

Space is the Place
The Exhibition as a Microcosm
Marianne Hultman, 2016



Imagine three adjoining gallery rooms, each around 50 square metres and just over three metres high. The rooms are located on the second floor of the oldest remaining building in Kvadraturen, the most ancient part of the city of Oslo – a red brick house completed in 1626 in Dutch baroque style for councillor Lauritz Hansen. The second floor is home to Oslo Kunstforening, and the rooms have been used for exhibitions for the past 80 years.

Then picture a group of artworks, which are to be arranged to form an exhibition. They need to relate to each other whilst maintaining their integrity and autonomy. Artworks have inherent concepts based partly upon the space and time in which they were created – each work needs to maintain these concepts, while also suggesting larger concepts as they interrelate with other works. An



exhibition is an experiment, wherein these three conceptual layers are tested out – the inherent concepts of the individual works, the collective concepts they make between them, and the formation of a new relationship with the public in the present moment. The works' placement in space is crucial in this relationship.

Space and time, or space-time, is of fundamental importance in our understanding of the physical universe.¹ When it comes to exhibitions, space is the place,² yet little attention is given to either the influence of space on artworks or the visitor's physical experience of the exhibition in time – despite the fact that our understanding of a work changes depending on where and when it is displayed. A contemporary art exhibition should encompass the expanded relationship between artworks, the architectural space, the body of the viewer and, importantly, time. Art criticism rarely acknowledges this relationship, and the curator rarely reflects on the exhibition as a spatial construct in catalogues and other related texts – it is as if the exhibition space was neutral, an empty shell.

Natalie Hope O'Donnell's PhD thesis 'Space as Curatorial Practice' addresses exactly this issue – the exhibition as a spatial construct.³ Based on three examples of exhibitions in the 1970s – 'Ny kunst i tusen år' (New Art for a Thousand Years), 'Vår verden av ting – objekter' (Our World of Things – Objects) and 'Norsk middelalderkunst' (Norwegian Medieval Art), all shown at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Bærum outside Oslo – she explores the art of arranging works spatially into an installation, and the function of the physical support structure of the exhibition space in the curatorial argument.⁴

As a further example of this idea, I include Eline McGeorge's exhibition 'As Spaces Fold, Companions Meet' (January to February 2016) [installation images pp. 179-184] at Oslo Kunstforening, for which I was the curator. The show included works from several different series ranging from 2003 to 2015, many of which had not been exhibited within the same space before. The folding of time was both a visual and thematic motif, and the show also made reference to science fiction-inspired travel, with a number of fictional and real characters meeting and assembling into new constellations from different spaces and times.

McGeorge's work encompasses themes of alienation and hybridisation, combining abstraction with concrete references and documentary, with allusions to democratic and environmental issues, the legacy of feminism and science fiction. These themes emerge through drawing as a key medium for the development of animations, collages, artist books, weaves, sculptural elements, moving images and sound that all interrelate to one another.

McGeorge usually presents her multimedia series of work as separate projects, but for this exhibition I wanted to present a broader narrative – firstly to present new relationships between the different bodies of work and how they might create new concepts, but also to get a better understanding of McGeorge's oeuvre.

For McGeorge, considering space is a fundamental part of her practice. She prepared a model of the exhibition in the 3D-modelling program SketchUp, which helped her to formulate where the different groups of works should go and where division walls could be placed. The high volume of works, and the fact that some of them had never been in the same space before, made it necessary to plan possible placements in advance. But to translate these ideas into real space isn't a given – they have to be tested, contested and sometimes adjusted.

The artist, of course, stands closest to their work. The curator liaises with the artist in relation to the institution, the artworks, the space and the mediation with the audience. Here I would also like to highlight the technician, a profession that continues to be undervalued, if even mentioned.⁵ The dialogue between curator and technician is invaluable, something I realised as soon as I started working as a curator at Norrköpings Konstmuseum in Sweden in the early 2000s. There the dialogue would be between the curator and the artist and the curator and the technician. At Oslo Kunstforening, the artist, curator and technician work closely together during the whole installation process – in the case of McGeorge's exhibition, installation manager Martin White and





technical manager Pablo Castro – and all possess spatial skills that are crucial to the outcome.⁶

This dialogue isn't a given, for either the technician or the artist, which is strange considering that many artists also work as technicians to support themselves.⁷ As a professional, the technician has crucial knowledge about the given space in relation to support structures and technological solutions, as well as experience of the gallery space over the course of many exhibitions. Their approach is crucial and supplements that of the curator and the artist, and this joint base of experience needs to be established for each exhibition.

The artist generally has an idea about the placement of the works in relation to each other. This is the foundation for the first stage, the exhibition's spatial construct. The curator in turn relates to the exhibition space on the basis of the narrative, rhythm and pattern of movement in the space. Technicians possess knowledge of what is possible in the exhibition space. The deeper the dialogue is between the team members, the more precise the result. Creating the conditions for this dialogue is part of the curator's professional practice.

