

Looking at the One and Only:

The Return of the Single-Work Show

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Today's museums are using their collections in new ways, most notably as event resources for institutional programming. The current context of collection repurposing is a phenomenon much broader than the logic exposed by François Mairesse under the rubric of "the museum as spectacle."¹ It participates in the larger paradigm of what we call the "museum as event."² The high point of the museum as spectacle was emblemized by the rise of the blockbuster exhibition and the multiplication of museum buildings erected as grand architectural gestures: these involved programming and expansion. The museum as event is a logic that permeates every part and aspect of the institution, including the collections that the spectacular museum rather took for granted and often neglected. It appears important, therefore, when addressing the issue of the relations between a museum and its collections, not to focus exclusively on the renewal of permanent displays, but to also question how collections are impacted by the intrusion of events into their territory. What are the new curatorial strategies, the new or renewed exhibition formulas that are deployed in order to "awaken" the collections and bring them into the fast and convulsive time of the event? For our study of this phenomenon, rather than look at collection-based exhibitions, increasingly popular among art museums, or permanent collection reinstallations, we chose to focus on a seasoned formula that is making an often innovative comeback: the single-work show.³

Several factors have contributed to the growing interest in collections; first and foremost, budgetary constraints in state-owned as well as private museums (due in part to the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on philanthropic foundations). The overuse and now prohibitive cost of the blockbuster formula that reigned in the last third of the twentieth century seem to have led museums to adjust the relative importance they place on collections and exhibitions, and to have blurred the line between the two. The growing emphasis on mediation in most museological institutions favors this blurring since, on balance, both the temporary exhibition and the collection show are suitable material for a communications operation. But along with economic and organizational constraints (mediator overshadowing curator, as in the United States), this novel way of programming, or sometimes merely entertaining around in-house material, may reflect the emergence of current social and cultural values, such as reuse and/or the new ethics of proximity (as in the locavore food movement).

The collection is thus—more than ever before—envisaged in terms of its exhibition value. While promoting a collection has always involved showcasing a limited display of its components, we now see previously long-running permanent collection exhibitions shortened or punctuated with one-off interventions that propel them toward an event-driven temporality. Seen through the lens of the single-work show, the question of event-making is particularly revealing: on the one hand, owing to the role of singularity in producing artistic value⁴ and, on the other, from the perspective of what we will define as the event imperative now claiming the territory of collections, such shows can be seen as operations by which the institution aims to exalt the uniqueness of the work but, paradoxically, does so in a formulaic manner that directly compromises what Jacques Derrida terms the “pure singularity of the event.”⁵

The very notion of event is anchored in oxymoronic meanings: it designates, so to speak, anything that happens to happen, but also outstanding occurrences—that which has never happened before. A third dimension might be added (since not all new occurrences are likely to interrupt the chain of events in which they appear): the event is also laden with a sense of *rupture* (according to François Dosse, it became the primary meaning of the term in French as of 1835).⁶ In traditional museum displays, conceived as spatial narratives, an artwork may have played two possible (but not necessarily exclusive) functions: firstly, it could stand as a good or perfect *example* (of a given school, genre, technique, artist, etc.). For the discipline of art history, this function is also tied to what Donald Preziosi reads as the “evidentiary status of the object.”⁷ Secondly, the work can also embody a *break* (in a given figurative tradition, history of a medium, enunciative strategy, etc.). Art historians have often conferred value to artworks according to their coefficient for radical or significant change, or to their performance in relation to what Hubert Damisch once called a “coup.”⁸ In so doing, they consider the emergence of certain artworks as “events,” occurrences that rupture or

significantly shift a grand or partial narrative and that are believed, in this regard and others, to potentially bear the promise of epiphanic encounters for the eventual viewers. The question, then, is as follows: is the “being-event” of the work compatible with the “event-making” in which it is now required to take part? In other words, can a work be agent and subject of an event (and under what conditions) if it is now defined as the primary material or support for what we call the “event imperative” (*impératif évènementiel*)?

We propose to see the event imperative as a governing regime in present-day museums and cultural institutions in general.⁹ Institutions can, of course, subvert or steer around it, but they cannot escape it without the dual act of reflexiveness and awareness of the social, economic, and political reality of their context and their times. It is also for this reason that the notion of “pseudo-event,” as defined by Daniel J. Boorstin, seems to us inadequate for the situation under consideration.¹⁰ Noticing how the event has migrated and been absorbed, from history and philosophy to communications, Boorstin decries the pseudo-event as an artificial happening, a sham, implying a moral distinction between a real event, which occurs as a rupture in time, and a fake event, which is fabricated and endlessly reiterated, in today’s ubiquitous and almost seamless fabric of cultural events. The distinction does not hold up, of course. For one thing, as François Dosse observes in citing Michel Foucault’s writings on serial history, “real” events may have been and remained quite invisible at the time of their occurrence (therefore not rupturing any historical narrative in any significant ways), only to be constructed as events by later historians.¹¹ Moreover, even the unforeseen and “unrepeatable” event that occurs in “its pure singularity” (to borrow from Derrida), and in so doing opens up a whole range of possibilities, is not exempt from fabrication. Instead of dwelling on the matter, for the present essay we have chosen to confine ourselves to a distinction between the event-driven and the event, without attaching to either any of the moral judgment implicit in Boorstin, and without commenting further on their increasing overlap or even inextricability.

Contemporary museums have used a rich arsenal of strategies and formulas to systematize the infiltration of the event imperative into their collections; for example, *delegation* (“carte blanche” shows by artists or guest curators), *intrusions*, anachronistic or occasional, into reinstallations, and *animation*, no longer merely through mediating guides, but by means of lectures, shows, concerts, and performances *held in collection galleries* alongside works that are sometimes more or less direct referents but always serve as a décor.

