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## FROM TEXTILE TO PLASTIC: ARCHITECTURE, EXHIBITION DESIGN, AND ABSTRACTION (1930–1955)

Museum- and exhibition-goers today have plenty of reasons to expect restraint and understatement from modern exhibition design for which variations on the white cube and the black box have been predominant since the late 1950s.<sup>1</sup> Yet before the white cube became most museums' gold standard, exhibitions could look vastly different and were frequently installed by a great variety of individuals from professionally diverse backgrounds. It was above all multi-disciplinary artists, architects, and designers who saw exhibition-making as an integral part of their practices. Driven by the growing number of arts, architecture and trade exhibitions following the First World War, the creative atmosphere and productivity of the 1920s led to several different concepts, designs, and techniques of display. Unlike art historians' interest in the past and developments unique to art objects, designers and architects focused on the formal ties between objects, art, and architecture in a given situation, enabling the crystallization of exhibition-making as a distinct mode of expression and production that impacted the surrounding context and the narratives, connections, tensions, and oppositions presented through constellations of inanimate objects.

Focusing on one of exhibition history's neglected branches, this article investigates the use of textiles as a key element in the design of modern art exhibitions during Europe's perhaps most eventful quarter-century. To

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<sup>1</sup> I first presented parts of this research at the CAA 2021 Annual Conference's panel "Textiles in Architecture" that was hosted by Didem Ekici. I thank her, my fellow panelists, my colleague Laura Colkitt, the editors of *Artium Quaestiones*, my anonymous reviewers, and especially Kaira Cabañas for providing me with invaluable comments on my previous drafts and the opportunity to share this work. Among the exceptions are historicizing presentations such as the period-rooms, for example, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre, or Munich's Old Pinakothek.

demonstrate how curtains and wall-hangings were successfully employed as mediators on the threshold between architecture and art, I start with the private gallery *Das Geistreich* in Berlin, 1930, and end with the first *documenta* in Kassel, 1955, Germany's largest international exhibition of modern art after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> On the way through these twenty-five years, I explore the textiles' functions in the changing sociopolitical contexts of the 1930s, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and the first postwar decade. Significantly, art historians did not design any of the exhibitions discussed in this article. The displays are the expression of an international exchange between designers who were bound together by a profound reconsideration of the interrelations between art and architecture, art objects and viewers, and past and present in often fundamentally different political and social frameworks. At times, the fabrics even antagonized or concealed the respective architecture's historical signifiers. The increasing relevance of these multifaceted relations can be observed in 1930s' architectural practice such as the Bauhaus curriculum, and the works of Wassily Kandinsky, Giuseppe Pagano, Le Corbusier, Carlo Scarpa, and Arnold Bode. By investigating exhibition design in the context of these connections, I also promote a modern exhibition history that parallels the white cube's early stages of development.

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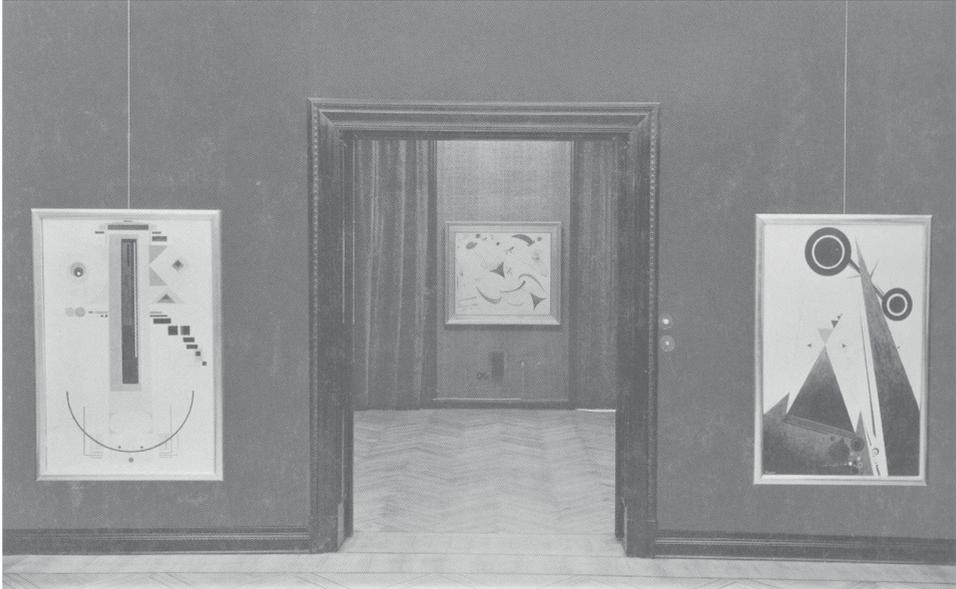
Berlin was the unrivalled center for Weimar-Germany's avant-gardes. It is also where, in October 1930, the painter Rudolf Bauer founded his own gallery, *Das Geistreich*. The name translates to "The Realm of the Spirit", but it also plays with *geistreich* being an adjective that can mean "ingenious" or "spirited."<sup>3</sup> Hoping that the ideal aesthetic presentation would increase the recognition and sales of his canvases, Bauer employed two strategies to elevate his paintings both aesthetically and economically: First, he juxtaposed his works with selected canvases by Wassily Kandinsky; and second, he developed a signature exhibition design that combined customized frames with expansive wall coverings of heavy, pleated textile (ill. 1).<sup>4</sup> The image shows

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<sup>2</sup> Although I start with a commercial gallery, the article focuses on museums and large exhibitions to which Bauer's space is relevant due to his connection with Hilla Rebay. Art dealers such as Durand-Ruel (Paris) and Thannhauser (Berlin), however, were still using textiles during the 1920s as backdrops for paintings to emulate the living rooms and salons of the upper class who they wanted to attract as customers.

