

# Writing with Exhibitions



Ingrid Halland, Björn Nilsson, and  
Karoline Kjesrud

# Metode

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**ROM**

If the exhibition is considered a starting point rather than an endpoint, what is it a starting point for? If the exhibition is a method, what is it a method for? What else can we discover if we venture beyond conventional notions of how and why exhibitions matter? How can we write about, think about, and make sense of exhibition as method?

## Room 1 – Regenerating Place

The Open Call for this fourth volume of *Metode* rested on a hypothesis: that the topic of exhibitions could gather perspectives and practices that rarely meet in sustained dialogue. Director of the Norwegian Association of Art Societies, Jonas Ekeberg, has noted that Norwegian cultural policy has largely been structured around two dominant poles: the role of the artist and the mandate of the museum.<sup>1</sup> The editors and the three collaborating institutions come from different parts of the arts and culture landscape: two large-scale cultural heritage institutions—the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo and the University Museum of Bergen—and ROM for *kunst og arkitektur*, a small, arts-based institution. Between these poles lies a third, less theorized dimension: the smaller exhibition institution, where exhibition-making often operates as a form of research and developmental work—an approach explored by **Maike Statz** in her essay on the project *Hosting Space* at Hordaland Kunstsenter (HKS), the regional art center in Bergen, Norway.

The collaboration between the Museum of Cultural History and ROM for *kunst og arkitektur* emerged from a moment of loss and transformation: the dismantling of a much-beloved exhibition of medieval art in the Museum of Cultural History. Curated by art historian Martin Blindheim with exhibition architecture by Sverre Fehn, this emblematic display opened in 1979 in the first-floor hall devoted to medieval art ever since the museum's opening to the public in 1904. For forty-two years, the Blindheim–Fehn exhibition shaped how Norwegian medieval history was seen, staged, and understood, until its dismantling in 2021. Curator Jérémie McGowan, at that time Director of Northern Norwegian Art Museum with interest in the decision of dismantling the exhibition, proposed treating this dismantling as a discursive event—a point of departure for developing new knowledge about what exhibitions do, and how they endure in professional memory and institutional practice. Picking up this institutional thread, **Jason A. Falkenburg** traces in his essay a hundred-year endeavor to 'spark life' in medieval stave church portals at Museum of Cultural History, including his own exhibition experiment as a researcher–curator.

1 Jonas Ekeberg, "Kunstpolitikkens tredje dimensjon," available at <https://www.kunstforeninger.no/nyheter/kunstpolitikkens-tredje-dimensjon>

Since 2021, Karoline Kjesrud, Björn Nilsson, and Gjertrud Steinsvåg have organized a series of seminars exploring exhibitions from multiple perspectives. Across around fifty talks, drawing on both cultural heritage and contemporary art practices, a shared insight emerged: an exhibition is not a finished product, nor merely a site of display—but equally open and dynamic processes for professionals. From the artist's perspective, an exhibition functions as an important workspace for exploration, experimentation, and dialogue, as well as a site for artistic practice and reflection. For museums, an exhibition is a tool for knowledge dissemination, reflection, and audience engagement, while also contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage. Taken together, the series of seminars revealed exhibitions as a generative format for investigation, negotiation, and professional inquiry—a tool for recalibrating how knowledge, objects, and publics encounter one another. This understanding is further developed in **Adeline Lépine**'s essay "Sandbox Exhibitions."

The ten essays in *Exhibition as Method* affirm that investments in exhibition spaces, institutional contexts, and the collective expertise of teams must be understood as qualitative commitments that directly shape both the works and their modes of presentation. In different ways, the exhibitions discussed here integrate constraints and possibilities into the development of artworks and displays, not as obstacles but as productive conditions. **Alice Haddad**'s essay on the large-scale exhibition *Mutations* (2000) exemplifies this: she argues that its design and spatial logic not only represented the object of inquiry—global urban infrastructures—but the exhibition *regenerated* how knowledge is produced and shared, what she calls a “topographical exhibition.” This orientation helps advance artistic and research practices on terms other than those dictated by quantitative indicators such as audience numbers, media coverage, or project-based funding. In this way, exhibitions function as tools for long-term professional development and as a critical practice situated at the intersection of art, architecture, and institutional reflection.