All these strategies help to intensify the focus on event-making, for which collections have become an increasingly important vehicle. But the study of single-work shows offers fertile ground for analyzing the classic and well-tested strategy of singularization. Perhaps Paul Valéry was longing

for singularity when, in *The Problem of Museums* (1923), he deplored the “juxtaposition of dead visions” and the “glorious chaos,” writing, “I am lost in a turmoil of frozen beings, each of which demands, all in vain, the abolition of all the others.”¹² However, we envisage the single-work show less as a solution to the turmoil of displays than in regard to the question of the event-driven and the event, which often arises with this formula. Since these exhibitions typically entail the promotion of a famous or exceptional work, they bring into play and into conflict the being-event of the work, which earned it a place in history and bolsters its iconic status, and the event-making, which is inevitably inflated by its mediatized display.

The variants of the single-work show, all aimed at singularization, can be grouped into three main modalities: insularization, circulation, and focalization. In *insularization*, the work is displayed alone, in its home museum, often dramatically staged and with the gallery unobtrusively acting as a lush jewel case. The spectacle-related (custom-built walls, lighting, artwork at a distance) and security-related (glass, ropes, movement sensors) features help enhance, if not sacralize, the displayed object. *Circulation* is a form of singularization that sees the work travel before it is exhibited: the one-time presentation follows from the scripted event of its journey to a new venue where the work may be granted a solo-status amidst a larger exhibition¹³ or just make a stop on a global or politically targeted solo tour.¹⁴ Lastly, *focalization*, which is not dealt with in depth here, because it is a somewhat hybrid formula, consists of singularizing a work by accompanying it with a small scholarly exhibition that provides context. Of course, one could argue that the most elementary form of focalization is the bench that sits in front of a work and invites the visitor to pause there, before work X, rather than elsewhere.

The subject of the single-work show can vary, even though historically it was often related to the problematic notion of “masterpiece,” meaning a work whose iconic status is already established (by a prestigious name, impeccable provenance, aesthetic reputation, and/or historical value). Some works may be spotlighted for different reasons, such as to mark the entry of a new acquisition into the collection or the homecoming of a prodigal work after a long-term loan. However, the recent updating of the formula has expanded its scope to include minor and even atypical, rather than exemplary, works. From this perspective, the issue that surfaces through singularization is that of the encounter, in the logic of individuation of the work. Here we recall the concept of “person-object” expounded by Nathalie Heinich (based on her “person function,” after Foucault’s “author function”), which recognizes three ways of animating the object, so to speak, of endowing it with traits usually reserved to human beings: the relic, the fetish, and the artwork.¹⁵ While the relic involves animating the inanimate through contact and contiguity, the fetish is an object to which one lends agency, and the artwork is treated like a person, possessing the same unstitutability, as demonstrated, according to Heinich, by the documentation

attesting its authenticity, its provenance, or the passport needed for its circulation. From this perspective, singularization can be seen as a pleonasm, a rhetorical redundancy that lauds and extols the matchless singularity institutionally and discursively conferred upon a category of objects called “works of art.”

Three case studies provided the basis for our research on how the single- work-show formula articulates the question of the event in relation to the event-driven. We examined two diametrically different examples of singularization: the first, a founding moment for the genre of the single-work show, is the Picture of the Month series at the National Gallery in London. Initiated in the context of World War II and set as a series of in-house insularizations, it undeniably works around the resonances between the political and historical events of the day and the precious singularities of artworks whose perilous presentations then stood as art events and acts of resilience. The third, *Picasso in Palestine*, offers a singularization by circulation and engages with current political conflicts, also at its own peril. In between these two examples, both somehow involving the endangerment of art, stands a short presentation of *Room for Reflection* at the Williams College Museum, an example perhaps less well known than the other two, but one that, in the context of a large reinstallation of this institution’s collections, makes its mark by deflecting museums’ “eventmania” and proposing a phenomenological invitation as a possible route toward locating the event in the very experience and encounter of art.

Picture of the Month at the National Gallery

The Picture of the Month scheme¹⁶ run by the National Gallery, London, was in many respects an exemplary case of singularization. Though not the earliest such initiative, it was no doubt the first to be fully implemented.¹⁷ It ran for four years during World War II, and its impact on the population was reported in contemporary newspapers and echoed in numerous testimonials.¹⁸ The presentation of each work to be exhibited was welcomed like a new event, as Suzanne Bosman describes in a recent book on the activities of the National Gallery during the war.¹⁹ This initiative established insularization by presenting noteworthy works one at a time in an empty museum, despite the threat of bombs. Bosman’s book mostly deals with the conservation of the works of art. Besides her publication, only two articles have studied the scheme, both by Neil MacGregor, a former National Gallery director (1987–2002). MacGregor stressed the impact of these isolated presentations of artwork in wartime, asking about Titian’s *Noli me tangere* (1514), “What did this picture mean in 1942, in the middle of the dark, harrowing time? I think it was similar to our experience before Masaccio’s *Crucifixion* that September 11.”²⁰ In 2014 the National Gallery once again demonstrated its appreciation of the formula by reviving Picture of the Month presentations, which continue to this day.



Fig. 1. A serviceperson examines Rembrandt’s *Portrait of Margaretha de Geer, Wife of Jacob Trip* (1661). Newly acquired in 1941, its display in the National Gallery in January and February 1942 inspired the Picture of the Month scheme.