<sup>3</sup> *The Museum of Non-Objective Painting: Hilla Rebay and the Origins of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, eds. J. Knox White, D. Quaintance, and K. Vail, New York City 2009, p. 182.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.



1. Anonymous, Rudolf Bauer's gallery *Das Geistreich* with three of Bauer's paintings, Heerstrasse, Berlin-Charlottenburg, ca. 1931, photograph. © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

a symmetric hanging of three of Bauer's own paintings across two rooms. The wall in the front room is covered in smooth panels of dark fabric; the centrally hanging work, in the room behind, is presented on the same woven background, but both the painting and the narrow strip of wall are framed by wooden trim and two undulating curtains of thick velvet, attracting the viewer's attention with their different texture and plasticity.

In its application of luxurious fabrics, Bauer's display responded both to Berlin-Charlottenburg's upper middle class, whose viewing expectations were still informed by nineteenth-century Salon culture, and Lilly Reich's work in exhibition design that had gained prominence through her success with the presentation *From Fiber to Textile* at the 1926 International Frankfurt Fair and her collaborations with Mies van der Rohe, for example, at the Silk and Velvet Café in Berlin, 1927.<sup>5</sup> Bauer's employment of curtains and wall-covers, however, combines Reich's celebration of textiles' lively, rich, and diverse textures with the belief that these surfaces are also perfectly suited as backdrops and framing-devices for paintings. The significance and extent of Bauer's design experiment with high-quality fabrics in *Das Geistreich* can be understood best through his close relationship with Hilla Rebay, who was

<sup>5</sup> *Lilly Reich: designer and architect*, ed. M. McQuaid, New York City 1996, pp. 21–26.

Solomon R. Guggenheim's advisor in New York City from the late 1920s and the Guggenheim Foundation's first director until the 1950s. Through letters and frequent visits, Bauer and Rebay constantly exchanged ideas about what would be the ideal museum for abstract painting. He shared his thoughts about the experiments in his Berlin exhibition space, and she thought of Das Geistreich as a testing ground for effective exhibition design.

Consequently, the design that Rebay and Bauer developed in the early 1930s was reflected when Guggenheim's Museum of Non-Objective Painting (MNOP) first opened with the exhibition *Art of Tomorrow* on June 1, 1939, in Manhattan (ill. 2). Rebay hired the New York-based designer William Muschenheim to turn the store building into the museum of her vision. Treating the building's outer walls merely as a shell, the finished exhibition space was entirely draped in thick panels of velour, similar to the kind that could be found in some high-end fashion boutiques at the time.<sup>6</sup> Like the walls, all windows were covered by plush, rippling curtains. At times the panels of fabric alternated with lighter-colored pillars and dry-wall sections, visually foregrounding individual works.<sup>7</sup> Lighting was also pivotal. Recently invented fluorescent fixtures could create a consistent aesthetic experience for the visitors.<sup>8</sup> The floor's gray plush carpeting complemented the textile wall covering. Ready to "launch the viewer into an indeterminate cosmic space that would evoke the music of the spheres," the large paintings in their wide, silver-gilt, billowing frames were hung with the lower edges nearly touching the baseboard, effectively turning the artworks into doorways.<sup>9</sup>

Rebay wanted the exhibition design to function both as an amplifier of the artwork's inert forces and as a sensitizer preparing the viewer's perception and adequate response. In her view, a "feeling of solemnity emanated from the museum's galleries, emphasized by the draperies on the walls."<sup>10</sup> She argued that the display helped viewers "immerse themselves completely in the galleries in order to be regenerated by the art" and "feel the individual organization and expression of each creation."<sup>11</sup> The museum's purpose was spiritual

<sup>6</sup> *The Museum of Non-Objective Painting*, p. 199.

<sup>7</sup> The neighboring Museum of Modern Art's exhibitions also used textiles as wall-covering in the 1930s, but this natural-colored fabric, so-called monk's cloth, was evenly stretched across the wall to provide a smooth background.

<sup>8</sup> *The Museum of Non-Objective Painting*, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 203.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> H. Rebay to L. Moholy-Nagy, 29 June 1943, Box 568, Records from Artist and Objects files, A0009, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (SRGM) Archives. Quoted in: *The Museum of Non-Objective Painting*, p. 42.



2. Anonymous, Installation view with paintings by Rudolf Bauer and Wassily Kandinsky, 1939–40, photograph, *Art of Tomorrow*, Museum of Non-Objective Painting, 24 East Fifty-fourth Street, New York. © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

regeneration and wellbeing: to provide the visitor with instructions for finding balance. This aim signaled the departure from the institution's educational mission and instead arrived at a quasi-religious "Temple of Non-Objectivity and Devotion."<sup>12</sup> "Joy," Rebay praised hymn-like, "is what these masterpieces in their quiet absolute purity can bring to all those who learn to feel their unearthly donation of rest, elevation, rhythm, balance, and beauty."<sup>13</sup> Photo-

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<sup>12</sup> J.M. Lukach, *Hilla Rebay: In Search of the Spirit in Art*, New York 1983, 62. Rebay was a deeply religious theosophist believing in a close connection between God and intuition. She claimed that "non-objectivity will be the religion of the future." *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings: Second Enlarged Catalogue*, ed. H. Rebay, New York City 1937, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection...*, p. 13.

