Honoré Daumier, *Connoisseurs*, c.1862—64, black chalk with watercolour, 24.7 × 18.1cm

Notes Towards a History of the Solo Exhibition

— João Ribas

The ongoing history of exhibitions amends traditional art historical methodologies — including categories of genre, style or period — by directly engaging the experiential, scenographic and epistemic dimensions of exhibition-making. This history, however, only began to be written in the early 1980s, appearing, in a sense, as the repressed of art history.[1]

Yet there is also a repressed within this history of exhibitions and curating, for it is a history largely written around a single typology, that of the 'paradigm-shifting' group exhibition. In the voluminous literature on curatorial practice and exhibitions produced since the early 80s, the solo exhibition has been surprisingly, and rather conspicuously, overlooked.[2] As a typology, it is given scant attention compared with group shows or biennials. There seems to be no comprehensive empirical history of the solo exhibition as a form, and important examples of such exhibitions — once tellingly referred to as 'one-man shows' — have not been presented as central within exhibition histories. The discursive presence of the form seems entirely compressed into the biographical and chronological focus of art historical writing on the one hand and art criticism on the other.

The general place of the solo exhibition within curatorial discourse was tersely expressed by Rob Bowman in 2010 in an article for *The Exhibitionist*, where he suggested that in relation to the group or biennial, the solo exhibition 'sounds straightforward and declamatory, a vehicle for the artist's voice in the first person singular, unmediated by curatorial meta-text … what scope could possibly be afforded an organisation or curator that chose the solo show as a specialism?'[3] Supporting a particular representation of curatorial labour, supposedly opaque within such exhibitions, this reproduces a narrative asserting the importance of certain types of exhibition-makers in the post-War era.[4]

João Ribas looks back upon the dissident origins of the monographic exhibition in the eighteenth century, prompting a re-evaluation of its critical potential.

In doing so, it devalues the historically significant as well as current acuity of curatorial work focused on monographic exhibitions, many of which have come to define the very critical discourse around an artist's practice. Even in its ubiquity as a form generally encountered in most contemporary art institutions worldwide, the solo exhibition remains remarkably unconsidered, though it plays a significant role in forming many of the norms readily employed in producing exhibitions.

Not only has the solo exhibition been insufficiently historicised, but its practical and conceptual concerns — as in, how are such exhibitions put together, what assumptions underpin them and what criteria might be used to evaluate them — have also been largely glossed over. This practical and historical omission is reproduced by the pedagogical model of curatorial education, in which solo shows are not commonly produced as thesis projects within curatorial studies departments.[5] In fact, a large part of the labour performed by the graduates of these departments might consist, on the aggregate, of tasks related to

1 Mary Anne Staniszewski, for example, writes of the 'history of the exhibition as culturally repressed'. M.A. Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001, p.xxi.

2 Exceptions include the discussion of solo exhibitions by William Blake (1809) and Joshua Reynolds (1813) in issue 14 of *Tate Papers* (Autumn 2010), as well as Robert Jensen's study of the retrospective in late-nineteenth-century France in *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

3 Rob Bowman, 'First Person Singular', *The Exhibitionist*, no.1, 2010, pp.35—38.

4 One interesting point to note in relation to this valuation of labour is how the typology is central to the work of female curators such as Lynne Cooke and Beatrix Ruf.

the production and dissemination of variants of the monographic exhibition, be it in commercial galleries, nonprofit spaces or museums. It is thus a historical omission enforced by a pedagogical basis, which, in turn, reproduces a particular historiographic model.

What then might account for this repressed? Why should solo exhibitions have such a lowly status within exhibition histories and curatorial discourse, even when these shows are largely the form through which an artist's work is presented and assessed, and the basis on which both value and relevance are ascribed? Part of the answer lies, of course, in the political economy in which this type of exhibition operates, a complex asymptotic web of dealers, collectors, critics, commercial galleries, nonprofit institutions, museums and curators. This dense network involves as much a *reputational economy* in which the solo exhibition functions as a type of currency as it does an *economy of curatorial prestige* particularly tied to the group show and biennial. It is along this line of prestige that the history of exhibitions has thus largely been written: as a history of thematic or survey exhibitions with articulated themes, and which potentially address or forecast current artistic developments.

