

Spring 5-2012

To Infinity and Beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube

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**TO INFINITY AND BEYOND:
A CRITIQUE OF THE AESTHETIC WHITE CUBE**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Museum Professions

Seton Hall University
May 2012

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ABSTRACT

From princely collections to public museums, the history of the display of art has been rich and varied. In the 1930s, New York's Museum of Modern Art and its director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. developed the aesthetic "white cube," a display method that was revolutionary in its objective focus and clean execution and fulfilled the unique needs of its era. Since this time, our society and culture have changed, yet art museum display has largely remained in stasis. Although European movements and institutions are mentioned, this thesis explores the history of museum display and the development of the white cube through the lens of the American art museum and seeks to offer practical alternatives. The time has come to embrace new contextual and interactive techniques that better suit the needs of our era and encourage viewer engagement and understanding rather than passive consumption.

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I. INTRODUCTION

At 5:00 in the evening on October 20, 2011, a few dozen protesters gathered outside of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Restricted to a small patch of sidewalk just outside the museum's main entrance, the group drew the attention of museum visitors, passersby, and even art critic Jerry Saltz, who joined the group in chanting, "speaking is a force!"¹ The protesters, known as "Occupy Museums," were there as an offshoot of the Occupy Wall Street movement in opposition to what they feel are "temples of cultural elitism controlled by the 1%." In their manifesto, written by Brooklyn-based artist and organizer Noah Fischer, they lament the commercialization of art and the transformation of museums into cultural "rating agencies" that alienate the interests of the lower classes.² Since their first protest, Occupy Museums has become a weekly event in New York City, and its participants have picketed the New Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, and have joined the Teamsters Local 814 to protest Sotheby's lockout of its art handlers.³

The reasoning behind the protests has been justly questioned. Do museums really deserve the blame for advancing the interests of the rich, for an inflated art market, or for elevating one artist over another? I would say no. While the profile and approach of museums vary greatly, no museum is perfect. In recent years, there has been a wave of blockbuster exhibitions funded largely by corporate money and wealthy donors. These shows often focus

¹ Michael H. Miller, "'Occupy Museums' Protests In Front of MoMA With Jerry Saltz," *Gallerist NY*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.galleristny.com/2011/10/occupy-museums-protests-in-front-of-moma-with-jerry-saltz>.

² Noah Fischer, "Occupy Museums! Speaking Out in Front of the Cannons," *Paddy Johnson*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://paddyjohnson.tumblr.com/post/11652516894/occupy-museums-speaking-out-in-front-of-the-cannons>.

³ "Occupy Museums," *Facebook*, accessed March 20, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Occupy-Museums/148157235282782>.

more on entertainment and spectacle than the enlightenment of their visitors. But in today's capitalist economy, with government contributions on the decline, museums depend on private contributions to remain open and accessible to their communities. Museums often significantly underpay their staff. Arguing against the equation of art with capital and "spectacularly out of touch auctions,"⁴ it would seem that the protesters' true target should be commercial galleries and auction houses. While a museum exhibition may inadvertently increase the market value of a work of art displayed, codes of ethics seek to ensure that no museum constituent benefits financially from such an increase. Donors are discouraged from selling works for a period of time following an exhibition, staff members are banned from any perceived conflicts of interest, and museums only deaccession works after intense consideration and scrutiny. Additionally, the charge that museums elevate "one individual genius over another human being"⁵ seems frivolous. Artists' desires are not a museums' primary concern. I would argue that selectivity not only ensures a valuable experience, but also keeps our cultural institutions functioning. Most museums are committed to presenting works they deem to be appropriate to their mission and of the highest quality. Furthermore, if museums were indiscriminate in their collecting, storage room space and financial resources would quickly run out.

However, the Occupy Museum protests are a symptom of a larger problem currently facing our cultural institutions. Right or wrong, museums have a reputation for being elitist institutions skewed toward the needs of the wealthy and highly educated. A report published in 1991 by the J. Paul Getty Book Distribution Center found that non-visitors to eleven American museums thought of them as stuffy and even intimidating. Although this report is now 20 years old and many of the participating institutions have long ago enacted reform, the basic principles

⁴ Fischer.

⁵ Ibid.

still hold for many contemporary museums. While many museum professionals hope that their institutions will act as inspiration for further learning, they may in fact discourage potential visitors. “I’m embarrassed,” one participant stated of the National Gallery in Washington DC, “my overall feeling is . . . people are there because they know what they are looking at, and I don’t.”⁶ Even after visiting the Denver Art Museum, another visitor felt unwelcomed because of the museum’s use of terms that “if you were really into history or really into art you would probably recognize, but I didn’t know.”⁷

Museum professionals should not dismiss the findings of the Getty report and the issues raised by Occupy protesters. Beginning in the 19th century, museums have defined themselves as public service institutions dedicated to the advancement of knowledge in the communities they serve. Additionally, most museums in the United States are nonprofit institutions and seek additional support from both the United States government and private individuals. If a museum does not appear to serve all individuals, regardless of economic status or experience level, it may lose the support of such patrons specifically as well as the public in general. Therefore, it is important that the operation of museums remain transparent and accountable to their communities. They must provide intellectually engaging experiences that are accessible to all members of the community, yet move beyond mere entertainment. In accordance with their missions, museums such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC must spread knowledge to “the widest possible student and general public,”⁸ while those like MoMA encourage “an ever-deeper understanding and enjoyment of modern and contemporary art.”⁹

⁶ *Insights: Museums, Visitors, Attitudes, Expectations: A Focus Group Experiment* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1991), 10.

⁷ *Ibid*, 22.

⁸ “Mission Statement,” *National Gallery of Art*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.nga.gov/xio/mission.shtm>.

⁹ “About MoMA,” *The Museum of Modern Art*, Accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.moma.org/about>.

Furthermore, today's museums cannot afford to alienate any members of the public they claim to serve. In 2008, Glenn D. Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art, warned of a coming economic storm as New York's Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg asked the Department of Cultural Affairs to decrease spending by 7% as of July of 2010.¹⁰ Three years later, an online survey of 383 institutional members of the American Association of Museums continues to confirm Lowry's fear. In 2010, over 70% of museums in the United States reported experiencing moderate to very severe economic stress, and approximately 53% reported a decrease in overall revenue. The economic conditions were even worse among museums in my own mid-Atlantic region, with 82% reporting some degree of stress. The situation begins to seem more dire when we consider what the new AAM report describes as a "perhaps permanent" philanthropic shift away from cultural organizations toward "social services, environment, and other causes."¹¹

The continued financial hardships have forced museums across the country to take action. As its endowment decreased by 25% during the 2009 fiscal year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art announced a hiring freeze and the closure of 15 satellite stores around the country.¹² By 2010, nearly 35% of museums had similar freezes in place and were relying more and more on unpaid volunteers. Other museums resorted to reductions in staff benefits as well as layoffs and furloughs.¹³ Although only a relatively small number of museums have resorted to increased admission prices, more and more instances are making their way into the news. Earlier this year,

¹⁰ Carol Vogel, "Museums Fear Lean Days Ahead," *The New York Times*, (2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/20/arts/design/20muse.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed March 20, 2012).

¹¹ "U.S. Museums Continue to Serve Despite Stress: A Report from the American Association of Museums (April 2011)," American Association of Museums, accessed March 20, 2012, us.org/upload/ACME11-report-FINAL.pdf, 2-5.

¹² Carol Vogel, "Met Museum to Close Shops, Freeze Hiring," *The New York Times*, (2009), <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/23/met-museum-to-close-shops-freeze-hiring/> (accessed March 20, 2012).

¹³ "U.S. Museums Continue to Serve Despite Stress," 2-7.

the Museum of Modern Art raised its adult admission price from \$20 to \$25,¹⁴ and just this month The J. Paul Getty Museum eliminated its free evening parking in order to maintain financial stability.¹⁵

At the same time, lower than average attendance has been an issue for all but the most resilient institutions. According to a National Endowment for the Arts survey of 1800 adults living in the United States, fewer adults visited cultural organizations than any time previously recorded. Visitation to art museums and galleries in particular dropped by about 3 million between 2002 and 2008. Even among women and the most educated, two key demographics, the number of visits notably declined.¹⁶ Since this time, many museums have reported increased attendance due to a decrease in public travel and a commitment to lower cost “staycations.” While people once traveled broadly for vacations, many are now choosing to stay closer to home, visiting nearby attractions. However, caused by the decrease in tourism, combined with budget reductions and a decline in school group visitations, 30% of museums were still experiencing declining attendance in 2010.¹⁷

It stands to reason that as the needs of museums and their audiences change, so must the museums themselves. This is not only true for management and education, but also the very ways in which museum professionals think about and display the artifacts in their care. After all, display is the main way museums communicate with visitors. Yet, while technology and

¹⁴ Carol Vogel, “Museum of Modern Art Raising Admission and Membership Fees,” *The New York Times*, (2011), <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/28/museum-of-modern-art-raising-admission-and-membership-fees/#> (accessed March 20, 2012).

¹⁵ Mike Boehm, “Getty Ends Free Evening Parking, Sets \$10 Fee after 5 P.M.,” *Los Angeles Times*, (2011), <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/11/getty-museum-parking-increase-.html> (accessed March 20, 2012).

¹⁶ “National Endowment for the Arts 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts,” *National Endowment for the Arts*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.nea.gov/research/2008-SPPA.pdf>, V-25.

¹⁷ “U.S. Museums Continue to Serve Despite Stress,” 1.

governance have evolved, the method of display in American art museums has remained largely intact for nearly a century.

This thesis seeks to bring to light and provide alternatives to what Brian O'Doherty termed the “social, financial, and intellectual snobbery”¹⁸ of the aesthetic “white cube” display primarily developed by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Museum of Modern Art. Although the primary focus is on art museums in the United States, I will be mentioning a select number of European institutions and developments beginning with the history of display from princely collections to the development of public museums. I will focus on two precursors that significantly influenced the ideas and development of the white cube. The early 20th century aesthetic movement in the United States focused viewer attention on selected masterpieces, while, in Germany, the Bauhaus introduced simple, dynamic architecture and design. Next, I will discuss the innovative history of the white cube itself as it relates to the life and experiences of Barr and his career at MoMA. Yet, however well suited for its era, the aesthetic white cube does have its limitations. I will discuss its tendency to alienate art from its history as well as those who come to view it with a specific focus on MoMA’s 1984 exhibition, “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art*. Following this, I will discuss alternative display methods from revisionist and thematic to artist-curated exhibitions that have been explored at institutions around the country with varying degrees of success. Finally, I will provide a practical overview to guide institutions in the creation of new, visitor-centric exhibitions and displays. Although the white cube was significant and revolutionary in its day, the time has come to embrace new contextual and interactive techniques that better suit the needs of our era and encourage viewer engagement and understanding rather than passive consumption.

¹⁸ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 76.

II. HISTORY OF MUSEUM DISPLAY AND PRECURSORS TO THE WHITE CUBE

We are all familiar with the “white cube.” If you have ever been to an art museum, especially one displaying modern or contemporary art, chances are you will have experienced the phenomenon: plain white walls, polished wooden floors, evenly spaced artworks lit from above. The white cube has come to define the gallery space. Revered for its flexibility and neutrality, it concentrates the viewer’s gaze on individual masterpieces while objectifying any characteristics that may interfere with such an aesthetic experience. However, this supposedly neutral approach is no less biased than previous concepts of display. It was born out of the social and artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and brought with it connotations of aesthetic transcendence and power.

The history of museum display is as varied and colorful as the artworks these institutions exhibit. The earliest displays of art were private collections in the hands of wealthy and often royal patrons. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw collections thriving throughout Europe in the form of the *kunst- und wunderkammer*. Translating from German as “chambers of art and wonder,” these “curiosity cabinets” consisted of crowded displays of artworks as well as ethnographic and natural artifacts covering nearly every surface including walls and ceilings. The quantity and diversity of objects served to illustrate the wonders of the world in an almost encyclopedic manner. By creating a universal microcosm, the owner of such a curiosity cabinet was, in effect, asserting control over a small piece of the world.¹⁹ Arranged symmetrically, curiosity cabinets also had a highly decorative appeal. The resulting effect was grand and visually captivating in a way that further reflected the superior social status and worldliness of

¹⁹ Francesca Fiorani, “Review: *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunstammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art, and Technology* by Horst Bredekamp,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1990), 269.

their owners. A focus on the rare and exotic further helped to restrict collecting to those with the wealth and opportunity to obtain objects such as precious gems and minerals, unicorn horns (often in reality narwhal tusks), painted miniatures, and exotic coins. Additionally, they were often only accessible to the owners, their family, and personal guests of similarly high class. Even the Royal Kunstkammer in Kassel, a remarkably accessible curiosity cabinet, was open only to “scholars, princes, noblemen, and the educated upper middle class.”²⁰

By the 18th century, aristocratic collectors increasingly turned their attentions toward art in an attempt to distance themselves from curiosities and oddities now considered low culture. With the coming of the intellectual Enlightenment, such objects had lost their credibility in the new, scientifically based society. However, the display methods of the earlier centuries remained largely intact. Arrangements were still very decorative with dense, symmetrical hangings prevailing. Yet, this method of display was not without its erudite reasonings. Connoisseurship and the study of art were taking hold. Experts believed each school of art had specific proficiencies in artistic composition, drawing, color, and expression. Therefore, arranging groups of works in close proximity, either highlighting only one school or mixing multiple schools, could expose these distinguishing characteristics and talents. Known as a “comparative” hanging, this method allowed aesthetes and students of art to identify specific traits of particular artistic movements or even individual artists.²¹

In Europe, the first public museums of art grew out of these private aristocratic collections and were highly influenced by the Paris salons. Held in the Palais du Louvre beginning in 1725, the government-sponsored exhibitions highlighted the best new academic work to come out of the French academies. Although hung floor-to-ceiling, similar to private

²⁰ David Carrier, “The Display of Art: An Historical Perspective,” *Leonardo* 20, no. 1 (1987), 83.

²¹ Andrew McClellan, *The Art Museum from Boulée to Bilbao*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 118.

collections of the time, the salon had an active, bazaar-like atmosphere. Visitors from nearly all classes in French society were free to view and evaluate the artworks on display.²²

The Musée du Louvre opened in 1793 after the French revolutionaries and the Assemblée Nationale claimed the royal collection and palace as possessions of the French public.²³ At this time, the museum still arranged its collections in a comparative manner. However, within a matter of months, the Louvre abandoned this aristocratic method in favor of a chronological system that favored art historical fact over connoisseurship and authenticity. Spurred by Carl Linnaeus's new taxonomic approach to scientific classification whereby biologists categorize organisms according to kingdom, class, order, genus, species, etc., art connoisseurs and collectors organized their works according to artists and national schools. The Louvre specifically divided its works into the Italian, Northern and French schools. At the same time, symmetrical, visually pleasing arrangements were still the norm.²⁴

While museums still cluttered their spaces with art due to extreme overcrowding in their collections, a new approach allowed a great degree of space around each work.²⁵ As a result, wall color and coverings became more and more important as time went on. Many museum professionals believed colors should be chosen based on their ability to contrast with the specific works on display, while others called for a standard choice of wall color for all works. In an 1845 pamphlet advocating reform at London's National Gallery, Charles L. Eastlake argued that "a picture will be seen to advantage on a ground brighter than its darks and darker than its lights, and of so subdued a tint as may contrast well with its brighter colors."²⁶ In the early nineteenth

²² Carrier, 84.

