Documenting Curatorial Practices in Dutch Art Museums, 1945-Today

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Documenting Curatorial Practices in Dutch Art Museums, 1945 -Today - Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen

‘... whether within curatorial studies, exhibition studies, the teaching of art or art history, the promise of exhibition histories is an education in the public life of art. A promise that, when fulfilled, puts it beyond sheer strategic usefulness in relation to professional practice.’

The Project

Methodes and approach

The Netherlands has a rich and varied tradition of curatorial practice in temporary museum exhibitions and collection presentations. Unfortunately much of this practice, once dismantled, has become invisible.

The NWO-funded pilot project Documenting Curatorial Practices in Dutch Art Museums, 1945-Today, carried out in cooperation between the University of Amsterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and the authors, is a first step in addressing methodological issues and formulating research questions resulting from the recovery and examination of material related to the museum’s exhibition history. The aim was to make the usually hidden but crucial curatorial processes involved in the realization of a set of exhibitions (see below) available for interpretation, and to explore the possibilities of making these and other data sets available to researchers and the general public through the creation of a database.

As the Netherlands’ only ‘universal’ museum -its collection comprises paintings, sculpture, works on paper and in other media from the Middle Ages to the present day, as well as a world-renowned design collection- Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen was a natural choice as partner. All the more so, as the institution aims to facilitate research not only into its collection, but also into its own history. The diversity of objects and expertise has meant that the museum also has a long and diverse exhibition history, with shows ranging from early Netherlandish altarpieces to the latest developments in video art and design. This provided us with the opportunity to delve into the archives of a number of different exhibitions, comprising several different formats and themes, curated by both museum staff and guest curators, and over a longer period of time. In consultation with the museum’s researchers and archivists, four exhibitions were chosen: a monographic retrospective (Dalí, 1970); a transhistorical collection exhibition conceived by a guest curator (The Physical Self, curated by Peter Greenaway in 1991); a research-oriented exhibition of medieval art (Dutch Primitives: Paintings from the Late Middle Ages, 2008) and a discursive (or ‘argumentative’) presentation of broadly defined contemporary craft objects (Hand Made – Long Live Crafts, 2013). In an initial experts meeting, which brought the authors and Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen staff together with archivists from the Van Abbe Museum (Eindhoven) and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, we defined the approach to the materials that we would take and discussed possible models; we also made an inventory of potential pitfalls in both the research phase and in the eventual creation of the database.

In the first instance, our method comprised making a checklist inventory of the various archival materials relating to the four chosen exhibitions that were available. This checklist (see below) was developed on the basis of a model presented in the context of a similar research project undertaken by the Centre Pompidou to create an accessible database of all the museum’s exhibitions since its opening in 1977 and to promote research into these events. Our minimal changes and additions to the Pompidou scheme were
designed to aid researchers in mapping out in somewhat more detail the processes that led to the exhibitions in their final form: the formation of ideas, the different decision-making moments and the tension between wishes and feasibility. This makes it possible to show shifts in the curator’s role over time, as well as shifts in exhibition formats. Following this phase, we endeavoured to develop a series of research questions based on the available documents and outline what further materials would be necessary in order to make a complete case study on the exhibition in question. What general conclusions may be drawn about this specific type of research? What are the possible pitfalls? How can we create the most ideal (online) environment for research into exhibition histories?

**Theoretical framework**

Before we describe our case studies, however, it is important to understand the discursive field in which our project is embedded. The number of art exhibitions held annually at museums around the world has seen an exponential increase in the decades since the end of the Second World War. Despite their seminal role in both museum economics and processes of canonization, the question of how to write a history of this important aspect of institutional practice has only been posed relatively recently. Although museums now regard their exhibition activities as an indisputable part of their core business, being temporary they are often seen as somewhat separate from other undertakings, such as care for and expansion of the (permanent) collection. As a consequence, at least historically, the documentation of exhibitions has been somewhat haphazard, lacking a systematic approach that would allow not only for the analysis of individual events, but also enable scholars to chart an institutional or even pan-institutional history of curatorial practice in the field of exhibition making.

More recently, however, museums have begun to understand themselves in a more holistic manner and take their own history both more seriously and as a starting point for reflection on their role in contemporary society. The notion of the ‘museum as archive’, in which the collection, building, documentation and public manifestations (exhibitions, but also symposiums and performances) are understood to constitute the institution as a whole, has led to a renewed interest in exhibitions as an integral part of individual organizations’ DNA. Since many current debates surrounding heritage and identity centre around museum presentations and their role in creating shared cultural memory, it has become increasingly clear to curators and archivists that they need to become more transparent, and one way of doing so is to make archives and curatorial processes available to the general public and make sure they remain accessible to future generations. This can be seen within the general framework of the so-called ‘reflexive turn’ in museology, whereby museums no longer understand themselves as objective and timeless institutions, but as part of a broader cultural system and as actors in the production of visibility.

This new consciousness has undoubtedly been stimulated by developments in both scholarship and theoretical discourse surrounding exhibitions and exhibition making. University courses, books and even academic or para-academic journals focusing on questions of curating, as well as publications dealing more or less in depth with the history of individual exhibitions, are legion. In the literature on the historiography of the study of exhibitions, a – to our mind false – distinction is often made between the approach from within the already well-established discipline of art history on the one hand, and the still-expanding field of curatorial studies on the other. The interest of the former, it has often been claimed, follows along the lines of its (now highly contested) interest in the ‘development’ or progression of art itself. Despite the fact that art historians were in fact the first to research the link between art and its public display, they are frequently accused of being interested in exhibition history only in so far as it sheds light on individual artists, their
works or particular (avant-garde) movements. It is the artwork shown and not necessarily the exhibition in itself that is important.

Curatorial studies take a different tack. Motivated – at least partially – by a need for both legitimation and models of practice, here exhibitions are examined mainly from the standpoint of the curator. In the introduction to his own list of fifty influential recent exhibitions, Jens Hoffmann describes curating as itself a ‘creative profession’, with curators’ attention to its past focused on shows that have contributed to altering ‘the way we understand curatorial practice’. For Hoffmann, exhibitions are vehicles for intellectual, cultural, social and political activity – not so much about art as about ideas. Thus, while the history of exhibitions written from an art-historical perspective concerns itself with material relating to the evolution of the artist, his oeuvre or an artistic movement, the curatorial approach emphasizes ‘the form and functions of exhibitions’. For Hoffmann, a history of exhibitions should ideally address ‘innovations in curating both formally and in terms of their broader cultural context and relevance’.

This approach, however, has resulted in a ‘canon of exhibitions’ that derives from, and more or less parallels, the canon of modern and contemporary art.

One could argue, however, that this distinction is a false one – at least potentially. Since the 1980s and the advent of the so-called ‘new art history’, art historians have become increasingly interested in the social and institutional aspects of the art world. As T.J. Clark put it in 1974, one of the main aims of the discipline should be to take ‘account of how the work [of art] took on its public form’, with an interest in the phenomenon of exhibitions as part of a larger network of art-world actors as one result. Today, many art historians ‘see their task as describing the social worlds in which something known as art was produced and perceived. In these accounts the artwork can no longer be grasped as something “in itself”, but can be properly understood only as an element in an ensemble or scenario within which the artwork is the enigmatic (or catalytic) centre’.

