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ON BABEL'S RUINS: THE A-HISTORICAL SOUNDINGS OF HARALD SZEEMANN'S EXPOSITORY MACHINE THROUGH THEMATIC EXHIBITIONS, QUESTIONED AUTHORSHIP, AND ARTISTS' RE-INSTALLATIONS

The Museum of Obsessions and its executive body, the Agency for Spiritual Guestwork, have always held the view that fear of transgressing borders in vertical, compartmentalized historical thought can be overcome by a manifest art history of sensitivity towards the intensive intentions of the works of all times, in the form of visualized non-historical dimensions.¹

¹Szeemann, Harald (Ed.) (1988). *a-Historische klanken / a-Historical soundings. Harald Szeemann's choice from the collections of the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum* (Rotterdam, Boymans-van Beuningen, 28 August - 2 October 1988). Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1.

A veritable declaration of a poetics that Harald Szeemann entrusted to his Museum of Obsessions, *fictio personae* but also a true brand, and to the Agency for Spiritual Guestwork, its executive instrument, thus tracing the conceptual and theoretical coordinates in which his whole artistic and existential trajectory was inscribed. Not a simple exhibition maker,² but a composer of 'poems in space',³ Szeemann can be considered one of the curators from the second half of the twentieth century who probed the possibilities and extended the boundaries of the expository medium, making the curatorial activity no longer a mere profession, but a form of art itself, oscillating constantly between the zero degree of the curatorial act, a more evident feature in the monographic exhibitions, where the figure of the curator assumes, as if by evaporation, more dissimulated forms, placing himself at the margins of the scenic representation, rather like those donors kneeling at the sides of Renaissance paintings, who opened the work to further horizons of meaning with their prayers, and purely authorial curatorial practices, reflected above all in the great thematic exhibitions, where the curatorial ego appears to be completely centralised.

Sceptical of the linear and progressive paths of history, Szeemann's historiographical conception seems to have been shaped rather on the

² Cf. Müller, Hans-Joachim (2006). *Harald Szeemann: Exhibition Maker*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz.

³ Cf. Millet, Catherine (1988). Harald Szeemann, *Zeitlos*, un poème dans l'espace (Interview par Catherine Millet). *Art Press*, 126, 4-8. This was an expression used by the Swiss curator to designate some of his most poetic productions, including *Zeitlos* (1988) and *Mario Merz* (1990), claiming a specific authorial, and therefore artistic, dimension for the curatorial activity: "c'était plutôt un poème dans l'espace qui visait à une harmonie universelle..." [the quotation comes from Heinich, Nathalie (1995). *Harald Szeemann: Un cas singulier. Entretien*. Paris: L'Échoppe, 30]. The same lyrical afflatus is also present in *GAS: Grandiose Ambitieux Silencieux* (1993), the exhibition Szeemann devised for the Musée d'Art Contemporain (CAPC) in Bordeaux.

ashes of historicism, and far from crystallising into rigid and already constituted forms, it has been configured as a Babelic “constellation saturated with tensions”⁴ in which different approaches and ways of understanding art converge and mingle. Stimulated by the studies of Henri Bergson, who claimed that “The intensity of a simple state, therefore, is not quantity but its qualitative sign,”⁵ and from some of his Deleuzian rereadings,⁶ Szeemann contributed to rewriting and displaying a history of art that no longer measured its value and its achievements by merely extensive criteria, but defined itself as an open field of varying intensity, giving intelligibility to what he himself defined as “*eine Kunstgeschichte der intensiven Intentionen*,”⁷ and specifying “that the world is a museum and puts obsessions before traditional notions of value, or an art history of intensive intentions before an art history of masterpieces.”⁸

In 1988 Szeemann was invited by Wim Crouwel, director of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, to rethink its permanent collection, which boasted important paintings, sculptures, design objects and furnishings from every style, period and provenance, within a

⁴ Benjamin, Walter (2003, orig. publ. 1942). On the Concept of History. In: *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940, H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (Eds.). Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 396.

⁵ Bergson, Henri (1910, orig. publ. 1889). *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 224.

⁶ Cf. Deleuze, Gilles (1956). *Bergson 1859-1941*. In: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (Ed.). *Les philosophes célèbres*. Paris: Mazenod, 292-299; ID. (1956). La conception de la différence chez Bergson. *Les études bergsoniennes*, IV, 79-112; Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix (1972). *L'Anti-Œdipe. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, vol. 1. Paris: Éd. de Minuit.

⁷ Szeemann, Harald (1983). “*Vorbereitungen*”. In: ID. (Ed.). *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800* (Zürich, Kunsthau, 11 February-30 April 1983). Zurich: Sauerländer, 16.

⁸ Szeemann, Harald (2018, orig. publ. 1975). Museum of Obsessions. In: *Harald Szeemann. Selected Writings*, D. Chon, G. Phillips, and P. Rigolo (Eds.). Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 94.

temporary exhibition; among the works exhibited, a key role was played by the small *Tower of Babel* (c. 1568) by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, which translated Szeemann's work in the Rotterdam museum on the visual and epistemological level, summing up the *modus operandi* and the stylistic code that distinguished all of his exhibitions.

The summa and recapitulation of the practices and experiences developed by Szeemann in the curatorial and exhibition field, *a-Historical soundings* was also a radical museographic experiment, as well as a benchmark on which he was called to verify his own curatorial approach; for the first time he found himself working not from scratch, but within an established collection, which he reorganised in accordance with "a neo-Brueghelian, so to speak, and a timelessly aesthetic form".⁹

With *a-Historical soundings*, Szeemann's authorial aspiration and his predilection for thematic productions attained its most striking effects, arranging the works according to 'the law of the good neighbour'¹⁰, in Aby Warburg's words, within the framework of three parables exemplified by the Babelic topos, which responded to two precise impulses at the same time: "The first was an inborn urge to pick the raisins out of the cake without succumbing to the temptation of 'highlights' or 'the world's 100 best paintings'. Secondly, I wanted to fashion the incomprehensible Utopia of art, its search for the

⁹ Szeemann. *a-Historische klanken / a-Historical soundings*. [op. cit.], 14.

¹⁰ Cf. Gombrich, Ernst H. (1970). *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*. London: Warburg Institute [the expression quoted comes from the second edition: ID. (1986). *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 327].

concentrate in the work as content, into a timeless part of pure vision.”¹¹

In the principal room [Fig. 1] the first of the three unfolded parables, conceived by Szeemann as a cinematographic sequence, in which each work seemed to correspond to one photogram, and not without tears and lacerations, pauses and suspensions disclosed a horizon that introduced the theme of confusion among artistic languages elicited by Brueghel's *Tower of Babel* [Fig. 2], then continuing towards the cathartic path of suffering, which through illness, leads to death, evoked in *The Three Crosses* (c. 1620) by Peter Paul Rubens. However, if Brueghel's painting constituted the methodological and theoretical framework that provided readability for Szeemann's intervention, it was the “human creative urge”¹² expressed by Joseph Beuys' *Grond* (1980-81) – evoked by the copper plates concealed in the wooden structures of the work, which served as batteries – to reopen the life and death cycle staged by the parable, marking its always unfolding, recurrent and recommencing character, recalling Walter Benjamin's reflections on the concept of *Jetztzeit*: “Now-time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the figure which the history of mankind describes in the universe.”¹³

¹¹ Szeemann. [op. cit.], 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³ Benjamin. [op. cit.], 396.



[Fig. 1] Installation view of the principal room of *a-Historische klanken / a-Historical soundings*. Harald Szeemann's choice from the collections of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 28 August-2 October 1988. Photo by Jannes Linders.



[Fig. 2.] The small *Tower of Babel* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, c. 1568, framed between Joseph Beuys' *Grond*, 1980-81. Photo by Jannes Linders.

