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# Editorial:

## Exhibitions and the Human Factor

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## Editorial: Exhibitions and the Human Factor

This issue of *Art East Central* focuses on exhibitions of central and eastern European art and design both in the locality and in other countries of Europe. Four of the articles originate in a workshop held at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art in Paris on 4 and 5 April 2022, under the theme 'Exhibitions, New Nations and the Human Factor, 1873–1939' as part of the European Research Council advanced grant project *Continuity / Rupture: Art and Architecture in Central Europe, 1918-1939*.<sup>1</sup> The project examines legacies of the Habsburg monarchy in the visual arts and culture of central Europe, and scrutinizing world's fairs and international exhibitions has been one of the main themes. The scope of the papers presented at the Paris conference was wide in terms of their geographical interest, but a number of speakers explored topics embedded in the region of interest of this journal. A selection of them that were reworked into articles appears here. They are complemented by another study of exhibitionary cultures that explores the early history of art exhibiting in Prague.

Exhibitions of art and industry provide rich material for investigating the visual cultures of central and eastern Europe. The new political entities here that came to existence as nation states in the early twentieth century sought to legitimise their identities internationally through participation at world's fairs and large international exhibitions. They also tried to do this internally, in the eyes of their own populations, through consolidation of the collections in national museums and galleries of art and design. Many scholars have examined large international exhibitions and world's fairs with their agendas, ideologies and the participations from various entities thoroughly in the past decades. Recently, however, attention has been turned to less exposed aspects of participation in the exhibitionary structures. As a result, they contribute to a fuller and more complex picture of these events. The involvement of the countries of central and eastern Europe, which underwent radical political recomposition in the early twentieth century, has become a key topic. Their motivations can be explored by focusing on the content of their pavilions, or through an examination of the various agents involved in exhibitions. One of the aims of the articles in this issue is to analyse the different roles individuals and groups played in organising, staging, performing or viewing of international exhibitions.

In his study *Fleeting Cities. Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siecle Europe*, Alexander T. Geppert identified five main types of actors whose individual agency could be detected in exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> There were the initiators, who proposed an exhibition or involvement in an exhibition, and consisted of public or private individuals, associations and groups. Then there were the official organisers, who included commissioners and country representatives amongst their number, and who were in charge of the actual organisation in the place of

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1) This workshop was made possible with funding from the project (ERC Project Number 786314).

2) Alexander C. T. Geppert, 'Introduction: How to Read an Exposition,' *Fleeting Cities. Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siecle Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 5-6.

exhibition. Geppert includes exhibitors and curators in this group too. Local and foreign active participants, like employees and performers including indigenous people, formed another group. And those who reported on the exhibitions, i.e. reviewers and critics, to different audiences and in different media, fell into a separate category, while the audiences and visitors – local, national, international – engaged with the events either in person or via mass media. The division into these categories, is indeed only cursory and the different roles, one might add, often overlapped. Paying attention to the contribution of such individuals and bodies, however, informs our understanding of how exhibitions, as the physical spaces as well as their ideological meanings, were constructed. After all, an exhibition space, like any other space, can be conceived of as a symbolic as well as a physical category, constructed by human agency.<sup>3</sup>

Agency is one of the key topics that authors in this issue of *Art East Central* address through the lens of gender, regional and national identity as well as religious belief. They focus on the relationships between the official narratives of exhibitions, as devised by the organisers, and those constructed by participants, who helped to create the meaning and content of the exhibits. In so doing, the papers here offer an original approach; they move the discussion away from the habitual focus on the state apparatus and formal ideologies that often prioritise the role of official authorities and see them as the dominant agent. The shift in this issue of the journal is towards what we might term the ‘human factor’, in other words, the individuals or groups involved, whether creative individuals, employees, interest groups or their representatives. The authors of the papers in this issue explore central and eastern European participation at two large exhibitions in Paris and one in Rome, delving into displays of applied and decorative arts as well as fine art, while studying their creators and promoters.

Julia Secklehner addresses the questions of gender in relation to the display in the Austrian pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts that took place in Paris in 1925. The role of women in world’s fairs and great exhibitions like this one was for a long time overlooked, even though women held many positions in all stages of the organisation process. Despite the efforts of various recent scholars to restore the gender balance in exhibitions research, in many cases women still need to be recognised as autonomous creators. Secklehner explores the contribution of the craftswomen of the Wiener Werkstätte, like Rosalia Rothansl, Vally Wieselthier and Emmy Zweybrueck-Prohaska, to the Austrian pavilion and the reception their work received in the press. Secklehner shows how nostalgia for the Habsburg monarchy surpassed a vision of modern Austrian state, which became also visible in the focus of the displayed objects like ceramic and textiles on the middle-class consumer.

