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The Aesthetics of Propaganda: Modern Design at the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow

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The Aesthetics of Propaganda:
Modern Design at the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow

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Introduction

United States Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev walked quickly through the model home, both men tired after a full day of engaging in a series of public debates.[1] Suddenly the two politicians stopped as Nixon drew Khrushchev into the model kitchen.

"I want to show you this kitchen," he said, gesturing to a washing machine. "See that built-in washing machine?"

Khrushchev quickly countered, "We have such things."[2]

So began the infamous "Kitchen Debate," in which Nixon and Khrushchev engaged in a deliberation about the merits of capitalism versus communism while gesticulating to various household items. As the men stood in the kitchen, a circle of reporters and photographers surrounded them, leaning on every word, recording the exchange that would come to characterize a new era in relations between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The Kitchen Debate has become one of the most iconic moments of the Cold War. While many accounts of the words that passed between the politicians exist, the backdrop to the debate is less often discussed. Where were Khrushchev and Nixon while they debated? The location is equally as important as the words themselves. This conversation was a concrete manifestation of the ideological conflict that existed between these two nations, but the space itself was also a

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[1] Harrison E. Salisbury, "Nixon and Khrushchev Argue in Public as U.S. Exhibit Opens; Accuse Each Other of Threats," *New York Times*, July 25, 1959.
[2] William Safire, "The Cold War's Hot Kitchen," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2009

silent and ever-present actor in this political debate. Outside of the model kitchen, a multi-storied exhibition stretched on, surrounding the debating politicians on all sides.

In 1959, the American government, with the help of numerous designers, architects, and curators, harnessed the power of visual propaganda in the creation of the American National Exhibition in Moscow. It was within this space that Nixon and Khrushchev debated. The kitchen was situated inside of the model home on the ground floor of one of the main exhibition buildings. It was a kaleidoscope of consumer goods and culture meant to show advances in American technology and prove to Soviet citizens the immense freedom of choice that the American people had.

As a propaganda tool, the 1959 exhibition employed the aesthetics of modern art and design to send a specific message to the Soviet Union and the world about American exceptionalism. At this point in the Cold War, the exhibition of culture was as powerful as the threat of any nuclear weapon. The exhibit attempted to carve out a bastion of American-ness in the heart of the Soviet Union. Built and conceived by American designers who were working on the cusp of design innovation, the exhibition featured the American lifestyle, advances in technology, as well as a large display of work by American modern artists. The context of the exhibition was a concerted attempt to display the "best of" American art, culture, and technological advances in a format that emphasized freedom and democracy, but also power and American cultural preeminence.

The American National Exhibition was a vibrant and dynamic example of cultural diplomacy. This display of culture generated strong reactions and drew excited crowds. In a photograph taken in the art section of the exhibition, crowds gather in the gallery. Their backs are turned to the photographer, their bodies pressed up against each other and the art, necks

craning to get a look at the pieces. In the center of the frame, a young man has been caught mid-turn by the photographer's film, and as he pivots away from his still-captivated countrymen, he makes eye-contact with the camera. His facial expression is arresting—conveying strong emotion in a split second. A viewer today cannot know what this young man is thinking, but the intensity of his gaze is enough to make one pause and consider. What was going through his mind at the moment this photo was taken? Perhaps his face shows surprise at the content of the exhibition, perhaps shock, concern, the possibility of new ideas, or exposure to the new ways of visualizing the world. This photo illustrates the unique relationship between a viewer and an object in an art gallery. In this boy's facial expression, we see the intent of the exhibition reflected. He has not stumbled across the painting by chance; this is a cultural encounter that has been carefully orchestrated.

The arrangement of art in the exhibition and the architecture of the space emphasized certain artists and works as well as the themes of freedom and democracy. The goal of the exhibition and the U.S. government was to insert itself and the image of American freedom into the moment of discovery that the exhibition had afforded this young man and the other visitors to the exhibition. In the photograph, the man's head is framed by Grant Wood's *Pastor Weems' Fable (1940),* which depicts the oft-told American tale of a young George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. In the painting, the upright Pastor Weems holds back a painted curtain revealing the scene of the 'crime' with a stern expression on his face. It is this face we can see peeking over the shoulder of the young Russian man, as if it were a reminder of the principles upon which America was founded. To the right of *Pastor Weems Fable* hangs Jackson Pollock's *Cathedral*, mostly obscured by the crowd. The dynamic and expressive paint splatters of *Cathedral* contrast sharply with the white walls of the exhibition making the visual impact of the

piece undeniable. This effect is reflected in the face of the young man—his raised eyebrows, wide eyes and open mouth.

The juxtaposition of the elements in this photograph emphasize the influence that the art exhibition had on those who viewed it. This exhibition was a tool of propaganda, and in this moment we are perhaps seeing an instance of an exposure to a new idea. This is the goal that the United States government had in mind when they made the decision (one that was predicated on at least a decade of earlier cultural diplomacy initiatives in the years following World War II) to send modern art abroad as a cultural weapon of the Cold War. Pollock and Wood did not paint with this specific propagandistic goal in mind, but this did not mean their work was immune to appropriation and interpretation. In this exhibition of modern American art, the arrangement of the art on the gallery walls was done for more than just visual effect.

The creation of the exhibition was in itself a propagandistic event that can be considered and analyzed like any work of art or piece of political propaganda. The entire design of the exhibition was meant to impress, awe, and convince. In addition to displaying modern art, the exhibition employed design elements rooted in the tradition avant-garde artistic movements. The exhibition's propagandist power lay in its design. The significance of this is two-fold. For one, the design draws on traditional avant-garde aesthetics and influences, placing the actions of the United States in the realm of governments making use of modern art to promote political ideology—not an uncommon phenomenon. Secondly, a close visual and spatial analysis of the design components reveals the authority that any exhibition space exerts on its viewer. In the case of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, this perspective holds true and is essential to understanding the propaganda effect of the exhibition, and more importantly, to investigating the methods in which this propaganda was successfully installed through modernist, avant-garde

aesthetics. An investigation of this relationship between propaganda and the avant-garde is important because it provides a tool with which to redefine the way that the United States government promoted ideals of democracy and freedom abroad during the Cold War. Though the ideology being promoted during the Moscow exhibition was democratic and free, it was not necessarily being promoted in a democratic and free manner.

In the instance of this specific exhibition, analysis of art and design demonstrates the importance of comparisons with other political powers that make use of art as propaganda. In using art as an instrument of propaganda during the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow, the actions of the United States government mirrored authoritarian regimes like the Soviet Union. The U.S. and USSR both appropriated artistic styles in the service of the propagation of their ideologies. By using modern art and the aesthetics of avant-garde design to aid in the spread of democracy and American freedom, the U.S. government acted in the tradition of totalitarian governments. For example, Hitler in Germany, Mussolini in Italy, and Stalin in Russia all harnessed art in some form or another to promote the power of their regimes.

I want to be clear here about what I mean by totalitarianism, and why I make this comparison. In employing the term "totalitarianism," I refer to a system of government characterized by the leader and the state's complete control over society. In a totalitarian regime, the public and the private, as well as the political, economic, cultural, and social aspects of society must be completely regulated and in line with the ruling power's ideology. I am not arguing that the American Cold War government was a totalitarian state. Although the basic tenets of American democracy were still in place at this time, what could be considered totalitarian tendencies and practices did exist in the actions of the United States government. These actions and tendencies come to light in an examination of the art and design displayed and

built for the 1959 exhibition in Moscow. Similar to the "inverted totalitarianism" argument of

political theorist Sheldon Wolin, I argue that these tendencies are sometimes imperceptible and

not premeditated, however, they are "totalizing in the sense that they are obsessed with control,

expansion, superiority, and supremacy."[3] As Igor Golomstock writes, looking for characteristics

of totalitarianism in western democracy is like, "looking for the intent of ice in cold water. It is

indisputably there, nevertheless, ice and water are two distinct conditions of society."[4] The

organizers of the American National Exhibition did not promote a totalitarian agenda toward art

or attempt to stifle creative freedom in the harsh manner that often occurred in these dictatorial

states. However, the actions of the United States must be considered in this context, because the

end goal—that of conveying a propagandistic message through the visual—was essentially the

same, demonstrating methodical attempts to present and sustain a particular world view, and

distinctive imperial purpose.

The United States after World War II was a global power and saw itself as such. It was

the era of the "American Century." As Henry Luce argued in his well-known piece outlining the

elements of American ascendency in the twentieth century, it was America's time to "be the

powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world can do their mysterious work of

lifting the life of mankind from the level of the beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower

than the angels."[5] Written in 1941, this piece demonstrates the attitude that fueled the war years,

and consequently the cold war that followed. During World War II, the centralized state power

of the United States reached an apex, and did not dissipate in the years following.

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[3] Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 10.

[4] Igor Golomshtok, *Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China* (Overlook Press, 2011).

[5] Henry Luce, "The American Century," *Life Magazine*, February 17, 1941, 68.

The idea that cultural diplomacy needed to be somehow divorced from official government policy in order to preserve the ideals of freedom, was deeply ingrained in American thinking prior to World War II. However, official American cultural diplomacy initiatives that continued into the Cold War were first established during World War II as a response to aggressive propaganda efforts produced by countries like Nazi Germany. As part of the war effort, there was a need to respond in kind to this propaganda, but a concern that if culture became a tool for the government, there would be a loss of democratic integrity. As Rosenberg writes, "the dilemma of how to disseminate an unofficial official culture was never resolved."[6] This dilemma would continue to play out during the Cold War, and is at the core of the tension and controversy that existed over discussions of government sponsorship of the arts for cultural diplomacy purposes. Diplomatic officials in the United States worked under the assumption that if they were promoting freedom, then, "a cultural policy closely linked to these diplomatic goals was less objectionable than the cultural diplomacy of other nations."[7]

As such, in the climate of World War II, a path was opened up for the intense propagation of American culture abroad by various government agencies.[8] These organizations and methods did not disappear at the end of the war, but rather morphed into new forms. President Eisenhower, a strong proponent of "psychological warfare," appreciated the power of cultural diplomacy and propaganda efforts.[9] The United States Information Agency (USIA), was created by Eisenhower in 1953 to disseminate American cultural information across the globe, and, as Rosenberg writes, "the government became increasingly committed to the free-flow

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[6] Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 205

[7] Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream,* 206

[8] Ibid

[9] Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 82.

doctrine of cultural exchange that would keep the world open to Americanizing influences."[10] The American National Exhibition in Moscow would be one of the agency's largest and most expansive undertakings, solidifying the relationship between government and culture.

The typical American narrative of the Cold War relies on extreme polarization between two sides. The promotion of American exceptionalism during the Cold War through agencies like the USIA, posited the United States and democracy as "good" and the Soviet Union and communism as "evil." In the role of "good," the United States government, as an advocate for democracy and freedom, had room to maneuver. By creating an "us" versus "them," "good" versus "evil" situation, space was made for undemocratic activity. The end products: democracy, freedom, no communism, economic and cultural influence, was more important than the means of getting there. By simply calling the standoff between democracy and communism a "war," albeit one that was cold, a space was opened up for any activity that would help win the "war." When proof of secretly funded CIA activities promoting American interests and culture came out in the 1960s, Thomas W. Braden, former CIA official and journalist, defended allegations of the CIA's "immorality" by using this argument: "For the cold war was and is a war, fought with ideas instead of bombs. And our country has had a clear-cut choice, either we win the war or we lose it."[11]

This thesis is not an examination of the many covert CIA sponsored art initiatives that were a part of the Cold War.[12] The American National Exhibition was openly sponsored by the US State Department. However, the very existence of this covert activity illuminates an

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[10] Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream,* 228

[11] Thomas Braden, "I'm Glad the CIA Is Immoral," *Saturday Evening Post*, May 20, 1967, 14.

[12] Eva Cockcroft discusses the implications of CIA sponsored art in her 1974 piece "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War." Frances Stonor Saunders has detailed these covert actions in her extensive book, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*.

important point about the United States government's relationship with culture. The argument was that the CIA had to secretly sponsor exhibitions of modern art because they would never pass muster in a conservative congress. The fact that the CIA went to such great lengths to make these exhibitions happen demonstrates the faith they put in the power of cutting-edge, contemporary art to spread the American dream and prove that American was not only a global economic power, but a cultural one as well. The American National Exhibition was conceived in this climate. Strict dividing lines between democracy and totalitarian control characterized Cold War ideology, and to some extent these dividing lines have been preserved in the historical study of the Cold War. It is easy to assume that because the United States government was promoting democracy, the agencies that were assigned to spread this American doctrine, such as the CIA and the USIA were doing so in a free and purely democratic fashion. We now know that this was not the case, as covert CIA operations and American support of world leaders with questionable human rights records during the Cold War years have come to light.[13]

In the particular case of the American National Exhibition in Moscow however, it is not at first obvious how the story of the exhibition might fit in with un-democratic actions. We have to realize that the American National Exhibition, while it promoted freedom, democracy, and capitalism, was not necessarily a free space. In its role as a propaganda event meant to persuade, the spatial layout and visual elements of the exhibition did not leave room for other opinions and subtly laid out a specific ideology of American exceptionalism. Additionally, in appropriating the style of the avant-garde for the purposes of the state, the American National Exhibition can

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[13] For example Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam in 1954. For a detailed account of covert CIA actions that have come to light after the Cold War, see James Callanan's *Covert Action in the Cold War*. As Callanan writes, "Rather than choosing the best man for the job, the CIA often found itself limited to picking…the best of a bad bunch" (184).

be and should be understood in the same category as previous propaganda exhibitions of European totalitarian states.

Why was the U.S. State Department so interested in using art for propaganda purposes? Why modern art especially? It is important to make the distinction that the art in the American National Exhibition was appropriated in the service of state propaganda, rather than explicitly created for this purpose. In *Art Power,* Boris Groys argues that "art becomes politically effective only when it is made beyond or outside the art market—in the context of direct political propaganda. Such art was made in the former Socialist countries."[14] However, art is not only politically effective when it is created with a propagandistic message in mind. Art becomes politically effective when a government appropriates and co-opts it in the service of a propaganda message, regardless of whether or not the artwork was originally created with a political or propagandistic intention. This idea extends to the appropriation of entire artistic styles and movements, such as the aesthetics of the avant-garde that were central to the American National Exhibition in Moscow. As Groys writes, "the art that is put in service of such a dynamic revolutionary balance of power takes necessarily the form of political propaganda."[15]

When powerful regimes use art for political and social gain, we can interrogate this action—the appropriation of art—to better understand history, art, and dynamics of power. In 1954, author Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt wrote *Art Under a Dictatorship* in which he outlined the ways that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany used artistic expression for ideological motives. It is a forceful call to action, a stringent reminder that art is to be taken seriously, because taken into the wrong hands it can be a dangerous tool. He writes, "*one of the reasons so many people find it difficult to take these things seriously is an ingrained indifference to art, a traditional*

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[14] Boris Groys, *Art Power* (MIT Press, 2008), 6.
[15] Ibid

reluctance to accept art as a direct social force of extraordinary magnitude."[16] In the study of

history, we must accept art as a direct social force of extraordinary magnitude. The history of art

and culture is not any less significant than political and social history, and one cannot be fully

understood without the other; they are inextricably linked. This thesis seeks to present a narrative

of an often-told Cold War story—that of political propaganda—and re-frame it using a cultural

lens. Through an analysis of the exhibition of art and culture that occurred in Moscow in 1959, it

is possible to redefine the typical story of American exceptionalism during the Cold War.

More recently a number of historians have focused their studies on the intersection of

culture and politics. Work done by historian Penny Von Eschen on U.S. State Department

sponsored Cold War jazz tours abroad provides a methodological and analytical framework for

studies of cultural diplomacy. Von Eschen's work reinforces the main tenet of this thesis—the

significance of studying the history of culture not in a vacuum, but in conversation with political,

economic, social, and global factors. Von Eschen conclusively demonstrates that the separation

of culture and politics in historical analysis has prevented a deep and meaningful understanding

of the role the United States took on after World War II. [17] This new role that the United States

defined for itself was predicated on ideals like Henry Luce's "American Century," that promoted

American exceptionalism and imperialism in all aspects of U.S interactions abroad. Von

Eschen's work has influenced scholars like Claire Croft, who analyzes State Department dance

tours. Croft's use of dance as a mode of analysis is an important example of how a cultural

phenomenon can be used to enhance understanding of a pre-existing historical narrative. Croft

goes beyond describing dance as a powerful tool of cultural diplomacy and propaganda, making

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[16] Hellmut Lehmann Haupt, *Art: Under a Dictatorship* (Oxford University Press, 1954), xviii.

[17] Penny Von Eschen, "Duke Ellington Plays Baghdad: Rethinking Hard and Soft Power from Inside Out" in *Contested Democracy: Freedom, Race, and Power in American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). 279-300
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use of the language of dance—the dancers' bodies and choreography—to provide a deep analysis

of U.S diplomatic policy. Like Von Eschen, Croft takes issue with the binaries of political and

cultural diplomacy. Challenging Joseph Nye's definitions of "hard power" and "soft power" both

Von Eschen and Croft argue that these definitions place culture as "separate from and perhaps

less than political or economic diplomacy"[18] and that this "remains an obstacle to understanding

American culture as well as the exercise of U.S. power in the world."[19] This thesis seeks to

reside in a similar sphere as Von Eschen and Croft's analyses and demonstrate that the political

and cultural aspects driving the American National Exhibition were interlinked. In this event, an

understanding of cultural aspects uniquely enhances our understanding of the political.

