

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’. 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 event². The exhibition in 1955 also differed from all subsequent editions in that it was by no means designed as a panorama of predominantly 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 1949³. 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 time⁴. 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 later⁵. 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 appro-

priation. 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 reinterpretation 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 manner⁶.

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, in the build-up of museum collections and in the art criticism of the first post-war decade⁷. 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-



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Fig. 1 A. Bode, *View from room 21 to room 20*
(photo G. Becker, Kassel, *documenta-Archiv, docA, MS, dl, 10011701*; © *documenta Archiv, Kassel*).

¹ For these preconditions see H. KIMPEL, *Documenta. Mythos und Wirklichkeit*, Köln 1997, pp. 88-112. General literature about the history of *documenta* is abundant; further basic accounts include *documenta - Idee und Institution. Tendenzen, Konzepte, Materialien*, herausgegeben von M. Schneckenburger, München 1983; A. CESTELLI GUIDI, *La "documenta" di Kassel. Percorsi dell'arte contemporanea*, Milano 1997; *Documenta zwischen Inszenierung und Kritik: 50 Jahre documenta*, Tagungsband zum Symposium (Evangelischen Akademie Hofgeismar, 27.-30. Oktober 2005), herausgegeben von K. Stengel, H. Radeck, F. Scharf, Hofgeismar 2007; *Documenta. Politics and Art*, exhibition catalogue (Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 18 June 2021-9 January 2022), edited by R. Gross, München-London-New York 2021.

² Monographs of the first *documenta* exhibition are U. WOLLENHAUPT-SCHMIDT, *Documenta 1955. Eine Ausstellung im Spannungsfeld der Auseinandersetzungen um die Kunst der Avantgarde 1945-1960*, Frankfurt am Main 1994; H. KIMPEL, K. STENGEL, *Documenta 1955. Erste internationale Kunstausstellung. Eine fotografische Rekonstruktion*, Bremen 1995; I. WALLACE, *The first documenta, 1955. Die erste documenta 1955*, Ostfildern 2011; *documenta 1955. Ein wissenschaftliches Lesebuch*, herausgegeben von S. Großpietsch, K.U. Hemken, Kassel 2018.

³ For an analysis of the exhibition practice see W. GRASSKAMP, *documenta - Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts*, in *Die Kunst der Ausstellung. Eine Dokumentation dreissig exemplarischer Kunstausstellungen dieses Jahrhunderts*, herausgegeben von B. Klüser, K. Hegewisch, Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 116-125; W. GRASSKAMP, "Degenerate Art" and *Documenta 1. Modernism ostracized and disarmed*, in *Museum Culture. Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, edited by D.J. Sherman, I. Rogoff, London 1994, pp. 163-194; C. KLONK, *Spaces of Experience. Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000*, New Haven-London 2009, pp. 173-189; K.U. HEMKEN, *Kuratorische Steuerung kultureller Diskurse. documenta 1955*, in *Inszenierung und Politik. Szenografie im sozialen Feld*, herausgegeben von R. Bohn, H. Wilharm, Bielefeld 2015, pp. 145-186.

⁴ Accounts of the exhibition practice in Italy include e.g. A. HUBER, *Il museo italiano. La trasformazione di spazi storici in spazi espositivi. Attualità dell'esperienza museografica degli anni '50*, Milano 1997; M.D. EMILIANI, *Per una critica della museografia del Novecento in Italia. Il "saper mostrare" di Carlo Scarpa*, Venezia 2008; M.C. MAZZI, *Musei anni '50. Spazio, forma, funzione*, Firenze 2009.

⁵ For the international perception of Italian museums in the period see A. JOACHIMIDES, *The "efficient museum" in Resistance to the "Dictatorship of the Wall". The Discourse of a new Museum Reform in Western Europe after the Second World War*, "Kunstgeschichte. Open Peer Reviewed Journal", XI, 2020: <https://www.kunstgeschichte-ejournal.net/563/> (consulted 13 May 2023).