The “wondrous silence of emptiness and monochromaticism”¹⁴ constituted the thematic nucleus of the second room, in which Szeemann highlighted the pervasive process of zeroing the figurative and expressive codes to which artists very different from one another in time and space have submitted their work. Morandi's still lifes, Imi Knoebel's *Buffet* (1984-85), as well as Hendrik Albertus van den Eijnde's *Urn* (1918) are some of the most significant examples of such a

¹⁴ Szeemann. [op. cit.], 14-15.

reduction process, which led these artists to limit the work to its plastic values and primary structures [Fig. 3]. However, the effects of this formal synthesis were also produced on a chromatic level, as revealed by the assonances that emerged from the encounter between Kees van Dongen and Geertgen tot Sint Jans, although the latter's *Glorification of the Virgin* (1490-95) would probably have engaged more amiably in a dialogue with Mark Rothko's *Grey, Orange on Maroon, No. 8* (1960), which constituted the nucleus of the last parable. In fact, the two artists appear to be very similar, as they seem to display the same sensibility to the liminal factors and tonal possibilities of colour confirmed by the vibrant colouring of Pompeian red grounds, and the incessant shimmering and changing of the hues on which their attention is focused. Through the skilful modulation of light, distilled with great mastery, they give life to liquid, atmospheric and infra-tonal painting that admirably translates the climate of suspension and phenomenological rarefaction which Szeemann built this parable around.

The last parable was set up on the subject of "sacralization of seeming indifference",¹⁵ where Bruce Nauman contrasts the hypostatized forms of chaos offered by Brueghel's *Tower of Babel* with *Studio Piece* (1978-79): an inverted and imploded pyramid which seems to evoke the Flemish painter's tower *in absentia*, constituting its negative [Fig. 4]. The refined chromatic textures and the spareness of the synthetic forms that articulate the interiors of Pieter Jansz Saenredam's *The Great or Saint Lawrence's Church at Alkmaar* (1661) make the 'petrified music' of his painted architecture, according to the well-chosen

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

expression that would later be used among others by Friedrich Schlegel; as highlighted by Szeemann in his reinstallation, the music that can be heard both in Mondrian's geometric abstraction, and in Rothko's more intimate and lyrical one, as well as in the geometric motifs that adorn Emanuel de Witte's *Interior with a Woman at the Virginal* (1665-70), where light infuses its own rhythm.



[Fig. 3] Detail of Imi Knoebel's *Buffet*, 1984-85, and Hendrik Albertus van den Eijnde's *Urn*, 1918. Photo by Jannes Linders.



[Fig. 4] Installation view of Bruce Nauman's *Studio Piece*, 1978-79, and Mark Rothko's *Grey, Orange on Maroon, No. 8*, 1960. Photo by Jannes Linders.

A rhythm that seems to resonate also in the dynamic multi-coloured intarsias of Donald Judd's *Untitled* (1984): a large rectangular parallelepiped which was eventually excluded from the redesign, although reproduced in the catalogue, as were *Galvanized Iron 17 January 1973* (1973) and Walter De Maria's *A Computer Which Will Solve Every Problem in the World / 3-12 Polygon* (1984), because their imposing dimensions meant they would have required a room each, thus compromising the dialogic conception of *a-Historical soundings*.

The boundaries among the three parables, however, remain very permeable, as revealed by the providential and unexpected dialogues at a distance between Brueghel and Nauman, Geertgen tot Sint Jans and

Rothko, configuring the exhibition medium as a ductile support that, like the cinematographic eye, is not satisfied with “establishing a causal nexus between various moments in history”, telling the “sequence of events like the beads of a rosary,”¹⁶ but actuating constant osmosis and negotiation between artistic practices and different time horizons.

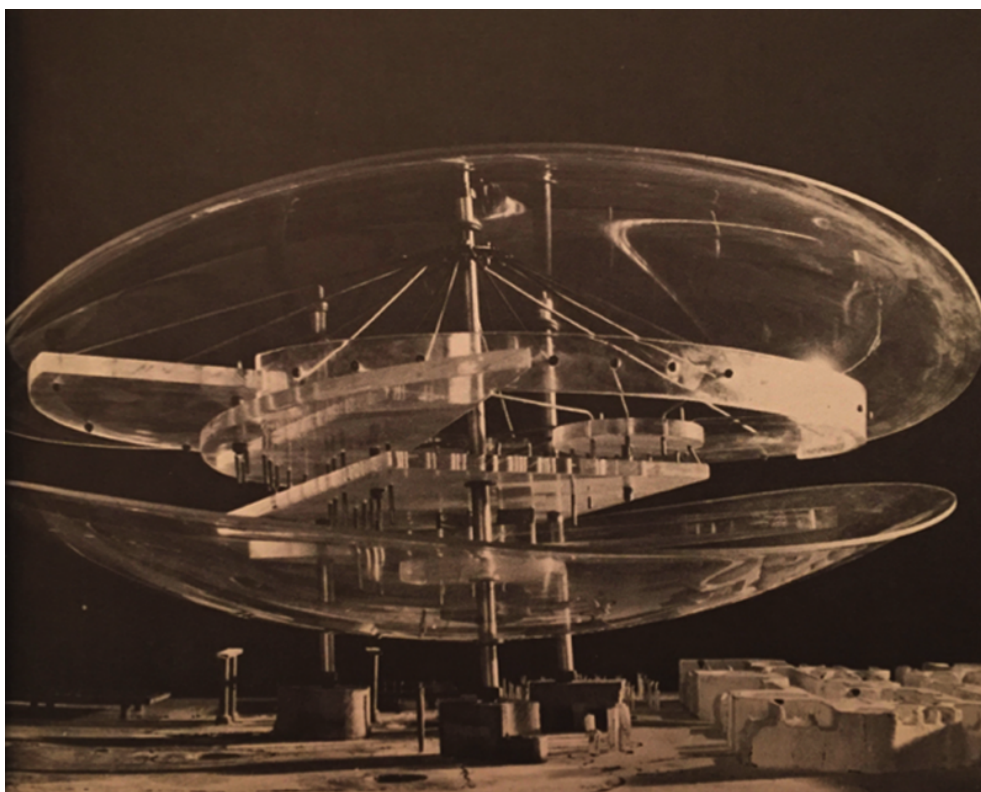
The first rewriting of the Babel myth presented by Szeemann dates from 1965, when he was the director of the Kunsthalle in Bern and organised an exhibition entitled *Neue Tendenzen der Architektur*. Among the diverse architectural and urban projects of utopian nature, we find *La ville verticale* by Paul Maymont [Fig. 5], the *Diamond Heights* by Jan Lubicz-Nycz, the *Wohnlandschaft* by Wolfgang Döring and the *Metabolism* by Noriaki Kurokawa, all brought together under the aegis of the *New Babylon* by Constant Nieuwenhuys, exhibited and documented in its various design phases and variants [Fig. 6]. As noted by Mario Perniola, in 1960 the Dutch artist abandoned the Situationist International by fusing his research into unified urbanism with the “project of a covered city, which he called New Babylon. It is a collective suspended house, extended to the whole breadth of the city and separated from circulation, which passes above or below it;”¹⁷ in Constant's designs, a city that an organised team of Situationist workers would constantly transform by providing its inhabitants with continuous stimuli and incentives.

¹⁶ Benjamin. [op. cit.], 397.

¹⁷ Perniola, Mario (2013). *New Babylon*. In: *L'avventura situazionista. Storia critica dell'ultima avanguardia del XX secolo*. Milano: Mimesis, 44.

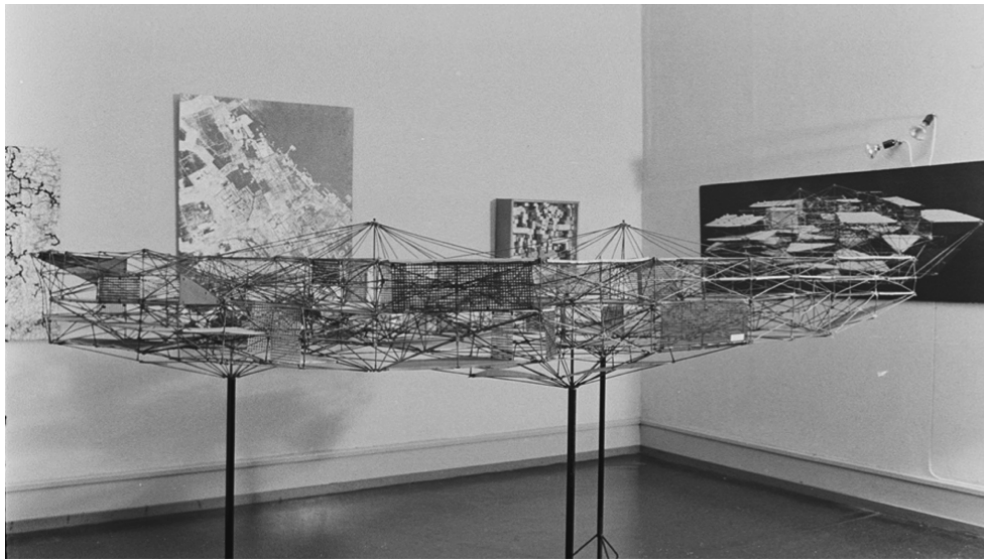


[Fig.5] Paul Maymont, *La ville verticale*, Paris, 1961.