The American National Exhibition in Moscow has been studied from many different

angles, mostly in terms of political propaganda. Most recently Andrew Wulf has contributed a

museum studies perspective to the current understanding of the event, analyzing the exhibition

and its design.[20] He delves deep into the factors that went into planning and creating the

exhibition, examining the way that design was used as a political force. His in-depth look at the

design of the exhibition as well as the influences and motives of the lead designers, sheds

significant light on the processes by which the exhibition came about.

Even so, more can be added to a close analysis of the space of the exhibition. As such,

Wulf starts the work that I seek to build on in this paper, namely that of analyzing the actual

aesthetic qualities of the exhibition. In addition, Mary Anne Staniszewski's scholarship on the

history of exhibition design at the Museum of Modern Art provides an invaluable framework for

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[18] Claire Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 18.
[19] Von Eschen, *Duke Ellington Plays Baghdad*, 281.
[20] Andrew James Wulf, *U.S. International Exhibitions during the Cold War: Winning Hearts and Minds through Cultural Diplomacy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

the analysis of exhibition design "as an aesthetic medium and historical category."

Staniszewski's work is groundbreaking, in that she closely analyzes the exhibition as a medium

in and of itself, a part of art history that is often overlooked. Staniszewski argues that,

> "Exhibitions, like the artworks themselves, represent what can be described as conscious and unconscious subjects, issues, and ideological agendas. Their unconscious, or less obvious visible, aspects can be understood as manifestations of historical limitations and social codes. *One effective strategy for seeing these often overlooked yet extremely powerful dimensions of art exhibitions is to analyze their installation designs.*"[21]

By acknowledging the power dynamics that exist in the space of an art exhibition, Staniszewski

makes room in the art historical canon for a new type of understanding. In her analysis she does

not only look at the art on the wall, but considers the importance of *how* it is placed on the wall.

Staniszewski's methods provide an important starting point for understanding the power of the

specific design decisions that were made in the 1959 exhibition, and her work has inspired mine.

For a full understanding of the significance of this exhibit as an example of American

propaganda that exemplifies totalitarian tendencies, an analysis of the exhibit must be placed in

the context of the avant-garde art movements that so inspired its design. There is little work done

on this specific comparison. There are many studies of avant-garde art and totalitarianism, or the

American National Exhibition and modern art that run parallel to each other but never seem to

collide. I propose it is necessary for this collision to happen—we must understand that the

American National Exhibition was an event of cultural diplomacy that was just as significant as

any political diplomacy that occurred during the Cold War because of the specific styles that

were used. The method I employ is to examine the art historical influences on both the modern

American art sent abroad with the exhibit as well as the design of the exhibit itself. By

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[21] Emphasis added. Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display : A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1998), xxii.

interrogating the design language of the exhibition, influences of the avant-garde will be revealed.

Focusing on the design of the exhibition exposes two significant ideas about this event: First, that modern art and design aesthetics were often condemned as communist and subversive at home in the United States, yet the State Department promoted the distribution of modern art abroad. Though they knew that this type of art was controversial in the public eye, State Department programs understood that there was some kind of inherent power in modern art and design techniques. Second, the design shows that the initial influences for the avant-garde aesthetics in the exhibition came from European modernists whose work was often co-opted by the totalitarian governments of 1930s Europe. For example, in early 20th century Russia, the avant-garde was instated as official cultural policy, meaning that Russian political propaganda in the early 20th century was essentially avant-garde. It was at this time that artists such as El Lissiztky, who would go on to become incredibly influential on American modern design, especially in regard to the exhibition of art, were developing the styles that would come to define modernism. It is this contradictory relationship between cutting edge artistic notions and government control that drives this story and the questions I ask.

The study of U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War is by no means an under-investigated field. The idea that the United States and the Soviet Union used culture (as did governments around the world) as a tool for political propaganda is an established fact. It may seem then, that there is little reason to return to this topic again. It is true that a study of U.S. cultural diplomacy and power could be focused on any one of the numerous countries that the U.S. government identified at risk for turning to communism. These areas are less studied, and likely have much to offer to a better understanding of American cultural power abroad. However,

in this case, it is important to focus on U.S.-Soviet relations, as this relationship is the most dominant historical narrative in our understanding of the Cold War. For this reason, the prevailing definition of the actions of the United States during the Cold War must be challenged and scrutinized even more closely.

Chapter 1 discusses the precedents for the American National Exhibition, placing it within the context of U.S. cultural diplomacy efforts and other such international exhibitions. This chapter attempts to situate the actions surrounding the 1959 exhibition in relation to prior cultural diplomacy initiatives, but also to totalitarian regimes that had similarly made use of international exhibitions as propaganda forms. The analysis relies on an examination of the decision-making process behind the choice of modern art to be included in the American National Exhibition, and a discussion of the intense controversy that followed. Here I argue that the attitudes surrounding modern art in the United States—in its simultaneous potential as a weapon of propaganda, or as some thought, a tool for the promotion of communism—can be compared to those held in certain totalitarian dictatorships. This comparison raises questions about why these governments appropriated art at all, and why the art of the avant-garde was considered particularly effective.

Delving deeper into the specific design elements employed in these exhibitions, we can trace the influence of the avant-garde artists who were often highly involved in creating such propaganda events. For example, the propagandist exhibitions were taken up by the United States government and the Museum of Modern Art in their collaborative World War II show, *Road to Victory*. This show, designed by Bauhaus-educated Herbert Bayer, made extensive use of avant-garde exhibition design technique, and is a touchstone for the tradition of the propaganda exhibition in the United States. In examining the networks of design influence

leading up to 1959, we can begin to understand the artistic context in which the American National Exhibition was conceived. By making these comparisons I hope to set the stage for a reconsideration of the meaning of the exhibition. In using the same design techniques that powered the propaganda of totalitarian states, the United States, though promoting freedom and democracy, relied on a specific power structure created by visual display to spread these ideologies in a forceful, yet subtle manner.

Chapter 2 builds on this idea through a close visual and spatial analysis of the exhibition space, in order to illustrate how the architecture and design of the exhibition were meant to persuade the viewer. I recreate the space of the art gallery and two of the main exhibition halls through a combination of photographs and first person accounts of the space. In recreating these spaces, I analyze the exhibition from a new point of view—one that considers the powerful design elements at work. These elements were essential to the creation of an event that was, at its heart, a magnificent piece of propaganda. This analysis rests on the contention that the design of an exhibition is an art form in and of itself, relying on the tools of visual analysis to consider elements unique to the experience of an exhibition—elements of time and space, as well as visual aesthetic.

In analyzing the space, I contend that avant-garde aesthetics were not only used because they were modern and the U.S. wanted to prove their cultural relevance, but because the avant-garde style was uniquely suited to the task of persuasion, creating a space where power dynamics could be subtly enacted. To make this analysis, I have had to make some choices about methodology. My analysis does not rely on reports of how visitors felt at the exhibit, and whether or not they personally were persuaded by the display. While the reaction of the visitors is no doubt important to understand in a study of the ultimate impact of the exhibition, this is

research for another day, and is not within the scope of this project. Instead, I focus my analysis on the words of the designers and curators— and the reasons and influences behind the choices that were made. This chapter is concerned with *how* the design was meant to work, or what impact its creators felt it *could* have. It is impossible to know to what extent this propaganda was successful. But we can understand *how* it worked, and what contextual factors motivated the design choices that were made for the exhibition. To this end, I take care to avoid putting words in the visitors' mouths, so to speak, and attempt to bolster my argument through explicit comparisons that demonstrate established connections between the design of the American National Exhibition and earlier avant-garde forms.

A full comprehension of the motivations, influences and goals—not only political but aesthetic ones as well—that lay at the heart of the exhibition's design is another road to understanding that does not rely on the reactions of the viewers as a method of measuring the exhibition's impact, yet still grounds the analysis in something real and specific—a historical context. The analysis also relies on the first person accounts of the people designing the exhibition, the decisions made by the curator and designer to create a specific and particular space. These decisions, and the motivations behind them cannot be disputed. So even though I do not attempt to measure the impact of the exhibition through the reactions of the visitors, in tracing the influence of the design, and why certain techniques were employed, it is possible to better understand what the designers were trying to do. We do not have to know if the design was effective, only that it was considered to be so. This can inform our understanding of the exhibit, but also that American actions in the sphere of cultural diplomacy are comparable to those of any other regime or government that appropriates culture in the promotion of ideology.

Here, I ultimately seek to demonstrate how avant-garde styles can create a space of authority,

persuasion, and power.

Figure 1
Nixon and Khrushchev during the Kitchen Debate
The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Figure 2
Crowds in the art gallery
The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Figure 3
Crowds outside Buckminster Fuller's golden geodesic dome.
The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Figure 4
View of the glass pavilion from the roof of the dome.
The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Figure 5
Nixon and Khrushchev outside of the glass
pavilion. The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Chapter 1
Before the Exhibition: Influences and Controversies

In January 1958, during the heart of the Cold War, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and President Dwight. D. Eisenhower signed the U.S-USSR Cultural Exchange Agreement. The agreement made provisions for the exchange of cultural exhibitions between the two countries. The following year, the Soviet Union exhibited in New York, while the United States presented its own exhibition in Moscow at the same time. The exhibition U.S. would be called the American National Exhibition in Moscow, and fell within the conventions of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, which along with military and economic initiatives, also harnessed cultural and psychological warfare in the ideological battle against the spread of communism. This exchange of culture may seem a brief moment in the long view of the Cold War, but in fact, this exhibit was built on a foundation of previous cultural diplomacy and propaganda exhibitions initiated by the U.S State Department. Walter Hixon calls the exhibition, "a landmark achievement and arguably one of the most successful initiatives in the Cold War."[22] While the success of the exhibition may be disputed among scholars, the significance of the exhibition within the realm of U.S. international involvement and cultural diplomacy cannot be disputed.[23] The immense effort that went into creating the exhibition, which became a collaboration between public, government agencies such as the United States Information Agency (USIA), and private institutions like the Modern Museum of Art (MoMA), as well as independent designers, reflects

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[22] Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), xiv.

[23] Ellen Propper Mickiewicz, "Efficacy and Evidence: Evaluating U.S. Goals at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, no. 4 (2011):138.

the far reaching impact of this event. It is clear that the people involved in creating the

exhibition, from the likes of President Eisenhower to a lowly design assistant, understood the

power and potential that this particular display of culture could have.

As important as an exchange of culture was, the exhibit was more than that: it was an

opportunity for propaganda. Both the Soviet Union and the United States hoped to capitalize on

this opportunity to "win the hearts and minds" of those who visited the exhibitions.[24] The USIA

proposed that the aim of the American National Exhibition in Moscow was to, " 'open the door

to American life,' to tell the Russians the truth." This "impossibly complicated truth was to be

believable, and convincing display techniques had to be developed."[25] The exhibition was to

take place at Sokolniki Park in Moscow, a 1,500 acre space with no existing infrastructure—

perfect for constructing cultural propaganda from the ground up and maximizing the potential of

the exhibition. Gorky Park, a space in the center of the city, had initially been chosen but the

buildings proposed to house the exhibition were not structurally sound, so Sokolniki Park was

decided upon instead.[26]

Plans for the exhibition layout included two large, main buildings. At the entrance to the

exhibition was the largest aluminum geodesic dome that had ever been built, designed by

Buckminster Fuller.[27] The dome was to be an "information dispensing machine," covering

30,000 square feet of exhibition space. Behind the dome lay a glass pavilion, providing an

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[24] The Soviet exhibition took place in New York, at the New York City Coliseum, and ran from June to July, 1959.

[25] "Plastic Parasols, American National Exhibition, Moscow, U.S.S.R," *Architectural Record*, Architectural engineering, November 1959, 170.

[26] Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations: US Exhibitions and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War* (Lars Müller, 2008): 156. Masey also writes that Harold McClellan, director of American National Exhibition, noted that "the Americans did their best not to show how pleased they were with [the] proposal" that the exhibition be moved to a place where the exhibition planners would be able to build new infrastructure for the fair.

[27] Fuller's geodesic domes were perhaps his greatest creation, and were commissioned for use in many other similar government sponsored fairs and exhibitions, as well as used for military operations, science experiments, and arenas for sporting events.

additional 50,000 square feet of exhibition space. The pavilion was the heart of the materialistic side of the exhibition, and as George Nelson put it, packed with "thousands of diverse objects."[28] These objects were American consumer goods meant to exemplify the success and prosperity of the capitalist American society. The exhibition also included an entire model home, complete with a working kitchen where Khrushchev and Nixon engaged in the well-known 'kitchen debate.' There was a fashion show, a display of American cars, a television studio, as well as Edward Steichen's extremely popular photographic exhibition *Family of Man.* Perhaps the most notable aspect of the larger exhibition however was the display of American painting and sculpture.

Like the rest of the exhibition, the art exhibit acted as a form of propaganda veiled in cultural exchange. But unlike the rest of the exhibition, it became an incredibly controversial topic in the United States, largely because of the inclusion of works by modern artists who were known to have communist leanings. This controversy is key to understanding the political motives for including modern art in the exhibit, as well as official government attitudes toward these artworks. Only weeks before the artwork in Moscow was to be exhibited, a debate was raging in the United States concerning the exhibition of modern art at the American National Exhibition. Opponents to the exhibition argued that this new art was not an example of American freedom of expression, but rather, the work of communists that only emphasized the seeping of the Soviet agenda into American life.

The decision-making process behind the selection of works to be shown in Moscow demonstrates the desire to apply political goals and motives to specific styles and works of art. More significantly, though the planners of the exhibition knew it would be controversial to

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[28] "Plastic parasols, American National Exhibition, Moscow, U.S.S.R.," 170.

include modern art, they felt it was necessary and important to do so. [29] The idea was that the works chosen for exhibition in Moscow would represent the freedom of expression that the USIA so wanted to promote as a mainstay of American life. Franklin C. Watkins, one of the jury-members who chose the artworks, contended that the art would "state strongly and frankly what has been going on in America since about 1920. We believe it will be charged with vitality and the sense of freedom that marks our character."[30]

A jury of professional artists and art experts was put together to choose the art, with the USIA relinquishing full control of this decision to the jury, with the hope that this would assuage accusations of excessive government control. The jury consisted of Franklin Watkins, chair of the jury, Lloyd Goodrich, director of the Whitney, and artist Henry Hope. The jury was informed that, "their decision regarding the content would be final and not subject to review by anyone."[31] Much of our understanding, then, of the political and ideological philosophies that were placed on these pieces of art, must be informed by the jury's criteria for selection.

It was important to the jury that they choose pieces of technical excellence, but also pieces that would demonstrate the themes of freedom and equality that were such a vital goal of the exhibition. The jury understood the power of the art to speak for them, and that the proper combination of artworks would be especially effective in conveying this message. As Watkins stated, "This show can have a terrific impact in our favor if we are astute in our selection." In

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[29] Prior exhibitions of modern American art to be sent abroad had been so contentious that exhibitions were cancelled as they tried to get off the ground. In the case of *Advancing American Art,* a show of 79 contemporary paintings organized by the state department in 1947, and meant to be sent abroad on a world tour, there was debate surrounding the use of taxpayer's money on art that many thought had little value or merit. President Truman called it "ham-and-eggs art," and organizations such as the House Un-American Activities Committee deemed it a communist conspiracy. Eventually the conflict would cause the exhibit to be cancelled. Clearly the USIA knew what it was getting into when the decision was made to include modern art in the 1959 exhibition in Moscow.

[30] quoted in Marilyn S. Kushner, "Exhibiting Art at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959: Domestic Politics and Cultural Diplomacy." *Journal Of Cold War Studies* 4, no. 1 (2002): 8.

[31] Michael L. Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 157.

sending this particular selection of art to Russia, the goal was to " 'make their [the Russians'] mouths water' by its expression of freedom and vitality."[32] Ultimately, 49 pieces were chosen to be sent abroad, spanning the last 30 years of art in the United States with the logic that the public in Moscow would be overwhelmed and "bewildered" by an exhibition consisting solely of contemporary art, as they had little chance to be exposed to this form of art. [33] Lloyd Goodrich called it " 'the broadest, most balanced representation of recent American painting…so far shown abroad by our government.'"[34] This balance of works included both the representational and the abstract, with styles as different as Edward Hopper's *Lighthouse at Two Lights* and Mark Rothko's *Old Gold over White*. Nevertheless, when controversy over the proposed works inevitably arose, it was not only the abstract works that came under fire, but also Jack Levine's satirical portrait of an army general, done in a style reminiscent of German Expressionism, and clearly critical to the government establishment.

