

Now-Tomorrow-Flux

An Anthology on the Museum
of Contemporary Art

Beatrice von Bismarck / Heike Munder / Peter J. Schneemann [Eds.]



jrp|ringier

Placing the Present in Relation to the Present

Bettina Funcke

April 2015: a friend accompanies me on a first visit to the Whitney Museum's new location downtown. Afterwards we take in Untitled—the museum's restaurant, not an artwork. We're trying to figure out, after our stroll through the debut collection show, why it's the architecture that dominates our first impression. How masterfully it highlights the urban setting of the museum. The galleries seem to widen on each side, directing visitors away from the art and toward wall-sized windows that give onto stunning terraces and views beyond: to the east, the Meatpacking District and Greenwich Village; to the west, the Hudson River and the setting sun. At Danny Meyer's ground-floor restaurant every table is occupied, there's chatter all around, the menu is delicious and completely 2015 (small plates, heavy on locally sourced vegetables). To our right, Glenn Lowry sits with Adam Weinberg; I try to imagine the thoughts the directors must be sharing on the new roles, audiences, and architectures of their museums. Behind me, a man and woman are busy taking and posting pictures of their food. The woman is ready to upload but pauses to contemplate the proper hashtag, asking, "Where are we again?"

Her question captures some of the conundrums museums face today. The Whitney has built a successful new brand, a new building, and a new restaurant, all of which are things museums need. Museums have always been part of tourism, as have adventurous dining and architecture, but each

has increasingly skewed younger and broader in search of greater attendance numbers. Name-brand architecture plus a destination restaurant is the basic recipe for a place where people will want to gather, consume, and socialize. But the museum obviously doesn't want patrons to be unaware of where, exactly, they happen to be. Now that museums are fashionable destinations, what will they do with all the visitors they've summoned, particularly the ones who don't know where they are? One could even say that the disoriented diner's question implies other, larger questions: Where are we with museums in general, and how did we arrive at this new sort of institution?

For centuries, a museum's collection was central to its role and identity. Museums placed the present in dialogue with the past by preserving and presenting objects from different periods. In the ancient world the *museion*, or "seat of the Muses," was invented in Alexandria, an institution for contemplation, teaching, and discussion centering on books and later also objects. The Renaissance revived the term to describe the renowned collection of Lorenzo de' Medici, the word now denoting not a building but the fact of the collection's comprehensiveness. In seventeenth-century Europe the term was used to describe collections of curiosities. After the French Revolution, in keeping with a general movement toward the public, museums made formerly private collections accessible to all. In the early stages of modern capitalist society, with its newly created public sphere and bourgeoisie, museums became places to emphasize national consciousness by giving nascent identities a historical context of objects and documents.

The present era, however, is marked by an intense preoccupation with the contemporary combined with a lack of understanding of its relation to the past, a combination that creates a false sense of existing outside historical time. History and its objects have mostly moved into the background or are used to punctuate the present for effect. Our dominant new museological model, the museum of contemporary art, is often founded without a collection and with little consideration of a dialogic relation to history. In fact, in light of the history of the word *museum*, the phrase "museum of contemporary art" has come to seem practically oxymoronic. So what is it that has replaced the collection in these museums of contemporary art?

While leading a tour of his recent Marcel Broodthaers exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curator Christophe Cherix said that "museums are just a platform to try to find out what art is." It's an intriguing statement, implying that museums now are about the flux

of current art and the present moment.¹ The goal it expresses is entirely contemporary and can be opposed to the traditional museological goals of illuminating beauty, faith, truth, history, or nation. We might say that while the traditional museum placed the present in relation to the past, the museum of contemporary art now places the present in relation to the present. The museum becomes a designated space for this self-reflexive activation. As far as funding is concerned, museums almost literally cannot afford to focus primarily on the past, so activation of the audience has replaced activation of the historical because that's what attracts the largest, most diverse crowd. Museums have traditionally expanded our sense of time by examining periods: the Renaissance focused on the past, and modernity was about imagining the future. Today, however, audiences want to imagine the present.

The public still wants to experience objects, of course, but contemporary objects, including paintings and sculptures, are hard to make sense of without a frame and a context. The museum must be this frame, offering an experience of the present that is distinct from everyday life and commodity culture. How, then, to make the contemporary perceptible? One answer is performance, which has always played out, in real time, the audience's encounter with itself and its own moment. For this the museum needs the right form, which means not traditional viewing galleries but art shells, art bays, white cubes, black boxes—the kinds of apparently neutral, flexible spaces that are necessary to stage performance in the broadest sense: dance, theater, concerts, screenings, lectures, readings, tours, discussions, meals, therapy sessions, haircuts. These activities are typically documented, uploaded, and live-streamed, and this makes today's activated museum of contemporary art eminently compatible with the Internet.²

It makes sense to try to open up to a larger discussion around art, to emphasize the relationship to one's own time, to embrace a younger and more diverse public. The dead objects of the mausoleum are brought to life and made to appear more welcoming. As Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, put it in the title of his memoir, the job is about “making the mummies dance.” On the other hand, the friendly openness that museums seek might compromise art's tensions, its edge, by helping to gloss over provocations and unresolved conundrums. Art is not always necessarily welcoming or friendly. Of course there is a part of

¹ Broodthaers himself already understood this impending change half a century ago, when he made himself the director of his fictitious Musée d'art moderne.

