

Case study: Photographic documentation of physical exhibition architectures and their re-presentation on Contemporary Art Daily

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For some fifteen years, I have been curious about the conditions of what the art industry commonly refers to as “the installation view” or “the installation shot”: How it frames an exhibition, what it portends to, what its digital publication means for the physical venue both as a business and architecturally speaking, in terms of how artworks are arranged therein, for the artists and organizers involved, and in the positioning of the camera to frame these installments as visual culture made manifest through a method of image dissemination and visual archiving. What does a daily dose of exhibition views make observable? Drawing only from the coverage of multiple exhibitions at a venue onsite over time, what does it mean to recall the spatial layout and floor plan of a certain venue we may have never set foot in ourselves? What blind spots do these semblances form?

During instances of encountering a new artwork or a new exhibition, we commonly acclimate ourselves to the occasion by finding familiarities in what we are aesthetically reminded of via associative processes, often recollections of artworks and/or exhibitions manifested elsewhere. Having a familiarity with a certain venue’s more static characteristics and architectural details through only the available visual documentation as a baseline seems another matter. Just as each subsequent exhibition in a given set of rooms tests the flexibility of the immediate architecture and what it can feasibly support, its service as a backdrop and ground to receive a diversity of artistic and curatorial arrangements derives from a constant capacity of how work within these limits is visibly accessible. In effect, the proverbial viewer is granted a place to view. A major component in this monosensorial accessibility comes from certain individuals tasked with documenting these occasions for posterity, publication, and archive.

With the advent and rise of smartphone usage over the last decade, which coincides with Contemporary Art Daily’s own respective trajectory as a (re)publisher of exhibitions, the means of documenting such occasions has arguably altered the experience of those who choose to frame, record, and share their subjective experiences while navigating encounters with physical art for the ever-accruing audiences that follow in wake. This arguable democratization of photography through smartphone usage has elevated any lived experience as being as valuable as demonstrable culture so long as it is captured for reception.

Simultaneously, this compendium of personalized views also impacts how exhibitions as aesthetically organized propositions and situated environments are

regarded through this expanded reception. To what extent does the ubiquity of diversified views today, generated through images posted to social media platforms, affect the shifting use value of the officiated documentation of exhibitions and the installed contents therein?

Exhibition photographers with whom I have conversed with have shared of distinctive familiarities they develop with these spaces from successive returns: A habit not born out of a search for stimulating, cultural experiences, but a pursuit for a regulated cycle of piecemeal employment of tentative continuity. For an individual who has been employed in the role of documentarian by a certain venue for a number of exhibitions, a level of dexterity begins to develop respective of a growing awareness of the architectural parameters over time through this repeated visitation. Unlike a visitor who is only able to enter a venue during public hours and may utilize the camera function they carry on a mobile device as a tool to align and perhaps also confirm a sense of enculturation, signaling their own personal presence in-kind, employed exhibition photographers provide a differently coded service to a venue, which extends to the artist(s), organizers, collectors, critics, publishers, and learners of a given show through their frequently unbeknownst labor. In instances where public photography is not permitted, any subsequent visual record manifests entirely in private. Why would an individual who is consequential in determining what becomes the dominant visual narrative of artworks placed, more often than not, be diminished in a public's encounter with these fundamental views?

Commonly employed as independent contractors, these individuals can make a personal business of this type of work through cobbling together various client accounts with venues in their region. Alternatively, a person may obtain these employment opportunities as "odd jobs" or "gigs", which go toward supplementing a personal livelihood that may also include any number of other forms of employment. A conscious observation in initiating this study is in the detail that a number of these laborers also identify as creative themselves, in many instances a key factor that precipitates this line of work, however supplemental it may be to support an ongoing personal practice.

A number of questions have arisen during preliminary considerations both in the instances of attending exhibitions in person as well as in viewing the documentation of exhibitions online:

- What does it mean to unequivocally acknowledge and credit this labor motivated by an accelerating pressure to turn photographic shoots around at a rapid rate for private business, internal operations, industries of re-view, online dissemination, and public consumption while physical exhibitions remain concurrently installed onsite? What does it mean not to?