Moreover, as Mary Anne Staniszewski’s *The Power of Display* demonstrates, from its inception, exhibition history has been attentive to the discursive aspect of exhibitions of both historical and contemporary art. She writes: ‘Exhibitions, like the artworks themselves, represent what can be described as conscious and unconscious subjects. The unconscious, or less obviously visible, aspects can be understood as manifestations of historical limitations and social codes.’ For her, aspects such as the form or function of an exhibition are as important as the works of art shown, and have implications that reach beyond the museum’s four walls.

How, then, might one bridge the (primarily conceptual) gap between the art-historical and the curatorial approaches to writing exhibition history? One way might be to look at all exhibitions as discursive formations through which art – of whatever time or place – becomes public. To show art (or any other object or artefact, for that matter) is to give it significance, and an exhibition should be seen as ‘the occasion when its meaning and import are collectively debated. More broadly, the disparate experience and dissonant discussions of art that emerge in the moment of exhibition are a basis on which the cultural realities of our places and our times are negotiated in relation to other cultural realities’.

Highlighting exhibitions as time- and site-specific events through which artefacts enter the public domain – become visible – de-emphasizes both the role of the artist’s subjectivity and art’s autonomy so prevalent in art history, and that of the curator, who is now as almost as highly fetishized as artists once were. The aim of exhibition history becomes neither canonization of works of art nor of exhibitions, neither of artists nor curators, but rather ‘to shift and widen the focus in order to take in the multiple agencies responsible for exhibitions: to consider not only artistic and curatorial contributions ... but also the work of those concerned with other dimensions ... [e.g. design, education, the institution]’. The crucial question then becomes ‘how art
realizes its affective and discursive potential – how art takes shape in experience and what debates it kindles’.  

Exhibition history should thus ideally be concerned with the how-why-when-and where of art’s becoming public, under which specific circumstances and in what form. As Lucy Steeds puts it: ‘Inherent to writing historically about the event of art’s exhibition, rather than about art as such ... is precisely dealing with the precariousness of contingent, shifting and disputed meaning and worth.’  

That the division between the ‘curatorial’ and ‘art-historical’ approaches has become less distinct in recent years is clearly demonstrated by, for example, the work of Kathryn M. Floyd on the Dada and Surrealist exhibitions. Floyd describes exhibitions as agents in the mediation, distribution and reception of art. She argues that established interpretations are often narrowed by relying exclusively on visual analysis or archival documentation: ‘While it purports to be a visual display, much of what makes up an exhibition is in fact invisible.’ According to her, the study of larger networks or patterns in exhibitions – including those of a more conventional nature – needs to involve diachronic and/or comparative, even transnational approaches that shed light on ‘the more complicated processes that make up each exhibition’.  

This makes for a thick reading of exhibitions that expands our view of the art of a certain moment, and places it within various social, political and economic regimes. This form of exhibition history, which seeks to map the intersections between artists, curators, dealers, the public, journalists, historians etc. that take place in exhibitions, can move the field beyond a narrowly defined art- or curatorial history.  

The question of method, however, remains acute: which exhibitions to study, and how? There can be no doubt that there now exists a canon of exhibitions and curators, just as there is a canon of artists and works of art. Reams of paper and hours of research have been devoted to a handful of exhibitions, which are now thoroughly codified in publications and even in ‘re-enactments’. In this there has been a focus on the large-scale and those exhibitions that are believed to have contributed significantly to individual artistic careers or the development of particular art forms or exhibition formats. Moreover, a relatively restricted number of institutional practices (in particular Anglo-American, German and French) have been examined, making these appear paradigmatic. Taken together, this has all rather limited our vision of the possibilities for the study of exhibitions. It is our firm belief that at this stage in its development, the field could benefit from more diversity in its research objects, and from paying attention to different, vanished or repressed curatorial voices. Bringing exactly these issues to the fore and demonstrating the benefits of looking at exhibitions that might be said to have taken place in the margins of the art world was one of the explicit aims of our project, Documenting Curatorial Practices in Dutch Art Museums, 1945-Today, which looked to the extensive exhibition archives of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen for its case studies. In other words, our goal was not to create a ‘canon of Dutch exhibitions’, but rather to show the range of possible objects of study.  

If, however, we understand exhibitions as complex organisms – a dynamic play between objects, exhibition-makers in the broadest sense, institutions and the public, coming together in ever-new constellations in time and space – then merely studying end-products such as catalogues, reviews or installations is not enough. As each element has its own history and relationality, as each ‘player’ (whether material objects or persons) is historically and socially determined, exhibitions must be understood not as products, but as a set of practices that come together temporarily to form a new whole. Exhibitions cannot be preserved or studied in an unmediated fashion and one is thus nevertheless always forced to rely on archival and photographic material as ‘remains’ of these practices. Archive documents and installation photographs, or interviews with curators, however, are each in their own way incomplete, freighted with their own conventions and laden with vested
interest. Researching process is therefore notoriously difficult and this knowledge requires critical awareness on the part of the researcher and the development of a method that in the first instance inventories what remains before attempting to reconstruct and reinterpret individual events. Our method for achieving this is outlined below.

Three Strategies

Strategies for Making Exhibition History Accessible Online: Three Examples

As a further prelude to the description of the outcomes of our own investigations, it is important to outline some of the strategies already in place for making information on exhibitions available to researchers and the public. In what follows we will outline the international context in which Documenting Curatorial Practices has taken place.

In recent years, the ability to digitize large amounts of data has given a decisive boost to the availability of images and documentary material on the internet. Since the turn of the century, this has led to the rapid development of museum websites. The strain on staff and resources of large-scale digitization projects, however, has meant that most museums have given priority to providing access to the artworks in their collections. In the meantime, though, many museum websites have sections devoted to past exhibitions, although information is usually only available from the period following the institution’s first online forays and is generally limited to photographs and a short description of the show in question. Significantly, efforts to comprehensively digitize exhibition history have almost exclusively been the purview of museums of modern and/or contemporary art with relatively large budgets. More than other museums, these institutions seem to feel the need to explore their own history, viewing it as an important source of information on the canonization of modern art, and in order to create a sense of transparency regarding acquisitions and institutional policy at large.

Among several others, the projects ventured by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and the Centre Pompidou in Paris deserve further consideration here. The Centre Pompidou’s exhibition history website in particular has been an important source of inspiration for our project thanks to the makers’ remarkable transparency with regard to their preliminary theoretical discussions (see below). In addition to these two large institutions, the Van Abbe Museum (Eindhoven, Netherlands) also deserves particular attention, because of its thorough and comprehensive approach to releasing its archival material. Viewing maximum transparency as an essential part of its overall policy, the Van Abbe Museum has adopted a vanguard position, even from an international perspective, by making not only exhibition photos, but also its management archives available to the public.

In the first instance, the aforementioned projects have set a standard due to the sheer scope of the material made available, which enables research into every exhibition held since the foundation of all three institutions, in 1929, 1977 and 1936, respectively. As such, they inevitably serve as a benchmark for the methodological decisions museums embarking on similar projects will have to make. Moreover, as a comparison of the architecture of the three sites will reveal, their structure in some sense predetermines the type of research questions one would be likely to raise in relation to both individual exhibitions and exhibition history in general.

MoMA
In order to understand how MoMA’s exhibition history website came into being, one needs to go back in time to before the birth of the internet as we know it today. In 1995, the museum pioneered in creating rather simple HTML websites for the exhibitions *Mutant Material* and *Video Spaces*, not coincidentally exhibitions featuring so-called new media. Since then, more than two hundred websites have been developed to accompany temporary exhibitions. The information provided on these sites resembles that of a press release: in most cases it has a matter-of-fact character, as the site is meant to inform and motivate the audience to visit the museum in real time.

