



The Band Members and the Band

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Discussions about the benefits and shortcomings of these two teaching approaches seem to be a structural feature of every debate about art education, despite the fact that they are anything but exclusive and that both have a solid place next to each other in many curricula. However, when addressing media, and the teaching of media, the distinction and the division that comes with it lingers; specifically on the level of the larger educational frame. Therein these separations are carried forward in an implicit way as they are used as linguistic separators of organizational units. This is, of course, often made necessary by practical and administrative concerns, but the consequence is that such divisions, quietly but steadily, regulate the kind of practices that can develop in art schools that are organizationally structured by media terminology.

The Institut für das künstlerische Lehramt an der Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien (IKL) is a peculiar organizational unit in an art school that, despite a certain interconnectedness of its various branches, is rigidly structured along a traditional division of artistic media. The IKL's status in that school is insofar peculiar as it is not labeled by artistic media, but by mediatization itself. Traditionally the IKL educated art educators based on

the premise that in order to mediate art, one has to not only know about art but have experience in making art. That experience was supposed to be gained by taking foundation classes in various media: from drawing to painting to photography to video, etc. Recent changes at the IKL have aimed to redefine the role of media in relation to art making as well as to arts relationship to communication. Key to this change is the structural implementation, in as many courses as possible, of a reflexive feedback loop between art, media, and communication; and, as a consequence thereof the attempt to implement research knowledge in a way so the courses become laboratories capable of actively feeding back into the fields they draw from.

On an artistic level, the presentational frame for artistic practice, the exhibition, the display are, of course central to those feedback loops. Drawing from my own practice as an artist, exhibit designer, and author, in the spring semester 2010 I taught an advanced seminar on the notions of display at the IKL. I have organized this seminar in different ways over the past few years. It has been focused on topics such as exhibit systems, information aesthetics, or exhibition as a medium for propaganda. Methodically the seminar starts off with presentations and lectures in order to stimulate the students' own analytic research and subsequent project work. In this particular installment I decided to not focus on a certain debate, period, or on particular historical exhibitions. Instead, I set up a structure through which I could respond to art students' more immediate needs in relation to the display topic, contribute information and expertise as well as provide them with a discourse tailored to their individual interests and practices.

I did, however, start the seminar with a session on definitions of display. We looked at how the different meanings of display in fields such as technology, biology, or commerce interconnect through the presentation of visual information; and how the way display is conceived in the art field only touches on one of the meanings inherent in the term.

Interestingly, the students decided to concentrate on two particularities as they took up the subject. Firstly, what they wanted to look at was the

notion of display as it is understood in behavioral biology; display as the exhibition of certain behaviors; display as a pose. The American designer George Nelson refers to this notion in his 1953 volume on display as: "The plumage of the male bird and the antics of the fighting fish are 'display.'" [1] Or Mick Jagger's parading up and down the stage during a performance is display.

Secondly, they were intrigued by a distinction I pointed out to them between display as a verb and display as a noun: the use as a verb has an active connotation thereby referring to something that is in the making; its use as a noun reflects something more static and points to an already established arrangement. This distinction is, of course, produced by the differentiation that their respective grammatical status imposes on them. But what the difference provides is an understanding for some of the confusions that the term generates, specifically in German language contexts. The German language use of display is quite different from English usage. In German the word only exists as a noun and not as a verb. The limited perception of display as a fixed arrangement then leads to the peculiarity that German language art discourse often conflates the terms display and exhibition. The result is a conundrum that limits the term's usefulness and makes it more difficult to generate a precise discourse about the functioning and form of exhibitions.

In order to transfer such engagement with display to a more concrete plane, the seminar group needed a tangible object of study. They decided to look at a rather unexpected field, namely at rock and roll bands and how in the visual and textual material that discursively frames popular music bands the notion of collectivity is displayed. They focused on band photos and record covers, concert footage and documentaries, interviews and song lyrics, as well as other material. It soon became clear that this somewhat surprising twist away from the art field provided them with an ideal investigative site; ideal because by means of topical distance it offered a way to think through issues that regulate the relationship between artworks and exhibitions in a free and playful way. The band would equate the exhibition and the individual elements of the exhibition

would equate the members of the band. The rock and roll metaphor introduced a passion and freshness to the topic that proved to be remarkably productive for the students (as well as for me). They ended up forming a group called BAND and over a short period of time produced a number of stunning artworks and events that tested the relationship of parts to a whole and vice versa. The driving force behind their activities was an investigative play with and testing of various display strategies, including displaying themselves.



