Lose Yourself! On Labyrinthine Exhibitions as Curatorial Model

Editorial

Margriet Schavemaker and Dorine de Bruijne

A logical sequence of bright-lit, white-walled spaces has become the dominant architectural model of presenting modern and contemporary art and design around the globe. However, since its first appearance in the early decades of the twentieth century, the introduction of this “white cube” model has been paired with its disruption: artists and curators have created chaotic structures in which the art breaks out of its increasingly sanitized cage and visitors are asked to engage physically, getting lost in what can best be described as labyrinthine exhibitions that often meander, both inside and outside the vicinity of the museum territory. Multiple layers instead of optical clarity, immersion instead of spectatorship, proximity as opposed to distance, chance versus rationality; these are some of the dichotic terms that come to mind when considering the relationship between the labyrinthine exhibition and its white cube alter ego.

The theme of this issue of *Stedelijk Studies* digs deeper into both the history and topicality of labyrinthine exhibitions as curatorial model. Renewed interest in this topic arose in conjunction with the large-scale retrospective of Jean Tinguely organized in 2015–2016 by the Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. In the Stedelijk’s version of the exhibition several rooms were dedicated to the exhibitions Tinguely had (co-)curated at the Stedelijk and the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, in close collaboration with museum directors Willem Sandberg (*Dylaby*) and Pontus Hultén (*HON*), as well as artists such as Martial Raysse, Robert Rauschenberg, Niki de Saint Phalle, Daniel Spoerri, and Per Olof Ultvedt. The first

exhibition, *Bewogen Beweging* (*Rorelse Konsten*), the lively overview of kinetic art which traveled from the Stedelijk to Moderna Museet and the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaek in 1961/1962, was overwhelming, chaotic, and participatory. The two following exhibitions, *Dylaby* (1962) in the Stedelijk Museum and *HON – en katedral* (1966) in the Moderna Museet, have become truly remarkable exhibitions in the history of curating. Walking into a large vagina, shooting paint, gazing at the stars in a planetarium, dancing the twist, plowing a path through a room filled with balloons… the exhibitions might easily be considered more as theme park attractions than serious art shows, comprising theatrical props instead of works of art.

At first glance, these exhibition "aberrations" seem to defy serious analysis, let alone contribute to the critical discourse of contemporary exhibition history. However, these large-scale, collaborative and comprehensive exhibition installations have attracted both the expanding academic field of exhibition history and current curatorial practices. But how are we to understand the body of knowledge produced by a generation of historically conscious, self-reflexive curators and art historians alike? What (critical) models do exhibitions such as *Dylaby* and *HON* provide for contemporary curatorial, artistic, and scholarly practices? And what new insights do they generate?

In the catalogue accompanying the recent Tinguely exhibition at the Stedelijk, Margriet Schavemaker, in her essay titled "Longing for Lost Labyrinths," argues that a key aspect of these exhibitions is that, although they are considered cutting-edge avant-garde practices, a wide public appreciated them.[1] As Tinguely himself described it:

> *The spirit was there, and people understood it, I speak about people knowing nothing about art, I don't care about people liking art, what is important to us is the child over there, the little lady, or that old lady there, who don't know anything of art, their reaction is important.*[2]

The photographic and video documentation of the exhibitions confirms that the audience, both young and old, indeed seems to enjoy the installations and works of art tremendously. Especially the physical interaction triggered pleasure and laughter. In other words, the museum became a place that was not just about a distant and thoughtful visual encounter with artworks, but instead a site for playful intergenerational interaction. This certainly has not grown into an everyday reality. Quite the opposite, in fact. At a time in which the increasing professionalization of museums makes a "barrier-free interaction" with the public almost impossible, these ludic labyrinths from the 1960s seem like an unattainable utopia. One could therefore argue that the current urge to reexamine these labyrinthine exhibitions serves to enable looking forward—a kind of "nostalgia for the future."[3]

This argument builds upon an earlier return to another Tinguely exhibition at the Stedelijk in 2011. The museum had been closed for over six years due to an extensive renovation of the original part of the building and the construction of a new wing. Awaiting its grand reopening in 2012, the museum temporarily opened the old building under the heading *Temporary Stedelijk*. In this period, a series of what Reesa Greenberg calls "remembering exhibitions" was programmed, of which the first was dedicated to *Bewogen Beweging* and *Dylaby*.[4] Using the scarce marks that the exhibitions had made on the collection of the museum, it became clear that the kinetic objects could no longer be touched and, in their resulting stasis, had difficulty engaging with the contemporary audience. This contrasts with documentary material of the labyrinthine exhibitions, in which the objects appeared very compelling and also held the status of "art object" in the museum collection. This resulted in a critical juxtaposition where it was made clear that a return to these exhibitions would draw "visitors into the museum's paradoxical identity: an institution that can appreciate its dynamic and beloved history in such a way that it elevates the remaining documentation to the level of art, while transforming the performative and participatory artworks from its history into static and nostalgic relics."[5]

