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1

Introduction: How to Read
an Exposition

EXPOSITION: Sujet de délire du XIXe siècle.
(Gustave Flaubert)¹

On 25 July 1896, the Viennese weekly *Die Zeit* published an elegant and remarkably brief review of the Berliner Gewerbeausstellung, the grand trade show that had opened in the south-east of the German capital a few weeks earlier. Little known today and only one and a half single-spaced newspaper columns in length, this short essay arguably proved one of the most perspicacious and powerful anatomies ever published of the most spectacular mass medium of the urban imagination in *fin-de-siècle* Europe: the imperial exposition. This astute observer understood that the national trade exhibition, temporarily staged in Berlin's Treptower Park on the banks of the River Spree, had exceeded its relatively limited scope and, as such, could only be comprehended in the context of much larger international expositions previously held elsewhere, particularly France. Indeed, the author argued that these 'momentary centers of world civilization', which assembled 'the products of the entire world in a confined space as if in a single picture', were nothing less than a defining feature of modernity. In hosting this trade exhibition, the German capital had managed to transform itself into a 'single city to which the whole world sends its products and where all the important styles of the present cultural world are put on display'. Berlin had thus transcended the status of a mere *Großstadt* or ordinary *Hauptstadt* and, 'despite everything', had at last been elevated to a genuine *Weltstadt*, a world city.²

This brief essay stood in marked contrast to the usual array of celebratory and effusive accounts that normally appeared at the opening of similar expositions in London, Paris or other European cities. Its author had clearly paid an extensive visit to the site and carefully studied its numerous attractions *in situ*, yet did not indulge in the florid descriptions which had become almost *de rigueur*. Unlike other contemporaneous observers, who tended to be entranced by the heterogeneity of the spectacle temporarily staged, this critic made his and other visitors' 'paralysis of the senses' (*Paralyse des Wahrnehmungsvermögens*) the cornerstone of his analysis, arguing that the exposition was unified by a prevailing sense of amusement. He realized that no other medium of modern life succeeded so

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spectacularly in presenting a no longer given vision of unity: 'Nowhere else [than in the great exhibition] is such a richness of different impressions brought together so that overall there seems to be outward unity, whereas underneath a vigorous interaction produces mutual contrasts, intensification and lack of relatedness.' The author demonstrated that the Berlin trade exhibition could be read as a site for an investigation into the visualized consumer culture and condensed urban spaces that he considered at once condition and consequence of current globalizing processes as well as pivotal to the very modernity that global capitalism depended upon for its universalizing effects. 'Perhaps', he wrote, 'it has never been so apparent before how much the form of modern culture has permitted a concentration in one place, not in the mere collection of exhibits as in a world fair, but how through its own production a city can represent itself as a copy and a sample of the manufacturing forces of world culture.'

The author of this remarkable account was none other than →Georg Simmel, the German sociologist and cultural philosopher, at this time *Privatdozent* at Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin. While this unassuming newspaper article might prima facie resemble his other much-praised analytical deciphering of cultural artifacts and social minutiae running the gamut from bridges, ruins, coins to plagiarism and clocks, Simmel here first presented some of the key ideas on commodity culture and urbanism that were later developed in his *Philosophy of Money* and, above all, in his seminal 1903 treatise on the 'metropolis and mental life'. The central topos in this essay, the dweller's constant 'stimulation of the nerves' in the big city, is a direct evocation of the 'paralysis of the senses' and the 'veritable hypnosis' that Georg Simmel experienced when strolling through Treptower Park as an exposition critic in the summer of 1896.³

Simmel interpreted the Berliner Gewerbeausstellung as an emblem of modernity and a testing ground for Berlin's new role as an internationally established and globally recognized world city, on par with world-class cities such as London and Paris, already centers of vast colonial Empires when Berlin was still merely the residence of Prussian monarchs. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the very act of mounting large-scale exhibitions had been considered a de facto manifestation of the modern. 'The utility of exhibitions has been so universally recognised that they have become an institution in every country that pretends to a fair share of civilisation', a contemporary observer noted in 1883.⁴ Thus, the Gewerbeausstellung confirmed Berlin's new status as a world city. Yet, as a by then widespread medium, the exhibition's significance far exceeded any local context. Not only was the exposition modern, but modernity itself was on display: the continuous attempts to create an illusionary unity, a fictitious, transitory and largely self-contained realm in which the audience could immerse itself on each such occasion, was reflexively considered 'modern'.

