

# Introduction

## The canonisation of modernism: exhibition strategies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

Gregor Langfeld and Tessel M. Bauduin

The term canon in art history refers to specific works of art, artists, and movements that are considered crucial or of the highest importance and serve as a reference point. The canon is reflected by, for instance, the UNESCO World Heritage List, art history textbooks, the collections of leading art museums, and the prices on the art market. These artistic hierarchies are continuously generated and maintained in the art field.

If these hierarchies once appeared static, universal and timeless, today art historians' work is based on the premise that the canon is a much more flexible category that should constantly be reassessed. This shift began a few decades ago, spurred on in large part by the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), who demonstrated that aesthetic experience and preferences are class-based, rather than innate.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1970s art historians, particularly with a background in feminism and later postcolonial theory, have considered the canon critically, pointing out structures of exclusion and ultimately modifying the canon.<sup>2</sup> Through their achievements with regard to the marginalisation of female and 'non-Western' artists it has become clear that the canon is culturally constructed.<sup>3</sup> However, as the contributions in this feature section demonstrate, our canon of modernism still remains strongly rooted in a 'Western' art historiography. Indeed, canon formation is a highly selective process. Agents in the art field, such as museum directors and curators, constantly have to make choices, which automatically involve the exclusion of a much larger group of works of art, artists or styles.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984 (orig. pub. 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Hubert Locher has shown that as a critical concept the use of the term 'canon' in art history is fairly recent: Locher, 'The Idea of the Canon and Canon Formation in Art History', in Matthew Rampley, Thierry Lenain, Hubert Locher, Andrea Pinotti, Charlotte Schoell-Glass, and Kitty Zijlmans, eds, *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2012, 29–40, 29–30.

<sup>3</sup> See, among other publications: Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?', *Art News*, January 1971, 22–39 and 67–71; Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, London: Routledge, 1999; Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012 (orig. pub. 1990); Janet Wolff, 'Groundless Beauty: Feminism and the Aesthetics of Uncertainty', *Feminist Theory*, 7: 2, August 2006, 143–58.

The formation of a canon is an inherently social process that involves various actors in the art scene and associated institutions, such as artists, art collectors, patrons, gallery owners, art historians, educators, museum professionals, curators, art critics and politicians. The degree to which the views upon art or art collections of specific social groups and institutions were able to prevail over time reveals their influence on the discourse of art and their dominance within the art field. This raises the question of how certain discourses and master narratives in society have been established.

As early as the nineteenth century European institutions that exhibited art, such as world fairs, salons and alternative jury-free exhibitions, were crucial for familiarising the public with art. They were challenged by artists' societies, such as the Secession, which in turn were instrumental in the introduction of new artists' groups and movements.<sup>4</sup> Well-known examples of exhibitions organised by artists' societies in the early twentieth century are the international *Sonderbund* exhibition in Cologne (1912) and the *Armory Show* in New York (1913). In large part the discourse on art that developed in the wake of these exhibitions helped to define what we now consider to be the major works of art, artists and movements in modern art history.

This feature section explores canonisation processes in relation to modernist and avant-gardist art that was created in the first half of the twentieth century and the post-war period, which radically broke with nineteenth-century artistic traditions. As the contributions demonstrate, museum exhibitions played a particularly crucial role in forming a canon. However, art museums contributed to modernist art being exhibited and collected at a relatively late stage. Although museums had been collecting works by living artists since the nineteenth century, modernist art had largely been excluded. Gradually museums too came to advocate for more progressive art – a development that took hold in countries such as Germany in the 1920s. One example of a landmark exhibition during interwar period is *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936) organised by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), a museum which has proven to be extremely influential in canon formation, as several authors in this feature section point out. Because of its pronounced autonomy and general public recognition, the museum as such had more of a widespread canonising effect than previous institutions and agents. During the second half of the twentieth century, exhibitions such as documenta and biennales emerged as influential institutions for the introduction of modern and contemporary art. The focus of these exhibitions, however, quickly shifted to contemporary art, which is why they play a less prominent role in this feature section.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Publications about the history of exhibiting and the canonisation of nineteenth century art are, among others: Bruce Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions That Made Art History*, vol. 1: 1863-1959, London: Phaidon, 2008; Maximiliane Drechsler, *Zwischen Kunst und Kommerz: zur Geschichte des Ausstellungswesens zwischen 1775 und 1905*, Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1996; see also: Anna Brzyski, ed., *Partisan Canons*, Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> See, regarding the first documentas: Walter Grasskamp, "'Degenerate Art' and Documenta I: Modernism Ostracized and Disarmed', in Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, eds, *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 163-94; Grasskamp, 'To Be Continued: Periodic Exhibitions (dOCUMENTA, for Example)', *Tate Papers*, 6: 12 (autumn

During the past few decades, scholars have increasingly turned to exhibition history and the role influential exhibitions have played in the formation of an art-historical canon.<sup>6</sup> One of the side effects of this attention is that certain exhibitions themselves have been canonised and even sacralised.<sup>7</sup> This tendency is especially evident with regard to an exhibition genre that remembers past exhibitions as replica or other forms of re-enactment.<sup>8</sup>

Although the authors in this feature section aim to question the canon critically, they are not so much focussed on actively revising the canon than in understanding processes of canonisation. The contributions show that a core type of research on canon formation is closely related to reception history, in which the history of collecting and exhibiting are important elements, and this can function as a critical tool to approach art history itself. Reception history makes the constructed nature of the discourse that creates the art work, and its meaning and value, visible. Studying the processes by which art and artists are excluded and included in their socio-historical contexts can lead to new insights that ultimately contribute to the transformation of the canon.

