**Session: Exhibition Catalogues as Experimental Spaces**

**Paper: *Cataloguing the ICA’s History: An Ephemeral Past?***

*30 minutes 3,000 words*

\*In this paper I want to argue that the exhibition catalogue is an experimental space on at least two counts: firstly, in terms of production the catalogue can be seen as a space which allows the exhibition organiser, the artist and the designer to experiment by producing challenging content, layout and design. We can see and feel this through examining the catalogues, and I have brought a selection to pass around as I talk. The materiality of the objects adds a dimension beyond the visual. Secondly, in terms of consumption, a study of exhibition catalogues allows us to see the representation of art within the context of an organisation and to the visiting public, rather than focus on the timeless qualities of the artwork out of context. As such, they are an important but neglected source for the art historian. Both these points, of production and consumption, have a particular relevance to the history of the Institute of Contemporary Arts or ICA.\*

Here is one example, a standard exhibition catalogue produced by the Arts Council in 1951 contrasted with the front cover of the ICA exhibition, *Ten Decades of British Taste* from the same year. The Arts Council has a standard garland, whilst the ICA has a Surrealist eye and a visual pun around the Roman numeral ten. And the Ten Decades catalogue contained excerpts from contemporary criticism while the Arts Council catalogue contained only standard artists’ biographies. So it is in terms of both form and content that the ICA’s exhibition catalogues are experimental spaces, producing a type of art history/contextual studies programme throughout its history.

'To put it briefly, art is solving problems that cannot be formulated before they have been solved. The shaping of the question is part of the answer.'[1]

And so it could also be said of art history as well as art. Before embarking on the main content of this paper, I want to say something about the research process which brought it into being, and the relationship of this process to art history more broadly. As the session convenors may have noticed, I have added a question mark to the title of my talk. During the process of preparing this paper the history of the ICA has been made more permanent – an exhibition has been curated, and a book published, so this paper is a result of an iterative process, and a signal that the ICA’s history is no longer in the realm of the ephemeral - as I originally argued - but has now been made more permanent. It certainly seemed ephemeral when I wrote the abstract for this paper last year, but this was before the book was published and the exhibition curated.

The ICA has now come to value its own history and its exhibition catalogues, two of which were on display at the exhibition I co-curated last year, *Parallel of Art & Life: the Independent Group and the ICA,* the Institute’s first archival show of recent years, which included two of its exhibition catalogues from the 1950s.\* As part of a change in curatorial practice, archives are now being included more and more in art exhibitions. The most \*recent exhibition, at the ICA’s old premises at Dover Street, came as a result of research I carried out in the ICA Archives held at Tate, amongst the papers and publications, a by product of the picture research for the book *ICA London 1946-68.* At what is now the London branch of Commes des Garcons, various object from the ICA archives were copied, blown up and fixed on thick card and displayed around the four floors of this high end fashion outlet. This exercise in ‘Archive Chic’ demonstrates the importance of documents from the past to the ICA’s current sense of itself. I am not sure what \*Herbert Read would have thought of his kindly face peering across at trousers priced at over £300, but perhaps he would have been happy that the ICA was being brought to the attention of a new audience.\*

In the absence of scant information in the archives about many of the exhibitions I had enthusiastically promised to write about, often my only port of call was the exhibition catalogue. This led me to focus on the catalogue, as there are so few secondary sources which focus on the history of the ICA and the study of twentieth century British art remains comparatively underdeveloped. Working with the exhibition catalogue as my key resource led me to value their very presence and survival in the archive, they act as remnants from a lost past even if the Tate Archives have inscribed their cataloguing references on the front in very sharp pencil. So the process of fixing a history of the ICA was based in a large part, on my working through its exhibition catalogues, many of which are catalogued at Tate as ‘Ephemera’. So the ephemeral has started to become more permanent over the preceeding six months during which this paper was prepared.

So, back to the main subject of my paper.