In its attempt to assemble and concentrate 'the world' in one place, the Berlin trade exhibition served as a laboratory for scrutinizing the fundamental characteristics and contradictions inherent in modern culture. Just as Simmel had, in another famous dictum, described the boundary not as a 'spatial entity with sociological consequences, but a sociological entity that is formed spatially',

the physical layout and spatial boundaries of the exposition were crucial to its functioning as they provided the only means to limit – and thus to establish uniformity – from a heterogeneous assembly of exhibits.⁵ This understanding of expositions as not only catalysts and agents, but also as indicators of modernity, was not ahistorical. Quite to the contrary: investigating how a particular style for such exhibitions had developed over time was, as Simmel deduced, ‘of great cultural historical interest’. Thus, Georg Simmel figures not only as the conceptual inspiration, but also as the chief witness to the present study.⁶

Spaces of modernity

In this book, five imperial expositions – the Berliner Gewerbeausstellung of 1896, the Exposition Universelle of 1900, the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908, the British Empire Exhibition of 1924–25 and the Exposition Coloniale Internationale of 1931 – held in Berlin, Paris and London over the course of 35 years and with a world war in between, serve as interconnected exemplars of urban modernity. Following Charles Baudelaire’s classic definition, the latter is understood as a set of representational practices that embraces ‘the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent’ and characterizes the present in general, and the world of the *fin-de-siècle* metropolis in particular.⁷ At the same time, expositions are treated not as symptoms or expressions of some other concrete historical phenomenon, but rather as a particular medium with its own special problems and internal dynamics. Conceptualizing exhibitions as ‘meta-media’, as specific means of communication that encompass and incorporate other communicative technologies, particular attention is paid to questions of medialization, visualization and virtualization. Taken as dense textures stretched over time, expositions require both a close hermeneutical reading and also a broad spatial analysis. Only then is it possible to scrutinize their internal functioning while simultaneously analyzing interactions with the surrounding cityscape and their effects on the urban fabric.

Imperial expositions held in *fin-de-siècle* London, Paris and Berlin were knots in what together constituted a worldwide web; contemporary observers already termed them ‘nodes in the course of history’ (*Knotenpunkte des Geschichtslaufes*).⁸ A ‘Crystal Palace’ could be found not only in London but also in New York, Munich and Paris; a so-called White City not only in Chicago but also in London; the notorious ‘Rue du Caire’ not only several times in Paris, but also in Chicago, London, St Louis and Berlin. This book offers several distinct perspectives within which to locate, read and explain five carefully selected nodes in both space and time, woven into a delicate but resilient web of national and international networks. Through a detailed analysis of each of the five cases, the book examines their specific aims and aspirations, their changing form and execution, and the public debates they engendered. Who was responsible for collecting items, assembling displays and orchestrating vistas? How were exhibits perceived and consumed by various audiences, communities and individuals on the local, national and global levels? What legacies did these expositions bequeath? And how did they position themselves vis-à-vis the medium’s own tradition and the surrounding metropolis?

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Each chapter emphasizes three underlying issues: space, time and the *personae*. The first of these three categories, space, fulfills a double function. Borrowing and operationalizing the terms ‘spaces of representation’ and ‘representation of space’ from Henri Lefebvre allows access to the expositions’ external spatial repercussion and their modes of internal operation. Understanding space as a built, material environment, the former notion establishes references to a more conventional metropolitan history. Both the layout and the location of the exhibition sites within the respective metropolis must be described. The book also analyzes the architecture and overall consequences for the surrounding environment and subsequent local development. In this respect, the problematic of how the city’s expansion correlated to the expanding exhibitions and their resulting move to the outskirts of the city is another central issue of concern – particularly if one takes seriously the plea, justly asserted by historical geographers in recent years, that history should be written ‘as a series of spaces, rather than a single, seamless narrative’, a move that developed into the now much-discussed and widely accepted ‘spatial turn’ within historiography and cultural studies.⁹

‘Representation of space’, on the other hand, concerns the various forms of space as embodied in the exhibitions themselves and their respective taxonomies. As complex constructs, the majority of expositions seem to have experimented with all conceivable possible forms of space. Frequently, for instance, the host city was represented in a special metropolitan section that formed part of the ‘exhibition city’ within the ‘real’ exhibiting city, with the same principle applying to the representation of different colonies, countries or nations. Strategies of representation and layers of meaning overlapped with one another and formed spaces of modernity that, though radically condensed, were never ‘annihilated’. Articulating how these compressed spaces were fabricated and what kind of itineraries they stipulated for visitors-cum-consumers yields important insights into the ways in which modernity was created and displayed, consumed and disputed at these protean sites within the European metropolis around 1900.

By the late nineteenth century, the central conundrum of the so-called exhibitionary complex was no longer why international expositions of ever greater scope were repeatedly held in almost all European metropolises, but rather what made them so similar. Why were these ephemeral urban spaces furnished with analogues, intertextual *accessoires*? A glacial pace of change and striking resemblances between different exhibitionary sites seem the most marked feature of the entire medium, which was, from the beginning, dominated by far-reaching internal references and formative transnational and inter-urban connections. As a consequence, the – historical – notion of an ‘exhibitionary system’ (*Weltausstellungssystem*) or the – contemporaneous – concept of an ‘exhibitionary complex’ should be replaced with that of ‘exhibitionary networks’ in order to allow for adequate historicization. Though the exhibitionary complex was undeniably complex, it is more accurately described as an overlapping series of networks that evolved over time.¹⁰ Uncovering why expositions were sustained even after their capacity to express the latest version of ‘the modern’ had waned requires an analysis of that peculiarly Victorian emotion: ‘exhibition fatigue’.