The genesis of a more historical approach came in the wake of MoMA’s seventy-fifth anniversary in 2004, which coincided with the reopening of the museum after extensive expansion and renovation. In the publication *Art in Our Time, a Chronicle of The Museum of Modern Art*, the museum looked back on its history through, among other things, the lens of a selection of exhibitions. The title itself references the eponymous exhibition held in 1939 to celebrate MoMA’s move to its then-newly-built quarters on Manhattan’s 57th Street. That show belonged to a series of (now-canonical) surveys organized by Alfred H. Barr, Jr illustrating the various fields of modern art with which the museum had been concerned during the first ten years of its existence. A fundamental criticism of the 2004 retrospective was that the choices made from MoMA’s long and varied exhibition history were rather obvious and limited. In other words: the selection affirmed a long-standing narrative rather than examining the lesser-known threads of the historical fabric.

In September 2006 the *Exhibition History* web pages went online, with documentation on all the exhibitions held from 1929 to 1989. After years of ‘grooming’ the archives, the site has now been updated and enlarged to include curatorial and registrar’s files, with the total number of exhibitions now up to 5,004 (2019), including performances, videos and digital exhibitions. Users will find information on all the participants in the exhibition, lists of works on display, and installation photographs with links to the works in the museum’s collection, and can read press releases as well as catalogues (limited to those now out of print). The database can be searched by decade, year, title or exhibition type. Moreover, the range of search options includes the possibility of a simple text search. For example, entering the name ‘William Rubin’ offers up all exhibitions and publications in which the former head of the painting and sculpture department was involved. In addition, the metadata on the exhibitions and collection have been uploaded to GitHub, enabling the social networking community to mine the data with specific research questions. Overall, the resulting data visualizations tend to be more quantitative than qualitative. Examples of these public initiatives include an analysis of the frequency with which an artist has been exhibited (Picasso 321 times and growing), or of the collection by race or gender.

Notwithstanding the impressive amount of documentary material that has been made available on the MoMA *Exhibition History* pages, some questions remain. The first search result for an exhibition is always a set of photographs of the installation. This seems to suggest that these images are transparent or neutral recordings; issues such as photographic conventions, the museum’s intentions or the personal interpretation of the photographer(s) are thus not addressed. It goes without saying, however, that photographs fall short in conveying the complexity of an exhibition. Moreover, even though the website provides unprecedented opportunities for research, until now the documentation has been limited to the final stage of an exhibition, i.e. to the exhibition as an end product. Close readings of the press releases and checklists may reveal some information regarding the show’s inception and provide some insight into how works were chosen or even the exhibition design, but for deeper insight into the processes of decision-making one still has to turn to MoMA’s physical archive.
Centre Pompidou

At the same time as MoMA’s Exhibition History pages went online, namely in 2006, the Centre Pompidou established IRI, the Institut de Recherche et d’Innovation du Centre Pompidou. An important spin-off developed in 2010 with the start of the programme Recherche et Mondialisation du Centre Pompidou. A working group involved in this research programme posited that there was a need to acknowledge exhibitions as cultural objects in and of themselves, through which questions of art history could be addressed. On a broader level, the aim was to query the format and nature of exhibitions and how they have been formative actors in the writing of the history of modern art. Centre Pompidou takes a unique position among the three museums discussed here, as it actually provides a methodological underpinning to its project. In line with the reflective character of the research programme, the intellectual assumptions as well as documentation methods are carefully accounted for in a publication. A catalogue raisonné of all the Pompidou’s exhibitions served as a starting point – a means of avoiding the canonical. The next step was to design of a kind of checklist, to ensure the consistency and ordering of the available documentation. Filled in fully, the model could encompass as many as forty-two entries, listing every possible aspect related to the exhibition, ranging from factual data to items concerning the concept of the exhibition, the genesis of the installation and all manner of secondary material.

Unfortunately, it takes quite some inventiveness to actually connect to the Centre Pompidou’s exhibition history portal, as it is not linked to the main museum website. Indeed, two home pages were created, that redirect to each other. The site https://histoiredesexpos.hypotheses.org/ functions as the entrance to the research programme, with a link to articles on special exhibitions or curatorial matters, and links to the current programme (mainly symposiums) and a bibliography. The catalogue raisonné des expositions is accessed via a Wikipedia page, with a further link to the collections of the Pompidou (http://catalogueexpositions.referata.com/wiki/Bienvenue); this site went offline at some time in 2018 but has been reinstated as of 2020. The Wikipedia page can be searched by year, exhibitions series, curators (commissaires), locations (galleries within the physical building) and names of artists. The link to the commissaires in particular is very comprehensive, leading to every exhibition in which these individuals were involved. The name ‘Jean Clair’ – among others former director of the Musée Picasso, curator at the Pompidou, and independent exhibition-maker – for example, delivers a complete survey of the exhibitions he curated at the Centre during his tenure there. Clicking on the link to the seminal exhibition Les Réalismes: entre revolution et reaction, 1919-1939 (1980) reveals the full potential of the descriptive model: in addition to factual data, a list of works and objects on display, the poster, press release and a list of publications and press reviews, a full description of the concept and the scénographie is provided. To aid further research in the physical archives, a list of primary sources and material (correspondence, loan letters, etc.) is provided, as well as a link to installation photographs (in this case 183).

Understandably, it proved impossible to thoroughly document the more than one thousand exhibitions held since 1977. Consequently, although the complete catalogue raisonné was in fact digitized between 2012 and 2015, the amount of information available on individual exhibitions still varies considerably, with priority being given to those shows that generated the most critical discourse. In addition, the continuity of the research blogs has not been guaranteed: the most recent post dates from September 2016. This illustrates once more that continuity is crucial in order for such projects to succeed.

Van Abbemuseum
While one would actually have to visit the physical archives of MoMA and the Centre Pompidou in order to get a full picture of the available archival material on any given exhibition, the Van Abbe Museum has made it possible to obtain this information virtually. Over the course of time, it has made both its exhibition (1936-2018) and management archives (1936-1989) available to the general public. An introduction to the digital resources is provided on the museum’s website. As a first step, an impression of the scope of the archives and a sense of direction for research topics may be obtained by consulting the links to the summary of all exhibitions and collection presentations held since 1936 (a kind of shortlist catalogue raisonné), and by clicking the link to the management archive inventory. To continue one’s search, the links to the exhibition archive (connected to the online library catalogue) and to the management archive offer the possibility of exploring these databases through a wide range of keywords. A structural asset is that the two databases redirect to each other, but are also linked to the online library catalogue. As a consequence, one finds primarily factual data on the exhibition archive pages: location, curator, a list of exhibiting artists and exhibited works, captions, gallery texts and a mention of other venues. Links then forward one to archive boxes in the management archives, installation photographs, media (among others YouTube) and in many cases a PDF of the catalogue. Artists’ names direct to other Van Abbe exhibitions they have participated in.

The management archive pages offer items on collection and exhibition policy and correspondence, as well as recordings of lectures and symposia. Researching the museum’s involvement with the art of Richard Serra, for example, produces records of three exhibitions. The exhibition archive pages provide material relating to Serra’s solo show *10 Sculptures for the Van Abbe* in 1988. Apart from the photographs, the introductory texts and the floor plan provide insight into how the sculptures interacted with the museum architecture. Reference is also made to a video recording of a lecture by the artist. Documents can then be found in the management archives for the year 1988 regarding the intended purchase of *T-Junction*, one of the works on display’ grant applications for the exhibition (the building needed to be strengthened because of the massive weight of the sculptures) and summary work descriptions. The next time *T-Junction* was on view was in 2004, during *Installations from the Collection (1968-1988)*. In this case, in addition to photographs of the installations and a list of all the works on display, the site offers the possibility to click on the names of the twelve participating artists for further information, leading to records on their works in the museum. Finally, the 2007 manifestation of the *Living Archive* series focused, among other things, on the rejection of a work commissioned from Serra for the city of Eindhoven in 1986. This ‘scandal’ would eventually lead to the 1988 solo exhibition.