⁶ *Die Zähmung der Avantgarde. Zur Rezeption der Moderne in den 50er Jahren*, herausgegeben von G. Breuer, Basel-Frankfurt am Main 1997; with respect to *documenta* especially GRASSKAMP, "Degenerate Art" and *Documenta*... cit.; G. WEDEKIND, *Abstraktion und Abendland. Die Erfindung der "documenta" als Antwort auf "unsere deutsche Lage"*, in *Kunstgeschichte nach 1945. Kontinuität und Neubeginn in Deutschland*, herausgegeben von N. Doll, R. Heftrig, Köln 2006, pp. 165-181.

⁷ J. HELD, *Kunst und Kunstpolitik 1945-49. Kulturaufbau in Deutschland nach dem 2. Weltkrieg*, Berlin 1981; D. SONNTAG, *Zugriff auf die Moderne. Fallstudien zu Kunstwissenschaft und Kunstausstellung um 1950*, Dissertation, Universität Stuttgart, 1999; "So fing man einfach an, ohne viele Worte". *Ausstellungswesen und Sammlungspolitik in den ersten Jahren nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Tagungsband zum Symposium (Köln, Museum Ludwig, 9.-10. November 2012), herausgegeben von J. Friedrich, A. Prinzing, Berlin 2013.

stern community of values, against which Germany had compromised itself in 1933-1945. Ironically, it has recently turned out that many of those involved in the Kassel exhibition of 1955, including its intellectual mentor Werner Haftmann, had successfully masked their own complicity in the Nazi regime before 1945 by identifying with the newly unsuspecting modern art⁸. Many visitors to the first *documenta*, which at that time still had a predominantly German audience, were similarly compromised by active participation or opportunism in the "Third Reich" and were looking for moral relief. In view of this expectation, the detachment of the avant-garde from any explicitly political stance was unavoidable, making possible the martyred profile of cultural freedom as a direct rebuke to the Nazi past as well as the socialist Eastern bloc present⁹. This particular cultural-political orientation of the exhibition was significantly supported by its innovative display. Its originator, Arnold Bode, whose professional career had been suppressed by National Socialism, was one of the few contributors whose rejection of the "Third Reich" cannot be doubted, nor can his early openness to artistic experiments, at the latest when he was an art teacher at a Berlin technical school in 1930-1933¹⁰. It is therefore reasonable to hold his presumed German horizon of experience responsible for the specific way of staging the first *documenta*. However, in the search for comparable exhibition practices, the previous analysis has only been selectively successful. As has been noted recurrently, there is a similarity between the "Abstract Cabinet" that El Lissitzky set up in the Provinzialmuseum Hannover in 1928 and the presentation of Constructivist works by Piet Mondrian and Antoine Pevsner in Kassel in 1955 in front of a black wall (room 16), but it was a rare exception within the exhibition, as much as in museum practice before 1933¹¹. The derivation of another, more often recurring device in Kassel from the practice

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 effect¹². 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 war¹³.

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 reasons¹⁴. Shortly before, Curjel had called for a fundamental reform of exhibition practice in the magazine *Das Werk*, the organ of the Swiss Werkbund¹⁵. 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 it¹⁶.

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 indi-

vidual 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 older 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 space¹⁷.

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 viewer¹⁸.

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 histo-

⁸ M. REDMANN, *Das Flüstern der Fußnoten. Zu den NS-Biografien der documenta Gründer*innen*, “Documenta studien” IX, 2020: https://documenta-studien.de/media/1/documenta_studien_9_Mirl_Redmann.pdf/ (consulted 13 May 2023); C. GENTILE, *Enthüllungen über die Nachkriegszeit. Der Krieg des Dr. Haftmann*, “Süddeutsche Zeitung”, 6 Juni 2021; J. VOSS, *Das Werner-Haftmann-Modell. Wie die documenta zur Bühne der Erinnerungspolitik wurde*, in *Documenta. Politics and Art...* cit., pp. 68-76.

