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Curation as Creation

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Harald Szeemann:

Museum of Obsessions

an exhibition at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, February 6–May 6, 2018; Kunsthalle Bern, June 9–September 2, 2018; Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, October 13, 2018–January 20, 2019; and Castello di Rivoli, Turin, February 26–May 26, 2019.

Catalog of the exhibition edited by Glenn Phillips and Philipp Kaiser with Doris Chon and Pietro Rigolo. Getty Research Institute, 406 pp., \$69.95

Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us

an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, February 4–April 22, 2018; Gerechtigkeitsgasse 74, Bern, June 9–September 2, 2018; Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, October 13, 2018–January 20, 2019; Castello di Rivoli, Turin, February 26–May 26, 2019; and Swiss Institute, New York City, June 28–August 18, 2019

Harald Szeemann:

Selected Writings

edited by Doris Chon, Glenn Phillips, and Pietro Rigolo and translated from the German by Jonathan Blower and Elizabeth Tucker. Getty Research Institute, 406 pp., \$49.95 (paper)



Harald Szeemann (seated) on the last night of 'Documenta 5: Questioning Reality—Image Worlds Today,' Kassel, Germany, 1972

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A restaurant near my apartment sells “curated salads”; a home goods store sells “carefully curated sheets”; a babysitting agency offers “curated care”; my inbox bulges with curated newsletters, curated dating apps, curated wine programs. Kanye West, the Trumpist rapper, calls himself a curator, as do Chris Anderson, who runs TED Talks, and Josh Ostrovsky, who under the name the Fat Jew spews plagiarized jokes and alcohol advertising to millions of followers on social media. It’s been well over a decade now since the figure of the curator—a once auxiliary player in the world of art—became vulgarized and generalized in consumer society, and still its demented currency endures; you can eat burgers at the Curator restaurant at Heathrow Airport. Actual curators, by which I mean the people who care for objects in museums and organize exhibitions and biennials, have had to start looking for new titles. (Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, this year’s winner of a major prize for curators, prefers “draftsperson.” She says, “You curate pork to make prosciutto.”)

The curator, especially the curator of contemporary art, is a young figure in art history; we critics have thousands of years on them. Aristocrats, physicians, and clergymen proudly oversaw the connoisseurship and display of their own *Wunderkammern* in the early modern period, while at the Louvre, the first of the national museums established in the late eighteenth century, the *décorateurs* who hung paintings and installed sculptures were artists themselves. Audiences discovered new painting and sculpture at artist-juried exhibitions such as the

art galleries; braver souls might first see the modernist avant-gardes in exhibitions artists organized on their own.

Only in the middle of the twentieth century did the curated exhibition take over from the salon, the dealership, and the independent show as the principal launch pad of contemporary art. In fits and starts, the professional curator arrogated responsibilities once held by the artist, the collector, the historian, or indeed the critic, becoming the figure who assigned meaning and importance to new art: someone the art historian Bruce Altshuler has called “the curator as creator.” Soon after, the curator stepped beyond the single museum or

institution to become a roving organizer and analyst of contemporary art.

In the United States, the paragon of this authorial form of curating contemporary art was Walter Hopps, a Californian who in the 1960s offered the first museum retrospectives of Marcel Duchamp and other living artists. (He later became the first director of the Menil Collection in Houston.) In Europe, it was Harald Szeemann, a shaggy Swiss savant whose early career at a small, noncollecting institution prefigured nearly four decades of organizing and circulating large-scale exhibitions. From his unruly headquarters in the mountains of Ticino, where his papers and books filled an entire warehouse he called the Fabbrica Rosa, Szeemann—who died in 2005 aged seventy-one—planned exhibitions of contemporary art “from vision to nail.” Some were staged in the world’s largest museums, others on view in private apartments or hilltop redoubts. Self-supporting, self-assured, with a Rabelaisian appetite for both art and life, Szeemann became the prototype for the frequent-flying contemporary art curator who emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century, bleary-eyed, with his crumpled Prada suit and dinged Rimowa suitcase, in the arrival terminals of Venice and São

has ever acquired. Szeemann’s catalogs, letters, photographs, hand-sketched exhibition layouts, and scribbled artist rosters were on view last year in a comprehensive exhibition at the Getty (which then toured to three European museums), and they’re assembled, too, in the hefty volume *Museum of Obsessions*, packed with scholarly essays and interviews on Szeemann’s expansive career. The Getty has also published a volume of Szeemann’s translated writings, while another fraction of the archive was deployed in the recreation of one of Szeemann’s weirdest and most important shows: “Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us,” an obsessive reconstitution

of the life and collection of his grandfather, who was a hairdresser. First seen in Los Angeles last year, “Grandfather” finished its tour this summer at Swiss Institute in New York’s East Village, and it contained no art as such. Instead, one discovered more than a thousand historical objects and documents Szeemann had preserved and kept in the Fabbrica Rosa archive, all presented within free-standing temporary walls that replicated the dimensions of the show’s first venue: his own Bern apartment.