Even if the typology of the solo exhibition is not significantly dealt with in terms of its historical, methodological or ideational aspects, there are a set of tacit or implied conventions that are commonly employed in its production and reception — what we might call the 'grammar' of the solo exhibition.[6] Perhaps most patent are the notions of *chronology*, in the sense of a narrative (often biographical), formal or conceptual development that is spatialised within an exhibition; *connoisseurship*, or that such exhibitions consist of exemplary works by an artist, which are related to or illustrate development upon some general teleology; *evaluation*, in the sense that solo exhibitions play a key role in assessment, with the mere fact of an exhibition functioning as a marker of relevance (this includes the role of the catalogue — almost always hagiographic); and lastly, *mediation*, as the solo exhibition is seen as more directly representing the artist's voice, and so supposedly comes with curatorial self-effacement. In this sense, the solo exhibition, in its supposed purity, becomes a 'way of … paying penance' for the 'excessive role of the curator today', in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's words.[7]

Solo exhibitions have gone from allowing for the articulation of a critical, social or economic counter-polemic in their dissident origins, to now being perceived as a canonical form lacking in criticality, ubiquitous yet ignored.

Such tacit conventions must, of course, have originated somewhere. In addressing the relative absence of the solo exhibition within the historiography of curating and exhibitions, the methodological approach of the genealogy seems particularly apt. A genealogy traces the advent or development of a set of norms through their diverse trajectories, and rather than uncovering a single origin, works backward to 'disentangle the separate strands of meaning that have come together in a (contingent) unity in the present', as Raymond Geuss notes.[8] My aim here will be to focus on the errant origins of the solo exhibition in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as forms of critical and productive resistance, drawing on a variety of sources — from eighteenth-century gossip to art historical writing — with the aim to relate the development of such exhibitions to the conventions of contemporary exhibition-making.

5 Exceptions include 'John Smith: Solo Show', organised by the Curating Contemporary Art graduating students at the Royal College of Art in London in 2010. The exhibition was accompanied by a two-part publication consisting of the titles *John Smith: Solo Show* and *Solo Show* (London: Royal College of Art, 2010); the second volume reflected on the solo show as an exhibition format.

6 Robert Storr discusses some of the assumptions, strategies and shortcomings of the retrospective solo exhibition as practiced in contemporary curating in his essay 'Show and Tell', though he does not address its history or development. See R. Storr, 'Show and Tell', in Paula Marincola (ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, 2006, pp.14—32.

7 'Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Liam Gillick in Conversation; Chaired by Susan Hiller', in Susan Hiller and Sarah Martin (ed.), *The Producers: Contemporary Curators in Conversation*, vol.4, Gateshead: Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, 2002, p.17.

8 Raymond Geuss, 'Nietzsche and Genealogy', *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol.2, no.3, December 1994, p.282. I am referring here specifically to Friedrich Nietzsche's historiographic model of genealogy, and its elaboration in the work of Michel Foucault.

George Scharf, *The Royal Academy Exhibition of 1828*, 1828, watercolour

Perhaps the earliest modern artist in Europe to hold a solo exhibition was the Dublin-born painter Nathaniel Hone, who had been elected to the Royal Academy in London in 1768.[9] Hone submitted a painting titled *The Pictorial Conjuror, Displaying the Whole Art of Optical Deception* to the annual exhibition at the Academy in 1775. Described as 'humorous, but really scurrilous',[10] Hone's painting was summarily rejected as thinly veiled 'malicious satire'.[11] The work's theme was deemed to be the pastiche of historical styles in the work of the Academy's president, Joshua Reynolds; essentially Hone was accusing Reynolds of plagiarism.[12] Hone was meanwhile faulted for having produced 'an indecent figure or caricature of an eminent female artist' — namely, his fellow Academician Angelica Kauffman — in the form of an obeisant figure resting on the conjuror's knee.[13]