Foto: Julia Fuchs

A group is defined as a number of things or persons being in some relation to one another; as a collection or assemblage of persons or things; as a cluster; an aggregation. Some lexica list a group of musicians or a group of paintings as examples, illustrating that an analogous structural logic is at work in terms of how individuals or how objects can be connected. The most basic element of that logic is physical proximity. But physical proximity alone does not make a group of musicians into a band. It does not make an exhibition out of a number of paintings. The

main link to the exhibition discourse appears to be nested in the lexical phrase “in some relation to each other.” The consequent questions to ask are: what kind of relationship is needed to transform a group of artworks into an exhibition? Could one identify a structural logic that regulates that relationship and therefore the exhibition? What would be the components, the processes, the contributors that inform such a logic? How could it be characterized? Having been inspired by BAND’s approach, I will try to work toward an answer to these questions by further relying on the analogy between the fields of art and rock and roll.

Generally speaking, there are two dominant tendencies of how rock and roll bands come about. In the first one, a band emerges in the process of friends playing together who, over time, grow into a band; the band emerges in an organic process that is set in motion without a clear goal of what the actual result might be. In the second one the desired result is what sets the process in motion. To have a band is the starting point. It is constructed as a frame that then gets filled with players who have to fit into a premeditated role. The first model would be one’s favorite indie band, such as last year’s hippest outfit The xx. They came together as four high-school friends who over the period of a few years casually played music after school. The second model would describe an industry shaped outfit such as Boyzone, the members of which were assembled by means of a public casting that was advertised in the newspaper. No matter what one’s musical taste might be, most everyone would probably agree that either approach can produce excitement and be an effective act.

If translated into the field of art, these band-forming processes can describe two tendencies for how exhibitions come about. The indie band version would be that someone – let’s call him/ her the curator – has a passion for certain individual artworks or artifacts and senses that their combination or physical proximity might be of mutual benefit to the parts. In order to activate this benefit the proximity has to be made tangible, has to be made intelligible. The consequent format that communicates the surplus generated by combining individual artworks into a physical or discursive group is the exhibition – most clearly an

exhibition with more than one element such as a group show or a show with multiple works by a single artist. The form of such an exhibition can be a spatio-temporal arrangement in an art space, but is not limited to that. Any discursive figure that effectively allows for the surplus-generating dynamic to become legible is possible. What coheres the works as an exhibition, what generates “the band,” is the relationship between the works. Hence, the exhibition form results not so much from its status as an exhibition or the works themselves, but from the dynamic between the works in the exhibition. The works that the exhibition includes are, of course, important. But the form of the exhibition is generated through and dependent on relationships, on dynamics, on the symbolic and physical space and interactions between the works.

The concept-band way of generating an exhibition goes another route. It starts with a formulated setting or reference point. When putting together the exhibition, one would identify artworks or artifacts that effectively articulate that setting or reference point and, in case there are multiple aspects to it, articulate all the positions that define them. These positions are determined in advance. The consequent format is, again, the exhibition, but there is a significant difference in the relationship of the works to each other as well as their relationship to the whole. The artworks' function is to inhabit the positions marked by the setting or reference point, by a schematic or by a plan. What happens between the works is of lesser importance than the works inhabiting their positions within the given framework. The form of this type of exhibition is dependent on the presence of the works and on accumulation rather than interaction; presence is what constitutes that form and therefore regulates that kind of exhibition.

Process emerges as the distinguishing factor between these two approaches to exhibition making. Within that distinction, process is further differentiated into the operators “dynamic” and “presence”. These operators surface not as part of an active vs. passive opposition but as equally productive. If applied to actual exhibitions both operators can be at work in one and the same exhibition, most likely not in the same

capacity and intensity, but at work nevertheless. Dynamic and process are both form producing, although in different ways and to different effect.

It might be obvious that this band distinction cannot be upheld as a qualifying one, making one approach better than the other. As any music lover knows, an industry shaped rock and roll outfit can be very exciting and the organically shaped indie band is no guarantee against being a bore. The same rings true for art exhibitions. This distinction between these two ways of exhibition making is one that is independent of value, of scale, of the degree of institutionalization, and, last but not least, of personal agency. Whereas rock and rollers are agents in their own process, artworks do not have agency of their own but are dependent on an agent to do things with them, to bring them together. That agent is commonly brought in by the curatorial and organizational process as the curator, artist, or other player in the field.

For the purpose of thinking through how form can be conceptualized in the exhibitory realm the who or what of this agent is of lesser importance. This is not to say that this agent does not influence how an exhibition comes about, it is to say that the distinction opens up another way to think of form in relation to an exhibition than to personalize it in a debate about authorship. Since the roles of curators, artists, or other exhibition makers are in continuous negotiation, a de-personalized, structural approach to form production might be helpful to more clearly understand the internal mechanics of exhibitions.

In the field of art, form frequently seems trapped in an oppositional relationship with content. To construct those form-is-bad content-is-good oppositions, the whole concept of form is coalesced with formalism and form becomes the negative foil against which art practices are constructed that are supposedly more engaged in a political or social way. Form is then further tied to materiality while content is understood as being immaterial. We generally assume to recognize form when we see it, thereby collapsing it with shape. But form is more than just shape. The American Heritage Dictionary defines form as “shape and structure,” as “arrangement or manner of coordinating elements in an ... organized

discourse.” Reading these definitions against the description of exhibitions above (and vice versa) allows for understanding the notion of form as something that operates in multiple ways. Form is a structural as well as procedural machine, positioned and operating clearly beyond conventional dichotomies. It emerges at once as the consequence of how an exhibition is put together and as an active tool for the process of exhibition making. Form is what produces and regulates the relationship of the individual parts of an exhibition to each other and to the whole.

