

Art Exhibition: Witness in Silence

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Abstract: Based on Jane Block's and J.L. Austin's discussion of performative expression, this paper turns to the analysis of performative expression in artists' solo exhibitions. Starting from the opening ceremony of artists' exhibition, analyzed the combination of language, behavior and power in exhibition activities, as well as the interaction and essence of witnessing. At the same time, it deals with the dissemination and productivity of solo exhibition audience viewing behavior.

Keywords: individual Exhibition; Performativity; Witness; Dissemination

When I was preparing my art works for the Undergraduate Graduation Exhibition, my instructor asked me would I like to hold a solo exhibition. Interestingly, three schoolmates just had held their own individual exhibitions one after another, all of which were held in the last two months. At the scene of those exhibition, from the moment when the academic host declared the opening of the exhibition, people began their own watching activities. From this moment, most people are watching the paintings in the exhibition hall; some people, such as artists and curators, are watching the watching activities of the viewers; others, such as some staff members are watching their watching activities; in fact, visitors definitely noticed the artist's view of their own viewing behavior, and his or her watching behavior is being watched by others. Snapping and videoing constantly appear in the exhibition, recording not only those art works, but also the viewing, the viewing of visitors and artists. At the same time, it also recorded the viewing of other photographers. This series of watching has profound meaning. "It is just like the abyss effect that describes 'watch someone watch someone watch', that is the effect of 'witness with witness'^[1]." Many scholars have talked about the "redundant witness" in weddings. But I deeply released that this kind of "redundant witness" was also hidden in exhibitions.

1. Exhibition activities and Implementation

For J.L. Austin the performativity is a kind of expression, "say what you want to do"^[2]. Austin's wedding examples include "I declare...". This kind of expression also appears in the exhibition activities. These languages are not descriptions, but actions. Jane Brock calls them performative sentences or performative expressions, or simply "acting behaviors".

The performative expression in exhibition activities is combined with discourse power: private social ties; who declare the opening of the exhibition; the power to gather audiences. An exhibition is full of interweaving of various powers. Such a "power activity" is closely related with social ties. A well-designed social link means those witnesses who are invited and authorized and those witnesses who come to the exhibition site to witness shows that a thoughtfully planned exhibition is defined by witness, which is "Prepared for others, witnessed by others"^[3]. Carol Mavor appealed to us that the main characteristics of witness are decomposition, strangeness and superposition. "Seeing and witnessing can't be close to reality. On the contrary, it's distorted reality and creates space for differences^[4]." The purpose contained in the various powers participating in the exhibition is infinitely extended in time and space, and the reality may be found in the future when we trace back to history. Only when time is separated from a potential return can we grasp it. In fast-pace environment, we will find that the impossible reappearance of history and the constant restatement of the same thing constitute an indispensable statement of reality, and the constant restatement of the past is dredging up those events to recall the certainty of reality in history.

2. Interaction and silence of witness

The witness of visitors in the opening ceremony of the exhibition is not only to witness the opening of an exhibition, but also to witness the power and the participation of the witness as a kind of power. At the beginning of the exhibition, the performative effect of the performative expression releases its power to the whole field, and the language and behavior are synchronized. The identity of all people in the field transformed in an instant, each of them has become a historical witness of this exhibition. Just as the witness gives testimony, the witness at the opening ceremony gives the exhibition acquaintance. The existence of witness in the opening ceremony is a direct, powerful, but silent statement; especially those who are erased is protection of the opening ceremony. Those who failed to witness were forced to remain silent and their identities were erased; these silent people were indispensable roles in the opening ceremony of the exhibition, and their existence was mercilessly excluded by history.

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Until a moment after the announcement; everyone's present is witnessing each others' existence and sharing each others' past and present. The constant repetition of each witness makes the power of language as performativity strengthened. At the end of the opening ceremony (or, more accurately, at the end of the whole exhibition), every witness's experience of the exhibition is denied at the most fundamental aspect. The exhibition itself, from the moment when it opened to the moment when it was completely over, in people's views, existed in the eyes of witnesses, also kept silent. After the exhibition, the news, articles and other kinds of repetition and retelling about the exhibition once again constitute the appearance of its return. In the future, each present witness will superimpose or withdraw the original witness in a different way, which makes the original witness consolidated or weakened or even lost.

3. Trauma and division

Standing on the scene of the opening ceremony, listening to the speeches of artists and guests; watching the opening ceremony in the flow of people; sharing the experience of watching the exhibition with visitors; getting the collection of artists' individual exhibition works, taking photos with artists and so on, all these are evidences of our presence. However, witnessing means staying aloof from the occurrence of an event. Even the artist holding his or her own solo exhibition is no exception. He or she is the protagonist of the exhibition and is witnessed by all the people present, and he or she is also witnessing the presence of all the people (including the artist himself). The witness behavior is divided. The reason lies in: the process of witnessing produces traumatic division, which is not only the witness but also the participant. For one thing, it is their own watching. For another, it is their own struggle. It is at the moment of division that history begins, in which "we are bound in each other's wounds."

"It can not be understood in the process of experience, but only through a potential return after leaving the event, a forced repetition can be understood^[5]." History has never been our current direct reference. We understand and reproduce what we have experienced and witnessed in the superposition.

4. Recording and dissemination of an exhibition

During that period, my friends' solo exhibitions both were held successfully. On the eve of each exhibition, posters are posted on billboards everywhere, and the critique of the exhibition have been spread on the Internet before the official opening. After the exhibition was completely end, the relevant information and pictures of the exhibition may be mentioned, spread and browsed again. The exhibition in a period of history and the exhibition itself as a period of history are related to: the essence of the exhibition, the accumulation and superposition of the exhibition itself, the death and resurrection of exhibition, the trauma brought by each death and the unexpected end. The witnesses who came to the opening ceremony witnessed it, as well as their own trauma and division; the records of various versions of the exhibition events also witnessed the presence of the witnesses. The memory of witness will end as loss. "The paradoxical nature of record is to forget for commemoration"^[6]. The spread of the exhibition is realized in the continuous delay and trauma of historical records.

Nowadays, I have witnessed the opening ceremonies of many exhibitions, especially at the moment when the academic host declared the opening of the exhibition, all the people present gave warm applause, the witness was close to swinging between the death and resurrection of the event. I witnessed all this in a silent way. Of course, there must be too many exhibitions that erase me, and I also recognized its existence in silence. In this era of information flow spreading everywhere, compared with our witnessing and watching, it is more important to spread this kind of uncontrollable witness, and expand the watching on the road of silence, and this kind of silent tenderness is the most significant viewing attitude for almost all of us.

References

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- [6]Gavin Butt, *After Criticism: New Responses To Art and Performance* (Oxford, Blackwell press, 2005), p.60.