

Biography

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SCENOTECHTURE: BETWEEN SCENOGRAPHY AND EXHIBITION ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

This paper investigates scenographic strategies and spatial approaches employed in contemporary art exhibitions in the Czech Republic, with a particular focus on those conceived by visual artists. After a brief historical overview of the tradition of *exhibition scenography*—institutionalised during the 1960s and 1970s through the national enterprise “Výstavnictví” in the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic—the discussion turns to the subsequent decline of this field and the post-1989 emergence of what is now commonly referred to as *exhibition architecture*. Through an analysis of selected exhibitions by Czech artist Dominik Lang, the paper examines spatial strategies that function as interpretive, authorial layers positioned between artistic intention and functional display. It is argued that these practices resonate more closely with scenographic principles than with architectural ones—despite the term *exhibition scenography* having largely disappeared from contemporary Czech exhibition discourse. Nonetheless, the selected case studies reveal that scenographic thinking continues to inform curatorial methodologies within current exhibition-making practices.

Keywords: exhibition scenography, artist-as-curator, theatricality in installation, exhibition as a medium

1. EXHIBITION SCENOGRAPHY OR EXHIBITION ARCHITECTURE?

This paper examines the phenomenon of exhibition scenography—an artistic discipline with a strong tradition in the Czechoslovak context, particularly in relation to the iconic designs of numerous international, often competitive, exhibitions from the second half of the 20th century.¹ From the late 1950s onwards, following international successes in this field, the practice of *exhibition-making* gradually became established as a specialised artistic discipline, institutionalised through newly founded state-run enterprises “Výstavnictví” and “Brněnské veletrhy”. (Binarová, 2017)

Through these institutions, the sub-components of exhibition design were systematically developed, both practically and theoretically. This process gave rise to new professional roles such as exhibition screenwriting, scenography, and dramaturgy. Within the framework of the national enterprise “Výstavnictví”, the appropriate form and function of the exhibition *scenario* was considered to be essential to the production of a compelling result—that is, a distinctive exhibition. This approach also required a unified dramaturgical and scenographic direction to ensure coherence and impact.²

Although the exhibition medium within this institutional framework primarily served as a tool of communication—functioning as an instrument of state propaganda and as an authorised mode of representing official art and culture—it remains relevant to current discourse. I argue that the systematic attention paid to functional spatial-artistic approaches to constructing and narrating the layers of an exhibition resonates with certain tendencies observed in contemporary exhibition practices and their associated “scenotecture”.

After 1989, with the restructuring of the Czech state, many institutions—including “Výstavnictví” and “Brněnské veletrhy”—were dissolved. In the wake of this institutional vacuum, a new approach began to emerge, characterised by the figure of the *artist-as-curator* and a renewed interest in the exhibition as a creative medium. Around the year 2000, the local art scene witnessed a growing trend towards self-organisation, whereby contemporary visual artists increasingly took on the roles of exhibition organisers and producers. (Nekvindová, 2020)

Although the term *exhibition architecture* had not yet been clearly articulated during this period, several key figures of this movement later came to be recognised as prominent *exhibition architects*. Among them are, for instance, the sculptor Dominik Lang and the new media artists Zbyněk Baladrán and Tomáš Svoboda, all of whom became actively engaged in the field of exhibition architecture. They continue to operate within this dual role, maintaining a distinction between their own artistic practices and their work on exhibition projects.

While the term *exhibition scenography* has largely disappeared from use in the Czech context—where it tends to be associated with historical, technical, or scientific museum displays or with immersive, spectacular formats—it continues to attract considerable attention internationally. For instance, in her 2014 research, Margaret Choi Kwan Lam demonstrates that contemporary international discourse on exhibition-making increasingly recognises scenography not only as a dominant spatial strategy but also as a curatorial methodology.