In 1939, just before Britain entered the war, the National Gallery was evacuated and the works of the collection were secretly moved to safety, first to various locations around Wales and then into the depths of a disused slate mine at Manod. To bring life to the emptied museum in the heart of Trafalgar Square, the Gallery held exhibitions of works by living artists and concerts. Then, in 1942, an art lover learned about a new acquisition and expressed a desire to see it in a letter that appeared in *The Times*: “Because London’s face is scarred and bruised,” he wrote, “these days we need more than ever to see beautiful things. Like many another one hungry for aesthetic refreshment, I would welcome the opportunity of seeing a few of the hundreds of the nation’s masterpieces now stored in a safe place.”²¹ The ensuing display of a small painting attributed to Rembrandt, *Portrait of Margaretha de Geer, Wife of Jacob Trip* (1661), which the Gallery agreed to show for a few weeks, drew some six hundred visitors a day (fig. 1).²²

Buoyed by this success and backed by the Board of Trustees, National Gallery director Kenneth Clark decided to enact the Picture of the Month scheme. Each month, he would select one work from the collection to be put on display for three weeks. The scheme—also internally called “Not One Picture Shall Leave this Island”²³ and “Masterpiece of the Month”²⁴—would show works of exceptional quality. The Gallery then announced these “masterpieces”; this qualification was passed on by the newspapers and retroactively used by the Gallery itself.²⁵ The chosen works had to speak to Londoners, who were invited to participate in the selection process by submitting proposals. This vox populi process helped Clark determine the first two works to be exhibited: Titian’s *Noli me Tangere* (ca. 1514) and El Greco’s *Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple* (ca. 1600). These were the works most requested by the public, whose ideas also served to establish the type of works to be selected or ruled out. Clark’s idealism shines through in a letter to curator Martin Davies, dated February 5, 1942. Expecting that the public would be eager to see calm and reassuring works, Clark was surprised by the specific pictures that were requested.²⁶ “I have received a large number of suggestions. These make it perfectly clear that people do not want to see Dutch painting or realistic painting of any kind: no doubt at the present time they are anxious to contemplate a nobler order of humanity.”²⁷

Between 1942 and 1945, approximately thirty-seven works were shown, of which thirty-two have been identified: eleven religious scenes, six portraits, five mythological scenes, five landscapes, four genre scenes, and one history painting.²⁸ Some selections reflected the Christian calendar—nativity scenes for Christmas in 1943 and 1944; the Entombment or the Agony in the Garden for the Easter season the same years—but none depicted the war. Despite this, the themes suggest that the exhibited paintings served a referential function in the face of difficult circumstances, and that the institution saw art as a metonym for civilization; thus, in wartime the subject of Mary Magdalene anointing Christ’s

body could be interpreted as love surviving death, and the subject of Christ driving the money changers from the temple offered a defense of just violence.²⁹ But neither victory nor slaughter nor portraits of conquering heroes were shown. If the works prompted reflection on the war, they never exposed viewers to it or directly underlined its glorious or tragic nature.

As the name of the scheme indicates, the works were exhibited one at a time, except in December 1943, when the presentation included two nativity scenes, and in February 1944, when it featured three small paintings. These were the only instances of possible dialogue between pictures; the exceptions seem to have been compensated by the number of works, the smaller size, and the importance of the monthly selection. The increased display, given its unusual character in wartime, may have generated some event-related buzz, but it also curtailed the event-status of the encounter with the minor works on display. The few available images that document the display of *Portrait of Margaretha de Geer, Wife of Jacob Trip*, which sparked the scheme, and that of *Noli me Tangere*, the first work exhibited, show the singularized paintings isolated in the entrance hall of the National Gallery, overlooking one of the two side staircases and serving as a vanishing point.³⁰ In each case, the work was framed first by a doorway and then by the moveable partition on which the exhibit hung.³¹ The so-called masterpieces were further promoted with explanatory material set out nearby, which provided formal and historical information with no connection to current events.³²

In 1979, more than thirty years after the scheme ended, Clark published a booklet on the question of the masterpiece, which he defined, in part, as a work that continues to speak in the present as eloquently as it did in the past, and that withstands the test of time.³³ He believed such high achievements, lending themselves to infinite interpretations, held relevance for all ages, thus implying that a masterpiece belongs to the ahistorical, fantastical time of eternity. In the 1930s Antonin Artaud had already expressed reservations about the concept of the masterpiece as transcendent and timeless, and proposed doing away with that notion of art, deeming it incomprehensible to the masses: "A public that shudders at train wrecks, that is familiar with earthquakes, plagues, revolutions, wars... can be affected by all these grand notions [of the masterpiece] and asks only to become aware of them, *but on condition that it is addressed in its own language*." [emphasis added]³⁴ Which is to say, in direct opposition to Clark's view, that each era has its masterpieces and not that a masterpiece functions as such for all eras. According to Clark, masterpieces are like the apostles of the Gospel in that they have the gift of tongues, as it were, and so are *universally understood*. Clark and Artaud differed as to the work's relationship to the present, but they nonetheless agreed that art should engage viewers by taking the public's reality into account.³⁵ So how did the works of the scheme engage Londoners? How could they

resonate with the traumatic experience of war while avoiding any representation of the omnipresent tragedy?