## Room no. 2 – Organizing objects

In the Nordic region over the past two decades, a distinctive discourse on exhibitions—above all as sites of research—has emerged across contemporary art and museum studies. Curators and scholars have shown how exhibitions can generate knowledge rather than merely display it. This is evident in Maria Lind's

context-oriented curatorial practice, which many of the essays in *Exhibition as Method* draw on, and in the cultural heritage field, where Peter Bjerregaard's edited book *Exhibitions as Research: Experimental Methods in Museums*—written while he was senior advisor of exhibitions at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo—and the project “The Method of Things” led by curator Henrik Treimo have fostered more experimental approaches to curating in cultural history museums.<sup>2</sup> The OCCAS group at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design has curated and written about exhibitions as research, notably in *Place and Displacement: Exhibiting Architecture* (2015). At Södertörn University in Sweden, Kim West and Sven-Olov Wallenstein have contributed to theorizing exhibitions; at Aarhus University, Jacob Lund—who, together with Pernille Lyslund Matzen, edited *Symbolic Machines: Institutional Transformation through Exhibitions* (2025)—has advanced discussions on institutional change through curating. Further, Mattias Bäckström's book *To Build Content with Exhibitions: Exhibition Production as Research Process* (original in Swedish), which traces exhibitions as idea and process from the 1750s to the 2010s,<sup>3</sup> has deepened understandings of exhibition-making as a mode of knowledge production and has been influential for the conceptual development of this volume, as has the work of designer, activist, and curator Jérémie McGowan. MA programs in Curating in have also helped build a strong critical discourse on curating and exhibitions in the Nordic regions. In Stockholm, CuratorLab at Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts, and Design, and the international MA in Curating at Stockholm University, led by Magdalena Holdar, have been formative. In Denmark, the MA in Curating currently led by Edward Payne, and in Norway, the work of Anne Szefer Karlsen at the former MA in Curating at the Art Academy in Bergen, alongside curator Lisa Rosendahl's work at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, have been key in consolidating and advancing curatorial debates.

We build on these conversations, but we do not simply add another case to the discussion on “exhibition-as-research” or situate the publication within the discourse of “the curatorial.” Rather than theorizing exhibitions from a distance, the authors of *Exhibition as Method* write from within specific display situations. Working in designated contexts, regions, and local politics, they treat the exhibition as a method that is spatially and temporally bounded: a contained gathering of objects and people, in a particular place, for a limited time. Yet so-called topographical exhibitions frequently work with objects that are anything but contained: ephemeral, immaterial phenomena in which the line between spatial

2 See Peter Bjerregaard (ed.), *Exhibitions as Research: Experimental Methods in Museums* (Routledge, 2020); Henrik Treimo, Lars Risan, Ketil Gjølme Andersen, Marianne Løken, and Torhild Skåtun (eds.), *Tingenes metode – museenes kunnskapstopografi* (Museumsforlaget, 2023).

3 Mattias Bäckström, *Att bygga innehåll med utställningar. Utställningsproduktion som forskningsprocess* [To Build Content with Exhibitions. Exhibition Production as Research Process] (Nordic Academic Press, 2016).

interior and extended exterior is constantly shifting. Nonetheless, the spatial and temporal frame of the exhibition compels a particular perception, concentrating what exceeds the room into a legible, situated form. **Zorana Đorđević**'s essay "Resonance and Silence: Displaying Acoustic Heritage" makes this tension especially tangible, showing how acoustics and architectural conditions shape sound and listening in an exhibition format.

Moreover, *Exhibition as Method* asks what happens when the logics of exhibition-making—its ways of organizing objects, structuring movement, and choreographing attention—are transferred into writing. If earlier work has cast the exhibition as a vehicle for research, our project here is to invert that relation: how might research writing itself be curated as an exhibition? Mattias Bäckström's notion of "the exhibition essay" crystallizes a key shift: that exhibition-making is no longer the decorative afterthought to research, but part of its core process. To think the exhibition as an essay, Bäckström suggests, is to reframe exhibition-making as integral to an expanded research process, rather than as the endpoint of scholarly work. Here, we rotate this insight. Rather than asking only how exhibitions can take on essayistic forms, we ask how essays can become exhibitions—how writing might be structured as a sequence of rooms, thresholds, and constellations of things. Instead of treating essays as commentary on exhibitions, the authors experiment with essays that behave like exhibitions: texts that assemble objects, references, and voices; that stage encounters and frictions; that rely on rhythm, adjacency, and spatial metaphors as much as on linear argument, as in **Farida Youssef**'s essay "Maxims for Curators."

In addressing the reader, we adopt the stance of a curator receiving visitors. The essays do not offer a single, continuous line of argument; they invite a path. Openings and conclusions are treated as entrances and exits, carefully staged for transitions of mood and thought. Just as a curator considers which objects, affects, and contextual cues might best introduce an exhibition—and which atmospheres, resonances, or "after-images" might accompany the visitor's exit—the authors here treat their opening and closing paragraphs as carefully staged thresholds. **Reyhaneh Mirjahan**'s contribution makes this most explicit, unfolding as a chain of textual rooms, each with its own spatial and affective arrangement. In this way, *Exhibition as Method* does not only describe how exhibitions organize objects; it performs, in writing, the curatorial act of organization itself.