[Fig.6] Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Space Eater*, 1960, plexiglass, metal and wood, 30 x 65 cm, base plate 90 x 65 cm.

New Babylon, a diffused city, whose status, unlike the other utopian cities on display that remain faithful to the phallogentric iconography of the biblical story, is inscribed in horizontality. The unified urbanism of a polycentric and radial character, which attracted the enthusiasm of Constant and Guy Debord, is highly reminiscent of one of the invisible cities that Italo Calvino narrated in 1972. Among his continuous cities there is one called Penthesilea, which “is only the outskirts of itself”,¹⁸ because its centre is everywhere.



[Fig.7] Installation view of the exhibition *Jean Gorin, Jean Dewasne, Constant. Drei Ausstellungen*, Bern, Kunsthalle, 2 April-8 May 1966. In the foreground a model of the *Self-Supporting Sector Construction*, c. 1958-61, metal, 130 x 100 x 80 cm. Photo by Balthasar Burkhard. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2011.M.30)

Further traces of Constant's work can be found in a collective exhibition in 1966 entitled *Jean Gorin, Jean Dewasne, Constant: Drei Ausstellungen*. Just a year after the last exhibition, the project concerning Constant's *New Babylon* presented significant developments in both extension and

¹⁸ Calvino, Italo (1974, orig. publ. 1972). *Invisible Cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace Yovanovich, 158.

complexity [Fig. 7]. In conjunction with the exhibition, the first performance of Babel (music for 13 randomly selected instruments, 1961-1965) by Urs Peter Schneider was held.

The long shadow of Babel would subsequently be projected also onto the horizons of *Documenta 5* organised by Szeemann in 1972. Its section entitled *Utopie und Planung*, entrusted to the curatorship of Lucius Burckhardt, François Burkhardt, and Burghart Schmidt, and devoted to the figure of Ernst Bloch (who like Benjamin, was in Bern in 1917, the city where Szeemann was born a few decades later), had a privileged centre of irradiation in the *Tower of Babel* (the catalogue of the exhibition mentions and reproduces the version on display at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna). Among the works presented in this thematic section, the biblical myth into which Brueghel had infused new life seemed to survive with particular force, especially in the utopian projects by Aldo Loris Rossi and Donatella Mazzoleni about a city's structure with a vertical development, and in the pneumatic architecture of the Haus-Rucker-Co collective, whose 'not-yet-being' (Noch-Nicht-Seins)¹⁹, to say it in the words of Bloch himself, and the anticipatory and messianic instances of concrete utopianism that nurtured these projects Szeemann captured, despite the impracticability of their proposals.

However, the long shadow of Babel seems to resurface as well – though no longer on the basis of possible iconographic analogies, but on a more exquisitely epistemological level – in the *Walking City* of the Archigram collective, in which the idea of unified, polycentric and open urbanism

¹⁹ Cf. Bloch, Ernst (2000, orig. publ. 1918). *The Spirit of Utopia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

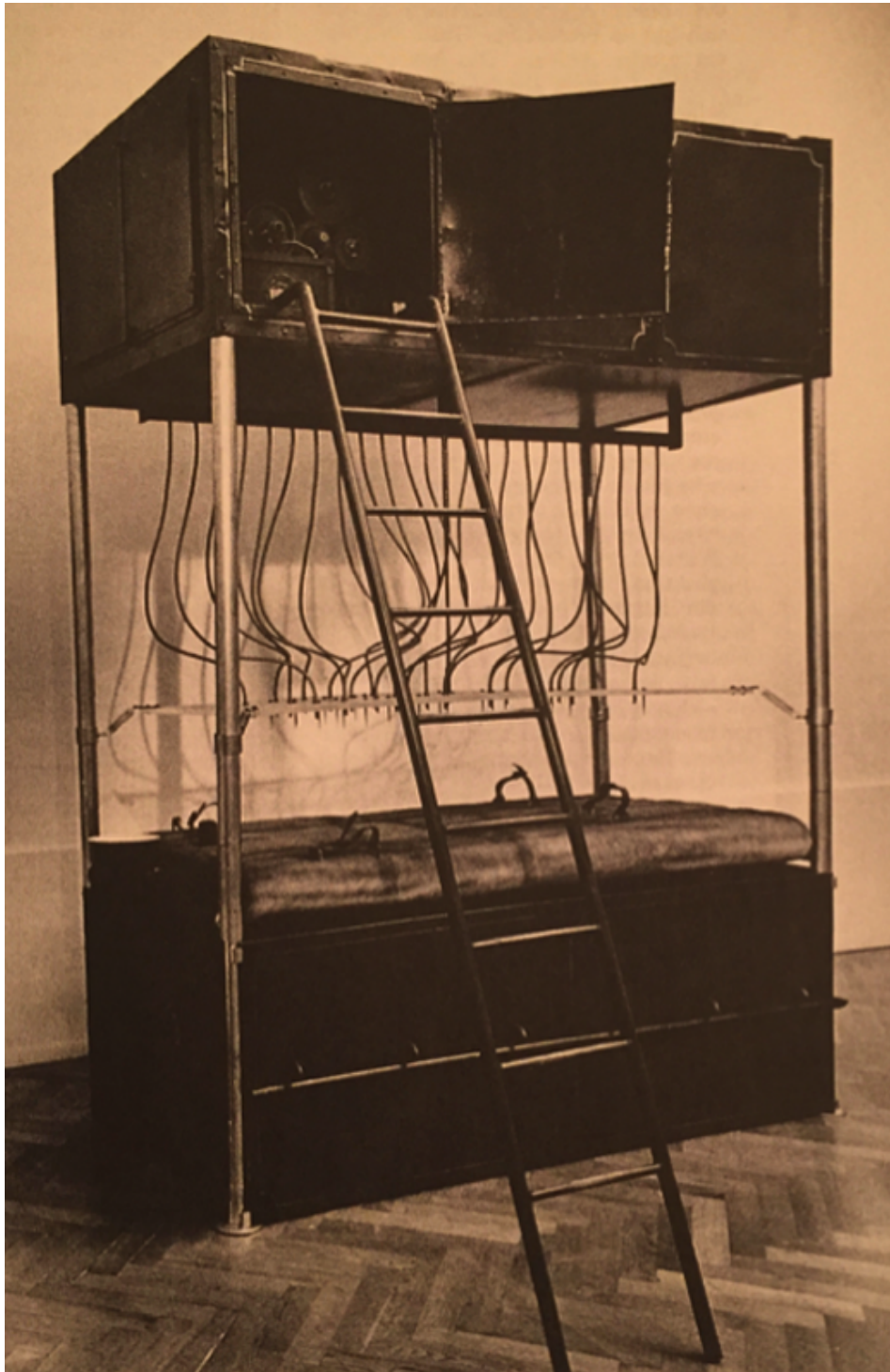
that had inspired Constant and Calvino finally came to maturity, as noted by Francisco Jarauta and Jean-Louis Maubant:

Desde la *dérive* de Guy Debord (entendida como una técnica de tránsito fugaz a través de situaciones cambiantes) al proyecto *New Babylon* de Constant, crecieron una amplia serie de ideas y proyectos cuya intención principal no era otra que la de construir espacios abiertos para sujetos nómadas, cuya forma de vida siempre transitoria iba definiéndose de acuerdo a la lógica de los acontecimientos, tal como sugeriría más tarde la *Walking City*, proyecto realizado por Archigram en 1963.²⁰

Perverse echoes and resonances of the Babel myth then appeared in *Junggesellenmaschinen / Les machines célibataires* (1975), where the Babelic topos, of which Szeemann had previously highlighted the positive utopian charge, turned into the dystopian torture machine [Fig. 8] Franz Kafka wrote about in his short story *Penal Colony* (*In der Strafkolonie*, 1914), recalling a well-known fragment of his diaries that inverts the assumption on which the iconography of the *Tower of Babel* rests: "What are you building? I want to dig a subterranean passage. Some progress must be made. My station up there is much too high. We are digging the pit of Babel."²¹

²⁰ Jarauta, Francisco and Maubant, Jean-Louis (2003). *MicroUTOPIAS*. In: L. Settembrini (Ed.). 2a Bienal de Valencia. La Ciudad Ideal. Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana; Milan: Charta, 290.