To answer these questions, it is instructive to look at one more work, a painting presented in September 1942. Clark's choice focused not so much on an artist, a genre, or a school as on a *subject*: the Agony in the Garden, as interpreted by Bellini or Mantegna. This subject, he felt, would afford more satisfaction and consolation than any other work in the collection. It is telling that his letter about this to Martin Davies is dated June 30, 1942, four days after the BBC broadcast a graphic report on the massacre of Jews by the Nazis.³⁶ This example suggests that the selected works were indirect responses to the war and, moreover, following a category defined by Horst Bredekamp in his theory of the image-act, could be called "substitutive," (like one of Heinrich's person-objects, the acting fetish). Bredekamp considers the faculty of images to appear alive and to produce a real or potential effect on human beings and their environment. So-called substitutive images are formed by "the exchange of bodies and images for one another,"³⁷ thus embodying the individual who projects her/himself into them. In so doing, the search for a "higher plane of reality" with regard to the Picture of the Month selections sought to elevate the viewer above the carnage and thus affirmed the redemptive and hence acting power of the works. Emptied, bombed, and endangering only one work at a time, the National Gallery was the picture of desolation, but also of resilience. Furthermore, as the Gallery saw it, the presented works also announced, in their own way, the impending return of the entire collection, and therefore also of the troops.³⁸

The Picture of the Month series was committed to exhibiting first-rate quality but, in fact, the status of the works changed over time. From March 1942 to February 1944, any small or mid-size (for reasons of transport) work in good condition could be selected. In February and March 1944, the scheme was interrupted because of the threat of air raids. When it resumed the following month, Clark did not select works he considered masterpieces, opting instead mostly for fine but less irreplaceable English paintings.³⁹ In September, as the bombing threat abated, Clark announced his intention to again show outstanding works, though none of prime importance.⁴⁰ A letter dated December 1, 1944, expresses his perplexity at the Board of Trustees' instruction "not to send very eminent pictures but not to exhibit mediocre ones." In response to this directive, a Rembrandt (now credited to one of his pupils) and a Carlo Crivelli were exhibited, neither being the most vibrant example of the artists' work held by the Gallery.

Finally, it is worth noting that, during the six years of World War II, the Gallery presented more exhibitions (that is, more single-work shows) than it had since its opening. The fact certainly lends credence to the view that the Picture of the Month played a significant role in accelerating the temporality of the Gallery's collections. The scheme indeed

marks, in more ways than one, the entrance of a convulsive time and event-driven rhythm in the dormant realm of museum collections.

Room for Reflection at the Williams College Museum of Art

Alongside formulas as ambitious as the Picture of the Month scheme, whose recent revival takes place under the inescapable influence of the event imperative, some museums have adopted more modest versions of the single-work show, so as to resist or (as will be seen) divert the pressures of event-making with a programming approach that discreetly singularizes works from their collections.

As part of the reinstallation of the Williams College Museum of Art collections in 2011, the then director, Lisa Corrin, proposed a series of five exhibitions targeting the museum as their subject. One of the exhibitions was called *Room for Reflection*. Each month for two years, a single work suggested by a staff member was displayed in a dedicated room.⁴¹ A project manager was assigned to balance the choices and ensure a diverse representation of the collection based on multiple parameters, such as artist gender and race, and variety of mediums. With few exceptions, the works were American from the last two centuries, the field wherein the collection is the strongest. Some choices seem to have been circumstantial: the presentation of *Morning in a City* (1944) by Edward Hopper (fig. 2) marked its homecoming from a long-term loan. The program also served to showcase recent acquisitions and works never included in the institution's permanent exhibition. A few pieces, such as a black stone stele of a crowned Buddha (ninth or tenth century), lent themselves as obvious invitations to contemplation. Most of the other works seem to have been selected less on the basis of an outstanding reputation than because singularization would enhance appreciation of some aspect of their material condition or semantic horizon, more than would a traditional display. Developed collectively, like the initial Picture of the Month scheme but without public input, *Room for Reflection* brought together different groups of museum staff and served as a tool for discussion and internal cohesion.

The minimalist display of each month's selection consisted of an empty gallery, an isolated work on or in front of a temporary partition installed parallel to the doorway, and a bench. Nearby, on a side wall, a text invited visitors to sit and take time to look. Instead of contextualizing the work, the text reiterated the reflective aim already apparent in the series title and asked if an immediate experience of art is at all possible, even in such conditions. This approach can be seen as challenging traditional institutional mediation (informing visitors, offering avenues of interpretation, providing a mediator or audio guide), but it also questions the filters and biases, favorable or unfavorable, that viewers



Fig. 2. Edward Hopper (American, 1882–1967). *Morning in a City* (1944), oil on canvas, 112.5 x 152 cm. Bequest of Lawrence H. Bloedel, Class of 1923. Installation view from *Room for Reflection* held at the Williams College Museum of Art from February 2011 to January 2013. The Hopper was on view from December 2011 to February 2012.

bring with them and are never asked to recognize or set aside.

Seen in this light, the strategy for the *Room for Reflection* series appears to be one of resistance to the event imperative. The almost anti-event singularization banked on the singularity of the experience rather than on event-driven fanfare. Showcasing a work in this way offered the possibility of an intimate encounter while on a stroll through the galleries, set apart from the visual overload of the regular displays. All the more remarkable is that the room dedicated to the series was previously the Field Media Room, where films, videos, and other media artworks were shown, in darkness, with a few rows of folding chairs and sound at a level that tended to distract from the experience of the collection in the adjacent rooms. This is one of the rare instances in which an art museum has replaced the universal craze for moving images with the promotion and contemplation of a fixed image, which has no intrinsic duration but invites the viewer to spend time.