International expositions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were characterized by their fleeting nature. The vast majority of all material structures, including buildings and pavilions, were usually planned with a view to immediate demolition after the event's closure and were, in Simmel's words, 'intended for temporary purposes only'.¹¹ This temporality did not hinder them, however, either individually or collectively, from acquiring meaning, founding traditions and creating legacies in architecture, urban development and media history that far outlived the expositions themselves. Composed of similar and/or closely related elements arranged in analogous ways, exhibitions can be considered 'isomorphous'. Such a family resemblance can only be excavated by careful chrono-chorological contextualization. To this end, expositions must be conceptualized as transitory yet recurrent meta-media that, despite their transitional character, established both internal and external traditions, not only with regard to the specific composition of the medium itself, but also to the numerous urban legacies and metropolitan residuals they bequeathed. Such a development is not metaphysical in its origins, but rather is the result of multifarious inter-urban competition and the widespread, transnational entanglements among the main protagonists in this extensively internationalized field.

For this reason, the book introduces individual agency into the historiography by describing the expositions not merely as hyper-representations of overarching cultural constellations, but also as the result of the personal strategies of planning, building and financing by the particular individuals responsible for their organization.¹² Both the medium's longevity and expositions' increasing resemblance to one another must be explained by the impact of a well-organized and very mobile class of cultural bureaucrats, exhibition experts, and entertainment entrepreneurs. Their intermingling led to transnational adjustments in consecutive expositions. Once successfully introduced, new elements and novel features were quickly transferred across borders and integrated into later exhibitions, largely regardless of their respective national contexts. Thus, ephemeral exposition spaces were usually furnished with analogues – ethnographic ensembles, so-called native villages, or exclusively domestic assemblages like *Old London*, *Vieux Paris* and *Alt-Berlin*, for example – precisely because originators, commissioners and organizers copied from each other, transferring not only specific features, but at times even entire sections, from one national and socio-cultural context to another.

Because of general similarities in the organization processes, five groups of actors can generally be distinguished for each exposition. First and foremost are the exhibition's initiators, sometimes acting as private individuals, though more often as representatives of groups, associations or even by governmental fiat. Second, the official organizers, commissioners and representatives of the participating nations, regions, cities and colonies, charged with the exhibition's actual realization *in situ*. While 'curator' commonly refers to a person responsible for the conceptual work and the subsequent management of ongoing expositions, 'exhibitors' are the individuals, institutions and organizations providing the actual exhibits. Third, there are the domestic and foreign active participants, including numerous employees working at the site and so-called natives, human beings of 'exotic' origins put on

display. Fourth are the reviewers, critics, mediators and professional observers who reported on the respective mega-event in different forms and formats, to various kinds of audiences and publics. And, fifth, the local, regional, national and international audiences and visitors themselves, composed of both actual fair-goers and sightseers, and including those who participated in the events via the mass media. ‘The public – the exhibiting and the visiting public – are the real actors in the Exhibitions’, British commissioner John Forbes Watson (1827–1892) stated as early as 1872: ‘The whole thing is done by and for them.’¹³ These categories are neither mutually exclusive nor all-inclusive. While, given the available sources, not all the groups of actors can be treated systematically at all times, such a typology proves useful in analyzing the different ways in and various levels on which meanings were ascribed, negotiated and contested. What makes these groups of men – there are, unsurprisingly, almost no women to be found in groups I (initiators), II (organizers, curators, exhibitors) and IV (reviewers and critics) – appear particularly heterogeneous is that they all assumed various and occasionally overlapping functions at different stages of the organization processes.

Based on the respective definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, throughout this book the terms ‘exhibition’ and ‘exposition’ are used interchangeably to refer to a coherent complement of goods that was, for a limited time, publicly displayed at a spatially confined location in a big city, usually the capital. An ‘exhibit’ is understood as one object or a set of objects composing such an exhibition. While the British ‘exhibition’ and the French ‘exposition’ are used interchangeably, ‘world’s fair’ always refers to an exposition held in the United States. Also used is the German *Weltausstellung*, translated as ‘world exhibition’ or ‘world exposition’, as this best conveys the notion of a world on display for the world.¹⁴

Thus, the present book constitutes a transnational and transdisciplinary investigation into how urban modernity was displayed, formed and disputed at and through one of the most momentous and powerful media in *fin-de-siècle* Europe. These events exposed divergent notions of modernity, from the machinery and huge blocks of cast steel characteristic of the mid-century, to the electricity and colored illuminations introduced in 1900, to the grand sports arenas made of reinforced concrete prominent in the 1920s. In each of the five closely ‘read’ cases, numerous debates about the medium’s modernity in different national contexts are reconstructed in order to chart changing sites of representation and forms of performance, as well as to analyze the competitive, mutually conditioned components of transnational controversies.

1851 ff.

‘As a cultural phenomenon’, sociologist and economist →Werner Sombart agreed with Simmel in 1908, ‘the exhibition is exceptionally interesting, for it appears in entirely different meanings, can be judged by very different criteria and classified in quite different contexts.’¹⁵ Taken as a means of studying the way societies represent themselves, the numerous urban, regional, national and international expositions held in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe as well as the United States and Australia have attracted considerable scholarly interest for

more than a century. With their rotating venues, great number of participating nations, and role in developing both a standardized exhibition language and a community of exhibition professionals, as well as their massive international audience, exhibitions have often been considered among the most characteristic inventions of the nineteenth century and one of its few genuinely international cultural institutions.