Of course, much more can be said about the significance of the labyrinthine exhibitions. To further the research into their context, genealogy, topology, and the contemporary return to them, a symposium titled Lose Yourself – A Symposium on Labyrinthine Exhibitions as Curatorial Model was organized from February 2 to 4, 2017, at the Stedelijk Museum, in collaboration with the Moderna Museet, the Tinguely Museum in Basel, and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The symposium was intended to navigate the territory encountered in *Dylaby* and *HON*, in order to investigate the legacy of labyrinthine exhibition models and their relevance in the twenty-first century.[6]

The invited speakers brought many related labyrinthian curatorial projects to the table, such as Marcel Duchamp's installation for *First Papers of Surrealism* in New York (1942), in which the room was filled with a web of threads, forcing visitors to bend and crawl. Another exhibition project referred to by many of the speakers was, in the end, never realized: the planned exhibition *The World as Labyrinth*, which was developed by the Situationist International network, chaired by the French theorist and philosopher Guy Debord. The project would have taken place in the Stedelijk Museum in 1960 and consisted of a chaotic *parcours* in the museum, as well as walks through the city of Amsterdam in which participants would follow instructions given to them via walkie-talkies and thereby experience the city as a labyrinth. The exhibition was scrapped shortly before its opening but must have made an impression on Sandberg, as it paved the way for Tinguely's labyrinthine exhibitions in the following two years.

Les Immateriaux, the exhibition which Francois Lyotard curated at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1985, also appears to be a canonical example. This exhibition was not intended to change the dispositive of the art museum or embrace the city as labyrinth. Instead, its goal was to create a "dramaturgy of information for the postmodern condition." In a dark space filled with screens and data projections, the French philosopher set the tone for the digital decades that would follow and their overwhelming overload of information. This endless layering of data and the constant feeling of losing oneself fuels many contemporary curatorial projects, as discussed by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru in their joint presentation. But how can we critically reflect on something which does not make straightforward sense to us, experientially? How can we logically describe the illogical feeling of being lost? Discussing the operative ideas behind their curation of the 11th Shanghai Biennale, the members of the Raqs Media Collective raised this issue as well. In their contribution to the conference, they try to come to terms with how to lose oneself in a productive, generative manner.

This issue of *Stedelijk Studies* includes several papers from the symposium and links to videos of some of the lectures. We also made a call for papers, which led to six additional essays. The result is a multifaceted reader in which a wide variety of authors from different academic backgrounds and career stages approach the theme of the labyrinthine exhibition as curatorial model in multiple ways, covering almost the entire twentieth century up to the present. Where some chose for a monographic approach focusing on a single exhibition, artist, or project, others focused on a more methodological framing and contextualizing of the theme, whether etymologically, aesthetically, or symbolically.

The first three articles work from this more theoretical approach, starting with Reesa Greenberg, who offers a very clear and critical discussion of terminology, canon formation, and knowledge production with regard to the labyrinthine exhibition and how new exhibition genres are constituted. In dissecting the return to historical labyrinthine exhibitions in the current trend of archival exhibition practices on past exhibitions, Greenberg critically reads the significance of the so-called "immersive" in these mise en abyme presentations and relates this to the understanding of the term "labyrinthine" as "disorienting."

She is followed by Noit Banai, who critically explores the construction of exhibition history "to understand how traditional disciplinary narratives have been formed and, for the most part, continue to maintain the hegemonic role of Western modernism and its biopolitics." By examining its "genealogy," Banai posits that labyrinthine frameworks continue to be reproduced because the labyrinth is entwined with an implicit promise of a shared social experience in museological and curatorial contexts—one both inherent to and distinct from our everyday.

Further investigating the concept of the labyrinth, Pamela Bianchi focuses on the idea of the "invisible maze," both as exhibition device and as a way to enhance the direct involvement of spectators in their relationship with the space. This might be a museum gallery, but can also be generated on an architectural scale, as a city, transforming the idea of the labyrinth into a positive metaphor for the discovery, experimentation, and emancipation of its wanderer. She refers in this context, as do several other authors in this issue, to Walter Benjamin, who suggested that the city is the key labyrinth in which "the flaneur goes botanizing on the asphalt."