“Scenography has now radically evolved into a new transdisciplinary staging practice that characterized by its self-sufficiency, autonomy, open-structured methodologies, and probability-seeking strategies. By seeing museums and exhibition spaces as metaphorical stages, the exhibition culture will borrow the ideological methodologies, strategies and staging skills from theatres, and translate them in the use of curating.” (Choi Kwan Lam, 2013, pp. 91)

Margaret Choi Kwan Lam further argues that this shift emerged in response to the growing imperative to “stage

¹ This paper is based on the thesis entitled “Scenotecture - Between Exhibition Scenography and Architecture” and defended by the author at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague in 2023 (thesis supervisor: Jan Wollner). Partially similar version of this paper had been prepared in the Czech language for the anthology of the VIII Congress Czech Association of Art Historians held in Brno (12. –14. 9. 2024).

² Josef Svoboda, a prominent Czech scenographer and author of many successful scenography solutions for international exhibition, also emphasises the concept of exhibition dramaturgy in his conference paper from 1975. According to Svoboda, exhibition dramaturgy represents the basis of an approach of staging material culture as well as ideas. As such, even theatrical technologies applied to exhibitions can then serve this purpose, proposes Svoboda, and in some cases, exhibitions themselves might become a space for experimentation with new audio-visual technologies (in such a way that they have had a retroactive effect on theatrical and artistic production of the exhibition). (Svoboda, 1975, pp. 30)

experiences” and, consequently, to enhance the affective relationship between exhibited works, objects, and their viewers. She observes that during the period of her research, between 2010 and 2014, exhibition scenography had already undergone a kind of trial phase, in which it was primarily associated with the production of spectacular commercial events.³ (Choi Kwan Lam, 2013) It was only once this initial tendency began to wane that exhibition scenography started to merge more seamlessly with curatorial practice, she explains.

Building upon this briefly outlined research, my focus shifts to various approaches, strategies, and general staging practices drawn from the field of theatre, which have significantly influenced the curatorial concepts of contemporary exhibition-making. Notably, such practices tend to appear in exhibitions whose *architecture*, *scenography*, or *scenotecture* has been conceptualised, designed, and executed by contemporary visual artists themselves. Whether applied in the context of permanent collections or in their own authorial presentations, these final spatial structures consistently demonstrate a capacity to interpret space and construct narrative via physical situations. In other words, these artists bring a distinctly scenographic sensibility to the practice of exhibition-making.

Although scenographic qualities can be observed across a wide range of contemporary art exhibitions, the spatial layer is, at least in the Czech context, almost invariably referred to as *architecture*. This may stem from the fact that the term *exhibition scenography* is still largely associated with large-scale, immersive shows and thus remains burdened by suspicions of certain inauthenticity. Another possible explanation lies in historical precedent—specifically, the legacy of the Czechoslovak exhibition tradition, particularly its scenographic achievements in the second half of the twentieth century, which were often closely tied to the political rhetoric of the time and to the capacity of exhibitions to materialise ideological frameworks. However, scenography has long since evolved beyond its traditional theatrical context. In its expanded field, it is now understood as a discipline or practice that employs visual and spatial organisational strategies to communicate meaning—effectively, as a method of composing and shaping any performative environment. (McKinney & Palmer, 2017)

Fully aware of both the historical legacy of *exhibition scenography* and the more recent discourse surrounding *exhibition architecture*, I have deliberately introduced a synthetic (newly coined) formulation in the title of this paper. By combining the two terms, my intention is to underscore the continuity between the contemporary exhibition-architectural turn and the scenographic tradition of Czechoslovak exhibition-making. Above all, I seek to emphasise the notion that the exhibition medium constitutes a performative scene in its own right.

2. CURATING THROUGH SCENOGRAPHY

The notion of exhibitions as performative units—or even as a particular form of theatre—is a recurring theme in curatorial studies.⁴ This perspective is grounded in the observation that when an artwork imaginatively *enters* an exhibition, it begins to function performatively: “[...] having agency but also in another sense as becoming exhibition, entering into another kind of ontological situation.” (Rebentisch, 2019, pp. 60) The presence of theatricality—understood as a specific mode of representation—thus emerges in the aesthetic presentation of the artwork. This may occur through the dramaturgical reading of space, its scenographic articulation, the choreographic management of visitors, or the orchestration of sensory experiences: the rhythm of viewing, the synchronisation of various media, and so forth. In such contexts, scenography operates as an active web of relations, a field of connotations embedded within a visual-spatial construct that allows for multiple interpretive perspectives and levels of engagement with the exhibition as a whole.