A second, equally important goal was also to prove American cultural relevance within the art world and present to Moscow and the world an image of the United States as an artistic powerhouse, and the new central hub for the greatest innovations in contemporary art. The thorn in the jury's (and the American art world's) side was the constant allegation coming from Europe that America was materialistic, too focused on consumer goods and capitalism to create great

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[32] Ibid

[33] Since the 1930s, the creation of art in the Soviet Union had been highly controlled. Stalin's regime set the precedent for the creation of Socialist Realism, which would become the official style of the communist party. Socialist Realism employed a realistic style that glorified the Soviet Union and the worker. As exemplified by Cora S. Goldstein's discussion of Soviet cultural policy in East Germany in the late 1940s, the official Soviet attitude towards culture at this time sought to control all intellectual and artistic development and condemned modernism. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Alexandar Dymschiz, a Soviet cultural officer declared that, "art must be realistic. Surrealism and abstraction have no right to exist. All art that does not fit the specifications is… decadent, individualistic, capitalistic…" (page 285 in *American Art Policy in Occupied Germany* in *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe, 1945-60)*. This attitude did not dissipate even after Stalin's death. Though the Khrushchev years are often characterized as a "thaw," there was still a tight control over artistic expression, and the official party line still did not view modernism in the arts favorably.

[34] Krenn, *Fall Out Shelters for the Human Spirit*, 158.

cultural works.[35] Michael Krenn quotes Lloyd Goodrich on this topic, writing that Goodrich

argued, " 'one of the most important governmental art activities today should be the use of

American art in our cultural relations with other nations.' It was time he declared, that the world

knew that American made more than 'efficient automobiles, airplanes and atom bombs."[36] The

members of the jury, as well as their fellow leaders in the American art world, were determined

to change this view, and in the USIA found a willing partner.

This collaboration was complicated however, by the inescapable political affiliation that was

cast on the art exhibit by the mere fact that it was sponsored and supported by the government.

As Krenn writes, "Members of the art world, such as Goodrich, desired government support for

an overseas art program but did not want politics to intrude in the selection of art." Additionally,

he continues, "the State Department and USIA would only provide support when they believed

that particular art shown in particular places would have particular propaganda advantages. In the

years 1958-60, the art world and the U.S. government were compelled to compromise in order to

sustain the program…." It was then though, that the "USIA came to the realization that art—

particularly modern art—was not only a popular form of American culture but could also be a

devastating weapon against the Soviet Union as a symbol of American freedom and diversity."[37]

It is ironic that these very elements of cultural diplomacy, meant to be examples of

American freedom of expression abroad, were in fact the cause of so much scrutiny and

controversy at home. For example, Jackson Pollock's *Cathedral* was one of the abstract

expressionist pieces chosen for exhibition. Envisioned by the exhibit organizers to represent

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[36] Krenn, *Fall Out Shelters for the Human Spirit*, 54.
[37] Ibid*,* 176.

freedom of expression and artistic innovation, instead *Cathedral's* detractors called the piece a

"meaningless scribble," and a "childish doodle" as well as a communist weapon. [38]

To the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), whose job it was to eradicate

any subversive communistic thought from the American public sphere, Pollock's *Cathedral* and

others were dangerous weapons that, given the chance at exhibition, would only emphasize

communism's hold in America. A statement released by the committee contended that, "of the

69 artists whose works have been chosen for exhibition in Moscow, 34—a fraction less than 50

percent—have records of affiliation with communist fronts and causes".[39] Wheeler Williams,

president of the American Artists Professional League, a conservative art organization, was

instrumental in creating this controversy and involving the House Un-American Activities

Commission. On July 3rd, 1959, the HUAC held a hearing to investigate the supposed communist

leanings of the artists slated for exhibition in Moscow. Artists Jack Levine, Ben Shahn, and

Philip Evergood were subpoenaed to appear before the committee.

While the HUAC and conservative artists such as Wheeler Williams did not succeed in

stopping the art from beig sent to Moscow, largely because the government knew it would be

counterproductive to prohibit the art and be accused of censorship, they did create enough

commotion to get the press and the president involved. Eisenhower personally did not have a

high opinion of paintings such as Jack Levine's *Welcome Home,* saying that it "looks more like a

lampoon than art, as far as I am concerned…"[40] Nevertheless, he knew that to withdraw the art

would create accusations of censorship, and play into the hands of Soviet propaganda. As a

compromise, Eisenhower proposed that 19th century paintings be added to the exhibition of

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[38] *Record of Certain Artists and an Appraisal of Their Works Selected for Display: Hearings before the United States House Committee on Un-American Activities*, 1959, 915.
[39] Ibid, 900
[40] "The Nation, On U.S. Show," *New York Times*, July 5, 1959.

works, but that the controversial works remain.[41]

The decision to display the controversial art in Moscow was a successful one. According to Lloyd Goodrich, one of the jurors, Levine's Welcome Home was admired by Russian visitors at the exhibition, for "the fact that it was included in spite of official attacks..." which, "was a telling demonstration of American freedom of expression."[42]

A reliance on the power of art to speak for an ideological purpose is found in Goodrich's endorsement of the art as a demonstration of freedom of expression, as well as the HUAC's condemnation of modern art as communist. During the hearing, Wheeler Williams made sure to emphasize the power of this modern "communist" art to topple American values of democracy and freedom:

> "They [the communist artists] want to destroy all phases of our culture, and if they can destroy our faith in God and our faith in the beauty and wonders of our cultural heritage, including the arts and literature and music and so forth, they can take us over without a hydrogen bomb. They can take us over with popguns." [43]

Williams' argument runs parallel to the anti-communist rhetoric that was such a stringent facet of U.S. foreign policy during the cold war. This overwhelming fear of the spread of communism is on display in Williams' assertion that art created by artists with communist political leanings would effectively destroy American cultural heritage. Williams' strong statement highlights the expectation that cultural objects could also perform politically and therefore had the power to completely decimate the core values of a society.

More importantly, Williams' words form the crux of a comparison between the actions of the United States and the Soviet Union when it came to using art as a Cold War weapon. Blinded

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[41] Alvin Shuster, "U.S. Exhibit Adds Traditional Art," *New York Times*, July 8, 1959.

[42] Whitney Museum of American Art, *Paintings and Sculpture from the American National Exhibition in Moscow, October 28-November 15, 1959.* (New York, 1959): 6.

[43] *Record of Certain Artists and an Appraisal of Their Works Selected for Display: Hearings before the United States House Committee on Un-American Activities*, 896.

by the never-ending quest for freedom and democracy and the unquestionable equating of communism with all things evil, Williams and the HUAC could not acknowledge that their fight for the censorship of artistic freedom was exactly what they accused the Soviet Union and the communist party of: "the suppression of freedom in art and the debasement of the artist, who is turned into a hack and propagandist for the regime in power."[44] Arguably, this unacknowledged double-standard did not only exist for the HUAC, but extended in subtle ways to all aspects of American action abroad during the Cold War, including cultural diplomacy initiatives. As Emily Rosenberg writes, "a fervent anti-Communism justified much illiberal conduct after World War II. There could, American liberal-expansionists believed, be no truly enlightened dissent against the ultimate acceptance of American ways, and this faith bred an intolerance, a narrowness, that was the very opposite of liberality."[45] The American National Exhibition in Moscow is debatably an example of this so-called "illiberal conduct." The appropriation of art in the service of a certain ideology does not allow much room for free thinking, even if the ideology being promoted is democratic and free. The use of art by governments in an attempt to promote a specific ideal is a way to stifle freedom of expression and understanding because it forces a certain interpretation on the art and the artist.

In defending modern art from accusations of communism, proponents of modern art often argued that the display of modern art was synonymous with the inherent freedom and democracy of the United States, and therefore could not be communist. Seven years before Wheeler's statements at the 1959 trial, Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, had addressed allegations similar to Wheeler's in his opinion piece "Is Modern Art Communistic?" Barr makes important distinctions in this article, describing the attitude towards

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[44] Ibid, 919.
[45] Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream*, 234.

modern art in the dictatorships of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, where totalitarian regimes did not tolerate modern art. He asks, how is it that Americans consider modern art communistic when the communist government of the Soviet Union did not condone this type of art and effectively outlawed any freedom of expression in this form? He goes on to write, "whatever a Western leader's point of view on artistic matters may be, he would not want to impose his taste upon his countrymen or interfere with their creative freedom" (like Russia and Germany did).[46] Barr makes it seem unlikely that either of these things could happen in the free, Western world of the United States is unheard of. Yet, the events surrounding the 1959 exhibition do not look so different from the way that the dictators of Germany, Russia, and Italy made use of art in service of the propagation of their own totalitarian ideologies.

To understand the United States' use of art as propaganda, before further analyzing the *type* of art or the *type* of message that was being promoted, it is necessary to consider the example of how various dictatorships of Europe, from the 1930s to the Cold War, harnessed the power of the visual for their own political gain. These governments were also acutely aware of how art and radical artistic movements might subvert their regimes. This is clearly not a phenomenon that is unique to this time or place—nations and groups have been using visual propaganda since the beginning of time, and the practice is by no means dead today. I make this specific comparison to totalitarian regimes in Europe because of the unique relationship between the formation of modern American art and the classical avant-garde style that originated in Europe. The creation of many American modern movements owe their inspiration to the multitude of European artists who sought refuge in the United States during and after World War II, fleeing from persecution and bringing with them the traditions and ideals of the avant-garde.

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[46] Alfred H. Barr, "Is Modern Art Communistic?" *New York Times Magazine* (1952): 22.

It was out of this migration that movements like Abstract Expressionism, considered essentially American, were born.

The European avant-garde came into existence at the beginning of the twentieth century to challenge the conventional, the mainstream, the bourgeois. These artists invented radically new ways of seeing, changing the course of the visual language of Western art forever. The various movements and "isms" that sprung up across Europe during this time not only encompassed a style of art, but also a way of being. Each group had its own manifesto, its own unique take on how art and life should operate in this new age of modernity, industrialization, and world wars. F.T Marinetti and the Italian futurists radically proclaimed that the machine was the way of the future, museums should be demolished, war was "the only hygiene of the world," and that a "a roaring car that seems to be driving under shrapnel, is more beautiful than *the Victory of Samothrace*."[47] The Dadaists rejected all convention and produced art in opposition of authoritarianism and nationalism. The Surrealists challenged reality, and in Russia, Malevich and the Suprematists harnessed geometry to redefine perception, while the Constructivists employed materials and design to express a new experience of modern life.

Because these avant-garde groups defined themselves through radical manifestos and challenging tradition, it was these artists and movements that came under fire during the regimes of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. To examine just one example, Hitler proclaimed modern, avant-garde art "degenerate," created by mentally unstable people. This art was "un-German," the work of Jews and Communists. It was diametrically opposed to the classical art that Hitler favored to promote his ideology of the superior German Aryan race. In 1937, the Nazi party devoted an

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[47] F.T Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism, 1909" in, *Futurism: An Anthology* eds., Christine Poggi, Lawrence S. Rainey, and Laura Wittman. (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2009).

entire exhibition to this "degenerate art," which had been forcibly taken out of national museums and hung haphazardly on the wall of a cramped gallery in Munich to make a statement about its worthlessness. If we pause for a moment and compare Hitler's attitude and actions to the words and concerns that Wheeler Williams voiced in the HUAC hearings regarding the modern art to be sent abroad to Moscow, the tone is eerily similar. In the rhetoric of the HUAC, modern art was "Un-American" and communist, not worthy of being included in a serious conversation about artistic merit. This call for nationalism and patriotism through the defamation of modern art was not so far from the methods of propaganda employed by totalitarian governments.[48] If this is true, a redefinition of America's spread of democracy through "freedom of expression" and cultural diplomacy must be considered.

Though the HUAC and the United States Information Agency were idealistically opposed with regard to taste in art, their respective attitudes toward modern art—one as "Un-American" and the other as the epitome of American freedom of expression—were located in the same tradition of an appropriation of art in order to make an ideological point. Additionally, though these two organizations had different ideas about how to do this, they were both concerned with controlling art to promote the spread of American democracy against the dangers of communistic thought. The aesthetics of American modern art and artistic style that the HUAC and the USIA were concerned with had direct roots in the European avant-garde. This comparison reveals the power that the aesthetics of the avant-garde had to make a statement, even when that statement was twisted by a government in the service of its own agenda.

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[48] Another example of the multi-faceted relationship of totalitarian governments to the avant-garde can be found in Stalin's Soviet Union. In *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond,* Boris Groys argues that though the state sanctioned style of Socialist Realism and the avant-garde are often presented as opposing stylistic philosophies, in fact, in socialist realism there is a continuation, "with the avant-garde project even though the realization of that project differed from the avant-garde vision…the Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetico-political project" (Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism,* 36).

Sending American art abroad and creating exhibitions abroad was by no means a new phenomenon. The cultural division of the US State Department was active at home and abroad both during World War II and in the aftermath of the war. They were involved with arranging exhibitions of American art and goods at home and abroad as part of trade shows, art fairs, and the Marshall Plan, all attempts at cultural diplomacy and the American government's mission to fight communism with culture. In a June 1941 article, museums and exhibitions were called, "the latest and strangest recruit in Uncle Sam's defense line-up…" In the same article, John Hay Whitney, the president of the board of MoMA, deemed the museum "a weapon in national defense."[49] By the time the American National Exhibition of 1959 was conceived, the medium of the exhibition had long been accepted as a powerful tool of persuasion.

Beyond examining the art and objects of the American National Exhibition of 1959, the exhibit itself as a propaganda medium provides a unique and rich landscape for analysis. Exhibitions are relatively small, controlled environments, and as a result are well suited to the task of persuasion. Herbert Bayer, a designer whose work would inspire the design of the American National Exhibition, believed that exhibition design was, "the apex of all collective efforts, of all powers of design."[50] Each element of an exhibition can be planned to create a total environment as envisioned by its maker. The path visitors take through the gallery, the pieces shown, the informational wall text, the lighting, wall color—these things are premeditated to create a certain effect. The exhibit hall is an enclosed space, a performance space, separate from outside society and ruled by certain laws of etiquette. By nature, the medium of an exhibit, with its origin in the museum, holds an innate and indisputable authority.

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[49] quoted in Staniszewski, *The Power of Display,* 210.

[50] Kristie La, "'Enlightenment, Advertising, Education, Etc.': Herbert Bayer and the Museum of Modern Art's Road to Victory," *October*, no. 150 (Fall 2014): 68.

Road to Victory, a highly political exhibition put on by the Museum of Modern Art and sponsored by the U.S. government during World War II, was an important predecessor of the American National Exhibition in Moscow. *Road to Victory: A Procession of Photographs of the Nation at War* opened in 1944 and was meant to celebrate the power and resilience of the United States during a time of war. It is also a revealing instance of how exhibition design can be used to create a propaganda message. The exhibition, directed by photographer Edward Steichen of *Family of Man* fame, with text written by poet Carl Sandburg, was a vividly staged demonstration of nationalism.[51] Herbert Bayer, a successful designer and architect who had recently emigrated from Germany to the United States, designed the exhibit. Bayer had also been a student and teacher at the famed German Bauhaus school, and his philosophies and design choices reflect his early education at the school. *Road to Victory,* a homage to modern exhibition design techniques, consisted of larger than life photography, bolstered by Sandburg's text, and brought together by Bayer's design. In a MoMA press release from 1944, the exhibit is described as "a dramatic presentation of this country's mighty resources and the power of its people in their struggle toward victory."[52] This dramatic exhibition was an overt work of propaganda. The Museum of Modern Art made no attempt to disguise the purpose of the exhibition, calling it, "one of the most powerful propaganda efforts yet attempted."[53] The artists involved—a photographer, poet, and designer— were the reason that the exhibition was so powerful, as well as popular.

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[51] Edward Steichen, a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy and a photographer, was tasked with arranging the exhibition. Though Steichen's own photos would anchor his famous (and controversial) *Family of Man* exhibition in 1955, the photographs in *Road to Victory* were taken from government archives. Steichen enlisted his brother-in-law, Carl Sandburg to provide the text.

[52]"Museum of Modern Art Opens Road to Victory Exhibition Arranged by Edward Steichen and Carl Sandburg." (The Museum of Modern Art, 1942),1.

[53]"Two Famous Americans Arrange Road to Victory Exhibition at Museum of Modern Art" (The Museum of Modern Art, 1942),1.

Upon opening, *Road to Victory* received a highly positive public response and was extremely well attended. What was it that made the exhibition so popular and successful? The answer lies in the design of the exhibition. The exhibition's design and layout did not leave the interpretation of propaganda to chance. Herbert Bayer's installation design of *Road to Victory* was quite literally a "procession of photographs," built to direct the visitor on a precise and deliberate path through the exhibition. Monroe Wheeler, the Director of Exhibitions and Publications for MoMA, described the exhibit as a tool that provided "every American," a chance "to see himself as a vital and indispensable element of victory."[54] On Bayer's *Road to Victory* each museum visitor was a well-calculated element. The exhibition was made up of large photographs that depicted iconic American scenes. Visitors entering the exhibition were first confronted by giant images displaying scenes of the American west: forests, buffalo, portraits of Native Americans, and Zion National Park. Sandburg's accompanying text, invoking a biblical tone, proclaimed, "In the beginning was virgin land and America was promises—and the Red man gave over to an endless tide of white men in endless numbers with a land hunger and no end to the land they wanted…."[55] The exhibition continued in this vein, as visitors marched on a designated path through oversized photographs of American land, farmers, industry, and wholesome small-towns, all the while reading Sandburg's text tinged with the ideas of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism.

