptual framework that should prepare the audience for the intuitive reception of the artistic form, which seemed to be the only legitimate goal of art appreciation. Albini had also described his role as a mediator much earlier using similar words, and Lohse explained to his German readers the guiding effect of his designs as mediation of a formal aesthetic reception. In the face of this apparent correspondence, the crucial difference that sets the German admirers apart from their Italian predecessors is striking. It was a matter of course for Albini to understand his mediating role in the design of exhibitions as an important condition for the democratic opening of the experience of art for the social strata below the educated middle class, which, according to Venturi, should become the decisive target groups of an anti-fascist educational policy. On the other hand, Curjel presented his German-speaking readers with the Italian theorist’s aesthetics of empathy as a pure art-theoretical reflection that seemed detached from any specific political situation. In a similar way, the target group of Bode’s “second order”, the art audience that finds its way into the exhibition, remains completely unspecific, is not socially defined and does not address the issue of social inclusion. This ‘decontextualization’ reduced the new Italian museology to a means to educate the public towards art through the design of exhibitions. In the German context of the experience of National Socialism, this probably tacitly implied an education of the traditional art public to accept modern art, which was intended to break down its generally suspected aversion to modernity. In this sense, the appeal to young people, which is called out again and again in the announcements about the documenta, should also be understood. The hopes of contemporary
museum education rested on the still malleable young people as well, while it explicitly formulated the suspicion that the typical museum audience was hostile to modernity and still shared the rejection that had been asserted in the “degenerate art” campaign. But the transfer of innovative Italian museum theory and practice into a German context was not only aimed at improving the acceptance of modern art. Presented in a historic museum building, it was also a criticism of the exhibition aesthetics of contemporary German art museums in general. The white cube, which had ossified into an institutional norm there, was to be confronted with an alternative paradigm that also offered itself as the better solution for the presentation of historical art. In the eyes of Arnold Bode, it also needed mediation through a display that would enable intuitive, emotional access to its visual properties, which should take precedence over the acquisition of (art)historical knowledge that had previously characterized its reception. A year after the documenta, in 1956, he experimented in the undestroyed Hessisches Landesmuseum in Kassel with a temporary exhibition of a selection of older panel paintings from the Kassel picture gallery, including major works by Rembrandt (fig. 10). As the historical frames had been destroyed in the war, he could design a modern solution with white linen coverings that set the paintings apart from the brightly coloured screens or plastic curtains, changing from group to group, in front of which they floated. Artificial light spots accentuated this presence in line with Curjel’s suggestions. In contrast to the previous year, when Bode’s display had met with general acclaim, published opinion now reacted with horror to the supposed provocation of dealing with historical paintings in this way. Bode’s understanding of the “art of a second order” as universal, applicable to old art as well as new, was not shared by most of his contemporaries. But it helps to understand documenta 1955 as a contribution to a reform of the art museum in a larger sense, an approach that met with a conservative defensive reaction and was therefore not imitated in regular German museum operations at the time, not even when exhibiting modern art. Thus the innovation anticipated by Curjel and Bode did not take place in post-war Germany where museum curators stayed true to their pre-war practice, essentially (and often quite literally) restoring the appearance of the art museum as it had been in the 1930s. The lead of Germany’s museology in the period that had shaped the white cube, now proved an obstacle to advancement, while the current museum revolution in Italy was facilitated by the reluctance to dispense with 19th-century-style installations prior to 1945.

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