After these more theoretical encounters, some historical analyses reread the exhibitions that formed the inspiration for this issue's theme: *Dylaby* and *HON*. The complexity of the ludic character of these exhibitions is what Paula Burleigh writes about, arguing that its playfulness functions as a strategy of disruption. She situates *Dylaby* in a larger context of the revival of the labyrinth in postwar Europe. The Letterist International, Situationist International, and nouveaux réalistes all used the labyrinth as a motif, metaphor, and organizing principle, seeing its ludic quality as a way to disrupt social norms inside and outside of the museum and offering an alternative form of knowledge.

Janna Schoenberger takes a similar approach when investigating three labyrinthine exhibitions at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in the 1960s: *Die Welt als Labyrinth* (a project initiated by the Situationist International, but ultimately canceled by the museum), *Bewogen Beweging* (1961), and *Dylaby* (1962). According to Schoenberger, these three exhibitions reflected upon artistic freedom in a playful way. She shows how ludic interventions can be paradoxical in that they present critique indirectly, thereby making it palatable, but at the same time also risking misinterpretation.

A similar recontextualizing of a canonical labyrinthine exhibition is offered by Annika Öhrner, who sets out to free *HON – en katedral* (1966) of the narrative written by the museum in which it was staged, the Moderna Museet, and its director, Pontus Hultén. She presents alternative readings and critiques the temporality that has been constructed around *HON*, aiming to open up new perspectives on both its authorship and the exhibition history of the 1960s. This includes not only creativity and the reinvention of the museum exhibition but also ruptures, tensions, and the gendered working conditions of the cultural space of *HON*'s production.

Another close reading is brought to us by Anton Pereira Rodriguez and Wouter Davidts. Arguing that the labyrinth does not simply function as a funhouse, Rodriguez and Davidts return to George Maciunas's *Flux-Labyrinth* during the 1976 exhibition *New York – Downtown Manhattan – SoHo* in Berlin. This labyrinth was designed to offer an

intricate experience of the SoHo way of life to a German audience, in a way affirming that survival as an artist and urban activist in SoHo required certain intelligence, namely, the aptitude to overcome obstacles and find ways to outwit city authorities and mobsters alike.

That the concept of the labyrinth is also applicable to the situation in postwar Germany, where the pervasive feeling was one of being lost, is described by Kristian Handberg. In his discussion of *documenta II* and related exhibitions and their installation and venues, he illustrates the idea of labyrinths that actually lead somewhere—a new beginning—while overcoming Nazi-era views on art in Germany.

Following these more historical readings is a section with contributions in which contemporary exhibition practices are investigated. Janneke Schoene examines the work of Christoph Schlingensief, focusing on the 2013–2014 retrospective at the *KW Institute for Contemporary Art* in Berlin. Schoene describes his artistic strategies as a labyrinthine overload: a multimedial overstimulation that enhanced a feeling of being lost. A comparison is made to the philosophical concept of the rhizome developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, named after a type of subterranean plant stem with a potentially endless number of roots and branches and no clear origin or end.

Christoph Chwatal further expands on this notion of the rhizome in proposing an understanding of Walid Raad's work, describing decentered threads, lines, and dead-ends (playing with fiction and the imaginary) that correspond to the idea that recent history cannot be understood and written by adhering to centralized, stable narratives. The labyrinthine dimension of Raad's work, a constant flux of images and narratives, provokes new ways to reflect on how we construct history.

In her essay on the project *On Otto*, Ina Blom offers an encounter with a similarly destabilizing overlaying of narratives. *On Otto* is a movie project that starts with a poster and ends with the writing of the screenplay, in the process playing with the rules of filmmaking, overturning its logic to suggest how the aestheticization of politics, the public sphere, or life in general could indicate a new definition of the common. The final result is an architectural construction not unlike a city.

The urban maze is also used as a metaphor by Paula Alaszkiewicz, who interprets the clash between fashion and the art world that occurred at the *Giorgio Armani* exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (2000) and the Rei Kawakubo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (2017), in which hybrids between display systems from the art world and the commercial world collide in various amalgamations. In blurring the boundaries between the boutique and the museum, along with their spatial attributes

and spectatorial positions, the exhibitions served to disrupt the chronological and progressive aspects of the museum.

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So what is the future of labyrinths? The potential of getting lost? For the Stedelijk Museum it is omnipresent, both as a curatorial model and as a theme. In December 2017 the museum opened its new permanent collection presentation, titled *Stedelijk BASE* (2017–2022). The exhibition design, created by AMO/Rem Koolhaas and Federico Martelli, set out to create a nonlinear *parcours* via thin, diagonally positioned steel walls that offer visitors a labyrinthine experience not unlike a city. The art on these partitioning walls is clustered thematically, but because of the unusual sightlines visitors can experience unexpected connections and even lose themselves in a productive way, creating transhistorical narratives that counter the hegemonic, canonical narratives.