Reesa Greenberg has rightly criticized ‘the tendency [within museums] to use analogue principles of construction ... even when the platform is digital’, thus repeating past approaches to information disclosure. The Van Abbe’s project, however, appears to be the more fundamentally digital when compared to those of MoMA and the Centre Pompidou. Contrary to the long-established manner of ordering information in linear sequence, the Van Abbe site uses digital techniques to their full potential, making it possible to pursue information along rhizomatic paths. This is all the more important as the notion of what an exhibition actually is has been changing rapidly in the last decades, broadening it beyond a spatially confined or time-bound event. More such ‘genuine’ digitization will definitely offer more opportunities to substantiate the site’s current medial and interactive features.

**Boijmans Case Studies**

Below we will present our findings on the individual exhibitions. We will provide a short description of each show and its place in the museum’s history. This will be followed by a general characterization of the archival
material examined thus far. We will then present some possible research questions that arose from this material in relation to the individual exhibitions and how these might prove significant for further research. An appendix contains a checklist for each exhibition, providing a clear and simplified overview of what was found in relation to each of the four shows separately, and demonstrate what kind of material is missing.

**Dalí 1970**

![Visitors at 'Dalí', Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1970. Photo: Behrens](image)

In many ways, *Dalí* was a typical retrospective and monographic exhibition, like so many that took place both before and after it. For Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, however, it was significant on a number of fronts: it was – or at any rate claimed to be – the first European retrospective of the Surrealist painter's work. It was also one of the first – if not the first – blockbuster exhibition in the Netherlands: in two months the museum received more than 200,000 visitors, forcing it to extend the opening hours and hire more security staff. The exhibition also led to two major purchases of work by the Surrealist master, which was not without controversy. As such, it has become a crucial pillar in the museum’s thinking about itself and its collection – an integral part of the institution’s DNA. For both the museum and the outside world, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen is the Dutch museum of Surrealism – a claim supported by, for example, a number of exhibitions on the movement, including *Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design* in 2008 and *Mad about Surrealism* in 2017. In addition, a number of rather innovative marketing techniques were employed to attract the public: for example, visitors were offered reductions on train tickets and on Rotterdam’s public transportation network. Another interesting and perhaps important aspect is that the show was curated by two women, Renilde Hammacher and Liesbeth Brandt Corstius, chief curator and curator of modern and contemporary art, respectively.
The archive material is diverse, but does allow for some reconstruction of the curatorial process. The presence of a large number of loan request letters is particularly illuminating. These letters make it possible to reconstruct the provenances of various works and provide a picture of who the Dalí collectors were in this period; this is clearly important for work on the artist’s oeuvre, but also for exhibition history. It demonstrates the close connection between the museum and private collectors, and the role they have played in both the institution’s exhibition history and the formation of the collection – to this day an important element in the museum’s DNA. More interesting in this regard is that the loan letters reveal the various lenders’ networks, and the interface of these networks with those of the curators. This makes it possible to analyze – to some extent – how the curators (and occasionally the director) operated in getting the works for the exhibition. Particularly interesting is that barely any effort is made to justify the requests: the curator simply states that she is making an exhibition and would like to borrow a certain work. This stands in sharp contrast to practices today. These are invaluable documents for examining curatorial practices in historical context, but they are also highly sensitive: for example, there is quite a large amount of correspondence relating to the potential sale of one of the requested works from a private collection, in which the museum promises its help in the matter; whether or not this was in exchange for agreeing to the loan remains unclear, but the documents
reveal – among other things – the price asked and potential interested buyers.37

Another large part of the archive is comprised of newspaper clippings – national and international – which provide insight into the exhibition’s reception, as well as several binders with photographs documenting the installation and the opening – at which Dalí himself was present (which likely accounts for the very extensive documentation of this event). Not in the archive, but easily available on the internet, are also a fragment from the Polygoonjournaal and a much later ArtTube interview with Hammacher in which she discusses the exhibition.38

Interview with Renilde Hammacher about the 'Dalí' exhibition from Arttube.

The available material raises many interesting questions in relation to museum and exhibition practices, some of them specific to this exhibition and to Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen but others with a broader import. In terms of the latter, we might think about how this show may have contributed to the growing commercialization of the museum landscape in the Netherlands. Can we see it as a starting point for blockbuster culture and the eventual (slow) withdrawal of the public sector from the museum? In addition, one could look at it from the point of view of the reception of Surrealism in the Netherlands.

Other research questions could contextualize the exhibition with the history of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen itself: what role did exhibitions play in the formation of the collection, in this instance the very important collection of Surrealism? What role did and does this exhibition play in the museum’s self-image, its DNA as an institution? How has it used Dalí throughout its history for projecting a particular image?

For the project as a whole, the research into this particular exhibition was fruitful for the insights it provided into an interesting period of Dutch museum history, when notions about museums and their role in society were changing, and both national and local governments were beginning to contemplate new models for financing cultural institutions. It would make an excellent starting point for comparative research into monographic exhibitions, blockbuster culture and the professionalization of the curator – all important issues when we speak of uncovering vanished curatorial practices.
Peter Greenaway’s exhibition *The Physical Self* is one of an occasional series of collection presentations prepared under the directorships of Wim Crouwel, Chris Dercon and – most recently Sjarel Ex – by guest curators from both within and beyond the art world. Since 1988 there have been seven such exhibitions, in which the invited curators were given free reign with both the concept and the choice of objects to be displayed. The first four exhibitions, which ran through the 1980s and 1990s, were curated by exhibition-maker Harald Szeemann (1988), theatre director Robert Wilson (1990), filmmaker Peter Greenaway (1991), and the German conceptual artist Hans Haacke (1996). Following a hiatus of several years, stylist Maarten Spruyt was asked to curate *De collectie 1* (2007-09) and *De collectie 2* (2009-11). This was followed by art historian and professor emeritus of Netherlandish art Peter Hecht’s presentation *De collectie verrijkt* (2011-15). The most recent manifestation, *De collectie als tijdmachine* (2017-19), was curated by artist, art critic and art historian Carel Blotkamp.

It is interesting to note the differences between the presentations of the first and second group of guest curators. Those of Szeemann, Wilson, Greenaway and Haacke were billed as temporary exhibitions and lasted only a few months. They were held in the museum’s Bodon Wing – the usual location for temporary exhibitions. All these presentations were a- or transhistorical in nature, and presented objects drawn from all the museum’s various departments. They were arranged according to an authorial concept rather than chronology, and employed sometimes highly innovative display techniques. The presentations curated by Spruyt, Hecht and Blotkamp, on the other hand, were designed to be on view for several years. They were installed in the Van der Steur Building; i.e. where the permanent collection is always on display. These curators all returned to a chronological ordering of the collection. Although many aspects of these installations were interesting (or irritating), their displays aimed to explore the museum’s actual objects in a
more common art-historical or museological sense, rather than to express broader, personal ideas.  