After the immense and largely unexpected success of the epoch-making Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations held in London in 1851 – described by Prussian ambassador Christian Karl Josias Freiherr von Bunsen (1791–1860) as ‘the most poetic and world-historic event of the time’ – international expositions quickly became a recurrent feature of public life in western Europe and the United States. ‘Exhibitions have come to be a regular part of the bill of fare annually served up for the enjoyment of society during the London season’, a British guidebook commented some 37 years later, ‘and when that fashionable period is at an end, they remain open for the pleasure of that far larger and more important section of humanity – the general public.’¹⁶ In its after-effects, the significance of the Great Exhibition as the first decidedly international exposition with its 19,000 exhibits on display and a prevailing ‘spirit of encyclopaedism’ cannot be overstated. It defined mid-century Britain. Establishing an unsurpassed founding myth and profoundly shaping the new medium, the syntax inaugurated in the Great Exhibition remained the standard for decades to come.¹⁷

In France, where the first international exposition was organized only four years later, in 1855, the degree of institutionalization was especially high. Unlike those in Great Britain or the United States, French expositions were inevitably official, state-sanctioned affairs. Over the course of the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, numerous grand-scale exhibitions were held not only in London and Paris, but also in Vienna, Turin, Antwerp, Barcelona, Berlin, Stockholm, Brussels, Milan and Liège. Outside Europe, cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, St Louis, San Francisco, Sydney and Melbourne hosted well-regarded international expositions, most of them several times.¹⁸ All were complex and well organized, composed of numerous sections and subsections devoted to diverse themes including industrial, artistic, geographical, ethnographic and historical topoi. Despite differences between individual ‘cases’ with regards to their respective use of forms and representation, these expositions aimed at replicating a European version of ‘the world’ in the metropolis’ center. While the objects displayed were ordered in ever-varying and increasingly complex systems of classification, each was allocated a specific spot in an ideally ordered world.¹⁹

Available numeric data support Simmel’s argument of the expositions’ absolute socio-cultural centrality to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both their frequency and popularity was immense: 210 international large-scale exhibitions were held worldwide between 1851 and 2010, more than half of them (112) in Europe (Figure 1.1). Three quarters (161) of these 210 expositions took place between the 1880s and the Second World War, with a similar majority held in Europe (86). There was a considerable increase in frequency at the beginning of the

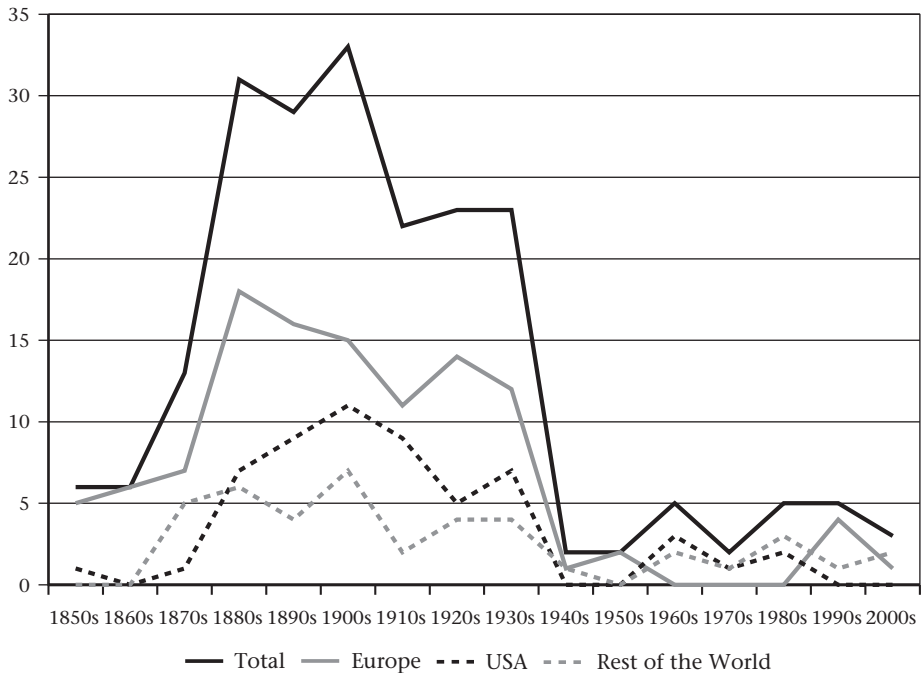
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Figure 1.1 Number of international expositions held in Europe, the USA and the rest of the world per decade between 1851 and 2010²⁰

1880s: no fewer than 18 expositions were organized in various parts of the Western world and Australia between 1880 and 1885.²¹