Of the twenty works singularized in this way during the two years of the project's run, few could be termed "masterpieces," given the make-up of the collection, but one can wonder whether masterpieces would have been suitable for this reflective experiment, in that their fame or ubiquitous reproduction would have created an invisible and therefore impassable filter, veiling them with a palimpsest of previous mediations inseparable from the experience of the moment. Whether the series changed the iconic status of the exhibited works cannot be verified—with Lisa Corrin's departure from the museum, the selection was not fully documented in a publication. Still, the joint simplicity and audacity of this project, an outlier from the event-driven hype that often surrounds single-work shows, lies precisely in treating works as "masterpieces," not to promote their aesthetic value or iconic status, but to allow viewers to experience them individually as a possible site from which an event might happen.

The curatorial decision not to provide contextual information on the selected works requires in and of itself to be put in a larger context, since *Room for Reflection* was part of a five-exhibition reinstallation of the museum's collections under the title *Reflection on a Museum*. Each exhibition interrogated "the function and meaning of art across time and cultures and the role of museums in shaping the understanding of art."⁴² Art re raised the issue of self-referentiality in art; quite a determinant aspect for the history of American modernism. From an eclectic array of artifacts, *The Object of Art* questioned the ways through which the museum participates in the transformation of an object into an artwork. The role of national romances in the development of art museums and art histories was evoked and countered in *Don't Fence US In: Crossing Boundaries in American Art*, a cross-disciplinary exploration of borders and frontiers; once more, it raised central notions for America's national mythology. But it is the final exhibition of

this ensemble that fully sets *Room for Reflection* in perspective: *A Collection of Histories* was also a single-work show of some sort. It displayed two Assyrian reliefs that, contrary to the works selected for *Room for Reflection*, appear richly contextualized, so as to reveal the thick layering of interpretations to which they were subjected through the centuries. In such a perspective, *Room for Reflection* becomes a kind of dialectic counterpart to *A Collection of Histories*, and the real twist of the former single-work show turns out to be the inter-exhibition logic and context in which it is staged as part of a dynamic dialogue between two single-work displays.

A Van Abbemuseum Picasso in Palestine

The Picture of the Month series was the first initiative to associate the singularizing of a work with putting it in jeopardy. But the National Gallery was not the first museum to recognize the event potential of having a piece from its collection in danger. The *Mona Lisa*'s journey following its theft in 1911 appears to be the high point of a process of singularization and one of the first examples of the event imperative associated with a work in a collection. From consecrated masterpiece with special status at the Louvre, seen in the various displays that tend to isolate it more and more, it has become a veritable icon, drawing record crowds.⁴³ It will always be exhibited as a unique work, and its travels will be increasingly rare and increasingly complicated due to its fragility and the required security conditions. It toured in the United States in 1962–1963 and then, for the last time, Japan and the USSR in 1974. The connection between singularization and endangerment appears to be reconfirmed and given new relevance by the recent case of the Van Abbemuseum which, at the urging of Khaled Hourani, artist and arts director of the International Academy of Art Palestine (IAAP), agreed to send one of the most important works of its collection—*Buste de Femme* (1943) by Pablo Picasso—to Palestine for exhibition.

In fact, the circulation of artworks has always implied putting them at risk, regardless of whether the aim of the journey was singularization or not. As Francis Haskell shows, the growth of large-scale exhibitions has required the shipment of works, especially “masterpieces,” from one country to another.⁴⁴ To attract visitors, these shows play on uniqueness and rarity (a masterpiece or a group of works on view for the first time) and on the brief duration of the event (on view for a short time only). In the case of Hourani's *Picasso in Palestine*, it was not only the unique and ephemeral nature of the exhibition or the threat of subtle material damage to the work that was in play, but also the inherent danger of moving the painting through conflict zones. This is seen in the complex negotiation process and the work's journey from the Van Abbemuseum to Ramallah, all of which was documented by filmmaker Rashid Masharawi.⁴⁵



Fig. 3. Installation view of *Picasso in Palestine*, exhibition of Pablo Picasso's *Buste de Femme* (1943) from the collection of the Van Abbemuseum at the International Academy of Art Palestine, Ramallah, June 24–July 20, 2011. Credit: Khaled Jarrar.

At the time that Hourani officially approached the Van Abbemuseum, in June 2009, about showing a work from its collection in Ramallah, director Charles Esche was pursuing an in-depth rethinking of the workings of the institution from within. He was looking for new ways of drawing attention to the museum's activities and, above all, of presenting the collection more dynamically. The museum launched a project to redeploy its collection in an innovative and critically different way—a new approach that Claire Bishop has described as an example of “radical museology.”⁴⁶ The project *Picasso in Palestine* was concurrent with *Play Van Abbe*, a series of exhibitions of and about the collection, which took place from November 28, 2009, to June 26, 2011. This eighteen-month program questioned the museum's role through the history and potential future of its collection. “What is the role of an art museum in the twenty-first century? What are the conventions of a museum and to what extent are we aware of them? How did they develop and are they appropriate today? Can we make them visible? Change them? Play with them?”⁴⁷ Once Esche had engaged the museum in the adventure of sending a Picasso to Palestine, he took this thinking a step further and came to believe that Western, especially European, culture had reached an insuperable limit: “We suspected that through the insights and actions of artists from very different cultural backgrounds, we might understand what would otherwise remain unimaginable to us. Particularly, we wanted to think about what we had in our archives and how this might be used in ways to which we were simply blind.”⁴⁸

After looking through the Van Abbe collection, Khaled Hourani and a group of students from the IAAP chose Picasso's *Buste de Femme* for presentation. Several reasons were given for choosing this artist and that particular work. Picasso is an emblematic figure of Western modernism, and although the painting has no explicit political content, the artist's lifelong social engagement is well known. Of the three Picassos in the collection, *Buste de Femme* was favored because in 1943, the year it was created, the artist was living in France under German occupation. Here, Hourani seems clearly to draw a parallel with the occupied Palestinian territories. Picasso's reputation and the work's value were also taken into account, for if the painting's journey and exhibition were to attract attention and have a real impact, the selected artist had to be in the pantheon of art history. And while the work does not share the masterpiece status of *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) or *Guernica* (1937), it is one of the most important pieces in the collection, valued at USD 7.1 million at the time of the project, and probably the most important European artwork ever exhibited in the West Bank. The final reason for choosing a work by Picasso was symbolic and political: several paintings by Picasso can be seen in the Israel Museum, no more than fifteen kilometers from Ramallah, but Palestinians do not have unimpeded access to them. In sum, the project built on the work's status as part of a museum collection and on all the values associated with Picasso's name.