- To what extent does an exhibition photographer work with the *immovable* dynamics of a given space, however altered by the arrangements of variable artistic inclusions and intentional interruptions, to accommodate an overview of the given situation?
- Are installation views at this point in time tailored in such a way to appear as the means by which a viewer can project themselves into the space of display? Is this any different from a pre-digital age when encountering the documentation of installed artworks was most commonly accessed through the likes of documentation in print publications, generally published after the particular exhibition in question had already come and gone?
- Has the documentation of an exhibition become more significant than the installation with its contents in the physical room itself? Have a quantity of views surmounted the lived experience of encountering artworks in-person?
- How often does a suite of views describing an exhibition provide an opportunity to study the architecture of a given space? What does it mean to look past the work in the foreground, the assumed *raison d'être* of these images, to these grounds themselves through compositional, in-camera compressions? Do certain spaces become recognizable over time through these visuals alone due to this refrain of a common ground and its notably recurrent features?
- How consequential are brick and mortar spaces in facilitating a provisional backdrop as the means of aiding an accreditation of matters in the name of artistry, populist aesthetics, and marketability? To what extent does this continue to affect the reception of art, sites of art, and education to adapt in design and décor to approximate signifiers constituting a semblance of display so as to elicit something as being valid of a valued existence?
- Are exhibitions in physical settings functioning more so now as the staging grounds for the photoshoots which record the installed arrangements therein?
- To what extent have artists and curators begun to consciously anticipate optimal viewpoints when determining the placement of an exhibition's contents? Have strategies developed to encourage where a person should stand, whether the hired documentarian or imaging visitor, to situate a mannered composition in frame?
- Have platforms like Contemporary Art Daily heightened a kind of pictorialism that may have already been latent in exhibition photography? Is the vignette as a modality anything new in this formatting of arrangements of material art in physical space? To what extent are these photographic documents of aesthetic

objects? To what extent are these objects aestheticized through their visual recording and published dissemination?

With an interest in further exploring these questions, a proposal was accepted by Contemporary Art Daily (CAD) in December 2019 to host an inquiry on its platform in the rubric of a case study. This involves an invitation to exhibition photographers to document a venue that they have recently received employment through as an independent contractor. Once a venue is selected and agreeable participation in the study is reached, a photoshoot is coordinated for a mutually feasible time after the deinstallation of one exhibition and prior to the subsequent installation of another. Not unlike what is entailed in documenting an installed exhibit; through their individual agency and haptic familiarity with the environment, the photographer generates a number of architectural views.

Initially proposed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the significant impact of elongated closures of which cultural venues continue to reconcile with in ways both inward and outward facing, the implications of this study have had to adapt in-kind to the advent of galleries and museums questioning what physical proximity and access to installed art in enclosed quarters as a public offering now entails. What has been a standard documentary view of aesthetic arrangements in a given room, during this reflexive period, now further amplifies the bodies absent from view. As newly implemented protocols are introduced to again grant limited public access within brick and mortar sites, the presentations of art this past year have become more dependent on online display than ever before, reprioritizing navigational access and skewed viewing at a distance of what had broadly been considered, in recent times, secondary to supposedly unimpeded encounters with art.

To encounter art, especially of the sanctioned sort, has never been absent of mediation. The recent delivery of curated culture through digital means, previously considered auxiliary, adjacent, and/or non-applicable, has introduced circumstances which present a number of fascinating questions still being articulated, inextricable from the digital records of physical architectures zoned for exhibition that are currently observing newly implemented codes of conduct, remain on pause, welcome visitors by appointment only, and/or are exhibiting as digitized surrogates for provisional public access and cultural consumption.

To what extent has a person's experience as a photographer of exhibitions prepared them to be an architectural photographer within a context they are already spatially acquainted with? Does this make them uniquely qualified in capturing what is more often than not a structured environment that supports the items incorporated into it at regular intervals? What are the differences in approach between a documentarian of exhibitions and a photographer of architec-

tures? What does it mean to invite an exhibition photographer to document an exhibition space absent of exhibition(s)?

If the material inclusions of an exhibition into an existent architecture are considered positively interruptive insofar that they dictate where a person is able to stand and roam due to the placement of artworks, pedestals, partition walls, furniture, etc., what will determine a photographer's positioning and the corollary views produced in the absence of such modular impediments? To what extent have the repeated experiences of navigating the fixed architecture of a gallery's room(s) dictated any preference of recurrently assured angles over time? With no artistic or curatorial inclusions in the room that would otherwise require photographic attention and framing, what becomes noticeable? What warrants documentation? At what distance? At what proximity?

On the side of reception, is the initial encounter with these architectural views, apparently absent of artwork(s) and made accessible through an online format predicated on daily postings of exhibition documentation, regarded as "empty(-ied)" and/or nondescript? Are these images conversely read as spaces full of potential to project onto/into? What architectural features become more noticeable?

The presentation of architectural views corresponding to each venue in this study follows the formatting standards established by CAD. Each gallery of images enacts a semblance of a particular venue on-view through an independent post in accordance with the platform's publishing of respective exhibitions, case by case. Following suit, decisions of the four images from the set and their sequencing, which appear "before the jump", are determined internally by CAD.