# Room no. 3 – Activating people

When we launched the Open Call for *Exhibition as Method*, a key premise was to invite a broad, international group of contributors working in different institutional settings across the cultural heritage sector and the arts—some with research backgrounds, some without. How is “exhibition as method” understood from the vantage point of a director of a small regional institution, a hotel owner working independently, a freelance artist–curator, or a heritage researcher? Over nine months, the contributors have developed their essays in close dialogue with one another, with Metode’s editorial board,<sup>4</sup> and with the three editors. Across their case studies, the authors show how exhibitions organize, activate, regenerate, and question. Yet the guiding questions from the Open Call has remained crucial: how might one write about exhibitions in a discursively meaningful way—without attempting to walk the reader through every aspect of the display? And how to navigate the many voices and roles involved in realizing an exhibition—the artists, audiences, institutional teams (technicians, educators, communicators), critics, curators, researchers—in a meaningful way that acknowledges the compromises that often accompany co-creative methodologies? Most explicitly, **Nikita Mathias** has developed a method for documenting insights from the exhibition process in written form. His essay unfolds as a dialogue among the different voices that contributed to the exhibition *Arif at Munch* at MUNCH, with his own voice as one among them. Adopting a methodological dialogic stance, the essay engages critically with collaborators, reviewers, and audiences—modelling how writing can mirror the polyphony of exhibition-making.

Approaching exhibitions in this way—less as stable outcomes than as processes animated by multiple professional perspectives and actions—led us to a core proposition: the exhibition itself can be understood as a method. Whether dealing with an art exhibition or a museum display, treating “exhibition” as a method allows us to work with a shared terminology that focuses on what exhibitions do to and with the people involved. After receiving over fifty essay drafts that answered our Open Call, the Editorial Board invited eleven professionals from various fields and disciplines to explore how the exhibition has functioned as a method in their practice. Their final essays can be grouped into four interrelated modalities through which exhibitions operate as method:

<sup>4</sup> Metode’s Editorial Board for *Exhibition as Method*: Hanne Hammer Stien, Gunhild Mathea Husvik-Olasussen, Gustav Jørgen Pedersen, Petrine Vinje, and Nick Walkley.

#### Organizing Objects:

Farida Youssef introduces the publication by examining exhibitions as “objects of thought”, while Jason A. Falkenburg explores museum objects and their long histories of display and re-interpretation.

#### Regenerating Place:

Alice Haddad considers the city and global infrastructures as sites of exhibition; Reyhaneh Mirjahani works through place-based projects; and Zorana Đorđević investigates how acoustics and architectural conditions shape sound and listening in an exhibition format.

#### Activating People:

Adeline Lépine addresses the activation of local contexts and publics; Maike Statz turns the “backstage” and the closure of a venue into a methodological front; and Nikita Mathias stages dialogues among audiences, critics, curators, and artists.

#### Questioning Time:

Gunhild Moe and Marie Bønløkke Missono challenge how the past is narrated and curated; and finally, Hala Alnaji creates futures through a co-creative exhibition practice.

Although the contributions are clustered under these four headings, they should not be read as separate themes. Rather, organizing objects, regenerating place, activating people, and questioning time appear throughout the volume as constituent elements of exhibitions themselves—interdependent forces that together shape what an exhibition is and what the exhibition as method can do.

## Room nr. 4 – Questioning time

A persistent challenge underlies this project: why are texts and essays—those discursive documents that frame exhibitions—typically finalized before the exhibition opens? Treating the exhibition as a method for writing presupposes that the exhibition itself poses new questions—questions that demand reflection, and whose answers must be situated within broader fields of inquiry. Here, we insist on the post-exhibition phase as equally crucial for critical work. Only in the aftermath can the experiences of making an exhibition be brought

into dialogue with audience responses and critical reception. The condition for treating the exhibition as a method for writing is that the exhibition itself generates new questions that demand critical reflection, and that the insights emerging from the event of the exhibition are then positioned within a relevant field of inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Such encounters generate what we call ‘post-exhibition writing,’ which extends the exhibition in time and space—as in **Gunhild Moe** and **Marie Bønløkke**’s crime story that tracks the history of a ‘museological murderer’ in their local community, and in **Hala Alnaji**’s future-oriented essay, where an exhibition on the dismantling of Gaza grows and changes with each revisiting.

Read together, the essays in *Exhibition as Method* frame exhibition-making as a temporal practice whose life does not end when the exhibition closes. On the contrary, the exhibitions continue as writing, as reflection, and as an ongoing questioning of how pasts, currents, and futures are assembled, staged, and unsettled across time and space. Here, exhibition and essay meet as shared method.

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5 In a similar way, the Metode volume ‘Currents’ attempted to extend the Lofoten International Art Festival 2024 ‘Sparks’ beyond its temporal and spatial limits. See <https://metode.rom.no/volume/3>

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