

## No one will visit the grave of a curator\*

About *Exposiciones y comisariado. Relatos cruzados*  
by Olga Fernández López

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### Abstract

*Exposiciones y comisariado. Relatos cruzados* by Olga Fernández López (Cátedra, 2020) is a singular and original contribution to the genre of exhibitions histories. It addresses the historical dimension of exhibitions as complex dispositifs of mediation, without framing a canon of historical exhibitions, nor a mere deconstruction of the value of art.

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*Exposiciones y comisariado. Relatos cruzados* by Olga Fernández López (Cátedra, 2020) is the proof that we are ready for an art history as medialogy. That is, an understanding of the history of art along with the media that shape it<sup>1</sup>. With media I don't refer to the TV monitors by Nam June Paik, nor to the incursions of Dora García in the world website —what has been called art of the new media—, nor even to the previous *pictorial art* that Clement Greenberg coined. With them, I mean the media that sustain the discourses of art, those who have an impact on modelling its narratives, which update the historical perspectives according to moments and contexts, which convey their bets and exclusions, which take their findings and reaffirm them as milestones.

"Exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most of art becomes known" wrote Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson and Sandy Nairne in a pioneer anthology of curatorial studies (1996: 2). We can add that exhibitions are also *the* medium of art history: when it comes to institute a new value in art, or to recover one that was once discarded, or to erase another one from the map, the impact that is achieved with an exhibition is generally much higher than that of a lecture, a university seminar, or even a book. Even though, at one time or another, it will be necessary to complement an exhibition with these or other means, holding an exhibition (whatever format) has to do with conveying the material dimension of the work of art with the public sphere, with generating an agora in which to testify its value in open, as well as articulating it with the institutions of art, both discursively and systemically; that is to say, with its exhibiting the work becomes an actor of the art system that is presumed to have agency to influence the course of things.

However, since Mary Anne Staniszewsky's foundational book *The Power of Display* (1998), the lament that the formalist approach that has prevailed throughout the 20th-century art has led to the repression of exhibitions in the prevailing narratives of art history has been operating for at least two decades. Even worse, while formalism has been recognized everywhere for years as a perspective that is entirely insufficient for the analysis of art, neither curatorial studies, nor more academic historiography have managed to find alternative approaches when it comes to recovering exhibitions from oblivion.

Fernández López considers that, in the attempts to find a history of exhibitions, "what has prevailed are publications based on summations of exhibitions constructed by individual files, that do not try to establish guiding threads between them" (2020: 17). Indeed, in previous cases such as Bruce Altshuler (1994), Anna María Guasch (1997), as well as in Hans Ulrich Obrist regarding curating history (2008), contributions tend to be isolated in order to articulate narratives of a marked canonical character, which limits the possibility to give an account of exhibitions as complex dispositifs of mediation —should we talk in this regard of a revenge of formalism?

In contrast, Fernández López offers an exploration at the heart of a history that, recognizing itself as paradoxical —a history about the scaffolding of history— uses all the counterintuitive potentiality of this fact to articulate a set of stories that are challenging, both in relation to art history and the emerging history of exhibitions. It is a collection of genealogies in the most Nietzschean and Foucaultian sense of the term, in which data are freed from its chronological bond and are instead imbued with historiographic reflection. Works and exhibitions fluctuate chapter after chapter, articulated either as causes, either as consequences of each other: if mediation is the condition of possibility of art or if it is its immediate effect, it is a Gordian knot that Fernández López will not let unravel so easily, but becomes the true engine of a perspective of renewal of literature in art<sup>2</sup>.

There is not a proposal of an alternative canon, but there is neither a mere deconstruction of the value of art. It is not formalism applied to the exhibition medium, but neither a deterministic sociology of art. Critique to the white cube does not linger, but a considerably more complex account of art's spatial policies is documented. The 1960s and 1970s are not demystified or re-mystified (to continue Paul O'Neill's terminology, 2012). Conversely, the curating contributions made in the 1980s are valued. She does not consider curators just mere authors of exhibitions, but neither their identity is diluted in a neutral and anonymous concept of mediation — instead, an interesting equidistant solution is rehearsed when the role of

curating is identified with a *discursive mediation* that has become inescapable for contemporary art.

Fernández López recognizes the critical and instituting potential of curating, at the same time that she proposes round trips between the alleged alternatives and the spaces of power, including political propaganda. The author has made a firm effort to locate contributions beyond Western geography, while recognizing the colonial rule as something that has been key to the irradiation of avant-garde artistic languages around the world. Not all of the works, exhibitions or curators mentioned are relevant or exemplary, however the book stresses the implications of situations without apparent continuity at their immediate time. And something that is not negligible: even if in the text she practices a genre that does not consider history at all to be transparent, the result is a clairvoyant book with a crystalline writing, which meets the expectations of being an academic tool—which is the signature of Cátedra manuals.

Perhaps the most surprising element is that such an exercise has occurred in the Spanish context, where the tradition of curatorial studies is practically non-existent. Fernández López's contribution far exceeds what would be to fill a gap. The only mark of this omission is the book's scarcity of local case studies. It can be read as an irrefutable sign of the research that remains to be done here around the history of curating, for which this book is going to surely be a stimulus.

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## Notes

\* *No one will visit the grave of a curator* is an expression from Tom Eccles quoted by Tirdad Zolghadr (2016: 244).

<sup>1</sup> As a free interpretation of Régis Debray's concept, with *medialogy*, I don't refer to the study of the technologies that are recognized as mass media, but to the examination of reality from the perspective that there are not ontologies that are autonomous. That is, from a *medialogical* perspective all entities are susceptible of acting as each other medium.

<sup>2</sup> Methodologically, Fernández López departs from of a reassessment of Martha Ward's contribution (1996) to the research of exhibitions, which still counts as one of the most orientative guidelines:

Ward points to four aspects that are interrelated in exhibition dispositifs, that could lead to independent approaches. Exhibitions can be studied as generators of public spheres, as discursive and representation realms, as dispositifs that produce psychological and social experiences, and as production formats capable of determining artistic practices. [...] This book will emphasize in each case the most convenient approach, never exclusive, for the advancement of the stories that are proposed. (Fernández López 2020: 16-17)