My case study of the ICA has been overlooked in the history of modern art, with the exception of the Independent Group, which is usually slotted into the neat trajectory of the patrilineage of Pop Art. So, lets zoom out from the Independent Group and leave Pop Art to one side, this paper offers a reading of a small selection of the nearly 200 catalogues produced by the ICA from 1948-68 as an exercise in looking at the history of art through experimental design objects, rather than art objects in themselves. This type of account brings the arts organisation into view, rather than focus on the individual artist. By looking at material objects which are not necessarily art works, the focus shifts to questions of representation and shifts our attention to the situated nature of cultural production.

\*An examination of these rare publications reveals the subtle changes in the avant garde, in the practice of graphic design and the importance of experimental typography. The ICA was careful to commission the most cutting edge artists and typographers for its catalogue design as part of their mission to encourage the experimental across all the arts, not just fine art. Design was important to the ICA as part of its identity, just as much as poetry, music and theatre. But it is design which projects the image of the organisation. The exhibition catalogues are indeed experimental spaces in terms of production and consumption, as I will endeavour to demonstrate.

\*The ICA was officially founded in 1946, and drew the inspiration for its foundation by Herbert Read, Peter Gregory, Peter Watson, Roland Penrose, E L T Mesens, Jacques Brunius, J M Richards and Robert Melville from the London First International Surrealist Exhibition in 1936 and New York’s Museum of Modern Art which had opened in 1929 – indeed, a photograph of the Museum of Modern Art was displayed in the entrance to the ICA’s first exhibition, *Forty Years of Modern Art* in 1948. Against the backdrop of a Britain emerging from a devastating war, the ICA borrowed the sophistication which had been developed at the Ministry of Information, which Peter Gregory had worked for during the war and the Design Research Unit, which Herbert Read worked for. There was also a strong adult education urge underlying the ICA’s activities, and the first exhibitions at various pop up locations always had an affordable pamphlet and a larger, more traditional catalogue. The experimental nature of the ICA is revealed in this core motivation to educate the public at large about modern art, which at that time was highly experimental and almost universally unpopular.

\*The two *Forty Years of Modern Art* exhibition catalogues were designed by the Design Research Unit with typography by Herbert Spencer, and published by Lund Humphries, of which Peter Gregory, was the Chairman, who had spotted the work of Herbert Spencer at the Anglo-French club .

\*Here we have Forty Years installation shots with Private View card, which has the same design and colourways as the larger catalogue, an invitation to the world of the ICA’s founders. The two were often designed in tandem.

The follow up show, *40,000 Years of Modern Art* followed the same strategy of pamphlet and catalogue.

\*The *40,000 Years of Modern Art* exhibition catalogues were published again by Lund Humphries and the 6d catalogue was designed by Edward Burrett with a simple hand list of exhibits and the longer version contained essays by anthropologist W G Archer and critic Robert Melville. Herbert Read wrote the Introduction.

\**40,000 Years of Modern Art* installation shot

The designer for this exhibition was German emigree, F H K Henrion, who used dramatic spotlights and pools of gravel rather than physical barriers to place the exhibits. The art critic, Maurice Collis, commented on the situation of the ICA on the London cultural scene, which still holds true: ‘The atmosphere is less cautious than in a Government-controlled exhibition, less commercial than in a dealer’s and arrives at a cosmopolitan brilliance which is stimulating and proper to a metropolis like London.’[[1]](#endnote-1)

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When the ICA at last found a permanent premises, at \*17-18 Dover Street in early 1950 the first exhibition to be held there was *James Joyce: His Life and Work*

\*Installation shot

The exhibition had been staged at the Librarie La Hune, Paris and organised by Joyce expert Patricia Graecen. It consisted of archival materials displayed in vitrines and images displayed around the walls. Richard Hamilton was the exhibition installer and also designed the exhibition catalogue which doubled as a poster. As Richard Hamilton declared: ‘this was my first typographic essay’ and we can detect Hamilton’s background in design and engineering drawing with the precision with which he has approached the project. It is perhaps more information design than fine art, using a grid layout and vertical and horizontals to communicate key facts such as dates and place, with images and the yellow overprinting, probably by screenprint, adding a different dimension to the ‘catalogue’.