As a result of the rejection, Hone organised his own solo exhibition in London in May of 1775, which brought together various paintings, enamels and miniatures from throughout his career, including the rejected painting. The exhibition, Hone claimed, was a direct appeal to the public, to 'whose candour and judgment' he was 'submitting himself and his art'. To publicise it, he placed the following advertisement in several London newspapers:

> *Exhibition, St Martin's Lane*
> *Mr Hone's Exhibition of the* Conjuror *and one hundred other pictures and designs, all by his own hands, may be seen every day (Sunday excepted), opposite Old Slaughter's Coffee-house, the upper end of St Martin's Lane, from ten in the morning till seven in the evening. Admittance one shilling. Catalogues, with Mr Hone's apology to the public, gratis. May 9th, 1775.*

9 See Kenneth W. Luckhurst, *The Story of Exhibitions*, New York: Studio Publications, 1951, p.53. Konstantinos Stefanis argues that Hone's exhibition is 'the first retrospective known to have been staged by an artist'. See K. Stefanis, 'Reasoned Exhibitions: Blake in 1809 and Reynolds in 1813', *Tate Papers*, issue 14, Autumn 2010, available at http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/reasoned-exhibitions-blake-1809-and-reynolds-1813 (last accessed on 24 October 2014). See also Graham Reynolds and Katharine Baetjer, *European Miniatures in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996, p.128.

10 Julia Clara Pitt Byrne, *Gossip of the Century: Personal and Traditional Memories, Volume 2*, London: Ward and Downey, 1892, p.488.

11 John Thomas Smith, *Nollekens and His Times*, London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1895, p.134.

12 Amelia Faye Rauser, *Caricature Unmasked: Irony, Authenticity, and Individualism in Eighteenth-Century English Prints*, Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2008, p.58.

13 Original catalogue for Nathaniel Hone's exhibition, quoted in J.T. Smith, *Nollekens and His Times*, *op. cit.*, p.135.

Gustave Le Gray, *Vue du Salon de 1853* (*View of the Salon of 1853*), 1853, salt print from waxed paper negative, 25.1 × 34.7cm

In the nine-page catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, Hone announced it as 'Mostly the Works of His Leisure and Many of Them in His Own Possession', and published his correspondence with Kauffman concerning the rejected painting, hoping that this would 'excuse the presumption of offering to the public an exhibition singly of his own labours'.[14]

The anxiously apologetic tone is telling. While the solo exhibition offered a way to assert independence or defend a reputation, its explicit commercial and hubristic dimensions necessitated rhetorical manoeuvring. It is interesting to contrast the anxious language used to circumscribe these negative connotations with the contemporary superlatives so frequently employed today with such exhibitions: 'the first major', 'the most comprehensive', 'the most significant collection of works', 'the largest exhibition of the work of…', etc.

Thomas Gainsborough would organise his own exhibition to protest the proposed display of his work in the Academy's annual exhibition of 1784.[15] Writing to the committee responsible for arranging the exhibition, Gainsborough, a founding member of the Academy, related that he would not allow the full-length painting of the daughters of George III, *The Three Elder Princesses*, to be shown 'higher than five feet and a half'.[16] This amounted to demanding 'a radical dispensation from the rule that full-length or three-quarter-length portraits were hung above the "line", a projecting wooden moulding running around the walls of the main exhibition space at a level of eight feet from the floor,' as Richard Dorment writes.[17] While he considered this convention to be apt for larger pictures that could be seen from a distance, Gainsborough argued that 'the likeness and work of the picture will not be seen any higher', and so demanded that it be displayed at eye level with the viewer.[18] When the hanging committee refused, Gainsborough removed the painting from the exhibition and organised a show of 25 of his works in his own house.