A compelling example of this approach can be found in the work of Czech artist Dominik Lang. Whether

3 “While a more fundamental transformation in the exhibitionary ideology is on call, a prominent artistic phenomenon is emerging on the other side of the world which has started influencing the exhibition scene, causing a paradigm shift in contemporary curating. It is the notion of the expanding field of scenography.” (Choi Kwan Lam, 2013, pp. 2-3)

4 “When an artwork enters an exhibition, it begins to function performatively, [...] having agency but also in another sense as becoming exhibition, entering into another kind of ontological situation.” (Thrué Djurslev, 2022, pp. 21)

designing exhibitions to which he was invited purely in the role of architect, or developing his own original projects, Lang consistently introduces a deliberate, interpretive layer of spatial design. One such project is *Haus der Wohnirrtümer (House of Housing Mistakes)*, presented at Gallery TZB in the Czech Centre Berlin.⁵ Here, Lang engaged scenographic principles to respond to the very building in which the exhibition took place, making it central to the installation's conceptual and material structure.

The building in question—the Czech Embassy in Berlin—was designed in 1972 by the renowned architectural duo Věra and Vladimír Machonin. Lang's exhibition responded not only to the building's architectural legacy, but critically and more pointedly to its current state of deterioration and misuse. These conditions were symbolised in part by valuable works of art originally created for the embassy's interior in the 1970s, which had since been neglected and relegated to obscure or inappropriate locations within the building due to a lack of awareness or care by local staff.

Lang's scenographic strategy addressed these realities through the principle of *absence*, evoking a sense of emptiness or incompleteness upon initial encounter. Only as visitors progressed through the exhibition space did it become apparent that period artefacts were concealed behind nondescript shelves and false columns—elements constructed by the artist to replicate the embassy's original architectural features with precise fidelity. In this way, reliefs, sculptures, tapestries, and other works gradually revealed themselves through movement, discovery, and spatial immersion of the audience. (Fig. 1, Fig. 2)



Fig. 1-2. Dominik Lang: *Haus der Wohnirrtümer (Dům bytových omylů)*, © Galerie Českého centra v Berlíně, foto: Šárka Lenertová

The most dominant element of the exhibition—one that also had to be *discovered* by the audience—was a bedroom constructed by the artist as an exact replica of the embassy's original facilities. This room was bounded on one side by a large glass gallery window overlooking a busy street, and on the other by an artificially constructed chipboard wall with a small opening. Visitors could access the bedroom from within the exhibition space and were invited to spend time there: to lie on the bed, sit in the armchair, and inhabit the room temporarily.

As a result, during gallery opening hours, it was possible for passers-by on the street to glimpse not only a static 1970s-style bedroom display through the gallery window, but also an unfolding live scene featuring an unknowing performer—a gallery visitor interacting with the space. (Fig. 3, Fig. 4)

This scenographic intervention created a paradoxical form of intimacy. On the one hand, it evoked the illusion of a private bedroom, secluded from the rest of the exhibition by a solid wall. On the other hand, it simultaneously constructed a *meta-scene*: an exposed, almost voyeuristic environment filled with objects and artefacts from the embassy, made visible to onlookers outside. The installation thus blurred the boundaries between private and public, performance and observation, fiction and reality.

⁵ Dominik Lang: *Haus der Wohnirrtümer (House of Housing Mistakes / Dům bytových omylů)*, TZB Galerie Tschechisches Zentrum Berlin, 11. 2. - 9. 4. 2016.