For McGeorge, the use of partition walls is an important part of presenting her work in installation. The walls assist the interrelation between works of several different media and are designed to embody the work in space. For this exhibition, she presented an aesthetic proposal of what could work, while White made sketches for how the walls could be built and function in the space. At the end, a long partition wall was placed in the first gallery room, and support structures for two video and wall-based works were placed in the other two rooms. Castro, with primary

responsibility for technology, oversaw the film formatting, lighting conditions and equipment best suited for the display of the video works.

The second stage occurs when the exhibition structures are more or less in place and the works are brought into the space. It is now that the negotiating process begins. During this phase, the exhibition space often seems too small to accommodate all of the artworks.



The following phase is the most stressful and challenging one – best described as the chaos phase. This is when the artworks resist the space, their suggested placement as well as each other, asserting themselves and forming antagonistic relationships. The works then start to indicate where they themselves want to be placed. And this is where things start to become interesting.

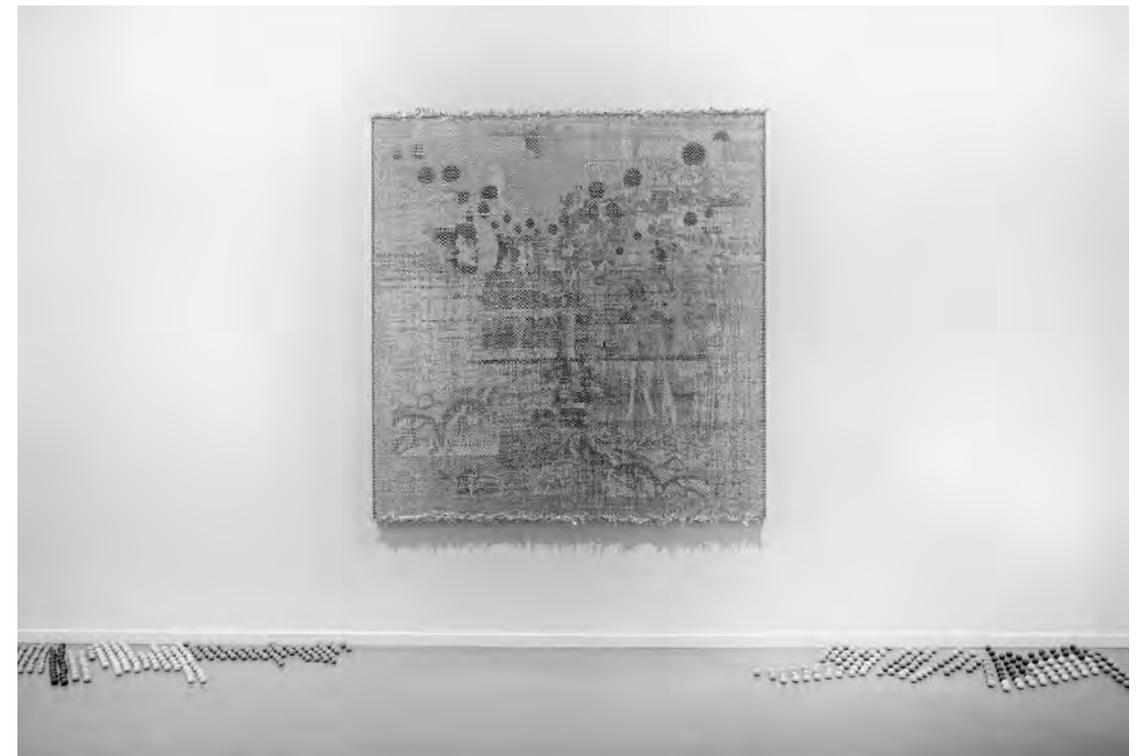
In McGeorge's case, works were assembled from Berlin, London and Oslo. The significant timespan between them contributed to the difficulty in predicting what would happen when they occupied the same space and time. McGeorge tried out the placement of the artworks in various sketches. Starting with a model provides a certain predictability, but reality often comes with surprises – artworks often behave differently in space and time than first imagined. When a work of art is in the studio, for example, it has a certain presence. When the work is placed in a different context,



its presence changes – artworks are highly influenced by their surroundings, especially within the exhibition context.

It is apparent when a piece doesn't work in a suggested placement – it remains unresolved. You then have to help it find its rightful place. You carry it around in the space, try it out here and there to see what happens, how the work reacts to its new location, and this requires time and patience. For an artist it is quite unusual to have the amount of time that is needed for this process, something McGeorge stressed on several occasions – she had never experienced an exhibition space as invested in this phase of the installation process as Oslo Kunstforening. A full installation team followed the artist through several days of the chaos phase, installing, re-installing and adjusting the placement of the works. When a work is accurately positioned it is brought into life. It begins to relate to other works and new connections between the works are revealed. These connections, I would argue, are unique and impossible to predict in advance. The process requires a special kind of sensitivity.