This loan by the Van Abbemuseum was both audacious and unprecedented, an initiative of historic significance: never before had a work by such a famous European artist been sent on a journey so fraught with risk; moreover, it was the first collaboration of its kind between Europe and the Middle East. Transporting the painting was a complicated task carried out in extreme conditions. It involved stepping outside of the institutional framework and revisiting the museum's loan policy. The process took two years, whereas a normal loan is dealt with in six to twelve months.⁴⁹ The Van Abbemuseum was fully aware of the risks that led to the extreme complexity of the operation. It was fully aware, too, that something else was in play: having the work travel in Israeli and Palestinian territories would mean confronting political agreements and bureaucratic systems, but also reexamining the engagement and the institutional role of the museum in general.⁵⁰



Fig. 4. Guards beside the *Mona Lisa* at the Uffizi Gallery, Florence (1913).

The exhibition ran from June 24 to July 20, 2011, and, in highly unusual circumstances, drew great crowds: six thousand visitors in twenty-four days, almost the equivalent of ten percent of Ramallah's population.⁵¹ But what, exactly was on view? Was it the Picasso, its journey to Palestine, its endangerment? The choice to show just one work, and what's more, a canon of Western art, may seem surprising. Indeed, Okwui Enwezor questioned that aspect at the public presentation given by Hourani at the Sharja Art Foundation, as if the single-work show were irredeemably associated with the idealistic stance of Kenneth Clark, or seen only for its event potential and not as a gesture of resistance by a Palestinian artist.⁵² In this case, however, the singularization has a particular meaning. It heightened the effect of endangerment: moving a single work served to spotlight not just the unicity of the object and all its value but also, and especially, the dangers of such a journey in a conflict zone. These conditions extended into the exhibition. A room was specially built at the IAAP to meet museum requirements for climate and humidity conditions and security standards. *Buste de Femme* was presented inside as an icon of Western modern art in need of protection: flanked by two armed Palestinian guards—provided by the Ministry of Interior, as required by the insurance company—in a closed, white cube space, where only two visitors at a time were allowed inside (fig. 3).⁵³ With its “bodyguards,” the Picasso became what Heinrich defined as a “person-object”: the work of art as it is treated like a person. Simultaneously offered and forbidden, like an alluring star, the work was insularized in a way that denied viewers the space for contemplation necessary to experience it as an original modern artwork, and that dramatized the risk to which it was exposed. All these conditions converge to form the experience of *Picasso in Palestine*. The sense of danger becomes inseparable from its entire meaning, and this exhibition device is no doubt one of the most spectacular in the history of museums, recalling, for instance, a well-known photograph of the 1913 exhibition of the recovered *Mona Lisa* at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (fig. 4), where it is flanked by four guards.

Is it not paradoxical to think that, in the end, this exhibition of an artistic symbol in Palestine would perpetuate the modernist cult of the unique work of art, the masterpiece? In order for the journey to achieve its aim, which was also to have an impact on the West, it had to be designed to put a Western icon in peril, and of all the artists in the Van Abbemuseum collection, Picasso was best suited to this role. In this case, the singularization reaches its height to such a degree as to call itself into question. It appears less like an event-driven strategy than an artistic act of resistance. This, in turn, unsettled the museum by leading it to reflect on its own practices. It was the artist's initiative that made all the difference here, because the complexity and the extreme measures taken to show and move the work ultimately manifested the political, economic, and legal circumstances of a situation of control. The event-driven was put at the service of the event, as it were.

Looking back at the three examples we have briefly presented, it seems rather obvious that the genesis of the single-work show as a museum genre is tied to the possible endangerment of art that it entails, while this risk-taking appears motivated by social and political issues: both the Picture of the Month scheme and *Picasso in Palestine* attempted to spark an unstable synchrony between historical artworks and conflicts in the present. The indexation of a political crisis is a factor likely to redeem the often empty rhetoric of the event-driven paradigm under which museums now seek to shake up the presentation of their collections. Around the program *Room for Reflection*, organized in the context of Williams College Museum of Art reinstallation, we also witnessed that some single-work shows may altogether avoid the logic of event production and instead set themselves as a modest invitation to the experience of an individual artwork in the context of a museum's reflexive turn. For this is what has become undeniable in all formulas, single-work shows included, that propose to revisit the collection: they participate in a kind of reflexive turn of the museum, one that is no longer necessarily anchored in institutional critique.

Translated from French by Marcia Couëlle.

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Carr: *New Perspectives*, 2006). Her research on museum studies and exhibition displays has appeared in major catalogs and anthologies such as *Theater Bestiarum* (MIT Press, 1990) and *Thinking About Exhibitions* (Routledge, 1996).