At the American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959, the propaganda could not be so explicit. Prior to the planning of the US-USSR cultural exchange exhibitions, both sides engaged in negotiations that were fraught with disagreement and conditions, with the Soviets often shutting down the exhibition plans proposed by U.S. representatives. The Soviet Union negotiators

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[54]Ibid.

[55] "Two Famous Americans Arrange Road to Victory Exhibition at Museum of Modern Art," 2.

demanded that whatever was shown in the exhibit be "cultural and non-political in character."[56]

Nevertheless, banning overt political messages only allowed the cultural aspects of the

exhibition, as well as the over-all design, to become parts of the implicit and subtle (sometimes

not-so) propaganda that was the ultimate goal of the exhibition. American ambassador to the

USSR, Llewellyn Thompson declared that, "nothing we have done will have the impact on

Soviet developments that this exhibition will have if we do it right."[57]

What did "doing it right" entail? Planning for the exhibition began in September 1958

when the USIA Director and general manager of the exhibition, George Allen, appointed Jack

Masey as Chief of Design and Construction of the American National Exhibition. Masey

recruited other well-known modern designers and architects such as Buckminster Fuller, George

Nelson, Richard Barringer, and Charles and Ray Eames to help design the buildings and the

interior of the exhibitions. These designers were contracted by the United States government to

imbue the exhibition in Moscow with the most modern design techniques, and in doing so, were

acting in a similar role as Herbert Bayer in *Road to Victory* and his contemporaries in Europe.

Bayer was a key transmitter of European design methods to the United States. Chanzit argues in

her analysis of Bayer's career that Bayer's move to the United States, "meant that new avant-

garde design methods would be introduced firsthand and assimilated to create a more

sophisticated fabric of American design, beginning a new era in American design."[58] The

designers of the American National Exhibition in 1959 were at the forefront of this new era.

George Nelson, as one of the lead designers of the American National Exhibition,

profoundly influenced the design choices made at the exhibition. Nelson had spent time in Rome

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[56] Hixson, *Parting the Curtain,* 164.
[57] quoted in Hixson, 162.
[58] Gwen Finkel Chanzit, *Herbert Bayer and Modernist Design in America.* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 31.

as a student, and while abroad, had met and interviewed influential modern architects such as

Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier.[59] Nelson, whose work was undoubtedly influenced by his

time in Europe, also drew direct influence from Herbert Bayer. In *Display*, Nelson's 1953 book

on exhibition design, he devotes twelve pages to a discussion of Bayer's work, claiming that

Bayer, "more than any other designer, has developed, synthesized and expounded new ways of

visual communication, and in his work in the field of exhibition design he has brought together a

remarkable variety of techniques and media." Nelson also refers to the Bauhaus school, where

Bayer and his contemporaries worked and studied, as "that extraordinary institution whose

influence is still felt in both design and art education."[60] It is clear from both Nelson's words and

work that he has been influenced by the Bauhaus group, who in turn were guided by the earlier

work of avant-garde artists in the development of Bauhaus practices and ideologies.

In this period of art and design the threads of influence are multi-layered and dense. It is

impossible to understand one artist, one school, one piece, one exhibit, without making reference

to all the others that came before or were happening at the same time. Therefore, we cannot

engage in a discussion of design at the 1959 American National Exhibition without first

considering what came before. It is important to note that these exhibition techniques were

considered revolutionary—never before had the exhibition space transcended the staid display of

works on the flat walls of a room.[61] Understanding the influences and motives behind the

American National Exhibition not only make clear that the design philosophies employed in

creating the 1959 exhibition were first and foremost rooted in the avant-garde realm of

experimental exhibition design, but also reveal the complicated relationship between design and

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[59] Stanley Abercrombie, *George Nelson: The Design of Modern Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 9.

[60] George Nelson, *Display*. (New York: Whitney Publications, 1953), 108.

[61] Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 91.

politics. The American National Exhibition, with its design so deeply grounded in the avant-garde was remarkably similar to the propaganda exhibitions put on by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy and should be studied within this context.

Delving deeper into the history and design process of *Road to Victory* also highlights strong parallels between this exhibition and ones created by the dictatorships of 1920s and 1930s Europe. As exemplified by this show*,* in the realm of state-sponsored propaganda, avant-garde aesthetics were integral to the success of such exhibitions. This style of exhibition—one that relied largely on the display of photos and murals—was relatively new to American audiences. Scholar Kristie La argues that *Road to Victory* "…occupies a pivotal place in the international history of monumental photo-exhibition design: *Road to Victory* was the American debut of this radical aesthetic practice, first developed by the Soviets and then employed by the Italian Fascists and German National Socialists."[62] In the design of *Road to Victory* Herbert Bayer brought with him the influences of international exhibition design, a field dominated by well-known avant-garde artists. Not only did Bayer bring these influences to American audiences, but he was able to make popular this style of "radical aesthetic practice" and dramatically enhance this particular manner of propaganda exhibition in the United States.

The enormous photomontage that concluded *Road to Victory* was markedly similar to those found in propaganda exhibitions of European totalitarian states in the 1920s and 1930s. In this instance in Bayer's design, the influence of the avant-garde is especially apparent. Bayer's method of exhibition design was noticeably influenced by El Lissitzky's work on the Soviet Pavillion at the International Press Exhibition (Pressa) in 1928 in Cologne, Germany.[63] Lissitzky,

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[62] La, *"Enlightenment, Advertising, Education, Etc,"* 64.

[63] Ulrich Pohlmann, "El Lissitzky's Exhibition Designs: The Influence of His Work in Germany, Italy, and the United States, 1923-1943," in *El Lizzitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 61.

a member of the Russian constructivist group, with connections to the Bauhaus, was well known for pushing the envelope in the field of exhibition design, and Pressa was no different. In fact, it changed the direction of exhibition design entirely; Bayer called Lissitzky's work at Pressa a "revolutionary turning point".[64] Lissitzky's Soviet pavilion, meant to promote the ideologies of the Soviet Union, harnessed many avant-garde techniques, the most striking of which was an immense photomural made up of Russian press photographs. The mural, a typical example of the avant-garde style of photomontage, was paired with text that stated, "the education of the masses is the main task of the Pressa in the transitional period from capitalism to communism."[65] While it was a landmark event for avant-garde exhibition design, it is clear from the images and text presented at the exhibit that the ultimate goal of Pressa, like *Road to Victory,* was a political one. It was successful propaganda powered by the aesthetics of the avant-garde, and it was not unique during this time. The technique of photomontage in the form of large photographic murals, would begin to crop up in a number of subsequent political propaganda exhibitions in Europe, particularly in countries with a totalitarian regime.

Lissitzky's influence is evident in the political propaganda exhibitions of Germany and Italy in the 1930s. As Benjamin Buchloh puts it, Pressa was a model that "could provide a highly productive and dynamic fusion of textual and visual devices for the propaganda of the newly established totalitarian state apparatuses," and these states, by embracing the success of Pressa, embraced the aesthetics of the avant-garde.[66]

In Italy, the propaganda exhibition *La Mostra Della Rivoluzione Fascista (The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution)* opened in 1932 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Fascist

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[64] Chanzit, *Herbert Bayer and Modernist Design*, 118

[65] Pohlmann, "El Lissitzky's Exhibition Designs: The Influence of His Work in Germany, Italy, and the United States, 1923-1943," 53.

[66] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. "From Faktura to Factography". *October.* 30 (1984): 83-119.

takeover and reaffirm the power of Mussolini and the fascist government. *La Mostra* made

extensive use of avant-garde styles, notably futurism and constructivism. The exhibit was the

work of a cadre of modern artists and architects such as Enrico Prampolini, Mario Sironi, and

Giuseppe Terragni. These artists, like Bayer, were also influenced by Lissitzky's pavilion at

Pressa.[67] Many rooms in the exhibition employed gigantic, bold photomontage and collage,

which glorified the fascist state and towered over the visitors. Bayer's *Road to Victory*

photomural is reminiscent of Giuseppe Terragni's photomontage in the Room of 1922 at *La*

Mostra. Terrangni's collage depicted photographs of crowds of people—"the masses"—cut,

shaped and arranged so that the collage overwhelmed the walls of the room and projected three-

dimensionally into the space, creating a visual assault on the visitor. F.T Marinetti, founder of

Futurism, called the exhibition, "a triumph of futurist style," and praised the "new aesthetic of

the machine and speed, typically Italian and fascist," which was on display in the design of *La*

Mostra della Rivoluzione. As Emily Braun writes, in this exhibit, "By patronizing and

commissioning the 'new volumes' and 'vanguard communication structures' of futurism and

constructivism, the regime adapted them to exalt 'predetermined propaganda messages.'"[68]

Though the "communication structures" and styles of the avant-garde movements remained

intact in *La Mostra*, these aesthetics, once appropriated for governmental propaganda, were no

longer tied to the original context of the avant-garde.

　　In a similar vein, in Germany, Hitler's government put on a series of political exhibitions

from the years 1934-1937.[69] These shows were tools with which a powerful regime could

persuade its public. Intense nationalism and Nazi ideologies about racial purity were strongly

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[67] Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[68] Ibid
[69] La, "Enlightenment, Advertising, Education, Etc," 70.

promoted through each exhibition. These exhibitions however, mark the brief period before official party rhetoric would embrace neo-classicism and term modern art "degenerate." Instead, the Nazi exhibit-planning committee turned to a modern group of designers and artists – including Herbert Bayer and his Bauhaus colleagues—to be the architects of these ideologically charged exhibitions.[70] For example, the exhibition *Deutschland,* created for the 1936 Olympics, displayed an enormous photomontage of Hitler surrounded by loyal crowds and followers, strikingly reminiscent of Terragni's work in *La Mostra Della Rivoluzione Fascista.*[71] Bayer, while not always directly involved in the exhibition design of these exhibits, created many of the promotional materials for the exhibits, which were dripping with party rhetoric and made extensive use of photomontage depicting mass rallies of National Socialism.

It is clear that with the help of Herbert Bayer's influence, *Road to Victory* applied many of the same methods of experimental, avant-garde design found in propaganda exhibitions of the Soviet Union, fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The American National Exhibition in 1959, with designers like George Nelson who were so strongly influenced by Bayer and his circle, was not at all a departure from this method. The exhibition's design, as well as the deliberate depiction of modern art by the USIA, offers a window into understanding American cultural diplomacy initiatives in a larger sense, outside of the typical narrative of the spread of freedom and democracy. The choices that the USIA and government officials made to include modern art and design as key components of the exhibition, and the controversy that ensued because of these decisions, make clear the strength of visual propaganda to all types of government, whether they are democratic or totalitarian.

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[70] Even though just the year before the exhibitions began, the Bauhaus had been shut down by the Nazi government because its modern mission no longer meshed with official German cultural policy.

[71] Pohlmann, "El Lissitzky's Exhibition Designs: The Influence of His Work in Germany, Italy, and the United States, 1923-1943," 59.

Figure 6
Jackson Pollock's *Cathedral,* (1947).
Enamel and aluminum paint on canvas
Displayed in the art exhibition of The American National Exhibition Moscow,
1959

Figure 6
Jack Levine
*Welcome Home,*1946.
Oil on canvas
Displayed in the art exhibition of The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Figure 7
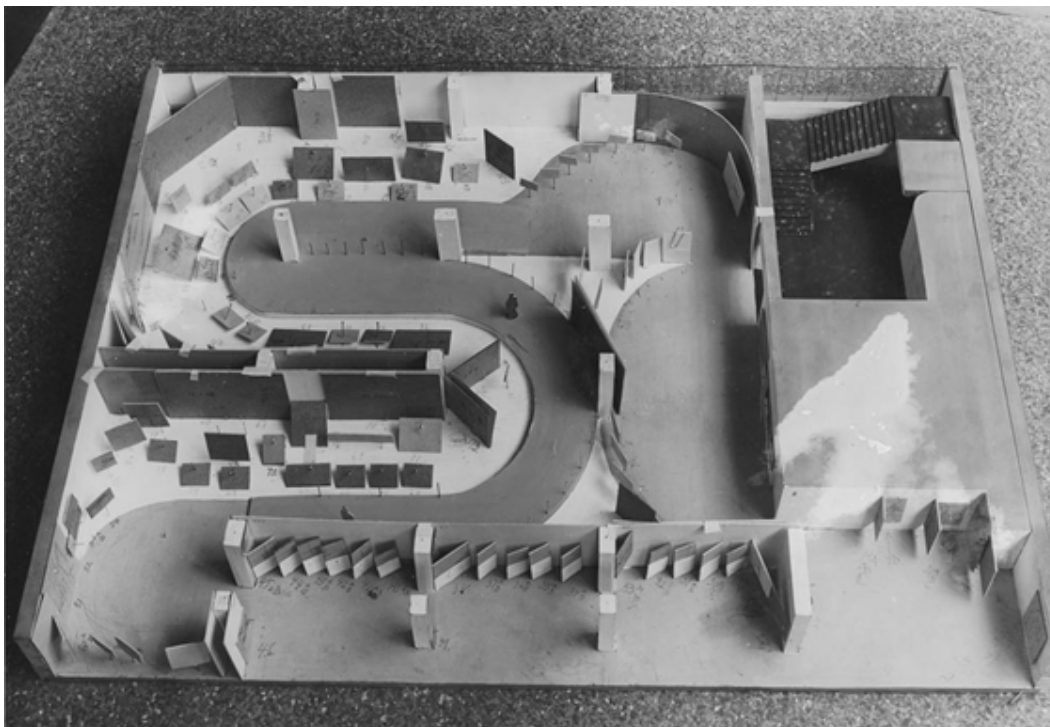Entrance to *Road to Victory*
The Museum of Modern Art
New York, 1942

Figure 8
Herbert Bayer's model for *Road to Victory*
The Museum of Modern Art
New York, 1942

Figure 10
Concluding photomontage of *Road to Victory*
The Museum of Modern Art
New York, 1942

Figure 11
Close up of El Lissitzky's photomural.
Soviet Pavilion at Pressa
1928

Figure 12
Giuseppe Terragni's Room of
1922. La Mostra della
Rivoluzione Fascista Rome,
1932

Figure 13
Herbert Bayer, photomontage in
Deutschland catalogue. Berlin, 1936

Chapter 2
Reading the Exhibition

"...just as there are 'sermons in stones and books and in running brooks,'
to take Shakespeare's view, there are indeed messages being transmitted
by inanimate objects which can be 'read' by anyone
capable of seeing what he is looking at." [72]

"There is plenty of propaganda without art, but at least mighty
little worthy art without propaganda—for propaganda is
the raison d'etre of the greatest arts....People are better
persuaded when they don't realize that they are being persuaded.
They resent the unconcealed and bald implication that they need to be persuaded."[73]

Upon entering the glass pavilion in Sokolniki Park in the summer of 1959, visitors to the

exhibition found themselves in George Nelson's "Jungle Gym." Aptly named for its resemblance

to a child's playground, this system of display was a flexible set-up of of steel bars and multi-

colored panels, upon which hundreds of American cultural products were displayed. In the

Jungle Gym, the visitor to the exhibition was immediately engulfed in a barrage of sights and

sounds. One newspaper writer described the space as a "riot of color" that visitors could

"clamber through" to see the "products of basically every consumer industry."[74] In addition to

housing the painting and sculpture, the structure was divided into various exhibits that covered

"items in the cultural, industrial, home, and leisure-time groups," such as a working television

studio and a "miracle" kitchen where baking demonstrations took place.[75] There were also

displays of books, textiles, music, radios, furniture, children's toys, and much more. In

comparison to the correlating exhibition space found in the dome and known as the "idea

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[72] George Nelson, *How To See*, 1977, 11

[73] William Pickens (1924) Art and Propaganda Extract from *The Messenger*, New York, April 1924
(reprinted Will Bradley and Charles Esche, *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader* (Tate Publishing, 2007),
74.

[74] "U.S. Gives Soviet Glittering Show, Fair Found Lavish in Color and Frills, but Lacking a Unifying Theme," *New York Times*, July 24, 1959.

[75] *Official Training Book for Guides,* National Archives, 68

building," the glass pavilion was deemed the "Item building" because of the number of objects displayed there. The idea was that "The display of these thousands of items related to daily living in the United States," would, "reflect the immense variety and the great freedom of economic system" and the importance of American consumerism.[76]

When *New Republic* journalist Frank Getlein reviewed the American National Exhibition in 1959, he focused his account on what the exhibition looked like, including a detailed description of the spatial layout of the show. He interviewed his Russian friend and fellow writer Victor Gorokhov about his impressions of the show, and concluded that, "it was the style, not the styles, that got him." Gorokhov was struck by Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome as well as the display inside: "the main show within the dome also impressed Gorokhov 'as a form, mind you, as a form.'"[77] This chapter is also concerned with the form of the exhibition, and discusses the avant-garde influence that was present in the design of the American National Exhibition. As designer George Nelson writes, the space can be "read" and understood in an examination of the inanimate aspects of the exhibition display. These spaces of display were very much meant to transmit a certain message to the viewer. Through a close analysis of the architectural and spatial elements of the art gallery, Nelson's Jungle Gym structure, and the short film *Glimpses of the USA,* this chapter explores the way that power, authority, and meaning is conveyed through the deliberate design of space. In particular, this chapter looks to consider why the philosophies of the avant-garde and traditions of contemporary display lent themselves so well to the propaganda effort of the exhibition.

