

Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History

Journal of the Fondazione CDEC

QUESTIONI DI STORIA EBRAICA CONTEMPORANEA, RIVISTA DELLA FONDAZIONE CDEC



Fondazione
Centro di
Documentazione
Ebraica
Contemporanea



issue 26 / n. 2 (2024)

REVIEWS

Sharon Hecker and Raffaele Bedarida, eds.

Curating Fascism: Exhibitions and Memory from the Fall of Mussolini to Today

by Francesco Cassata

DOI: [10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15773](https://doi.org/10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15773)



Edited by art historians and curators Sharon Hecker and Raffaele Bedarida, *Curating Fascism* examines how exhibitions after the Second World War and until recent times, in Italy and abroad, have shaped collective memory, political discourses and historical narratives about the relationship between art and politics during the

fascist *ventennio*.

The book is articulated in four thematic parts. Part I explores three representative case studies of survey exhibitions on art under fascism: Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti's 1967 *Arte moderna in Italia, 1915-1935* in Florence, Renato Barilli's 1982 *Annitrenta* in Milan, and Germano Celant's 2018 *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics, Italia 1918-1943*, also in Milan. Although each curator's political and cultural trajectory was distinct, these three exhibitions—as art historians Luca Quattrocchi and Denis Viva, along with the editors, convincingly argue—shared a common approach of uncritical depoliticization of fascist-era art, combined with the spectacularization of the historical narrative.

This section of the book includes also an interview with Barilli and two additional essays. Robert Gordon analyzes two sites that epitomize the role of public display and exhibition in the cultural memorialization of Italy's Holocaust, from the 1950s to the present: first, the museum-monument at Carpi, near Fossoli, the principal transit camp for Italian Jews and others destined to



Auschwitz; and second, the Italian national memorial and exhibit at Auschwitz-I camp. Art historian Romy Golan focuses on Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, exploring how this architectural container, used during fascism, has negotiated its past functions with postwar exhibitions.

The second part of the volume broadens the scope to explore exhibitions about Italian fascism in other countries, including the UK, Brazil, Germany, and the USA.

Rosalind McKeever illustrates how the postwar reception of fascist-era art in Britain was closely tied with the collecting practices of art dealer Eric Estorick, who avoided addressing the political issues surrounding Italian modern art. Art historian and museum director Ana Magalhães discusses a group of Italian paintings acquired by Italian-Brazilian industrialist Francesco Matarazzo Sobrinho, on the advice of the powerful Italian fascist art critic Margherita Sarfatti, for South America's first museum of modern art, in São Paulo. The connection between this private collection and the cultural policies of Italian fascism in the 1930s, along with the visual aesthetics of the Novecento Italiano, resulted in its being forgotten and silenced until the 2010s. Miriam Paeslack presents the curatorial strategies she employed in the organization of the 2019 exhibition of photographs and videos *Photographic Recall: Italian Rationalist Architecture in Contemporary German Art* at the UN Anderson Gallery at the University at Buffalo. She emphasizes how the decision to assemble a variety of artistic voices in dialogue with one another, and with didactic supplemental materials, contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the different impact of the architectural traces of fascism in Italy and in Germany. Design historians Elena Dellapiana and Jonathan Mekinda address the role of design through exhibitions of the fascist-era art in Italy and beyond. By tracing the path of Gio Ponti's ceramics back to their fascist roots, the chapter advocates for the need to extract design objects from the realm of mere "decoration" and to challenge the general sense of "feeling at home" often associated with the display of furniture, textiles, and intimate objects. A critical curatorial approach is necessary to unpack the political and cultural mechanisms of power, exclusion, and control, that are embedded in the alleged neutrality of design works. The second part of the book concludes with an interview with art historian and curator Emily Braun on her 1990 exhibition, *Gardens and Ghettos: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy*, shown in New York and Ferrara, the first to include a section on the neglected topic of Jewish artists under fascism.

Part III of the book is devoted to "Absences", focusing on areas of curatorial practices characterized by omissions, exclusions, and silences. The first chapter, by literary historian John Champagne, examines two postwar exhibitions dedicated to Corrado Cagli and

Filippo De Pisis. In both cases, a threefold silence shaped the curatorial approach, with no mention of the artists' queer sexuality, the homoeroticism of some of their fascist-era works, and their relationship with the regime. Champagne addresses the tensions and complexities involved in recognizing Cagli's and Pisis' contributions to the history of the erotic representations of the male body, without ignoring their connection to the regime.