Mélanie Boucher is a professor of museum studies at Université du Québec en Outaouais, Quebec. Her expertise in addressing the intrusive strategies that museums use to occasionally slot works of contemporary art into their historical collections is widely recognized. One major focus of her thinking concerns the reinvention of contiguous spaces to undercut the predictable associations of art history and engage viewers in new ways. This idea informed *Intrus/Intruders*, an exhibition she curated for Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in 2008–2009. Following the publication of her PhD dissertation, *La nourriture en art performatif: Son usage, de la première moitié du XXe siècle à aujourd'hui* (2014), her work on the tableau vivant in contemporary art has steered her toward performative reenactment of collections for event-related purposes.

Marie Fraser is professor of art history and museum studies at Université du Québec à Montréal and a member of Figura, centre de recherche sur le texte et l'imaginaire. Her research generally has to do with the transformation of narrative and temporal systems in contemporary art. She focuses more specifically on event-related usages that call for bringing collections up to date and affect how history is constructed, as well as the relationship of the museum to its own history. A well-known curator, she served as chief curator at Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal from 2010 to 2013. She has organized about thirty exhibitions in Canada and Europe for, among others, Jeu de Paume, Paris, and Casino Luxembourg, Forum d'art contemporain. She curated the Canadian Pavilion of the 56th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia in 2015.

1. François Mairesse, *Le musée temple spectaculaire* (Lyon: Presses de l'Université de Lyon, 2002).
2. The development of the notion of the “museum as event” and the analysis of the “single work show” in this article are part of a study conducted by CIÉCO: Collections et impératif événementiel/The Convulsive Collections, a research and inquiry group funded by a Partnership Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). CIÉCO includes three university-based researchers (the authors) and three partner museums: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Musée d'art de Joliette, and Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.
3. The term “single-work show” is taken from Judith H. Dobrzynski, “One Masterpiece Can Go A Long Way” (2011), accessed August 30, 2016, <http://www.judithdobrzynski.com/10277/one-masterpiece-can-go-a-long-way>. It was later used by Manolis Karterakis and Milena Pérez in “La fabrique du

- chef-d'œuvre par le musée: L'avènement du *single-work show*," in *Voir la Joconde: Approches muséologiques, Les cahiers de la médiation culturelle*, ed. François Mairesse (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), 71–97.
4. On the paradoxical roles of singularity for the creation of value in art, see Nathalie Heinich, *L'élite artiste: Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).
 5. "Singularity pure de l'événement." Jacques Derrida, "Signature contexte événement," in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 388. Quoted in English from "Signature Event Context," in *The Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 326.
 6. François Dosse, *Renaissance de l'événement: Un défi pour l'historien – Entre sphinx et phénix*, Le Nœud Gordien (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2010), 4.
 7. See Donald Preziosi, "The Question of Art History," in *In the Aftermath of Art: Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 30.
 8. See Hubert Damisch, "La Défense Duchamp," *10/18* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1979), 65–115.
 9. It seems that Julie Bawin uses the expression "impératif événementiel" once in *L'artiste commissaire*, but she does so without defining it and, most importantly, with a different meaning than the one we give to this concept. For her, the "impératif événementiel" refers to the contingent and constraining circumstances of a given exhibition, whereas we had coined the expression to define the very opposite: the imposition of a new media regime demanding the constant production of events. See Julie Bawin, *L'artiste commissaire: Entre posture critique, jeu créatif et valeur ajoutée* (Paris: Éditions des archives contemporaines, 2014), 150.
 10. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1962; repr., New York: Vintage, 1992).
 11. Dosse, *Renaissance de l'événement*, 147.
 12. Paul Valéry, "Le Problème des musées," (1923) in *Œuvres*, tome II, *Pièces sur l'art*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 1290–1293. Quoted in English from "The Problem of Museums," in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. Jackson Matthews, trans. David Paul, vol. 12 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960) 202.
 13. Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
 14. Tomaso Montanari, *A che cosa serve Michelangelo?* (Bologna: Einaudi, 2011).
 15. Nathalie Heinich, "Les objets-personnes: Fétiches, reliques, œuvres d'art," *Sociologie de l'art* 6 (1993): 25–56.
 16. Most of the information on the series is taken from National Gallery archive documents (e.g., newspaper articles, internal correspondence).
 17. The program was inspired by an initiative of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Harewood, "Museums in War-Time: To the Editor of the Times," *The Times*, February 13, 1942.