graphs of the MNOP's exhibitions testify to the founders' belief in employing all elements within the exhibition to service a physiological approach to painting, to facilitate "all those situations and things which are reputed to make a person feel good or great or drunk or merry or well and wise," as Friedrich Nietzsche described art's role a half-century earlier.<sup>14</sup>

Music was another key element in Rebay's exhibition theory. The thought of sitting or even reclining on one of the large custom-made tufted ottoman-islands must take the visitor's uninterrupted listening to music, for example, from Bach, Beethoven, and Chopin, into account.<sup>15</sup> Any echoes would have been effectively dampened by the all-surrounding velvet wrapping. The sounds of music and voices from other visitors were toned down and swallowed by the fabric. Although it is unclear to what degree Rebay was familiar with Martin Heidegger's work of that period, based on their shared discursive context I suggest that her motivation to integrate music into the gallery space is captured by Heidegger's criticism of music, written down in his notebook in the same year, 1939. Expanding on his work on Nietzsche, Heidegger maintains:

"Art" undertakes the management and the corresponding organization of lived experience (as feeling of feelings), whereby the conviction must arise that now for the first time the tasks of calculation and planning are uncovered and established, and thus so is the essence of art. Since, however, the enjoyment of the feelings becomes all the more desultory and agreeable as the feelings become more indeterminate and contentless, and since music most immediately excites such feelings, music thus becomes the prescriptive type of art.<sup>16</sup>

Heidegger's criticism aims at music's calculability and subjectivity, by which he means the common conception of music as "the language of feeling."<sup>17</sup> He rejects the relative ease with which an array of emotional responses can be evoked through a calculated application of certain rules of composition. Conversely, such a calculated, reliable experience was what Rebay need-

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<sup>14</sup> M. Rampley, "Physiology as art: Nietzsche on form," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 1993, 33(3), available online: <<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A14035645/LitRC?u=gain40375&sid=LitRC&xid=7c34fc24>> [accessed: February 8, 2021].

<sup>15</sup> Lukach, *Hilla Rebay*, p. 141.

<sup>16</sup> M. Heidegger, *Ponderings VII–XI: Black Notebooks 1938–1939*, trans. R. Rojcewicz, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2017, pp. 115–116. Quoted in: E. Wallrup, "Against the Grain: Heidegger and Musical Attunement," in: *Mood: Interdisciplinary perspectives, new theories*, eds. B. Breidenbach and T. Docherty, New York City 2019, pp. 78–79.

<sup>17</sup> Wallrup, "Against the Grain", p. 79.

ed to attune the viewer to the aesthetic experience of her preference. Rebay considered non-objective painting to provide the quickest route to spiritual health, but success was contingent on architecture, music, and design joining forces. Her idea of design was often emblematic, creating visual analogies for her intentions behind her display and the museum's purpose to elevate "the human spirit through an uplifting presentation of art."<sup>18</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright's design for the Guggenheim Museum's iconic upward-spiraling ramp clearly represents this ethos.

Similarly, Bauer and Rebay thought that it was possible to "design the walls based on them (the paintings), thus matching the museum to the painting, to the galleries, just as one custom-creates the frame around the picture."<sup>19</sup> This extension of the pictorial space beyond the painted canvas, then, also echoes what the designers and architects of the Dutch De Stijl movement during the 1920s characterized as "total environment," which conceived exhibitions and their elements "as integrated interiors that were, in many cases, dynamic experiences for viewers."<sup>20</sup> Of course, the role of exhibitions in the mechanisms of cultural production and dissemination had already been recognized at the Bauhaus's foundation in 1919 in Walter Gropius's official program, which declared that the school of art and design would carry out "new research into the nature of the exhibition, to solve the problem of displaying visual work and sculpture within the framework of architecture."<sup>21</sup>

Three years earlier, at the *6th Milan Triennial*, in Italy in 1936, the architect and exhibition designer Giuseppe Pagano installed the middle section of Mario Sironi's mosaic *Fascist Labor* in the Palazzo dell' Arte's grand staircase (ill. 3). The building had been constructed according to the plans of Giovanni Muzio and finished in 1933 as one of Fascist Italy's architectural statements. Pagano's plan for the work's first presentation was to wrap the entire staircase into evenly undulating fabric, reminding viewers of a grand theater's stage curtains. Placed in the central axis, right below the ceiling, the mosaic's alle-

<sup>18</sup> *The Museum of Non-Objective Painting*, p. 184.

<sup>19</sup> R. Bauer to H. Rebay, 24 February 1937, Box 80, HvRF Archive, M0007, SRGM Archives. Quoted in: *The Museum of Non-Objective Painting*, p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> M.A. Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge–London 1998, p. 14. Staniszewski, however, discusses Alexander Dorner's "atmosphere rooms" at the Hannover Landesmuseum (1922–1933) as examples of "total environments". While Dorner's design looks very different from Rebay's, they share the goal to attune the viewer to the exhibits.

<sup>21</sup> W. Gropius, "Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar", Weimar 1919. Quoted in: H.M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago*, Cambridge 1969, pp. 30–32.



3. Anonymous, Giuseppe Pagano's presentation of Mario Sironi's mosaic *Fascist Labor* (1936), 1936, photograph, *VI Triennale di Milano*, Palazzo dell' Arte. © historical and photo archive, La Triennale di Milano

gory of enthroned Italy left no doubt about its significance as a quasi-Christian revelation of labor as the redeemer for Italy's fascist nation.<sup>22</sup> Pagano's display alone conveyed "the impression that the glorious days of Italian art and culture – Roman Antiquity – was poised for its imminent rebirth."<sup>23</sup> Exhibition design in Fascist Italy, I argue, not only had to mediate between art and architecture, but also had to bridge the present with the past even beyond the degree to which all exhibitions try to turn history into present experiences and events.

