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After the White Cube

Hal Foster asks what art museums are for

Tate Modern II, designed by Herzog and de Meuron, is now rising on the Thames. On the Hudson the new Whitney Museum, conceived by Renzo Piano, will open its doors in May. Guided by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the Museum of Modern Art is planning another expansion (the last one was just ten years ago), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art will transform its modern wing by the end of the decade. I draw these examples from London and New York, skipping over the museum boom underway in the Middle East, China and elsewhere. But all institutions that aim to encompass modern and contemporary art face similar problems, and not all of these are political and economic in nature. [*]

The first dilemma is the variety of scales of this art and the different spaces needed to exhibit it. The initial setting for modern painting and sculpture, produced as it typically was for the market, was the 19th-century interior, usually the bourgeois apartment, and early museums for this art were often made up of refurbished rooms of a similar sort. This model was gradually displaced by another: as modern art became more abstract and more autonomous, it called out for a space that mirrored its homeless condition, a space that came to be known as ‘the white cube’. In turn this model came under pressure as the size of ambitious work expanded after World War Two – from the vast canvases of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and others to the serial objects of Minimalists like Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin, and on to the site-specific and ‘post-medium’ installations of subsequent artists from James Turrell to Olafur Eliasson. To hold together the large halls needed for contemporary production with the delimited galleries for modernist painting and sculpture is no easy task, as any visit to Tate Modern or MoMA attests. And the problem is complicated by the fact that some new art demands yet another kind of space, an enclosed area darkened for the projection of images that has come to be called ‘the black box’. Finally, as a result of the current interest in presenting performance and dance at museums, large institutions anticipate a need for still other spaces – the initial proposal for the MoMA expansion names them ‘grey boxes’ and ‘art bays’. (I assume the former is a cross between a white cube and a black box, and the latter a hybrid of a performance area and an event space, but that’s just a guess.) Any museum that intends to show a representative array of modern and contemporary art must somehow allow for all these settings, and do so all at once.

Two factors were central to the expansion of modern and contemporary art museums. In the 1960s, as industry began to collapse in New York and other cities, manufacturing lofts were turned into inexpensive studios by artists such as the Minimalists, in part so that they could produce work that might test the limits of the white cube. Eventually, though, old industrial structures, such as power stations, were refashioned as new galleries and museums in order to cope with the increased size of this art. A circularity emerged, as can be seen at institutions such as Dia:Beacon, a mecca for Minimalist and Post-Minimalist art in upstate New York, which is an old Nabisco box factory transformed into an ensemble of vast halls to encompass gigantic sculptures by Richard Serra and others. The second road to expansion was more direct: the building from scratch of new museums as vast containers for huge artwork, as exemplified by Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao. In some respects this bigness is the outcome of a space race between architects like Gehry and artists like Serra, and by now it seems almost natural to us. Yet there is nothing definitive about it: well-regarded artists who have emerged over the last twenty years, such as Pierre Huyghe, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Tino Sehgal among many others, don't require such space, and in many ways refuse it. (Bigness has also led to bad by-products like immense atria, which, however important they are to museums as event spaces, are deadly as art galleries.)

The Guggenheim Bilbao is the clearest example of a third problem, the museum as icon. Leaders of a depressed city or an overlooked region want to retool for a new economy of cultural tourism, and believe an architectural symbol that will also serve as a media emblem can help them. To achieve this iconicity, the chosen architect is allowed, even encouraged, to model idiosyncratic shapes at urban scale, often near poor neighbourhoods that are thereby disrupted, if not displaced. Some museums become so sculptural that the art arrives after the fact, and can only ever be second on the bill; this is often the case at the Maxxi (Museum of the 21st-Century Arts) in Rome, a neo-Futurist plaiting of low-slung volumes designed by Zaha Hadid. Such museums make such a strong claim on our visual interest that they stand as the dominant work on display, and upstage the art they are meant to present; though it is too early to say, this might also be the impression left by Tate Modern II. Other museums become so theatrical that the artists feel they have to respond to the architecture in the first instance; this is sometimes the case at the Institute of Contemporary Art, created by Diller Scofidio + Renfro on the Boston harbour front, so ingenious is it as a machine for seeing and spectating. Of course, architects operate in the visual arena too, and can hardly be begrudged for doing so, but sometimes an emphasis on design power distracts from fundamental matters of function. In part this is what happened at the American Folk Art Museum, designed by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, in midtown Manhattan – too much capital put into the architecture, not enough thought put into its use – and in the end it was forced to sell the building to MoMA and retreat to its former home in Lincoln Square (the Maxxi faces a similar threat).