Of all the exhibitions, Greenaway's *The Physical Self* was by far the most unusual and even controversial. This was in part the result of its subject matter – the human body in all its manifestations throughout the ages – but also of the display, which consisted not only of artefacts, but of actual living human beings: hired models ‘exhibited’ in the nude in glass cases. Not surprisingly, a certain proportion of the archive material is devoted to questions surrounding this rather unusual approach: there is much correspondence with the modelling agency, particularly regarding the remuneration and comfort of the hired models, as well as public reaction in the form of letters to museum officials and newspaper articles.

Unfortunately, the archival material relating to the genesis of the exhibition is once again sparse. In this case, this seems to be largely the result of the use of fax in the communication between the responsible museum curator Piet de Jonge and Peter Greenaway. Although the faxes themselves are preserved, they are mostly illegible. Important (and well preserved) documents in this regard are a fax dating from late 1990 in which Greenaway speaks of an exhibition in the form of a ‘table painting’, letters detailing the filmmaker’s visit to the museum to examine the collection in March 1991, a letter from Greenaway to the curator dated 21 March 1991 in which he lays out his idea for the show and its various themes, with, on the back, some handwritten notes (by the curator?) suggesting possible works from collections, as well as various object lists. A few of the letters and faxes give some insight into the struggles the curator had with the whole project, especially getting Greenaway to respond to his requests for information and to come to Rotterdam. There is also interesting material – particularly photographs – documenting the installation, including a hand-drawn floor plan.

Another large part of the archive is comprised of newspaper clippings, which provide insight into the exhibition’s reception. Predictably, these reviews are rather sensationalist, focusing mainly on the theatricality of the exhibition installation and the live models on display.

Like the Dalí exhibition, *The Physical Self* – together with the other shows in the series – has become an integral part of the museum’s self-image. This is demonstrated by the fact that the concept has remained in place since its inception in 1988, albeit now in somewhat different form. Moreover, the museum has continued to regularly explore various other types of interventions in the collection display itself. This makes the show highly relevant to the museum’s own history: examining all the exhibitions together, as a true series, could prove very fruitful. But Greenaway’s project could also be taken as a starting point for a broader investigation of similar manifestations in other (Dutch) museums. Where have similar exhibitions taken place? What were the themes? How were they received by the public? How has the notion of guest curatorship evolved over the years? Likewise, one could look at the different ways permanent collections have been deployed in exhibitions. To what end have museums put their collections to work through non-traditional displays?

This case study was significant in a number of ways for thinking about a future digital exhibition archive. First, the almost complete deterioration of some of the material is a clear demonstration of the urgent need for some form of preservation; in fact, it may already be too late for much documentation related to exhibitions of the 1990s and early 2000s, before the advent and widespread use of digital forms of communication. Perhaps even more so than in the case of Dalí, it is now apparent that – if one wishes to document actual curatorial practices – the exhibition archive alone is not enough. The exhibition undoubtedly generated much discussion among the museum staff, none of which has been preserved in the archive itself, but may be discovered in minutes of curatorial meetings and similar documents held by other departments.

The exhibition 'The Physical Self' at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1991

Where does ‘Dutch’ painting begin? This was the question curators Jeroen Giltaij and Friso Lammertse sought to address with the exhibition Dutch Primitives. Painting from the Late Middle Ages. Dutch Primitives can thus be characterized as an exhibition format that presents ground-breaking scientific research. The curators took Max J. Friedländer’s Die altniederländische Malerei (1924-37) as a starting point, which posits that circumstances in the province of Holland around 1500 were favourable to the rise of a distinctive school of painting, distinguishable from the Flemish School but unmistakably based on it. Six cities in particular were viewed as the cradle for this development: Dordrecht, Delft, Gouda, Leiden, Alkmaar and Amsterdam. Bringing together works from different collections in an exhibition offers the perfect opportunity to submit them to a detailed comparative analysis in order to test, and even reject, a variety of hypotheses. In this respect, both the exhibition and the scholarly catalogue were designed to have a hypothetical or argumentative character, and to leave ample room for questioning conclusions.

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen was undoubtedly the most suitable platform for such a project, as it could supply seven key pieces for the exhibition from its own collection. Moreover, at the time the museum was hosting an important temporary loan of so-called Early Netherlandish painting from the Rijksmuseum, then closed for renovation. This combination undoubtedly contributed to the success with international loan requests. One of the research spin-offs – brought to the attention of the public with quite a lot of publicity in the press – was the discovery by the Berlin art historian Stephan Kemperdick that a small painting by Geertgen tot St Jans in the Historisches Museum Frankfurt, clearly a fragment, had once belonged to the artist’s Adoration of the Magi triptych in the Národni Gallery in Prague. Shortly after the opening, the two works were briefly re-united.

In the course of the preparations, it was decided that the purported realism of the paintings could be
underlined by combining them in the show with real objects. A selection of appropriate artefacts from the
museum’s collection was made by Alexandra Gaba-Van Dongen, curator of preindustrial design. The
paintings proved to be quite accurate in their renderings, so that in many cases the they could be linked to
extant objects – many of which could be found in the museum’s own collection.43

The exhibition was organized into six sections, each representing an important city; this division was
visualized by Studio Ramin Visch using a zigzag-like infrastructure of coloured walls. Each city was given its
own wall in a different colour, for example yellow for Leiden and dark blue for Haarlem. Visch derived the
colour range from Mary with Jesus and four Holy Virgins, a work by the master of the Virgo inter Virgines
from the Rijksmuseum. The use of colour in this late medieval painting thus determined the aesthetic choice.
The position of the walls, which varied in length and height, guided the visitor through the show, although
following this path was not mandatory. One could also wander freely, as if to underline the equality of the six
cities, but also perhaps as an allusion to the hypothetical character of the exhibition.

The three-dimensional objects were displayed in niches that opened in the walls, usually next to the painting
in which they were depicted. These showcases provided glimpses to other walls (and cities) and prevented the
setup from becoming too rigid. Whether the designer’s intention to ‘present the works and objects as a
mystery’ was also realized remains an open question. Even the link made with medieval art in the colour
scheme may not have been perceived by the audience, as such strong colours are also very contemporary. In
any case, the design certainly favoured the precise and intimate viewing that this kind of art requires.44

A large amount of archival material is available, documenting almost all phases of the exhibition’s
realization.45 It encompasses loan correspondence, minutes of curatorial meetings, correspondence on the
catalogue, checklists of objects and drafts for the exhibition design, as well as a brochure on its final form,
data concerning the budget and sponsorship and publicity, wall texts, labels or captions, educational material
for schools, photographs of the mounting process and final installation, press clippings and – finally – an
internal evaluation. This enables us to thoroughly reconstruct the conceptualization of the exhibition as well
as its reception, and a number of conclusions may be drawn regarding changes that occurred during the
preparations.

The curatorial minutes of 23 March 2007, about a year before the opening, for example, indicate that at that
time it had already been decided that the presentation would be arranged according to city. Variations on ‘The
Origins of’ circulated as titles. Among the suggestions we also find ‘Dutch Painting’ or ‘Dutch Painting from
Geertgen tot St Jans to Lucas van Leyden’. In light of the definitive title, it seems that later on it was thought
advisable to be somewhat vaguer. As for the exhibition design, the preference at the time was for a monastic
atmosphere, described as ‘in the spirit of Dom Hans van der Laan’. There was as yet no mention of objects
other than paintings.46 An undated note (presumably from a slightly later date) suggests the inclusion of
three-dimensional artefacts, albeit in a separate gallery, such as the introductory room.47 In the end, as
described above, they were indeed integrated into the exhibition. On 9 November 2007 Visch presented his
first proposal for the installation. Giltaij and Lammertse objected to the long walls proposed, arguing that
they would reduce the paintings to the size of postage stamps. They also asked for breaks in the walls, as well
as for the possibility to show the backs of the paintings, as these often provide interesting information. It was
also at this meeting that the final title was chosen. Unfortunately, such reports were not made on a regular
basis, or at least have not been systematically archived, making it impossible to trace why specific solutions
were chosen. Was the integration of the three-dimensional intended as a means of reaching a wider audience?
Was there a fear that the formal language of the paintings and their symbolism might prove inaccessible
otherwise? Interviews with the curators might still provide some clarity in this regard.