Held in artists' homes, studios or rented rooms, such exhibitions became increasingly common in the late eighteenth century, offering artists a new kind of opportunity to

14 Quoted in *ibid.*
15 See K.W. Luckhurst, *The Story of Exhibitions*, *op. cit.*, pp.54—55.
16 Richard Dorment, 'The Great Room of Art', *The New York Review of Books*, 13 June 2003, available at http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2002/jun/13/the-great-room-of-art/ (last accessed on 24 October 2014).
17 *Ibid.*
18 Thomas Gainsborough, quoted in Richard Redgrave and Samuel Redgrave, *A Century of British Painters*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981, p.73.

experiment with display outside of the increasingly restricted criteria of committee-selected shows.[19] These early historical examples set up a recurring motif of the emergence of the solo exhibition as what William Hauptman calls a 'counter-exhibition'. As with the 'Salon des Refusés' of 1863 in Paris, such exhibitions opposed the dominant exhibition practices of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, offering artists an opportunity to 'express their indignation' at refusals and rejections.[20]

Until the late nineteenth century, the Royal Academy exhibition and its French equivalent, the Salon, functioned as central venues for artists to present their work to the public. Crowds to the Salon in Paris, for example, often averaged more than 23,000 people a day, and nearly a million annually.[21] Reputations and careers were made through such official exhibitions, which were subject to 'artistic control by [the] appointed body' in terms of style, size, subject and display method.[22] As the critic Julius Meier-Graefe, who considered the exhibition, despite its 'thoroughly bourgeois nature', 'the most important artistic medium of our age', wrote in 1904,

> *artists acquiesce in the system, because if they held aloof, their last means of expression would be denied them. They want, at least, to let their work be seen, and see it themselves, even among that of a thousand others, even for a few months, even under barbaric conditions. What becomes of it after the exhibition is indifferent to them. It is enough if the picture fulfils its purpose at the exhibition, attracts attention, is discussed by the critics, and perhaps, even — this is the culminating distinction! — receives a medal.*[23]

Well into the nineteenth century it was considered demeaning for an artist to offer work for sale directly to the public through any venues outside such official exhibitions.[24] Outside these venues, as the nineteenth-century French critic Louis Peisse wrote, 'there would be only picture shops', selling art supplies and stationary along with genre paintings.[25]

Mere inclusion in an official exhibition was an affirmation of value; to be refused was, in contrast, a denunciation. The refusals themselves, often due to the jury's politicised sensitivity to 'offending or unflattering themes', became increasingly common in the early nineteenth century.[26] In the Salon of 1827, around 47 per cent of the over three thousand paintings submitted were refused, nearly eight times the number rejected a decade earlier, as Hauptman recounts.[27] By 1840, 53 per cent of the works submitted to the Salon were rejected. Artists were largely left to the vicissitudes of these juries and governing bodies, the criteria of which they knew little about, and whose rejections were the source of ongoing protests and petitions. The rise of the solo exhibition as a form is thus directly tied to the need for alternative models to resist centralised forms for the reception and consumption of art, which afforded legitimacy and economic support.[28]

In 1809, William Blake put together an exhibition of his own work in response to such strictures. Blake's particular intent was both to sell the sixteen watercolours on view and to affirm the importance of the medium against a perceived bias on the part of the Academy. As the artist explained, this made it 'necessary that [he] should exhibit to the Public, in an Exhibition of [his] own'.[29] As Philippa Simpson writes of the exhibition, which was recreated at Tate Britain in London in 2009, Blake created a precise arrangement of old