⁹ About the distancing from the Eastern bloc most recently L.B. LARSEN, *Freiheitsglocke. Das kulturelle und politische Programm des “Westens” auf der documenta*, in *Documenta. Politics and Art...* cit., pp. 106-116.

¹⁰ For the exhibition designer cf. B. BECKER, *Arnold Bode. Ein Mann mit Eigenschaften. Studie zu Leben und Werk*, Dissertation, Universität Kassel, 1990; *Arnold Bode. Leben und Werk (1900-1977)*, Ausstellungskatalog (Kassel, 16. Dezember 2000-4. Februar 2001), herausgegeben von M. Heinz, Wolfrahshausen 2000; S. STÖBE, *Arnold Bode. Künstler und Visionär, Begründer der documenta. Eine Biografie*, Kassel 2021.

¹¹ This derivation is argued in GRASSKAMP, *documenta - Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts...* cit., p. 120; KLONK, *Spaces of Experience...* cit., pp. 187-188; alternatively, El Lissitzky’s similar space at the *Internationale Kunstausstellung* in Dresden 1926 could be the inspiration, cf. HEMKEN, *Kuratorische Steuerung...* cit., p. 159.

¹² Hemken, *Kuratorische Steuerung...* cit., pp. 157-158.

¹³ For the exhibition practices during the period of the National Socialist state see especially A. JOACHIMIDES, *Die Museumsreformbewegung in Deutschland und die Entstehung des modernen Museums 1880-1940*, Dresden-Basel 2001, pp. 225-238; KLONK, *Spaces of Experience...* cit., pp. 125-130; for the reestablishment of museums in (West)Germany after 1945 there are so far only contemporary surveys like K. MARTIN, *Renovation of Museums in Germany*, “Museum”, V, 1952, 3, pp. 145-155; E. GÖPEL, *Herbergen der Bilder. Die Alte Pinakothek in München, das Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Köln wieder eröffnet*, “Die Weltkunst”, XXVII, 12, 1957, pp. 14-15.

¹⁴ To this contact cf. *documenta - bauhaus. Vision und Marke. Die Virtuelle Ausstellung*, herausgegeben von B. Jooss: <https://www.documenta-bauhaus.de/de/personen/122/hans-curjel/> (consulted 13 May 2023). Curjel, who had emigrated to Switzerland in 1933, shared Bode’s dislike of the Nazi regime; cf. I. BIGLER-MARSCHALL: *Hans Curjel*, “Theaterlexikon der Schweiz online”: http://tls.theaterwissenschaft.ch/wiki/Hans_Curjel/ (consulted 13 May 2023).

¹⁵ H. CURJEL, *Über einige Museums- und Ausstellungsprobleme*, “Das Werk. Architektur und Kunst”, XL, 1953, 4, pp. 128-132; later supplemented by a more theoretical perspective in Id., *Anmerkungen zum Museumsbau*, “Das Werk. Architektur und Kunst”, XLII, 1955, 9, pp. 269-272. On the position of these texts within a discourse on museum reform cf. JOACHIMIDES, *The “efficient museum”...* cit., p. 2-6.

¹⁶ CURJEL, *Über einige...* cit., p. 129 [Translation by the author].

¹⁷ CURJEL, *Über einige...* cit., p. 130 [Translation by the author].

¹⁸ CURJEL, *Anmerkungen...* cit., p. 272. The corresponding presentation by Bode in Kassel 1955 is mentioned at the same location; see also JOACHIMIDES, *The “efficient museum”...* cit., pp. 5-6.



Fig. 2 A. Bode, Room 19, compartment with works by Max Beckmann (photo G. Becker, Kassel, *documenta-Archiv, docA, MS, d1, 10011697*; © *documenta Archiv, Kassel*).