The scenographic approach adopted in the exhibition described above enabled the artist to construct layered narratives, rather than a linear mode of presentation. It allowed for the integration of the exhibition's processual qualities, as well as the potential interactions between people and objects within the space. As a result, this approach rendered the exhibition inherently self-reflexive, prompting visitors to adopt a specific position—or even to engage as co-authors—in relation to the building itself: the architecture that the exhibition was critically reflecting upon.

In this way, the exhibition space functioned as a performative structure, one that shifted over time and through space in response to the movement of the human body. This embodied engagement was not incidental, but rather intrinsically tied to the curatorial intention of the project. The performativity of the exhibition—its capacity to generate meaning through spatial experience—was thus inseparable from the conceptual and material framework of the artwork as a whole.



Fig. 3-4. Dominik Lang: Haus der Wohnirrtümer (Dům bytových omylů), © Galerie Českého centra v Berlíně, foto: Šárka Lenertová

3. SCENE WITHIN A SCENE WITHIN A SCENE...

Dominik Lang frequently works with *meta-scenes* and, more broadly, with various scenographic constructs that allow for a multi-layered reading of the exhibition as a whole. He often places both human actors and non-human objects—i.e. the exhibited artefacts—onto diverse kinds of *stages*, allowing them to narrate an imaginary story embedded within the specific context of each display. A notable example is the exhibition *Ivan Meštrović (1883–1962): Sculptor and Citizen of the World*⁶, for which Lang was originally invited solely in the capacity of exhibition architect. Ultimately, however, the spatial design he created came to serve as the dominant curatorial and dramaturgical framework of the entire project.

Here too, the spatial conception may be described as scenographic: it functioned as a stage for the construction of multiple discourses and interpretive narratives through which the oeuvre of the exhibited artist, Ivan Meštrović, was mediated.

The first part of the exhibition was situated in a long connecting corridor of the gallery, functioning both as a cartographic presentation of Meštrović's sculptural works and as a historical-social contextualisation of his life and practice. The curatorial narrative began with a section devoted to the 1960s—the decade of Meštrović's death—from which visitors could proceed *backwards* in time toward the artist's birth. This reverse chronology was articulated not only through the selection of documents, catalogues, letters, and artefacts, but also via the transformation of the furnishings—pieces of furniture that operated as active scenographic props, themselves metaphorically *ageing* over time.

6 Sandra Baborovská, Barbara Vujanović (curators). *Ivan Meštrović (1883–1962): Sculptor and Citizen of the World / Sochař a světoobčan*, Prague City Gallery, 24. 11. 2022 – 26. 2. 2023.

In this way, the spatial layout was tightly interwoven with the dramaturgy of the exhibition, engaging directly with questions of *what* the exhibition reveals and *how* this revelation unfolds through time.

In other words, by the time visitors reached the beginning of Ivan Meštrović's life story—his birth—they had already been introduced to his major exhibitions, key biographical milestones, stylistic classifications, and critical reflections on his sculptural practice. This layering was a crucial aspect of the overall curatorial concept, as the corridor functioned not only as a spatial connector between the two sections of the exhibition, but also as a spatial-temporal *node*. Upon passing through this transitional space, visitors entered the rear section of the gallery, where several additional exhibition rooms were located. To access the remainder of the exhibition on the opposite side, they were required to retrace their steps and pass through the connecting corridor once more. This return journey offered the possibility of recognising new connections within the presented materials—connections that may not have been legible upon first encounter, but became clearer only after engaging with the installations in the rear gallery spaces.

A particularly striking example of this principle was the treatment of the political dimensions of Meštrović's work. These were represented not only through historical documents, but also by a sculptural installation composed of two portrait busts of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first President of Czechoslovakia. Both busts, dating from the 1920s, were placed on classical plinths positioned directly opposite one another, creating the impression of an imaginary dialogue between the two likenesses. The installation also included a historic chair, placed atop a wooden table, into which one of the plinths had been partially inserted. Since this plinth supported one of the busts, it meant that the portrait of the president was, quite literally, *embedded* within the chair.

