

# Harald Szeemann, pioneer as exhibition maker

Roundly esteemed as the first ‘exhibition maker,’ Harald Szeemann’s 150 exhibitions spanning 1957-2005 are legendary. And several have been reconstructed or the subject of exhibitions themselves, lending credence to Daniel Buren’s having criticised the rise of ‘the exhibition as a work of art’ in the documenta 5 catalogue. Positioning Szeemann as ‘first’ problematically glosses over earlier curators such as Lawrence Alloway, Alfred Barr, Walter Hopps, Willem Sandburg, and Edward Steichen, who too got in trouble for employing unusual exhibition formats, introducing novel aesthetic frames, and challenging traditional narratives.

Consider Szeemann’s 1974 exhibition ‘Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us,’ stored since then and restaged here from photographs. Et Voila! ... a ‘readymade’ exhibition. One discovers his paternal grandfathers’ belongings, including his barber tools, his inventive wave machine, personal photographs, clothing, furniture, all arranged as originally presented, so as to convey: ‘My entrepreneurial grandfather who began as a Hungarian immigrant managed to carve out a prosperous life as a Bern coiffeur, and even invented a really cool machine for waving ladies’ hair.’

With ‘Grandfather,’ one literally experiences an exhibition of an exhibition, yet one immediately senses the difference between this and exhibitions of installation art, such as Song Dong’s displaying the contents of his mother’s Beijing home at MoMA. Exhibitions relay interpretations, whereas, artworks prompt interpretations. Szeemann’s claim here is both straightforward and even convincing. Standing inside ‘Grandfather’ seems more like visiting an historic home filled with personal belongings than being inside an exhibition.

The Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles – where I visited the show that’s now running in Bern – casts Szeemann (1933-2005) as the first ‘freelance curator,’ which is apter, since he managed to attract venues for scores of unwieldy thematic exhibitions, whose topics ranged from burgeoning art movements (environments, in situ works, Fluxus and happenings) to personal interests (utopian dreams, outsider art, anarchists, imaginary machines, artists’ museums, pataphysics, and the gesamtkunstwerk), as well as homages to people and places, such as his grandfather, Hugo Ball, Charles Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, Ljubljana, nearby Monte Verità, and last but not least Belgium (his death preceded its opening by two weeks!).

To simplify matters, ‘Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions’ is divided into three sections: 1) Avant-Gardes: 60s and 70s, 2) Utopias and Visionaries, and 3) Geographies. One soon realises that Szeemann’s main topic was the imagination, and his life’s work concerned helping people execute their ideas, fantasies, and otherwise fictional worlds, so as to avoid becoming immobilised by impossibility. Storing ‘Grandfather’ all these years left him unburdened by memories, thus advancing his remedy for the illness he once diagnosed as ‘liv[ing] in your head.’

In addition to exhibiting drawings, etchings and Fluxkits, the Getty’s modest three-part exhibition featured historical journals, artists’ proposals, documentary photographs, letters,



‘Installation view of Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us’ (1974), Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, February 4–April 22, 2018  
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telegrams, research notes, press releases, TV footage, interviews, as well as exhibition floor plans, posters, invitations, and catalogues. Szeemann originally archived this material as his personal Museum of Obsessions, which occupied eight rooms of his Fabbrica Rosa in Maggia, CH until the GRI acquired it in 2011. This treasure trove, the GRI’s largest acquisition ever, arrived in nearly 1000 boxes (about 1 linear km), and reportedly includes 28,000 books; 40,500 prints, negatives, and transparencies (hundreds shot by noted Swiss photographer Bathasar Burkhard); files on 24,000 artists; as well as 2,400 films and videos. Exemplary of what Foucault termed the archaeology of knowledge, Szeemann’s exhibitions often presented reams of ephemera on bulletin boards and in vitrines, thus sparking visitors’ curiosities, while providing evidence for his views. Now that Szeemann’s massive archive is intact and publicly accessible, future researchers can continue producing fresh genealogies. One archivist has already noted his ‘intentional “misfiling” of exhibitions he felt were unsatisfactory.’

The ‘Museum of Obsessions’ features Carl Andre’s postcard declining his involvement in documenta 5, yet neither it nor the accompanying catalogue explain why ten American artists jointly published their declaration against Szeemann’s documenta in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung six weeks before its opening. One is thus left wondering why Andre, Robert Morris, Donald Judd, and Fred Sandback boycotted documenta 5, since they had participated in ‘When Attitude Became Form’ (1969). The catalogue mentions that Andre considered his classic sculptures inappropriate for documenta’s conceptual art section. Elsewhere, Morris remarked that he didn’t appreciate curators selecting his works without prior consultation. I imagine however that these minimalists couldn’t stand the idea of their works, which some critics had dismissed as too literalist, being exhibited alongside ‘low’ art such as propaganda posters, advertising, and the art of the mentally ill; let alone ‘high’ art such as photorealistic paintings, realist sculptures, photography, Marcel Broodthaers’ ‘Musée d’Art Moderne,

Département des Aigles’, or the 100-day event, capped off by Joseph Beuys’ ‘Boxkampf für Direkte Demokratie’.

Fortunately, the catalogue depicts a little-known Dada-like prank, circulated by the Guerrilla Art Action Group three weeks before documenta 5’s opening, to publicise its curators’ sexism. After forging an over-the-top misogynist letter purportedly penned by Szeemann, the pranksters mailed it alongside their indignant response to people like curator Lucy Lippard and Artforum editor John Coplans. Not surprisingly, Lippard mailed Szeemann a letter threatening to destroy his reputation. It’s not mentioned whether she was in on the prank from the onset, making the forged letter a set up for her attack. Still, it’s a pity that her letter failed to ‘guilt trip’ him into actually including more artworks by women over the next 33 years.

Despite its manageable scale, ‘Museum of Obsessions’ is comprehensive enough to demonstrate that Szeemann’s exhibitions were neither artworks nor hapless displays of esoteric minutiae. This exhibition captures him attempting to balance stakeholders’ divergent interests, while honouring his fidelity to venues, their public, artists, their artworks, and historical eras. His penchant for fabricating fictional objects (as described in the literature of Raymond Roussel, Franz Kafka, and Alfred Jarry) reflects their potential as compelling visual objects, not some secret desire to produce art. His collaborative spirit fostered post-studio practices. Not surprisingly, archived collectibles wound up in his exhibitions, and vice versa. Largely commissioned affairs, his exhibitions highlighted the breadth of human creativity, even in remote hamlets.

## Sue SPAID

‘Harald Szeemann: Museum der Obsessionen’ through 2 September in Kunsthalle Bern, Helvetiaplatz 1; ‘Grossvater: ein Pionier wie wir’ in Gerechtigkeitsgasse 74 Bern, through 2 September  
[www.kunsthalle-bern.ch](http://www.kunsthalle-bern.ch)

Both are travelling to Düsseldorf (Kunsthalle) and Torino (Castello di Rivoli) through February 2019.