

Article

The Aesthetics of Encounter: Participation and Visual Mediation in Contemporary Trade Fairs

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Abstract: This paper examines contemporary trade fairs as immersive exhibition spaces in which visual mediation and embodied participation structure the aesthetics of encounter. Approached through cultural and media-theoretical frameworks, trade fairs are treated not merely as commercial marketplaces but as hybrid exhibitionary environments where visibility, presence, and interaction are orchestrated through curatorial strategies, spatial design, and sensory techniques. The analysis foregrounds participation as a mode of embodied engagement enacted through movement, orientation, and attention, while visual mediation is conceptualized as a cultural technique that organizes perception and distributes visibility. These dynamics illuminate how trade fairs produce experiential immersion without relying on technological determinism, instead mobilizing forms of display, spectatorship, and performative presence rooted in exhibition cultures. By reframing trade fairs as mediated visual cultures, the study situates them within ongoing debates in visual culture, media studies, and cultural theory, demonstrating how encounter operates as both an aesthetic and social process through which publics negotiate participation and meaning.

Keywords: Visual mediation; Participation; Encounter; Trade fairs; Embodiment

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

Trade fairs constitute contemporary environments in which encounters unfold through display, participation, and mediated presence. Although popularly characterized as spaces of commercial negotiation, contemporary fairs increasingly resemble exhibitionary institutions in their curatorial logic, spatial orchestration, and experiential design. Their immersive qualities do not derive solely from technological augmentation or sensory spectacle, but from the organization of attention, movement, and visibility within bounded yet heterogeneous environments. Such spaces choreograph how publics encounter artifacts, commodities, and imaginaries, foregrounding the cultural techniques through which participation is enacted (Bennett, 1988).

Situating trade fairs within a broader cultural history of display highlights their role as hybrid arenas where aesthetic, economic, and epistemic strategies overlap. Participation within these environments is not reducible to transactional behavior; it involves embodied attention, sensory negotiation, and performative engagement that blur distinctions between spectatorship and interaction. This analytical shift allows trade fairs to be understood not as neutral containers for commercial exchange but as mediated cultural spaces that mobilize visibility and presence to produce social and experiential effects (Bennett, 1995). From this perspective, the aesthetics of encounter emerges as a useful framework for examining how publics navigate and interpret trade fair environments through bodily movement, orientation, and perceptual immersion.

1.2 Research Scope and Methodological Note

This study adopts a conceptual and cultural-analytical approach grounded in visual culture studies, media theory, and exhibition studies. Rather than conducting empirical fieldwork or quantitative analysis, the article develops a theoretical framework for understanding trade

fairs as mediated exhibitionary environments. The analysis draws on existing scholarship on the exhibitionary complex, visual mediation, participation, and cultural techniques to construct an interpretive lens through which contemporary trade fairs can be examined.

To enhance analytical clarity, selected well-documented international trade fairs—such as the Consumer Electronics Show (CES), the Milan Furniture Fair, and the Canton Fair—are referenced as illustrative cases. These examples serve not as primary empirical data but as contextual anchors that ground theoretical arguments in recognizable exhibition practices. The aim is not to generalize across all trade fairs, but to examine large-scale contemporary commercial exhibitions that combine industrial display, public participation, and spatial orchestration.

In this sense, the article positions itself as a theoretical inquiry informed by illustrative cases, contributing conceptual clarification to ongoing discussions in visual culture and media studies.

2. Literature Review/Background

Contemporary scholarship on exhibitionary cultures, visual mediation, and participation provides an essential foundation for understanding trade fairs beyond their commercial functions. Rather than approaching trade fairs solely as market platforms, existing theoretical work in visual culture, museum studies, and media theory invites reconsideration of such environments as structured fields of visibility, pedagogy, and embodied encounter. Drawing on this body of literature, this section situates trade fairs within broader exhibitionary traditions and develops a conceptual framework that foregrounds participation and mediation as co-constitutive processes.

2.1 Trade Fairs within Exhibitionary Cultures

In this article, the term “trade fairs” refers specifically to large-scale contemporary commercial exhibitions that combine product display, industry networking, and mediated public engagement. This definition excludes historical world expositions, purely academic conferences, and small-scale local markets. The focus is on hybrid industry exhibitions that operate within contemporary global trade circuits and employ curatorial and spatial strategies comparable to those of cultural exhibitionary institutions.