As a gallery being documented does not need to remain clear of installed exhibits for any longer period of time than it takes a photographer to adequately document the open environment, these corresponding images on CAD behave differently than the majority of daily posts presented on the platform – While an accounting of each gallery is consistent in it being located somewhere in the material world, the record of its spatial layout, viewed as such, is only accessible as digital matter. A momentary interruption via clearance of these rooms constitutes a propositional intermission in the perpetual operations of trade. If someone were to visit any one of these venues at the time of its publication as part of this study, they would not find corollary, physical rooms absent of exhibitions included in event schedules or in onsite galleries. The contents of the study provide public tours for viewers of vacant, enclosed spaces zoned for the display of art and its consumption. A venue interested in corroborating the study through acknowledging and/or hosting its representation on their platform(s) is in no way obligated to though is welcomed as a point of discussion.

A condition of venue selection requires that prior representation of the site is locatable within the archived posts of CAD. In certain instances, this entails that a contributing photographer's labor has already invariably been an unbeknownst presence on the platform, dependent on whether photo credit has been included in the accompanying show information copied in. Corroboration becomes feasible between the architectural tour of a space with its previous appearances in archived CAD posts. A dialectical correspondence also becomes viable between the visible presence of the venue and the (in)visible presence of the photographer recording exhibitions otherwise devoid of human presence, on average.

Substantial consideration in this inquiry stems from observing the invisible labor of individuals that might otherwise be artists hoping to share their own aesthetic investments within exhibitions at venues elsewhere. It becomes paramount that each participant maintains shared rights to the images they contribute to the study and be credited accordingly. Concurrent to this, it is integral that each person producing these visual contents be paid fairly at no less than their usual rates when documenting exhibitions in and for the respective venue of their choosing. As the project addresses matters connected to a source of income for the participating exhibition photographers, necessary care is made to ensure that involvement in the study does not compromise their immediate, continued employment with the venue in question.

Any material printing of an image from and up to a sum total set becomes something external to the scope of the study and not consistent with its parameters. The invitation is to carefully consider the threshold between physical galleries otherwise displaying art and the digitally accessible, visual documentation of them absent of such installments. As a credited author of these images, the photographer has license to use them as they see fit at their own discretion. The re-posting of any image in the study on digital platforms or by persons is welcomed under Creative Commons insofar that provenance is maintained through noted citation. This is to be respectful of the ways in which visual information already carries a flexible reuse quotient when existing as digital matter.

This ongoing study involves a small number of sites from cities where cultural venues display art for public reception. A range of spaces framed through cameras usually trained towards the incorporated artwork(s) positioned within them aims to provide a sample of architectures prioritized to exhibit art and here render aesthetic experimentation as condoned culture. Concurrently, utilizing the standardized formatting on CAD intends to situate a set of examples in ratio to the way a set of installation views of a particular exhibition seems to (re)construct and make apparent, from various vantage points, a semblance of a show therein. There is no way to comprehensively capture the cultural landscape at-large or each venue in particular. What further questions need articulation, observant of the

distance between human presence and the presentation of art via a corollary sub-industry of documentation and the laborers involved in the production of its visual record? In this instance, the requisite analysis that follows from case studies is a matter of the commons. Exhibition photographers account for only one demographic of less than credited labor among several contributing to systems of art presentation regularly excised from view.

Through encounters with the documentation, questions arise from the many octaves of presence we tend to ignore or inadvertently marginalize when viewing physical exhibitions primarily through available photographic documentation –by and large online, and prior to social media and recent adoptions of virtual interfaces– representative of the general limit of a visual, public record. Giving agency to employed exhibition photographers through reinstating their presence in these architectural views aims to compliment their absence within each installation shot these contributors are present in when framing and/or editing them, relative to the circulation of a given exhibition through its disseminated documentation.

What has a daily dose of provisional access to concurrently installed exhibitions in cities near and far meant for receptive communities accessing exhibitions online who may never set foot in these locales, not having the financial capital to travel the distance let alone the ability to do so within the temporal duration of a specific exhibition? In the last decade, the function of publishing, acknowledging, and (re)presenting exhibitions has shifted the tense in no small part due to the impact and heightened visibility of physically displayed art when shared through its digital, photographic documentation. Through this, Contemporary Art Daily becomes a point of consideration as not only an aggregate library of brick and mortar venues, but additionally as a venue in its own right, composed of daily postings and accruing archives, effectively the bricks of its own virtual architecture.

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