²¹ Kafka, Franz (1975, orig. publ. 1936). *Parables and Paradoxes*. New York: Schocken, 35.



[Fig.8] Installation view of the torture machine from Franz Kafka's *Penal Colony* (*In der Strafkolonie*), 1914. Photo by Albert Winkler.



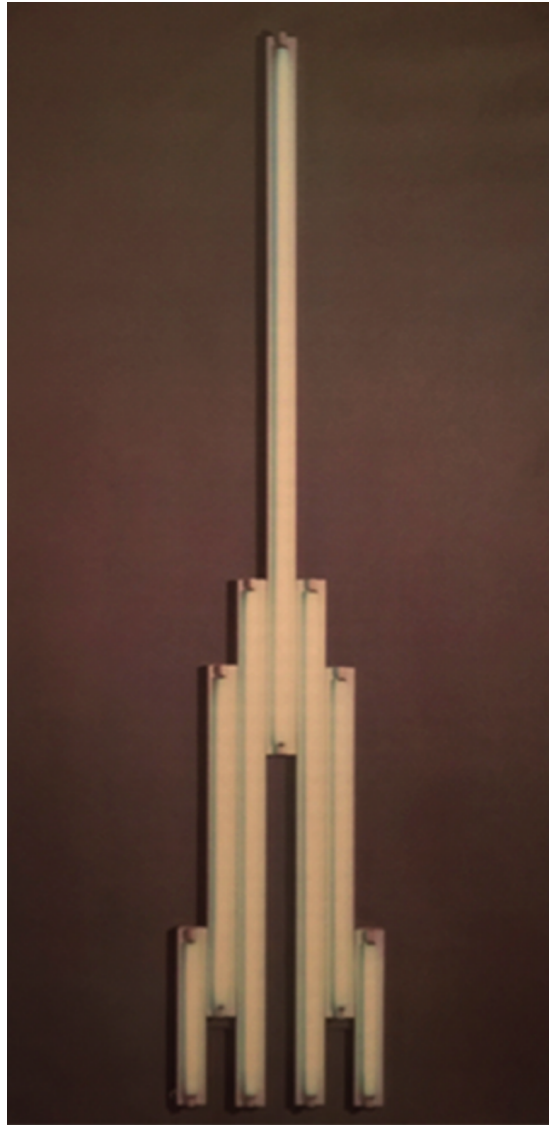
[Fig.9] Reconstruction of Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* (1933), 1980-83, designed by Peter Bisseger on the occasion of the exhibition *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800*, Zürich, Kunsthhaus, 11 February-30 April 1983.

The reconstruction of some of the major architectural and monumental works with a Utopian character from the 19th and 20th centuries, including Ferdinand Cheval's *Palais idéal* (1879-1912), the model designed by Antoni Gaudí for the Church of Colònia Güell (1898-1908), Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919-20), and Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* (1933) [Fig. 9] constitutes the thematic core of *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800*: an exhibition organised by Szeemann in 1983 at the Kunsthhaus in Zurich which, as can also be seen from the curator's notes and diagrams, in the wake of Warburg, visualises the survival of the forms of pathos (*Pathosformel*) bound up with the Babelic iconography, which was assumed mainly as an example of incompleteness in this case.

Other references to the ascensional iconography of the Babel myth are also found in *Zeitlos*, as the works of Dan Flavin [Fig. 10] and Royden Rabinowitch [Fig. 11] seem to suggest. This exhibition completes the intellectualisation and cooling of the artistic experience begun by Marcel Duchamp at the beginning of the 20th century and then continued by the conceptual tendencies of the 1960s, whose opposite pole consists of the various kinds of expressionism that returned to the scene in the late 1970s.

In fact, between the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, there was a return to painting, to manual dexterity and skill of execution, which apparently seemed to privilege more legible codes; yet the idea of composition suggested by coeval figurative research did not share anything of the classical pictorial tradition, since it never fully reached the point of construction: the use of tautology and the tendency to citationism enabled this poetics to escape the risks arising from any

mimetic intention by constantly questioning the status of the pictorial
image.²²



[Fig. 10] Dan Flavin, *Monument for V. Tatlin*, 1966, cool white fluorescent light, 365,8 x 71 x 11 cm. Image courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London.

²² Cf. Oliva, Achille Bonito (Ed.) (1982). *Avanguardia-Transavanguardia* (Rome, Aurelian Walls, April-July 1982). Milan: Electa.



[Fig.11] Royden Rabinowitch, *The 4th Lesson of Emanuel Feuermann*, 1988, lubricated steel, 240 x 100 x 50 cm. Royden Rabinowitch, Dublin and New York.

Among the first and most important exhibitions that sought to document the return to order were *American Painting: The Eighties*, organised in 1979 by Barbara Rose at the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center in New York, *Documenta 7* in Kassel, entrusted in 1982 to the curatorship of Rudi Fuchs, but notably Christos M. Joachimides, Norman Rosenthal and Nicolas Serota with *A New Spirit in Painting* held at the Royal Academy of Art in London in 1981. Conversely, in Italy it found legitimacy principally starting from the critical and curatorial work of Achille Bonito Oliva,²³ who in 1982 organised two seminal exhibitions titled *Transavanguardia: Italia/America* and *Avanguardia-Transavanguardia*, held respectively at the Galleria Civica in Modena and at the Aurelian Walls in Rome.

A particularly significant exhibition was *Zeitgeist*, organised by Joachimides and Rosenthal at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin in 1982. Although strongly oriented towards the returning expression of the Transavantgarde and the Neuen Wilden, *Zeitgeist* embraced a number of figurative languages, including certain revisitations of a Pop matrix and Beuys, James Lee Byars, Robert Flanagan, Jannis Kounellis and others' new research, which seemed to rediscover a long repressed sensuousness in figuration. An unprecedented and happy Babel of

²³ One of the first official appearances of the Transavanguardia can actually be traced back to the section of *Aperto 80* curated by Achille Bonito Oliva and Harald Szeemann on the occasion of the First International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale (1980), in a fertile exchange with another one set up by Szeemann and Bonito Oliva with Michael Compton and Martin Kunz called *L'arte degli anni settanta*, and where the mingling and coexistence of different artistic languages, ranging from post-minimalist and conceptual poetics of the 1960s to diverse forms of neo-expressionism, seemed to foreshadow, not without tensions and no less than two years in advance, the Babel that Robert Rosenblum referred to in *Zeitgeist* (1982).

different cultures and languages, as Robert Rosenblum, one of the editors of the fine catalogue, pointed out:

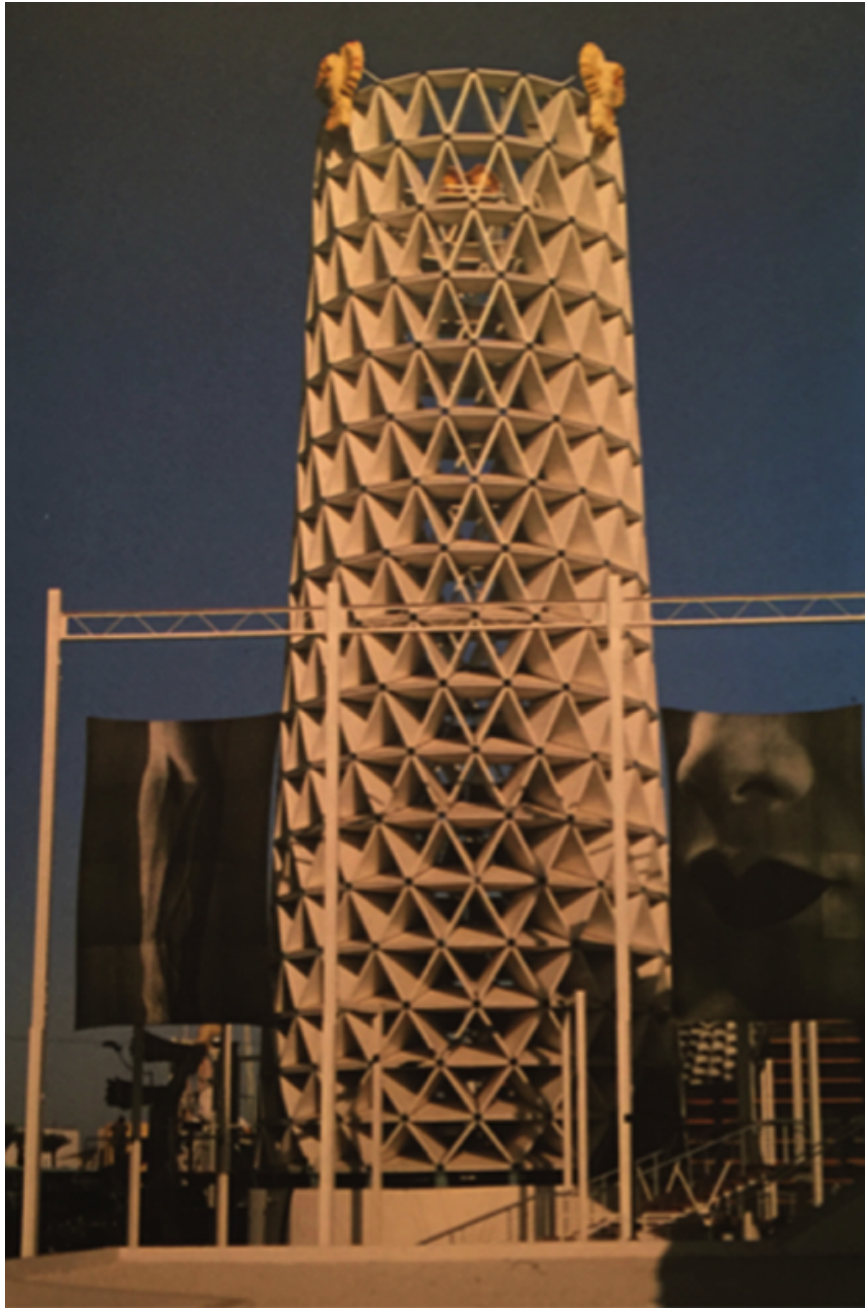
The result is a visual Tower of Babel that mixes its cultures – high and low, contemporary and prehistoric, classical and Christian, legendary and historical – with an exuberant irreverence that mirrors closely the confusing glut of encyclopedic data that fills our shared visual environment and provides us with the material of dreams and art.²⁴

The last survey concerns the *Pabellón de Suiza* installed by Szeemann at the 1992 Seville Expo [Fig. 12], one of his last phantasmagorias inspired by the Babel myth, which is reflected both in the iconic architecture of the pavilion and the so-called ‘Diversity of Switzerland’: a sort of atmosphere room dedicated to the cultural identity of Switzerland exemplified very well in the background by Mario Merz’s *Cono* (1984), with a correspondence to the motif of the tower from within, and *Schiefe Ebene mit Waagen* (1991) by Christoph Rütimann [Fig. 13].²⁵ A phantasmagoria which during the 55th Venice Art Biennale Massimiliano Gioni helped to revitalise by displaying the famous *Encyclopaedic Palace* (*Palazzo enciclopedico*) designed by Marino Auriti [Fig. 14]: an Italian artist who had emigrated to the United States in the 1930s to escape from fascism, and whose fervid imagination had

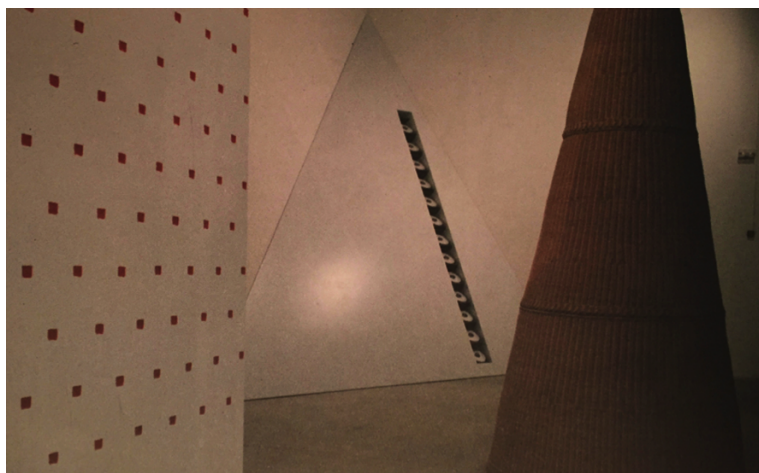
²⁴ The original quotation is in German and is found in: Rosenblum, Robert (1982). *Gedanken zu den Quellen des Zeitgeistes*. In: C. M. Joachimides and N. Rosenthal (Eds.). *Zeitgeist*. Berlin: Frölich & Kaufmann, 12; the English translation is quoted from: Crimp, Donald (1984). *The Art of Exhibition*, *October*, 30, 61.

²⁵ Cf. Bezzola, Tobia and Kurzmeyer, Roman (Eds.) (2007). *Harald Szeemann with by through because towards despite*. Edition Voldemeer Zürich / Springer Vienna New York.

devised a Babelic archive that was supposed to collect and fuse every past and present human invention.



[Fig.12] *Pabellón de Suiza* framed by flags (arm and mouth) by Balthasar Burkhard, at Expo 92, Seville, 20 April-12 October 1992. Photo by Violette Pini.



[Fig.13] Installation view of 'Diversity of Switzerland' in the Swiss Pavilion: in the background Mario Merz's *Cono* (1984), with a correspondence to the motif of the tower from within, and Christoph Rütimanns' *Schiefe Ebene mit Waagen* (1991). Photo by Violette Pini.



[Fig.14] Installation view of Marino Auriti's *Palazzo enciclopedico* (1955) at the 55th Venice Art Biennale, 2013. Photo by Virgilio Berardocco.

By virtue of the polysemic value that distinguishes it, Babelic iconography can be assumed productively also to probe the composite

figure of the curator, demonstrating how open and blurred are the boundaries that delimit his status and define his tasks, which often tend to overlap and be confused with those of the artist. As is well known, the figure of the curator began to be defined between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, occupying a position at the crossroads of important economic, social, artistic and cultural transformations: the transition from an industrial society governed by Fordist logic to a post-industrial one based essentially on knowledge, in which "The use of the hyphenated prefix *post-* indicates, thus, that sense of living in interstitial time,"²⁶ as well as constituting an essential frame of reference, also produced important changes in the cultural sphere. The disruption of artistic and literary genres, which possess an important classificatory, regulatory and meta-communicative function intended to ensure precomprehension and fruition of the work of art, enhanced consolidation of the authorial function itself between the late 1950s and the end of 1960s. In this respect, a leading role was played by the so-called *politique des auteurs* supported in the spring of 1957 by André Bazin and the other critics of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, with the aim of "erecting the personal factor as a point of reference for artistic creation",²⁷ at the same time nurturing the hopes of that generation of young German filmmakers, including Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, Peter Schamoni and others, who in 1962 signed the Oberhausen

²⁶ Bell, Daniel (1973). *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society. A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York: Basic Books, 37.

²⁷ Bazin, André (1957). De la politique des auteurs. *Cahiers du cinéma*, 70, 10. It is interesting to note that André Bazin's critical attitude to the issue of the author appears ambivalent. Although in 1957 he contributed to the construction of a true cult of the author, in an early article from 1948 he stressed that the notion of "author" was relatively recent and destined to be questioned together with the uniqueness of the work by the technical reproducibility of some media, as happened for example with the film adaptations of famous novels [Cf. Bazin, André (1948). L'adaptation ou le cinema comme Digeste. *L'Esprit*, 146 (7), 37 and f.].

Manifiesto, laying the foundations for the Junger Deutscher Film. Meanwhile Structuralism, whose lesson on the mechanisms that govern practice and functions proper to authorship – analysed in depth among others by Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, and Michel Foucault²⁸ – by contrast would decree the weakening of the authorial function towards the end of the decade.

Hence there was a paradigm shift, which produced effects also in the exhibition and curatorial fields, as Bruce Altshuler has pointed out, noting that “These changes also spawned important developments in the world of advanced exhibitions, the rise of the curator as creator.”²⁹

Exhibitions like *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form. Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information*³⁰ and *Documenta 5* played a seminal role in providing the curators with the appropriate context for their creative activity to be recognised.