This composition simultaneously conveyed a sense of statesmanlike authority—by elevating and enshrining the figure of Masaryk—while also evoking connotations of entrapment or constraint, as if the political figure were confined within the institutional structures he once helped to shape. (see Fig. 5)

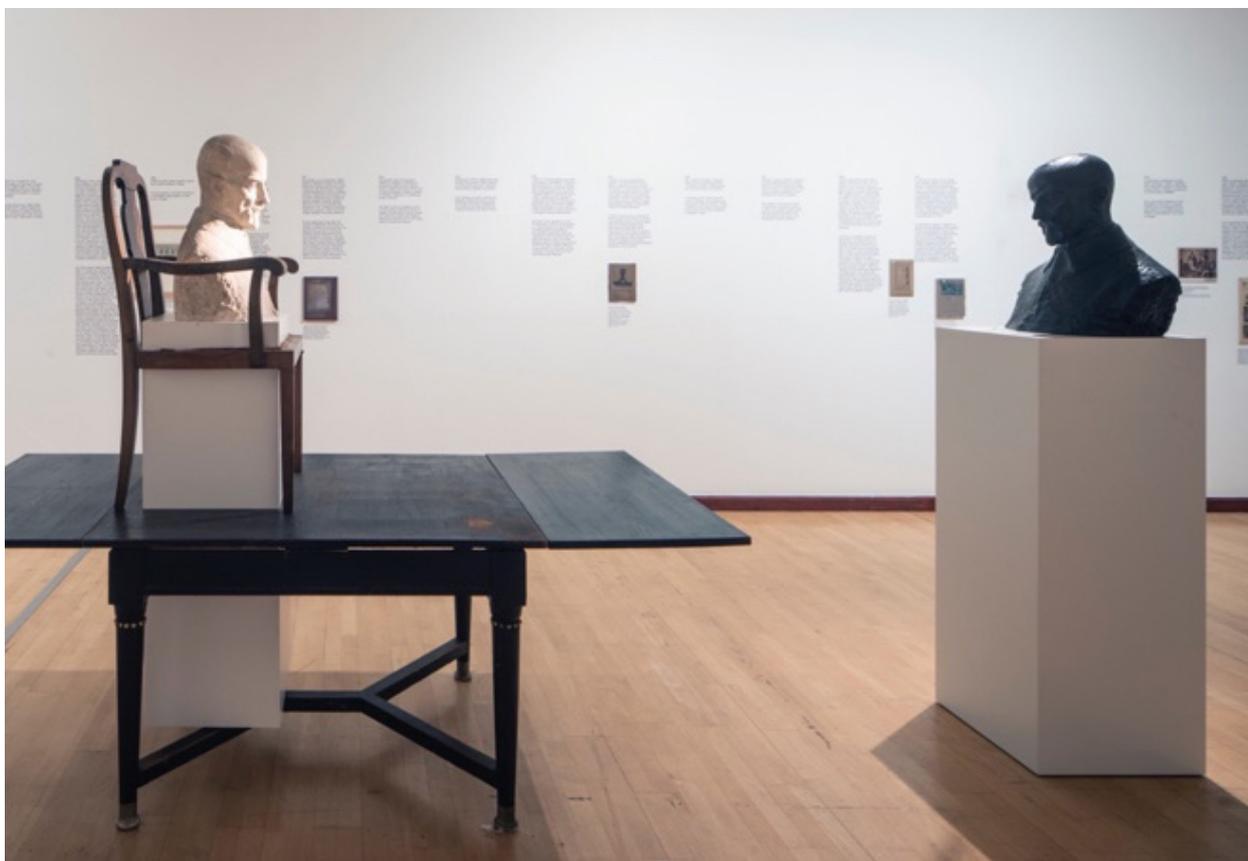


Fig. 5 Sandra Baborovská, Barbara Vujanović: Ivan Meštrović (1883–1962): Sculptor and Citizen of the World / Sochař a světoobčan, ©Prague City Gallery.