The emerging picture is further complicated if the number of expositions is correlated with their respective attendance figures, though the latter should generally be treated with considerable caution since the statistics were neither always reliable nor was the data collected based on common criteria. According to conservative estimates, European expositions attracted approximately 415 million visitors between 1851 and 1958, three-quarters of whom (320 million) attended expositions held between 1885 and the Second World War (Figure 1.2). Almost 110 million consumers saw the five Parisian Expositions Universelles held in the French capital over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century at regular 11-year intervals, the so-called *règle des onze années*.²² The last in this line of spectacular mega-events, officially named the 'Exposition Universelle Internationale de 1900 à Paris', attracted over 50 million sightseers alone – a number greater than the population of France at the time and roughly equal to the population of the German *Kaiserreich*. It was 'by far the vastest [...] gathering of men and of things, of all kindreds, kingdoms, nations and languages in the entire course of history', a contemporaneous critic observed.²³ Indeed, the 1900 exposition set a record that would only be broken in Montreal 67 years later. Before the advent of television, no other mass media reached so many individuals. Figure 1.2 reveals three other noteworthy trends: consistently

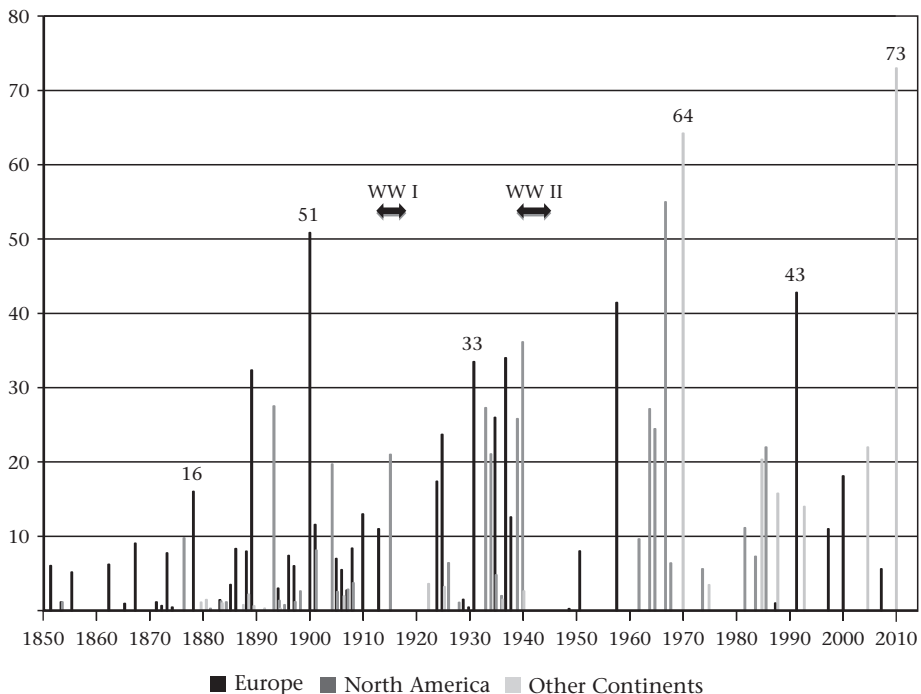


Figure 1.2 Attendance in millions at international expositions held between 1851 and 2010

high attendance despite far fewer expositions after the Second World War; the rapid rise in significance of American world's fairs over the course of the twentieth century; and the success of non-Western expositions in the last 40 years, with the Japanese Expo '70 in Osaka being the second best attended exhibition ever. With altogether 73 million visitors, Expo 2010 in Shanghai set a new world record.

The rise of exposition studies

Hailed by contemporaries as the 'age of expositions', the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries inspired so-called 'exposition hysteria', 'mania' or 'circus', which is reflected in the flood of scholarly attention they continue to inspire over a century later. Academic interest is not, however, a recent phenomenon, but rather dates to the turn of the century when the first historical overviews and specialized monographs on single aspects of the history of large-scale expositions began to appear. Among them, →Adolphe Démy's 1100-page 'Essai historique sur les Expositions universelles de Paris' published in 1907 can, despite a number of inaccuracies and careless mistakes *en détail*, still be considered one of the most comprehensive historical accounts available, especially on the medium in France.²⁴ Since then, international exhibitions and world's fairs have attracted considerable scholarly attention precisely because in them societies claim to represent and thematize themselves in a highly condensed and aesthetically fascinating manner.

Academic interest increased steadily over the course of the twentieth century, rising most notably in the mid to late 1980s. American historian and aspiring doyen of international exposition studies Robert W. Rydell's first book, *All the World's a Fair*, was published in 1984, art historian Paul Greenhalgh's broad synopsis *Ephemeral Vistas* followed four years later and, in 1989, political theorist Timothy Mitchell's groundbreaking article 'The World as Exhibition' appeared. At the same time, French historian Madeleine Rebérioux could still diagnose a 'relative rarity of contemporary books devoted to universal expositions, particularly to those that took place in Paris between 1855 and 1900', while museum curator Robert Brain expressed his annoyance that, 'until quite recently, exhibitions have remained largely neglected by historians.'²⁵ A year earlier, in 1988, sociologist and cultural analyst Tony Bennett had brought a Foucauldian perspective to bear in coining the expression 'exhibitionary complex', a term that proved as influential as it was misleading since it assumed a type of consolidation that was, historically, not given but rather evolved over time.²⁶ Summarizing extant scholarship in the early 1990s, Rydell noted that 'comparative studies of expositions have been few. Systematic inquiries into colonial expositions can be counted on one hand. Though important work has been published about international exhibitions, much of the literature is tentative, eclectic, and far from complete.' He concluded:

Some of the most influential fairs – including most of the Paris expositions – have not received the kind of attention to archaeological detail that they deserve. Above all, there is an acute need and golden opportunity for comparative work on exhibitions. Even if such comparative studies were limited to the great exhibitions, it would advance our understanding of the way human beings in the modern world came to see – or were encouraged to see – themselves and others.²⁷

In the interim, the situation has dramatically improved, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Figure 1.3 charts the number of scholarly publications on national

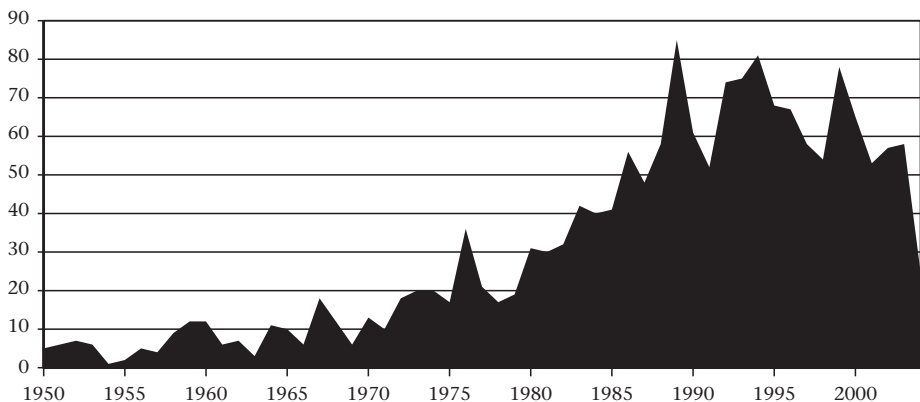


Figure 1.3 Number of scholarly publications on national and international expositions printed between 1950 and 2004

and international expositions annually printed between 1950 and 2004. The overall trend is immediately apparent: though perhaps not quite an explosion, the field has grown considerably in the last two decades. While in the 1970s an average of 17 titles was published per year, numbers climbed to 47 over the course of the 1980s, with a preliminary climax in 1989 with 85 publications. Two further peaks occurred in 1994 and 1999, with 81 and 78 publications, respectively. Ever since, an average of 63 scholarly publications tackling the 'exhibition complex' have been issued each year. As a consequence, 40 percent of the entire body of literature currently in existence is less than ten years old, and more than 60 percent is under 15 years old. Although there is still neither an academic journal nor a professionally monitored electronic discussion network exclusively dedicated to the historical analysis of expositions worldwide, it is clear that a new field of 'exposition studies' was created, with substantial contributions stemming from a wide variety of disciplines including history, art history, history of architecture and design, museology, urban anthropology, geography, sociology, political science, economics and others.²⁸

Why has research in this area flourished in the last two decades? The ongoing popularity of exhibitions as an object of study must be attributed to the polysemantic and protean character of the subject matter itself. Scholars approaching the material from different directions collectively realized the analytical potential of expositions. An insight initially formulated by Georg Simmel gradually prevailed: exhibitions, with their complex interplay between nationalism and internationalism in a concrete urban locality, constituted direct precursors of, and early testing grounds for, a rapidly globalizing society as well as for the creation of spectacular visual-virtual ersatz realities – two traits frequently regarded as characterizing the present age. From a historiographical perspective, the study of exhibitions provides an almost ideal occasion to connect a historiography of structures with one of events. Historians eager to translate the various theoretical 'turns' into scholarly practice that followed the groundbreaking 'linguistic turn', especially the 'pictorial'/'iconic' and the 'spatial turn', have found appealing material here. As a direct consequence of these three forces at play – political, cultural and historiographical – national and international expositions are now widely regarded as a central feature of Western cultural history whose popular impact was anything but ephemeral.²⁹

Such intense research interest from various disciplines has led to an ever-increasing number of studies, several of which have proved invaluable.³⁰ It is unsurprising that the three arguably most significant international exhibitions of the nineteenth century – the previously mentioned Great Exhibition of 1851, the Parisian Exposition Universelle of 1889, and the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 – have attracted the greatest scholarly attention.³¹ Imperial expositions in particular have been used as socio-cultural gauges to measure attitudes toward empire and imperialism, their meaning, role and perception in the motherland throughout the period. They provide, as historian John M. MacKenzie has argued, 'the best insights into national obsessions, character, and morale'.³² At times imperial exhibitions have been treated as static propaganda exercises, selling colonial exoticism to domestic audiences in an effort to persuade them of the political necessity of continued imperial expansion, while, in turn, allegedly

offering far-reaching possibilities for developing so-called national identities that were in sharp distinction to an exoticized and eroticized colonial 'other'.