²⁸ Cf. Barthes, Roland (1977, orig. publ. 1967). The Death of the Author. In: *Image-Music-Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 142-148; Foucault, Michel (1998, orig. publ. 1969). What is an Author?. In: J. Faubion (Ed.). *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Essential. Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. II. New York: The New York Press, 205-222. Although with reference to the literary field, a precocious interest in the work conceived as an impersonal space, where the creator relates the possibilities of writing with a different truth that lies beyond the person himself, is found in the bright book by Blanchot, Maurice (1982, orig. publ. 1955). *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press; see also the splendid and unsurpassed book by Carla Benedetti, who devoted a study that is still unmatched to the subject: Benedetti, Carla (1999). *L'ombra lunga dell'autore. Indagine su una figura cancellata*. Milan: Feltrinelli.

²⁹ Altshuler, Bruce (1994). *The Avant-Garde on Exhibition. New Art in the 20th Century*. New York: Abrams, 236.

³⁰ Cf. Szeemann, Harald (Ed.) (1969). *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form. Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information* (Bern, Kunsthalle, 22 March-27 April 1969). Bern: Stampfli + Cie Ltd; ID. et al. (Eds.) (1972). *Documenta 5. Befragung der Realität: Bildwelten heute* (Kassel, Museum Fridericianum, Friedrichsplatz, Neue Galerie, 30 June-8 October 1972). Kassel: Documenta; Gütersloh: Bertelsmann.

In Bern, Paolo Icaro had asked Szeemann to conduct a performance for the inauguration of the exhibition, which involved turning off the lights of the Kunsthalle and reading aloud the following sentence: 'I was born for love.' Although the performance could not take place due to organizational problems,³¹ the instructions given by the artist to the curator can be taken as a kind of investiture, endowing the curator with the status of meta-artist.

The edition of *Documenta 5* curated by Szeemann in 1972 remains paradigmatic in this respect, because it embodied both the artists and the curator's prerogatives, revealing once again how vague the boundaries that define their respective fields of competence are. On that occasion, Daniel Buren condemned the curator's artistic ambitions, arguing that "More and more, exhibitions are ceasing to be exhibitions of artworks and exhibiting themselves as an artwork instead",³² while Robert Smithson described the context to which the warden-curator had relegated the artists' works in terms of cultural confinement: "Cultural confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits."³³

³¹ The performance would be fulfilled by Germano Celant, who had also given the inaugural address at the exhibition in Bern, on the occasion of the reenactment of *When Attitudes Become Form*, which he curated together with Thomas Demand and Rem Koolhaas at the Prada Foundation in Venice in 2013.

³² The original quotation comes from *Exposition d'une exposition*, the text by Buren was published in French and German in the official catalogue of the exhibition: Buren, Daniel (1972). *Exposition d'une exposition / Ausstellung einer Ausstellung*. In: Szeemann, Harald et al. (Eds.). *Documenta 5*. [op. cit.], 17, 29; the English translation comes from Glasmeier, Michael and Stengel, Karin (Eds.) (2005). *50 Jahre/Years documenta 1955-2005*, vol. 2. *Archive in Motion*. Göttingen: Steidl, 259.

³³ Smithson, Robert (1972). Cultural Confinement, *Artforum*, vol. 11, 2, 39; Smithson's polemical text had originally appeared, also in German, in the official catalogue of the exhibition: Smithson, Robert (1972). *Kulturbeschränkung*. In: Szeemann et al. (Eds.). *Documenta 5*. [op. cit.], 17, 74.

An additional useful source has emerged from archival research, namely a letter from Jean Dubuffet criticising the Swiss curator for some statements³⁴ issued during the preparation of *Documenta 5*, which suggest that Szeemann first wanted to assemble the artistic creations of the mentally ill under the label of Art Brut. The French painter replied promptly by writing to Szeemann, who eventually respected Dubuffet's wishes, to point out that, "L'expression art brut doit, pour éviter toute confusion du public, rester exclusivement réservée aux collections et à l'action de la Compagnie de l'art brut, fondée à Paris en 1947, et je souhaiterais donc que vous n'utilisiez pas ce terme pour une présentation à laquelle l'Art Brut n'a pas de part."³⁵

The controversy was fuelled by Robert Morris, who in turn wrote a letter informing the curator that he wanted "all work of mine withdrawn from the forthcoming Documenta V."³⁶ This request was followed by a petition³⁷ against Szeemann signed by Carl Andre, Hans Haacke, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Barry Le Va, Robert Morris, Dorothea Rockburne, Fred Sandback, Richard Serra and Robert Smithson. These artists claimed among other things the right to decide whether, when,

³⁴ Cf. Lebeer, Irmeline (1971). *Documenta 5: Entretien avec Harald Szeemann. Chronique de l'art vivant*, 25, 4.

³⁵ The source mentioned is from the Harald Szeemann papers, in the archives of the Getty Research Institute (Box 269, folder 4), and is being published "avec l'aimable autorisation de la Fondation Dubuffet" and of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2011. M. 30).

³⁶ Morris's letter, of which a copy each is held in the Harald Szeemann collection at the Getty Research Institute and the archives of Documenta at Kassel, was published jointly with the petition mentioned in the text: Morris, Robert (1972). Regarding Documenta V. *Flash Art*, 32, 33, 34, 9, and subsequently reissued in: Glasmeier and Stengel (Eds.). [*op. cit.*], 258.

³⁷ The petition was first published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 12 May 1972 and titled *Erklärung gegen die documenta*, and then in: Morris, Robert (1972). [*op. cit.*], 9.

and how their art should or should not be exhibited in any case respecting the artists' will.

Marcel Broodthaers, by contrast, took up a different position revealing another aspect of the process that governs and circumscribes the relation between curator and artist, namely the one by which the artist claims curatorial aspirations. By designing the section of the exhibition devoted to Artists' Museums (Museen von Künstlern), his fictitious *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968-72), a sort of counter-museum, the Belgian artist presented himself as the artist curator of his own work, undermining the presumed sovereignty of the curator and the authoritativeness of the exhibition device conceived by him,³⁸ in the same years as the Institutional Critique, with Broodthaers representing one of its leading exponents, subjected it to verification as a power structure.

According to Mary Anne Staniszewski, the real watershed within curatorial studies was shaped especially by events like *Spaces*³⁹ and *Projects Series* (renamed the Elaine Dannheisser's *Projects Series* in 2006),⁴⁰ which allowed the artists to debate problems of specifically museographic nature directly and productively, overturning and confusing, as in Babel, the increasingly evanescent roles and tasks that define the curator's status and the artist's:

After the *Information* exhibition, the Museum of Modern Art relegated this type of Conceptual work to the *Projects* series,

³⁸ Cf. Broodthaers, Marcel (1973). *Changement de Propriete?. Interfunktionen*, 10, 76-79.

³⁹ Cf. Licht, Jennifer (1969). *Spaces*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

⁴⁰ This was a series of exhibitions held at the MoMA, which was inaugurated by Keith Sonnier in May 1971 and includes Michael Armitage's present exhibition.

which was started the following year with a Keith Sonnier video installation. In keeping with the new institutional practices that were introduced with the *Information* show, for each *Projects* exhibition the Museum invited a single artist to install a piece or an exhibition in a gallery. Among the artists who created these installations were Mel Bochner, Nancy Graves, and Sam Gilliam. Even more prominently than the *Information* or *Spaces* shows, the *Projects Rooms* transferred the creative and ideological dimensions of an installation design to an individual; the exhibition was inscribed more overtly within the artist's signature.⁴¹

Seen in this perspective, both the curatorial and the artistic act could correspond to dialogical and highly shared practices (sometimes disputed, if we recall the controversies that emerged during 1972's *Documenta*), as the result of constant mediation. One could therefore describe the phenomenon – as Boris Groys suggests – in terms of 'multiple authorship',⁴² without, however, equating (as the Russian philosopher does, legitimising his analyses in the wake of the Duchampian poetics) the selection act with the creative one, since they are neither identical nor comparable, given that each exhibition context is a field of opposing forces and a 'contact zone':⁴³ a place of negotiation

⁴¹ Staniszewski, Mary Anne (2001). *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 286. See also the essay on the subject by Bishop, Claire (2007). *Che cos'è un curatore?*. In: A. Aymonino and I. Tolic (Eds.). *La vita delle mostre*. Milan: Mondadori, 73-84.

⁴² Cf. Groys, Boris (2008). Multiple Authorship. In: *Art Power*. Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 93-100.

⁴³ Clifford, James (1997). Museums as Contact Zones. In: *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 188-219.

in which artists and curators are called upon to participate in each case, constantly redefining their role and their authoriality.