19 See K. Stefanis, 'Reasoned Exhibitions: Blake in 1809 and Reynolds in 1813', *op. cit.*; and Philippa Simpson, 'Lost in the Crowd: Blake and London in 1809', *Tate Papers*, issue 14, Autumn 2010, available at http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/lost-crowd-blake-and-london-1809 (last accessed on 24 October 2014).
20 W. Hauptman, 'Juries, Protests, and Counter-Exhibitions Before 1850', *The Art Bulletin*, vol.67, no.1, March 1985, p.105. See also Patricia Mainardi, 'Courbet's Exhibitionism', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, no.118, December 1991, p.256.
21 See Ross King, *The Judgment of Paris*, New York: Walker & Co., 2006, p.17.
22 *Ibid.*, p.44. See also Marci Regan, 'Paul Durand-Ruel and the Market for Early Modernism', unpublished master's thesis, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1997, p.3.
23 Julius Meier-Graefe, 'The Medium of Art, Past, and Present' (1904), in Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood (ed.), *Art in Theory*, New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993, p.89.
24 See P. Mainardi, 'Courbet's Exhibitionism', *op. cit.*, p.255.
25 Louis Peisse, quoted in *ibid.*, p.257.
26 W. Hauptman, 'Juries, Protests, and Counter-Exhibitions Before 1850', *op. cit.*, p.97.
27 *Ibid.*, p.98.
28 See R. Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, *op. cit.*, p.23.
29 William Blake, quoted in David Blayney Brown and Martin Myrone, 'William Blake's 1809 Exhibition', *Tate Papers*, issue 14, Autumn 2010, available at http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/william-blakes-1809-exhibition#footnote12_ep9xtun (last accessed on 24 October 2014).

Firmin Gillot, 'Salon de 1863: Les Refusés', *La Vie Parisienne*, 1863

and new works, evincing 'an attempt to marshal the pictures into some visual (or theoretical) system', with the earliest work appearing last in the catalogue.[30]

Perhaps the earliest example of a solo exhibition in continental Europe is Jacques-Louis David's presentation of *Les Sabines* (*The Intervention of the Sabine Women*) in 1799 in one of the galleries of the Louvre. The exhibition consisted of the single large painting along with a mirror hung opposite, reflecting both the work and the viewer.[31] With the exhibition, David brought to France the 'custom observed in England'.[32]

The French painter Horace Vernet organised his own exhibition in 1822, after nearly all of his submitted paintings to the Salon were rejected due to their supposedly politicised content. Held in his studio and consisting of 45 paintings, Vernet's exhibition effectively constituted the first retrospective in France.[33] 'A bold stroke, but a fortunate one',[34]

30 P. Simpson, 'Lost in the Crowd: Blake and London in 1809', *op. cit.*

31 See John Stephen Hallam, *Paris Salon Exhibitions: 1667—1880* [website], available at https://sites.google.com/a/plu.edu/paris-salon-exhibitions-1667-1880/salon-de-1800 (last accessed on 24 October 2014).

32 Jacques-Louis David, quoted in P. Mainardi, 'Courbet's Exhibitionism', *op. cit.*, p.258.

33 See W. Hauptman, 'Juries, Protests, and Counter-Exhibitions Before 1850', *op. cit.*, p.97; and Carol Armstrong, *Manet Manette*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, p.4.

34 'Horace Vernet's *Brethren of Joseph* at Goupil & Co.'s Gallery', *Putnam's Magazine*, May 1855, reprinted in *Putnam's Magazine: Original Papers on Literature, Science, Art and National Interests*, vol.5, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1855, p.555.

as *Putnam's Magazine* described it at the time, the exhibition was particularly popular, becoming 'the centre of attraction in Paris'.[35]

Vernet's exhibition also set the precedent for Gustave Courbet's well-known solo exhibitions of 1855 and 1867.[36] Having debuted in the Salon of the 1840s, by the end of the decade Courbet had had only two of his eighteen submissions accepted.[37] Courbet's exhibition of 1855 was a reaction to the exclusion of two of his most famous paintings from the Universal Exposition on the Champs-Élysées that year. On 5 April 1855 he wrote to his collector and patron Alfred Bruyas: 'They have just refused my *Burial* and my latest painting, the *Atelier* … Eleven of my paintings have been accepted … Everyone is urging me to have a private show and I have given in. I will organise another exhibition of 27 of my new and old paintings.'[38]