Trade fairs occupy a complex position within what Tony Bennett has termed the exhibitionary complex, wherein institutions organize publics and objects through display, pedagogy, and spectacle. While museums, expositions, and galleries historically served as paradigmatic exhibitionary institutions, trade fairs extend these logics into commercial and professional domains, complicating the boundary between education, persuasion, and promotion. Their cultural function exceeds material exchange (Duncan, 1995). They operate as sites for showcasing emergent technologies, projecting industrial futures, and negotiating market imaginaries through forms of display that solicit attention and participation. Through this interplay between commodity circulation and symbolic production, trade fairs contribute to broader regimes of visibility in which innovation is performed, evaluated, and legitimized.

Historically, trade fairs emerged from medieval marketplaces and itinerant festivals, where commerce, entertainment, and public gathering converged. The transformation from marketplace to display environment reoriented trade fairs toward curated presentation, categorical organization, and thematic alignment (Rydell, 1993). This shift involved new forms of classification and knowledge management, as commodities came to be sorted, compared, and contextualized within broader industrial narratives. Contemporary fairs retain their commercial character but foreground experiential and speculative dimensions that extend beyond immediate exchange. They function as stages for articulating futures, presenting prototypes and innovations to publics who act simultaneously as consumers, partners, experts, and observers.

From this perspective, the trade fair can be understood as a communicative apparatus mediating between industry and public. It stages techno-economic futures as provisional worlds that visitors can inhabit, test, and imagine. The exhibitionary culture of trade fairs extends beyond discrete commodities to encompass infrastructures of anticipation and speculative prototypes (Greenhalgh, 1988). Such environments operate within multi-temporal architectures that link past traditions of display, present commercial strategies, and projected futures (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015).

Curatorial logics further reinforce this exhibitionary dimension. Spatial arrangements direct attention, regulate circulation, and structure sensory pathways. Decisions concerning prominence and hierarchy foreground visibility as a cultural technique shaped by assumptions about value and desirability (Mirzoeff, 1999). Spatial design becomes a strategic resource for shaping interpretive frames (Crary, 1990), positioning trade fairs as pedagogical environments that teach visitors how to look, compare, and judge.

2.2 Participation and Embodied Mediation

Beyond exhibitionary structure, participation and embodiment constitute central analytical dimensions. Participation unfolds through micro-temporal sequences of approach, comparison,

inquiry, and withdrawal (Debord, 1994). Such sequencing enables visitors to construct narratives of discovery and evaluation, transforming the fair into a site of emergent storytelling. Participation is not merely transactional; it involves embodied negotiation within shared spatial fields (Ranci re, 2004).

The performative character of participation requires visitors to enact roles oscillating between evaluator, learner, negotiator, and witness (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Attention becomes a scarce resource mobilized through sensory cues and narrative pacing. Through comparison and juxtaposition, visitors acquire tacit literacies for assessing innovation (Pink, 2015). Participation is co-produced between exhibitors and visitors, dynamically assembling publics through interaction (Citton, 2017). It also calibrates expectations, positioning visitors within broader industrial imaginaries (Warner, 2002).

Embodiment plays a constitutive role in this process. The body functions as an active interface within distributed ecologies of sensation (Kember et al., 2010). Spatial navigation generates ephemeral publics organized through shared attention and co-presence (Niquette & Buxton, 1997). Participation thus emerges as relational and distributed across bodies, infrastructures, and artifacts. Embodied engagement thickens temporal experience and shapes interpretive labor (Luckhurst, 2012), underscoring how immersion may arise from spatial and cultural techniques rather than technological spectacle.

2.3 Thesis Statements and Research Questions

Building on these theoretical perspectives, this study aims to conceptualize contemporary trade fairs as exhibitionary cultures structured through participation and visual mediation. It argues that trade fairs operate as hybrid environments in which embodied encounter and regimes of visibility co-produce immersive yet negotiated forms of experience.

