The Factory on Show (Paris, 25-26 Mar 27)

Paris, Mar 25–26, 2027
Deadline: Oct 30, 2026

Audrey Jeanroy

The Factory on Show : Rethinking the Visibility of Industry (18th-21st c.)

International conference

Argument
Addressing the question of how the “industrial world” and the emblematic “factory” have been exhibited since the eighteenth century first requires us to set the analytical framework regarding places (factories, workshops, and industrial sites), people (workers, engineers, entrepreneurs), machinery, manufactured goods (including their design), and their representations (painting, graphic arts, prints, photography, stained glass, sculpture, plans, models, and films). As we know, exhibitions are never neutral, and may serve to promote particular images, whether those of a brand mark shaped by industrialists, of a territory, a trade, a patron, or an institution.
The representation of the factory by cultural institutions has never been self-evident. Testimonies from museum professionals and exhibition curators, including those involved in recent projects, reveal the persistent challenges associated with exhibiting industry, a subject that has largely remained confined to specialised institutions and narratives centred on innovation. The history of innovation itself encompasses a range of specific exhibition formats and dedicated spaces, such as international and industrial exhibitions. Innovation and performance, however, are only two among many possible interpretative frameworks. Their prominence has often obscured more enduring realities, including imitation, the acquisition of patents, routine production, fragmented manufacturing systems, technological coexistence, and resistance to technological change. The framework adopted for this two-days conference is the museum understood in its broadest sense. Rather than limiting the discussion to the contemporary definition of the museum (ICOM, 24 August 2022), we seek to encompass the diverse meanings and forms that this institution has assumed over the period under consideration. Whether specialised or generalist, temporary or permanent, situated within industrial environments or detached from them, interdisciplinary or otherwise, the museum is approached here as a long-term site for making visible processes of rationalisation and mechanisation through the powerful symbol of the factory.
This inquiry therefore embraces a wide variety of institutions, including fine-art museums, applied arts and decorative arts collections, museums of arts and crafts, social history and civilisation museums, museums of modern and contemporary art, art centres, foundations, former factories converted into museums, ecomuseums, science, industry and design centres, regional, international and world exhibitions, corporate museums, technology museums, and trade fairs. Decentralised, site-specific, and off-site museum initiatives are equally relevant to this investigation. Accordingly, our approach to exhibition practices is deliberately inclusive. We consider institution-

al frameworks, venues, patrons, audiences, voices, networks, and transfers, alongside the diversity of objects, machines, and representations displayed, as well as forms of resistance and processes of invisibilisation. This investigation seeks to sketch a preliminary historical landscape of the phenomenon at an international scale. Rather than simply reaffirming the underrepresentation of the factory—or a broader reluctance to engage with industry within cultural institutions—we aim to examine the place of industrial production within museums while taking into account the full range of activities that shape exhibitions: surveying, collecting, commissioning, acquiring, documenting, researching, and disseminating.

The thread running through this inquiry is the image of the factory, as transmitted and perceived through a wide variety of forms, functions, and configurations. The term “factory” is understood in its historical depth as a built—or sometimes projected—space organised for production and bringing together labour, energy sources, materials, and machinery. We are therefore interested in all representations of the factory, meaning realistic, imagined, comprehensive, fragmentary, or simulated, regardless of the industrial process involved, the definitions applied to the site under consideration (industrial architecture, machine-building, extraction sites, including temporary installations), or the symbolic meanings attached to these images, whether promotional or critical.

While exhibitions are a phenomenon extending from the eighteenth century to the present, the exhibited factory may itself originate in much earlier periods, sharing some characteristics—such as concentration of the workspace, use of mechanical power, and serial production—with the mill, the manufactory, and the workshop. The historical depth of industrial sites itself raises issues about contemporary strategies of representation.

We invite case studies that enable us to map, historicise, and compare the spaces in which these themes and this object—the factory, understood both as container and as content—have been exhibited since the eighteenth century. Contributions may seek to identify recurring challenges associated with their display, highlight moments when exhibitions responded to ongoing industrial transformations, and deepen our understanding of the actors who promoted them. While the programme of the two study days will likely combine chronological and thematic approaches, we propose the following cross-cutting theme :

- Institutional Histories
- Promoters and Professional Circulation
- The Exhibition as Project, Research Process, and Event
- Fetish and Myth
- The Factory as Emblem?
- The Industrial Artist

Scientific Committee

Anne-Laure Carré (musée des Arts et Métiers), Olivier Cinqualbre, Julie Corteville (ministère de la Culture, service des musées de France), Élise Dubreuil (musée d’Orsay), Lionel Dufaux (musée d’Orsay), Astrid Fontaine (Universcience), Marie-Laure Griffaton (musée de l’Air et de l’Espace), Yohann Guffroy (université de Genève), Odile Lassère (musée historique de Strasbourg), Ariane Mak (université Paris-Cité), Pierre Maurer (Ensa Nancy), Christophe Morin (université de Tours, InTRu), Marie Thébaud-Sorger (CNRS, Centre Alexandre Koyré).

Organising Committee

Liliane Hilaire-Perez (université Paris-Cité/EHESS), Audrey Jeanroy (université de Tours, InTRu),

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Further Information
Proposals of no more than 400 words should be submitted to the members of the organising committee by 30 October 2026.
The workshop will take place during two days in Paris in March 25 and 26, 2027. Papers may be delivered in either French or English. The organisers are currently considering the use of AI-assisted automatic translation. Limited funding may be available to contribute towards speakers' travel and accommodation costs. Remote participation by videoconference will also be possible for contributors who prefer this option.

If you have any question, please contact:
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https://intru.hypotheses.org/20089

Reference:
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