The anachronistic perspective that pervades much of Szeemann's exhibition production, to which the Babelic metaphor alludes so effectively, both iconographically and epistemologically, can already be traced in its beginnings. The first exhibition based on thematic and anachronistic criteria that Szeemann had the opportunity to work on dates back to 1957. He was invited by Franz Meyer, who at the time directed the Kunsthalle in Bern, to collaborate in organising an exhibition entitled *Malende Dichter – dichtende Maler* at the St. Gallen Museum in 1957, with the aim of documenting, among paintings, manuscripts, prints and various materials, the multifaceted character and the transdisciplinary tendency of some of the greatest artists of the modern and contemporary age: from Michelangelo to Albrecht Dürer, from William Blake to Johann Heinrich Füssli, from Dante Gabriele Rossetti to Victor Hugo, and from Giorgio de Chirico to Henri Michaux.

The friendship with Willem Sandberg, whom Szeemann always considered a master, must certainly have helped delineate the cultural and methodological horizon on which the Swiss curator drew. Sandberg's was an important lesson in historiographical methodology, which taught the young Swiss curator to view the history of art no longer as a linear and progressive chronological succession, but backwards, in keeping to the anachronistic perspective that had inspired famous exhibitions such as *40,000 Years of Modern Art: A Comparison of Primitive and Modern*, held in 1948 at the Institute of

Contemporary Art in London, and *Modern Art Old and New*, curated by Sandberg himself in 1955 at the Amsterdam Stedelijk:

lionello venturi expresses this experience so well: “if it is true that all history is the actual interpretation of the past then the awareness of the art of today is the basis for all history of the art of the past” [...] we are looking with the eyes of today why not start looking at the art of our own period and going step by step back into the past?⁴⁴

At first, however, the new museographic approach embraced by Sandberg, as noted by Ad Peterson, did not receive much support in Amsterdam, except from Hans Jaffé, and in fact it encountered strong resistance: “Hans Jaffé, who until 1960 was the only art historian in the Stedelijk, shared Sandberg's conviction that the museum should proceed from the present and from there, when deemed necessary and for clarity's sake, travel back in time.”⁴⁵

Some of the factors that concurred to legitimate the anachronistic method in the museological and exhibition sphere, writes Debora Meijers, were the fact that “The growth of interest in non-European art on the part of artists themselves coincided with the first experiments by a few progressive collectors and museum directors to arrange parts of their collections in a 'mixed' way.”⁴⁶ The publication by André Malraux in 1947 of the *Musée Imaginaire* also helped to clarify this process,

⁴⁴ Sandberg, Willem (1973). *Museums at the Crossroads: Herbert Read Lecture by Willem Sandberg*. London: ICA, 8.

⁴⁵ Petersen, Ad (2004). *Sandberg, Designer and Director of Stedelijk*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 14.

⁴⁶ Meijers, Debora J. (1996). The Museum and The A-Historical Exhibition. The latest gimmick by the arbiters of taste, or an important cultural phenomenon?. In: B. W. Ferguson, R. Greenberg, and S. Nairne (Eds.). *Thinking about Exhibitions*. London and New York: Routledge, 14.

measuring the distance between “the actual museum and the imaginary museum, that is the unlimited archive of images which could be compiled once photography had made it possible to reproduce everything.”⁴⁷

Further stimulus came from seminal studies such as *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* by Wilhelm Worringer.⁴⁸ It combined Theodor Lipps' empathy theories and Konrad Fiedler and Adolf von Hildebrand's pure visibility formalism, which provided an indispensable contribution to the recovery of primitive and tribal cultures, setting them in a fertile dialogue with some of the more advanced languages of the historical avant-garde, as did the texts of Carl Einstein and Ernst Bloch on black sculpture.⁴⁹ Another crucial text was *Primitivism in Modern Painting* by Robert Goldwater,⁵⁰ who, in harmony with Worringer, noted that “primitive art, in its impulse toward abstraction, is the forerunner of Oriental, Egyptian, and modern art”.⁵¹

The fascination for primitive cultures and the East did not end with the dissolution of Modernism, which continued to seduce artists and curators of various orientations especially in the second part of the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁸ It should be noted that the book by Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* was the PhD thesis he presented in 1907 under the guidance of Artur Weese at the University of Bern (from which Szeemann also graduated) and published at Neuwied before being reissued in 1908 in Munich by the publisher Piper.

⁴⁹ Cf. Bloch, Ernst (1915). Über ein Sammelwerk. Negerplastik. In: *Die Argonauten*, 7, 10-20; then republished in ID. (1965). *Literarische Aufsätze*, vol. 9. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 190-196; and Einstein, Carl (1915). *Negerplastik*. Leipzig: Verlag der Weißen Bücher.

⁵⁰ Cf. Goldwater, Robert (1938). *Primitivism in Modern Painting*. New York and London: Harper & Brothers; the book was revised, retitled and reissued in 1967 as *Primitivism in Modern Art*. New York: Vintage Books.

⁵¹ The quotation comes from the enlarged edition of 1986: Goldwater, Robert (1986). *Primitivism in Modern Art*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 29.

twentieth century. Despite Goldwater's efforts to build a cult around primitivism, without ever going so far as to make it become a colonial myth, by contrast, in 1984 William Rubin in collaboration with Kirk Varnedoe organised the historic *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, an exhibition designed starting from a very refined "purevisibilism", yet facing the limit of looking at primitive art still from a Eurocentric point of view and keeping to hierarchical relationships.⁵²

Precious testimony in the exhibition field was again provided by Szeemann, who at the beginning of the 1960s organised some small, but important thematic exhibitions at the Kunsthalle in Bern, continuing the cycle 'Kunst außereuropäischer' begun by Max Huggler and Arnold Rüdinger.⁵³ Although *Prähistorische Felsbilder der Sahara: Expedition Henri Lhote im Gebiet Tassili-n-Ajjer* (1961) can still be considered a transitional exhibition aimed at illustrating the artistic developments of the primitive hunting images and idols up to the courtly painting style of ancient Egypt and the modernity of rock painting in a long-term

⁵² Only a few years later, in 1989, John-Hubert Martin would curate a famous exhibition entitled *Magiciens de la terre* for the Centre Pompidou in Paris, overturning the cultural and methodological perspective adopted by Rubin and Varnedoe in favour of a free dialogue among the artists, all of them contemporary, that was positioned outside any ideological framework. On the debate generated by *Magiciens de la terre*, also consider the comprehensive critical survey by Guasch, Anna Maria (2018). *Magiciens de la terre* and its polemics. In: *The Codes of the Global in the Twenty-first Century*. Barcelona: Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 90-98, in addition to the special issues of *Les Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne*, 28 (spring 1989), and *Third Text*, vol. 3, 6 (spring 1989); finally, the volume issued on the occasion of the recovery (2014), although largely documentary, of the famous exhibition: Cohen-Solal, A. and Martin, J.-H. (Eds.) (2014) *Magiciens de la terre: Retour sur une exposition légendaire* (Paris, Center Pompidou, 2 July-8 September 2014). Paris: Éd. Xavier Barral / Éd. du Center Pompidou.

⁵³ Among the exhibitions organised by Huggler, note *Chinesische Malerei der Gegenwart* (1934) and *Asiatische Kunst aus Schweizer Privatbesitz* (1941), while Rüdinger curated exhibitions such as *Moderne primitive Maler* (1949), *Japanische Kunst* (1950), *Kunst der Südsee* (1952), and *Kunst der Neger* (1953).

perspective, not immune from certain historical evolutionism, it provides documentary evidence of the impact exerted by these prehistoric works on contemporary art in a historicist perspective that is at risk of being reduced to a study of sources and influences.

On the other hand, *Puppen, Marionetten, Schattenspiel: Asiatica und Experimente* (1962) and *Kunst aus Tibet* (1962) were no longer designed around the rhetoric of the 'Other'⁵⁴, nurtured by the dichotomy that contrasts European with extra-European art and culture, being configured rather as a comparative investigation intended to document the various points of contact and reciprocity among different cultures and artistic languages, from painting to drama, sculpture or any other kind of performance.