Fig. 3 A. Bode, Room 21, compartment with works by Emil Nolde (photo G. Becker, Kassel, *documenta-Archiv, docA, MS, d1, 10011703*; © *documenta Archiv, Kassel*).

rial 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 Hera-

klith 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-

¹⁹ On the reconstruction of the museum see S. GROSSPIETSCH, *Where Did It All Go Wrong? Fatum und Faktum der documenta 1955*, in *documenta 1955. Ein wissenschaftliches Lesebuch...* cit., pp. 13-17. In consequence, the prevalent interpretation as a metaphorical "ruin", as for example in KIMPEL, *Documenta. Mythos...* cit., pp. 305-308, seems questionable now. On the pre-war character of the building see among others K.H. WEGNER, *Gründung und Einrichtung des Museums Fridericianum in Kassel, "Hessische Heimat"*, XXVII, 1977, pp. 154-164.

²⁰ CURJEL, *Über einige...* cit., pp. 129-130; CURJEL, *Anmerkungen...* cit., pp. 271-272; understood as a concept of perceptual aesthetics in JOACHIMIDES, *The "efficient museum"...* cit., p. 4.

²¹ These photographs now in Kassel, *documenta-Archiv*, partly published by KIMPEL, STENDEL, *Documenta 1955...* cit.; on the creation of the installation shots cf. most recently HEMKEN, *Kuratorische Steuerung...* cit., p. 155.

²² CURJEL, *Über einige...* cit., pp. 129-130.

²³ H. CURJEL, *Die Formung der documenta*, "Die Innenarchitektur. Zeitschrift für Ausbau, Einrichtung, Form und Farbe", III, 10, 1956, pp. 629-630: 630.

Fig. 4 A. Bode, Room 20, works by Marc Chagall
(photo G. Becker, Kassel, *documenta*-Archiv, docA,
MS, d1, 10011699; © *documenta* Archiv, Kassel).

Fig. 5 A. Bode, Room 28, works by Raoul Dufy
(photo G. Becker, Kassel, *documenta*-Archiv, docA,
MS, d1, 10011707; © *documenta* Archiv, Kassel).

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 being²³.





Fig. 6 G.C. Menichetti, *Exhibition of works by Pablo Picasso, Palazzo Reale, Milan, 1953* (in KELLER, *Die Problematik... cit.*, p. 353).

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 1945²⁴. 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 framework²⁵. Significantly, Venturi illustrated the potential of this strategy with the same example later taken up by Curjel:

Each work should be detached from the wall and presented in such a way that it can be viewed not only in isolation but also under a light that is uni-

que to it. For this purpose, the Roman architect Menichetti designed a very slender vertical stand, fixed at the height of the wall by a horizontal apparatus of variable length. The painting is thus attached to the stand in such a way that it receives the most favourable light, tilted towards the back wall in a way that differs from that of the neighbouring paintings, which contributes greatly to its insulation. If we then add that the background, which was pleated, produced a continuous nuance of chiaroscuro, and that the light was diffused by velum, we understand that the space of isolation surrounds the painting with an atmospheric halo that is very beneficial for its contemplation²⁶.

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 Venturi²⁷. 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 wall²⁸. 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

²⁴ Especially in CURJEL, *Anmerkungen...* cit.; see also JOACHIMIDES, *The "efficient museum"...* cit., p. 9.

²⁵ L. VENTURI, *Il museo-scuola*, "La Nuova Europa", II, 36, 1945, reprint in MAZZI, *Musei anni '50...* cit., pp. 243-246; L. VENTURI, *Il museo, scuola del pubblico*, in *Atti del convegno di museologia organizzato in collaborazione con la Accademia Americana in Roma, Perugia, 18-20 marzo 1955*, Perugia 1955, pp. 31-36; on Venturi's museology cf. for example MAZZI, *Musei anni '50...* cit.

²⁶ L. VENTURI, *Musées et recherche esthétique*, in *Troisième conférence générale de l'ICOM*, Paris 1953, pp. 104-109: 106-107 [Translation by the author].

