

The construction of MOMA's visual culture through the history of its exhibitions

Mary Anne Staniszewski

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MACBA Auditorium

A few statements from and about Mary Anne Staniszewski's *The Power of Display*

1.

“Art historians, traditionally, have implicitly accepted the autonomy of the artwork and ignored what Mary Anne Staniszewski calls ‘the power of display’. In this examination of installation design as an aesthetic medium and cultural practice, Staniszewski offers the first history of exhibitions at the most powerful and influential modern art museum, The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Focusing on over two hundred photographs of key exhibitions at MoMA from its founding in 1929 through the 1990s, Staniszewski documents and deciphers an essential chapter of twentieth-century art and culture and provides a historical and theoretical framework for a primary area of contemporary aesthetic practice, installation-based art.

Staniszewski treats installations as creations that manifest values, ideologies, politics, and of course aesthetics. Incorporating analysis of display techniques used in department stores, natural history museums, non-Western art galleries, and the international avant-gardes' exhibitions of the first half of the century, she makes visible both the explicit and covert meanings found in exhibitions. Some of the questions she addresses are: What sorts of viewers do different types of installations ‘create’? How do exhibition designs affect the meanings and receptions of specific objects, images, artifacts, and buildings when they are displayed? How do installations shape the viewer’s experience of the cultural ritual of a museum visit? How does an amnesia regarding exhibition design affect art history, the art world, and collective cultural memories?”

Fragment of the presentation text of Mary Anne Staniszewski's *The Power of Display* on its publisher's website [<http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?type=2&tid=8169>]

2.

“A work of art, when publicly displayed, almost never stands alone: it is always an element within a permanent or temporary exhibition created in accordance with historically determined and self-consciously staged installation conventions.”

Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1998, p. xxi.

3.

“Mary Anne Staniszewski’s *The Power of Display* is notable for having played a critical role in integrating exhibition-making within a larger discourse. The book attempts to unravel the hidden complicity between museum and department store strategies of display through the rich history of conflicting ideologies behind the seemingly neutral whiteness of gallery spaces. But as she points out, the same display techniques are also at play in television, entertainment, information, and beyond, extending to determine how things appear in the world and in the environment. And it is through the development of shared concepts of “public” or “citizen” that these techniques are produced by viewers and institutional structures alike, affecting the meaning of things and shaping our understanding of culture.”

Céline Condorelli, “Life Always Escapes”, *e-flux Journal*, no. 10, 11/2009, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/92>

Fragment from an interview with Mary Anne Staniszewski by Gerd Elise Mørland and Bale Amundsen

“Gerd Elise Mørland and Heidi Bale Amundsen: You have criticized MoMA and major American art institutions for separating art from life through an object-oriented white-cube aesthetic, and for thereby neutralizing the political potential of the exhibitions. How can the autonomous structures of the museum be overthrown, and can the curator play a considerable part in it?

Mary Anne Staniszewski: In the case of MoMA: during its early years, the MoMA was more of an open text and open to cultural influences, but in recent decades, it has turned inward, becoming more autonomous and isolated in terms of the spectrum of possibilities for art and culture. Of course there have been some exceptions to this, but generally this holds true. And in this sense, the museum is in crisis. (...) Curating has political potential in that it is one type of media that contributes to public discourses and the public domain. An exhibition -- including those in smaller or alternative spaces-- has the potential to seep, spread, influence, transform and change culture. Therefore I feel that curators have a responsibility to engage with the critical issues of our time. (...)

Gerd Elise Mørland and Heidi Bale Amundsen: Do you consider processual and performative curatorial strategies more effective tools for causing political change than the object-based exhibition?

Mary Anne Staniszewski: In regards to the museum, I would not go one way or the other. A museum should not be devoted only to preserving, presenting and archiving the object, but I don't think it should be only textbased, performative and interventionist either --with no objects and no collection. A truly radical and vital museum would embrace the full spectrum of the tradition of artistic practice and the full spectrum of current possibilities. (...) What's important in curating is eloquence of expression, and first and foremost is the vitality of the questions asked. The curatorial project must fit the needs of a particular moment: What kind of exhibitions do we need right now? What voices do we need to hear?"

Gerd Elise Mørland and Heidi Bale Amundsen, "Denial, Delusion and Curating in the U.S. Interview with Mary Anne Staniszewski", *OnCURATING*, no. 4, 2010, pp. 2-3, http://www.on-curating.org/documents/oncurating_issue_0410.pdf

Mary Anne Staniszewski (Ph.D., Art History, Graduate Center, City University of New York) is Associate Professor, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, New York. She investigates art, media, and culture in relation to political and social perspectives. Her work takes the form of writing, editing, collaborative curatorial practices, and, more frequently in the past, collaborative artists projects. She has written for a diverse range of academic, art world, and general interest publications for more than twenty-five years. Her major research and writing projects form a "trilogy" of interdisciplinary investigations of modern art and culture as articulations of the modern self. Staniszewski is currently working on the third area of investigation, a multi-volume work, which is an analysis of the historical and contemporary sense of self in the United States, featuring three key themes: race; sex (gender); and life and death.

Staniszewski is also the Director of a "Curatorial Incubator" at Exit Art, New York, which gives young and emerging curators, artists, and scholars opportunities to produce exhibitions dealing with critical issues not being adequately addressed by the mainstream art world. In addition to the Curatorial Incubator projects, Staniszewski is currently collaborating with Exit Art's directors and staff on an exhibition and symposium dealing with contemporary slavery that will be held in 2011.

<http://www.arts.rpi.edu/pl/faculty-staff/mary-anne-staniszewski>

Selected publications by Mary Anne Staniszewski

Executive editor and contributor, "The Times They Are A-Changin'," *Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures, 1960s to Now*, exhibition catalogue curators/editors, Dara Greenwald and Josh MacPhee, New York and Oakland, CA, Exit Art and AK Press, forthcoming 2010.

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Compiled by Karin Jaschke