TOWARDS A GENEALOGY OF THE
THEMATIC CONTEMPORARY ART
EXHIBITION:
ITALIAN EXHIBITION CULTURE
FROM THE MOSTRA DELLA
RIVOLUZIONE FASCISTA, (1932) TO
THE PALAZZO GRASSI'S CICLO
DELLA VITALITÀ (1959-1961)

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is to look at the emergence of the thematic contemporary art exhibition in Italy through an analysis of the influence of Fascism and the commercial sector in the three exhibitions composing the Cycle of Vitality, organised between 1959 and 1961 at the Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume (CIAC), opened at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 1951. The cycle falls within the fields of both curatorial studies and the history of modern and contemporary exhibitions, two disciplines that have been developed since the 1990s. This inquiry contributes to them by clarifying further their specific fields of investigation, or in presenting alternative genealogies by casting light on overlooked antecedents; and by addressing the curator as a distinct cultural producer, the institution as a medium for social change and the history of exhibitions.

The exhibitions analysed belong to the genealogy that resulted from the shift in the display language of international inter-war avant-garde experiments in exhibition design as manipulated by Fascism and commerce in the 1930s. Modernist architects were engaged in turning the exhibition into a medium for social change, and a mass-medium to bring a sense of the future into the present: It was from this premise that the model of the thematic exhibition emerged. Its further development in post-war Italy paralleled the questioning of the fine art museum’s entanglement with the discipline of art history, enacted by those architects trained in the 1930s. The Cycle of Vitality paired the two models in the thematic contemporary art exhibitions – Vitalità nell’arte (1959); Dalla natura all’arte (1960) and Arte e contemplazione (1961) – organised by curators avant-la-lettre Paolo Marinotti and Willem Sandberg.

Crucial to the analysis of the Cycle of Vitality is the questioning of the relationship between contemporary curators, museums and the discipline of art history, as a consequence of Italian exhibition culture between 1932 and 1961. Within this historical framework, these exhibitions were influenced by the original profile of the CIAC, a cultural centre sponsored by the SNIA Viscosa, a company manufacturing man-made fibres. The CIAC allowed for the development of exhibitions that were intended to reshape the social body rather than to present the results of art historical research as was traditionally the role of museum or fine art exhibitions. In the 1950s, modernist Italian architects played a strategic role in rethinking the museum, a tendency further fostered by curators avant-la-lettre who, as cultural producers, turned the institution into their medium rather than considering it a function of the discipline of art history.
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