The article addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How do trade fairs organize participation as an embodied cultural practice within exhibitionary environments?
- (2) How does visual mediation structure regimes of visibility and attention in trade fair contexts?
- (3) In what ways does encounter function as both an aesthetic and social process in contemporary trade fairs?

3. Mediation and the Aesthetics of Encounter

Visual mediation structures how trade fairs organize perception, constructing hierarchies of visibility and distributing attention across heterogeneous displays. Mediation does not merely present objects; it conditions how objects are encountered, by whom, and under what perceptual regimes. Trade fairs operate as visual economies in which attention becomes a scarce resource, competed for through aesthetic strategies, spatial positioning, and narrative framing. Mediation thus functions as a cultural and power-related technique that shapes how publics experience and interpret exhibitionary environments.

In this context, mediation involves the orchestration of visual codes as well as the management of perceptual tempo. Displays are designed to arrest attention momentarily before releasing it toward adjacent zones, creating circulation patterns that bind spectators to objects. Mediation therefore participates in a broader ecology of attention within which technological novelty must be rendered both intelligible and desirable. The visual economy of the fair becomes a competition for perceptual commitment, wherein exhibitors seek to secure dwell time, sustain interest, and convert attention into recognition or persuasive uptake (Blythe, 1999).

Visual mediation also intersects with questions of knowledge. What becomes visible is often what becomes knowable. Trade fairs thus play a role in stabilizing classifications, making categories appear self-evident through visual differentiation and comparative display. In this sense, mediation is not only aesthetic but epistemic, participating in the construction of what counts as innovation, relevance, or futurity.

3.1 Devices of Mediation and the Governance of Attention

Devices such as screens, lighting systems, signage, banners, demonstrative objects, and staged performances operate as mediating infrastructures that canalize perception and choreograph attention. Such devices do not simply augment visibility; they produce modes of looking that align spectators with particular interpretive positions. Bright illumination isolates objects, directional lighting creates focal hierarchies, and screen-based content produces temporal sequences that unfold before the visitor. Devices of mediation therefore enact visual pedagogy, teaching spectators how to engage, compare, and judge.

These mediating devices organize sensory information into legible narratives. They determine what is foregrounded and what recedes into ambient background, thereby creating spatial and perceptual layers. Through mediation, objects become demonstrative, persuasive, or contemplative, depending on how they are framed. Mediation is therefore not neutral; it configures the conditions under which meaning is produced and negotiated among publics.

Devices of mediation further operate through intensities. Sound amplification, motion graphics, and synchronized performance expand the sensory profile of displays, activating

cross-modal perception. These multi-sensory strategies deepen engagement while producing atmospheres that suspend the distinction between observation and participation (Blythe, 2002). Atmosphere becomes an operational technique that renders mediation affective, enveloping audiences within fields of sensation that subtly orient perception.

The device is also relational. It mediates between exhibitors and publics but also between publics and broader industrial imaginaries. Screens, prototypes, and models articulate technical futures in compressed visual form, enabling publics to perceive not only the object but the world that the object presupposes. Devices thus function as speculative surfaces, making futures perceptible before they are materially realized.

Visibility is intrinsically linked to power, as it structures who or what is allowed to appear. Trade fairs distribute attention unevenly across objects, actors, and spaces, producing hierarchies of visibility that reflect economic, cultural, and epistemic power. Exhibitors compete for visibility through aesthetic strategies, spatial placement, proximity to circulation routes, and access to infrastructural resources. Prime zones become sites where visibility can be converted into commercial or reputational capital. The fair becomes a structured visibility system in which prominence signifies value, relevance, or futurity.

At the Canton Fair in Guangzhou, spatial zoning and booth hierarchy visibly structure degrees of prominence and accessibility. Prime locations near main circulation corridors attract larger audiences and facilitate sustained engagement, while peripheral zones receive comparatively limited traffic. Such spatial differentiation demonstrates how visibility is distributed through infrastructural design, shaping how attention, credibility, and commercial opportunity are unevenly allocated across exhibitors.

The governance of attention also produces patterns of exclusion and marginalization. What remains unseen, partially visible, or relegated to peripheral zones reveals the limits of exhibitionary discourse. Background labor, logistical infrastructures, and maintenance remain concealed, enabling the spectacle of display to operate without friction. Concealment is a condition of spectacle. The smooth functioning of exhibitionary environments depends on the invisibility of technical, managerial, and affective labor.

