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**Introduction to the Exhibition 'Art Opening' by Johan van Geluwe**  
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When an introduction to an exhibition is announced, one can assume that the organiser considers what is being shown so little known or so new that there is a need to provide the public with assistance in understanding what is shown. Accordingly, it is generally and right-fully expected of a speaker introducing such an exhibition that he has something to communicate that the public he is addressing does not yet or cannot know and that is helpful in understanding what is being exhibited. A speaker draws his authority from the greater wealth of knowledge he or she is presumed to possess. In this context, it is also helpful for maintaining this temporary advantage if the public cannot see or can merely surmise what the subject-matter of the speech actually is. That way, the public has little choice but to listen to the speaker or to wait for the speech to end, and for an opportunity to make one's own appraisal of the speaker's subject-matter. Even if the introductory speech is interesting and finds favours among the public, the role of the person making it is nevertheless a precarious one that in itself provides little cause to attend the opening of the exhibition in question. After all, experience tells us that listening to someone speaking about something unknown, and unseen to boot, is going to be amusing in exceptional cases only.

This explains why the organisers of exhibitions, particularly when something unknown or new is being shown, will endeavour to recruit speakers who, by virtue of the individual authority they have gained in other contexts, are able to focus the attention of the public on the event being introduced and to imbue that event with a certain importance. With a well-known speaker, it is possible to a certain extent to divert the public's interest away from the fact that something unknown or new is being introduced, and to give it a feeling of security that it will at least enjoy the speech, if not the event itself.

In most cases, however, one can invite well-known authorities only to events where they can be relatively sure that the thing to which they are to provide an introduction will not jeopardise their authority - in other words, where there is a good chance that it will be accepted by the public. Their authority is more or less based on the public accepting what they say and what they speak about. However, this means that well-known speakers generally speak only at such events where it is more or less obvious from the outset that they will be a public success, or, to put it more pointedly, at events that do not actually require an introduction, least of all by an accepted authority. The implication of this line of thinking, in a nutshell, is that real introductions to exhibitions are given primarily in places where one cannot presume the public will be present. Or, conversely, wherever the public is expected to appear, there is unlikely to be a genuine introduction. Or, taking these two elements in conjunction, introductions given before a public audience work best when no reference is made to what is to be seen.

The reason why this should be so derives from the very nature of exhibition openings - the opening of an exhibition is founded on the notion that the material exhibited was not previously accessible, for example because the rooms containing them were locked. The opening denotes first and foremost an act of unlocking, and a subsequent transition from an already accessible and hence well-known room into an unknown room or a room with unknown content. Yet it is part of our everyday experience that, however curious we may be about the unknown and unseen, we humans tend to develop considerable anxiety before entering a room that is unfamiliar to us or when we do not know what is contained within it. Thus, the opening of an exhibition is always more than the mere opening of a previously inaccessible space. It is usually associated with a promise to the public that, on the one hand, assures the public that it need have no fear of what it can now gain access to, while signalling, on the other hand, that the opening involves a discovery of hitherto unknown facts, circumstances and background aspects - in other

words, akin to the reading of a will, that eyes are opened for something that until this moment was invisible.

Although openings always involve speculation with the sensation of the undiscovered, they actually confront us in most cases with something from the past, with the history of what is now being made accessible, with something that has already happened and which therefore we cannot change, but only accept for what it is. Given the uncertainty that exists as to whether the thing being opened, seen and made accessible will find public favour, openings are sometimes characterised by legitimations and by the tendency to detract or distance themselves explicitly from the thing they are supposed to refer to - to become autonomous entities, in other words. They develop into a separate form of event, with an existence that is distinct from its respective subject-matter and with a very specific character, typified by the opulent vocabulary used for an aesthetic analysis of the non-actual. This form is especially pronounced when, contrary to all announcements, little that is really unknown and new can be discovered when the exhibition is opened, and there is therefore a danger that the public will turn away bored and disappointed.

It is precisely at this juncture that the introduction by a well-known speaker has its place and its function. With the strength of his authority, at least for duration of the opening, he is able to cover the risks that an exhibition can generate and he may succeed in focussing the public's attention on the one aspect that is certain and which is of paramount importance - namely that the public itself feels itself to be the most interesting part of the event and recognises the event by the mere fact that it has congregated.

Ladies and Gentlemen, if you give some thought to the interrelationships that I have outlined here in a necessarily brief and rough fashion, you will realise immediately that the Art Opening at which we are able to take part today is the ideal form of exhibition, one that relates unambiguously to Art. Everything else is and remains open.

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