²³ "History of the Louvre." *Site officiel du musée du Louvre*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.louvre.fr/en/history-louvre>.

²⁴ McClellan, 120-123.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 122-125.

²⁶ Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 31.

century, a greenish gray color was favored for its neutrality, while later, a deep crimson was preferred for its visual contrast with the gold of most picture frames.²⁷

Following the lead of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London's South Kensington district, museums forming in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century sought to educate and morally uplift a broad American public. By presenting objects of art and science as didactic specimens instead of princely treasures, these institutions hoped to refine commercial design and industrial manufacturing and civilize the working class.²⁸ In its original 1870 mission statement, even New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art underscored its dedication to "the application of arts to manufacture and practical life," and "furnishing popular instruction."²⁹ In 1870, Charles Perkins, a vocal proponent of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, whose very building was modeled after that of South Kensington, also stated that the proper function of a museum was not "making collections of objects of art," but "the education of a nation."³⁰

One manifestation of this educational focus was the pervasiveness of casts and reproductions within the collections of American museums. As mentioned previously, the collection of rare and costly artifacts was not the focus of such institutions. Instead, many museums wished to impart lessons in idyllic beauty by exposing their patrons to the finest works of art, whether in the form of originals or reproductions. Therefore, visitors could view plaster casts of classical sculpture in almost any institution dedicated to the arts from the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy to Pittsburgh's Carnegie Institute. In fact, the Metropolitan Museum dedicated an

²⁷ Ibid, 32.

²⁸ Michael Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts," in *A Grand Design: A History of the Victoria & Albert Museum*, ed. Malcom Baker, Anthony Burton, and Brenda Richardson (V&A Publications, 1999) http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1159_grand_design/essay-the-idealist-enterprise_new.html (accessed March 20, 2012).

²⁹ "Museum Mission Statement," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/mission-statement>.

³⁰ Conforti.

entire wing exclusively to the display of casts.³¹ The ideal gallery, archaeologist and museum professional Edward Robinson explained, would be one in which “children could grow up familiar with the noblest productions of Greece and Italy, in which the laborer could pass some of his holiday hours, and in which the mechanic could find stimulus to make his own work beautiful as well as good.”³²

With the turn-of-the-century rise of wealthy robber barons, American art museums began to turn away from their educational mission and moved toward a new aestheticism based in rarity and transcendental beauty. When J.P. Morgan became president of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1904, the museum became more concerned with standards of authenticity and connoisseurship. Two years later, the museum had disbanded its cast department.³³ Rather than displaying reproductions that visitors could see in any city and that lacked any true artistic spirit, the staff and trustees of the Met believed that only original works of art could enrich the lives of the masses and propel the museum to new heights of status and reputation.

Two key figures in the museological shift toward aestheticism were Benjamin Ives Gilman and Matthew Prichard of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts. Like Morgan, Prichard too believed that, due to their lack of vitality and merit, casts did not belong in museums of art. In a letter to museum trustee Samuel Warren, he stated that each instance of their display should contain the disclaimer “THE ORIGINAL DOES NOT LOOK LIKE THIS.”³⁴ Taking the sentiments of the movement further, the two men believed that education in its previous forms had no place within American museums. Instead, museums should promote “appreciative

³¹ Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 46.

³² *Ibid.*, 47.

³³ *Ibid.*, 49-51.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

acquaintance with objects of beauty”³⁵ and “pleasure derived from a contemplation of the perfect.”³⁶ Gilman himself saw artistic and pedagogic objectives as mutually exclusive, and, with the upper floors dedicated to exhibition and the basement set aside for study, the very structure of the Museum of Fine Art’s new 1909 building on Boston’s Fenway supported this belief and promoted the supremacy of the aesthetic.³⁷ Ultimately, this new aesthetic focus served to mirror developing American social ideals and encouraged the continued philanthropy of the rich. As the nation’s economy boomed, the demand for status-enhancing luxury items increased greatly. In turn, emerging industrialists and financiers felt it was their duty to share their cultural wealth with the common man.

With the new aesthetic focus came new methods of display. As previously discussed, artworks were crowded into dimly lit, highly decorative rooms. In 1918, Gilman brought to light just how draining and ineffectual such spaces could be. “After a brief initial exertion,” he wrote, the typical museum visitor “will resign himself to seeing practically everything and by passing glance.”³⁸ Therefore, with Gilman’s leadership, the Museum of Fine Arts spearheaded a new movement in the United States, fostering a more efficient, tranquil viewing experience.

Instead of embracing the busy galleries of the past, Gilman and his followers took their cues from contemporary interior design and commercial displays. The number of works on display was greatly reduced, highlighting only the best works of aesthetic genius, and hung at eye level in well-lit, dull-colored rooms to save visitors from eyestrain and the physical exertion of crouching, bending, etc. The walls of the Museum of Fine Arts itself were a creamy shade of

³⁵ Benjamin Ives Gilman, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1918), 87.

³⁶ Wallach, 52.

³⁷ Gilman, xii-92.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

grey.³⁹ In 1917, the Metropolitan Museum of Art went even further, hosting a session of the annual American Association of Museums conference in which Frederick Hoffman, a window dresser at New York's Altman's department store spoke on new commercial display methods that could be incorporated into the art museum setting. In 1927, the Met again untied with the commercial world, this time collaborating with Macy's in a series of shows under the banner *Art-in-Trade*. Featuring arrangements of interior décor, a recognized designer organized each exhibition. One such designer, responsible for a show at Macy's that year, was set designer Lee Simonson who had long believed that museums should follow the lead of theatrical and commercial design.⁴⁰ In a 1914 article, originally published in the art and political magazine *The New Republic*, Simonson described museums as rooms "crammed with paintings until they become a kaleidoscope" and cases "crowded with objects until the mere process of attention becomes an agony of effort." Like Gilman and his followers, Simonson too thought museums must drastically alter their display methods. "Only ruthless elimination can produce design. . . . A museum must become not a permanent exhibition, but a permanent exposition, arranged as our expositions are, and pervaded by the same holiday spirit."⁴¹

Gilman further believed that ideal gallery spaces were small, intimate rooms, in which museum visitors could view works of art comfortably, as if they were in their own homes. Therefore, he argued that individual rooms should be open, with little distracting adornment and situated off a central walkway. In this way, galleries would not become "thoroughfares"⁴² and visitors could enjoy an intimate viewing experience without the distractions of passersby or unnecessary ornamentation. Finally, he concluded that museums must distribute sufficient

³⁹ Ibid, 252-428.

⁴⁰ McClellan, 205-206.

⁴¹ Lee Simonson, "The Land of Sunday Afternoon," in *The New Republic Book: Selections from the First Hundred Issues* (New York: Republic Publishing Company, 1916), 312.

⁴² Gilman, 399.

seating among the space to allow visitors to enjoy the gallery at their leisure while still staving off fatigue.⁴³ In many ways, museums began to resemble the feminine sphere of the home rather than a public space. Like a home, they become more comfortable, inviting, and intimate.

By the time of the aesthetic movement in the United States, many German museums had already embraced new systems of design and decor. In his 1853 essay “Thoughts on the New Building to be Erected for the National Gallery of England, and on the Arrangement, Preservation, and Enlargement of the Collection,” Gustav Waagen, the director of the Berlin Museum, had advised the staff of London’s new National Gallery to be more selective when choosing artworks for display and to hang them farther apart.⁴⁴ In fact, as part of the planning process for the new Fenway building, representatives from Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts visited the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin, now renamed the Bode Museum after Wilhelm von Bode, its first curator.⁴⁵

When German museums of art first used white walls, it was not radical, but simply continued evidence of the influence of contemporary interior design. When exhibiting modern works, museum professionals often chose white for its ability to contrast with and emphasize the artists’ use of bright color. As Gustav Pauli, director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle, asserted, “The stronger the colors of the paintings, the more decided may be the brightness of the background. Our Expressionists . . . bear black well – or white.”⁴⁶ When Nationalgalerie director Ludwig Justi, acquired the Kronprinzenpalais to show contemporary works, he unabashedly utilized the latest trends in interior decor. However, when renovating the top floor in 1929, he stripped the walls of several rooms of adornment and completely painted them white

⁴³ Ibid, 252-428.

⁴⁴ McClellan, 124-125.

⁴⁵ Conforti.

⁴⁶ Klonk, 96.

as a nod to the burgeoning Bauhaus style architecture and design. Yet, even here, the rooms retained their intimate feel through a largely symmetrical arrangement and the works' relatively low hanging with bottoms aligned.⁴⁷

Yet, it was the Bauhaus and the artists themselves that were more revolutionary than the German museum professionals they initially influenced. Established in 1919 by architect Walter Gropius, the Staatliches Bauhaus was a revolutionary school of visual arts that combined fine and applied arts such as painting, sculpture, photography, film, stage design, architecture, industrial design, and the graphic arts. Located in Weimar until 1925, the school's founding staff included American-German painter Lyonel Feininger, Swiss Expressionist painter Johannes Itten, and German sculptor Gerhard Marcks. Its purpose, Gropius stated in his 1919 manifesto, was to create "a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions which raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist." However, highly influenced by Vkhutemas and the Constructivists in Russia, the Bauhaus soon began to turn from craftsmanship towards a new focus on industry and commercial production and the Bauhaus style became extremely influential in Modern architecture and design.⁴⁸

Bauhaus architects and designers did not follow the homelike, intimate methods prescribed in the United States. Although, like Gilman, they were interested in increased functionality, they instead focused on exteriority, breaking away from cozy spaces like that of the MFA. In his 1930 article "Weiss, alles Weiss," critic J. E. Hammann theorized:

One no longer wishes to be closed off from the exterior world, from nature, in a sentimental romantic dimness. Rather, one seeks [the exterior world] through the use of all means, and not just through the given options of big windows, house or roof gardens, verandas and so on, but also through the breadth created with the illusion of white paint. The human being of today wants freedom, air, and light;

⁴⁷ Ibid, 96-135.

⁴⁸ Rainer K. Wick, "Bauhaus" In *Grove Art online, Oxford Art Online*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T006947>.

he needs distance from his thoughts and ideas. . . . The room becomes empty, allows movement and liberates in contrast to a time where it was only possible, with utmost dexterity, to find one's way through "living rooms" darkened by multiple door and window curtains and crowded with knick-knacks and furniture of all styles. In the whitewashed, almost empty room there stands today the minimum of absolutely necessary furniture, as if one were outside.⁴⁹

As the Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925, even Gropius had stated that one of the school's main goals should be to create artists and craftsmen who restrict their use of "basic forms and colors to what is typical and universally intelligible."⁵⁰

Buildings such as Hamburg's art union building, the Kunstverein, designed by former Bauhaus student Karl Schneider, were typical of the Bauhaus style. Built in 1930, the Kunstverein consisted of flexible, cubic spaces with white interior and exterior walls.⁵¹ Yet, the Bauhaus's Dessau building is one of the best examples of this philosophy. Designed by Gropius himself, each portion of the building complex, including workshops, administrative offices, and living spaces, acted as a functional manifestation of its specific needs and applications. For example, the outer walls of the school's workshops were made of glass to admit natural light, while the interior was an open, fluid space that Gropius hoped would encourage creative collaboration and flexibility. Unlike past styles, Gropius arranged the complex asymmetrically with as little decoration as possible. Glass and concrete walls were painted white or left unadorned.⁵² According to former Bauhaus student Howard Dearstyne, in a 1928 letter to his mother, the building was "full of light and air and properly temperatured. No wallpaper, metal window frames, simple pipe for railings, etc; plain surfaces painted in frank colors; furniture

⁴⁹ Klonk, 105.

⁵⁰ Fred Kleiner and Christin Mamiya, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective* (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 175.

⁵¹ Klonk, 123.

⁵² Wick.

simple and square-cut to match the architecture; simple straight hangings of simple stuffs- everything simplified so it can be made economically by machines.”⁵³

It is likely that such a conception of the color white as pure and free stemmed from Russian artists Kasimir Malevich, Supremattist painter and faculty member of Vkhutemas, and El Lissitzky who was the Russian cultural ambassador to Weimar Germany and participated in the city’s Dadaist-Constructionist conference in 1922. In many of his paintings, including Suprematist Compositions *Red Square and Black Square* from 1915 and *White on White* from 1918, Malevich incorporated white as the background for colored geometric shapes. In the catalogue for Moscow’s *Tenth State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creation and Suprematist Works*, Malevich explains his choice of color, describing white as “the true actual representation of infinity” and urging his fellow artists to “swim in the white free abyss.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Lissitzky believed that white was a visualization of dynamic and unconstrained space. However, whereas Malevich based his theory in the mystical and emotional, Lissitzky linked color to Einstein’s scientific theories of energy.⁵⁵

Yet, in spirit, the Bauhaus was more of a social phenomenon than an artistic or formal one. In many ways, it was a socialistic utopian movement based in the belief that new methods of production and visual purity could help shape a better world. The Bauhaus manifesto reflects this social agenda as Gropius argues for the joining of all arts. “Together let us conceive and create the new building of the future which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will rise one day toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like

⁵³ Howard Dearstyne, “The Bauhaus Revisited, *Journal of Architectural Education* 17, no. 1 (1962), 14.

⁵⁴ Kasimir Malevich, “Non-Objective Art and Suprematism, in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 293.

⁵⁵ Klonk, 121.

a crystal symbol of a new faith.”⁵⁶ This conviction was evident in the very structure of Bauhaus learning. The communal aspect of the workshops and Gropius’s appeal for design simplicity encouraged a unique spirit of cooperation and universality. Taking this further, Gropius even included the school’s teachers and students studying carpentry, design, and weaving in the building of the Dessau complex itself.⁵⁷ Although Gropius was responsible for the architecture, the design and production of furniture, textiles, and other internal elements was largely a collective effort.

While the display of art had been a concern of the Bauhaus, the only exhibition the school organized was its Weimar exhibition in 1923. Yet, after leaving the Bauhaus, several former teachers and students did apply the school’s ideal of simple, dynamic space to experiment in this field. In 1929, Walter Gropius and fellow Bauhaus instructor Lazlo Moholy-Nagy designed an exhibition in Berlin in which the Bauhaus focus on openness thrived through the incorporation of both interior and exterior space and all-white painted walls. In 1931, the two artists, along with former Bauhaus student and staff member Herbert Bayer, organized a section of a larger exhibition on building and building materials at the Deutsche Bauausstellung in Berlin. Focusing on the importance of building worker unions, the group set out to create a display that would encourage interaction and guided movement through their subject matter. In one area, viewers were required to peer into small peepholes in order to see a visual representation of the rigors of being a building worker. In another, printed footprints arranged on the floor encouraged visitors to stand in specific locations to view four different images formed by a system of rotating slats.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Kleiner and Mamiya, 781-782.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 783.