Aside from its strong theatrical association, the narrowly pleated curtain's monotonous, yet rhythmic sectioning of the expansive stone walls also ensured that the viewer's gaze remained engaged without undermining

<sup>22</sup> R. Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of the Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957*, New Haven 2009, p. 92.

<sup>23</sup> M. Nezzo, "Museen und Museumspolitik im faschistischen Italien in den 1930er Jahren," in: *Museen im Nationalsozialismus: Akteure – Orte – Politik*, eds. T. Baensch, K. Kratz-Kessemeier, and D. Wimmer, Cologne–Weimar–Vienna 2016, p. 88.

the space's monumentality with visually distracting elements.<sup>24</sup> In Pagano's hands, the curtain became a finely modeled general backdrop, hovering just between the lithic, monumental architecture and the mosaic's countless pieces of glass, ceramic and stone. The architect strongly believed in the power and impact of his work as designer of exhibition. In his 1941 essay "Parliamo un pò di esposizioni" (Let us talk a bit about exhibitions), he claimed that "exhibitions are the most efficacious vehicles for the knowledge, the diffusion, and the theorization of the concepts that dominate the modern sensibility."<sup>25</sup>

Italian museums and exhibitions assumed an important role in the production and proliferation of Fascist culture and identity. To succeed, the practice of exhibition making underwent several changes during the late 1920s and 30s. Most notable was the desire to become more dynamic and attractive, first, by focusing on temporary exhibitions and, second, the acknowledgment of different types of exhibition visitors, the professional and the layperson. While the knowledgeable viewer supposedly did not require special attention, the layperson, it was decided, had to be drawn to the art through an emphasis on masterworks and persuasive methods of presentation.<sup>26</sup>

During a conference in 1938, Italian museum directors and curators identified the country's recent turn towards excessively neutral exhibition spaces that "created a feeling of scarcity and inefficacy" as a central challenge to exhibition makers in the present.<sup>27</sup> Guglielmo Pacchioni, the museum director in Milan's Pinacoteca di Brera (1939–45), reiterated that "among an artwork's many aspects, only those are lively and viable to which we are receptive and that can convey to us the emotion whose potential the artwork already harbors."<sup>28</sup> This claim and desire to amplify the artwork's inherent emotional potential – the psychological power that was believed to simmer in the artwork's forms – with the help of design aligns the Italian exhibition makers with the practices of Bauer and Rebay.

Compared to Italy, Nazi Germany had a different relation to textiles in the public sphere. Tapestries and luxurious wall-hangings were largely consigned to the private realm, whereas the fabric tolerated in public spaces came mainly in the form of flags and banners bearing the totalitarian state's insignia. Here, like elsewhere, the Nazis' most frequently used exhibition technique

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<sup>24</sup> For Nietzsche, rhythm is an expression of the will to power because it imposes form and organization.

<sup>25</sup> G. Pagano, "Parliamo un pò di esposizioni," *Casabella-Costruzioni* 1941, pp. 159–160, n.p. Quoted in: Golan, *Muralnomad*, p. 99.

<sup>26</sup> Nezzo, "Museen und Museumspolitik im faschistischen Italien...", pp. 90–91.

<sup>27</sup> Eadem, p. 94.

<sup>28</sup> Eadem, p. 95.

was the principle of repetition and alignment, evinced by the ample documentation of parades and public assemblies such as the Reich Party Congress in Nuremberg. Most common were flags mounted with equal spacing and at the same height. The treatment of official state-art, for example, at the annual Great German Art Exhibitions in Munich, was similar. Objects of differing sizes and media were visually grounded on the same imagined horizontal line (ill. 4). The installation photograph shows the House of German Art's marble base-cladding as the common orientation for the height at which all artworks, including sculptures on pedestals, were installed. These displays, art historian Michael Tymkiw argues, efficiently convey the strong relation between "alignment" and the kind of "collectivity formation" that was desired and commanded by the regime.<sup>29</sup>

The example of the state-sanctioned exhibition design, however, demonstrates that the rationalist-neoclassicist architecture and overbearing white wall-space in Munich's House of German Art forced the exhibition designers,