On the other hand, there is very thorough reporting in 2007 and 2008 on financial and organizational aspects, on education and public programmes. In addition to educational courses for different school levels, a symposium was organized for the general public at the start of the exhibition, as well as an experts meeting at its closure. In the final evaluation report, the educational programme and the gallery texts are assessed positively, but it was noted that the catalogue did not fit well with the exhibition – an indication of some possible friction between public outreach and scholarly ambition. The majority of the comments concern the restricted budget and the failure to raise outside funds. In the end, the costs were about 100,000 euros higher than expected.

With regard to the writing of exhibition histories, it would first of all be relevant to examine how Dutch Primitives aligns with the policy successive directors of the museum have followed over the years with regard to its pre-modern art department. Indeed, the leeway granted to the Old Master curators to organize exhibitions and make acquisitions has differed from director to director. Programming in the past decade indicates that the museum has focused to a much greater extent than before on its core collection of older art, parallel to its profiling of the Surrealists. Announced as a follow-up to Dutch Primitives, The Road to Van Eyck, for example, was staged in 2012-13 to stimulate research into an even earlier period in art history. The ambitious set-up of this exhibition – a marriage between a blockbuster and a scholarly project – was once again made possible thanks to the museum’s owning several key works, in particular The Three Marys at the Grave by the Van Eyck brothers, and the anonymous Norfolk Triptych. Moreover, The Road to Van Eyck triggered three important purchases of works that had been on display and had proven their relevance to the collection in that setting. Two triptychs were acquired in 2013 and 2018 and a drawing attributed to the circle of Jan van Eyck in 2014. This shows how beneficial the synergy between exhibition programming and acquisition policy can be.

Further, a study of the broader context of canonization might be undertaken. What changes can one point out in the museum’s history with regard to its valuation of late medieval painting? And how does this relate to the exhibition and acquisition policies of other museums in the Netherlands? Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen itself mentions Medieval Art of the Northern Low Countries – a famous and ground-breaking exhibition organized in 1958 by the Rijksmuseum – as a precursor to Dutch Primitives. This seems to indicate a shift in focus between the two museums, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen concentrating on early painting, leaving the Dutch Golden Age more or less to the Rijksmuseum’s expertise.

The Road to Van Eyck demonstrates yet another tendency that was already visible in 2008, namely the use of a digital environment for preserving the memory of the exhibition. While there is only a short text on Dutch Primitives on the museum’s website, The Road to Van Eyck is more extensively chronicled, with a short description, photographs of the exhibits and links to several videos on ARTtube relating to the exhibition. In fact, this can be seen as a kind of forerunner to an eventual website on exhibition history, with the caveat that the tone at the moment is exclusively positive and missing critical reflection.

The exhibition 'Dutch Primitives' at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2008

Hand Made 2013
An overview of the exhibition 'Hand Made - Long Live Crafts', 2013. Photo: Lotte Stekelenburg

*Hand Made - Long Live Crafts* is arguably the most intricately designed exhibition in the museum’s history. This was due not only to the astonishing number of objects shown (more than six hundred), but primarily to the innovative and multifaceted participatory exhibition format. In *Hand Made*, curator of applied art and design Mienke Simon Thomas sought to interrogate received ideas about the applied arts, in particular the valuation of (traditional) craftsmanship. This was addressed through seven so-called stereotypes or clichés, values generally associated with handicraft and crafts in general. Each of these stereotypes was illustrated with objects dating from all periods, some from the museum’s collection, others on loan. Rejigging the conventional design-history narrative, the transhistorical and high-and-low juxtaposition of objects underlined the exhibition’s aim to question judgments and labels. *Hand Made* can therefore be characterized as an exploration of a new type of exhibition, one that defines the museum not as an authority but instead seeks to involve the audience in an open discussion. As we will see, this expansion of the concept ‘exhibition’ also has consequences for the method of archiving, and thus for its accessibility in an exhibition history repository.

The first object that confronted the visitor when entering the exhibition was Grayson Perry’s *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman.* This eye-catching work – a large funerary ship filled with casts of all kinds of artefacts (taken from the collection of the British Museum) – served to epitomize the ‘crafts’ concept. A quote from Perry on the wall text read as follows: *‘The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman’ is a memorial to makers and builders, all those countless un-named skilled individuals who have made the beautiful man-made wonders of history.’* Apart from this introduction, there was no obligatory routing. The visitor could roam freely between the clusters of objects illustrating the seven stereotypes, each indicated by a distinctive wall colour, captions and an introductory text. Nonetheless, a certain degree of pairing could be distinguished in the layout of the Bodon Wing. In the central hall, the notion of ‘art’ (*kunst*) was arranged opposite the concept of ‘honest’ (*eerlijk*), while ‘virtuosity’ (*virtuoos*) contrasted with ‘craftsmanship’ (*vakmanschap*). In one of the two side rooms, ‘tradition’ (*traditie*) was the counterpart to ‘unique’ (*uniek*), while the other showed ‘handicrafts’ (*huisvlijt*). In order to stimulate discussion, it was important to show that these stereotypes do have a kernel of truth, but may escape sharp divisions when seen from a different perspective. When designing the installation, Studio Parade took this principle as a starting point for the transparent layout of the space and the delicate design of the display furniture. The see-through effect obtained ensured cross-views...
between the different stereotypes, resulting in a kind of dialogue between the seven sections of the exhibition.

The objective of engaging visitors in the actual process of making was concretized in an extensive and diverse complementary public programme, using a wide variety of media, live performances and events. For example, videos showed how a number of the objects on display had been made, while a specially designed studio hosted demonstrations of traditional techniques such as paper-making, goldsmithing, violin-making and weaving. In addition, it was possible to sign up for a whole variety of workshops, visit a handicraft market or join in a design contest. A free exhibition newspaper included – in addition to a discussion of the seven
stereotypes – columns by the curator, modern designers and opinion-makers. Information for the public and calls for participation were listed in a calendar of all public activities.

Archival material and recordings on the exhibition are abundant, and enable us to follow the genesis of the exhibition to a certain extent. Simon Thomas introduced her idea to director Sjarel Ex in 2011, possibly inspired by Perry’s exhibition in London. As evidenced by an initial plan, Simon Thomas conceived the show from the outset in seven parts or stereotypes, each exemplified by objects. This plan is undated but in view of the then-limited number of 200 (!) objects proposed, it must have been drafted at an early stage. As with Dutch Primitives, the archive contains mainly detailed information on the execution stage of the exhibition. Minutes of curatorial meetings, documents on the budget, tenders, applications for funds, loan requests, condition reports, detailed building plans – taken together these illustrate once again that putting together an exhibition has become a team effort for which the expertise of many is required. With regard to the participatory design of the exhibition, the detailed plans of the Marketing and Communication (M&C) and Education and Public Guidance (E&P) departments are worth special consideration. Apart from the preparatory phase, these departments were involved during the entire duration of the exhibition. After all, Hand Made was not an exhibition that was ‘finished’ once it opened, but rather an ongoing project that kept these departments involved, undoubtedly to a greater extent than has been the case with other exhibitions.