Visibility as power is further articulated through asymmetries of expertise. Exhibitors possess knowledge that allows them to mobilize mediating devices to secure attention. Visitors, by contrast, must navigate attention under conditions of limited time and imperfect knowledge. The asymmetry between those who design visibility and those who must interpret it underscores the inherently power-related nature of exhibitionary participation. At a broader level, visibility contributes to the articulation of futures. Those granted visibility are positioned as agents of innovation and industrial progress, while those relegated to obscurity risk becoming epistemically irrelevant (Blythe, 2010). The governance of attention therefore participates in the shaping of industrial imaginaries and in the delineation of who is authorized to envision projected futures.

3.2 The Aesthetics of Encounter and Immersive Participation

The aesthetics of encounter provides a conceptual lens through which the experiential and perceptual dynamics of trade fairs can be understood. Rather than treating immersion as a matter of technological enhancement or sensory overload, this framework foregrounds encounter as a cultural process in which perception, embodiment, and interpretation converge. Encounter unfolds in the interstices between bodies and displays, mediated by gestures, glances, and movements through space. It is aesthetic in the broader sense of aisthesis: the sensory apprehension of the world and the conditions under which experience becomes perceptible.

Encounter is both situated and relational. It emerges from proximate co-presence between visitors, exhibitors, and artifacts, and from the infrastructures and devices that organize how perception is oriented and distributed. The aesthetic dimension of encounter arises from the assemblage of spatial, sensory, and social cues that structure participation. Trade fairs enact forms of encounter that solicit attention and curiosity, encouraging visitors to dwell, compare, and imagine. Through encounter, meaning is not simply transmitted but negotiated, making the trade fair a site where publics co-produce interpretive and affective worlds.

Encounter encompasses both immediate sensory experience and reflective interpretation. Sensory engagement involves seeing, hearing, touching, and bodily orientation, while reflective processes contextualize and evaluate these experiences. Sensation and reflection unfold in micro-temporal sequences across the duration of participation. Encounter therefore becomes a hinge between perception and imagination, allowing trade fairs to function as speculative environments in which futures are sensed as much as reasoned.

Immersion at trade fairs emerges from cultural and spatial techniques rather than technological determinism. Participation and mediation operate together to produce immersive conditions, mobilizing attention, embodiment, and presence without requiring theatrical spectacle. Immersion is less a product of sensory saturation than of orchestration. Visitors negotiate immersion through selective attention, strategic navigation, and comparative reasoning. Immersion is therefore situational and reversible rather than total or coercive.

Finally, immersive conditions invite publics to inhabit industrial futures before those futures become materially actualized. Displays render possible worlds tangible enough to be felt and evaluated. Under such conditions, the aesthetics of encounter becomes integral to how publics sense, assess, and adjudicate speculative futures.

4. Discussion

Reframing trade fairs through the aesthetics of encounter foregrounds their status as hybrid exhibition environments in which commercial persuasion, curatorial strategies, and participatory cultural practices converge. This analytical shift challenges reductive accounts that position trade fairs solely as market mechanisms or transactional events. Instead, it reveals how trade fairs mobilize aesthetic and cultural techniques to produce publics, shape imaginaries, and articulate visions of technological and economic futures.

This study makes three primary contributions. First, it reframes trade fairs as exhibitionary cultures rather than purely commercial platforms. Second, it conceptualizes participation and mediation as co-constitutive processes that shape embodied encounter. Third, it clarifies how immersion emerges through spatial and cultural techniques rather than technological determinism.

This perspective clarifies how market logics intersect with exhibitionary practices. Value is not asserted exclusively through price, performance, or functionality, but staged through visibility, presence, and participation. The choreography of encounter demonstrates how embodiment and mediation produce forms of sensory and interpretive presence that exceed purely commercial objectives. These forms of presence invite visitors to engage in affective, reflexive, and speculative modes of participation. In this light, trade fairs contribute to the production of interpretive literacies that condition how publics come to perceive innovation, anticipate futures, and adjudicate technological possibilities.