18. Letters in response to an interview with Kenneth Clark conducted shortly after the war, concerning the National Gallery's wartime activities.
19. Suzanne Bosman, *The National Gallery in Wartime* (London: National Gallery Company Limited, 2008), 99.
20. Neil MacGregor, "A Pentecost in Trafalgar Square," *Antioch* 61, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 765; accessed December 21, 2016, https://www.jmu.edu/gened/wd_library/Pentecost.pdf. See also, by the same author, "Chef d'œuvre: valeur sûre?," in *Qu'est-ce qu'un chef d'œuvre?*, Art et artistes, eds. Jean Galard and Matthias Waschek (Paris: Musée du Louvre / Gallimard, 2000), 67–113.
21. Charles Wheeler, "Pictures in London," *The Times*, January 3, 1942. In the Gallery's archives, the letter is dated January 3, 1942, but in "A Pentecost in Trafalgar Square," Neil MacGregor indicates January 2 as the date of publication; see MacGregor, 763.
22. Kenneth Clark gives this estimate of attendance in a letter published in *The Times* on June 26, 1942. The average attendance compiled by the National Gallery between 1942 and 1944 was one thousand visitors a day. See *The National Gallery 1938–1954* (London and Wisbech: Balding & Mansell, 1955), 20.
23. This inscription on the back of a photograph in National Gallery archives file NG930/1942/39 is taken from Winston Churchill's telegraphed order about protecting the collections. The telegram was not preserved. Kenneth Clark, *A Self Portrait: The Other Half* (London: A Hamish Hamilton Paperback, 1977), 5.
24. Inscription on the back of a photograph in National Gallery archives file NG930/1942/43.
25. *The National Gallery 1938–1954*, 5.
26. MacGregor, "Chef d'œuvre: valeur sûre?," 85.
27. Correspondence in National Gallery archives file NG16/59/4, Registry Files, Martin Davies (1942).
28. *The National Gallery 1938–1954*, 20, reports that forty-three paintings were shown as part of the series. However, a review of National Gallery archives suggests that this figure includes *Portrait of Margaretha de Geer*, *Wife of Jacob Trip*, and five new acquisitions shown during the war but not as part of the scheme; this finding is based on their size, their lack of relevance to the initiative, or the absence of mention of the scheme in newspaper articles about them.
29. MacGregor, "Chef d'œuvre: valeur sûre?," 87.
30. Photographs in National Gallery files NG930/1942/ (39, 41, 42, 43, 44).
31. Occasionally, other works not part of the collection (some by war artists) hung nearby in temporary exhibitions.
32. This was deduced from an archival photograph and an article from the *Daily Telegraph* and *Morning Post* dated June 5, 1942, and announcements of exhibitions in the *Illustrated London News*.
33. Kenneth Clark, *What is a Masterpiece?* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 5.
34. Antonin Artaud, *Le théâtre et son double / Le théâtre de Séraphin*, Folio/Essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1985) 117. Quoted in English from *Theater of the Avant-Garde*,

- 1890–1960: *A Critical Anthology*, ed. Robert Knopf (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 357.
35. Artaud, *Le théâtre et son double*, 115–118.
36. Michael Fleming, *Auschwitz, the Allies and Censorship of the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 63–64. The broadcast was graphic in that it mentioned the use of “mobile lethal chambers.”
37. Horst Bredekamp, *Théorie de l’acte d’image*, Politique et société (Paris: Éditions de la découverte, 2015), 45. Originally published in German as *Theorie des Bildakts* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010).
38. *The National Gallery 1938–1954*, 20.
39. Most of the works inventoried as exhibited during this period were by English artists. Not all works were announced in the papers, which explains why at least four have not been identified.
40. This is stated in a letter to Martin Davies, dated September 27, 1944: “I feel justified in bringing back more important pictures, though I would not like to bring up supreme masterpieces.”
41. The authors thank Elizabeth E. Gallerani, curator of Mellon Academic Programs at the Williams College Museum of Art, for providing information and documents on the *Room for Reflection* series.
42. See, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://wcma.williams.edu/exhibit/reflections-on-a-museum>.
43. See Mairesse, *Voir la Joconde: Approches muséologiques*. In particular, the article by Karterakis and Páez, which details the process of singularization carried out by the Louvre to showcase the *Mona Lisa* and make it the world’s most revered masterpiece.
44. Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum*.
45. The film *Picasso in Palestine* was directed by Rashid Masharawi and produced by Khaled Hourani. In 2012 it was screened for the first time at *Documenta 13* in a video program at the Fridericianum, and it has been shown, among other venues, at the Reel Artists Film Festival, Toronto, in 2013. It provides a rich documentation, and Hourani situates it as part of his overall art project. The idea to show a Picasso in Palestine and the complexity of the process have attracted a huge media attention, both in the West and the Middle East. Among the relevant documentation, Prior Magazine devoted a special issue to the project in 2011 and, more recently, Michael Baers recounts the whole story in an online graphic novel, *An Oral History of Picasso in Palestine* (HKW, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2014); see https://www.hkw.de/de/media/publikationen/michael_baers_an_oral_history_of_picasso_in_palestine.php.
46. Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology or, What’s “Contemporary” in Museums of Contemporary Art?*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Koenig Books, 2014). For an analysis of the Play van Abbe program at the Van Abbemuseum, see pp. 28–35.
47. Van Abbemuseum website, accessed December 31, 2016, <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/play-van-abbe>.

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48. Charles Esche, "An Ambitious Claim," *A Prior Magazine: Picasso in Palestine*, no. 22 (2011): 53.
 49. This was mentioned by Khaled Hourani in an interview with Myrko Katsimicha, "Picasso in Palestine: The Echo of an Unending Journey," *Art:I:Curate Journal*, February 18, 2015, accessed August 30, 2016, https://www.articurate.net/journal/picasso_in_palestine_the_echo_of_an_unending_journey.
 50. The comments made by the various participants in the project at the Van Abbemuseum, as recorded by Michael Bears in his oral history cited above, are eloquent on this subject.
 51. The number of visitors vary according to the source. This estimate of six thousand is given by Khaled Hourani in an interview for Canadian Art. See Leah Sandals, "Khaled Hourani on Picasso in Palestine's Canadian Debut," *Canadian Art*, February 6, 2013, accessed August 28, 2016, <http://canadianart.ca/features/picasso-in-palestine>. It pales in comparison to attendance for the Mona Lisa in Washington, DC, for example, which drew 674,000 visitors in one month, but as the artist says, "It's a big audience for one painting in Ramallah."
 52. The artist's presentation can be viewed online, accessed August 28, 2016, <http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Khaled+Hourani+&&view=detail&mid=086076858BC5FC4E9B94086076858BC5FC4E9B94&FORM=VRDGAR>.
 53. There were four armed guards, as required by the insurance company: two inside the room—one on either side of the painting—and two others posted outside the room, where the shipping crate was also presented.