⁵⁸ Klonk, 108-110.

Although not strictly a museum movement, the simple, dynamic nature of Bauhaus design further illustrates the malleable nature of space and its ability to conform to the ideals and needs of an era. While wealthy sixteenth and seventeenth century collectors arranged encyclopedic and highly decorative curiosity cabinets that portrayed their owners' worldliness and status, many 19th century museums in the United States got their start by presenting art as didactic specimen in an effort to uplift American culture. The white cube was highly influenced by the past display methods discussed here and was especially affected by the aesthetic movement in the United States and the German Bauhaus. It is important for museum professionals to understand where our cultural institutions have come from in order to make the best decisions for museums today.

III. ALFRED H. BARR, JR., THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF WHITE CUBE

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movements in art and design radically altered the ways in which museum galleries were organized and perceived. Benjamin Ives Gilman and the aesthetic movement of the United States focused attention on a select number of masterpieces in comfortable yet functional spaces, while the artists of the Bauhaus introduced simple, dynamic architecture meant to open up into the world and promote communal social atmosphere. However, it was Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Museum of Modern Art in New York that most significantly and lastingly changed the museum landscape with the development of the modernist concept of the “white cube” display that rose to prominence in the 1930s and continues to dominate the museum world today.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr. was born in Detroit on January 28, 1902 to Presbyterian minister Alfred Barr, Sr. and his wife Annie. Growing up in Baltimore, Barr enjoyed the sciences, collecting birds, butterflies and fossils. He could often be found categorizing his specimen, demonstrating their respective taxonomies. Nearing his graduation from the Boys’ Latin School of Maryland in 1918, the school’s newspaper described him as encompassing “the human faculty of inquisitiveness in the form of a collector of stamps, butterflies, botanical specimen and many other oddities. . . . He’s a born scientist.”⁵⁹ However, although Barr originally intended to study paleontology upon entering Princeton in 1918, the encouragement of his professors prompted him to major instead in art history. Chief among them was Charles Morey, professor of art

⁵⁹ Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 16.

history and chairman of the Department of Art and Archaeology. Morey, like Barr, was methodical and analytical. He appealed to Barr's scientific sensibilities, expounding in his classes on the sources and chronology of artistic styles as if he were constructing an evolutionary tree.⁶⁰

Upon graduating from Princeton, first with a B.A. in 1922 and then with an M.A. a year later, Barr was accepted into Harvard's doctoral program where he began his studies in the fall of 1924. Building off the Ruskinian ideals and methodology of former professor and critic Charles Eliot Norton, the "Harvard method" of art history was deeply rooted in form, color, material, and the empirical concerns of connoisseurship, often disregarding the social and psychological underpinnings behind a work of art. Following a course on prints taught by Paul Sachs, the associate director of Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, in the spring of 1924, Barr composed a ten-page evaluation, including a detailed chart outlining the evolution of printmaking. Drawing on his scientific tendencies and his art historical training at Harvard and Princeton, and Morey's classes in particular, this chart was the first of many, following artistic developments across centuries and nations, connecting artistic movements and their influences, while tracing the evolution of an art form. Under Sachs's tutelage, Barr's Harvard studies went on to include Sachs's famous, academically based "museum course" and the organization of his first exhibition of modern art at the Fogg.⁶¹

Barr had begun teaching to finance his Harvard studies. In 1925, he stepped in to lecture on nineteenth- and twentieth-century prints at Harvard at Sach's request. On this occasion, he arranged a series of slides to project for his fellow students. He spoke very little, and when he

⁶⁰ Ibid, 16-26.

⁶¹ Ibid, 2-59.

did, it was only to expound on technical and formal elements of the work under observation. Such an unobtrusive approach characterized his teaching style. He preferred art to speak for itself and wanted students to make their own discoveries. Beginning his print lecture, Barr attempted to prepare the audience for his unique, non-directive teaching style. “I hope,” he stated, “you will not find anything I say worth writing down – it will take your eye from the screen.”⁶²

Soon after finishing his doctoral coursework, Barr turned his attention almost wholly toward teaching. Over the following years, Barr taught at Vassar College, Princeton, and Wellesley. His teaching methods, however, remained largely intact. One of his Wellesley students would later recall him presenting slides in silence “for eternity.”⁶³ In early 1927, Barr again agreed to lecture at Harvard, this time for Sach’s undergraduate course on nineteenth-century French painting. Yet, this time, his teaching style garnered criticism not only from the students, but from Sachs as well. Apparently overlooking the fact that the students were less knowledgeable than he was, Barr opened his lecture speaking in Latin, quoting Roman aristocrat Petronius as he complained about the contemporary Egyptian art of that era. Defending his methods in a letter to Sachs, Barr explained that he had hoped to counteract the typical education system in which lecturers “[pour] forth . . . a net of words to minds titillated by easy explanations,” leaving students to believe they have “understood in an hour’s passive listening what it takes years to comprehend.”⁶⁴ Barr did not believe students could truly appreciate the complexities of art through lecture. A deep understanding, he believed, could only emerge out of long hours of personal aesthetic communion with the art.

⁶² Ibid, 77.

⁶³ Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.: Missionary for the Modern* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 42.

⁶⁴ Kantor, 96.

Later that year, Barr left for Europe on a yearlong sabbatical from teaching. Although he traveled to England, Holland and Russia, it was his two-month stay in Germany and his visit to the Dessau Bauhaus that would leave the deepest impression. Barr had been aware of the school for some time, writing later that he “had looked forward with great anticipation to the Bauhaus.”⁶⁵ Well before his visit, he had even begun to embrace some of its teachings. At Wellesley, Barr sent his student to a local dime store to help them look at everyday items through the lens of modern design. Each student was to spend one dollar on an item made from modern materials such as aluminum. The student to bring back the best designed object was awarded a paper mache dinosaur. As this assignment demonstrates, he was already exploring the interconnectedness of art, craft, and commercial manufacture. Although he spent only four nights at the Bauhaus in total, his time sitting in on classes and speaking with students and professors reinforced and expanded his avant-garde preferences.⁶⁶ The school’s new conceptualization of the arts as an interrelated, international network of stylistic currents and formal ideas greatly intrigued Barr. Upon returning to the United States and assuming his teaching position at Wellesley in 1928, he incorporated what he had learned into a course on modern art, combining lessons on architecture, design, painting, sculpture, film, and photography into one curriculum.⁶⁷ In a letter to Walter Gropius in 1938, Barr would recall his visit with intense affection. “I regard the three days which I spent at the Bauhaus in 1927,” he wrote, “as one of the most important incidents in my own education.”⁶⁸

When Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie P. Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan set out to create a museum dedicated to the art of their time, Paul Sachs, now a founding trustee of that

⁶⁵ Ibid, 155.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 103-161.

⁶⁷ Marquis, 49.

⁶⁸ Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 135.

museum, recommended Barr for the position of director. However, it is interesting to note that, despite Barr's enormous influence over institutional actions (museum president A. Conger Goodyear would eventually refer to him as "the museum's pituitary gland"⁶⁹), the initial exhibitions of New York's new Museum of Modern Art showed little of his Bauhaus influences. Opening on November 7, 1929, the museum's first exhibition was surprisingly conservative. Featuring French Post-Impressionist artists Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat and Van Gogh, the exhibition was located in the Heckscher Building on the corner of 5th Avenue and 57th Street. Barr planned the temporary gallery space in part with the help of a professional designer who assisted in the purchase of proper lighting, floor coverings, partitions and light beige monk's cloth Barr selected to cover the walls.⁷⁰ In many ways, Barr was following the lead of Gilman, Justi, and the other established museum professionals of the time. Although he had much of the embellishment removed, skirting board and crown, molding remained. The artworks themselves consisted almost entirely of paintings and suspended from rails at a relatively low level, at times in two tiers. Although placed in closer proximity than is typical today, they were far enough apart to avoid the museum fatigue described by Benjamin Ives Gilman in his 1918 book *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method*. A well-worn, patterned couch sat underneath a small grouping of three paintings for visitors to rest on while viewing the art. As this arrangement demonstrates, the exhibition's hanging was largely symmetrical. Doorways bordered by works of art of approximately equal size, often depicting analogous subject matter, perfectly framed larger works. In one location, van Gogh's *Irises* was flanked by two of the artist's small self-portraits, thus creating the effect as if each face seemingly gazed at the larger painting. Overall, this

⁶⁹ Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York, Atheneum, 1973), 287.

⁷⁰ Marquis, 68-69.

exhibition, as well as several others following it, seemed remarkably intimate and ordered, as if in a collector's home.

It was not until the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* that Barr developed his defining style and the “white cube” was born. By this time, the museum was located in the former Rockefeller townhouse on 11 West 53rd Street, and Barr had made the gallery space seem as austere as possible.⁷¹ Rugs were removed, exposing hardwood and, in places, tile flooring, decorative light fixtures were simplified, and walls and ceilings were painted white. Although chair rails, skirting boards, and other minor decorative elements remained from the building's previous use, they had been painted to match the walls, rendering them neutral. The introduction of movable partitions created a more versatile space. Although Barr still provided a couch for visitor seating, it was a simpler design with no artworks placed above it.

The works themselves consisted not only of paintings, but also of sculpture, posters, collage, photographs, architectural models, household objects and other artistic media. In all, the exhibition contained nearly 400 works distributed throughout four floors.⁷² Although, in instances, Barr still hung works in two tiers, he now installed them directly onto the walls in arrangements that were more “spare” than ever before. He even hung two Picasso works, *The Painter and His Model* and *Studio*, by themselves on walls of their own.⁷³ Furthermore, the exhibition's organization was largely asymmetrical, shunning past conventions that promoted the decorative. Freestanding objects rested on pedestals of varying sizes and shapes and, from time to time, Barr hung wall-mounted works at different heights. On one wall, he installed a grouping

⁷¹ Klonk, 138.

⁷² Any Newman and Irving Sandler, *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (New York, Abrams, 1986), 22.

⁷³ Susan Noyes Platt, “Modernism, Formalism, and Politics: The ‘Cubism and Abstract Art’ Exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art,” *Art Journal* 47, no. 4 (1988), 285.

of Mondrian paintings uniformly until he hung the second to last several inches higher and the last several inches lower.

Not independent of the display, *Cubism and Abstract Art*'s very concept indicated a new focus. Before the exhibition's opening, Barr had once again been devising a chart, this time chronicling the development of abstract art. Beginning with the Post-Impressionists, he plotted the evolution of Cubism and Fauvism, to Suprematism and Expressionism, and finally to geometrical and non-geometrical abstraction. Although he listed non-western and industrial influences, he differentiated them with bright red ink and based them in the purely visual instead of the cultural, social, or political. Once completed, Barr used this chart as the cover of the exhibition catalogue and pasted it on the gallery walls in several locations. The exhibition's layout mirrored the structure of the chart, furthering its impact. Entering on Pablo Picasso's *Dancer*, the show's archetypal work, visitors encountered a grouping of objects representing the primary influences and sources of Cubism. Following this, the development of cubism was broken down chronologically and compared with African artifacts, works by Cézanne, and other influences. In one room, Barr paired Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* with a small plaster reproduction of the ancient Nike, *Winged Victory of Samothrace*.⁷⁴ Finally, the remainder of the exhibition consisted of subsequent movements, broken down and identified with labels such as "FUTURISM," "BAUHAUS," and "ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM."

In many ways, Barr was allowing his analytic approach toward art, known alternatively as formalism or aestheticism, to flourish for the first time in his career as director of the Museum of Modern Art. Like a scientist, Barr isolated and objectified his subjects. As art historian and critic Meyer Schapiro noted in his article "Nature of Abstract Art," "he gives us . . . the dates of

⁷⁴ Ibid, 284-285.

every stage in the various movements, as if to enable us to plot a curve, or to follow the emergence of art year by year.” More to the point, Schapiro stated that, in his exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, Barr treats art as “pure form” independent of “historical conditions” or “content.”⁷⁵ Barr himself illustrated his ideas further in the catalogue. “Since resemblance to nature is at best superfluous and at worst distracting,” he stated, “it might as well be eliminated.”⁷⁶ Although Barr was referring to the radical new practices of abstract artists themselves, this sentiment can just as easily be applied to his own curatorial processes. Not only does Barr limit context to the most basic chronology, he also attempts to remove art from our preconceptions. This is evident in the methods he utilized to display three chairs displayed in the exhibition including Marcel Breuer’s Bauhaus-designed *Wassily Chair* and Gerrit Rietveld’s *The Red and Blue Chair*. Rather than placing them on the floor, as they would be seen in everyday life, Barr mounted them on the wall, taking them out of their typical context and making us perceive them in a new way.

Such scientifically based display methods were not unique to *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Over the years, this formal approach toward art and exhibition development would come to define both Barr and the Museum of Modern Art. Four years before the opening of *Cubism*, Barr, architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and Philip Johnson, the founder of the museum’s department of architecture and design, had already organized an exhibition that predicted the formal basis of *Cubism*. In 1932, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* became the first exhibition of modern architecture in the United States. Although the exhibition was more crowded and, in some ways, decorative, its conceptual handling was very similar to

⁷⁵ Meyer Schapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art,” in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: G. Braziller, 1987), 187-188.

⁷⁶ Alfred Hamilton Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* 1936, reprint (New York: Arno Press, 1986), 13.

that of its successor. It presented the works of architects Jacobus Oud, Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius in aesthetic terms without any social or ideological context.⁷⁷ Barr's wife, Margaret, attributed Barr's methods to his drive for academic "neatness." She goes on to state that the very arrangement of the permanent collection reflected his scientific origins and "his demand for intellectual discipline."⁷⁸ Successive hangings of the permanent collection portrayed the evolution of modern art as a sole linear narrative from Cézanne's *The Bather* to total abstraction. Even Barr's wall text favored formal analysis over interpretation. Using precise, objective terminology, he described only what was visible to the eye.⁷⁹

However, there was another motivator for Barr's formal approach. Beginning with his visit to Russia as part of his 1927-1928 European sabbatical, Barr had witnessed the culturally oppressive tendencies associated with totalitarian governments. While there, he spoke to Russian writer Segei Tretyakov and theatre actor, director, and producer Vesvolod Meyerhold. Both men considered themselves "a unit in the new [Marxist] society," Barr explained. "While they function in this way I suppose any artistic objectivity is impossible."⁸⁰ In 1933, Barr again witnessed government attempts to suppress artistic creativity and freedom. On a one-year leave from the museum, Barr was in Stuttgart when the National Socialist German Workers' Party came to power and Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany.⁸¹ In his article, "Art in the Third Reich," Barr looked back on a public meeting he attended on April 9 of that year. Reading from the pamphlet "Kulturprogramm in neuen Reich," the head of the new Wuerttemberg Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur, or the Militant League for German Culture, said:

⁷⁷ Kantor, 227.

⁷⁸ Newman and Sandler, 78.

⁷⁹ Kantor, 317-324.

⁸⁰ Alfred Hamilton Barr, "Russian Diary, 1927-28," in *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, ed. Amy Newman and Irving Sandler (New York: Abrams, 1986), 127.