The very act of restaging a decades-old exhibition, from the placement of walls to the design of the displays, suggests how thoroughly the object of inquiry in contemporary art has passed from individual artworks to full-scale shows. (And this is not Szeemann’s first to be resuscitated; in 2013 the Fondazione Prada in Venice restaged “When Attitudes Become Form,” his breakthrough 1969 exhibition of postminimal sculpture and conceptual art.) But the richly illustrated *Museum of Obsessions* does not aim to replicate his shows on paper, and does not even include a list of the more than 150 exhibitions he curated.*

*If you want a straight history of Szeemann’s exhibitions, you’ll have to go

"The fact that Harald Szeemann was a curator," writes Glenn Phillips in the introduction to *Museum of Obsessions*, "is not the thing that makes him interesting." That sounds a bit like a rearguard action to those of us who've eaten one too many "curated" sandwiches and frowned at hotels' "curated" pillow menus, as if the editors want to insulate him after the fact from the generalization and dilution of the curatorial mode. Yet perhaps Szeemann, who always called himself an *Austellungsmacher* (a maker of exhibitions), would have liked the abnegation. For this king of curators was also his own public relations officer, his own technical chief, his own accountant—and, as countless Getty employees and interns have since learned, his own diligent archivist.

Harald Szeemann was born in Bern in 1933, into a family of hairdressers. In his teenage years he started a cabaret, but he left the theater for art history, eventually completing a Ph.D. on French modernism at the University of Bern and, later, the Sorbonne. The natural decision for a newcomer of his ambition, in the hundred years before 1961, would have been to stay in Paris. But the young Szeemann noticed that the most interesting European art—and the most interesting exhibitions, which was beginning to mean the same thing—had shifted out of the French capital and toward internationally minded museums to the north, in particular the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam under Willem Sandberg (which Szeemann visited every

month) and Moderna Museet in Stockholm, led by Pontus Hultén.

So Szeemann stayed in Switzerland. He had already curated his first exhibition, on the theme of poets and painters, for the Museum St. Gallen, where "the intensity of the work made me realize this [making exhibitions] was my medium. It gives you the same rhythm as in theater, only you don't have to be on stage constantly." In 1961, aged twenty-eight, he was named director of the Kunsthalle Bern, an exhibition hall governed by a local artists' union. These days the Kunsthallen of German-speaking Europe host big-ticket shows and publish authoritative catalogs, but in the early 1960s the Kunsthalle Bern had a staff of three, a piddling budget of 60,000 Swiss francs ("My whiskey consumption took care of my salary in no time"), and just a few hours' turnaround time between shows. The straitened circumstances enjoined Szeemann to collaborate with institutions like the Stedelijk, whose larger budget he relied on to ship over the work of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and other American artists. He also improvised thematic exhibitions like "12 Environments" (1968), for which artists came to Bern to fill, slather, and overwhelm the galleries, while Christo draped the Kunsthalle's functionalist building with a plastic sheet. Christo, interviewed for

"When Attitudes Become Form" short-circuited what Szeemann called "the studio-museum-gallery triangle": the pathway of modern art from the artist's studio, via the commercial gallery, to the public or private collection. In its place it proposed a more pervasive, even numinous conception of art that has endured ever since. It insisted that "art" is a whole bundle of activities, stretching past autonomous images and objects, that encompasses *being* an artist, *speaking* like an artist, and *acting* like an artist within a specific setting. It proposed that texts, recordings, and other forms of documentation were integral components of artistic creation, and that the eyes were insufficient to perceive a work of art in its totality. And it positioned the curator as an active agent in artistic creation, perhaps even an author or an Über-artist. (The artist Daniel Buren would later complain that Szeemann was exhibiting his work as mere "brushstrokes in his [i.e., Szeemann's] painting"; the curator generously published the insult in the exhibition's catalog.)