Featuring a selection of forty paintings, the exhibition opened on 28 June 1855 near the Universal Exposition itself, and surveyed the previous seven years of his work (he was then 36 years of age). To publicise it, advertisements were plastered on walls throughout Paris — 'next to street performers and quack doctors',[39] as one newspaper commented — which, along with the accompanying catalogue, described the exhibition as 'an exhibition and sale'.[40]

Tellingly, Courbet called it an *exhibition*, rather than an *exposition*. As Patricia Mainardi explains in her study of Courbet's exhibition practices, the term *exhibition* 'assumed in nineteenth-century France a pejorative connotation of ostentation and immodesty[;] a commercial enterprise, such as a shop-window display, would be an exhibition'.[41] In contrast to such negative connotations, *exposition* implied a didactic and edifying endeavour, she explains. Seeing his *exhibition* as 'held in an atmosphere of extraordinary independence', Courbet wrote Bruyas that 'people will think I am a monster'.[42]

Along with such self-organised exhibitions, artists also began to exhibit more widely in the various galleries that gained prominence in the 1850s and 60s, including that of Paul Durand-Ruel, who produced exhibitions, and accompanying publications, of the work of Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet (who did not participate in group exhibitions after the 1890s) and Camille Pissarro, among others. By the late nineteenth century, solo exhibitions typically involved the direct participation and support of an art dealer, in terms of archives and inventory, linking the commercial art market with the production of curatorial knowledge.[43]

Within this genealogy, the ingenious exhibition designs that James McNeill Whistler introduced in the late nineteenth century are particularly significant. Display practices were an essential part of his artistic output, and Whistler himself innovated, and substantially developed, many conventions associated with modern exhibition practices.[44] From 1897 onwards, Whistler's exhibition history consists mainly of solo shows in commercial galleries and venues such as the Flemish Gallery and the Fine Art Society, both in London. As one contemporary reviewer put it, in these exhibitions the 'gallery and its contents [were] altogether in harmony — a "symphony of colour", carried out in every detail … above all, in the juxtaposition of the pictures'.[45]

Whistler's articulated arrangements weren't strictly based on chronology, size or genre, but rather followed aesthetic and decorative principles. As he writes in *The Gentle*

35 Charles Blanc, *Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles: École française*, Paris: 1865, III, p.8; cited in W. Hauptman, 'Juries, Protests, and Counter-Exhibitions Before 1850', *op. cit.*, p.97. Translation the author's.
36 See *ibid.*, p.97.
37 See P. Mainardi, 'Courbet's Exhibitionism', *op. cit.*, p.255.
38 Petra ten-Doesschate Chu (ed.), *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.139. The paintings referred to in the letter are *Un enterrement à Ornans* (*A Burial at Ornans*, 1849—50) and *L'Atelier du peintre: Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* (*The Artist's Studio: A real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life*, 1854—55).
39 Charles Perrier, 'Du Réalisme, Lettre à M. le Directeur de *l'Artiste*', *L'Artiste*, 14 October 1855, cited in P. Mainardi, 'Courbet's Exhibitionism', *op. cit.*, p.259.
40 See P. Mainardi, 'Courbet's Exhibitionism', *op. cit.*, p.255.
41 *Ibid.*, p.254.
42 P. ten-Doesschate Chu (ed.), *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, *op. cit.*, p.140.
43 For a detailed discussion of the role of commercial galleries in the organisation of retrospectives in the late nineteenth century, see R. Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, *op. cit.*, pp.110, 131; and R. King, *The Judgment of Paris*, *op. cit.*, pp.48—51, 147.
44 For more on Whistler's exhibition practice, see David Park Curry, *James McNeill Whistler: Uneasy Pieces*, Richmond, VA: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2005; R. Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, *op. cit.*, pp.43—44, 123; James McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, New York: Dover, 1967; and Colleen Denney, *At the Temple of Art: The Grosvenor Gallery*, 1877—1890, Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000, p.220. Some of Whistler's exhibition designs were recently re-staged as part of the 2014 Liverpool Biennial in an exhibition at the Bluecoat curated by Mai Abu ElDahab and Rosie Cooper, on view from 5 July until 26 October 2014.
45 Henry Blackburn, quoted in Joyce Hill Stoner, 'Whistler's Views on the Restoration and Display of his Paintings', *Studies in Conservation*, vol.42, no.2, 1997, p.111.