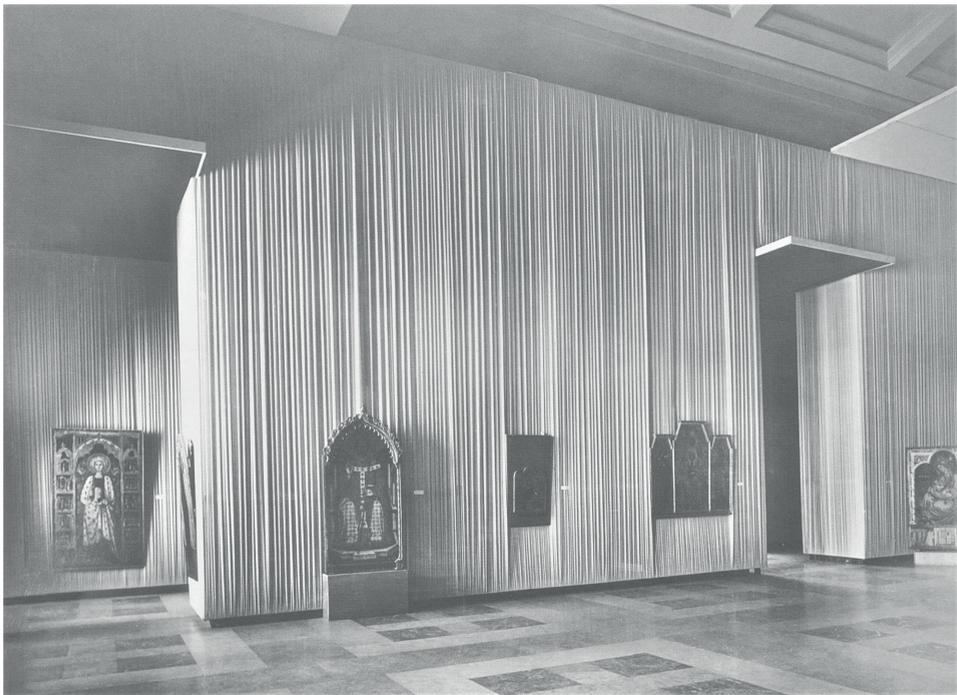


4. Anonymous, Installation view with Josef Thorak's sculpture *Female Nude* (1940) in the background, 1940, photograph, *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, Haus der Kunst, Munich. © Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Photothek

<sup>29</sup> M. Tymkiw, *Nazi Exhibition Design and Modernism*, Minneapolis 2018, p. 22.

who were mostly artists, to use dark-colored curtains for the presentation of white sculptures made of plaster or marble. Otherwise, the sculptures would have blended visually with the architecture. Similar to Pagano's staging of *Fascist Labor* in Milan, the fabrics' fluting in Munich creates a theatrical effect by setting the three-dimensional works against a vivid, contrasting, but equally three-dimensional backdrop that accentuates the artworks' white, cold and smooth surfaces.

The early postwar period saw a surge of textiles in exhibition spaces. The most striking example is Carlo Scarpa's design for the exhibition of Antonello da Messina and fifteenth-century painting in Sicily at the island's Palazzo Zanca in 1953 (ill. 5). Both the MNOP and Sironi's display for the Milan Triennial intended to harness the formal properties of textiles to amplify the psychological and political signals emanating from the exhibited artworks. Scarpa's practice concurs with Bauer and Rebay's views. The Italian designer considered exhibition architecture not responsible for clearing out the space of any ornaments and distractions, but for the active intervention in the view-



5. Anonymous, Exhibition *Antonello da Messina e la pittura del quattrocento in Sicilia* designed by Carlo Scarpa, 1953, photograph, Palazzo Zanca, Messina. © Archivio del Comune di Messina

er's encounter with art. His goal was to enhance and improve the visual experience. Yet the challenge stemmed from amalgamating forms of expression as divergent as fifteenth-century oil painting with mid-twentieth-century interior design. How might a dialogue develop "without diminishing [the artwork's] importance, but highlighting its qualities"?<sup>30</sup>

Scarpa's answer is based on the idea that only a process of abstraction can lead to a common language between any given artistic style and genre, on the one hand, and contemporary exhibition design, on the other. The Italian's archive in Turin contains numerous sketches and notes documenting his analytical process to distill the exhibits' most important compositional and formal aspects.<sup>31</sup> Aside from the sculptures, paintings, and frames' most essential measurements, the sketches show dominant lines and geometric shapes in isolation of the subject matter. Apparently, any of these elements could yield the artwork's keynote to which the surrounding design elements had to be tuned. "In this sense," Andrés Ros Campos explains, "abstraction as a language has a value in its application to the space of the museum, allowing not to distract the attention of the exhibited object, and reinforcing those characteristics that truly value the artwork and emphasize its pedagogical character."<sup>32</sup> In the language of abstraction, Scarpa believed, all of humanity's cultural production can find common ground from which the designer can pick the elements that require or deserve emphasis.

In addition to tuning the design-choices to resonate with important elements of individual artworks, Scarpa's wrapping of the entire architecture in pleated calico – a plain, low-cost textile woven of unbleached cotton – shows that his exhibition design paid equal attention to its spatial context. The large fabric veils conceal the identifying 1920s Italian neoclassical features. The walls and most of the ceilings are covered; even the space's proportion and size are altered by from custom-made lattices' hanging curtains (ill. 6). Because these grids are significantly smaller than the floor's surface, the textiles' confluence towards the ceiling prompts the association with a monumental tent or roof structure. Closing off the exhibition space with these masses of opaque calico opposed the concept of open space as propagated, for example, by van der Rohe. Scarpa believed that every object had its own voice, and that

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<sup>30</sup> A. Ros Campos, "Carlo Scarpa: Architecture, Abstraction and Museography," *VLC Architectura* 2019, 6(2), p. 148.

<sup>31</sup> O. Lanzarini, "Scarpa: As Italy Sought to Forge Its Cultural Identity, Carlo Scarpa Was Part of an Architectural Movement in Museum Design Reinventing the Display of Italian Art in Historic Spaces," *The Architectural Review* 2016, 1427, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Ros Campos, "Carlo Scarpa", p. 148.



6. Students of the Interior Architecture Design Studio, Exhibition *Antonello da Messina e la pittura del Quattrocento in Sicilia* (1953) designed by Carlo Scarpa, Palazzo Zanca, Messina, 2005–06, maquette, Politecnico di Milano (Prof G. Ottolini, M. Nocchi), courtesy of Atlas of Interiors, available online: <<http://www.atlasofinteriors.polimi.it/>> [accessed: 5 February 2021]

successful exhibition design was contingent on the possibility for all objects to share one space and enter conversation with each other. Consequently, the architect elevated the role of quotidian materials and technological means, albeit not to equal rank with the artwork, to the degree that they were completely integrated with the exhibit. Here, artwork and design become one, inseparable for the exhibition's duration.<sup>33</sup>

This integrated display of mostly religious Renaissance art and textile-based exhibition design in 1953 further points to the postwar period's affinity for what, only two years earlier, Italian art historian Gillo Dorfles had called a "baroque" susceptibility.<sup>34</sup> In his book *Barocco nell'architettura moderna* (Baroque in modern architecture), Dorfles claimed that modern architecture should be understood as an echo of the cyclical recurrence of the Baroque sentimentality.<sup>35</sup> With the understanding of history as cyclical rather than a linear progression

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>34</sup> Golan, *Muralnomad*, pp. 230–235.