Returning to the questions posted earlier, one can now say: form is what translates a group of artworks into an exhibition. It is what allows us to differentiate between a random frame -- for instance several things nearby each other --, a collection, and an exhibition. Form, in the realm of the exhibition, is structured by dynamic and presence, which are the main operators that characterize the relationships between artworks, artifacts, and exhibition.

In an earlier essay titled “Display – eine Begriffsklärung” I examined the use of the display term in relation to the exhibition.[2] By looking closely at the terminology and definitions used in exhibition literature from the 1950s and 1960s I pointed to a differentiation between exhibition and display: despite being temporary in its nature, the exhibition came into sight as a static format; static understood not in the sense that the notion of what an exhibition is does not change in time, but in the sense that the exhibition is strictly defined as a format -- format being understood as the organization, plan, style, or type of something. Display on the other hand emerged as the result of an activity, which allowed for understanding it as a method that is used to generate form. This differentiation is rather fragile and was made primarily for the purpose of understanding display in relation to the exhibition. The fragility of this difference comes about by highlighting the properties of display as it is constructed through verbal usage. A more complicated relationship of exhibition and display would emerge when all the grammatical possibilities of display’s usage are equally taken into account.

Putting together these pieces of an investigation with the above elaboration on the notion of form, one could, in a consequent step, work one's way towards a grammar of the exhibition. The axioms on the table so far include:

Form is the tool that is used to make an exhibition. It is regulated by dynamic and presence.

Display is the method that is applied to use that tool.

The exhibition is the format that is thereby constructed.

But, just as axioms function in mathematics, these statements have to be used with caution as they are only propositions made for the explicit purpose of a certain chain of reasoning; in this case, a chain of reasoning that tries to investigate the exhibition from a structuralist point of view. If one would approach the exhibition from a different perspective a different logic could emerge.



Foto: Julia Fuchs

The student group BAND's first public exhibition was held this summer at a rock and roll venue in Vienna. It was composed of a series of gestures starting with a poster campaign, merchandise sale, light show, a video, and a performance by the members of BAND. The performance was driven by internal discussions about being a band, the negotiations, conflicts, and highlights that come with it. It followed a script that was composed from a multitude of sources, ranging from dialogue from Metallica's *Some Kind of Monster* documentary to excerpts from a letter about the function of discipline in group contexts written by Tim Rollins to Group Material in 1980. The performance was held in the private realm of the backstage area, but live-fed to a small monitor that was casually placed on stage in front of an audience expecting a rock and roll show. After the performance the members of BAND -- Amy Croft, Rosina Huth, Stephanie Misa, and Katarzyna Winiiecka -- walked from the backstage area through the audience to the bar and had a drink.

What I found striking about BAND's process and their rather enigmatic event was how, through the lens of metaphor, they analyzed and displayed the inner mechanics of an exhibition. Their simultaneous application of the operators dynamic and presence twisted the understanding of display into method and subject and object. What one was left with was, on one hand, a puzzle, but, on the other hand, an opportunity to shift the exhibition discourse from one about curators and artists to one about form and structure. And that has some urgency in current artistic debates.

BAND's achievement also has to be looked at on the level of mediatization: the practice that Croft, Huth, Misa, and Winiiecka developed in the course and beyond is one that does not fit into traditional media categories. Instead media, mediatization and their function in the development of an artistic practice and identity have been foregrounded in their relatedness. In their genre-bending conversation about group structures BAND's members layed bare some of the basic operators of practice and identity as such. Every aspect of the lead up to the event and, consequently, the event's components themselves were defined by the

use of a specific media strategy, but without foregrounding one or the other: BAND's event was more than a performance, more than a video, more than a script, more than an advertising campaign, etc. That "more" is not simply an intermingling of media in the form of an "art installation." The various aspects of the project were carefully structured, their relations carefully calibrated. Each medium had its own locale and time frame, but rather than being structurally separated they fed into each other, needed each other, acknowledged each other in their consequences. What was gained is a new form of media specificity and reflexivity – one that, last but not least, holds a potential lesson for how to think about media in the kind of communication environment that schools always are.

[1] Nelson, Display (New York: Whitney Interiors Library, 1953), 7.

[2] Martin Beck, "Display – Eine Begriffsklärung" (Display – A Clarification), unpublished lecture at Kunstverein Hamburg, July 11, 2009. A revised and updated version was presented as "Die Ausstellung und das Display" (The Exhibition and the Display) at Generali Foundation, Vienna, April 7, 2011.