² See Boris Groys, “Entering the Flow,” in Groys, *In the Flow* (New York: Verso, 2016), pp. 3–22.

art that wants to communicate and share, but art also wants to hide something; an artwork is also there to challenge. If a viewer no longer senses this challenge, what remains is a visual surface barely distinct from any other in a highly aestheticized world.

The powerful interests that have recently attached themselves to contemporary art—urban renewal, tourism, financial speculation—distract from the difficult, reclusive, and uncompromising core of art. This resistant nature arises, in part, from an attempt to withstand the flow of time, from a longing to leave traces beyond the lifetime of the artist. In response, the museum traditionally offered a material eternity, secured politically and economically if not ontologically. Are modern museums of contemporary art—perhaps even modern societies—avoiding a consideration of the eternal and metaphysical? The turbulence of the early twenty-first century has certainly undermined any sense of material or political perpetuity. Today's sense of transience, and the absence of any claim on eternal essence, may be signs of the lateness of our era. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, museums have only become more relevant and more visited. This raises a question: Who is the intended consumer of art? Or, to put it differently: What constitutes the economic basis of radical contemporary art? Historically it has been the ruling class, be that the church, the aristocracy, or the modern state. Capitalism's elite have now taken on the role, and ideological interests have always been attached to such support. Might it be that the framing of museums for a mass audience is related to an elite's need to stay in power? Are museums a tool? We know that power needs to propose a (false) promise of equality in order to perpetuate itself, and that it uses an aesthetic of equality (e.g. "art for all") to do so. One could say, then, that to retain political power, the ruling class pretends to erase distinctions of taste, creating an illusion of aesthetic solidarity.³

Consider the 2016 redesign of the Metropolitan Museum's logo. Part of an institutional rebranding effort, the new logo is intended to signal a more welcoming, accessible, and current Met. The older logo, in use since 1971, featured a capital M set against a circle and square, with a smaller circle nestled in each serif, recalling Leonardo da Vinci's famous *Vitruvian Man* (ca. 1490); in which proportional geometries formed an image of relation and harmony. The M itself originated in an illustration from the 1509 book *De divina proportione* by Fra Luca Pacioli, da Vinci's math teacher and collaborator; in his illustration the letter was already a logo,

³ See Groys, "Clement Greenberg: Engineer of Art," in Groys, *In the Flow* (see note 2), pp. 101–114.

as it stood for the word *mathematica*. The older Met design was thus grounded in knowledge, history, and a visualization of their relations. In the new design, the words *THE MET* are stacked, one over the other, in bright red letters whose conjoined shapes are meant to evoke both modernity and classicism while also embodying a theme of connection. In explaining the desire to rebrand, the institution used the words “friendlier,” “simpler,” and “contemporary.” “It’s the right direction,” said the museum’s chairman, Daniel Brodsky. “It’s a changing institution; the world is changing around us, and I think it’s time for the Met to move forward.”⁴

From divine proportion to the friendliness of contemporary branding: this is the new direction that the contemporary museum and its audience have to contend with. The question remains: What will these more fashionable institutions do with the new audiences they attract? In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg suggested that the mark of kitsch is the way it imitates the effects of art.⁵ In their efforts to activate spaces, stage encounters, and entertain the public, museums of contemporary art are increasingly engaging in such mimicry. Does that make them kitsch? The Whitney’s new restaurant borrows from art gestures in calling itself *Untitled*; *In Situ*, the restaurant at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, goes even further: at what may be the first conceptual restaurant, star chef Corey Lee offers no recipes of his own, instead curating the menu as a “group show” composed entirely of recipes by other well-known chefs. Where are we again?

Art’s power is to make visible the rules governing social behavior. By offering a dialogue with historical objects, museums traditionally played a decisive role in demonstrating the transitory character of the current order, helping audiences imagine a beyond, offering the possibility of transcendence. If you erase a dialogue with history, or if that dialogue only considers the last fifty years or so, it makes it very hard to imagine the future or anything beyond the material world we live in, producing frustration and confusion. Museums may draw larger, broader, younger publics, but people still expect to understand, to be moved, to have a moment of clarity or a connection to eternal values. As much as they want to imagine the present, they also still desire all that the museum once represented.

4 Robin Pogrebin, “The Met, Courting Criticism, in Caps,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2016, New York edition, C1.

5 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939), pp. 34–49.