<sup>35</sup> Eadem. Golan translates the article's title as "Timelessness of the Baroque".

gaining traction after the two World Wars having shattered most people's belief in progress, Dorfles argued that the Baroque has been a continuous cultural force that was perhaps briefly pushed aside, but not replaced, by Neoclassicism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

While textiles need not always signify a "baroque susceptibility," the examples of their use in exhibition design show that they can be powerful instruments in the creation of integrated, psychologically evocative interiors. Thus, the spaces direct the viewer's perception and promote immersive experiences. On the one hand, such spaces and experiences were also key traits of the Counterreformation and Baroque period's architecture and philosophy, from Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptures and plans for St. Peter's Square (1650s) to Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's *Treatise on the sensations* (1754). On the other hand, in early postwar Germany and Italy, the recourse to the Baroque provided a historical precedent and powerful tools to undermine and combat the Classicism that had been instrumentalized by both countries' Fascist ideologies. The 1950s, Dorfles explained, ushered a new *Kunstwollen*, that is, a collective will to form, "in which the dynamic overcame the static, the tactile the optical, the organic or plastic the geometric, whether in architecture, painting, or music."<sup>36</sup> As the author conceded that ornament had lost against functionalism's advance, he also observed that "the severity of the International Style was on the wane" and "functionalism was about to give way to organic free form."<sup>37</sup>

The use of textiles in exhibition design since the 1930s, but especially after the war, I argue, can be described as a baroque subversion of the "stripped classicism" favored by Fascism and National Socialism. What Dorfles and I call a "baroque susceptibility" in exhibition design during the 1930s, Tymkiw describes as "engaged spectatorship" that he defines as the Nazis' attempt "to more dramatically engage and vary a spectator's sensory perceptions."<sup>38</sup> The goal for all was to break down the layperson's threshold-fear and provide easier access to the cultural production that was endorsed by the designer or regime. Meanwhile, there is a connection between neobaroque exhibition design, engaged spectatorship, theatricality, and what Guy Debord identified as "the theatrical festival" in his seminal 1967 critique *The Society of the Spectacle*, that is, according to him, historically "the outstanding achievement [...]"

<sup>36</sup> Eadem.

<sup>37</sup> Eadem.

<sup>38</sup> M. Tymkiw, "Engaged Spectatorship: On the Relationship between Non-Museum Exhibitions and Museum in National Socialist Germany," in: *Museen im Nationalsozialismus*, p. 161.

of the baroque where every specific artistic expression becomes meaningful only with reference to the setting of a constructed place.”<sup>39</sup> The French philosopher also observed a “somewhat excessive importance given to the concept of the baroque in the contemporary discussion of esthetics,” thus confirming Dorflès’s thesis from the previous decade.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to the period’s growing number of sterile and monotonously arranged exhibition rooms, the neobaroque design created spaces that allowed viewers to enjoy themselves without the intellectual didacticism that accompanied conventional exhibitions. By crafting displays appealing to the senses of sight, touch and hearing, the draped spaces also encouraged viewers to explore subject-object relations. Eventually, the viewer became part of a theatrical stage set and was constantly cast into different light and situations.

Viewers found themselves in comparable settings when *documenta* – the international exhibition of modern and contemporary art hosted by the German city of Kassel every four to five years – opened for the first time in 1955. The Museum Fridericianum’s (MF) large, cleared-out space was partitioned by a system of lightweight brick walls and outsized black or white plastic curtains (ill. 7). Built between 1769 and 1779 as the city’s most prominent contribution to neoclassicist architecture, the MF’s roof and interior were lost to fires during the war in 1943. For *documenta*’s head exhibition designer, Arnold Bode, the combination of the architecture’s neoclassical shell and the budgetary constraints lead to restoring the building’s historical facade while fashioning its interior with a de-rigueur open floor plan. With the intention to create an exhibition architecture that was both aesthetically effective and easy to dismantle and recycle, Bode chose mainly prefabricated materials such as cinder block, floating floor tiles, Heraklit® panels as lightweight cladding for walls and suspended ceilings, and Göppinger Plastics® as translucent plastic curtains.<sup>41</sup>

Browsing through the numerous installation shots, it appears that the exhibition’s main photographer, Günther Becker, was especially intrigued by the designer’s integration of large black and white plastic curtains into the displays (ill. 8).<sup>42</sup> Frequently, the images focus on the white curtains’ function as screens to filter the light flooding through the building’s northwest facade,

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<sup>39</sup> G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 3rd ed., trans. F. Perlman, Detroit 1983, thesis 189.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> H. Kimpel, *Documenta: Mythos und Wirklichkeit*, Cologne 1997, pp. 107–108.

<sup>42</sup> While these plastic partitions in the MF, in 1955, recall the celebrated interiors designed by Reich and van der Rohe during the 1920s, the latter two did not hang paintings on top of curtains.