⁸¹ Marquis, 105.

It belongs to the sorriest chapters of the history of the last 14 years that our universities and technical schools in a mistaken interpretation of the expression 'academic freedom' have in general given way to the spirit of liberalism . . . Academic freedom shall and must be preserved. It is the right of the creative spirit. *But it must be a German academic freedom!* . . . The widely held contemporary belief that art is international is absolutely misleading. . . . What does not issue out of the depths of the spirit with conscious responsibility toward German culture, is not art in the German sense of the word.⁸²

In both Communist Russia and Nazi Germany, Barr saw a turn from creative invention toward reverence of the autocratic government and nation and the resulting subordination and suppression of the people. Modern artists and progressive scholars were dismissed from teaching positions, museum directors and art critics were replaced, and their supporters were punished. Art institutions themselves were purged of "offensive" art. Just months after Hitler came to power in Germany, the new regime forcibly removed the Stuttgart Civic Gallery's retrospective exhibition on the works of Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer.⁸³ In Russia, the Stalinists closed the Museum of Modern Western Art entirely.⁸⁴ Several works that Barr had intended to include in his own exhibitions proved too dangerous to acquire. In *Cubism and Abstract Art*, many Russian avant-garde works were represented only by photographs while a number of Suprematist works had to be smuggled out of Nazi Germany.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, government-sanctioned artistic propaganda was thriving. Soviet Realism had taken hold in Russia with art critic Nikolay Alexandrovich Milyutin stating, "art, the object of which is to serve the masses, cannot be other than realistic. The attention of artists is concentrated on Socialist construction . . . our struggles . . . the enemies of the people . . . the

⁸² Alfred Hamilton Barr, "Art in the Third Reich," in *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, ed. Amy Newman and Irving Sandler (New York: Abrams, 1986), 164-165.

⁸³ Barr, "Art in the Third Reich," 166-167.

⁸⁴ Alfred Hamilton Barr, "Is Modern Art Communistic?," in *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, ed. Amy Newman and Irving Sandler (New York: Abrams, 1986), 217.

⁸⁵ Marquis, 153.

heroes of the soviet land.”⁸⁶ Similarly, in Germany, Barr argued, the government forced artists to “conform to the personal taste of that great art connoisseur, Adolf Hitler - the feeble and conservative taste of a mediocre Viennese art student of thirty years ago, frozen by failure into patriotic bigotry.”⁸⁷ In truth, an academic focus prevailed in the artists of Nazi Germany who borrowed heavily from classical works. Heroic and beautiful German citizen populated idealized German landscapes, German military forces won great victories and proud Nazi officials stood lionized in their representations.

Even curatorial practice in the two countries profoundly changed in their respective political climates. Under Stalin’s first five-year plan, Russian museums began to present art within a communal social context promoting the collective, proletariat ideal. Referring to the new museums as “self-explaining” or “talking” museums, Victor Grinevich explained that the duty of the museum “is to give every worker or peasant, seeking knowledge, the possibility to look over the whole museum on his own, reading only the explanatory labels and posters.”⁸⁸ Therefore, Russian museums relied heavily on supplemental material including maps, graphs, charts, photography, and didactic wall text, rather than allowing the art to speak for itself.

In German museums, an aura of social order prevailed. It was in Nazi Germany, not the United States, that white gallery walls became standard. Although it was similar to Barr’s MoMA approach, the German style emphasized the transcendental, rather than neutrality or isolation. In fact, some suggested the use of white represented cultural purity. Yet, beyond wall color, Nazi museology tended to cling to the traditional. Rather than hang work chronologically, exhibitions such as the Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung, or the Great German Art Exhibition,

⁸⁶ Barr, “Is Modern Art Communistic?,” 215-216.

⁸⁷ Edward Alden Jewell, “Free Art’: Work Nazis Reject Shown at Museum,” *The New York Times* (1942), x5.

⁸⁸ Adam Jolles, “Stalin’s Talking Museums,” *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 3 (2005), 439.

at the Haus der Kunst in Munich reverted to the academic genre divisions that placed history painting, portraiture, genre painting, landscape and still life in a strict hierarchical order.⁸⁹ A limited amount of ornamental architectural and decorative features began to creep back into the gallery space. A high wooden chair rail and marble flooring can clearly be seen in the 1939 photograph of Hitler visiting the exhibition.

However, the threat to artistic freedom was not simply a foreign matter. As Barr saw it, art was vulnerable to political intrusion even within the United States. In his 1952 article “Is Modern Art Communistic?,” he claims that modern art is mistakenly called “communistic” by those who do not appreciate it. In fact, Barr quoted President Truman saying that he only considered true art to be works that represented the outside world in a naturalistic fashion. Modern art, he stated, is “merely the vaporings of half-baked lazy people.”⁹⁰

Because of the perceived threats to the autonomy of art and the artist, Barr fought against the encroachment of any context in the display of art beyond formal elements and basic chronology. In the 1936 catalogue for *Cubism and Abstract Art*, he dedicated the exhibition “to those painters of squares and circles (and the architects influenced by them) who have suffered at the hands of philistines with political power.”⁹¹ He believed not just Nazi and Communist but all societal factors were irrelevant and even harmful to the creation of art, and therefore sought to eradicate such concerns from its display. Instead, Barr embraced what he termed “the modern artist’s non-conformity and love of freedom.”⁹² The Museum of Modern Art further minimized its wall text and interpretation, allowing visitors to interpret art for themselves and leaving the artwork to act as symbols of their creators’ supposed autonomy and artistic genius.

⁸⁹ Klonk, 125-128.

⁹⁰ Barr, “Is Modern Art Communistic?,” 214.

⁹¹ Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 18.

⁹² Barr, “Is Modern Art Communistic?,” 214.

Yet MoMA's "white cube" was not free of ideological connotations. In many ways, its dedication to artistic freedom marked it as a truly American museum in support of a democratic, capitalist society. Since the museum's founding, wealthy businessmen and entrepreneurs had acted as trustees, benefactors and patrons. Therefore, whether deliberate or unconscious, Barr presented art in a way that promoted the newly coined concept of the "American dream." By presenting art in aesthetic terms, separated from its worldly origins, he presented artists as self-made innovators. Additionally, although the museum was organized around the organization and structure he encountered at the Bauhaus, painting and sculpture once again held a place of privilege, creating a hierarchy that promoted a sense of the unique and rare over the more common or practical. Art became an object of aesthetic education and desire. As art historian Charlotte Klonk pointed out in her book *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000*, the museum invited its visitors to "cultivate their taste, up-date themselves in matters of style, and recognize themselves as informed members of the consumer society."⁹³ In fact, MoMA did not simply intend its architecture and design exhibitions for public education, but also for inspiration in the conception of new products.⁹⁴

Even MoMA's new 1939 building reflected the museum's capitalist bend. Architects Philip Goodwin and Edward Stone designed and built the new building on the location of the old Rockefeller townhouse. However, they erased any homey or feminine associations that the space may have previously had. Instead, the museum resembled a commercial business. In his article "Opening of the New Museum of Modern Art," art critic Henry McBride described the almost Bauhaus-like façade as "factory-like" in its "stark and machine-made simplicity."⁹⁵ The

⁹³ Klonk, 149.

⁹⁴ Newman and Sandler, 22.

⁹⁵ Henry McBride, "Opening of the New Museum of Modern Art," in *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticism of Henry McBride*, ed. Daniel Cotton Rich (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 334.

six story flat-roofed building was a simple, white marble box pierced by glass walls and polished metal supports. Like a department store, the museum had a clear glass entrance, revolving doors and curved metal awning reaching out into the sidewalk.

Inside, the similarities continued. As visitors entered the building, they were confronted by a curved counter leading them into the museum. Potted plants were unobtrusively arranged throughout the building.⁹⁶ Overall, the museum's layout guided visitors through the galleries as if on an assembly line to see the most art. MoMA's newly created "picture alcoves disdain coziness," McBride stated.

Apparently, in the new museum, we shall be expected to stand up, look quickly, and pass on. There are some chairs and settees, but the machine-like neatness of the rooms does not invite repose. The old-time habit of sitting in front of a masterpiece for half an hour and 'drinking it in,' as it were, will soon be out of date.⁹⁷

However, while retail outlets of this style could be seen in Europe, it had not yet become widespread in the United States.⁹⁸ In this way, the museum was setting the trend.

At a private reception celebrating the completion of the new building, Paul Sachs announced "in serving the elite [MoMA] will reach better than in any other way, the great general public."⁹⁹ Two days later at the building's official opening, president Franklin Delano Roosevelt stated, "only when men are free can the arts flourish," christening the museum "a citadel of civilization," that bridges "the gap between the artists and American industry, and the great American public," and raising "the standards of American taste."¹⁰⁰ Soon, MoMA's

⁹⁶ Klonk, 147-148.

⁹⁷ McBride, "Opening of the New Museum of Modern Art," 334.

⁹⁸ Klonk, 147-148.

⁹⁹ Marquis, 171.

¹⁰⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Radio Dedication of the Museum of Modern Art," May 10, 1939, I.146, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York: Monroe Wheeler Papers.

building style, its display methods, and its philosophy came to be associated with American power. This phenomenon, in turn, was emulated by museums and commercial businesses alike.

While the white cube is now a staple of museum practice, it was Alfred H. Barr, Jr. in his role as the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, New York who deserves most of the credit for its development. His analytical mind pushed aesthetic and formalist ideas to the forefront. Yet, to a large degree, Barr was guided by the circumstances of his era. By the 1930s, the art world was more focused on connoisseurship than ever before. Additionally, Barr's disdain for fascist and social interference in the arts prompted the white cube's focus on freedom and aesthetics. The white cube's long reign is proof of its lasting influence.

IV. LIMITATIONS OF THE WHITE CUBE

Not everyone embraced the aesthetic “white cube.” While some praised Barr and the Museum of Modern Art for their innovative spirit, others had been criticizing MoMA’s exhibition techniques since *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Meyer Schapiro questioned Barr’s method of removing art from its historical and social contexts. In “Nature of Abstract Art,” Schapiro stated that “there is no ‘pure art,’ . . . all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience, and non aesthetic concerns.”¹⁰¹ He argued that no one could truly understand the history of art without some knowledge of its background. “The movement of abstract art is too comprehensive and long-prepared, too closely related to similar movements in literature and philosophy, which have quite other technical conditions, and finally, are too varied according to time and place, to be considered a self-contained development issuing by a kind of internal logic directly from aesthetic problems.”¹⁰²

In 1936, Henry McBride declared that *Cubism and Abstract Art* was geared toward those with advanced knowledge and did not make an effort to appeal to the general public. He claimed that the exhibition methods used, effectively alienated uninformed visitors, stating that the museum’s officials “smite the public in the eye on the very door-step, so to speak, of the show.”¹⁰³ He believed that the public needed more than just statistics and dates. Instead, a gradual introduction to the subject of abstract art and guidance from concept to concept would

¹⁰¹ Meyer Schapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art,” in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978), 196.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁰³ Henry McBride, “Exhibition of Abstract Art at the Museum of Modern Art,” in *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticisms of Henry McBride*, ed. Daniel Cotton Rich (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 334.

build more interest and understanding. “Though abstract art is here in plenty,” he stated, “‘abstract beauty’ is not placarded in a way to win new converts.”¹⁰⁴

As the white cube began to gain a larger following, its elitist tendencies became more defined. The authoritative history of art presented within the gallery space supported traditional power relationships, portraying the curators as the ultimate purveyors of knowledge and visitors as lowly consumer peons. The museums are geared more toward those with at least some advanced knowledge of the type of art displayed. Like Barr with his Harvard lecture, museum staff members may overlook the fact that many visitors have not yet developed the same knowledge base as they have. Even when aware of their audience and its skill level, curators often decide that providing context interferes with the visitor’s ability to think for him or herself. Yet, such methods are clearly ineffective and may actually alienate uninformed visitors. “I was a little disappointed,” one participant of *Insights*, a series of visitor focus groups published by the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1991, stated after visiting the Philadelphia Museum of Art for the first time. “There was really no background information on a lot of the items, how they were made, why they were used, what they symbolized . . . It was just sort of all there.”¹⁰⁵

Similarly, the white cube artificially elevates the status of the artworks themselves. As the Getty’s report points out, museum staff now strive to convey works of art primarily as “significant and original” rather than grounding them in the human realm from which they sprung.¹⁰⁶ In order to do this, works of art are isolated from one another, widely spaced and spot-lit from above. The empty white walls of the gallery make the artworks appear transcendent and timeless, as if they were sacred objects in sacrosanct temples. The curators further detach art

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 334.

¹⁰⁵ *Insights: Museums, Visitors, Attitudes, Expectations: A Focus Group Experiment* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1991), 22.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 9.

from the everyday world by limiting background information to simple facts such as artist, title, date, and media. They, like Barr, treat art as if it was self-contained, emerging whole and untouched from the ether.

Finally, the white cube erects a psychological barrier between the artworks and their viewers. Since people live in the real world, they could contaminate the art. Museum staff wants visitors to perceive their institutions as an escape from the mundane. One staff member participating in *Insights* stated that he or she wanted the museum to be “a special place, apart from the everyday world.”¹⁰⁷ In this way, visitors too, are encouraged to leave their lives, the world, and any preconceived notions behind. In his 1976 book, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, artist and author Brian O’Doherty explains, “presence before a work of art, then, means that we absent ourselves in favor of the Eye and Spectator, who report to us what we might have seen had we been there.”¹⁰⁸

Even the artworks in museums of modern and contemporary art support the new elitism. While most viewers could at least superficially understand the meanings and intentions behind most academic and historical works of art, modern art speaks a different language and is often unintelligible without prior knowledge. In order to understand modern art, one must first have the access and leisure time needed to become familiar with it. While the middle and upper classes have had ready admittance, the working class and impoverished often have limited resources and daily pressures that restrict their access to modern art. In “Nature of Abstract Art,” Meyer Schapiro explains that Barr and his followers saw naturalistic representation as “a passive mirroring of things” and “essentially non-artistic.” Abstract artists, on the other hand, stripped their art of representation, meaning, and other “unavoidable impurities,” leaving only the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 9.

¹⁰⁸ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 55.

untainted, aesthetic “essence.”¹⁰⁹ Barr himself further commented on the inferiority of the easily understood. As Sybil Gorgon Kantor points out in her book *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum Modern Art*, Barr often used the term “pretty” to discredit works of art that were too readily understandable. However, Barr believed that “difficult” works required more contemplation and “by their poetry [had] the power to lift us up out of humdrum ruts.”¹¹⁰

Overall, the art museum now acted as the protector of our most noble societal values. It consumed art and presented it in a way that elevated it above life and shrouded it in an aura of mystery and transcendence. Brian O’Doherty summarizes this best.