James McNeill Whistler, *Interior of the Incorporated Society of British Artists*, c.1880—89, pen and ink on paper, 20.2 × 12.6cm. Courtesy the Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London

Art of Making Enemies (1890), his aim was 'to prove that the place in which works of art are shown may be made as free from discordant elements which distract the spectators' attention as the works themselves'.[46] Paintings were 'well spaced [so] that each may, to a certain degree, be studied by itself'. In the case of paintings with prevalent green tones, for example, Whistler suggested that 'the background should be neither red nor green, but, theoretically, a grey'.[47] Whistler's exhibitions, as the scholarly work of David Park Curry has shown, were marked by the artist's careful attention to arrangement, order, framing and lighting.[48]

Throughout the nineteenth century, the development of the solo exhibition marks a decisive turn away from the established display practices of both museums and salons in Europe, where artworks were grouped into arrangements ordered by size, genre or type in order to emphasise an 'ideal organic unity' and 'quantitative method' rather than

46 J. McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, *op. cit.*, p.48.

47 J. McNeill Whistler, quoted in Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Recollections and Impressions of James McNeill Whistler*, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1904, p.138.

48 As Park Curry writes, 'Many of today's familiar exhibition design techniques and museum practices were introduced to London a hundred years ago in one-man and group shows partially or entirely arranged by Whistler. These techniques include indirect lighting, colour-coordinated walls, uniform framing, elegant spacing, large banners outside the exhibition space, the sale of specially designed catalogues and photographic reproductions of art, elaborate evening openings and admission charges for temporary exhibitions.' D. Park Curry, 'Total Control: Whistler at an Exhibition', *James McNeill Whistler: A Re-examination*, Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 1987, pp.67—82.

James McNeill Whistler, *Velarium* (design for exhibition lighting), c.1887—88, pencil, pen, brown ink and watercolour on off-white wove paper, 25.3 × 17.7cm. © The Hunterian, University of Glasgow 2014

any individual merit, thematic focus or stylistic emphasis.[49] If Christian von Mechel's 1780 installation of the Habsburg collection at the Belvedere in Vienna had pioneered the European convention of ordering collections according to national school and chronology,[50] by 1894 Paul Signac writes in his diary that paintings should be displayed in a single row, with works by the same artist hung together in an evenly spaced sequence at more or less eye level.[51] These new conventions of display largely developed alongside the emergence of solo exhibitions; eventually, by the end of the nineteenth century, they were incorporated institutionally.

This shift from quantitative effect to qualitative display involved new biographical and teleological conceptions of artistic production, which had a significant impact on how relationships among artworks were developed both spatially and discursively, significantly

49 Germano Celant, 'A Visual Machine: Art Installation and its Modern Archetypes', in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London: Routledge, 2010, p.374.

50 See Debora J. Meijers, 'The Places of Painting: The Survival of Mnemotechnics in Christian von Mechel's Gallery Arrangement in Vienna (1778—81)', in Wessel Reinink and Jeroen Stumpel (ed.), *Memory and Oblivion: Proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art held in Amsterdam, 1—7 September 1996*, Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.

51 See Mary Tompkins Lewis (ed.), *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism: An Anthology*, Berkeley: Ahmanson-Murphy, 2007, p.65. According to Walter Grasskamp's scholarship on the history of exhibitions, the convention of hanging works in a single row was established in German museums. See Dorothee Richter, 'A Brief Outline of the History of Exhibition Making', On Curating.org [online journal], issue 06, available at http://www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-6.html#.VG4We0smV4M (last accessed on 24 October 2014).