\*Catalogue

The official opening exhibition at the ICA in Dover Street was *1950: Aspects of British Art* in December 1950. The \*exhibition catalogue for this was designed by leading typographer, Anthony Froshang who also designed the invitation cards. The art critic for the *Eastern Daily Press* found the exhibition: ‘…ebulliently outré. So too, more irritatingly is the typography of the catalogue,…’[[2]](#endnote-2) Froshang has been working for Lund Humphries during the late 1940s, owned by one of the ICA’s founders, Peter Gregory. As one of the UK’s leading typographic designers, Froshang went on to design some of the ICA’s most important exhibition catalogues and also publicity. Another ICA founder, Peter Watson wrote the introduction to this modest, 4 page pamphlet.

\**Young Painters and Sculptors* organised by ICAat Warner Theatre, Leicester Square June 1951, not a cutting edge exhibition catalogue! But cutting edge context.

The next exhibition catalogues which I would like to highlight as an experimental space was that for *Growth and Form.*

\**Growth and Form* – exhibition catalogue and posters

Again, there was a small exhibition catalogue of 20 pages long which featured Richard Hamilton’s *Heteromorphism* print from 1951. It was designed by John Dennison-Hunt with a brief Foreward from Herbert Read and the detailed listing of the 85 exhibits, which was key as the exhibition itself – recreated at the Richard Hamilton Tate Modern exhibition – did not have labels. The poster was designed by William Turnbull. This was a group exhibition and not just the brain child of Richard Hamilton. It brought together science with art, and presented the catalogue as a space for listing biological objects, photograms, photomicrographs, drawings, technical models and films or cine projections as they were termed in the catalogue. The catalogue was an experimental space in that it allowed Hamilton to insert scientific material into a cultural context. It also supported he educational aim of the ICA with a sale price of 6d – 895 were sold from a print run of 1417.

The original exhibition catalogue grew so big, that it was published as an edited book by Lund Humphries later in 1951. It was designed by Dennison-Hunt with contributions by many of the advisory committee, including Herbert Read, the fascinating theoretical physicist, Lancelot Law Whyte (who went on to edit the 2nd edition in 1968), Rudolf Arnheim and E H Gombrich. This attempt to bridge the gap between science and art through the concept of form was certainly highly experimental for the time.

*\*Picasso: Drawings and Watercolours since 1893* was held at the end of 1951, with perhaps a less experimental catalogue but the ICA’s most profitable exhibition so far, making over £1,000 mainly from the sales of the catalogue.

\*The next exhibition to highlight is *Tomorrow’s Furniture* in 1952, seen here with furniture designer Clive Latimer, who displayed a shelving unit. Organised by IG member Toni del Renzio, the exhibition consisted of furniture prototypes with a canopy designed by Eduardo Paolozzi. The catalogue consisted of a fold out leaflet with this design on one side, and a history of recent chair design on the other, reinforcing the ICA’s mission to educate coupled with the chance for the young artist, Toni del Renzio, to experiment. Toni del Renzio also designed the 4 page exhibition catalogue for the \**Opposing Forces* exhibition in 1953, which contained a statement by Michel Tapie translated by Peter Watson. Toni del Renzio also designed the private view card.

*\*The Wonder and Horror of the Human Head* 1953 16 pages with a Foreward by Herbert Read and Roland Penrose. The exhibition was installed by Richard and Terry Hamilton, but we can’t find any clues as to who designed the catalogue. The longer ‘anthology’ was written by Roland Penrose with a Foreward by Herbert Read and spanned to 40 illustrated pages and sold for 8s 6d.

\*Later in the year was the exhibition, *Parallel of Life and Art*. This was a show ‘Edited’ by Alison and Peter Smithson, Nigel Henderson and Ronald Jenkins. The exhibition catalogue was a concertina fold out sheet, printed in black and white listing the 122 exhibits with 10 black and white images including this Maholy-Nagy image of a man shaving on the cover. Tom Hopkinson found the catalogue clumsy and unreflective of the exhibition. This was because the catalogue was put together really quickly as Toni del Renzio, who was tasked with writing it, resigned when objections to his text were raised and something else had to be produced really swiftly. The catalogue contains only four quotes by A Hyatt Mayor, Leo Steinberg, E T Bell and Charles Baudelaire but the deliberately rough layout and thick paper was one of the first examples of New Brutalism.