7. Erich Müller, Installation view of Max Bill's *Konstruktion* (1937) on a black pedestal with Hans Uhlmann's *Stahlplastik* (1955) in the back and Theo van Doesburg's *Rhythm of a Russian Dance* (1918) on the right between white, billowing Göppinger Plastics©, 1955, photograph, *documenta*, Fridericianum, Kassel, © documenta archiv



8. Günther Becker, Installation view with paintings by Marc Chagall and black Göppinger Plastics©, 1955, photograph, *documenta*, Fridericianum, Kassel, © documenta archiv

or on the framed canvases hung directly on the rippling white or black wall hangings. The curtains sometimes covered brick walls, while at other times they were used as partitions to provide a translucent form of separation between spaces (ill. 9). Intermittently, visitors could even see the shadows of the paintings in the adjacent section.



9. Günther Becker, Installation view with Willi Baumeister's *Monturi mit Rot und Blau* (1953) in the center and paintings by other contemporary German artists, 1955, photograph, *documenta*, Fridericianum, Kassel, © *documenta* archiv

In its engagement with the architecture, *documenta's* employment of the Göppinger Plastics® share with Scarpa's use of calico veils the wish to intervene in neoclassical architecture. These elements create smaller spatial units, vary proportions, promote material variation, and allow for multisensorial visual experiences. On the threshold between building structure and artwork, and in line with Bauer's and Rebay's ideas about exhibition design, the plastic curtains effectively isolated singular works from their architectural contexts by providing them with a carefully designed self-referential frame. Rebay's and Bode's method is the same way "of thinking about the essence of each

object” that is also characteristic in Scarpa’s work.<sup>43</sup> By subjecting all exhibits to a process of abstraction, the exhibition designer can extrapolate principles that subsequently provide the cues for the exhibition’s lighting, positioning of exhibits, materials, and all technologies.

The exhibition designers employ extended framing to create visual resonances with the displayed artworks’ essential qualities, effectively turning the ripples of textile curtains and plastic foil into amplifiers for the works’ psychological forces of expression. In other words, the wall-hangings become soundboards for the artworks, and soundboard should be understood literally, not as a metaphor. After all, numerous modernists likened modern painting to musical composition and stressed the genres’ entanglement. Kandinsky, whose work was greatly admired by Bauer, Rebay, Scarpa, and Bode, pushed the convergence of music and painting further than any other artist at the time, firmly establishing the reciprocal relation between modern art and musical composition.<sup>44</sup> If understood as music, especially in Kandinsky’s synaesthetic grasp of color, paintings can be translated into sound arrangements, that is, arrays of shorter and longer wavelengths. As waves, the “sound of paintings”, as I suggest calling it, even transcends the psychological sphere and becomes a physical experience. The curtain’s undulation signifies the kinetic energy of the artwork’s dominant frequency and gives it a greater surface, figuratively moving a greater volume of air.

A soundboard’s function is to resonate with the sound, that is, frequencies or waves, for amplification. Resonance is defined as the “increase in the amplitude of vibration of a mechanical or acoustic system when forced to vibrate by an external source. It occurs when the frequency of the applied force is equal to the natural vibrational frequency of the system.”<sup>45</sup> The exhibition’s textiles, especially Bode’s plastic curtains, offer a striking visualization of this effect. The vinyl’s malleability conveys the exhibition designer’s hope to ease the viewer’s attunement to the exhibited artwork. Informed by Timothy Morton’s analysis of La Monte Young’s *Trio for Strings* (1958), I argue that the Göppinger Plastics®, that is, their resonating frequencies and resulting

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<sup>43</sup> Ros Campos, “Carlo Scarpa”, pp. 154–155. Interestingly, Olivetti, the Italian manufacturer of typewriters, commissioned Scarpa with the design for the company’s showroom in Venice, 1957–58, and only a few years later, in 1961, the company chose Arnold Bode to design a product display for the trade fair in Frankfurt.

<sup>44</sup> R. Rosenblum, “The Music of the Spheres,” in: *Art of Tomorrow: Hilla Rebay and Solomon R. Guggenheim*, eds. E. Franzen and E. Weisberger, New York 2005, p. 225.

<sup>45</sup> “resonance”, in: *WorldEncyclopedia2004*, available online: <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199546091.001.0001/acref-9780199546091-e-9817>> [accessed: January 12, 2021].

ambience, attune the body to the artwork.<sup>46</sup> Bode himself always spoke of his wish that his displays enabled viewers to grasp art visually, bypassing the arduous intellectual labor commonly associated with modern art and culture.<sup>47</sup> Claiming that his methods would speak for themselves, the Kassel-based designer never elaborated on the difference between visual and rational understanding of art. Therefore, I propose that the concept and process of attunement, “which is precisely the way in which the mind becomes congruent with an object,” provides the perfect model to add meaning to Bode’s words.<sup>48</sup>

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In 1961, looking back at what was one of the most successful and influential careers in exhibition design, the former Bauhaus student and instructor Herbert Bayer declared:

Exhibition design has evolved as a new discipline, as an apex of all media and powers of communication and of collective efforts and effects. The combined means of visual communication constitutes a remarkable complexity: language as visible printing or sound, pictures as symbols, paintings, and photographs, sculptural media, materials and surfaces, color, light, movement (of the display as well as the visitor), films, diagrams, and charts. The total application of all plastic psychological means (more than anything else) makes exhibition design an intensified and new language.<sup>49</sup>

It is in the integration, combination and juxtaposition of contrasting elements, the balance, and harmonies that these designers produced humanistic, psychologically compelling design. Although these exhibition spaces already contained artworks that were supposed to engage the senses and emotions of the visitors and viewers, these exhibition-makers were convinced that the insertion of textiles on the threshold between object and structure would benefit the former.