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[76] Ibid, 67

[77] Frank Getlein, "Pictures at an Exhibition," *Russia's Reaction to the US Show in Moscow* 141 (August 24, 1959): 12–15.

Idealistic, universal, and utopian ideals often drove the actions of avant-garde designers and artists. The self-defined universality of avant-garde art made it especially suitable as an ideological tool that could promote the ideas of individuality and freedom. It is possible to trace specific visual strategies that were used at the 1959 exhibition, yet have roots in the avant-garde. For example, in examining modern display techniques for art, we must consider the "white cube" installation style that was employed in the art gallery. In an analysis of the larger exhibition space, focused here on George Nelson's "Jungle Gym" structure, there are two specific techniques to be interrogated further: the scaffold-like, cage-like strategy of display, and the experience of bombardment of images, which is continued in the film *Glimpses of the USA*. All of these techniques exert a specific experience upon the viewer, and play a role in creating a dynamic of power within the exhibition space.

The Art Gallery

One example of this dynamic of power existed within the art gallery. When Edith Halpert, the curator of the art show, arrived in Moscow prior to the exhibit in the summer of 1959, she found the exhibition site a chaotic and disorganized mess. With just weeks to go until opening, the builders and designers were massively behind schedule and plagued by technical problems. Those involved in the construction and design of the site found it impossible to envision how this "madhouse" as Halpert remembered it, would transform into the powerful cultural spectacle that it was destined to become in just a few days.[78] For her part, Halpert got to work renovating the section of the exhibition hall that was designated for the display of the painting and sculpture. A seasoned art dealer and curator, Halpert could see that the space given to her was inadequate for

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[78] Edith Gregor Halpert. Interview with Harlan Phillips, 1963.

her purposes. Upon seeing the space, she was "utterly shocked," by the size, "it was so small,

and I kept thinking of forty-eight pictures and so many pieces of sculpture—where the hell

would you put them?"[79] Somehow though, even among the chaos, Halpert was able to make it

work. She painted the walls and ceilings white, and changed the lighting so that it was better

suited to viewing art. When asked if there was any objection to her changes, she responded, "I

could have put on a strip tease troop there, and they [the U.S government officials in charge of

the exhibition] wouldn't have known the difference…."[80] In the days prior to the exhibition, the

designers and officials were frantically trying to finish everything before the opening.

Nevertheless, the exhibit would open successfully, and, in the words of a LIFE magazine

headline, "Good Displays" would "Catch Crowds." The good displays did indeed catch crowds.

The exhibition was extremely well attended, attracting 3 million visitors during its 6 week run.[81]

The controversy that had surrounded the artworks when they were initially chosen did not

dissipate in Moscow. Though the art gallery was passed over by Nixon and Khrushchev in their

initial tour of the exhibition because the art was "too controversial," the exhibition of painting

and sculpture would prove to be one of the most well attended and most talked about areas of the

Jungle Gym.[82] According to Halpert, "several days after the exhibition opened against all odds,"

a Russian art critic reported that, " 'The art section is by far the most vivacious arousing so much

[79] Ibid

[80] Ibid

[81] "At the Fair Fascinated Russians Flock to US Exhibits," *Life Magazine*, August 10, 1959.

[82] Edith Halpert remembers this moment in her interview with Harlan Phillips: Well, in any event, the entourage -- the two leaders and the entourage started -- this was on the first floor, and they covered every department, every exhibit down there. They then went up and covered every exhibit on the balcony, on the second floor where I was. I was at the extreme end, and there was a big staircase which led downstairs. They came up the other side, and they were coming in. The photographers and the newsmen backed into the gallery with their cameras ready to shoot them when they came in. As Nixon and Khrushchev got the gallery, suddenly Nixon grabbed Khrushchev's arm, almost broke it, and led him down the stairs with the entourage following and with all of the pressmen and photographers standing there like idiots watching this. Then they followed."

commotion that it drowns out even the voices coming from the nearby TV demonstration.'"[83]

The Russian public was by no means un-informed about the dispute surrounding the selection of art for the show. In fact, they were as eager to see the controversial art as they were to see the notorious curator of the exhibition. During the HUAC controversy Edith Halpert had stridently upheld the choice of *Welcome Home* for the exhibition after Eisenhower called the work a "lampoon." She had retorted that, "Some people think the President's paintings aren't so good either,"[84] taking a stab at Eisenhower's amateur painting hobby. Consequently, one news story from the exhibition reported that, "countless visitors to the exhibition have asked, 'What happened to the woman who dared to criticize your President's judgment?" When Mrs. Halpert is pointed out to them, they stare in disbelief and demand to see the name on her passport."[85] This extreme interest in both the art and the curator only increased the discussion and scrutiny surrounding the art exhibition.

Visitor responses to the art varied, sometimes positive, sometimes disgusted, but responses were rarely neutral. For example, one visitor called the abstract art "incomprehensible," while another was "disgusted to the bottom of my heart" with the art exhibit. Still another stated, "the abstract art insults the best sentiments of simple men."[86] And when Khrushchev finally did visit the art gallery, he "found it repugnant."[87] Edith Halpert however, reported that she wished she could have "recorded the enthusiastic remarks each day, the extraordinary effect the show had on a large number of artists, architects, writers, designers, and museum personnel…as well as many

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[83] Edith Halpert. Correspondence, July 1959. Archives of American Art: Downtown Gallery Records, Box 12, Reel 5519, Frame 203.

[84] "President Favors Art Liked By U.S," *New York Times*, July 2, 1959.

[85] Emily Genauer, "Our Moscow Exhibit Draws Cool Press," *New York Herald*, August 9, 1959.

[86] Dan I. Slobin, "Excerpts from a 1959 Journal: U.S Exhibition in Moscow," 2009.

[87] Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev* (Penn State Press, 2007): 182.

layman visitors throughout the day."[88] Though these comments provide insight into individual feelings toward the exhibit, they cannot be wholly relied upon as a method of analyzing the exhibition space, as they only relate the experiences of those who felt strongly about the exhibition, and had the motivation and opportunity to write their thoughts down.

Official American and Soviet accounts are also incredibly biased—for obvious reasons. American news sources related the triumph and success of the exhibition, while Soviet sources took up the official, negative, view of modern art.[89] Many of the Soviet reports found fault with the abstract style, ironically not unlike American detractors of modern art. For example, one reporter wrote, "the profoundly reactionary quintessence of abstraction and its corrupt influence lie in the fact that it separates the artist from the spectator or from the nation, that it destroys the simple elements of literal reality in art which make the work intelligible and understandable."[90] Another wrote that, "the majority of pictures are of the abstract genre that is fashionable in the West, and they evoke annoyance and perplexity among the spectators."[91]

The location and plan of the physical space of the art exhibit influenced the way visitors experienced the art. The gallery was located in one corner of the Jungle Gym, on the second floor of the structure, somewhat isolated from the rest of the exhibitions by both its physical situation and style of display. The paintings were arranged chronologically on white walls, differing from the more haphazard display employed by the other exhibits in the Jungle Gym. The area allotted for the art exhibit was a long rectangular space flanked by two entrances—this

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[88] Edith Gregor Halpert, interview by Harlan Phillips, 1963

[89] Though these news articles contain clear biases, the photographs and objective descriptions found in these sources offer a way to piece together an image of the gallery space when few photographs are readily available, and add to a visual analysis of the space.

[90] Vlanidmir Kemenov in *Sovietskaya Kultura,* Quoted in Lloyd Goodrich, *Paintings and Sculpture from the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959.* 8

[91] Quoted in Pamela Kachurin, "The ROCI Road to Peace: Robert Rauschenberg, Perestroika, and the End of the Cold War," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, no. 1 (2002): 29.

created something of a funnel effect when crowds of people entered the gallery. As Edith Halpert describes it,

> "Situated as the art section was—on the second floor, between two stairways—not only did those interested in art crowd into the alcoves, but a large captive audience was forced by the mobs through the two wide entrances. Although the exhibition was arranged chronologically, more or less, the visitors were rapidly propelled past the realistic examples to face a wall displaying Grant Wood, Pollock, O'Keeffe, Blume, Hartley, Kuniyoshi and Albright. They gasped, laughed and exclaimed, surrounding the guides and me in enormous, hot circles"[92]

Though the exhibition had been selected with the goal of presenting a balanced depiction of American art over the past thirty years, and arranged chronologically to show a progression, the physical space of the gallery created a different focus.[93] Funneled through the space in the way Halpert describes, visitors were suddenly confronted with works that were recent, modern, and provoking, and somewhat shocking to Soviet audiences whose only exposure to art in recent years was the state sanctioned Social Realism. Due to the extremely high number of visitors in the gallery, people were quite literally pushed up against the art—later guard rails would be installed to protect the canvases. The wall that Halpert describes was one of the largest and most prominent in the exhibition and uniquely situated so that it could easily be seen as one entered the exhibition. The New York Times reported that, "The excitement waxes around the modern works. Loud guffaws and jeering gestures are hurled at paintings of Jackson Pollock and Ben Shahn. But many visitors study these paintings carefully…"[94] It was this sudden confrontation that characterized the gallery experience, and emphasized these provoking modern pieces. Additionally, the controversy surrounding the art was by no means a secret, and visitors came eager to see these paintings that had caused such a stir.

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[92] Edith Gregor Halpert, "Moscow Sees American Art," *Art in America* 47, no. 3 (October 15, 1959): 94–95.

[93] The nineteenth century works added to the original 49 were displayed in a separate section of the gallery.

[94] Caruthers Osgood, "Russians at U.S. Fair Debate Abstract Art and Right to Like It," *New York Times*, September 4, 1959.
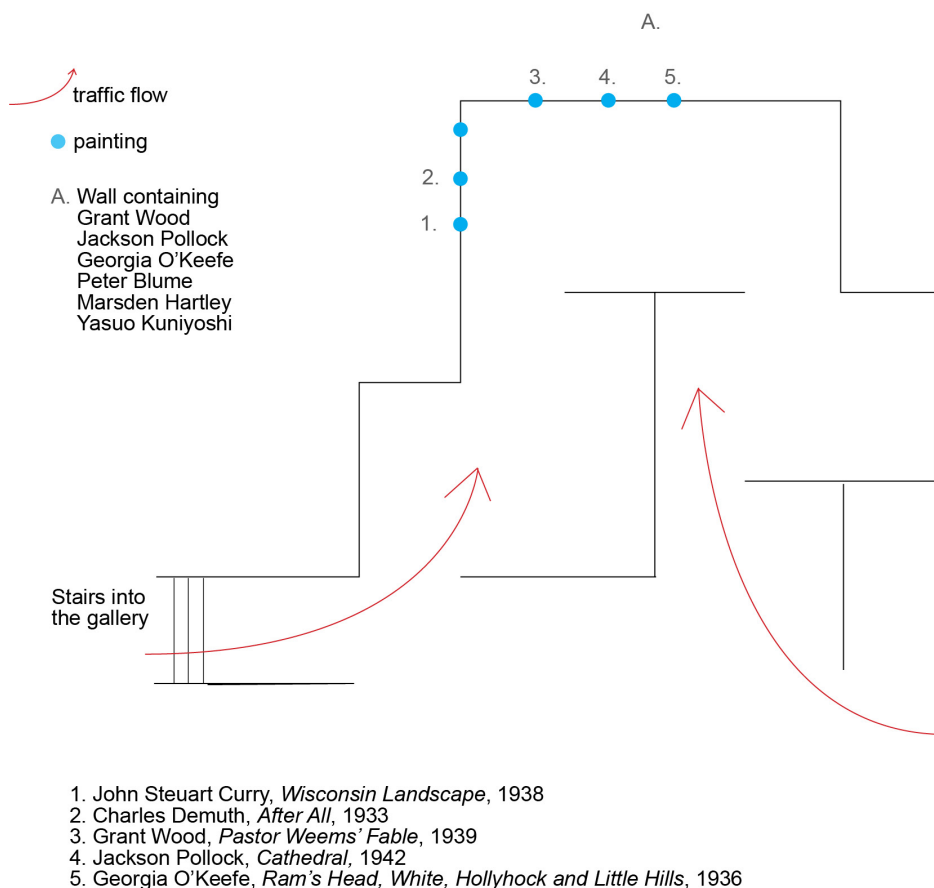
traffic flow

● painting

A. Wall containing
Grant Wood
Jackson Pollock
Georgia O'Keefe
Peter Blume
Marsden Hartley
Yasuo Kuniyoshi

A.

3.   4.   5.

2.

1.

Stairs into
the gallery

1. John Steuart Curry, *Wisconsin Landscape*, 1938
2. Charles Demuth, *After All*, 1933
3. Grant Wood, *Pastor Weems' Fable*, 1939
4. Jackson Pollock, *Cathedral,* 1942
5. Georgia O'Keefe, *Ram's Head, White, Hollyhock and Little Hills*, 1936

Figure A.
Diagram of gallery space.[95]

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[95] This diagram represents a partial layout of the exhibition, gleaned from multiple photographs and original plans of the exhibition from the National Archives *(Design Drawings for the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1957 – 1959).* There is a lack of range of photos from the exhibition, and for this project was impossible to recreate a full image of where each painting was located. However, this diagram does show the bottleneck effect that occurred in the gallery, as visitors were pushed towards the back wall, where they were confronted with a long wall of modern art.

The arrangement of art on the gallery wall provides insight into the physical layout of the exhibition space, but also the spatial experience of the exhibition. Compared to the rest of the Jungle Gym, the art gallery seemed conservative in its form and plan—a simple line of paintings on white walls. This format has become commonplace in the display of art and at first glance seems unremarkable. In Mary Anne Staniszewski's discussion of the history of exhibition display at MoMA, she makes an excellent argument for why this form of display is significant. At the time of the 1959 exhibition, the practice of displaying works of art in a single line on white or neutral colored walls had only become commonplace in the last 30 years. This emergence of the "white cube," has its origins in Alfred Barr's Museum of Modern Art during the 1930s. In his exhibitions, Barr eschewed the then typical gallery tradition of 'skying' paintings above eye-level in clumped groups on the gallery wall—a well established museum installation technique with its origins in the royal museums and national galleries of the 19th century—and instead organized the work in a single, well-spaced line. When Edith Halpert installed the paintings at the American National Exhibition in a similar way, she was likely only acting according to the norms of the day. However, though this format of display was standard for the time and the "white cube" has become unquestioned today, deeper meanings must be considered. As Staniszweski argues, this seemingly neutral method of display is anything but, in fact: "it produces a powerful and continually repeated social experience that enhances the viewer's sense of autonomy and independence."[96]

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[96] Staniszewski, *The Power of Display,* 66.

The progression of works of art widely spaced in a line on a white background allows for a specific viewing experience. The visitor to the exhibition is not only confronted with the overall experience of the art gallery, but is given the opportunity to individually view each piece. This display enables a one-on-one interaction between the artwork and the visitor, "The placement of paintings on neutral-colored walls at just below eye level and at relatively widely spaced intervals created a 'field of vision' that facilitated appreciation of a singular artwork."[97] Although the climate of the gallery at the American National Exhibition was not the quiet, contemplative atmosphere of the average art museum, this idea of "appreciation" of a single artwork is not lost. In the context of the American National Exhibition, this relationship between art and viewer must be understood in the framework of the cultural diplomacy effort that the exhibition represented.

The ultimate goal of the exhibition was to portray American freedom and democracy. The art exhibition accomplished this by not only exhibiting modern art, but by exhibiting it in this "white cube," promoting the importance of individually viewing art. Staniszewski argues that this was an installation practice that would, "magnify the viewer's sense of autonomy and individual experience, characteristics particularly significant for the modern sense of self in a liberal democracy." The result of this experience was the creation of an "ideological apparatus," in which, "the liberal democratic ideal of the autonomous, independent individual born to natural rights and free will is the foundation of the mythology of the American dream."[98] By this analysis, the implementation of the white cube within the Jungle Gym was in a subtle way, a continuation of the overall goal of the exhibition: a promotion of democracy, individuality, and freedom.

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[97] Ibid
[98] Ibid 70

The white cube display was an excellent choice for an exhibition meant to persuade. The white cube not only emphasized the individuality of viewing a work of art, but was (and is) well suited to the promotion of a certain message. In the white cube, there is a certain amount of decontextualization that occurs—works are situated on a neutral ground, divorced from their original context and origin. It is the curator's role to arrange these works in the gallery, and to provide information about the art. The way in which they do this creates a particular narrative. There is a power dynamic that exists in curating, an inherent measure of authority that comes about in the ordering and interpretation of art. In an exhibition such as the one in Moscow, which existed in such a politically charged context, with the art being used as propaganda in service of the state, this is especially true. Halpert did not arrange the art with the explicit intent of making a propaganda statement, however, the success of the white cube exhibition strategy is partially dependent on a decontextualization of the work. As Emma Barker argues, this strategy creates a sense of "effacement and simultaneous self-negation: highlighting the inherent (that is formal) qualities of a work of art through the neutralization of its original context and content…."[99] This seemingly neutral format of display emphasized the work of art itself, rather than the context. In an understanding of how the layout of the artwork reinforced certain political goals at the American National Exhibition, this idea of decontextualization is essential (and related to the eagerness to use abstract art to promote the ideology of freedom and democracy). Though the art was given context in the chronological organization of the gallery, use of explanatory text, and tours given by Halpert and guides, the combination of the power of the white cube to wipe original context, and the intensely political and propaganda atmosphere in which the art

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[99] Emma Barker, *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (Yale University Press, 1999), 31.

exhibition existed made it so that the artwork could not be separated from the promotion of American ideology.