The articles in this feature section are centred on two central canonising infrastructures of modern art: the exhibition and the modern art museum. One contribution explores the canonisation of a specific artwork: the mural *Swing Landscape* (1938) by Stuart Davis (1892-1964); and a second one that of a specific artist: the Russian avant-garde artist Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962). Two other contributions trace the reception history of specific movements and periods: German expressionism and post-war German art, and surrealism in the United States. Another one explores the institutional canonisation of the Cobra group in the post-war Netherlands, and the final contribution focuses on the rather belated

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2009), Landmark Exhibitions Issue, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/to-be-continued-periodic-exhibitions-documenta-for-example>, accessed 31 October 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Examples for this tendency are, among others: Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998; Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial*, vol. 1: (see above) and vol. 2: *Biennials and Beyond: 1962-2002*, London: Phaidon, 2013; Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016; Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds, *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996; Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000; Bernd Klüser and Katharina Hegewisch, eds, *Die Kunst der Ausstellung. Eine Dokumentation dreißig exemplarischer Kunstausstellungen dieses Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1991; Michael Bollé and Eva Zürchner, eds, *Stationen der Moderne. Die bedeutenden Kunstausstellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland*, Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Altshuler, 'A Canon of Exhibitions', *Manifesta Journal*, 11, 2010, 5-12, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Reesa Greenberg, "'Remembering Exhibitions:' From Point to Line to Web', *Tate Papers*, 6: 12 (autumn 2009), Landmark Exhibitions Issue, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/remembering-exhibitions-from-point-to-line-to-web>, accessed 31 October 2018; see also Linda Boersma and Patrick van Rossem, eds, *Rewriting or Reaffirming the Canon? Critical Readings of Exhibitions History*, special issue of *Stedelijk Studies*, 2: 2 (spring 2015), <https://stedelijkstudies.com/issue-2-exhibition-histories>, accessed 31 October 2018.

recognition of Latin American and Eastern European modernist art in recent exhibitions.

A thread that runs through all the articles is an interest in the function of ideology and politics (and depoliticisation) within the canonisation of art. Highly remarkable in this regard are: the developments and ruptures in the wake of the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War, which led, for instance, to a complete volte-face in the American reception of German expressionism, once declared 'degenerate', as explored in the contributions by Gregor Langfeld and Ilka Voermann; the complicated reception and initial marginalisation of Goncharova's work, as discussed by Elena Korowin; and also the appreciation of the art by the Cobra artists, which functioned as a mediator for collective memory and identity, as discussed by Claartje Wesselink.

Langfeld's opening article provides a broader framework of existing art-historical concepts and approaches towards the canon and canon formation, such as feminist art history. The latter played its part in the reception of Goncharova too, as is teased out by Korowin. As she notes, Goncharova's works are among the most expensive by a female artist on the art market today, but this certainly was not always the case. In fact, in the 1950s the artist was nearly forgotten; one aspect of Goncharova's uneven reception trajectory that is explored. Related dynamics are discussed by Voermann with regard to German art. Central to her case-study is the Busch-Reisinger Museum, then the only museum outside Germany that was focussed exclusively on the German cultural sphere. Voermann lays bare how, in the years following the 1939-45 war, American and German art historians relied on the existing canon of prewar modernism in their efforts to promote contemporary German art. Taking the Dutch art scene during the reconstruction period (1945-1960) as her case, Wesselink explores how factors other than aesthetic ones significantly influenced the production and canonisation of Dutch art in the wake of the war.

In her article about *Swing Landscape* by Stuart Davis, Jennifer McComas explores a case that offers another take on the interrelations of politics and art. As a mural originally commissioned for a public housing project in New York City, there is a significant social and political context to *Swing Landscape*. The mural was rejected from its intended site, and, as McComas shows in its reception and exhibition history, its independence from a fixed location ensured its broader visibility and canonisation almost entirely in terms of its aesthetic innovations, along with the marginalisation of its original social and political context, which resulted in interpretative problems.

Sandra Zalman points to the depoliticisation of art within Greenbergian formalism, an artistic discourse that denigrated surrealism. Zalman elucidates the reception and canonisation of surrealism, analysing three major exhibitions as landmarks in 1936, 1968 and 1985. The last of these exhibitions, *L'Amour Fou*, organised by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, brought attention to surrealist photographers, and thereby reframed surrealism as a movement around the medium of photography, after it had been received rather negatively in the post-war period. In their closing piece, Miriam Oesterreich and Kristian Handberg present the contemporary angle on the themes of this feature section in their take on more recent exhibitions that have acted as agents in the formation of a canon of modern

art history: *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965* (2016–17); *Art in Europe 1945–1968* (2016–17); and *The Other Trans-Atlantic: Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America 1950s–1970s* (2017). The authors discuss these exhibitions as expressions of an ongoing debate concerning the canon of modernist art, exemplifying how the exhibitions served both to reassess the existing canon and to generate new processes of canonisation of specific genres and artists.

This feature section on the canonisation of modern art is the result of a discussion among the authors in the summer of 2017 in Amsterdam,<sup>9</sup> a discussion we are continuing and opening up with this publication, which, thanks to the authors' dedication and constructive exchanges with the peer-reviewers makes an additional contribution to this ever-growing research field on the canon and canon formation in art history.

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**Tessel Bauduin's** study on *Surrealism and the Occult* was published in 2014 (Amsterdam University Press). Her upcoming monograph on the reception of old masters in surrealism is one outcome of a postdoctoral project for which Bauduin was awarded a prestigious individual VENI grant by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). Bauduin has published widely on modern art, surrealism, automatism, occultism and the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint. Among other interests, Bauduin researches the potential alterity as well as the canonisation of modernism.

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<sup>9</sup> We organised several panels at the Modernist Studies Association's Annual Conference and the University of Amsterdam on the canonisation of modernism.