

# Contemporary Art, Out of Place

Laura Holzman

Excellent contemporary art might seem out of place in Indianapolis. After all, artists looking for their big break don't typically set their sights on this city. I've found that here we like art that celebrates and beautifies, but we don't often demand that our cultural organizations surprise us, unsettle us, and, in turn, help us grow. Even so, Indianapolis is home to many skilled and creative people, affordable studio spaces, and a professional art and design school that has employed established artists and trained emerging ones for more than a century. And we're fortunate that some local artists and curators do the important work of nudging viewers to think differently about the world around them. For example, Kelli Morgan and Bryn Jackson at Newfields recently opened a bold show of work by Samuel Levi Jones that asks viewers to confront the ways in which our cultural systems—and we, as people who support those systems—are complicit in perpetuating racism in this country. These facets of our cultural landscape could fill a volume of essays. With that in mind, it's wrong to suggest that excellent contemporary art doesn't belong in Indianapolis. Our city needs it and deserves it. The relaunch of iMOCA as Indianapolis Contemporary (I/C) provides an opportunity to redefine and reassert our expectations for contemporary art institutions in this city.

When we think about contemporary art institutions, it's easy to envision architectural entities: the gallery and museum spaces where viewers connect with works of art. Buildings, after all, typically change at a slower pace than exhibitions, the programming calendar, or staff appointments. They tend to remain fixed while other organizational factors shift, so they offer an anchor for our understanding of an institution. Even as metaphors, architectural structures shape the way culture workers and scholars describe museums. They are *temples*, sacred spaces to find enlightenment, and *forums*, civic spaces where people can connect with each other and examine the issues of their time. (1) Often these roles manifest in both an exhibition venue's form and its function. Large rooms with high ceilings can inspire awe, inviting visitors to approach the works on view with reverence. (2) Proximity to a public park, an unassuming street-level entrance, or a comfortable gathering space can encourage visitors to bring their day-to-day concerns and behaviors into the exhibition setting and into the ways in which they interpret what they encounter there. For at least the past two decades, many museums—art and history, large and small—have grappled with how to operate more like a forum when their spaces have historically served a temple-like role. Space can define—or confine—an institution.

Deb Sokolow examines the relationship between institution and architecture in her work, *Contemporary Art Museums Contain a Number of Cavernous Spaces* (2019). Visually, her drawing speaks the language of a rough architectural diagram. In a pared-down perspectival view, she employs simple, geometric line work. Lightweight marks that extend beyond the delineated borders of the walls, floor, and roof evoke the process of drafting with a straightedge.

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Washes of color breathe life into a loose elevation view of the same structure. Hand lettered annotations reinforce vague spatial elements by naming “cavernous spaces,” “a building shell,” and “a measurement.” She captures the essence of the space, offering a rendering that, with its many undefined variables, could stand in for any contemporary art exhibition venue. In doing so, Sokolow invites critical questions: Are all these spaces, in essence, interchangeable? Are the “grandiose experiences” they invite meaningful? Could we perhaps make substantive encounters with contemporary art available to more people by unpairing the institution from its exhibition space?

While it’s common for a museum and its building to shape one another, an institution does not have to be contained by its space. There are many ways to dislodge contemporary art institutions—that is, to separate them from the potential tyranny or monotony of a single, static exhibition space and, in turn, reevaluate the experiences that they offer.

In an effort to open up access to art, to invite new people into the conversation, some institutions have turned to the *event*. Voter registration. Yoga. Scavenger hunts. Familiar activities in a potentially unfamiliar setting that suggest that you, too, can find something you care about in the galleries. Activities like these can draw new people to art spaces that were previously off-putting. When done well, they can empower visitors. When they fall short, event-based interventions risk creating two parallel conversations. The people with existing ties to the art world, the people who already felt at home in the galleries, continue connecting with art in the way they always have, while the new visitors have their separate—playful but superficial—communion with the space and the works on view. They might get to peek behind the scenes after hours, but are they also invited to ask and answer tough questions about culture, meaning making, power, and privilege? Truly transforming the exclusive, pretentious, interchangeable art experience requires opening up art world conversations to new participants and shifting the scope of those conversations to include a wider range of perspectives.

The event is not the only route toward inclusive change. Another path reconsiders *space*. Rather than prioritizing bringing new audiences to exhibits in spaces that may have been designed with other audiences and experiences in mind, some institutions embrace different kinds of spaces and bring the exhibits to their audiences.

One approach is the satellite space. For six months in 2016 the Birmingham Museum of Art operated *shift*, a project space in a downtown storefront less than one mile from the museum’s four-acre campus. If the museum’s galleries were a place for looking and learning, *shift* was a place for creating and convening. It hosted artist residencies and invited community members to gather and discuss contemporary art and other matters of interest. By working in a different physical setting, the museum offered new ways of serving new audiences.

Another model for stepping outside of fixed exhibition spaces to provide a different encounter with art is the mobile museum. In the 1970s, for example, the Philadelphia Museum of Art created small traveling exhibitions on a minibus that it sent to neighborhoods in the city and suburbs. This approach enabled audiences to connect with the museum’s exhibits and the scholarship behind them, even if they didn’t come to the main museum building.

Other institutions eschew any consistent exhibition venue. The Contemporary in Baltimore pursued this approach between 1989 and 1999. It facilitated collaborations between artists and host locations across the city that ranged from the Maryland Historical Society to a parking garage. The projects it generated were critical and site-specific, responsive to their physical and institutional settings.

I/C is adopting a similarly nomadic approach, and it has the potential to extend and enhance access to the contemporary art experience. I hope that by dispersing the contemporary art institution across physical exhibition spaces in Indianapolis and across virtual spaces through this web-based publication, I/C will serve the existing audience for contemporary art in the city and expand that audience to include more people within and beyond central Indiana. I hope that I/C will bring exciting, challenging contemporary art to exhibition spaces in town, whether it's showcasing work by excellent local artists or bringing fresh voices and visions from out of town. I hope that, through *Abstract*, I/C will provide a platform for asking tough questions related to contemporary culture— questions that invite more than the regular players to the table, questions that inspire a broad readership to think critically about the cultural landscape and join the conversation. If I/C makes the most of its nomadic and virtual model, we will see the benefits of deliberately pushing contemporary art out of place in Indianapolis.

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(1) Duncan Cameron popularized this concept in “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” originally published in 1971. It is reprinted in Gail Anderson, ed., *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift* (AltaMira Press, 2004), 61-79.

(2) Carol Duncan described the relationship between museum architecture and the ritualized behavior it invites in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (Routledge, 1995).

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