Frequently, however, their synchronic embedding in different temporal and spatial contexts remains unsatisfactory. Few studies have focused on the ways in which modes of self-representation functioned, internal dynamics operated, and media-related rules were followed. Rather, exhibitions are considered historical gadgets, fleeting magnifying glasses, under which it is possible to gain immediate insights into societies as they represent and regard themselves. Expositions are taken at their word: detached from their immediate historical surrounding and urban environment, they are too often superficially read according to the wishes of their originators and 'authors'. Such approaches do not allow a proper analysis of the manifestations of progress and modernity materialized in the exhibitions. 'We have moved from issues of consensus to those of contest', historian Peter H. Hoffenberg aptly summarized the state of the art in international exposition scholarship a few years ago: 'Questions of hybridity, audience participation, and shifting identities inform current exhibition studies.'³³ Thus, a small but growing number of works argue for a greater distance between the medium of exposition and its self-implemented rhetoric. These new studies suggest that scholarly attention first be turned to medial conditions and contexts, to the rules and principles of staging, displaying and representing as well as forms of receiving, consuming and appropriating, before analyzing a society's self-thematization via the exposition medium. The operative metaphor is not that of a magnifying glass but that of a prism.³⁴

Moreover, many existing studies suffer from an overly narrow approach to the traditions established by the exposition medium itself. Particularly if only a single exposition is analyzed, the central significance of transnational and transatlantic entanglements and far-reaching inter-urban competition is necessarily disregarded. Certain qualities and characteristics are attributed to one particular exhibition when they are, effectively, less a consequence of the local text than a part of the larger rules and grammar governing the whole medium. Though largely unacknowledged, references between different nationally organized exhibitionary networks proved determinative both in terms of internal organization (design, layout and size of location, for instance) and external organization (sequence, timing, participation). That this is less true with regard to reception and consumption is a further argument of the present study, already *in nuce* in Simmel.

In order, first, to avoid such a diachronic deficiency, second, to analyze the emergent language that these expositions shared, and, third, to read the subject matter back into the transnational context from which it stems, a concentration on one or two cases within the boundaries of a particular nation-state cannot do justice to the phenomenon. Only by reading a carefully selected sample of different types of expositions as embodiments of a much larger medium is it possible to comprehend their public impact and popular meaning. In the end, far-reaching international similarities and increasing codification must be explained by the widespread networks and personal connections between the internationalized and exceedingly mobile actors in the field. The present study endeavors to analyze these interrelations as not only representational and semiotic, but also personal and professional.

Modus procedendi

By the late nineteenth century, exhibitions were a well-established feature of public life in the Western world. By 1931, they had lost much of their original luster and were no longer considered the *dernier cri* in displaying urban modernity in Europe, though they continued to be held, largely thanks to a variety of vested interests and institutions who had a stake in their continuing, even in the face of criticism and hostility. This study, based on extensive archival research, offers a rethinking of international expositions in their heyday, analyzing a heterogeneous sample of five rather 'late' exhibitions of various type, scope and character, including a trade fair, a bi-national exposition, two colonial exhibitions and one genuine Exposition Universelle, that took place in three different European metropolises in order to demonstrate their deep interrelatedness. To decipher their protean character in detail, these five cases are carefully placed in their respective contexts, both geographically and chronologically. Parallel to such a diachronic and synchronic embedding, each exhibition undergoes both a horizontal and vertical analysis of its reception, based on autobiographical accounts including personal correspondence, postcards, letters to the editor, as well as a number of oral history interviews.³⁵ However, as anthropologist Penelope Harvey has convincingly argued, insisting on too clear a distinction between a representational and a practice-oriented approach is problematic, as such artificial dichotomies are almost always disfiguring. Knowledge and meaning are negotiated and generated in the space between representation and consumption.³⁶

At the same time, the book is comparative, arguing that expositions can only be properly analyzed in relation to one another. Their structural similarity is emphasized: In all these cases, the 'arts of display' functioned according to comparable, if not analogous, sets of discursive rules and equivalent principles of visual-spatial composition, despite profound national, social and cultural differences.³⁷ Though perhaps less perceptible to contemporaneous participants and observers, such 'quotations' ran through the entire medium. Hence, the book gives due weight to the medium's transnational and transcultural character, either implicitly, by studying the historical displaying and staging of cultural differences, or explicitly, by analyzing particular references, interrelations and transfers. Thus, the book combines empirical research with an underlying interest in larger theoretical issues in order to explore the possibilities of a relational historiography that is simultaneously open to multiple perspectives and considers mutual influences, perceptual interdependencies and transnational interrelations in a new form of network analysis.