Yet the extensive reception of anachronism and thematic studies on both the theoretical and the expository level remains a rather recent phenomenon, as Alexander Nagel demonstrated with acumen and multiple examples,⁵⁵ despite the fact that in the early years of the twentieth century there was no shortage of personalities who were able to reap the benefits. They included Alexander Dorner, who revolutionised the museography and museology field between 1923 and 1937 transforming the Provinzialmuseum (now known as the Landesmuseum) in Hannover into a true laboratory, in which atmosphere rooms were installed like El Lissitzky's *Abstract Cabinet* (1927-28) and thematic exhibitions such as *Original und Reproduktion* (1929) held at the Kestnergesellschaft. In 1912 Karl Ernst Osthaus also

⁵⁴ An interesting attempt to subvert, debate and rethink the concept of the 'Other' is given by the programmatically titled exhibition *L'Autre*, organised by Szeemann in the context of the Biennale of Contemporary Art of Lyon in 1997.

⁵⁵ Cf. Nagel, Alexander (2012). *Medieval Modern. Art out of time*. London: Thames & Hudson.

reorganised the collections in the Folkwang Museum in Hagen (the museum was moved after its founder's death in 1921 to the city of Essen) on the basis of thematic principles, creating a dialogue between ethnographic collections and those dedicated to Modernist painting.

Between the mid-1950s and the end of the 1960s it was principally Sandberg's Stedelijk, the Moderna Museet of Pontus Hultén, and Szeemann's Kunsthalle in Bern that experimented with the possibilities offered by thematic installations, if we exclude epochal exhibitions such as *The Family of Man* (one of the most popular, but also disputed, photography exhibitions in history), organised by Edward Steichen in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, or *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, the great exhibition that Alfred Barr commissioned from Hultén in 1968, again for the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The scenario changed radically between the late 1960s and early 1970s, if we take as a watershed Andy Warhol's famous *Raid the Icebox*, the exhibition he was asked to organise by John and Dominique de Menil, using the "works of art that had been lying dormant for years in their very own basement", ⁵⁶ in the storage vaults of the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Although Warhol's exhibition was not conceived upon properly thematic assumptions, but rather on new accumulations and juxtapositions aimed at revealing "the unfamiliar and often the unsuspected treasures moldering in museum

⁵⁶ Bourdon, David (1969). Andy's Dish. In: S. E. Ostrow (Ed.). *Raid the Icebox*. Providence: Eastern Press, 17.

basements, inaccessible to the general public",⁵⁷ it would have established a paradigm for subsequent reorganisations.

Nevertheless, it would not be correct to say that the figure of the curator was born with Warhol; in fact, we know from Francis Haskell's studies about the existence of artists already active in the curatorial field in the 17th century, among whom Giuseppe Ghezzi stands out:

Ghezzi, a talented painter, copyist and restorer born near Ascoli Piceno in the Marche, was also a collector [...] and a reliable administrator who played a dominant role in most of the artistic institutions in the Rome of his day. It was in 1676, when he was aged forty-two, that he became involved with the S. Salvatore exhibitions, only a year after they had come into being, and from his surviving (but patchy) notes it is possible to get some impression both of the extent of his efficiency and also of the difficulties that he (like so many of his successors in a similar role during the next three centuries) had to face in trying to secure satisfactory loans. Within a year or two of his official appointment as organiser of the exhibitions Ghezzi drew up guidelines for their installation, and he and his collaborators adhered to these throughout his period of office.⁵⁸

But we could also mention the famous case of Jacques-Louis David, who played a leading role both in the organisation of some revolutionary festivities, and in the installation of personal exhibitions; or Gustave Courbet, who in 1855 set up his Pavillon du Réalisme himself, thus

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Haskell, Francis (2000). *The Ephemeral Museum. Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 9-10.

divesting the Universal Exposition of its official role, without forgetting that most of the Surrealist exhibitions were organised by the protagonists themselves, starting from Duchamp, André Breton, Man Ray and Wolfgang Paalen.

If Warhol's *Raid the Icebox* helped to legitimate the figure of the curator artist on an institutional level, Szeemann's work at the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen had even greater relevance. On the one hand, it contributed to the recognition of the curator's personality as author or meta-artist, being aware, however, not to exploit the works and collections by using them as if they were readymades, but rather arranging them according to 'family resemblances'⁵⁹, as Ludwig Wittgenstein put it, giving rise to unforeseen short circuits and unusual kinds of cohabitation of meaning; on the other hand, it greatly expanded the expressive possibilities of the display mechanism and of the museum itself, which thus became a time machine,⁶⁰ highlighting the potential and the limitations inherent in both retrospective exhibitions and thematic-anachronistic ones.

The rupture caused by Warhol, and the breach opened (immediately afterwards) by Szeemann in the museographic and curatorial field proved immensely influential, conferring an important conceptual and methodological framework, as well as greater legibility to the

⁵⁹ On the concept of family resemblance (*Familienähnlichkeit*), see Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1958, orig. publ. 1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 65-67. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 32-33; e ID. (1958). *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations" generally known as the Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 17.

⁶⁰ See in this respect the book by Bishop, Claire (2013). *Radical Museology, Or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?*. London: Koenig Books.

innumerable thematic and non-thematic collection redesigns between the late 1980s and the present, which seem really countless.

In April 1989 Scott Burton inaugurated the cycle entitled 'Artist's Choice' at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This is a series of artist's selections that continues as is shown by the current Amy Sillman's exhibition; after Szeemann's inaugural *a-Historical soundings*, the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen entrusted subsequent reinstallations to other eminent figures from the world of art, cinema and culture, including Peter Greenaway (1991), Robert Wilson (1993), Hans Haacke (1996) and Hubert Damisch (1997).

Damisch's work is also an opportunity to reassess the valuable contribution offered by scholars and academics in verifying the museum as institution, whose most mature results can be traced back to the cycle of exhibitions called 'Parti Pris' promoted by Régis Michel and Françoise Viatte at the Louvre in Paris. Between 1990 and 1998, they invited illustrious intellectuals, such as Jacques Derrida, Greenaway, Jean Starobinski, Damisch, and Julia Kristeva to design their personal exhibition choosing the works directly from the museum holdings, and also from other French museums in a few cases.

The cycle of exhibitions organised at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna by Ed Ruscha (2012), Edmund de Waal (2016), and the Wes Anderson and Juman Malouf duo (2018) is more recent. The exhibition by Antony Gormley entitled *Still Standing*, which opened at the Hermitage in Petersburg in September 2011, is also of particular interest for its radical choices. The British sculptor conceived a new arrangement of the Dionysus Hall, removing the Greek and Roman

sculptures from their pedestals to place them directly on the floor on the visitor's same level while his sculptural works occupied the Small Classical Courtyard of the museum, or Antichny dvorik. From the short circuit that arose between the alleged timelessness and permanence that characterise classical culture and the transience of the Gormley installation, a more liquid and permeable setting takes shape, which enables us to rethink classicism on a quite different basis; or, again, the collective exhibition entitled *L'image volée*, which Thomas Demand organised in 2016 at the Fondazione Prada in Milan, where the artist verified the validity of concepts such as authoriality, originality and reproducibility, while simultaneously investigating the logic of appropriation of the creative process, in an attempt to renegotiate disciplinary boundaries constantly, and get rid of the "Chronological Corset,"⁶¹ to use Thierry Dufrêne's fine expression.

The Museum of Obsessions, to which Szeemann gave life, is a museum of invention that consists of all conceivable combinations of the languages of art, and at the same time, a marvellous and indestructible expository machine that continues to produce memory and images, dreams and possibilities, reminding us that "We live surrounded by possibility, not merely by presence. In the prison of mere presence we could not even move, not even breathe."⁶²

Hence this is the horizon within which it is still possible to grasp the a-historical soundings of Szeemann's work, its relevance renewed and

⁶¹ Also received in this respect have been the numerous stimuli from *Théâtre du Monde*, the interesting thematic exhibition curated in 2013 by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Maison Rouge in Paris; cf. T. Dufrêne (2013). Junking the Chronological Corset: Towards a Broader Art History that Splices Periods and Works. In: De Galbert, Antoine et al. (Eds). *Théâtre du Monde* (Paris, La maison rouge, 19 October 2013-12 January 2014). Lyon: Fage, 207-213.

⁶² Bloch, Ernst (1968). Man as possibility. *CrossCurrents*. vol. 18, 3, 281.

enhanced in the incessant rewriting of Babel's myth, which is utopian project, methodological anarchy and a felicitous dance of opposites at once; but above all, when the sense of reality gives way to what Robert Musil calls the sense of possibility, a principle of hope: "So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not."⁶³

⁶³ Musil, Robert (1931). *The Man without Qualities*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995, 1 vol., 11.

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