²⁷ Later, Bode mentioned the impression of this visit, cf. KIMPEL, *Documenta. Mythos...* cit., pp. 297-300. However, the vertical stands were not used in the main hall, preserved as a war ruin to present the painting *Guernica*, as referred to by Kimpel, but in adjoining rooms in front of a textile background, as described by Venturi; illustration of this display in H. KELLER, *Die Problematik der grossen Kunstausstellungen*, "Das Werk. Architektur und Kunst", XLIV, 1957, 10, pp. 351-353: 353.

²⁸ The device by Menichetti published in *Musei*, a cura di C. Bassi, F. Berlanda, G. Boschetti, Milano 1956, pp. 216-217.

²⁹ G.C. ARGAN, *La Galleria di Palazzo Bianco a Genova*, "Metron. Rivista Internazionale di Architettura", VII, 45, 1952, pp. 25-39; L. MORETTI, *Galleria di Palazzo Bianco. Allestimento di Franco Albini*, "Spazio. Rassegna delle arti e dell'architettura", IV, 7, 1952-1953, pp. 31-40; H. KELLER, *Die Neuordnung des Palazzo Bianco in Genua 1950*, "Das Werk. Architektur und Kunst", XL, 1953, 4, pp. 133-136; N. VON HOLST, *Italiens Museen auf neuen Wegen*, "Die Weltkunst",



but also in German specialist journals (fig. 7)²⁹. 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 to³⁰. 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"³¹. 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 enough³². 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 spaces³³. 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

Fig. 7 F. Albini, Re-installation of room 4, Flemish painting 15th century, Museo di Palazzo Bianco, Genoa, 1949-1951 (in ARGAN, *La Galleria di Palazzo Bianco...* cit., p. 33).

XXIV, 1954, 21, pp. 5-7; see also JOACHIMIDES, *The "efficient museum"*... cit., pp. 10-13.

³⁰ Arnold Bode *unframed. Malerei und Graphik des documenta Gründers*, Ausstellungskatalog (Kassel, Museumslandschaft Hessen-Kassel, Neue Galerie, 03. Juni 2022-09. Oktober 2022), herausgegeben von S. Kaiser, S. Schmidt, Kassel 2022, p. 95.

³¹ F. ALBINI, *L'architecture des musées et les musées dans l'urbanisme moderne*, in *Troisième conférence générale de l'ICOM*, Paris 1953, pp. 96-99; C. MARCENARO, *Le concept de musée et la réorganisation du Palazzo Bianco à Gênes/The museum concept and the rearrangement of the Palazzo Bianco, Genoa*, "Museum", VII, 1954, 4, pp. 250-267.

³² R.P. LOHSE, *Neue Ausstellungsgestaltung. 75 Beispiele neuer Ausstellungsform*, Erlenbach-Zürich 1953. The copy at the university library in Kassel has a stamp of the *Werkkunstschule* 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, Pinacoteca di Brera, 1941), LOHSE, *Neue Ausstellungsgestaltung...* cit., pp. 167-169. In addition, the second exhibition featured freestanding short steel rods with paintings mounted on *pass-partouts*, as employed in Kassel in 1955 (cf. fig. 5). For the wooden lattice cf. Albini's *Stanza per un uomo* (Milano, VI Triennale, 1936); not in LOHSE, *Neue Ausstellungsgestaltung...* cit., but available in interior design magazines.