Even if some of these propositions had their roots in Dada and other modernist tendencies, they were still not common currency in the 1960s, and "When Attitudes Become Form" set

off a national scandal. "Is Art Finally Dead?" read one magazine headline. Artists dumped a pile of manure outside the front door. Szeemann was forced to resign as artistic director of the Kunsthalle, and he would never again hold a job. Later in 1969 he established the Agentur für geistige Gastarbeit (Agency for Spiritual Guest Labor): a one-man operation for the production of exhibitions, tarted up with pseudocorporate letterhead and official-looking stamps and seals. With the Agentur, Szeemann essentially invented the position of the freelance curator, organizing and circulating exhibitions at museums in Switzerland, across Europe, and as far afield as Sydney.

“When Attitudes Become Form” made enough of an impact that Arnold Bode, the founder of Documenta, invited Szeemann to organize its fifth edition. Documenta is a giant exhibition held every four or five years in Kassel, Germany (running from June to September, it is known as the “museum of 100 days”), founded in 1955 to redeem large-scale German art exhibitions after the Degenerate Art Show of the Nazi era. But it had badly misstepped in 1968 with a conservative, American-heavy edition that incited protests and boycotts. Bode heard the demands for a new direction at Documenta and found, in Szeemann, a figure who could inscribe the era’s countercultural protests and avant-garde impostures inside his institution, when others wanted to tear it down entirely.

If Documenta is now the world’s most important exhibition of contemporary art, that is largely the legacy of Szeemann’s edition of 1972, for which he reassembled most of the postminimal and conceptual artists of “When Attitudes Become Form,” but also included photorealism, hyperrealistic sculpture, political propaganda, and the art of the mentally ill, all of which typified what he called “*individuelle Mythologien*” (individual mythologies). Large-scale international exhibitions of new art were already well established (the Venice Biennale by then was more than seventy-five years old), but Szeemann’s Documenta established the megashow as we imagine it today: a thesis-driven presentation with a unified mode of display; bold, often temporary public interventions; and theoretical discourses in the form of catalogs, debates, performances, and interviews. “The notion of innovation was no longer sufficiently attractive,”



Installation view of Harald Szeemann's 'Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us,' Bern, 1974

Bullhusar/Birkhard/J. Paul Getty Trust/Getty Research Institute

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Museum of Obsessions, relates that the show so irritated Bernese art audiences that someone wrapped Szeemann’s Volkswagen Beetle in retaliation.

The local press regularly flayed him, but people outside Switzerland were talking about sleepy Bern, and on the strength of “12 Environments” the tobacco company Philip Morris made Szeemann a very strange offer: a no-strings-attached budget of \$150,000 (more than \$1 million in 2019 dollars) to organize any show he wanted. Even in 1968 such corporate hand-washing could raise hackles (Hultén, at Moderna Museet, had faced protests for accepting tobacco company sponsorship), but the chain-smoking Szeemann pocketed it gleefully. He used the cash to travel to America—in *Museum of Obsessions* you can see his densely annotated address book, with phone numbers for Bruce Nauman and Robert Ryman in New York, Ed Ruscha and Mary Corse in Los Angeles. Back in Bern in 1969, he blew the rest of the tobacco money on an exhibition that would leave the most fundamental principles of aesthetic appreciation in tatters.

Szeemann later wrote, "and an accumulation of painters was replaced by the exhibition as *Gesamtkunstwerk*."

But a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is not a democratic endeavor. Farewell to the Salon jury or the independent artists' group; in their place was the curator as gatekeeper, designer, chief theoretician, and impresario. The critic Barbara Rose, in *New York* magazine, called the show "a kind of Disneyland as designed by Hieronymus Bosch," and took an ironic pleasure in how thoroughly Szeemann had institutionalized the avant-garde: "Every strategy and ploy of the contemporary artist to remain outside of society and critical of its institutions is proved useless." Serra,

of eagles. (First shown in Broodthaers's Brussels apartment in 1968, the mock museum traveled to Szeemann's Documenta 5.) Phillips, in *Museum of Obsessions*, glosses "Grandfather" as "a symbol of curating in its purest form—exhibition making as a creative act, curating for curating's sake." Its full-scale restaging, with nearly all the original objects, is an achievement perhaps only the Getty could pull off, and demonstrates that archival curating, far from a programmatic exercise, is capable of eliciting the most intense emotions.

If "Grandfather" romanticized and miniaturized the individual mythologies Szeemann appreciated in the artists of Documenta 5, it also cleared the path for several of his later exhibitions, particularly the touring show "Bachelor Machines" (1975–1977). Drawing on Duchamp's intertwining of erotics and mechanics, "Bachelor Machines" narrated an onanistic history of modernism in which engines and contraptions get confused for flesh and blood. Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, a bicycle wheel fastened to a stool, stood next to the Swiss sculptor Robert Müller's *La Veuve du Coureur*, a stationary bike whose pedals powered a phallus that rose and fell through the saddle. Szeemann also commissioned several models of bachelor machines from literature, most fearsomely a full-scale rendition of the torture device in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," which tattoos a condemned prisoner with the law he has broken. (Several objects from "Grand-

father" were included, though not the perm chair; it would have fit right in.)