Given the *chronotopic* arrangement of the exhibition, visitors may not have immediately made the suggested associations upon their first encounter with the Masaryk installation. Rather, the interpretive potential of these juxtapositions emerged retrospectively—upon re-entering the corridor after having explored the adjoining gallery rooms. These other sections included, among other features, audio recordings of professionally interpreted archival materials, such as personal letters and excerpts from Meštrović's memoirs. One particularly significant text was a 1923 memoir entitled *On a Visit to Masaryk*, in which the artist reflected on his personal relationship with the president.

Such materials offered a rich interpretive framework for re-engaging not only with the dialogical installation of the Masaryk busts but also with other scenographic compositions throughout the exhibition. In this way, the exhibition *Ivan Meštrović (1883–1962): Sculptor and Citizen of the World* emphasised a processual, fluid unfolding of interpretive layers. Meaning was not fixed or linear, but rather constructed gradually through spatial movement, repetition, and return.

During his lifetime, Meštrović's work achieved international acclaim, thanks to a wide array of exhibitions both within Czechoslovakia and abroad. This continuous *movement*—not only of the artist himself but of his sculptures across numerous international venues—informed Dominik Lang's overall spatial and architectural conception of the exhibition. This idea was also materially represented, that is by the use of metal shelving units, which structured the placement of the sculptures within the space. These racks resembled contemporary storage or transport systems more than traditional museum displays, thereby underscoring their function as framing devices and highlighting the exhibition space itself as a *non-neutral zone*—a scenographic setting in its own right. (see Fig. 6)



Fig. 6 Sandra Baborovská, Barbara Vujanović: Ivan Meštrović (1883–1962): Sculptor and Citizen of the World / Sochař a světoobčan, ©Prague City Gallery, foto: Tomáš Souček

4. SCENOTECHTURE: STAGING CURATORIAL STRATEGIES

The aforementioned examples serve to illustrate how a scenographic approach to exhibition-making actively constructs the chosen narrative form. This mode of working draws upon a range of elements—such as the conceptual use of spatial segments as transitional *scenes*—to further articulate and intensify the exhibition's overall structure. At the same time, these projects demonstrate that by foregrounding the very presence of the stage or *scene*, it becomes possible to articulate a form of meta-commentary on the exhibition as a whole.

This perspective is echoed by philosopher and art theorist Juliane Rebentisch, who addresses the theatricality

inherent in the medium of installation. According to her, when the exhibition medium is approached as a stage-like, performative environment, a dominant hierarchical relationship is often presumed—one in which individual artworks are viewed as subordinate to the overarching exhibition scenography or its sub-scenes. However, as Rebentisch argues, this is not the only possible configuration:

“[The] frame, the border of a work of art is nothing static, [...], the context sensibility of contemporary art points to the open structure of artistic experience. [...] Instead of it locking and defining the work of art the highlighting of the stage lets us become aware of our conditions for experiencing art. The stage presence lets the exhibition structure come to the fore and be reflected upon.” (Rebentisch, 2019, p. 60)

The principle articulated by Rebentisch resonates with the previously discussed projects, in which the exhibition functions as a fluid and inherently ambiguous situation—one in which the boundaries and frames of the artwork are continually renegotiated with each visitor’s engagement. The act of foregrounding the scenes, and of identifying their various forms, does not serve to enclose or delimit the artwork; rather, as the examples have demonstrated, it brings into focus the conditions under which the artwork is experienced. These are among the defining characteristics of scenography as a discipline—qualities that are manifest in spatial-artistic solutions even when exhibitions are not conceived as spectacular or immersive shows.

I have chosen to focus on the projects of Dominik Lang as a way of illustrating the potential of the scenographic approach within exhibition-making, and to show how the navigation of the exhibition space can itself become a subject—a medium—that constitutes an integral component of the curatorial concept. In such cases, spatial arrangement does not serve as a neutral framework for the autonomous display of artworks in the service of so-called “objective” presentation. On the contrary, it functions as an interpretive force in its own right, actively shaping the meaning, experience, and narrative of the exhibition as a whole.

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