The labyrinth through which we tread daily via our media devices, in which the thin boundaries between fact and fiction are continuously blurred, as are narratives on a local, national, and global level, also returns in exhibitions such as *EARTH* by the Dutch artist duo Metahaven (October 6, 2018 – February 24, 2019). Through their immersive installations and film productions we find “historical time running at different, incompatible rates, across vast territories that are collapsed into singular media spaces,” using admixtures of animation, documentary analysis, science fiction, poetry, and folktale.

Furthermore, in 2019 the Stedelijk is compiling an exhibition on the work of Walid Raad in collaboration with the Moderna Museet. The exhibition at the Stedelijk will not be particularly mazelike in its design, but as Christoph Chwatal describes in his essay in this issue of *Stedelijk Studies*, Raad’s work is labyrinthine in itself. Works from the long-term projects *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, *Sweet Talks Commissions Beirut*, and *The Atlas Group* will be shown, offering visitors several narratives to unravel.

In 2019 the Stedelijk will also return to one of the historical labyrinthine exhibitions via an exciting collaboration with artist and designer Jacqueline de Jong. As discussed in Paula Burleigh’s essay in this issue, De Jong worked at the Stedelijk Museum between 1958 and 1960. During this period she also met Asger Jorn and became acquainted with Guy Debord, the leader of the Situationist International (SI).

Debord and other members of the SI, such as Jorn and Constant, attempted to organize the above-mentioned radical exhibition *The World as Labyrinth* in these same years. Sandberg pulled the plug on the project at the last minute and instead put on a solo exhibition of the former

Italian SI member Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio. Around the same time, Debord asked De Jong to head the Dutch section of SI on her own. She quit her job at the Stedelijk and departed for Paris half a year later. In the exhibition titled *Pinball Wizard: The Work and Life of Jacqueline de Jong* (February 8, 2019 – August 18, 2019), De Jong will return to highlights in her oeuvre, including the exhibition history of this canceled labyrinthine exhibition and the six issues of the magazine *The Situationist Times*, which she produced between 1962 and 1968.

In contrast to Debord's more theoretical and text-oriented journal, *Internationale Situationniste*, *The Situationist Times* is multidisciplinary, playful, full of photographs and drawings, and dedicated to various themes like the node and the ring. These "topologies" are an alternative form of knowledge: a non-Euclidean system that operates in the field of paradoxes, misunderstandings, and contradictions. Its fourth issue is devoted to the topology of the labyrinth. In one of the contributions, architect Aldo van Eyck argues that the topologies are all about "the in-between realm," creating a "labyrinthine clarity."[7]

We do hope that we have succeeded in reaching a similar goal in this issue of *Stedelijk Studies*. Lose yourself in labyrinthine clarity.

The editors would like to express their gratitude to all the people and organizations who made the various projects in this context possible, in particular:

For their role in organizing the symposium with us, we would like to thank our colleagues at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm: Daniël Birnbaum, Annika Gunnarsson, Ylva Hillström, Anna Lundström, and Anna Tellgren; and those at the Museum Tinguely in Basel: Andres Pardey and Roland Wetzel. Angela Bartholomew and Katja Kwastek from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam were also an essential part of the organizing committee. Thank you for all your work, especially with regard to the Young Researchers Colloquium that preceded the symposium.

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organized various exhibitions, including *The Stedelijk Museum & The Second World War* (2015), *ZERO: Let Us Explore the Stars* (2015), *Jean Tinguely: Machine Spectacle* (2016), and the permanent collection presentation *Stedelijk BASE* (in collaboration with Beatrix Ruf, AMO/Rem Koolhaas, and Federico Martelli) (2017–2022).

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1. Margriet Schavemaker, "Longing for Lost Labyrinths," in *Jean Tinguely*, eds. M. Schavemaker, B. Til, and B. Wismer (Walther König Verlag, Museum Palast Düsseldorf, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2016), 155–160.
2. Jean Tinguely, quote from the documentary film by François de Menil, *Tinguely: A Kinetic Cosmos*, 1980. The quote is in the eighteenth minute of the film.
3. Schavemaker, "Longing for Lost Labyrinths," 157.
4. *Recollections I: Bewogen Beweging (1961) and Dylaby (1962)*, March 3–July 10, 2011. For an account of the exhibition, see Reesa Greenberg, "Archival Remembering Exhibitions," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 1, no. 2 (June 2012): 159–177.
5. Margriet Schavemaker, *The White Cube as Lieu de Mémoire* (Amsterdam: Reinwardt Academy, 2017), 36. See https://www.reinwardt.ahk.nl/media/rwa/docs/Publicaties/WhiteCube_MSchavemaker_web.df.
6. See https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/events/lose-yourself-2.
7. Aldo van Eyck, "Beyond Visibility," *The Situationist Times*, no. 4 (1963): 79–81.