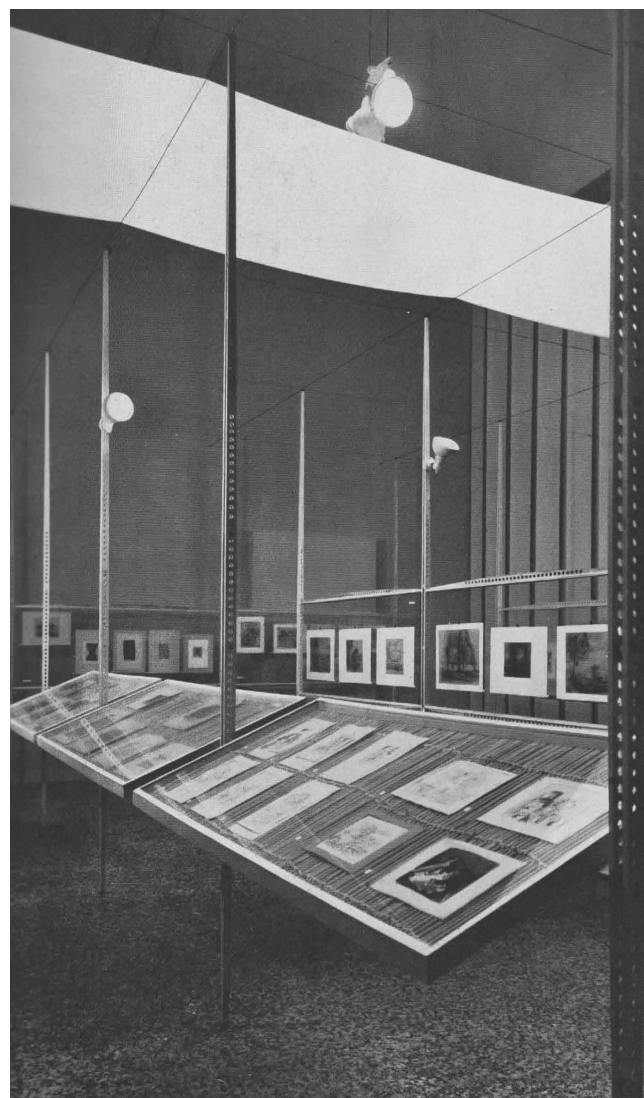


Fig. 8 F. Albini, Re-installation of room 10, Italian painting 17th century, Museo di Palazzo Bianco, Genoa, 1949-1951 (in R. ALOI, *Musei. Architettura, Tecnica*, Milano 1962, p. 179).

Fig. 9 F. Albini, Exhibition 'Bianco e Nero', Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, 1941 (in LOHSE, *Neue Ausstellungsgestaltung... cit.*, p. 168).

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 Venturi³⁴. 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 reception³⁵. 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 be-

come 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

³⁴ *Das große Gespräch. Interview mit Professor Arnold Bode*, “Magazin Kunst”, IV, 1964, 2, pp. 35-38; reprint in Arnold Bode. *Schriften und Gespräche*, herausgegeben von H. Georgsdorf, Berlin 2007, pp. 139-142; most recently discussed by HEMKEN, *Kuratorische Steuerung... cit.*, pp. 170-172.

³⁵ ALBINI, *L'architecture... cit.*, p. 97; LOHSE, *Neue Ausstellungsgestaltung... cit.*, p. 154.



Fig. 10 A. Bode, *Exhibition of works by Rembrandt van Rijn*, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Kassel, 1956 (in Arnold Bode, *documenta Kassel. Essays*, edited by L. Orzechowski, Kassel 1986, p. 121).

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” campaign³⁶.

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 of 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 Rembrandt³⁷ (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 floa-

ted. 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 way³⁸. 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.

³⁶ A typical example is H.F. GEIST, *Erfahrungen bei Ausstellungen moderner Kunst*, “Das Werk. Architektur und Kunst”, XXXIX, 1952, 9, pp. 298-300.

³⁷ H. VOGEL, *Gemälde der Kasseler Galerie kehren zurück*, “Hessische Heimat”, VIII, 1956-57, 2, pp. 2-4; G.M. VONAU, *Vom Menschenbild zum Menschlichen. Die Kasseler Gemäldegalerie und die 63 aus Wien heimgekehrten Bilder*, “Hessische Hefte” VI, 1956, 4, pp. 139-145; *Kassels “Klassische documenta” eröffnet [...]*, “Kasseler Post”, 19 March 1956 (with illustrations).

³⁸ E. BUCHNER, *Wie man Bilder nicht hängen soll*, “Bayerische Staatszeitung”, 16 Juni 1956; B. REIFENBERG, *Das rechte Licht für Rembrandt. Die Kasseler Frage: Fridericianum oder Galerie?*, “Die Gegenwart”, XI, 1956, 10, pp. 311-313.