For many of us, the gallery space still gives off negative vibrations when we wander in. Esthetics are turned into a kind of social elitism – the gallery space is *exclusive*. Isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewelry, or silver: esthetics are turned into commerce – the gallery space is *expensive*. What it contains is, without initiation, well-nigh incomprehensible - art is *difficult*. . . . here we have a social, financial, and intellectual snobbery which models (and at its worst parodies) our system of limited production, our modes of assigning value, our social habits at large. Never was a space designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle-classes so efficiently codified.¹¹¹

This elitism also translated into a new passivity never before seen in the museum setting. Non-initiated visitors feel intimidated and inadequate due to their lack of understanding and the museum’s authoritative atmosphere. O’Doherty equates the discomfort felt by such visitors with the unpleasantly heightened self-consciousness of trespass. “Because trespass makes one partly visible to oneself, it plays down body language, encourages a convention of silence, and tends to substitute the Eye for the Spectator.”¹¹² The Getty’s *Insights* brought these feelings to the

¹⁰⁹ Schapiro, 195.

¹¹⁰ Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 249.

¹¹¹ O’Doherty, 76.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 49.

forefront, pointing out that visitors do not feel like they can be themselves. They feel they must be on their best behavior, making as little noise as possible or even dressing up. “It’s going to be so quiet,” one participant stated of Cleveland Museum of Art, “that you will feel conspicuous if you cough or anything.”¹¹³ Again, O’Doherty summarizes this perfectly: “from this room, burps and farts are exiled.”¹¹⁴ Even those regular museum visitors who do feel comfortable within the gallery setting restrain themselves in deference to the space and artworks on display there. In *Making Museums Matter*, Stephen Weil explains that whether a work of art is sensual, shocking, lavish, or amusing, the typical viewer nearly always responds with quiet deference. “Well bred visitors,” he writes, “rarely display any horror, lust, envy, or open amusement at the things they see in art museums.”¹¹⁵ Furthermore, those individuals that would be more likely to openly react to a work of art may avoid attending museums precisely because they find them to be too stultifying and passive. Another participant of *Insights* explained, “if you weren’t walking, you’d probably sleep through the entire trip.”¹¹⁶

However, it was not until the 1980s that an exhibition came along that was so poorly received that it prompted people to reconsider the aesthetic focus of the “white cube” format. Organized by William Rubin, director of the museum’s painting and sculpture department, in conjunction with New York University professor Kirk Varnedoe, “*Primitivism*” in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* opened at the Museum of Modern Art on September 19, 1984. The exhibition consisted of 150 modern and contemporary works as well as over 200 African, Oceanic, and North American tribal artifacts.¹¹⁷ Focusing on the shared formal

¹¹³ *Insights*, 10.

¹¹⁴ O’Doherty, 85.

¹¹⁵ Stephen E. Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 185.

¹¹⁶ *Insights*, 11.

¹¹⁷ “New Exhibition Opening September 27 at Museum of Modern Art Examines ‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art,” *The Museum of Modern Art*, accessed March 20, 2012, http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/6081/releases/MOMA_1984_0017_17.pdf?2010.

characteristics of the two genres, the exhibition told the history of modernism as it was influenced by “primitive art.”

As with Barr’s *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Rubin and Varmedoe strictly organized “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art*, with sections labeled “I. Concepts,” “II. History,” “III. Affinities,” and “IV. Contemporary Exploration.” The works of art displayed were expertly spot-lit and wall text had been limited. Although the curators provided some wooden benches for visitors to relax on, they were located in the center of the galleries and were extremely simple in design.

When following the intended layout, visitors were first introduced to the basic issues that the exhibition highlighted and then moved on to a more detailed overview of the shared history of Modernism and tribal artifacts.¹¹⁸ Beginning with Gauguin’s *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, this section juxtaposed the actual tribal artifacts that the artists owned or had seen with the modern works they subsequently produced. The walls were darker than is typical and the floors transitioned from carpeting and marble tile to polished hardwood as the galleries progressed. In several instances, Rubin and Varmedoe placed artifacts near their graphic representations in photographic enlargements of artists’ studios. While the curators arranged objects on simple white pedestals, they often situated objects in illuminated glass cases set into the gallery walls. The interiors of these cases were painted white and object groupings were slightly more compact than is typical. Labels were adhered to slanted blocks or outcrops from the cases. In a grouping including Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* and five African masks, photographic labels singled out the painting’s individual faces and compared them with their respective masks. With rooms labeled “Video Gallery” and “Theatre Arts,” this section was further broken down to illustrate

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

the influence of tribal objects on the performing arts. Overall, these galleries almost seemed more reminiscent of an ethnographic exhibition than that of the typical art museum.

Moving to the third floor, the “affinities” section illustrated the supposed aesthetic similarities between modern and “primitive” art.¹¹⁹ The walls were lighter and the floors were entirely hardwood. Although Rubin and Varnedoe still placed some objects behind glass, they chose larger cases, in one instance encompassing an entire wall. The two curators centered a Joan Miró painting with dynamic visual motion in a case and surrounded by artifacts that were similarly energetic. For the most part, the block labels were replaced with text adhered directly to the walls. Ignoring these, however, it was often difficult to distinguish what was modern and what was tribal, especially in the case of sculpture, like that of Jacques Lipchitz and Constantin Brancusi.

The final section consisted solely of contemporary works that shared similar formal elements to the more historical works presented in the show. However, the art in this section was not specifically based in “primitive” objects and did not include recent tribal work.¹²⁰ The arrangement of this gallery was the most typical “white cube.” Museum staff painted the walls white and completely replaced all block labels. The space was also more open, allowing works room to breathe.

While the curators intended “*Primitivism*” to illustrate the intertwined history of tribal artifacts and modern art, many saw the exhibition as one-sided and demeaning to the various cultures represented. The gradual transition from a more ethnographic display to a pure “white cube” can, in itself, be seen negatively. Although the entire exhibition was aesthetically focused, Rubin and Varnedoe only treated the art in the last section, containing exclusively Western

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

works, as transcendental masterpieces. Historian James Clifford argues that even when tribal objects were displayed, the aesthetic focus forced them to be seen “on modernist terms.” The exhibition’s modern art seemingly elevates the tribal objects from “fetishes” or “specimen” to “high art.”¹²¹ The exhibition depicted Western artists as humanitarian geniuses for seeing artistic potential in what their societies often believed to be naïve, barbarian, or primitive sub-art. “Beneath this general umbrella,” he states, “the tribal is modern and the modern more richly, more diversely human.”¹²²

Clifford goes on to argue that the aesthetic focus of “*Primitivism*” was not only demeaning to tribal cultures, but was, in fact, simplistic and incorrect in both its assumptions and conclusions. Beyond the basic history of what Rubin terms modern artists’ “discover[y]” of primitive sculpture,¹²³ the two genres have very little in common. “An equally striking [exhibition],” Clifford explains, “could be made demonstrating sharp dissimilarities between tribal and modern objects.” While it is true that both groups rely heavily on stylization, he states that the exhibition was “an intriguing, but entirely problematic exercise in formal mix-and-match.”¹²⁴ Clifford points to the pairing of Picasso’s *Girl Before a Mirror* and a Kwakiutl half-mask pictured on the cover of the exhibition catalogue as a definitive example, pointing out that all similarities were, in fact, the result of the camera’s angle and lighting. However, I tend to find the juxtaposition of a lithograph of Munch’s famous *The Scream* with a tribal mask making an “o” with its mouth more representative of the exhibition’s contrived nature. While it is true that some scholars have suggested that Munch may have used a mummy for a reference for his

¹²¹ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 195.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 191.

¹²³ William Rubin, “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 1.

¹²⁴ Clifford, 192.

figure, I know of no evidence of a connection to any mask. The comparison appears to be purely formal and is simplistic and misleading in an exhibition that makes such lofty claims.

Since this time, even the Museum of Modern Art itself has begun to question its previous exhibition practices. The museum's self-published book describes its traditional taxonomic methods as "static" and "reductivist."¹²⁵ Although in many ways powerful and innovative, exhibitions from *Cubism and Abstract Art* to "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art*, may have the effect of isolating art, alienating potential visitors, and simplifying an immensely complex subject. As the next chapter discusses, institutions are beginning to experiment more with alternative methods of display in an attempt to address these issues. As Meyer Schapiro did before them, they are beginning to realize that there is no "pure art."¹²⁶ Art comes from different places and there are different options for displaying it.

¹²⁵ Harriet Schoenholz Bee and Cassandra Heliczzer, *MoMA Highlights: 350 Works from the Museum of Modern Art, New York* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004) 18-21.

¹²⁶ Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978), 196.

V. EXPERIMENTATION AND ALTERNATIVES TO THE WHITE CUBE

Criticism of museum practices and shifting social and institutional needs can often act as a catalyst for change. Yet, however necessary or well-intentioned, change rarely comes easily. In the case of art museums, the mere prospect of change may cause a backlash from art critics, wealthy patrons, and other industry insiders who feel threatened by any change to the institutions they helped develop. Yet, fear of potential repercussion should not and has not completely halted experimentation in exhibition and display methods. Although there has yet to be a truly revolutionary and widely embraced alternative to the aesthetic white cube, many museums and galleries have been searching for alternate ways of presenting artistic content.

In the 1960s, political and social activist culture swelled in the arts in the form of revisionist art history. Alongside the anti-war and civil rights movements, young art historians and avant-garde artists challenged what they saw as complacent elitism born out of art's supposed formalist autonomy.¹²⁷ Instead, they called for a reexamining of art history through the lens of emerging postmodern philosophy and ideas. They understood that art was not neutral or self-sufficient, but stemmed from the culture and politics of its day. They believed the public needed to understand art in relation to its social origins in order to bring about an increased public relevance.

Few museums followed the lead of the new revisionist scholars. Museums had become temples of transcendent aesthetics, and the new art historical perspectives seemed to conflict with the values and beliefs of the moneyed and influential critics and patrons on whom a

¹²⁷ Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 118.

museum's reputation depended. When an exhibit did draw from revisionist theories, it was, more often than not, met with fierce criticism and disapproval.

Thirty years later, revisionist exhibitions were still controversial. On March 15, 1991, The Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art, now simply the American Art Museum, opened an exhibition of 164 paintings, prints, sculptures, watercolors, and photographs depicting images of the westward expansion of the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Titled *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, the exhibition, curated by William Truettner, sought to reveal the biases of artists represented vis-à-vis the American myth of Manifest Destiny. Guided by over 50 text panels, visitors were encouraged to interpret subtle cues said to be present and learn how artists imbue meaning in their works. Arguing that history, as well as art, is subject to conscious and unconscious prejudices including those of race and status, one wall label stated that "more often than not, [works of art] are contrived views," and, in this case, were intended to "answer the hopes and desires of people facing a seemingly unlimited and mostly unsettled portion of the nation."¹²⁸

Unsurprisingly, *The West as America* proved to be extremely controversial. Critics saw the exhibition's reliance on wall text and its organization in general as demeaning to both the works of art on display and the visitors who came to see them. Jumping to the aid of the artists represented, *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman chastised the curators for presenting painters and sculptors such as Emanuel Leutze and Charles Russell as interested only in advancing the views of their wealthy white male patrons, going on to call the exhibition "frustrating" and even "infuriating."¹²⁹ When republican senators Ted Stevens of Alaska and Slade Gorton of Washington accused the exhibition of demonstrating leftist leanings by rejecting

¹²⁸ "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920," accessed March 20, 2012, <http://people.virginia.edu/~mmw3v/west/home.htm>.

¹²⁹ Michael Kimmelman, "Old West, New Twist at the Smithsonian," *The New York Times*, (1991), h1.

the traditional view of Manifest Destiny as fated, glorious, and honorable, they even called the public funding of the Smithsonian into question.¹³⁰

Despite the exhibition's flaws, the controversy and subsequent media coverage surrounding it made *The West as America* more intriguing and successful than it otherwise would have been. The number of visitors in April and May alone nearly doubled the National Museum of American Art's typical attendance, and by the time the exhibition closed on July 28, the museum had sold every soft-cover copy of the accompanying catalogue. However, the most remarkable indicator of the exhibition's accomplishments was the behavior of its visitor's who often stood in a line for up to 20 minutes to record their thoughts and observations in one of the exhibition's four comment books. Sometimes filling entire pages, the comments did not always agree. Some lambasted the curators for their "sickening example of the dishonesty of contemporary art historical interpretations" while others thanked them for their "revisionist view of American history."¹³¹ However, the true marvel of the comment book phenomenon is that it was able to illustrate the extent to which the exhibition and related controversy were able to provoke thoughtful and honest contemplation of subjects as diverse as art, history, and politics. Visitors did not passively consume aesthetic characteristics, but internalized the artwork they saw and related it to their own experiences and beliefs. They made up their own minds. While each comment is eloquent and profound, I will record only one, written about half way through the exhibition's duration: "Controversy engenders enlightenment. Somewhere in the middle is the truth."¹³²

¹³⁰ Ibid, h1.

¹³¹ Andrew Gulliford, "Visitors Respond: Selections from 'The West as America' Comment Books," *The Magazine of Western History* 42, no. 3 (1992), 77-78.

¹³² Ibid, 80.

Yet, as postmodern and revisionist thinking progressed, art historians began to question the accepted evolution and categorization of art, from the Classical to the Medieval to the Renaissance, etc. all the way up to contemporary trends, as constructed formalist dogma. They no longer thought of social context and subject matter as wearisome obstacles to conquer on the way to a pure aesthetic experience.¹³³ Focusing on these long neglected aspects of art could bring about new insights into specific works and the artists who created them. The prospect of increased appreciation and public engagement was so alluring that, as the 20th century became the 21st, a handful of influential museums decided to experiment with a revived thematic display. In London, both Tate Britain and the newly opened Tate Modern rearranged their collections in this manner.

In the second half of 1999, just before closing its building for expansion, New York's Museum of Modern Art opened the first of three museum-wide exhibitions celebrating the artistic developments of the 20th century and the beginning of a new Millennium. Titled *ModernStarts*, this first exhibition focused on the years between 1880 and 1920 and explored the issues of the era in an interdisciplinary manner, incorporating objects from all six of the museum's collecting departments. However, as the title implies, the curators did not simply wish to rehash Alfred Barr's established evolution of modern art from postimpressionism to abstraction. Instead, the curators intended *ModernStarts* as a broader study of multiple beginnings and competing versions of the Modern movements. They chose to organize the exhibition according to three overarching sections titled "People," "Places," and "Things." Further divided into 28 subdivisions, scattered throughout the museum, the thematic display itself was a return to an organization prevalent when the works originally emerged, and acted as

¹³³ David Sylvester, "Mayhem at Millbank: David Sylvester Visits the Tate," *London Review of Books* (2000) <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v22/n10/david-sylvester/mayhem-at-millbank> (accessed March 20, 2012).

a foil against which viewers could understand their artistic significance and historical implications.¹³⁴ In this way, *ModernStarts* transformed the museum into a “laboratory” exploring new methods of museological communication and artistic thought.