It must have been quite difficult for Studio Parade to figure out how to accommodate so many objects, some of them very small, in the spacious 1,500 square metres of the Bodon Wing. Unlike the hanging of paintings, which allows for last-minute changes, the display of three-dimensional objects requires accurate calculation of the exact location of each object, either in showcases or on pedestals. It must also have been rather mind-boggling to deal with the ever-growing number of objects: the definite list was not fixed until December 2012. A first proposal for the installation, dated 17 September 2012, gives two alternatives, with variations on a grid for showcases and pedestals. The final installation plan dates from 12 February 2013, but many adjustments were made in between, as the available archive material shows.

For a broader context, it would be of interest to investigate how Hand Made fits into the policy of the museum and its design department. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen is the only museum with a collection that covers the timespan from the Middle Ages up to the present day. As a consequence, it may feel authorized to profile itself along these lines within the Dutch museum world. To this end, it launched the ‘Programme Design,’ which organizes activities (including lectures and a design column) and exhibitions, with the aim of stimulating the debate about the place of design in society. In this regard, Hand Made certainly does not stand on its own: rather, its activating and participatory character runs through the museum’s programming. In this case, Hand Made responded to the current renewed appreciation of materials and craft in society. Crafts are hot, as evidenced, for example, by the popularity of Etsy.com.

To conclude, Hand Made demonstrates that different exhibition formats may demand different digitizing strategies. To do justice to the show’s participatory character, material should be included on the studios, the workshops and the craft market, preferably even using video recording. It should be noted as well that including exhibition reviews in this case also requires a novel approach. Whereas for most exhibitions a selection of reviews from the main newspapers would suffice, with Hand Made the bulk of press clippings is essential in researching the scope of the exhibition. These show that to a significant extent coverage took place in the popular and local press as well as on the internet. A striking example is the mention in De Bunschoter huis aan huis, a newspaper for a quite traditional local community, on their ‘ambassadors of craft’, women who came from this little village to show off their skills in the museum.
The exhibition 'Hand Made' at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2013

Conclusions

If nothing else, our project has demonstrated that we have now reached something of a turning point when it comes to both exhibition history and the digitization of exhibition archives. The scholarly field is rapidly expanding, and there is a broad realization that both the theories and methods developed so far may not be adequate. Within the field of curatorial studies, the perspective has been somewhat limited by a concentration on exhibitions since the 1960s and the need to create a genealogy for contemporary practice. Similarly, research methods, while not lacking in historical depth regarding individual exhibitions, have so far done little in terms of developing a comparative approach. The digitization projects realized by various museums, while offering the possibility of insights into a wide variety of exhibitions and the institution's own history, do not allow for what – to our mind – is the great power of the digital revolution, namely the ability to gather information and draw conclusions from large sets of analogous data. The question then arises: how should Dutch museums react to these developments? The moment seems ripe to embark on an exemplary project with a broad consortium of researchers from both universities and museums who, together with developers, can establish a new platform or infrastructure that will allow not only for further research into individual exhibitions but also stimulate a broader theorization of the field of exhibition studies.

Documenting Curatorial Practices in Dutch Art Museums has provided insights on several levels. First, into the exhibitions themselves, where the archival material revealed information on the development and reception of presentations that might be considered of fundamental importance to the self-image of the institution Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. Second, the project has shed light on the progress and some of the implications for curatorial practice of the continuing professionalization of the museum sector: for example, while the curators of Dali and The Physical Self were more or less autonomous actors, in more recent times the making of an exhibition has become a complex process involving multiple internal and external services. The position and function of the curator has thus changed fundamentally in the period since 1970. Finally, we believe the project has provided some ideas for how a future database might actually look and what it ideally must contain. At the same time, of course, our own research has shown that traditional archival work can still deliver interesting results.

The first and most important question is that of quantity: how complete must a digital archive be? The amount of material generated in relation to contemporary exhibitions is so enormous that some form of selection is absolutely necessary. Moreover, how should one deal with questions of privacy, in particular with reference to loan requests and applications for funding? How can we ensure that researchers nonetheless know about, and have access to, documents that are not digitized? And what to do with material that is not preserved on paper, but in other – often fragile – media such as fax or video?

Taking the checklist as a starting point, a first step would be to determine what information is essential: what are the documents one undeniably needs in order to understand the history of a particular presentation, which can be made accessible without endangering the privacy of individuals or the interests of the institution? These would include, in the first instance, a catalogue raisonné of all the museum's exhibitions; and for individual shows: the names of the curators, a checklist of works, press releases, the catalogue, the floor plan, installation photographs, wall texts and labels, and links to 'native' digitized media (such as ArtTube), as well as to internal and external databases, for example to aid in the identification of the works on display. Such documents can be made available digitally with relative ease. To ensure that researchers also
have access to other, non-digitized material, each exhibition entry must, however, also include not only a
general description of the preserved documentation but also, where possible, detailed references to material
in the institution’s physical archive.

Equally important, however, is the question of quality – the type of materials kept, how they are preserved, as
well as their physical state. Unfortunately, records have not always been kept in the most transparent or
complete fashion. The fact that so much – even recent – material is undated makes a precise reconstruction of
the curatorial process difficult, if not impossible. In relation to more recent projects, in particular those that
expand the notion of ‘exhibition’ itself (as in the case of *Hand Made*), the question of how and what to archive
becomes especially urgent. Given the numerous integrated activities that are so much part of today’s
exhibition practice, a paper archive can never provide a complete understanding of the event’s meaning and
import. Not to mention the issue of email correspondence! This may well mean that curators and archivists
need to fundamentally change their documentation and archiving procedures if they wish to conserve the
history of their presentations for the future.

Aside from practical – but of course fundamentally important – questions of the database architecture, its
user-friendliness, searchability etc., and guarantees of continuity and stability, an exhibition history site must
also be thoroughly transparent. It must include reflection on itself and on its sources and methods, for
example in the form of articles, blogs and other (online) publications, as well as symposiums and experts
meetings. It is also imperative that researchers themselves continually question the archive, in particular that
they look for lacunae and do not take information at face value – this is especially the case when it comes to
the documentation of installations, but other materials require similar caution – for example minutes of
meetings or loan letters. A combination of a critical attitude, a broad and informed historical perspective and
a rich database are the ingredients needed for the practice of exhibition history in the future.

**Example checklist**

The documentation checklist below was developed on the basis of a model presented in the context of a
similar research project undertaken by the Centre Pompidou to create an accessible database of all the
museum’s exhibitions since the opening in 1977 and to promote research into these events. We have made
minimal changes and additions to the this scheme in an effort to better reflect the Dutch context and to aid
researchers in mapping out in somewhat more detail the processes that led to the exhibitions in their final
form: the formation of ideas, the different decision-making moments, and the tension between wishes and
feasibility. In what follows, we present the material found in relation to the *Dalí* exhibition of 1970, to give an
indication to the reader of the possibilities offered by such a listing, but also to make visible the lacunae in the
documentation that may present obstacles to further exhibition research.

