National identity and Exhibition Histories (online, 14 Jan 23)

Online, Jan 14, 2023
Deadline: Nov 14, 2022

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National identity and exhibition histories: from fin-de-siècle world's fairs to contemporary art biennials.

Convenors: Claudia Di Tosto (University of Warwick) and Maria Chiara Scuderi (University of Leicester).

'National identity and exhibition histories' is a virtual one-day symposium focused on understanding the relationship between art and politics in world's fairs, international exhibitions, missionary loan expositions, and art biennials. It aims to explore how such cultural and artistic events played a fundamental role in fostering national identities through their displays and material culture.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, exhibitions in Western Europe have been used to display national greatness at home and abroad. Responding to the Enlightenment's strive towards a universal knowledge, world's fairs and international exhibitions were informed by the Imperial world order of the time, and enabled the construction of national identities through an encounter with the colonial 'other' subjected to the exoticisation of the Western gaze (Geppert, 2010). Subsequently, with the first standalone missionary exhibition The Orient in London in 1908, the intertwining between Christian religion and material culture became a means of propaganda to show the Empire as God's gift to evangelise 'native' population in the colonies, despite visitors participated mainly for elements of spectacle, amusement and exoticism (Hasinoff, 2011). In a seminal essay published in 1988 on New Formations, Tony Bennet drew a comparison between exhibitions and spectacle and coined the term 'exhibitionary complex' to shed a light on the use of museums and exhibitions as tools used by Western European nations to control their populace. Nationalism and imperialism were embedded in the cultural project promoted by these events.

When the colonial order started to crumble at the end of the Second World War, Western European countries were forced to redefine their national identity against a shifting political landscape. This self-redefinition of a national identity in a supposedly postcolonial context found in an event such as the Venice Biennale the ideal cultural platform. Since its foundation in 1895, the Venice Biennale has always been characterised by a close intertwining between diplomacy and art, an aspect amplified by its national pavilions system. Even nowadays, the Biennale still reflects power imbalances and inequalities in its structure, with the emerging countries confined in collateral venues outside the main locations of the Giardini and Arsenale, thus replicating a new form of

cultural imperialism. The pivotal role that politics played in the organisation, display arrangements and curatorial choices of world's fairs has been inherited by the periodic international contemporary art events – such as biennials and triennials – that proliferate in the current art landscape and which have been described as 'usefully prestigious creatures in a competitive geopolitical game' (Tang, 2007).

Drawing from these considerations, the symposium will explore the intertwining between national identity, art and material culture embedded in exhibition histories through a broad historical framework, from fin-de-siècle world's fairs to contemporary art biennials. The aim is to highlight the importance of assessing these events against a broader political, economic and social context and to understand the role of these events in nation-building then, and national self-representation now.

The symposium seeks to address the following themes:
- Imperial roots of world's fairs – intertwining of religion, art and power in missionary exhibitions.
- Imperial legacies in contemporary art periodic exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta, Manifesta, etc.
- Material culture & imperial legacies.
- Curating in the postcolonial context.
- Intertwining between imperial legacies and national identity in museum collections.
- Histories of imperial collecting.
- Nation-building and exhibition histories.

We aim to host six 20-minute papers, and applications from PhD candidates, postdoctoral and early-career researchers, museum practitioners and artists are particularly welcome. If you would like to present your research, please submit your name, email address, abstract (max. 300 words), and a short biography (max. 100 words) to the conference email address nationalidentityandexhibitions@gmail.com by Monday, 14 November 2022.

Symposium generously funded by the AHRC Midlands4Cities DTP.

Visit our website for more information: https://nationalidentityexhibitionhistories.wordpress.com/
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Reference:

CFP: National identity and Exhibition Histories (online, 14 Jan 23). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 20, 2022 (accessed Nov 23, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/37451>.