The Jungle Gym and Glimpses of the USA

The structure of the Jungle Gym was particularly suited to this job of depicting a multitude of objects of various sizes and styles. True to its name, the Jungle Gym was reminiscent of a children's playground, an open structure made up of steel and aluminum bars that formed two stories of a connected cage-like display system which existed within the glass pavilion as an interior organizing structure for the exhibits. The official guidebook written for the exhibition guides emphasized the flexibility of the structure both in terms of set up and space, "the specifically designed exhibit structure allows for easy assembly, traffic pattern control, and adjustability to the variety of shapes and sizes of the products on display." The exhibits were stacked on top of each other in "cubes shaped to fit the various-sized products, descriptive texts, and photographs" and delineated by hanging vertical panels and ceiling panels that segmented the space. [100] As described by a reporter from LIFE magazine, "Airy panels of transparent color, set in bold geometric patterns," separated "exhibits of dishes and cooking utensils. Visitors saw this spectacle from balconies."[101] People visiting the exhibition could travel between the displays using stairs that connected the two floors of the Jungle Gym, and elevated walkways running through and above the entire structure.

To fully envision the atmosphere of the space, we must imagine beyond the still black and white photographs. The hanging panels that divided the exhibits were made from colorful

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[100] *Official Training Book for Guides,* National Archives, 68

[101] "At the Fair Fascinated Russians Flock to US Exhibits," 28.

translucent plastic of blue, green, orange and magenta—as Edith Halpert put it, the "ceilings were painted a la Mondrian."[102] These panels were illuminated and enhanced by spotlights as well as the natural light coming through the windowed front and rear walls of the glass pavilion, making the space bright and vibrant. In the summer of 1959, the Moscow sun was hot, and beat through the glass pavilion's floor to ceiling windows relentlessly during the day. Halpert remembers that the heat inside the pavilion was intense, and not particularly conducive to an art exhibition—"what with a metal roof and a huge mass of people…the canvasses buckled and the metal sculptures were about to melt and the guides and I were ready to collapse."[103] Despite the stifling heat, the crowds still pushed in, curious to see this provocative show of American culture. The sound of hundreds of voices, coupled with sound from the TV and radio demonstrations, would have echoed across the pavilion—the temporary walls and open structure of the Jungle Gym were hardly soundproof.[104]

The cage-like structure of the Jungle Gym was employed for practical reasons—it was easy to ship the pieces overseas and then construct them in Moscow. However, this structure is also a significant example of modern exhibition technique. As George Nelson wrote, these type of display structures had not only recently come into being because they were practical, but because "there has been a change in our feelings about space and how it should be handled…The need to be practical doesn't exist, the necessity to build inexpensively does. The designer can ease up a bit and enjoy himself. The result can be fun. It is surprising how often it is significant fun."[105] This change in ways of dealing with space was a driving force of modern architecture and design

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[102] Edith Gregor Halpert, interview by Harlan Phillips, 1963.

[103] Ibid

[104] "U.S. Gives Soviet Glittering Show, Fair Found Lavish in Color and Frills, but Lacking a Unifying Theme," *New York Times*, July 24, 1959.

[105] Nelson, *Display*, 9.

during Nelson's time, and this disregard for convention and practicality; this, "significant fun" is what made the use of this particular design successful in a propaganda effort like the American National Exhibition.

The cage display system was a relatively new phenomenon in the field of exhibition design, and had become popular for traveling exhibitions because of the flexibility that the cage structures permitted. The cage exhibition system was a modern product of display, with roots firmly planted in methods of avant-garde art installation techniques.

The Jungle Gym brings to mind the "L and T" system of display first developed by Frederick Kiesler in the 1920s**.** Kiesler, a German-American artist and architect was an influential figure in the American modern art scene, and was well known for his boundary-pushing exhibition strategies. Kiesler created the L and T system with the goal of allowing works of art to come off the gallery wall and into the space of the viewer. The system was made up of interconnecting "L" and "T" beams that held up rectangular panels that would support the art. The system was freestanding and easily rearranged, it was, as Staniszewski writes, "a new ideological scaffolding" upon which exhibition design could build.[106] Kiesler's work was driven by the idea of "correalism," a term that he coined which "expressed his belief in the integral relationship between each object and its environment.…" In addition, he believed that for the art gallery there must be a design, "that would make conducive a meeting between painting and visitor." [107] For Kiesler, the interaction of the viewer to the display was highly important, and his exhibition designs hinged on the idea that the display should be dependent on the viewer for the creation of meaning within the exhibition. The design of the Jungle Gym shares with the L and T system many formal properties, which are especially apparent in a comparison of the Jungle

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[106] Staniszewski, *The Power of Display,* 4.

[107] Cynthia Goodman, "The Art of Revolutionary Display Techniques," in Lisa Philips, *Frederick Kiesler* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989), 57.

Gym to *City in Space,* Kiesler's 1925 architectural model and exhibition display. These formal

properties imbued the exhibition with a sense of space that was flexible and unlimited.

Furthermore, both Kiesler and Nelson were concerned with the relationship of the viewer to

the space of display. In their designs, they use the display of art and objects to construct a

specific environment and viewing experience. Beyond this, Nelson was acutely aware that the

space of display was a space of persuasion. He saw the art of display as an "essential procedure"

that always involved "attracting attention." He realized that, "The great bulk of display, in this

unromantic age of ours, is designed to persuade someone to buy something he may or may not

need or want."[108] In the context of the American National Exhibition, what was being "sold" was

a particular way of life—that of a free, American, capitalist society. The cage structure, designed

by Nelson and his team to best display the multitude of consumer goods and examples of

American culture, was meant to promote this way of life by influencing the experience of the

visitor in the space of the exhibition. This notion that interaction between the display and the

visitor would create something more—like Kiesler argued, a creation of "meaning,"—was not

just a utopian hope of the avant-garde, but was recognized in the design of the American

National Exhibition as an opportunity for persuasion.

While the persuasion and propaganda motives of the American National Exhibition were in

many ways obvious and explicit to those who visited the exhibition—clearly a specific way of

life was being promoted in the proliferation of American consumer goods—there were more

subtle power dynamics at work in the very design of the Jungle Gym. One of the most

significant elements of the Jungle Gym was its space and openness. Made up of two stories of

multiple different exhibits, the structure did not have rooms and walls, but rather employed

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[108] Nelson, *Display*, 7.

sheets of plastic and bars of aluminum and steel to delineate the space. This allowed little separation between the exhibits and the visitors. In a guidebook written for the exhibition, the Jungle Gym is described as creating "mezzanine areas from which the visitor may observe exhibits above, below, and from the same level on which he stands."[109] The cage-like structure emphasized the intense proliferation of American material goods that were on display, and enhanced the visitor's view of these goods, so that even when they were looking at one section of the exhibit, the next was never far from their field of vision. In addition, those viewing the exhibit could see and hear their fellow visitors quite easily, the mezzanine areas allowing people to not only observe the others in their own section, or on their own floor, but also to look down on people and exhibitions from above. This lack of separation between exhibits and people created a democratization of experience, magnifying and multiplying effect in both what visitors saw and how they reacted.

Exhibitions are, at their essence, public spaces, and in public spaces, people act differently than they would in private.[110] This occurs because of many factors, but most importantly the physical space and the presence of other people govern the way a person—or group of people— will behave. These things affect the way an exhibition is understood and experienced. In this instance, the reaction of one person to any part of the exhibition would be easily seen by another, and therefore enhance the interest and discussion around what was being displayed. In Andrew Wulf's analysis of the American National Exhibition, he makes an important parallel between

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[109] *Official Training Book for Guides,* National Archives, 67

[110] People act differently in public, and their behavior is shaped by the space. John F. Kasson discusses this phenomenon in *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century.* Kasson examines how Coney Island contributed to the formulation of American culture, arguing that amusement parks were particularly significant because people were not just acting as "spectators" but interacting with the space and with others. Kasson calls amusement parks "laboratories of the new mass culture, providing settings and attractions that immediately affected behavior" (7). The American National Exhibition was not so different from an amusement park setting, as it created spectatorship and promoted interaction between visitors.

Nelson's design, and perhaps the most influential national exhibition of all—the Great

Exhibition of 1851, which was housed in Paxton's famous glass structure, the "Crystal Palace."

The Great Exhibition of 1851 featured exhibits from many different countries and is the first

example of what would become the World's Fair. Wulf writes that although the Jungle Gym can

be understood strictly as modern design, influenced by modern display techniques, "Nelson

himself admitted the seeming avant-gardism of which he and design peers like the Eames and

others were offering the world at the time were truly predated by earlier exhibitions, including

the Great Exhibition of 1851"[111]

Although created more than 100 years prior to the American National Exhibition, the

elements of the Crystal Palace are echoed in the space of the Glass Pavilion and the Jungle Gym.

The Crystal Palace was a magnificent architectural achievement, a multi-storied structure made

up of rods of iron and walls of glass. The central transept was large and rectangular, creating an

open gallery that rose high above the main floor. Balconies surrounded the gallery on all sides,

constructed within the cage-like frame. George Nelson called the Crystal Palace a "prefabricated

cage enclosing people, gardens and interior structures."[112] This "prefabricated cage" was the

original predecessor to what would become the classic World's Fair exhibition style; it set a

precedent for impermanent and flexible systems of display that were ideal for temporary

exhibitions like the American National Exhibition.

The structure of the Crystal Palace, its architecture so influential to later international

exhibitions (as well as a multitude of other public buildings such as museums, galleries, and

department stores), exerted a certain amount of power upon the visitor. In Tony Bennet's

Exhibitionary Complex, he seeks to analyze the architecture of the Crystal Palace to "unravel the

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[111] Wulf, *U.S. International Exhibitions during the Cold War,* 119.
[112] Nelson, *Display*, 137.

relations between knowledge and power effected by the technologies of vision embodied in the

architectural forms of the exhibitionary complex." In Bennet's analysis, he engages Foucault,

arguing that the surveillance mechanisms that were a part of society were present in the

exhibition, and these "new forms of spectacle produced a more complex and nuanced set of

relations through which power was exercised and relayed…than the Foucauldian account

allows."[113] A main component of Bennet's argument hinges upon an analysis of the architectural

space. He writes that "one of the architectural innovations of the Crystal Palace consisted in the

arrangement of relations between the public and exhibits so that, while everyone could see, there

were also vantage points from which everyone could be seen, thus combining the functions of

spectacle and surveillance."[114] Ultimately, in examining the relationship between power and

knowledge at play in the exhibition space, the power lies in the space's "ability to coordinate an

order of things and to produce a place for the people in relation to that order."[115] This ordering of

space and objects that occurred in the Crystal Palace was markedly similar to the space of the

open, cage-structure of the Jungle Gym. In addition, the power dynamics are arguably similar,

existing because of the architectural framework of the space.

The Jungle Gym, in its chaotic, yet ordered display of materials, was not only effective

because of the cage structure, but also relied on the visual strategy of bombardment. Inside of the

glass pavilion, the viewer experienced sensory overload, a complete saturation of perception.

Everywhere they looked, objects and information could be found. This experience was facilitated

by the multi-tiered, open structure, and in addition, can be understood as a sort of visual

photomontage technique. Like the monumental photomontages of Lissitzky, Bayer, and

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[113] Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex.," ed. Greenberg Reesa and Ferguson Bruce, *Thinking about Exhibitions*, 1996, 83.
[114] Ibid, 87.
[115] Bennet, 89.

Terragni, George Nelson's design for the American National Exhibition employed this modern method of bombardment of enormous images. Instead of still images, visitors were inundated with visions of material consumer goods ensconced in a cage of modern design. Freedom of choice was the order of the day, the exhibition built to facilitate ease of movement and maximum possibility for viewing each different exhibit.

Inside of Buckminster Fuller's golden geodesic dome, the bombardment continued, this time in the form of projected film images. The dome was intended to be viewed first, as "Act I" of the exhibition. In contrast to the glass pavilion, the dome was meant to provide information, rather than display objects. The information provided in the dome focused on American technological advances, education, research, medicine, agriculture, space exploration, and nuclear energy. This all came together in a 12-minute, multi-screened film installation created by Charles and Ray Eames. The film, *Glimpses of the USA* was played on a loop, with the lights inside the dome dimming at regular intervals so that the seven, 20x30-foot screens could play the film, which was made up of 2,200 individual images and included scenes of a typical day in the life of an American citizen. Charles and Ray Eames were brought onto the American National Exhibition design team by George Nelson, and their experience with creating various multi-screened slide shows and films, influenced the decision to include one at the American National Exhibition. [116]

The film was meant to pick up where the exhibit left off, and intercede in the Soviet imagination in a way that the rest of the display could not. As George Nelson said, there was a worry that even with 80,000 square feet of exhibition space, the designers would still not be able

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[116] Nelson and the Eames' worked together on an art curriculum at the University of Georgia called "Art X," which like *Glimpes of the USA,* was concerned with the way that design could be used for maximum communication. Masey writes that "the idea was to build, through the onrush of different elements, an awareness of potential relationships between things that would otherwise be considered unrelated" (Masey, *Cold War Confrontations,* 165).

to "communicate more than a small fraction of what we wanted to say." The film would provide a chance to synthesize and effectively compress "into a small volume the tremendous quantity of information we wanted to present."[117] In addition to the rest of the exhibition, the designers used this film to harness the power of images to impart a particular message about life in the United States. The film, unlike the objects and still images that made up other sections of the exhibition, had the unique ability to capture the attention of the viewer with moving images (that had the benefit of portraying real Americans using real American products), sound, sheer size, and an audacity of display that employed not just a single, straight screen, but seven massive ones.

Originally, when the design team presented the initial plans for the dome and the film to the USIA, they received a lukewarm reaction. George Nelson remembers that there were concerns that the dome as an "information machine" would not be "sufficiently dramatic." He noted that there was "Considerable pressure to follow conventional exhibition procedures, which would mean glass pavilion would be stuffed with one set of objects, dome equally stuffed with another." The design team however, advocated for an appreciable difference between the two main buildings of the exhibit, arguing, that "if acts one and two are identical, people leave the theater…" The design for the dome and the film was eventually accepted, but Nelson recalled that there was "alarm and disapproval of the idea of a multiple-screen presentation in the dome as its major exhibit."[118] Though the designers had faith in the impact and power of their proposed display, it is interesting that this power of display did not initially translate to the USIA officials. This instance highlights the influence that the designers had on the decision making process. Although the designs needed to be approved and discussed with the USIA, it was the designers who were ultimately responsible for creating the unique display of communication that the

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[117] quoted in Abercrombie, *George Nelson: The Design of Modern Design*, 164.

[118] Ibid, 164-165.

exhibit would manifest. Peter Blake, who was in charge of the architecture exhibit in Moscow, remembered that it was Jack Masey, head of design decisions for the USIA, who pushed for avant-garde, cutting edge designers to be hired. As Blake writes, "Charles and Ray were hardly in the mainstream of American culture. They were very much 'on the cutting edge'; and for a staid U.S. government agency to commission two such unpredictable experimenters to produce what was to be the theme song of our exhibition was mind-boggling."[119] In the case of *Glimpses of the USA,* the design was finally accepted not because the designers impressed upon the government officials the impact of the multi-screened film, but because the officials decided that presenting videos that depicted real, everyday American people using the various products and technologies that were displayed in the exhibit would be an effective way to make credible the claim that these products were used by the majority of the American public.

When the film was installed in Moscow, however, the overall visual impact was indisputable. Every so often, the lights of the dome were dimmed, the screens were illuminated, and visions of the American experience were projected from the seven screens that were situated high above the crowd, close to the ceiling of the dome. The images moved quickly, to the tune of triumphant orchestral music written by Leonard Bernstein. One New York Times writer called *Glimpses of the USA* the "dome's most dramatic message," which was "transmitted through an ingenious film device."[120] The images provided "glimpses" into American life, portraying cities, highways filled with cars, farms and countryside, skyscrapers, multitudes of Americans on their way to work or school, or enjoying leisure time.

The specific combination of images, as well as the speed that they were cycled through, provided the film with a narrative arc, and emphasized certain points more than others. For the

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[119] Peter Blake, *No Place like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 230.

[120] "U.S. Gives Soviet Glittering Show, Fair Found Lavish in Color and Frills, but Lacking a Unifying Theme."

most part, the scenes were "flashed in sequence" but, "sometimes, for special impact, all at once."[121] For example, the film begins with images of the night stars displayed across the seven screens. Gradually, the images on each screen change, and the stars morph into views of cities seen from the sky. The narrator tells the audience that, "from the sky it would be difficult to distinguish the Russian city from the American city."[122] Images of scenic American vistas are followed by views of cities, skyscrapers, and neighborhoods, birds-eye views of pools and cul-de-sacs. The music gets faster, and the images change quickly in time with this soundtrack until a wall of image and sound inundates the viewer's senses.