The question of class and democracy in exhibitionary practices resonates in other contributions to this issue. It is prominent in two following articles that both focus on Soviet participation at two different exhibitions in Paris. In the current climate of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is pertinent to examine how Russia’s predecessor, the Soviet Union, formed and forged its identity using exhibition spaces. Mira Kozhanova continues Secklehner’s interest in the 1925 Decorative arts exhibition, while Elizaveta Berezina explores the 1937 International

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3) Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith., Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 1-11.

Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life. The Soviet contributions to both fairs have indeed featured prominently in studies of exhibitions, but the focus has been rather limited. In the case of the 1925 event, scholarship has tended to reduce the Soviet pavilion to an example of the constructivist experimentation of Konstantin Melnikov and a few other avant-garde artists, while focus on the ideological competition between Germans and the Soviets in architecture and art has dominated debates of the 1937 exhibition. Going beyond these most obvious expressions of Soviet identity at two different historic moments, Kozhanova and Berezina uncover other, no less important, elements of such identities.

Focusing on the display of folk art in 1925, Kozhanova emphasises the crucial place craft had in the Soviet presentation. Located next to contemporary works of art and in a constructivist pavilion, the so-called *kustar* (cottage) art of Soviet Russia and rural crafts of further Soviet Republics evoked local traditions, the territorial immensity of the Union and links between Russia and Europe. Soviet crafts became an important vehicle of Soviet identity as well as a useful commodity for international markets. As Berezina points out, such practices were extended to the 1937 Exposition. The Moscow-based Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry was responsible for establishing closer contacts with artisans all around the Soviet Union. It was also charged with arranging a collection of Soviet crafts at international displays. The Institute's 'experts' consisted of different individuals and groups of the Soviet art industry: representatives of cultural and trade organizations, researchers, art historians, and artisans who were a diverse group of individuals with different expertise, experience and motivations.

Motivation is an important factor to consider when examining the involvement of individuals and groups in exhibitions and world's fairs. Researchers have mostly focused on the official goals for taking part endorsed by the state and driven by the need to find trading and diplomatic partners and present oneself culturally. However, Joanna Wolańska turns attention to further issues in relation to Poland and its part in the World Exhibition of the Catholic Press that took place in Roma in 1936. Wolańska argues that the state – in her case, Poland – was not always the main organizer of the national participation in such events. The main actor in her examination of the Press exhibition was the Polish Catholic Church, specifically, bishop Stanisław Adamski. Adamski devised the Polish display, the main feature of which was a painting by Jan Henryk Rosek *Polonia – Sanctorum Mater et Scutum Christianitatis* (Poland – Mother of the Saints and Shield of Christianity) that featured life-size figures of important personalities from Polish history, King John III Sobieski and Marshall Józef Piłsudski, representatives of the Polish state, without the government actually being involved. Although the Catholic Press exhibition was not a world's fair per se, it was organised with a similar ambition of bringing together international participants united by the same belief.

As a medium, exhibitions have always been more than displays of art. The four articles from the Parisian workshop are complemented here by a text in which Pavla Machalíková explores how exhibition space was formed in early nineteenth-century Prague. Exploring early art and trade exhibitions in Bohemia, she argues that exhibitions became established as sites where artworks entered the public sphere and where spaces of interaction between the individual actors of the art world, its economy and politics, opened up for the first. Examining in detail

the art exhibition that took place in Prague's Kampa island in 1832 and was put together by a wealthy individual, Joseph Alois Klar, Machalíková points to the innovative distribution and design of the exhibition space, which deliberately applied contemporary theories of colour, lighting and vision. Alongside these advancements in exhibitionary practice and the initiative of the exhibition's patron, Machalíková also stressed the role of the modern public. Ultimately, the art exhibition of 1832 is another reminder of the class aspect and the human factor that have shaped exhibitions, whether national or international, in all their stages. The explorations of patrons and the public, institutions and individuals, as well as artists and amateur craftspeople in the following articles have their own motivations: to enhance understanding of exhibitions as spaces where the active involvement of human beings affects every aspect of the display.



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