Raffaele Bedarida's chapter analyzes the narratives through which exhibitions have presented antifascist artists, from *Arte contro la barbarie* organized in 1944 after the liberation of Rome, to the 2018 *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum*. By focusing on *The Chinese Hero* and *Concentration Camp*, two paintings by Giustizia and Libertà activist Carlo Levi, who was persecuted but also exhibited by the regime, Bedarida argues that post-fascist shows in Italy have consistently included but failed to fully address pre-Civil War antifascism, ultimately replicating the dynamics of fascist censorship or mirroring the redemptive and conciliatory agenda centered exclusively on the Resistance. Historian Nicola Labanca explores another silenced voice, that of Italy's colonial past. Discussing the 1993 exhibition *Architettura italiana d'oltremare 1870-1940*, Labanca recognizes the groundbreaking role of this show, while criticizing its numerous pitfalls, such as the depiction of Africa as an architectural void as well as the celebration of fascist architecture as an expression of modern and universal rationality. The other two chapters in this section focus on innovative curatorial approaches in the critical analysis of fascist difficult heritage. Literary historian Lucia Re shows how the exhibition *I fiori del male. Donne in manicomio nel regime fascista* (2016-2019), drawing from the photographic archive of the psychiatric hospital in Teramo, significantly reverses the visual panopticon of the asylum. Through a contextualized narrative montage of images and texts, and by adopting a feminist ethics of care, the curators of *I fiori del male* invite the spectators to recognize the inmates' suffering and humanity, while deconstructing the process of women's confinement and punishment implemented by the Fascist regime. Shelleen Greene examines *Roma Negata: Postcolonial Routes of the City*, a 2014 exhibition organized by photojournalist Rino Bianchi and writer and activist Igiaba Scego, and *Postcolonial Italy: Mapping Colonial Heritage*, a 2018 digital project that reframes Italian colonial histories through the creation of digital public archives. Both *Roma Negata* and *Postcolonial Italy* are viewed here as decolonial interventions, based on participatory reengagements with urban geographies and archival materials. The final part of the volume addresses innovative strategies for curating fascism today. Vanessa Rocco examines how certain curatorial practices, such as re-enactments, rehangs, and in general reconstructions of the past, can be challenging and sometimes misleading. Focusing again on the 2018 *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum*, Rocco demonstrates how

difficult it is to rehang the installation shots of the 1932 *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* without either fetishizing and monumentalizing them or erasing their broader political and ideological context. This does not imply that all reenactments, rehangs, or restagings are unproductive at the scholarly level. As convincing, positive examples, Rocco quotes the 2008 reconstruction of El Lissitzky's 1929 Soviet Pavilion at MACBA Barcellona, as well as the AI simulation of the 1931 Exhibition of the Building Workers' Unions, created by the media professor Patrick Roessler. Vivien Greene and Susan Thompson, the curators of the exhibition *Italian Futurism (1909-1944): Reconstructing the Universe* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2014, discuss their own curatorial choices. In this retrospective reflection, they not only recall the pressures they faced to downplay references to fascism but also reevaluate their choices with the benefit of hindsight. For example, the apex of *Italian Futurism*, showcased in the museum's top gallery, was Benedetta Cappa Marinetti's murals *Sintesi delle comunicazioni*, a loan from Palermo's Post office: Was this final aesthetic climax of the exhibition too spectacular? Where should the line be drawn—Greene and Thompson self-critically ponder—to avoid any risk of glorification?

Looking ahead to future curatorial strategies, Sharon Hecker suggests presenting fascist-era art alongside photographic and painted representations by artists of their studios. This approach would allow viewers to peer behind the visual power of art and grasp the contradictions, dissonances, and tragedies in which these artists operated.

Additionally, this section is enriched by interviews to Gabriella Belli, the founding director of the *Museo d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento (MART)*—home of one of Italy's most important collections of fascist-era Italian modernism—and the writer Maaza Mengiste, author of the online exhibition *Project 3541*, which reflects her intimate perspective on the global and personal consequences of the 1935-41 Italo-Ethiopian War.

Methodologically rich and innovative, Bedarida and Hecker's book provides a much-needed intellectual history of postwar exhibitions on fascism. It addressed the multidimensional specificity of the art show by integrating architecture and exhibition design, curatorial practices and institutional history, cultural diplomacy and political history, as well as theories of viewership and the construction of collective memory. This groundbreaking approach opens new avenues for research in areas that are only briefly explored in the book. For instance, the role of science and technology exhibits, as well as the public display of fascist "anthropological revolution" (eugenics, demography, environmentalism, etc.) offer fertile ground for future investigations.

Francesco Cassata, University of Genoa

Sharon Hecker and Raffaele Bedarida, eds., *Curating Fascism: Exhibitions and Memory from the Fall of Mussolini to Today* (London: Bloombury Visual Arts, 2022), pp. 320.

How to quote this article:

Francesco Cassata, review of Curating Fascism: Exhibitions and Memory from the Fall of Mussolini to Today, by Sharon Hecker and Raffaele Bedarida, eds., Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC 26, no. 2 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15773

All Issues

issue 26 / november 2024

issue 25 / september 2024

is:



QUEST
Issues in Contemporary Jewish History

Registrazione Tribunale Milano n. 403 del 18/09/2009

Direttore Responsabile ai sensi della legge italiana (Legge 47/1948), Stefano Jesurum

ISSN 2037-741X

CONTACT

C/o Fondazione CDEC
piazza Edmond J. Safra 1, 20125 Milano
+3902316338
questjournal@cdec.it
www.quest-cdecjournal.it



QUEST is published by



QUEST is referenced in