These thousands of images thrown at the viewer in quick succession, created a visual field that was impossible to escape. As Peter Blake writes, "The thousands of images chosen by Charles and Ray each told a direct story and a subliminal one, the latter being what it was like to live in a free capitalist society."[123] The seven-screened set up was considered carefully by the Eameses, the number of images shown had to be enough for high visual impact, but not too many that the display became incomprehensible. Seven proved to be just the right number to both allow for understanding of what was shown, with maximum visual impact still intact. Ultimately, *Glimpses of the USA* would be described by one reporter as a "twelve-minute blitz," an "information overload—an avalanche of related data that comes at a viewer too fast for him to cull and reject it…"[124] This feeling of a "blitz," came from the unique set up of gigantic screens that confronted the viewer's field of vision.

This method of display was deeply rooted in ideas that were first put forth by avant-garde artists and designers. In their work, Charles and Ray Eames, highly influential modern designers

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[121] *Official Training Book for Guides,* National Archives, 19.

[122] Charles Eames and Ray Eames, *Glimpses of the U.S.A. Film* (The Eames Office, 1959).

[123] Blake, *No Place Like Utopia,* 230.

[124] Beatriz Colomina, "Enclosed by Images: The Eameses' Multimedia Architecture," *Grey Room*, no. 2 (2001): 19.

in their own right, were influenced by these earlier designers. Additionally, the design philosophies and goals of Charles and Ray Eames were particularly concerned with ways of communicating through both product design and multi-screened presentations like *Glimpses of the USA*. It was the display of images that was deemed to have the ultimate power of communication, more so than words ever could. As Charles Eames remembers, "when we used seven screens over an area that was over half the length of a football field—that was just a desperate attempt to make a credible statement to a group of people in Moscow when words had almost ceased to have meaning." The designers found that in an earlier prototype that relied on a more traditional linear film style, they "couldn't really give credibility" to the message. Rather, they discovered that there was a unique power in the multi-screened and many imaged display, as Eames said, "when we could put 50 images on the screen for a certain subject in a matter of 10 seconds, we got a kind of breadth which we felt we couldn't get any other way."[125]

In many ways, *Glimpses of the USA* is reminiscent of the oversized photomontages that were featured in the European propaganda exhibitions of the 1930s. Like photomontage, *Glimpses of the USA* takes a simple and traditional element of visual communication—the photograph (or in this case a moving image), and employs this single element in combination with others to form a new, innovative, and impactful whole. The photomontage is a visual bombardment, a mashing together of images to create new meaning and in this case, a propaganda message. The quickly moving images of *Glimpses of the USA* is nothing but a photomontage put into film, as the film takes simple images and uses them to saturate and bombard the viewer's field of vision. As the Eameses said, "if for example, we were to show a freeway interchange, somebody would look at it and say, 'We have one at Smolensk and one at

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[125] quoted in Colomina, "Enclosed by Images," 15.

Minsk; we have two, they have one'—that kind of thing. So we conceived the idea of having the imagery come on in multiple forms…."[126] The singular image of a highway, skyscraper, or suburban home has little visual power on its own, but when displayed in quickly changing scenes on oversized screens, these images take on new meaning in their relentless multiplicity, as the film bombards the viewer's field of vision.

The idea of the "field of vision" in exhibition design was first put forth by Herbert Bayer, and is used to great effect in the installation and display of *Glimpses of the USA*. Bayer first conceptualized the notion of a "field of vision" in 1930, and it was a theory that would continue to guide the design of all of his subsequent exhibitions. In his book *Display,* George Nelson describes Bayer's idea as a "simple and obvious" concept, "if display material is related to the height and angle of a person's vision, more can be seen simultaneously and with greater ease…" More importantly, he continues, this display "gave to the exhibition a new three-dimensional device which changed its entire character and offered new opportunities for gaining attention."[127] In Bayer's field of vision, the work of art was not relegated to flat gallery walls, yet like Kiesler's L and T system, allowed what was being displayed to come into the space of the viewer, surrounding them and engulfing their line of vision. Additionally, Bayer equated exhibition design to the "psychology of advertising." Similarly to Nelson's statement that the design of display is at its heart meant to be persuasive, Bayer stated that the theme of the exhibition should not "retain its distance from the spectator, it should be brought close to him, penetrate and leave an impression on him, should explain, demonstrate, and even persuade and lead him to a planned and direct reaction."[128] Bayer's concept of display allowed for better and

[126] quoted in Colomina, "Enclosed by Images," 19.
[127] Nelson, Display, 110.
[128] quoted in La, "Enlightenment, Advertising, Education, Etc," 68.

more effective viewing—searching for methods of display that would lead to a meaningful experience for the viewer. In the multi-screened set up of *Glimpses of the USA,* the Eames-Nelson design team were aiming for exactly that. The installation of the film, the screens elevated as they were high above the crowd on the curved wall of the dome, echoes Bayer's diagram of the 360 degree field of vision, with the panels of display surrounding the audience.

Though an "expanded field of vision" like the one employed in *Glimpses of the USA,* might at first seem to be a more democratic form of display, upon second glance, it is clear that this form of display dominates the viewer in a way that does not allow for other thoughts or opinions. As Kristie La argues, the expanded field of vision that Bayer formulated, "intensified the drama of the exhibition, relentlessly firing photographs at the viewer from all angles, so that he could only be in 'the thick of it'—so there could be no outside. Despite its radical surface, expanded vision in Bayer's use is conservative at heart, producing a passive spectator under the guise of an active one."[129] Among the impressive architecture of the dome, and the other exhibits displayed there, *Glimpses of the USA* was a grandiose and monumental grab for attention, the images bombarding visitors with proof of the success of American infrastructure and technology.

In the design of exhibition space, the designer holds an inherent authority over the visitors to the exhibition. This holds true for each of the elements of the American National Exhibition examined here; in the art gallery, the Jungle Gym, and the dome. The visitor must travel through the space created by the designer, and in doing so they are following a premeditated plan. However loosely this plan may have been designed to actually control a visitor's movement, the design of a space always exerts influence over a visitor's understanding and experience of the space. Whether the original intent is made explicitly clear, or is more subtle, going unnoticed by

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[129] Ibid

the conscious mind of the visitor, the design of an exhibition is at its essence is concerned with the ordering not only of objects in space, but of the body in space. This creates a dynamic of power—in making their design considerations, the designer leaves visual cues and manipulates physical space so that the viewer will walk one way, or see one object in relation to the one next to it.

In looking at design that was chosen for this power to persuade, it is not the ultimate experience that matters, but the designer's *intent* of creating a particular, manufactured experience that does. It was this intent that was sought after in the creation of the American National Exhibition. The design process always begins with a problem, to which the designer must create a solution. In the case of the American National Exhibition the problem was to generate a persuasive display of American culture that would stand up to the charged atmosphere of Cold War and send a particular message to the Soviet visitors. The designers of the exhibition found the solution in techniques and philosophies grounded in avant-garde installation methods first put forth by El Lissitzky, Fredrick Kiesler and Herbert Bayer. As George Nelson writes, the designer, "brings to the problem his own private baggage, his personal collection of images and the individual philosophy he holds whether he is aware of it or not." In addition, "no design can exist in isolation. It is always related, sometimes in very complex ways, to an entire constellation of influencing situations and attitudes."[130] George Nelson's own philosophy, so influenced by modernism and the tenets of Herbert Bayer and the Bauhaus, was reflected in his effort to craft a total environment, in which meaning and persuasion were created.

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[130] George Nelson, *Problems of Design* (Whitney Publications, 1957), 11.

Figure 14
A woman examines Jackson Pollock's *Cathedral.*
The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Figure 15
Visitors to the art gallery pass Jack
Levine's *Welcome Home.*

The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Figure 16
Crowds in the gallery.
The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Figure 17
Crowds in the gallery.
The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Figures 18 and 19
Second floor mezzanine of the Jungle Gym
The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959
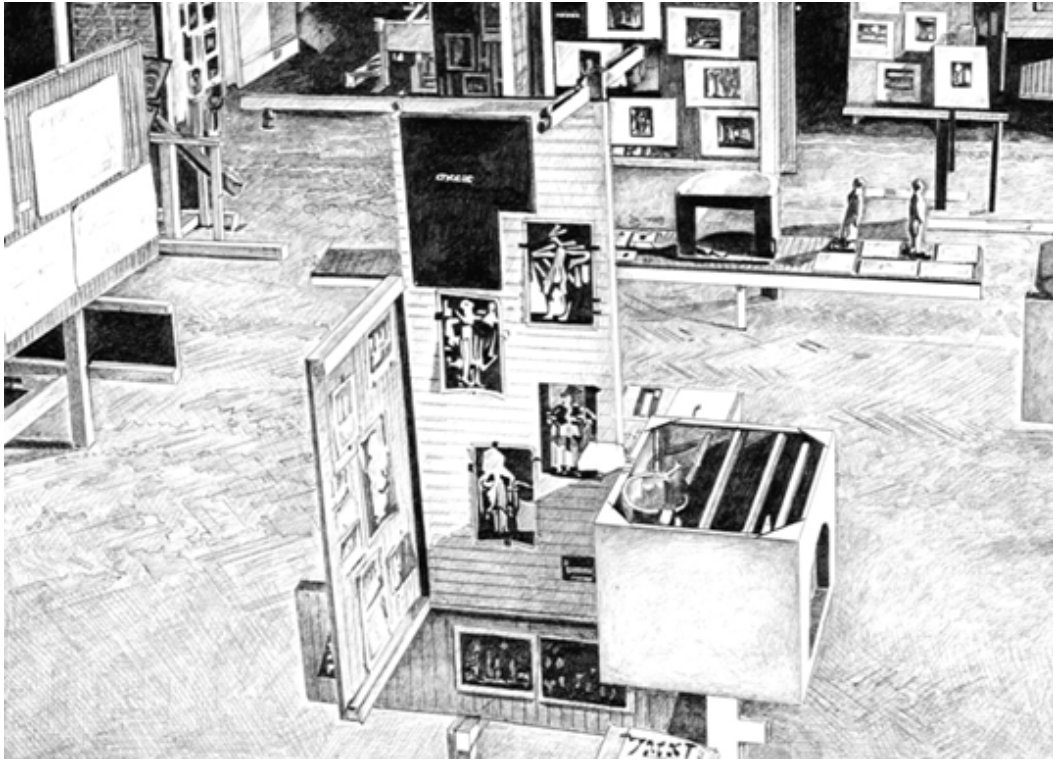
Figure 20
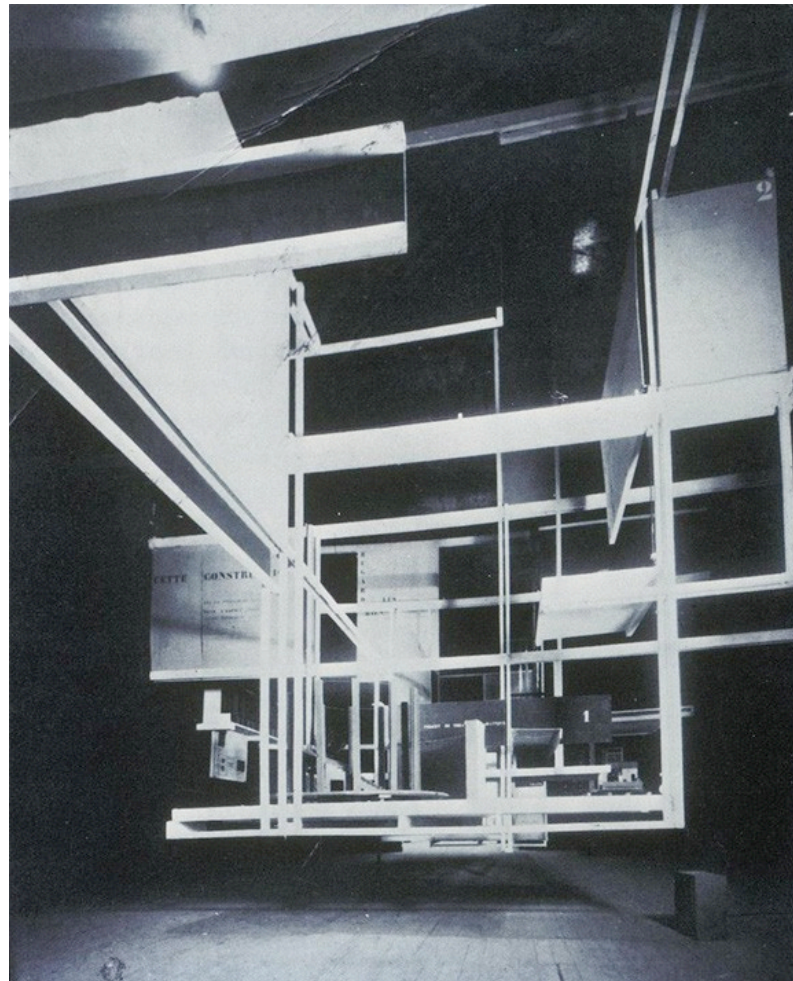Rendering of Kiesler's L + T system.

Vienna, 1924

Figure 21
City in Space
Frederick Kiesler
1925

Figures 22 and 23
Glimpses of the USA
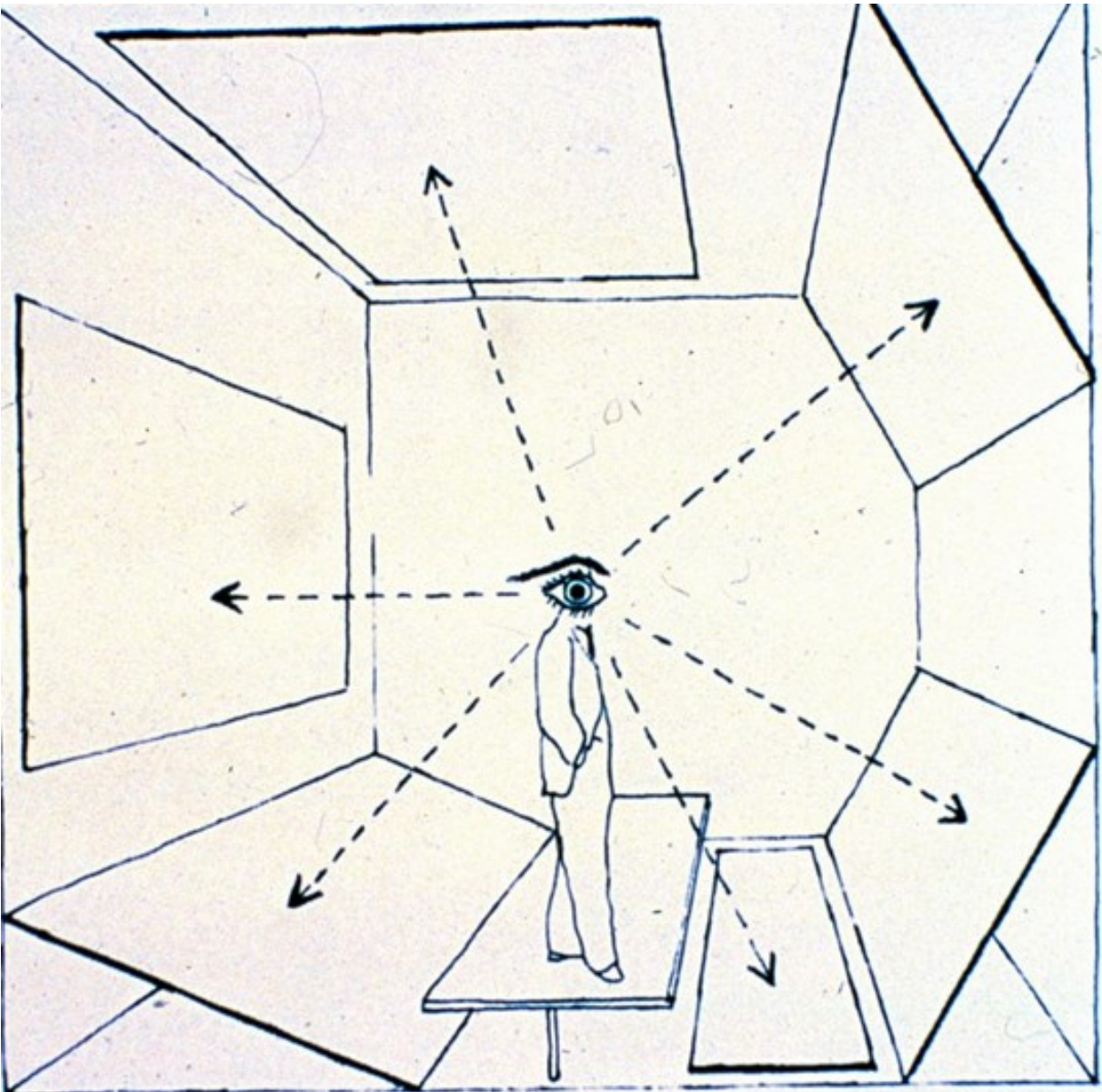Charles and Ray Eames
The American National Exhibition
Moscow, 1959

Figure 24
Extended Field of Vision
Bayer
1935

Conclusion
A Historical Paradox in Visual Form

"In these exhibition systems, organizing and disseminating information
(and thus the modern concept of emancipation through access to information)
becomes an organizational endeavor with all of the administrative
precision and hierarchical integration of a modern industrialized
corporation, military apparatus, or totalitarian state."[131]

"design is a professional euphemism for control over people and things,
a euphemism that is, for power."[132]

In 2007, contemporary artist Martin Beck produced a video work that took as its subject the groundbreaking "Struc-Tube" exhibition system designed by George Nelson. The "Struc-Tube" system, easily produced and put together with connecting tubes and joints, was a predecessor to the system used in Moscow in 1959. Beck titled the work *About the Relative Size of Things in The Universe,* a nod to the subtitle of Charles and Ray Eames' film *Powers of Ten: A Film Dealing with the Relative Size of Things in the Universe and the Effect of Adding Another Zero.* Beck's video is a loop of a man and a woman assembling and disassembling the Struc-Tube system. In lieu of being able to watch the video here, a critic of the exhibition provides a description:

> "An orderly stack of metal modular tubing and display panels is approached by a man and a woman, who together begin efficiently constructing an obviously temporary structure…They are interrupted by a third player, who asks whether they will be able to come to a meeting the next day, in order to discuss workers' rights. Unable to commit, the man and woman attempt to keep at their job while explaining that they have another exhibition to put up tomorrow; they'll likely miss the meeting. They complete their task, and the camera holds a wide dilated gaze until the workers begin taking the structure apart, all the while retaining their pace and steadiness. They are interrupted a second time by the dissident worker, who repeats his request for a meeting. He is again put off; the structure is cleanly disassembled as the camera returns to its original position until the scenario beings again."[133]

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[131] Martin Beck, "Sovereignty and Control," in *Martin Beck: About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe*, 2007, 58.