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<sup>46</sup> T. Morton, “Hyperobjects”, Intellectual Deep Web 2019, available online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbFOaA3kv5g>> [accessed: December 8, 2020]. Bode’s own association of vision and hearing is fully crystallized in his design for the display “Jazz hören – Jazz sehen”, which can be translated to “listening to Jazz – seeing Jazz”, at the Frankfurt Trade Fair in 1961. See: *50 Jahre / Years Documenta 1955–2005*, eds. M. Glasmeier and K. Stengel, Göttingen 2005, p. 27.

<sup>47</sup> Kimpel, *Documenta*, p. 292.

<sup>48</sup> Morton, “Hyperobjects”.

<sup>49</sup> H. Bayer, “Aspects of Design of Exhibitions and Museums”, 1961. Quoted in: Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, p. 3.

An anonymous design critic in 1929 concluded that “falling fabric has for a long time been one of the most beloved elements in the architectural harmony of a room. The flow of its folds is the power of its own movement, which forms from the dead material of the four walls a powerful living whole.”<sup>50</sup> By enlivening the surfaces of the exhibition architecture, by creating a stimulating exhibition architecture, the art itself should be animated to spring to life. This two-directional orientation of the textiles in these spaces is also already captured in what architecture historian Gottfried Semper called the “mystery of transfiguration,” which accounts for the possibility of a construction element, such as enclosure in the form of textiles, to perform a “structural-technical” as well as a “structural-symbolic” function.<sup>51</sup> In other words, the author’s statement in 1929 emphasizes design’s animistic potential. The capability to fold and undulate, to swing and bellow, endows textiles with a life of their own, as seen in Erich Müller’s exhibition photographs recording *documenta* in 1955 (ill. 7). The designer or critic in the periodical is interested in the material’s potential to turn a space into “a powerful living whole,” to liven up the otherwise dangerously lifeless, soulless, vacuous architecture. In short, exhibition design consciously explored the textiles’ potential to animate the objects within a space.

Although the role of textiles as both a corrective and retreat from the more ascetic trends in modern exhibition design has yet to be comprehensively examined, the public and temporary nature of my case studies suggests that exhibitions provided welcome opportunities for designers to deviate from neoclassicist and rationalist architecture. The examples further highlight important continuities running through these politically contrasting decades, consequently challenging the common perception that modernism in Nazi Germany experienced a twelve-year-long break and that the younger generation, in 1945, at the so-called *zero hour*, had to look back and elsewhere to determine their place in European culture. As I demonstrated, despite their application in different sociopolitical contexts, textile and plastic wall hangings always took on the role of mediators between architecture and artwork, artwork and viewer, as well as past and present societal realities. Although the artworks at the exhibition designers’ disposal were strikingly different in periodization and style, the designers were aligned in their efforts to bypass in-

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<sup>50</sup> Anonymous, “Fensterschmuck im Raum,” *Das Schöne Heim* 1929, 33(3), p. 113. Quoted in: M. Eggler, “Divide and Conquer: Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe and Lilly Reich’s Fabric Partitions at the Tugendhat House,” *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 2009, 16(2), pp. 68–69.

<sup>51</sup> K. Holliday, “Walls as Curtains: Architecture and Humanism in Ralph Walker’s Skyscrapers of the 1920s,” *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 2009, 16(2), p. 39.

tellectual labor in favor of sensory and emotional experience. Considering the discursive qualities of fabric, lighting, walls, and other fixtures in the gallery space, it is not surprising to see these elements of exhibition design increasingly scrutinized during the 1960s and gradually absorbed into the conceptual artistic practices of the day. Although this put an end to the use of textiles and plastic in contemporary exhibition design, such materials live on in some contemporary artists' installations.

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## FROM TEXTILE TO PLASTIC: ARCHITECTURE, EXHIBITION DESIGN, AND ABSTRACTION (1930–1955)

### Summary

This article investigates the growing proliferation of curtains and wall hangings as key elements in the design of art exhibitions in the years 1930–1955. To demonstrate how textiles were successfully employed as mediators on the threshold between architecture, design objects, and fine arts, I first examine the increasing use of curtains in the interwar period, Fascist Italy, and Nazi Germany to subsequently explore how the role of fabrics in both countries’ rationalist and neoclassicist architecture also played a significant part in exhibition design after the Second World War. I chart how the interest in textiles culminated in 1955, when glossy plastic curtains were integrated into the exhibition architecture at the first *documenta* in Kassel, Germany, one of the country’s most prestigious recurring art events to this day. During these politically turbulent decades, the exchange between exhibition designers in both countries was bound together by a profound reassessment of the relation between architecture, design, and art. The renewed consciousness of design as an integrated practice played a key role in 1930s architecture, also providing the foundation for the Bauhaus curriculum and the work of artists, designers, and architects (e.g., Wassily Kandinsky, Giuseppe Pagano, Le Corbusier, Carlo Scarpa, Willi Baumeister, Arnold Bode). I demonstrate that during this period textiles were essential for creating continuity between exhibitions and exhibits of vastly differing styles and contexts. The wall hangings, veils, and banners that were used as part of the monumental spaces created for the Fascist regimes in Italy and Germany were ultimately appropriated and turned into means to undermine the neoclassicist and rationalist style in a way that echoed, I argue, society’s neobaroque sensibility in the aftermath of World War II. Though the Federal Republic of Germa-

ny's first two decades were characterized by the general will to educate its citizens in the aesthetics of internationalism, this effort and the concomitant return to the interwar period were accompanied by a strong resurgence in religiosity and desire for emotionally compelling experiences, which signify a partial disavowal of modernism's most radical stipulations.

Keywords:

design, exhibitions, architecture, modernism, abstraction, textiles