Arguably the biggest drawback of endeavoring to treat all expositions in the sample with the same empirical rigor while also reading them as exemplars is the need to be strictly selective in choosing cases. In theory, numerous other European expositions could have been added: in Great Britain, the Franco-British Exhibition and the British Empire Exhibition receive full treatment, while the earlier Crystal Palace exhibitions such as the Festival of Empire, held in Sydenham in 1911, is only mentioned in passing. The study ends with the most momentous Parisian colonial exhibition, the Exposition Coloniale of 1931, but neither the earlier Marseilles expositions of 1906 and 1922 nor the Parisian Exposition Internationale

des Arts Décoratifs of 1925 or the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, also held in the Champ de Mars and best remembered for its juxtaposition of the giant Nazi and Soviet pavilions on the banks of the Seine, receive in-depth attention. Moreover, with international exhibitions held in 1897, 1910 and 1935, a third European capital, Brussels, was transformed at the beginning of the twentieth century into an important and dramatically under-researched exhibition hub, with a Paris–Brussels axis largely responsible for popularizing Art Nouveau on the continent.³⁸ But even if these nine momentous expositions had been included, other, hardly less important European exhibitions held, for instance, in Barcelona in 1888 (Exposición Universal) and in 1929–30 (Exposición Internacional), in Milan in 1906 (Esposizione Internazionale del Sempione) or five years later in Turin (Esposizione Internazionale delle Industrie e del Lavoro) would still have been left out, not to mention the numerous American world's fairs. This is a simple consequence of the exhibitionary complex being such a vast network spread over time and space.³⁹ Such selective decisions are always easily impugnable yet indispensable. Therefore, the choice was made to cast a wide but still manageable net and gather a representative European sample. As the host capital of the first international exhibition, London could not be done without, and it was also necessary to include Paris, the oft-quoted 'Queen City of Expositions'. Third, and perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, the Gewerbeausstellung of 1896 was chosen as a counter-case: Berlin's reluctant and eventually frustrated aspirations for status as both a world city and a capital city where large-scale exhibitions would be held were never realized. Indeed, the medium gained significantly less of a foothold in Berlin than elsewhere, such that the Gewerbeausstellung stands as a remarkable and counter-intuitive, albeit under-researched, case.

There is a further consequence of comprehending these five examples in three European metropolises as specific nodes within a worldwide web. Despite the primary expectation that expositions operated within a metropolitan framework and were thus expected to stimulate national unity and local self-confidence, they were also widely regarded as important arenas for international competition and alignment. While these repercussions are hardly disputable, it has nonetheless caused a historiographical shift, with the notion of 'identity' having become one of the cornerstones of analysis within the ever-expanding literature. Expositions, or so the standard argument goes, were central instruments in the making of 'national identities', not the least because they commonly featured displays of an exoticized colonial 'other'. Such an 'identity through non-identity' (that is 'otherness') argument, or juxtaposing 'l'autre et nous' might be politically correct, yet it often proves simplistic and an impediment to challenging and opening the exposition medium's self-implemented rhetoric. Insisting on a simple metropole/colony opposition may have been heuristically necessary in the early stages of historicizing exposition practices, but it is now insufficient.⁴⁰ From the outset the evolving exhibitionary networks were characterized by multipolarities including overlapping dimensions of intra-metropolitan, trans-European and even global competition.

Moreover, 'identity' is a conceptually vague, highly charged and worn buzzword that is unsuitable for stringent historiographical analysis, and does not possess

sufficient heuristic potential for describing and analyzing the complex repercussions and processes of consumption and appropriation. It is the very existence of the exhibition medium's worldwide web that renders all arguments about national characteristics and the forming of collective 'identities' unsatisfactory, as it calls for a new form of relational network analysis. By responding and reacting to each other through various types of networks – personal, professional, institutional – these representational spaces developed a specific use of forms, thus giving further shape to the medium and codifying a standard repertoire, while continuing to differentiate the specific language of the exhibition. Although a central interpretative element in many other studies, 'identity' is, therefore, a notion that is peripheral to this book.⁴¹

Finally, the *modus procedendi* within each of the following five chapters is largely identical and is inspired by the conceptual triad of 'presentation', 'representation' and 'perception' advanced by French cultural historian Roger Chartier. In an attempt to render the superordinate of these terms, 'representation', the cornerstone of conceptualizing cultural history, Chartier has described three modes of relations toward the social world which the notion helps elucidate: first, the construction processes of distinct, possibly competing, realities by different individuals, social groups and powers through classification and delineation; second, their respective organizational practices that aim at exhibiting a specific way of being in the world and through which groups, communities and powers propose an image of themselves, including the sharing of signs and symbols; and third, complex processes of perception and reception, consumption and appropriation which lead to quite different results in the making of meaning. Understood along these lines, the concept of representation, Chartier has argued, 'leads to thinking of the social world and the exercise of power according to a relational model'.⁴²

In the following, these three facets of the superordinate notion – presentation, representation and perception – serve as underlying guiding principles but also return more concretely as subsections on the construction/politics, the site/sights, and the reading/meaning of each individual exposition visited and read in each of the subsequent chapters. Such a procedure can be understood as a specifically historiographical variant of field reconnaissance, an operation developed by urban ethnographers and town planners such as Kevin Lynch in the 1960s to cover and map urban spaces. By querying ceremony, ritual and representation – and, likewise, participation, reaction and reception – it is, finally, the interplay of imperial, spatial and spectacular elements within European *fin-de-siècle* urban modernity that this book examines. Over the course of five virtual visits to five different expositions, it fashions an analysis of the complementary imaginative geographies of the metropolis London; the classic nineteenth century capital, Paris; and the would-be global city, Berlin.⁴³

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