*\*Collages and Objects* 1954 – this exhibition was designed by Toni del Renzio and ‘curated’ by Lawrence Alloway. It was a small scale, 14 page document but had a Hans Arp image on the front cover, and contained \*work by John McHale, an early representation of the transistor.

\*The *Man, Machine & Motion* exhibition catalogue was certainly an experimental space. At 56 pages it was packed with detailed information by Reyner Banham about the history and technology of movement by means of various appliances. The design was by Anthony Froshang and printed at King’s College to resemble a technical manual – printed on fine, grey, black and buff paper with a spare typewriter design for the lettering, which Froshang typed himself making sure that words weren’t broken, full stops were omitted and the columns laid out radically.

The highly innovative, fold out catalogue for *an exhibit* of 1957, was printed on translucent paper and mimicked the form of a fold out route map. When folded up the title of the show, the three people responsible and the logo of the ICA could be seen, with sneak previews behind of the fuller contents. The catalogue folds out in stages 1 through to 3, with a statement next to each number. The text in the exhibition catalogue was an instruction manual for play:

1. *Pre-planning decided on the rules of a game, to be called an Exhibit.*

This detailed the sourcing of the Perspex panels, but stressed that the ordering of them into an show in an art gallery was postponed until the actual installation.

1. *An Exhibit as it stands, records one set of possible moves*

The process of the exhibition installation was then described using words such as ‘play’ and ‘improvisation’.

1. *Visitors to an Exhibit are involved in a game: the game is a structure of the Exhibit*

‘The visitor is asked to look neither for spate works of art nor for symbols but…To inhabit, for the duration of the game, a real environment, the meaning of an Exhibit is now dependent on the decisions of visitors, just as, at an earlier stage, it was dependent on the artists who were the players. It is a game, a maze, a ceremony completed by the participation of the visitors. Which routes will they take, will they move through narrow or wide spaces, where will they decide to stop and assess the whole?

An Exhibit is a test and an entertainment: are you maze-bright or maze dim?’

As Roger Coleman commented in Art News and Review: ‘…the catalogue notes, arranged on a map-like sheet which is itself something of a game: artwork: environment (the latter when it is folded), repudiates any purely aesthetic interpretation and steers the whole thing off in another direction entirely: namely towards spectator participation, the corridors of Behaviourism, and the theory of Games, etc. Which should present no difficulties to regular attenders at the ICA.’ The Apollo critic was less impressed by the exhibition or the catalogue: ‘I twisted my catalogue so as to find the odd bits of text in their proper order. Alas with little further enlightenment!’[[3]](#endnote-3)

Alloway was to leave the ICA in the autumn of 1960, initially to teach and this was a great loss to the ICA. He was eventually replaced by Jasia Reichardt in 1964, who brought an enthusiasm for working on the edge of art. She organised the 1965 exhibition ‘Between Poetry and Painting’ which showcased Concrete Poetry and was the first exhibition to do so in London. The exhibition catalogue was 84 pages long and contained many works from the exhibition plus the artists’ biographies and a ‘Type in Art’ essay by Reichardt. This spiral bound book signals a change in direction for the ICA, with investment in more conceptual practice, which mirrored the times, and more discursive catalogues.

In 1967 the ICA moved to The Mall and the inaugural exhibition was *The Obsessive Image 1960-68,* a show of figurative painting and sculpture organised by Robert Melville and Mario Amaya. The catalogue was designed by Gwyn Lewis, with a radical use of silver and black on the cover.

*\*Cybernetic Serendipity* (1968) capture the ICA’s changing sense of itself, and of avant garde practice. The catalogue was broad ranging, as suited this first ever exhibition of computer art and was produced as a special issue of Studio International, running to over 100 pages.

This paper has demonstrated that both the production and consumption of the exhibition catalogue as an experimental space have a particular relevance to the history of the Institute of Contemporary Arts or ICA. A history which is now perhaps less ephemeral than it was 6 months ago.

1. Maurice Collis, ’The Year’s Art’ *Time and Tide,* 1.1.1947, p7 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Eastern Daily Press,* 22nd December 1950, np [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Apollo, ‘A Shaft from Apollo’s bow: Hopscotch into Art’, September 1957, TGA [↑](#endnote-ref-3)