By foregrounding encounter as an aesthetic and cultural process, this study clarifies how trade fairs organize perception, embodiment, and interpretation within structured environments. Rather than reiterating their commercial function, this perspective highlights how participation and mediation co-produce experiential worlds in which innovation becomes culturally intelligible. In doing so, the article contributes to broader debates in visual culture and media studies by offering a conceptual framework for understanding how publics engage with mediated spaces and negotiate speculative futures.

This theoretical orientation further suggests that trade fairs can serve as empirical sites for studying the formation of industrial and technological imaginaries. Trade fairs render futures visible not by predicting them but by staging them as experiential propositions that can be sensed, evaluated, and debated. In doing so, they position publics as interpretive agents capable of negotiating the plausibility and desirability of projected futures. This framing expands understandings of market culture by demonstrating how the evaluation of technologies involves aesthetic and affective considerations alongside economic criteria.

Finally, examining trade fairs through the aesthetics of encounter highlights how commerce, culture, and sensory experience converge in contemporary life. It underscores the extent to which public engagement with innovation is mediated by aesthetic forms, curatorial strategies, and embodied practices. This contribution opens pathways for future research that explore how other mediated environments, such as museums, festivals, and expos, enact similar techniques of encounter and how publics learn to navigate speculative futures across diverse institutional settings. As a theoretically oriented inquiry, this study does not offer systematic empirical investigation, which may be further developed through field-based or ethnographic research in future studies.

5. Conclusions

Contemporary trade fairs mobilize participation and visual mediation to generate immersive encounters, positioning themselves as hybrid exhibitionary environments in which publics engage not merely as consumers but as embodied, interpretive, and performative subjects. Through the aesthetics of encounter, trade fairs orchestrate sensory, spatial, and narrative techniques that solicit attention, choreograph movement, and distribute visibility. These processes exceed transactional imperatives, foregrounding how encounter operates as both an aesthetic and social modality through which meanings, values, and imaginaries are negotiated.

Understanding trade fairs as exhibitionary cultures expands theoretical vocabularies within visual culture and media studies by highlighting how participation and mediation co-produce presence. Trade fairs contribute to ongoing debates about how publics are organized through regimes of display, how environments shape sensory experience, and how attention is governed within mediated spaces. They offer distinctive terrains for examining how contemporary publics learn to see, desire, evaluate, and imagine in relation to emerging technologies, markets, and futures.

This reframing suggests that immersion need not rely on technological determinism; rather, it emerges from cultural and spatial techniques that align bodies, displays, and infrastructures. Encounter becomes a useful analytical concept for articulating how experience unfolds through aisthesis, understood as sensory apprehension, and how publics co-produce interpretive worlds through reflective engagement. In this view, immersion becomes contingent, negotiated, and participatory rather than automatic or coercive. The aesthetics of encounter thereby elucidates how publics develop capacities for comparative judgment, speculative reasoning, and affective orientation within mediated environments.

This approach also contributes to the emergent literature on cultural techniques by emphasizing how seeing, navigating, and attending are organized through institutional and infrastructural arrangements. Trade fairs illuminate how techniques of mediation, spectatorship,

and orientation operate across commercial, cultural, and technological domains. They thus provide an empirical basis for examining how publics are enrolled into industrial imaginaries, how futures are sensed as plausible, and how innovation becomes culturally intelligible.

Future research may examine how publics negotiate mediated spaces by attending to the sensory, affective, and cognitive dimensions of encounter, as well as the temporalities through which display cultures imagine possible futures. Comparative inquiry across exhibitionary forms may further clarify how museums, expos, festivals, trade conferences, and commercial showrooms mobilize similar techniques while pursuing distinct institutional goals. Additionally, attention to the material and infrastructural labor underlying exhibitionary environments could illuminate the politics of visibility and concealment that govern contemporary display, including the management of logistics, maintenance, atmosphere, and affect.

Foregrounding encounter as both aesthetic and cultural process positions trade fairs as compelling sites for studying how participation, mediation, and embodiment shape the textures of contemporary public life. It highlights the ways in which publics learn to inhabit mediated spaces, negotiate sensory and symbolic orders, and engage with speculative futures. Trade fairs thus merit further examination not only as economic institutions but as cultural infrastructures through which experience, attention, and imagination are organized in the present.

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