As so often with Szeemann, "Bachelor Machines" grafted the art of his contemporaries onto an earlier, messier modernism of the 1880s to the 1920s, typified by Duchamp, Kafka, Raymond Roussel, and the earlier pataphysics of Alfred Jarry, the author of *Ubu Roi*. (The years around World War II did not interest Szeemann much, and he almost never exhibited Abstract Expressionism.) His other major show of the 1970s, "Monte Verità," warmer and freer than the closed circuit of "Bachelor Machines," studied a collection of spiritualists, utopians, anarchists, and vegetarians who all came to the titular mountain in the years around 1900. You can still see this permanent exhibition in a house in Ascona, Switzerland—and "Monte Verità" may, more than any other show, typify Szeemann's advocacy for a blending of art and life, with one foot planted in the mountains and the other traipsing around Europe.

Nam June Paik, speaking to a Swiss television station in 1992, celebrated Szeemann as "one of few guy [sic] who can combine the impetus and the anger and the rebellion of our underground artists...with institutions and money people and bankers.... Art world's problem is that all radical people must live on the most dirty rascals' money." Szeemann's later career, often focusing on national art scenes (Austria, Belgium, Spain, the Balkans) and culminating in two editions of the Venice Biennale in 1999 and 2001, tried to reconcile those two camps, and the results were mixed. These late shows had larger budgets, drew larger audiences, but had little of the fissiparous invention and theoretical heft of "Grandfather," "Bachelor Machines," and the other achievements of the 1970s.

was brutal, and even Jürgen Habermas, whom Szeemann expected to appreciate Documenta 5's emphasis on communication and interaction, said Chuck Close and the other photorealists were all he could make sense of. The show also went over budget; the city of Kassel sued him for liability. Morris and his fellow American detractors imagined Szeemann to be an art-world dictator, but he was, by 1973, essentially broke.

Back in Bern, he withdrew from the large-format exhibition to create the strangest show of his career. "Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us," staged in his apartment in the spring of 1974, was a tribute to his late grandfather Étienne Szeemann, a high-end hairstylist who also invented a permanent-wave machine. "Grandfather" included more than 1,200 hairdressing tools, cosmetics, dolls, teacups, and documents, carefully organized by chronology, geographical origin, color, and theme. These objects did more than relate Étienne Szeemann's migration from Hungary, professional success, and family life. They also, in Harald Szeemann's presentation, outlined a half-century's cultural history, with hairdressing as a funhouse reflection of the modernist avant-garde. Wig stands in the form of bald, big-eyed maidens became Surrealist totems. A framed Helvetian white cross on a red field, which the elder Szeemann made after he took Swiss citizenship in 1919, is crafted from dyed human hair. His worrying perm machine, topped by a dozen tangled metal cylinders dangling from wires, looks rather like an electric chair.

Rich, dense, and tinged with melancholy, "Grandfather" owed a profound debt to another roving assemblage of mundane objects: the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'art moderne, département des aigles*, which mapped centuries of national and European history through an aggregation of hundreds of postcards and tchotchkes of eagles. (First shown in Broodthaers's

The one place he could hold onto the spirit of that era was up near Monte Verità, in the ever-growing archive of the Fabbrica Rosa, which held in tension the curator's Apollonian impulse to organize and Dionysian drive to freedom. Christov-Bakargiev, who curated Documenta in 2012, writes in *Museum of Obsessions* that this extended even to Szeemann's drinking habits: "For forty years he drank a simple midrange Ticino merlot...and used the cardboard boxes that the wine bottles had been packed in as containers for his archive...so that 'the more I drink, the more I organize.'"

Artists called Szeemann "King Harry," but is the curator still the boss? By the late 1990s, the institutionalization of the avant-garde that began with "When Attitudes Become Form" had begotten a global network of biennials, fairs, schools, and publications. My generation of artists and writers (I'm thirty-six) treated curators like Okwui Enwezor and Vasif Kortun with the intellectual deference our predecessors reserved for critics like Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss. Art historians began to study the "history of exhibitions," and "curatorial studies" programs proliferated outside the traditional academy and even within it, at institutions like my alma mater, the Courtauld Institute of Art.

Now these curatorial studies graduates fill the seats of every EasyJet flight from Brussels to Berlin, banging out catalog entries for one of three-