If for nothing else, *ModernStarts* was significant for its fresh and daring move away from the, by then deep-rooted, chronological “white cube.” The curators brought lesser-known works out of storage that were not necessarily essential to the portrayal of the accepted evolution of modernism. British art critic Jed Pearl was especially taken by Georges Braque’s little seen painting *Studio V*¹³⁵ while New Yorker critic Peter Schjeldahl exclaimed, “I never thought I could have more fun with Picasso’s self-indulgent pal Derain than I could with the man himself.”¹³⁶ By placing such works in the limelight, the museum diverged from the typical narrative. Additionally, idiosyncratic yet evocative juxtapositions allowed well-known works to be experienced in new ways. Museum staff mixed what Alfred Barr termed “near” and “pure” abstractions throughout the exhibition, illustrating how such works had emerged out of traditional portrait, landscape, and still life subjects. In the subsection “Changing Visions: French Landscape, 1880-1920,” the thematic arrangement brought the paintings’ subjects to the forefront, ultimately calling attention to the strangeness of the artists’ aesthetic choices. As Schjeldahl stated, “suddenly, the paintings seem as jittery and weird as they must have seemed to viewers at the time.”¹³⁷ The curators further heightened the suggestion of the historical origins of works of art by replacing the museum’s standard “strip” frames with more ornate, gold ones and hanging Impressionist and Postimpressionist works on dark, colorful walls reminiscent of

¹³⁴ John Elderfield, *ModernStarts: People, Places, Things* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 8-28.

¹³⁵ Jed Perl, “Welcome to the Funhouse: The Tate Modern and the Crisis of the Museums,” *The New Republic* (2000), 35.

¹³⁶ Peter Schjeldahl, “The Reinvention of MoMA,” *The New Yorker* (2000), http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2000/01/17/2000_01_17_084_TNY_LIBRY_000020029 (accessed March 20, 2012).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

the era's commercial galleries and private homes. Labels depicting vintage photographs accompanied several landscape paintings, depicting the very scenes portrayed by the artists.¹³⁸ Moreover, a small number of later works were included and even commissioned,¹³⁹ illustrating that concerns of early modernist artists are still relevant today.

For the most part, the critical response to the major thematic exhibitions at MoMA and the Tate was negative. Dubbing them postmodern and revisionist mix and match, critics maintained that the unconventional organization was a ploy to distract visitors from the exhibitions' academic failings. Critic David Sylvester further argued that through their thematic focus, the curators circumvented the need for a set narrative argument and created exhibitions that were so open ended, they evaded making definitive statements entirely.¹⁴⁰ At Tate Modern, critics attributed the equivocation to the museum's general lack of accepted modern masterpieces stating that the use of themes enables them "to bulk up their classic holdings with humungous recent works."¹⁴¹

Artist Frank Stella was so upset with the thematic organization of MoMA's *ModernStarts* that in February 2001, he gave a lecture at the Frick Collection calling it "philistine," "retardaire," and a "flip trivialization," among other characterizations. Although he was expected to speak about Charles-Francois Daubigny's 1877 harbor painting *Dieppe*, it was never mentioned. Instead, his talk, titled "Dead Endings," attacked MoMA, and specifically curator John Elderfield and director Glen Lowry, for what he saw as a misguided attempt to draw a broader audience.¹⁴² Stating that the museum had confused art with entertainment, he went on to

¹³⁸ Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2005), 227.

¹³⁹ Elderfield, 26.

¹⁴⁰ Sylvester.

¹⁴¹ Perl, 34-35.

¹⁴² Deborah Solomon, "Frank Stella's Expressionist Phase," *The New York Times* (2003), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/04/magazine/04STELLA.html?pagewanted=1> (accessed March 20, 2012).

say, “the museum is blowing its brains out. The show is clueless because it has a self-centered and misguided view of what the role of the Museum of Modern Art should be.”¹⁴³ *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl similarly states his belief that, in *ModernStarts*, MoMA was settling to be a spectacular and trendy repository of artworks that had outlived their intellectual purposes.¹⁴⁴ Critics accused the Tates, too, of turning the museum into more of a “funhouse” experience.¹⁴⁵ David Sylvester in particular claimed that Tate Britain had “decided that British art has no history worth recounting,” and that it needed “jazzing up.” However, he went on to state, conceivably with some degree of accuracy, that perhaps the exhibition was not specifically aimed at the art world elites, but at “schoolchildren and tourists.”¹⁴⁶ However, I would argue that the entrenched art insiders could benefit from seeing art in the new contexts and from the new perspectives offered by these exhibitions as much as anyone else. Experiencing the familiar in unexpected ways can be beneficial to anyone, opening up your eyes to different points of view.

However, worse yet, the critics argued, was the effect the method of exhibition had on the perception of the artworks themselves. Instead of allowing the works to speak for themselves, the curatorial staff of all three institutions had imposed speculative interpretation. Even MoMA’s then chief curator Kirk Varnedoe spoke negatively of the thematic hangings (although only those at the Tates of course, not *ModernStarts*). “When you put a Richard Long next to a Monet,” he wrote, “you are forcing viewers to be bound by the curator’s vision.” He, like others, believed that placing chronologically disparate works of art side by side was disingenuous and

¹⁴³ Elisabeth Franck, “MoMA Enemy No. 1: STELLA!,” *The New York Observer* (2001), <http://www.observer.com/2001/02/moma-enemy-no-1-stella-joan-allens-midnight-rendezvous/> (accessed March 20, 2012).

¹⁴⁴ Schjeldahl.

¹⁴⁵ Perl, 30.

¹⁴⁶ Sylvester.

baffling to the viewer. Instead, museums were expected to adhere to the prescribed “external sense of reality.”¹⁴⁷ Yet, even MoMA’s *ModernStarts* included enough contemporary artworks to “muddle historical consistency.”¹⁴⁸ Such thematic juxtapositions, they believed, reduced art to subject-oriented decoration.

In the last decades of the 20th century, experimentation was becoming more acceptable in museums and galleries of pre-Modern art. Again, following domestic trends, colors and décor evocative of past fashions began to reappear.¹⁴⁹ Even conservative institutions such as New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery began to experiment with color and tiered hangings. Although still relatively uncommon in most of the museum’s galleries, the Met’s Gallery 805, containing European plein-air landscape paintings, not only features salmon colored walls and paintings hung in two rows, but also a decorative white chair rail. As a result, more and more museums have been following suit. On November 20, 2010, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston opened its refurbished Art of the Americas wing, housing a grand, glass-enclosed social court and more than 5,000 works of North, Central, and South American artworks spanning 3,000 years.¹⁵⁰ Costing \$504 million and taking over 10 years to complete, the 121,307 square foot, four-story space features patterned wallpapers, dense hangings, integrated artworks of various media, and even whole period rooms. Yet, unlike

¹⁴⁷ Stephen E. Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 149-150.

¹⁴⁸ Schjeldahl.

¹⁴⁹ Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 192-193.

¹⁵⁰ “Art of the Americas Wing,” *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.mfa.org/americas-wing/>.

previous departures from the accepted display methods, in most of its media coverage it was dubbed a “smashing success.”¹⁵¹

However, one of the most groundbreaking displays of historical artworks is that of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1998, the largest of the institution’s three buildings closed for renovation. Three years later, on October 20, 2001, the Centre St. building reopened to the public with 39 reconfigured galleries and a dramatically altered installation of the institution’s permanent collection.¹⁵² Rather than focusing on chronological art historical development, the museum attempted to place artworks within their original context. Media including paintings, armor, and decorative arts that the museum used to segregate into separate galleries was integrated according to their respective periods of time and geographic origins. The staff arranged one gallery to resemble a medieval banquet hall while the entrance to another, containing works of Egyptian art, mimicked the exterior of an ancient temple. Additionally, they dimly lit a gallery containing Eastern Orthodox icons with works of art illuminated under spotlights. Emulating candlelight, this gallery highlighted the visual “effect of an icon in a Byzantine church, or a Limoges book cover in a Gothic cathedral.”¹⁵³ In 2005, the Walters again rearranged a portion of its galleries, this time suggesting the 17th-century home of a Southern Netherlands nobleman. The most notable gallery arranged at this time was the “Chamber of Wonders.” Modeled after *The Archdukes Albert and Isabella Visiting a Collector’s Cabinet*, a 17th-century painting in the museum’s collection, this gallery reproduced a collector’s cabinet

¹⁵¹ Ada Louise Huxtable, “The MFA’s New Art of the Americas Wing,” *The Wall Street Journal* (2011) http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704698004576104261414046524.html?mod=googlenews_wsj (accessed March 20, 2012).

¹⁵² “The History of the Walters Art Museum,” *The Walters Art Museum*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://thewalters.org/about/history/>.

¹⁵³ Jo Ann Lewis, “Renovated Walters Museum Sheds Light on Its Collections,” *The Washington Post* (2001), <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/access/85065945.html?FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&date=Oct+20%2C+2001&author=Jo+Ann+Lewis&pub=The+Washington+Post&edition=&startpage=C.01&desc=Renovated+Walters+Museum+Sheds+Light+on+Its+Collections> (accessed March 20, 2012).

and featured paintings and works in ivory and gold, as well as natural specimen and curiosities.¹⁵⁴ Now, built into its very mission, the Walters's installations "evoke the original manner in which the art was displayed, and in turn," they hope, "provide greater insights into the art and a more personal and rewarding viewer experience."¹⁵⁵

Museums were willing to experiment with color and display in galleries such as those of Boston's MFA and the Walters, at least in part because the risk of reprisal was significantly less than it would have been in those dealing with living artists. The staff did not have to worry about artists' reactions to or agreement with the displays. Additionally, the art of the past itself is often more predictable and less demanding of the gallery space. While artist installations, sometimes occupying entire rooms, have become common in contemporary exhibits, no such art form existed before the 20th century. Therefore, curators and designers could paint walls and add embellishments while retaining the flexibility to move, add, and remove artwork without worrying about accommodating contemporary concerns.

However, while the new display environments may seem innovative and fresh, they do little to reverse the main elements of the white cube's aesthetic focus. Both the MFA's Art of the Americas wing and the Walters's galleries still rely heavily on dramatic lighting to highlight individual works of art. In small period vignettes including furniture, decorative, and fine arts at the MFA, the paintings are most noticeably spotlighted. This combined with the galleries' overall arrangement from ancient artifacts on the lowest floors to contemporary art on the top perpetuates the established hierarchy. Even when displays do bring about a heightened understanding of context, it is usually done in a visual manner. One of the most notable groupings at the MFA is John Singer Sargent's large painting *Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*

¹⁵⁴ Alison Echardt Ledes, "Reinstallation in Baltimore," *Antiques* (2005), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1026/is_5_168/ai_n15895196/ (accessed March 20, 2012).

¹⁵⁵ "The History of the Walters Art Museum."

flanked by the actual Japanese Vases featured in the painting. Yet, while it is intriguing to see an artistic representation juxtaposed with the physical object, the pairing does not provide any deeper understanding of the works or their contexts. There is no connection between the works beyond aesthetics.

Where the new displays do break from the accepted aesthetic exhibition methods, the result is often ineffectual, simply reverting back to earlier modes of display. Dense, tiered hangings, especially those of the salon-style galleries at Boston's MFA and Baltimore's Walters Art Museum, bring with them all the difficulties the white cube was trying to correct. Paintings hung especially high are "skied" and become difficult for viewers to distinguish. A gallery hung in this manner may seem to be more about a constructed installation than the works of art on view. Because of this, *the Washington Post's* Jo Ann Lewis called such displays at the Walters "moody" and "occasionally overly theatrical." Additionally, she found the crowded arrangements in the icon galleries to be almost claustrophobic, bringing to mind the museum fatigue of the past.¹⁵⁶

It seems that true experimentation can often be often found primarily in temporary exhibitions and small institutions out of the critical eye. In 1987, the Hudson River Museum of Westchester was able to draw from revisionist art history in its exhibition *The Catskills* with little to no negative repercussions. The Hudson River Museum juxtaposed works of various media dealing with similar subject matter in a way that larger, more conservative institutions often avoided, creating an environment in which visitors could explore the connection between the American landscape, nature, tourism, and, ultimately, discover the 19th century American

¹⁵⁶ Lewis.

identity. The amalgamation of paintings, prints, books, and related artifacts even garnered local critical praise.¹⁵⁷

In many contemporary galleries such as MoMA PS1, much of this experimentation stems from the innovative nature of the work displayed and the artists themselves. While this is also true of Art in General, a small nonprofit arts organization operating out of an old General Hardware building in New York's China Town, the staff have questioned the very definition of what a gallery space is through the creation of the Musée Miniscule. A tribute to San Francisco's former New Langton Arts's space of the same name, the Musée Miniscule at Art in General was created in 1990 after a renovation to the building's elevator caused it to run unusually slow. Taking 38 seconds to travel from the ground floor to the main sixth floor gallery, the museum now utilizes the elevator as its own exhibition space, typically featuring between one and five audiovisual works per year. Since its inception, artist Tom Burckhardt has incorporated the sounds of the elevator as it moves from floor to floor into an overlaid melody, identifying the elevator itself as a "live performer," while Caroline Stikker played video taken inside the Whitney Museum's elevator, transporting the viewers to another space.¹⁵⁸

Yet, some of the most unique and exiting exhibitions of the last decades have been those conceived of exclusively by artists rather than museum staff. In 1989, the Museum of Modern Art launched their noteworthy Artist's Choice series in which the museum invites artists to act as curator, selecting and installing objects drawn wholly from the museum's permanent collection.¹⁵⁹ Beginning with Scott Burton's installation of Brancusi bases minus the sculpture, a series of exhibitions have included Elizabeth Murray's *Modern Women*, an all-woman show

¹⁵⁷ Wallach, 118-121.

¹⁵⁸ "The Musée Miniscule," *Art in General*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.artingeneral.org/about/programs#elevator>.

¹⁵⁹ "Artist's Choice: Stephen Sondheim," *The Museum of Modern Art*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/films/667>.

highlighting the absence of women artists in the typical museum setting, and Chuck Close's 1991 exhibition *Head-On/The Modern Portrait*. In his exhibition, Close selected 170 portraits in various media and arranged them salon-style in a single gallery. Through this dense hanging and by choosing only those works representing individuals that had particular significance to the artists who created them, Close was able to create a feeling of intimacy and community that reflects the subjects of the works on view as well as his own artistic processes.¹⁶⁰

However, the quintessential artist-curator is undoubtedly conceptual artist Fred Wilson. Using museums and their unique holdings as his medium, Wilson has demonstrated the extent to which changes in context and display alter viewer perception and overall meaning. Like many of his later "interventions," his pioneering 1992 exhibition *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society focused on the often-overlooked history of African and Native Americans within the United States and Maryland specifically. Through astonishing juxtapositions, the introduction of new labels, and clever lighting and overall display, he brings to light marginalized aspects of our art, history, and culture. In one exhibition case, Wilson arranged a grouping of ornate silver goblets, decanters, and other containers, along with a single pair of rusted slave shackles. Labeled "Metalwork, 1723-1880," this simple display forces its viewers to see the ugly as well as the beautiful.¹⁶¹ In a 2005 interview with Barbara Thompson, Curator of African, Oceanic, and Native American Collections at Dartmouth's Hood Museum of Art, Wilson explained that he is not interested in creating an overtly didactic experience, but instead

¹⁶⁰ Rona Roob, "From the Archives: Chuck Close and MoMA," *MoMA* 1, no. 1 (1998), 34.