Stage three is to finalise the exact specifications of the artworks' placement. To take a very simple example, if you place a painting or a photograph on a wall, the balance of the wall and gallery space changes when you move the work ten centimetres up or down, left or right. You need to be familiar with the scale of the space in relation to the body. It's all about creating an entire installation, creating equilibrium between artwork, body, space and time. The working process is incredibly complex, with a vast number of possibilities – some artworks look great wherever you place them, while others require meticulous accuracy.



During the installing process the exhibition space is highly charged – the artworks in combination with the movement within the space, the building of support structures, the discussions within the team. By the time the exhibition opens to the public, one can sense the fully charged space. But usually the energy begins to seep out after a couple of weeks. The visitors help to recharge the space, as well as other activities such as tours and artist talks. On the other hand, it's often at the end of an exhibition that you really start to grasp it, to build an understanding and language around it – when the accumulated understanding is at its highest. The concepts of space and time become muddled at this point. In McGeorge's case, this became even more apparent because of her interest in folded time. If you imagine the world from outer space you realise that everything exists at the same time – day and night, the sun and the moon, all hours, all seasons, all knowledge. There is no beginning nor end.

Throughout the installation period, the team builds up a responsiveness that comes from their exposure to the works and their embodied understanding of the space. This sensitivity can be compared to the intuition of a connoisseur. As with all experience-based knowledge, it is situated in the body. Some say that the function of art institutions is changing, that in the future there will be no need for exhibitions in our digital world.⁸ I would argue, however, that the exhibition format is highly relevant today, as it provides us with an opportunity to extend our senses in space – expanding our intellect into the body. It's with our body that we relate to the world.

And some believe the curator's role is outdated, that today anyone can call themselves a curator – it's just a question of making personal choices, something we do all the time.⁹ But curating is about much more than that. The word curator comes from the Latin *curare* – to take care of. The curator's professional palette is wide. It varies depending on where they work – in a museum or a gallery, if they are freelancing or working as an artist. However, it always involves caretaking in some way, and being an intermediary – between the artist and the institution, the artist and the audience, the space and the artwork, and the space and its audience.

In this essay, I have tried to illustrate how the institution can give time to the consideration of space and space to the coexistence of time. I argue that the exhibition can be a unique vehicle for the experience of space and time. And if it is properly considering both, it will always be relevant. This is what's lacking in catalogues, or in online presentations of artworks and exhibitions. The curatorial argument for the future should perhaps be the renegotiation and

reestablishment of the exhibition space as a spatial practice for experiment and interaction between artwork, body, space and time. By properly considering these aspects, the exhibition can formulate new structures and arguments that will equip us all for the future. Space is literally the place.



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1 Space-time is the mathematical model that does not separate the three dimensions of space and the dimension of time, but sees them as one continuum – one coordinate that specifies the precise location of an event.

2 *Space is the Place* is an Afrofuturist sci-fi movie released in 1974, directed by John Coney and written by Sun Ra and Joshua Smith. The term “space is the place” is used in this essay both in reference to McGeorge's interest in the sci-fi genre, as well as a statement on the importance of the exhibition space as a pillar in artistic and curatorial practice.

3 Natalie Hope O'Donnell, 'Space as Curatorial Practice: the Exhibition as a Spatial Construct. *Ny kunst i tusen år* (1970), *Vår verden av ting – objekter* (1970) and *Norsk middelalderkunst* (1972) at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter', Oslo School of Architecture and Design, 2016.

4 Hope O'Donnell concludes that the relationship between the artwork, space and viewer was highlighted by the minimalists in the late 1960s, partly inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (Hope O'Donnell, pp. 26 ff.) However, arguably one of the first artworks dealing with the embodiment of space and time was Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* of 1951 – panels on which the world could be projected, which could be read as a premonition of time-based art (Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, Doubleday, 1980, pp. 65, 71).

5 In her thesis, Hope O'Donnell discusses the exhibition designer, rather than the technician. She argues that museums and other art institutions tend to outsource the physical exhibition arrangement to exhibition designers. The authorship, the curatorial argument in the exhibition space, risks being lost. The technician is not mentioned as part of the installation crew. 'Space as Curatorial Practice', pp. 4 ff, 35 ff.

6 I would like to thank Martin White for our conversations and his invaluable input during the writing of this essay.

7 Both Martin White and Pablo Castro are artists, and have great experience in installing exhibitions.

8 A recent example is Lars-Erik Hjertröm Lappalainen's features over the past year in *Kunstkritikk*, where he describes how “the intimacy between art and exhibition found in the contemporary art installation format is about to dissolve. Young artists do not seem to work with the exhibition as a final step in the realisation of the work of art, and ‘the exhibition as a medium’ within curatorial practice has become an interior design theme”. *Kunstkritikk*, 11 December 2016.

9 A similar discussion came up in the early 2000s, about the exhibition versus the exhibition catalogue. Some argued that exhibitions were overrated, and that the catalogue could replace the exhibition altogether.