[132] quoted in Felicity Scott, "On the 'Counter-Design' of Institutions: Emilio Ambasz's Universitas Symposium at MoMA," *Grey Room*, No. 14 (Winter 2004), 65.

[133] Johanna Burton, "Martin Beck," *Art Forum*, September 2007, 469.

Beck is fascinated by the struc-tube system. In his work he addresses it in other forms as well, using reconstructions of the system for both the exhibition of his own work, and *as* his own work. In a review of one of his recent exhibitions, David Everitt Howe writes that in Beck's work he is, "Laying bare the appropriation and re-articulation of the avant-garde as a design language, infinitely reproducible….he invokes impassioned political debates around art historical movements and their larger cultural contexts only to relegate them to a kind of modernist décor. Historical baggage is both evoked and buried in surface sheen, complementary to his exhibition design and somehow mutually at odds with it."[134] In using the struc-tube system as a topic and a medium in his art, Beck privileges form as a way of understanding greater social and historical currents. For example, this exhibition system was the first system that could be assembled without a single tool, easily put together anywhere by unskilled workers. In *About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe,* Beck takes this idea as a point of departure for exploring contemporary labor relations. In his work, an examination of the struc-tube system becomes "a methodological apparatus within a broader framework of artistic practice."[135]

Additionally, for Beck, the exhibition system is a place where "the utopian vision of infinite dissemination of information (expandability, portability) and… the administration of this utopia by a means of a rigid geometry" come together.[136] In the recognition of this comparison he identifies the inherent complication that exists in this system of display, the freedom and liberation that is assumed in the flexibility and modernism of the form, yet the simultaneous

[134] David Everitt Howe, "Contentious Utopias: Martin Beck's Avant-Garde Art and Design," *Afterall*, January 10, 2012, http://www.afterall.org/online/contentious-utopias-martin-beck-s-avant-garde-art-and-design#cite7449.
[135] Martin Beck, The Industrialization of Display Systems, Email Interview, 2008, 22. http://adsz.hfg-karlsruhe.de/archiv/ausstellungsdesign.hfg-karlsruhe.de/sites/default/files/0302.pdf.
[136] Ibid

authority that is created in the highly structured grid system. In researching the history of modern exhibition design that is exemplified by the struc-tube, Beck takes the historical moment of the late twentieth century and uses the struc-tube as a "methodological apparatus" to understand, in his words, how "two apparently contradictory movements interact" within this structure.[137] In Beck's work, the struc-tube "functions as a kind of homogenous sign that is capable of translating a historical paradox into visual form—the paradox being the way emancipatory scenarios and control apparatuses mutually produce and condition each other."[138]

Martin Beck's work addresses many of the questions that are explored in this thesis, most centrally the importance of the role of the visual form in analysis of history and society. This perspective includes the appropriation of modern and avant-garde techniques, as well as the complex relationship between the promotion of freedom and simultaneous regulation that is found in the exhibit space. He finds this relationship so well articulated in the "modular exhibit system and its emblem, the connector joint," which, "are at the heart of a paradox that continuously haunts modernity's utopias: they liberate as they regulate and they regulate as they liberate."[139] In his work, Beck adds to the current intellectual work in the field of art history and analyzing exhibition design. As he appropriates a form that was once itself appropriated, and presents it to contemporary viewers, he creates an alternative mode of understanding the history and implications of this piece of design. He brings historical and social questions into the art world, into the gallery, and offers a new way of seeing. In the synthesis of design, history, and art-making that this piece creates, Beck makes clear that it is the analysis and interrogation of form that allows us to begin to ask questions about meaning.

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[137] Ibid, 21

[138] Ibid

[139] Quoted in Benoît Buquet, "Portrait. Martin Beck," *Critique d'art. Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain*, no. 40 (November 1, 2012).

In the case of the American National Exhibition in 1959, this concept is crucial to our understanding of the event. The structure of the architecture and design of the exhibition was the medium through which this cultural and political persuasion was enacted. The USIA, Jack Masey, and George Nelson knew that it was not only the multitude of objects displayed that would have impact on the viewer. Most importantly, it was the method used to display these objects that made the exhibition instrumental to the promotion of American ideology.

The combination of cultural and political power that creates meaning in the exhibition takes concrete form when politicians inhabit the exhibition space, as shown in a photograph of Nixon and Khrushchev visiting the exhibition on its opening day. The composition of the photograph allows us to imagine what it might be like to be a visitor at the exhibition; the space is simultaneously a baazar—filled with light, color, sound, objects—and a political arena. If our eyes become the photographer's lens, we stand on the ground floor and look upward. In front of us a display features American music and sound recording technology. A column of high fidelity records hangs from the ceiling among the bars and panels of the steel cage system of display. Many bright lights illuminate the display. It is an eclectic mix of Americana, jazz by Thelonious Monk, next to a record of folk songs by famed poet Carl Sandburg. The square shapes of the record covers echo the scaffolding system of the exhibit, and our eyes are drawn upward by the multiple vertical lines created by the metal bars of the display as well as the vertical orientation of the objects being displayed. Above the display, the bars of the balcony continue to carry our gaze upward, until they stop at the top of the frame, near the roof, finally resting on the group of politicians. Standing on the second floor balcony, they tower above us, as does the heavy industrial structure of the Jungle Gym. Nixon leans on the railing of the mezzanine balcony, a smug expression on his face, staring off at the display below him. Next to him is Khrushchev,

who is making a move as if to grab Nixon's arm to get his attention. Nixon is tall, with dark hair and a dark suit, Khrushchev is shorter, with a balding, white-haired head, and a light grey suit. The pair are opposites, embodying their antagonistic roles as the figureheads of the communism versus capitalism debate.

In one shot, the photographer captured the layered and multifaceted power dynamics at play in the 1959 American National Exhibition. The cadre of grey-suited diplomats that fill the balcony, above the display and simultaneously *on* display, are an obvious reminder of the high political stakes under which the exhibition was conceived. The meshing of culture and politics at the heart of the entire event comes to life here, as the politicians (who would later that week partake in the famous "kitchen debate") engage with the cultural exhibit, an exhibit that was meant not only to awe and impress, but use the power of the visual to persuade and instruct Russian visitors in the ways of modern American life in a capitalist, free, and democratic society.

It was the artists of the early twentieth-century avant-garde whose influence is so strongly seen in this photograph and throughout Sokolniki Park---in the glass pavilion, the Jungle Gym, the white cube, the geodesic dome, and the Eameses multi-screened film. However, the modernism on display in Moscow in 1959 was a modernism divorced from the original intent of the avant-garde. As Greg Barnhisel writes, "it was American *modernism* in art, literature, music, architecture, and even dance that served as evidence of American cultural advancement—but this was a modernism redefined and made safe for official sponsorship."[140] The utopian ideologies of the avant-garde powered the creation of the American National Exhibition, but in the appropriation of these forms for state-sponsored propaganda, the existing definition and

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[140] Greg Barnhisel, "Perspectives USA and the Cultural Cold War: Modernism in Service of the State," *Modernism/modernity* 14, no. 4 (November 2007): 730.

understanding of modernism, and "avant-garde" were redefined in order make room for the promotion of democratic ideologies.

As we have seen, modern art and design were particularly well suited to the propaganda mission. The idealism and abstraction that characterized so much of the philosophies of avant-garde artists and designers was easily coopted in service of a specific message. Stuart Hobbs writes, "the meaning that avant-gardists gave to their work, which they believed was expressed in a form that tapped into a universal human subconscious, proved susceptible to diverse interpretations."[141] For example, highly influential critics such as Clement Greenberg framed and interpreted the work of modern artists like the New York school as they saw fit. Greenberg was known for his formalism, which identified the form of the artwork as its most important characteristic.

While an examination of form can expose meaning, a singular focus on the formal properties of a work of art, outside of any contextual framework can do just the opposite, obscuring the context in which the art was created and opening the door for the addition of meaning by outside sources. This is exactly what happened in the art gallery at the American National exhibition, where much of the art included was modern and abstract, and displayed in the decontextualizing white cube. The proclivity of modern artists to demonstrate universality in their art paved the way for easy interpretation and redefinition by outside actors – critics, curators, and government officials. This openness to interpretation is what allowed modern art to be appropriated for political use. The act of this appropriation also highlights totalitarian tendencies that existed in the methods of American cultural diplomacy.

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[141] Stuart D. Hobbs, *The End of the American Avant Garde*. New York: New York University Press. 1997, 7.

In participating in this appropriation of a specific style of avant-garde in the American National exhibition, the United States government used practices that were cultivated by what we see today as "classical" totalitarian states such as Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Stalin's Soviet Union. The United States government participated in actions that emulated totalitarian practices when they created a propaganda exhibit so similar in style to those found in less democratic regimes. Consequently, the American National Exhibition, though promoting freedom, was not necessarily a free and democratic space. This had everything to do with the appropriation of art and design by government powers with specific propaganda goals in mind, and the design's power to convey these goals and create a space of power and persuasion. In the creation of this space, true freedom of opinion did not exist.

The story of the American government's appropriation of culture during the Cold War, is one of paradoxes and ironies. In the United States, modern American art was simultaneously a beacon of independence and freedom and the worst kind of communist scribbling. In the Soviet Union it was condemned as a symbol of the degradation of the capitalist system. The American National exhibition took place during the extreme polarization of the Cold War. It was a cultural manifestation of good versus evil. Capitalism versus communism. Democracy and freedom versus totalitarianism. It was a story of strange bedfellows: government agencies and modern artists and designers. At the outset, these opposites seem forever opposed, with one eventually triumphing over the other. However, upon closer examination these contradictions are fluid, co-existing in never-ending tension. The American National Exhibition was not only a triumph of propaganda, an unquestioned promotion of the American dream and democracy. The United States was not on the democratic side of the equation simply because democracy was the product being sold. George Nelson's Jungle Gym was not a playground of commercial choice, but rather

a highly structured and hierarchical space. Edith Halpert's art gallery was anything but a "neutral" white cube. The Eameses' film did not offer a democracy of images, but rather an all-encompassing blitz of carefully sequenced scenes of persuasion. We can come to these conclusions by considering the space in which cultural propaganda was created. By taking into account the visual format of the exhibition style, these seeming paradoxes and tensions can be interrogated and redefined, and slowly, the one-dimensional story of American cultural diplomacy changes.
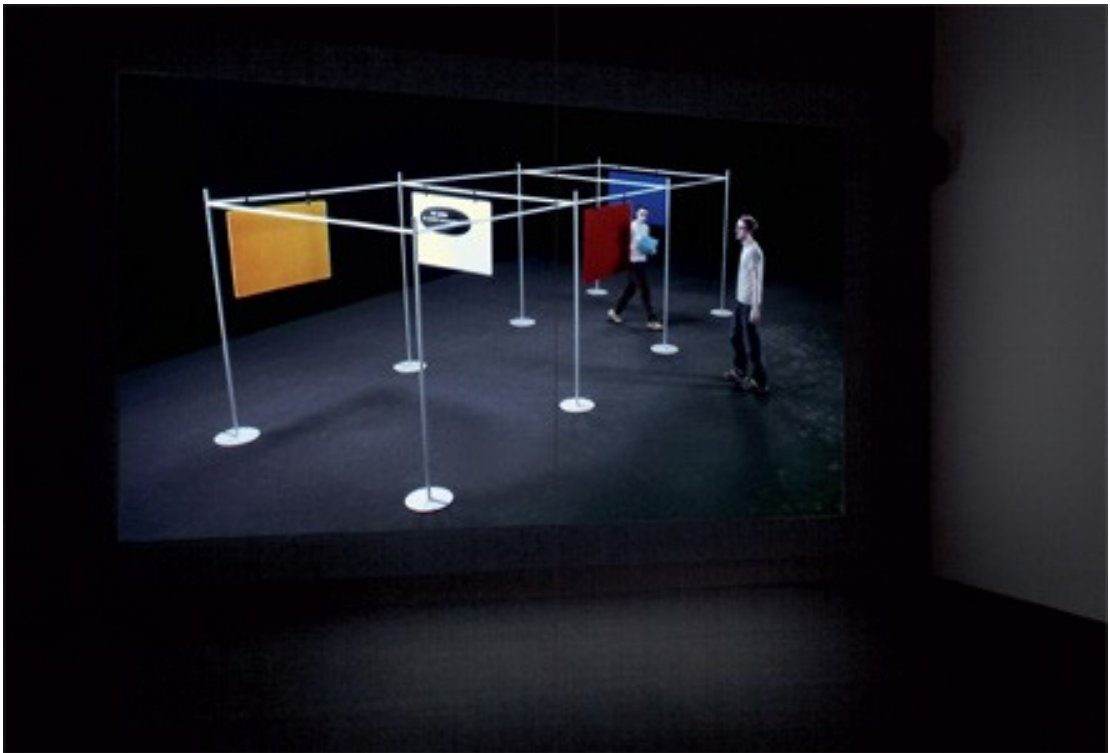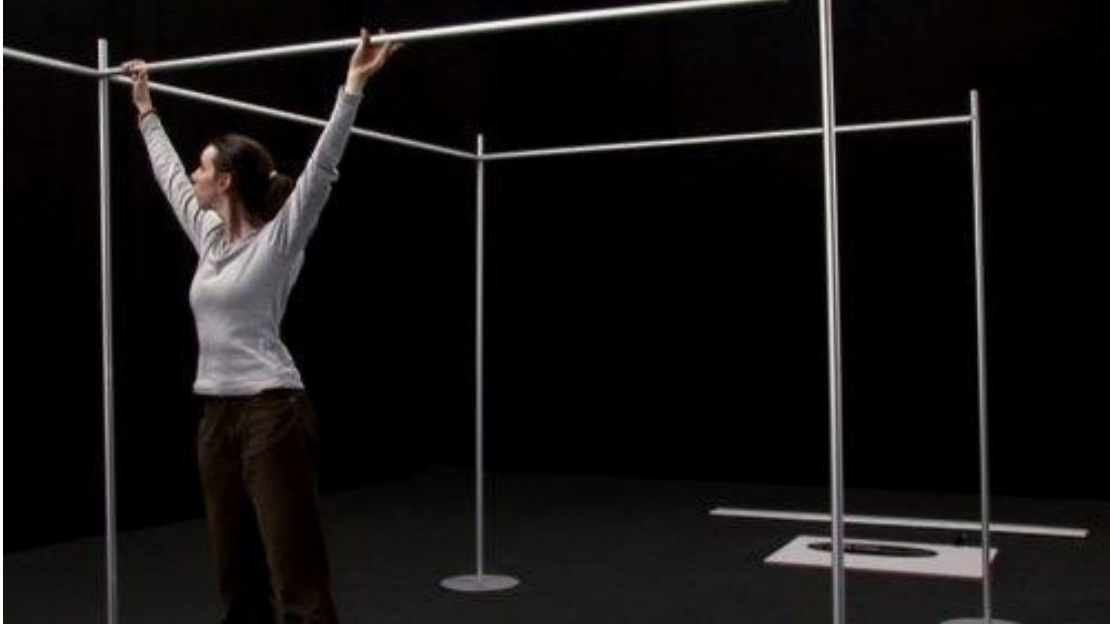
Figures 25 and 26
About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe
Martin Beck
2007

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