¹⁶¹ Judith E Stein, "Sins of Omission: Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*," *Art in America* 81, no. 10 (1993), 110-115.

hopes his exhibitions “open up a myriad of questions,” allowing viewers to make connections and form their own opinions.¹⁶²

While museum curators could benefit from thoughtful and creative experimentation, their role is different from the artists discussed above. When an artist acts as curator, the resulting exhibition is, in essence, a gallery-wide, site-specific installation. Like Chuck Close in *Head-On/The Modern Portrait*, they are often more interested in portraying a sensual visual experience and creating their own meanings than portraying any meaning natural to the artworks incorporated. A curator, on the other hand, is bound by his or her duty to the public as well as professional and scholarly integrity. Curators are not in a position to create meaning and yet practice of shaping exhibitions remains closely tied to the process of generating meaning for visitors. A curator must discover and convey meanings and messages in some way inherent in a work of art, its interpretation, or its history, no matter how removed from the original intent of the artist it may seem.

While backlash from critics, patrons, and art world insiders can cause serious financial and public image problems for museums, curators and other museum professionals must balance potential negative outcomes with the benefits of experimentation. Always sticking to the same display methods is limiting and does not take into account the ever-shifting nature of institutional and social needs. Innovation requires museums to take risks and it is important that museums and their staff are willing and able to take those risks.

¹⁶² Barbara Thompson, “Fred Wilson in the Hood: An Interview,” *Hood Museum of Art*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/exhibitions/fredwilson/fredwilsonpressr.html>.

VI. BEST PRACTICES

In many ways, art museums must place the objects in their collection before the audiences they serve. Museums are expected to maintain and preserve the objects in their care for the appreciation, education and enjoyment of future generations. This often means not letting visitors climb on sculpture, forbidding the use of photography, limiting painting and drawing within the galleries, as well as countless other visitor restrictions. In fact, the field of museum registration and collection management is almost entirely devoted to the care of the collection. If registrars consistently put the desires of the museum's audience above the safety of its collection, they would not be doing their job.

Yet this "art first" approach has also led to a commoditization of our artistic heritage, vague expectations when it comes to visitor experience, and the alienation of audiences. The National Endowment for the Arts's 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts reported a decline of 3 million in art museum or gallery attendance since 2002 alone. People were more likely to visit historical sites, conduct internet research, or read books than attend an art exhibition. Those that did attend an art museum or gallery, tended to be more affluent, educated, and white. More than half of adult visitors had earned a college degree and approximately 80% were white.¹⁶³

However, if art museums are to remain relevant in an ever-changing society, they must become more audience centric, drawing from wider demographics. We must trust visitors to act as active participants in a vibrant cultural exchange rather than the giving them a strict lesson that they passively consume. While museum visits should be comfortable and enjoyable,

¹⁶³ "National Endowment for the Arts 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts," *National Endowment for the Arts*, accessed March 20, 2012, 13-76.

museum staff should no longer think of them as havens “apart from the everyday world.”¹⁶⁴

Museums must engage with the world around them and provide visitors the opportunity to encounter, think about, and discuss ideas that are complex and simple, large and small, important and less so, contemporary and historical.

One of the most important ways a museum can increase visitor appreciation and understanding of art is through providing more contextual information. It is a mistake to believe that all art is completely self-sufficient and thus best presented with the barest minimum of information. When museums homogeneously present art as isolated in static, chorological, white rooms, it can dull visitors’ reactions to the artwork, decrease their capacity to think about it contextually, and alienate those with no previous knowledge. In fact, lack of information was one of the primary complaints of visitors participating in the Getty’s series of *Insights* focus groups. One visitor to Boston’s Museum of Fine Art stated, “I wish someone would come along and tell me how to appreciate this because I know it’s probably a beautiful painting.”¹⁶⁵ A visitor to the National Gallery of Art had a more extreme reaction to the difficult to understand, yet typically left with no explanation contemporary works, writing, “this can’t be art.”¹⁶⁶ If we, museum and art professionals, look back on our own development, I believe that we too will find we are able to relate to such sentiments. In my own experience, I can recall a time when most traditional Japanese prints did not appeal to me. However, after beginning art school and learning about these works and the effect Japonisme had on 19th and early 20th century western artists, I found that because I had now formed an intellectual connection with Japanese art, I could better appreciate it. *Insights* captured this process too. “I became aware of how important

¹⁶⁴ *Insights: Museums, Visitors, Attitudes, Expectations: A Focus Group Experiment* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1991), 9.

¹⁶⁵ *Insights*, 20.

¹⁶⁶ *Insights*, 24.

knowledge is to appreciation,” a visitor to the Getty explained. “I had noticed [James] Ensor’s work . . . but recoiled from it. I wouldn’t say that I like Ensor’s painting, but I value it now that I understand something about it.”¹⁶⁷

Furthermore, the white cube often reduces the impact of the artwork itself. Art was not created in a void. No matter how fantastical or abstract, all works of art are the products of their creators, the subject presented, the school of art, the techniques used, the location in which they were created, their era, the social, and its social, political, and cultural environment. Even after creation, the meanings continue to evolve and expand. While the provenance of a piece of art may not have been inherent from the beginning, such information, too, effects meaning and perception and eventually becomes an integral part of it. Why, then, do museums insist on removing art from its history? While multiple narratives may be more complicated, it is the complexities and nuances of life reflected in art that make it so rich.

It is important to remember that, unless there is significant reason, the addition of more text is not necessarily the answer. Too much text can be confusing, uncomfortable to read in the museum setting, and, therefore, easily ignored. As many have said before me, “a successful exhibition is not a book on the wall.”¹⁶⁸ People visit art museums to learn through looking at original objects. If they wanted to read, they would go to a library.

This is not to say that text does not have its place. When done correctly and creatively, text can greatly enhance an exhibition and add to its overall effect. Dia: Beacon, founded in 1974, is located in an historic Nabisco box printing factory on the Hudson River. Its collection focuses on art from the 1960s to the present and contains major works by artists such as Donald Judd, Andy Warhol, Richard Serra, and Sol LeWitt. Museum staff created several of the

¹⁶⁷ *Insights*, 21.

¹⁶⁸ Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 121.

museum's galleries in collaboration with the artists who created the unique, often large-scale works on display in them.¹⁶⁹ In this way, Dia: Beacon is able to maintain the industrial, minimalist feel representative of the artists' works. To further this atmosphere, the curators decided to go in an unconventional direction in terms of text. They left the walls clear, with no labels visible inside the galleries. Instead, visitors can pick up laminated sheets, identifying and providing information about the works on display. Dia: Beacon leaves the artworks as they were originally intended to be seen. The clean lines and lack of textual clutter reflect the artwork itself, while visitors still get the information they need.

While some text solutions may seem simple, you should always consider its use carefully. Write text in clear, concise language, and, for the most part, directly relate it to a physical object on display. You may choose a font that relates to the feel of the exhibition. However, it must be clear/simple enough and printed large enough to read without difficulty. While it is not the place of this thesis to discuss the details of text, you can refer to *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* by Lord and Lord, Beverly Serrell's *Exhibit Labels*, or the ADA accessibility guidelines for further details.

Instead of bringing context into an exhibition solely through text, you should start by forming a clear plan. Vague expectations of visitor experience can derail an otherwise well constructed exhibition. One participant of the *Insights* focus groups complained about the lack of direction at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. "There was no organized pattern, I felt. You would just flow through the place."¹⁷⁰ To counter this, fully research and understand potential exhibition topics. Do not be afraid to question standard art historical narratives or experiment with unorthodox ways of doing things. It is important to go beyond presenting objects as simply

¹⁶⁹ "About Dia: Beacon," *Dia Art Foundation*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.diaart.org/sites/page/1/1003>.

¹⁷⁰ *Insights*, 18.

“significant and original”¹⁷¹ and have a defined objective. Compare all ideas to the mission of the museum, the expected resources available, and the desired audience. If you have an inadequate conception of your audience beyond “the general public,” you must get to know them better. Who comes into the museum? Who do you want to come in? What are their abilities, skill levels, and needs? If something you plan to do does not fit with the needs of the institution or audience, change it.

There are several alternatives already in use. As an alternative to the strict chronology standard in conventional white cube institutions, exhibitions can be based in contextual criteria. As discussed in the previous chapter, New York’s Museum of Modern Art and the Tate in London both experimented with thematic organization around the turn of the millennium. However, you could organize displays around innumerable criteria from subject, to use of material, to intent, and even to the emotional tenor behind a work of art.

Another relatively common non-chronological exhibition method is the personal collection or donor memorial. This display method presents works of art that belong or belonged to a single collection as a whole. Some of the most well known examples of donor memorial museums include Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, New York’s Frick Collection, and the controversial Barnes Foundation. However, a museum does not have to be entirely devoted to the collection of a single individual to follow this pattern. Exhibitions featuring personal collections are a great way to highlight an often-overlooked aspect of art and allow visitors to experience it from a new perspective.

On September 24, 2010, *Living for Art: The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection* opened at the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey. The exhibition centered around fifty works formerly in the collection of the Vogels who, shortly after their marriage in 1962,

¹⁷¹ *Insights*, 9.

decided to subsist on Dorothy's salary as a Brooklyn Public Library reference librarian while dedicating Herb's postal clerk salary exclusively to the purchase of art. Remarkably, within thirty years, the couple had befriended artists, wheeled and dealt, and amassed over 4000 works of minimalist, conceptual, and post-minimalist art.

When the Vogels ran out of space in their one bedroom apartment in Manhattan, they enlisted the help of the National Gallery of Art to distribute their collection to museums throughout the country. In the resulting gifts program, *Fifty Works for Fifty States*, one institution from each state was chosen to receive a selection of fifty works including drawings, paintings, sculpture, prints, and photography. The Montclair Art Museum had a personal significance to the Vogels. They had befriended former museum director Patterson Sims as well as curator Gail Stavitsky and could occasionally be seen attending a museum opening. Therefore, it is unsurprising that it became the first museum to benefit from the *50x50* program.¹⁷²

The resulting exhibition consisted of art created between 1967 and 2000. With works by 27 different artists, including Will Barnet, Robert Berry, and Richard Tuttle, the show did not explore the individual works as much as it presented them as an indivisible whole portraying themes of collecting, philanthropy, and the passion of their collectors.¹⁷³ In fact, several works in the exhibition directly dealt with the Vogels themselves. Martin Johnson titled his 1989 sculpture *Herb and Dot 1/10* after the two collectors, while Will Barnet's 1977 pencil sketch, *Study for Vogels*, depicts the two in characteristic poses. While Dorothy sits erect and alert, Herb leans in, intensely gazing at a work of art hanging just out of view. Viewers could get to

¹⁷² "The Montclair Art Museum Presents *Living for Art: The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection* on Display September 24, 2010 – January 2, 2011," *Montclair Art Museum*, accessed March 20, 2012, http://www.montclair-art.com/_userfiles/file/MAM%20Vogel%20show.pdf.

¹⁷³ "The Montclair Art Museum Presents *Living for Art: The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection . . .*"

know the Vogels further through the looped showing of Megumi Sasaki's 2008 documentary *Herb and Dorothy*.

However, due to the Vogel's intimate connection to the works in their collection as well as the friendships they forged with the artists who made them, the exhibition also allows you to learn more about the art and artists themselves. "I think knowing the artist adds another dimension because you really get to know the work a lot better," Dorothy stated in 1994. "You understand it better, and you see things through their eyes."¹⁷⁴ The same can be said of the collectors. By presenting art through the eyes of its collectors, a human connection is formed in the viewers mind. The art gains a worldly lifeline through which viewers can forge a deeper connection. Artist Richard Tuttle spoke of a "very deep friendship and symbiosis" with Herb, explaining that he "sees the world as I do." In particular, Tuttle describes his 1989 styrofoam and string sculpture as a "collaboration with Herb." Through the collector's suggestions, Tuttle states, Herb's "eyes became a part of the work."¹⁷⁵

Perhaps the most unique and effective aspect of the exhibition was a small alcove arranged to reflect the Vogels own living room, but, as Dorothy points out, "less cluttered."¹⁷⁶ Although the brainchild of Stavitsky and two of the museum's exhibit designers, the Vogels themselves picked out the furniture from an IKEA catalogue and supervised its installation.¹⁷⁷ The result was a cramped little room with a small black leather couch, a coffee table covered with Dorothy's own magazines, a common floor lamp, a few chairs, and walls crowded with art.¹⁷⁸ The works that were chosen for this section were among the most moving of the

¹⁷⁴ "The Montclair Art Museum Presents *Living for Art: The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection . . .*"

¹⁷⁵ "The Montclair Art Museum Presents *Living for Art: The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection . . .*"

¹⁷⁶ Carol Selman, "Contemporary Art World Stars Align in Montclair," *MontclairPatch*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://montclair.patch.com/articles/contemporary-art-world-stars-align-in-montclair>.

¹⁷⁷ Selman.

¹⁷⁸ Elizabeth Oguss, "Collecting Art as a Life's (Art) Work," *NorthJersey.com*, accessed March 20, 2012, https://verify1.newsbank.com/cgi-bin/ncom/NJMNP/ec_signin.

exhibition. “The little grouping was personal,” Dorothy explained. They included Robert Barry’s photographic portrait of his son entitled *Father and Son*, Clark Fox’s diptych *Patterson Sims/Davenport Beach* depicting the museum’s former director, and Barnett’s *Study for Vogels*. Stavitsky herself drew from her personal relationship with the Vogels to complete the look. She added an imitation aquarium and a small faux cat on the couch. “Herb and Dot did have these big aquariums for a while,” she explained. They also kept cats; “a house isn’t a home without a cat.”¹⁷⁹

Environmental interiors and period rooms, such as the one in *Living for Art*, are an excellent way of increasing artistic context and have been utilized in institutions from the famed Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to the little-known Arnot Art Museum in Elmira, New York. Furthermore, they are remarkably popular with visitors. In the typical aesthetic white cube, visitors may become dissatisfied with the prevailing sense of sterility. “The museum was still just a lot of hallways and rooms with pictures and objects set in them,” one participant of the *Insights* focus groups said of the Art Institute of Chicago. “I didn’t feel any source of presence in a room that took me away to that period of time.”¹⁸⁰ Conversely, visitors to the Getty and the Denver Art Museum enjoyed the environmental installations they encountered. “When you go into a room and it’s, in essence, there as you might [have seen] it, as opposed to isolated pieces,” one participant explained, “to me you get a feeling of going back in time.” Another stated, “It gives you a better sense of the feeling of the art than having things set out by themselves.”¹⁸¹

However, it is important to fully understand the effect an environmental installation will have on your visitors. If an installation is poorly conceived or maintained, it may have an air of

¹⁷⁹ Dan Bischoff, “Living for Art: The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection at the Montclair Art Museum,” *nj.com*, accessed March 20, 2012, http://www.nj.com/entertainment/arts/index.ssf/2010/10/living_for_art_the_dorothy_and.html.

¹⁸⁰ *Insights*, 16.

¹⁸¹ *Insights*, 29.

stagnancy and neglect. Beyond that, a dense integrated installation consisting of multiple objects may make it more difficult for visitors to focus on individual works of art. Therefore, you should highlight any object that you want visitors to pay special attention to. To do this, you could use lighting, arrangement, or numerous other tools of display.