Dalí exhibition - example checklist as PDF [Download](#)

**Credits**

**Authors**
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Noten

See, for example, the recent exhibition Boijmans in the War: Art in the Destroyed City (13 October 2018 – 27 January 2019) and its accompanying publication, A Controversial Past Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and the Second World War (Rotterdam 2018); as well as P. van Ulzen, J.C. Ebbing Wubben Museumdirecteur met een missie, 1945-1978 (Rotterdam 2016) and F. Lammertse, et al., Van Meegeren’s Vermeers: The Connoisseur’s Eye and the Forger's Art (Rotterdam 2011). Curator Cathy Jacob is currently undertaking research into the exhibitions that have taken place in the museum’s Bodon Gallery since its opening fortyeight years ago.

This meeting took place at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen on 28 June 2018, with the participation of Rachel Esner (University of Amsterdam), Fieke Konijn (emeritus VU University), Sandra Kisters (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), Erik van Boxtel (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), Marieke Lenferink (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), Diane Franssen (Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven) and Maurice Rummens (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam). The pilot was rounded off with a second experts meeting, which took place on 5 March 2019 at the RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History in The Hague; participants included Rachel Esner (University of Amsterdam), Fieke Konijn (emeritus VU University), Anita Hopmans (RKD), Sandra Kisters (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), Erik van Boxtel (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), Hanna Leijen (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), Michiel Nijhoff (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam), Vincent de Keizer (Kunstmuseum, The Hague) and Julia Noordegraaf (University of Amsterdam).

The literature on curating is vast and ever-expanding, with too many titles to mention here. Journals include the (now defunct) Exhibitionist, as well as Afterall, Manifesta Journal, On Curating, Mousse Magazine, and Journal of Curatorial Studies.

G.F. Koch’s ground-breaking Die Kunstausstellung. Ihre


17 A partial list of other institutions with exhibition history
websites would include the Brooklyn Museum, New York (exhibition archive from the 1840s onwards); the Art Institute of Chicago (exhibitions as of 1883); MACBA Barcelona (exhibition archive as of 1995); the Cooper Hewitt Museum, New York (as of 1977, with gaps); ASAC Documentation Centre of the Biennale di Venezia (Biennale 1999 being the only one online). The scope of the documentation available on these sites, however, varies greatly.


20 It is unclear, however, what exactly is meant by ‘curatorial files’, in other words whether or not these include minutes, correspondence and similar documents.


23 J. Lill, ‘Putting It Out There: The MoMA Exhibition History Project’, Museum Archivist 27 (2017), 1: pp. 5-6. A so-called Art Datathon was held at MoMA on 2 February 2016; see https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/1793). One of the winning groups made a visualization through time of the frequency of the most popular artist’s exhibitions, as well as a visualization of different countries and movements represented in the museum’s collections; see http://woojink.com/moma/movements.html (both accessed 17 October 2019).


25 In fact, not all the material available in the exhibition archives has been fully digitized. MoMA Archives Image Database (MAID) gives access to a select body of digitized materials. Performing a search on the exhibitions Cubism and Abstract Art (1936) or Indian Art of The United States (1941), for example, yields many more photographs than registered on the Exhibition History
pages, but (as yet) no correspondence or other archival material. See: https://maid.moma.org (accessed 14 January 2020).


29 <a href="http://212.61.168.66/abbeweb/SaveList.csp?SearchMethod=Find_1&Profile=Default&OpacLanguage=eng&EncodedRequest=*C8*B6F*5E*F4*17*C6*FE*E2*2C*2DrX*DA*F04&PageType=RecordListFind&WebAction=NewSearch&WebPageNr=1&NameSpace=ABBEVBS&NumberToRetrieve=25&SaveListInfo=General_*_AANWINSTENLIJST&SortIndex=Year&SortDirection=-1&TreeInfo=Vanabbe_AANWINSTEN_5" target=_new>Click here for the catalogue</a> (accessed 14 January 2020).


33 Although there were already several highly successful exhibitions in terms of visitor numbers staged in the museum in the years directly following the Second World War, I believe we can call this the first Dutch ‘blockbuster’ in the contemporary sense of the term; it was the first of its kind to involve a modern, living master; it employed an extensive popularizing marketing campaign (with, for example, combination train and entrance tickets, merchandise related to the exhibition) and it sought to capitalize as much on Dalí’s reputation as an artist as on his oeuvre to draw in visitors.

34 The exhibition was such a financial success that the museum had its own means to purchase Dalí’s sculpture Vénus de Milo aux tiroirs (1936/1964), while the municipality used funds from the estate of G.J. Verijssel (set aside for the purchase of works of modern art) to acquire Le Visage de la guerre (1940). See S. van Kampen-Prein, ‘Van incidentele aankoop tot kerncollectie. De vorming van een verzameling surrealistische kunst’, in Een droomcollectie. Surrealisme in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam 2017, p. 27. An article in the Vrije Volk of 26 February 1971, however, accused the museum of a lack of transparency regarding these purchases: Bertus Schmidt noted the success of the exhibition but attributed it not to the art but to Dalí’s image. In relation to the two works that the museum bought, the author finds it shocking that the museum refused to say how much they paid for them (although it seems to have leaked out, as he mentions a sum of 300,000 guilders). He objects to the museum’s secrecy, stating that the museum was here behaving like a ‘regenteninstelling’ (an institution run by regents) and not as a public institution. The author notes that this is not the first time the museum has acted in such a manner, and he states categorically that they should not be so secretive, as this is not in the public’s or the museum’s interest.

36 Even today, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen uses its policy documents and public image of the link between the museum and the private collectors who made, and still make, important contributions to the collection.

37 Stadsarchief Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen archive, 1214.

38 See https://vimeo.com/125125968 and https://www.arttube.nl/videos/Dali-in-rotterdam (accessed 11 February 2020). This raises the question of how to link this type of material to an eventual database and demonstrates that even before the rise of digital media, sources outside the archive can supply interesting information on individual exhibitions.


41 Exhibition 572, 16 February-25 May 2008. Folder 30 for a letter by director Sjarel Ex, 22 October 2007, outlining the plan to the intended sponsors.


44 See page 2 pf Studio Ramon Visch’s (undated) brochure for an explanation of the design and colour scheme (Intranet Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen).

45 Excel sheet recording all objects with title, material, museum, contact person and insurance cover dates from 12 July 2007.
46 Minutes of the curatorial meeting of 23 March 2007. ‘The spirit of Dom Hans van der Laan’ refers to his design for the extension to the Benedictine Abbey in Vaals.

47 Undated minutes, before November 2007; the title still starts with “The origins of” (“in het begin”).

48 The Marketing and Communication Plan dated 12 July 2007 gives detailed information on the budget and sponsoring; 27 August 2007 reports that there is still a shortfall of 100,000 euros. The main sponsor was the Turing Foundation.

49 The experts meeting, intended especially for the lenders, was held on 26 May 2008.

50 Internal evaluation 27 June 2008.

51 Final settlement 12 December 2008.
52 Staged from 13 October-10 February 2013, in partnership with the Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

53 In 2013 *Triptych with the Embalming of Christ* (1400-20); in 2014 *Crucifixion*, drawing, circle of Jan van Eyck; in 2018 *Triptych with Enthroned Madonna* by the Master of St Veronica (1410).

54 Letter from director Sjarel Ex, 22 October 2007 (Map 30). Also Giltaij/Lammertse?


56 The first version was for the eponymous exhibition in the British Museum in 2011. The version in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen is presumably the second. A third version was acquired by the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, Netherlands, in 2016. The only genuine object on the ship is a prehistoric stone hand axe, the beginning of all human design.

58 Archive at Boijmans

59 Minutes, 11 December 2012.

60 *De Bunschoter huis aan huis*, 3 March 2013.

Toon alle noten Toon minder noten