Installation view, 'First International Exhibition', Knightsbridge, London, 1898, featuring paintings by James McNeill Whistler

inflecting definitions of artistic development and the sequencing of artworks in space.[52] As Germano Celant has written of late-nineteenth-century expository methods, with 'new emphasis on the individual work, shown with contemporary work by others, or shown in retrospectives, importance comes to be given to a "linear" articulation of the works of art'.[53] Such a shift from the quantitative to the qualitative can in fact be seen to emerge from within the epistemological order of the Salon itself, as the writings of its great chronicler, Charles Baudelaire, make evident. Having singled out Eugène Delacroix's work in his review of the 1846 Salon, Baudelaire delivered a lecture indicative of such a shift following the artist's death in 1863.

The lecture starts by introducing the practical, quantitative problem of accurately cataloguing Delacroix's entire artistic production. Starting his assessment with the 77 paintings exhibited in the Salon over the artist's lifetime, Baudelaire eventually gives up on inventorying, Delacroix's output being just too extensive. Leaving the task behind, Baudelaire explains that 'the important thing … is to search for, and to try and define, the characteristic quality of Delacroix's genius'.[54] The interest in this qualitative description of genius, rather than in quantitative inventory, mobilises two distinct conceptions: the idea of a 'good' or important work, which enforces connoisseurship; and chronological teleology, or as Baudelaire puts it, 'Delacroix's genius is precisely that he knows not decadence; he only displays progress'.[55] These same qualities, which Baudelaire uses to frame and define the singular nature of Delacroix's work, are those that, by the end of the nineteenth century, are firmly established within solo exhibitions, in their monographic and retrospective forms. By the turn of the century, these exhibitions come to function as markers of artistic success, defining the very idea of historical validity or canonical status — as Paul Cézanne's solo exhibitions at the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1904 and 1907, for example, demonstrate.[56] Representative of a shift in the distribution of power within

52 See R. Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, p.112.
53 See G. Celant, 'A Visual Machine', *op. cit.*, p.374. Celant speculates that 'perhaps it is with the advent of the first world's fairs, and in particular with the specific pavilions for Courbet and Manet at the 1867 fair, that the expository method becomes more refined'.
54 Charles Baudelaire, *Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne), New York: Da Capo Press, 1986, p.42.
55 *Ibid.*, p.47.
56 See Martha Ward, 'What's important about the history of modern art exhibitions?', *op. cit.*, p.458; and R. Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, *op. cit.*, p.113.

The Jury of the Salon, Paris, 1903

the political economy of art, such exhibitions evince the adoption of these conventions as well the emergence of the figure of the curator itself, largely absent within the emergence of the monographic show.

In contemporary terms, the lack of attention given to the solo exhibition also ignores the possible critical function of such exhibitions today. Part of the reason for their absence may be their largely celebratory, spectacularised and market-driven focus — all factors that contribute to their exclusion from the writing of exhibition histories. Yet they remain a central means through which the art market positions, contextualises and circulates value, in dialectical tension with the institutional production of legitimating distinction or edification. It seems, then, that such exhibitions have gone from allowing for the articulation of a critical, social or economic counter-polemic in their dissident origins, to now being perceived as a canonical form lacking in criticality, ubiquitous yet ignored. So while the writing of recent art history involves confronting a history of individual exhibitions — as crystallising moments for artistic production — to what extent can curatorial discourse continue to maintain a distance from the solo show as a catalysing form?

From a global art historical perspective, the importance of such exhibitions might also act as a corrective to the kinds of totalised history — both global and revisionist — that is often presented in group or survey exhibitions. To do so also entails, of course, opening this history to its non-Western and feminist valences. In this sense, monographic exhibitions can be understood as reflecting, and indeed producing, important changes in the formation of curatorial practices. In fact, as the central means of presenting and historicising the art of the present, such exhibition practices can be said to function as the archive of contemporary art history. It is then crucial to understand their function in the political economy of art. In light of this, how might we call upon the errant history of resistance, experimentation, negation and critical engagement that the solo exhibition has represented to reflect upon the current role of such exhibitions within a globalised art system?