Finally, nearly all environmental installations could be more effective if they were functional to some extent. Yet, this is obviously not an option in all circumstances. Fragile objects need protection and should not be handled or used. Therefore, some institutions have decided to create environmental installations mainly using replaceable art or even replicas. In conjunction with the 2009-2010 exhibition *Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity*, Museum of Modern Art staff converted a reading room on the first floor of the museum's Cullman Building into "the Bauhaus Lounge." Furnished with Bauhaus designed furniture including two Mies van der Rohe Barcelona Chairs, red and black B3 Club or "Wassily" Chairs designed by Marcel Bruer, and an Anni Albers rug, the space suggests a subtle period environment, albeit with modern conveniences such as a flat screen television and wifi. Because the art is commercially manufactured, the space can be entered and used by museum visitors in order to better understand, and, in fact, experience for themselves, the social aspects of the movement and explore further information in books and catalogues as well as through regular screenings of documentary films. On Thursdays from 4:00-5:30 pm, the museum invited visitors to test their chess skills against one another, playing on a set designed by Bauhaus sculptor Joseph Hartwig.¹⁸² However, if you use replicas to achieve this immersion effect, carefully consider any combination with real artifacts. Mixed installations may have the effect of making real artifacts appear to be reproductions, as if they were simply another prop in a theatrical play

¹⁸² "Bauhaus Lounge," *The Museum of Modern Art*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1009>.

or a theme park. Yet, whether using replicas or the real thing, museum staff must make clear what is usable and what is not.

However, I believe the most effective alternative display method is the simple integration of different media or artistic types to convey a more complete story of a movement, era, or subject. Within the museum, this can be done as Evelyn Orantes did as a part of the Oakland Museum of California's *Days of the Dead* exhibition, by "merging artists, community members, and school groups, so you will often see the work of an established artist right next to an installation of glitter-covered macaroni."¹⁸³ But the key exhibition to anticipate is MoMA's *Inventing Abstraction, 1912-1925* opening in December 2012. Curated by Leah Dickerman, the exhibition will integrate music, dance, film, writing, and science with the visual arts to challenge the traditional reductionist theory of abstract art. While Clement Greenberg and his followers believed abstraction emerged from the aesthetic distillation of a single medium, Dickerman will be seeking to prove that it instead came from a combination of various media and art forms.¹⁸⁴ By presenting everything together, *Inventing Abstraction, 1912-1925* will better reflect the spirit of the age and the ways in which the artists themselves thought about their work.

Getting down to the little details of exhibition display, there are certain steps you can take in almost any exhibition to enhance contextual understanding. Beginning with the placement of artworks in relation to one another, careful contrast can bring out both shared and dissimilar characteristics between works of art. Without a single line of explanatory text, clever juxtapositions prompt visitors to puzzle out the reasonings behind a placement. Recently, the J. Paul Getty Museum juxtaposed the works of Picasso, de Chirico, Léger, and Picaba with ancient objects in the exhibition *Modern Antiquity*. In the early 1990s, The Hirshhorn Museum and

¹⁸³ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010) <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/read/> (accessed March 20, 2012), chapter 8.

¹⁸⁴ Masha Chlenova, interview by author, personal interview, New York, January 10, 2011.

Sculpture Garden took it to the extreme with *Comparisons: An Exercise in Looking*. In this exhibition, the curator, Judith Zilczer, paired artworks together with questions posted between them, encouraging visitors to evaluate the two objects. With questions like “does one area stand out, or do you find yourself looking at the overall pattern in each work?”¹⁸⁵ hung between two Jackson Pollock paintings, the exhibition prompted visitors to think critically about the artwork on display and therefore more fully understand it. According to interviews conducted within the gallery space, most visitors believed *Comparisons* was compelling and highly educational.¹⁸⁶

The exhibition space itself can also help ground works of art in the desired context. While the large, empty, white walls of most traditional white cube institutions overwhelm works of art, making them seem as if they were floating in space, smaller walls, or ones that have been broken up in some manner, make artwork seem more intimate and worldly. In his 1987 article “When Museums Overpower Their Own Art,” the Museum of Modern Art’s William Rubin explains that the large, empty, white walls of most institutions actually detract from what Pollock termed “wall pictures” or “portable murals.” Artists made such canvases large so that they would fill a space. They wanted viewers to feel as if they were inside a work rather than looking through a window as with smaller works. Mark Rothko explained that he “paint[ed] big to be intimate.” Yet, on large walls, these works lose much of their power and intent, appearing smaller and less immediate. The paintings “get transformed back . . . into the very easel pictures the artists were trying to break with,” Rubin stated, “just bigger ‘windows’ on higher walls.”¹⁸⁷ Yet, with the addition of simple, appropriate adornment, large walls can be broken into sections

¹⁸⁵ Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1996), 18.

¹⁸⁶ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, chapter 4.

¹⁸⁷ William Rubin, “When Museums Overpower Their Own Art,” *The New York Times* (1987), <http://go.galegroup.com.libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CA176178249&v=2.1&u=newpaltz&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w> (accessed March 20, 2012).

while also providing a heightened sense of context. Such articulation can include chair rail, molding, or even exhibition components like pedestals, frames, and lighting.

In general, I do not recommend increasing context by using computers, videos, or other electronic devices. Visitors come to museums to see, learn from, and commune with real objects. An overuse of the virtual can detract from the desired experience (the same goes for large photographic reproductions). This is not to say that new technologies do not have their place. People now stay connected with the museum through social media, they tour collections virtually from the comfort of their own homes, and can even play exhibition-related games. However, within the exhibition space, all technology must be subordinate to the artworks and ideas presented, not the focus. The Museum of Art and History in Santa Cruz, California accomplishes this task especially well in the exhibition *Studio Made: Santa Cruz Woodworkers* that ran from July 30 to November 13, 2011.¹⁸⁸ Including exquisite furniture, musical instruments, and stunning art objects, the exhibition focused not only on the aesthetic beauty of the works, but also on the artistic process and use of the works included. To do this, the woodworkers themselves suggested including quick response or “QR” codes for visitors to scan with their smartphones and tablets PCs. By scanning these codes, visitors were able to access supplementary material including a nine-minute video of an artist creating a piece on display, a one-minute slideshow of a cabinet opening, and a forty-second audio clip of an instrument on display being played.¹⁸⁹ This could be adapted to almost any exhibition to provide visitors more information on an object, especially when an object should not be physically handled. To take it a step further, museums can offer tablets so that all visitors have the opportunity to get involved.

¹⁸⁸ “Studio Made: Santa Cruz Woodworkers,” *The Museum of Art & History*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.santacruzmah.org/2011/studio-made-santa-cruz-woodworkers/>.

¹⁸⁹ Nina Simon, “QR Codes and Visitor Motivation: Tell Them What They’ll Get with that Shiny Gadget,” *Museum 2.0*, accessed March 20, 2012, <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2011/08/qr-codes-and-visitor-motivation-tell.html>.

Beyond context, museums can promote visitor connection with art through an increased focus on visitor engagement and interaction. Yet, as discussed previously regarding exhibitions as a whole, opportunities for engagement must be carefully defined. If there is no structure, visitors are unlikely to be comfortable enough to fully engage with the art or each other or even realize the extent to which interaction is possible.

First, let us focus on social engagement. The Getty's *Insights* found that visitors like museum experiences that encourage interaction. "It's a way to bring my wife and [I] together," one participant explained. "It provides a setting for us to talk about things we otherwise don't talk about."¹⁹⁰ However, in *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon explains that visitors must first connect through "personal entry points" before engaging socially. On a small scale, this can be done simply through the choice of objects to display. What Simon terms "active objects" are simply objects that insert themselves into the viewers' space. A shared experience with an active object can be a conversation starter, bringing people together. Similarly, "relational objects" are objects that can only be fully activated by multiple people working together. For example, the Innovation Center in the Corning Museum of Glass contains an intriguing relational object that demonstrates the effects shaped glass can have on sound. Visitors to the Vessels Gallery may enter a giant glass egg that doubles as a small audiovisual theatre. Sitting on opposite ends, individuals can talk to each other as if they were right next to one another. On a larger scale, museum staff can build social projects into an exhibition. In this way, visitors can come together, discuss ideas, and interact as members of a larger team.¹⁹¹

Interacting with the museum and its staff may be just as valuable to visitors as interacting with each other. Relationships between the museum or exhibition and the visitor can be fostered

¹⁹⁰ *Insights*, 16.

¹⁹¹ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, chapter 1-4.

in similar ways as those discussed above. Museums may choose to include visitors or community members in the development or support of an exhibition itself or solicit contributions as a part of an exhibition in progress. Participatory projects could be as simple as asking your community members to help spread the word about an exhibition or as complex as having them select the art to be included, as the Brooklyn Museum did in its 2008 exhibition *Click!*. In *Portraiture: Inside Out*, my own exhibition of contemporary portraiture that took place in Seton Hall University's Walsh Gallery in the spring of 2011, we commissioned artist Ryan Roa to create a public intervention for the exhibition opening. The resulting work, *Lay On*, was a contributory piece inviting visitors and passersby to interact with stacked couches and have their pictures taken by a professional photographer. We then incorporated the photographs into a slideshow on display in the exhibition itself. Although our intervention only lasted one night, long term contributory projects could easily be developed by asking visitors to create their own portraits, or simply post comments as is currently being done as a part of MoMA's "I went to MoMA and . . ." project.

A dynamic viewing experience can also help to fight the ennui of the aesthetic "white cube." "I'm just more interested in things that are active," one participant of the *Insights* focus groups stated. "To me, going around and just walking and looking at pictures is not really active enough."¹⁹² In this case, you can again use active objects to capture and hold the visitor's attention. Yet, more generally, variety can be just as effective. As Alan Wallach points out in "Revisionism Has Transformed Art History, but Not Museums," "a steady diet of commodified culture can only dull the public's critical capacities."¹⁹³ Do not be afraid to shake things up or challenge the status quo. Do the unexpected. If possible, temporary exhibitions and even

¹⁹² *Insights*, 11.

¹⁹³ Wallach, 121.

displays of the permanent collection should be changed as much as is practical for your institution.

One of the most important aspects of exhibition design may also be one of the most easily overlooked. Assessment is key to determining what works for your institution and its visitors. The first type of assessment available during the exhibition planning process is front-end evaluation. This is completed during the conceptual phase of exhibition development and explores the relationship potential visitors have with the prospective exhibition concept. Who is the target audience, what are their expectations, and what do they already know about a selected topic? This will ensure that the concept of an exhibition is fully understood and developed to meet the needs of its audience. Formative evaluation takes place during the exhibition design phase and tests specific content and its presentation. Produce text and label mockups, exhibition prototypes, and other sample components. Assess whether potential visitors can properly use and understand both the detailed components and larger exhibition concept. Can they read the text, operate interactive components, and understand the exhibition's overarching themes? Finally, summative evaluation takes place during the actual exhibition and is conducted with the actual visitors. Was the exhibition successful? How could it be improved? Although the individual exhibition is already in place by this point, it is important to understand what is and is not effective for use in future exhibitions.¹⁹⁴ Additionally, institutions can also conduct more general visitor surveys or even focus groups like the Getty's experimental series *Insights*.

Change does not come without its challenges. As discussed previously, an overly contrived exhibition may result in a theatrical environment in which even original masterpieces seem insignificant, like mere illustration in support of a larger narrative. However, there are

¹⁹⁴ Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord, *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2001), 45-52.

those who would condemn any inclusion of further context in an exhibition of art; those who live by the gospel of “art first” and believe that it should stand alone. In 1994, Alan Wallach and William Truettner presented *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, an exhibition that sought to connect the themes and tones of Thomas Cole’s paintings with social and political affairs of his time. Yet, some people felt this was improper. “I think it’s problematic to impose the spirit of the age on paintings,” one visitor stated. “It discounts the importance of understanding the artist as creative genius who somehow transcends the spirit of his or her age.”¹⁹⁵ And they do have a point. If purely aesthetic exhibitions of art were to be entirely eradicated, our cultural institutions would be lacking a valuable perspective. The aesthetic dimension is essential to the experience of art and museum visitors should be exposed to it.

An argument I take issue with, however, is that the inclusion of context and increased visitor engagement will somehow “dumb down” the museum, making it unappealing to its biggest supporters. Such arguments are common among the intellectual elite. In fact, as a part of the *Insights* project, museum professional Evan Turner worried that the process of making museums more welcoming and engaging may in effect make them boring and unchallenging for the frequent visitor.¹⁹⁶ Yet, I am not suggesting that exhibitions present an authoritative didactic narrative with no room for higher critical thought. I believe the thoughtful inclusion of context into dynamic, welcoming exhibition environments can actually allow for more reflection, understanding, and, ultimately, learning than ever before.

It is important to understand that what works for one museum may not work for another. Audience and institutional mission vary greatly from one museum to the next, and these differences call for distinct approaches. The same goes for exhibitions. Display methods that

¹⁹⁵ Stephen E. Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 182-183.

¹⁹⁶ *Insights*, 55.

work for one topic may completely negate the message of another. Above all, what today's art museums need is variety and experimentation. The most effective museums gear their content toward their specific collections and their audiences to offer experiences that are compelling, engaging, and thought provoking.

VII. CONCLUSION

From princely collections to public museums, the history of the display of art has been rich and varied. While 18th-century aristocratic collectors favored dense, symmetrical hangings that allowed viewers to compare the strengths and weaknesses of different artistic movements, 19th-century institutions like New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts began by presenting art as didactic specimen in order to refine commercial design and uplift the working-class. In the 1930s, New York's Museum of Modern Art and its director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. developed the aesthetic "white cube." Building off the developments of the aesthetic movement in the United States as well as Bauhaus design, this new display method focused viewer attention on a select number of masterpieces in a simple, yet dynamic setting. By presenting art as self-sufficient symbols of freedom in a capitalist society, Barr created a space that perfectly fit the needs of an era and was emulated by museums and businesses alike.

Yet, while our society and culture have changed, art museum display has remained in stasis. What was once new and revolutionary is now the status quo. The white cube now elevates art above its earthly origins, alienating uninitiated visitors and supporting traditional power relationships. While there have been some attempts at experimentation and change, they have often still been essentially aesthetic, highly flawed, or too specific to their subject and process to be a viable alternative. When an exhibition has succeeded in reaching a broader, contemporary audience, it has often led to a backlash from conservative museum constituents who fear the loss of the institutions they helped build.

If we allow the aesthetic “art over audience” attitude to continue, then museums are sure to become places of narrowing perspectives rather than a broadening. Museums may lose public confidence as well as the financial support of government agencies and private investors alike. For these reasons and many more, we must seek to engage with the world around us, offering visitors a welcoming and engaging environment in which to participate in and understand our varied artistic culture rather than simply consume a limited portion of it. While this thesis has been just an overview, it is my hope that it will encourage others to devise their own questions and conduct their own research. When this has been done, we may find that museums shall remain compelling and relevant institutions that suit the unique needs of our era.

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