The question of function points to a fourth problem, which is a pervasive uncertainty about what contemporary art is and how a space might come to be used. How can one design for what one doesn't really know and can't truly anticipate? As a result of this uncertainty, we have begun to see 'cultural sheds' with little apparent programme; one such structure, designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, with great canopies that will open and close for different events, is slated for the Hudson Yards area on the West Side of Manhattan. The logic seems to be to build a container and then leave it to artists to deal with it, but the result on the art side is likely to be a default form of installation work. Meanwhile, on the architectural side the projection of new spaces like 'grey boxes' and 'art bays' might constrain the very practices they aim to support. What seems like flexibility can end up as the opposite; witness the very tall contemporary galleries at the New Museum on the Lower East Side, or indeed at MoMA, which overbear almost all of the art placed there. Serra produces great work, to be sure, but that doesn't mean its size should be the standard measure of exhibition space.

Perhaps these new and renovated museums have a programme after all, a mega-programme so obvious that it goes unstated: entertainment. We still live in a spectacle society – our reliance on information hasn't altered our investment in images – or, to use the anodyne phrase, we live in an 'experience economy'. What relation do modern and contemporary art museums have to a culture that so prizes the entertainment experience? As early as 1996, Nicholas Serota framed 'the dilemma of museums of modern art' as a stark option, 'experience or interpretation', which might be rephrased as entertainment on the one side and aesthetic contemplation and/or historical understanding on the other. Nearly twenty years later, however, we needn't be stymied by this either/or. Spectacle is here to stay, at least as long as capitalism is, and museums are part of it; that's a given, but for that very reason it shouldn't be a goal.

Yet for many museums, even ones that don't depend on ticket sales, it is a goal. This is evident from all the institutional space given over to event rooms, big stores and nice restaurants, but it is also suggested by trends in programming. Consider the turn to performance and dance, and the restaging of historical examples of both, in art museums over the last few years; the Marina Abramović retrospective at MoMA in 2010 (including a ten-week spectacle in which she stared down anyone who sat opposite her) is a representative instance. This turn can be seen negatively as an institutionalisation of once alternative practices, or positively as the recovery of otherwise lost events (like independent film, experimental performance and dance have come to museums in part because their own venues have fallen on hard times). But this doesn't explain the sudden embrace of live events in institutions otherwise dedicated to inanimate art. During the first boom in museums in post-1989 'new Europe', Rem Koolhaas remarked that since there's not enough past to go around, its tokens can only rise in value. Today, it seems, there's not enough present to go around: for reasons that are obvious enough in a hyper-mediated age, it is in great demand too, as is anything that feels like presence.

Another reason for this embrace of performance events is that they are thought to activate the viewer, who is thereby assumed, wrongly, to be passive to begin with. Museums today can't seem to leave us alone; they prompt and prod us as many of us do our children. And often this activation has become an end, not a means: as in the culture at large, communication and connectivity are promoted for their own sake, with little interest in the quality of subjectivity and sociality effected. All this helps to validate the museum, to overseers and onlookers alike, as relevant, vital or simply busy; yet, more than the viewer, it is the museum itself that the museum seeks to activate. Weirdly, this only confirms the negative image that detractors have long had of it: not simply that aesthetic contemplation is boring and historical understanding elitist, but that the museum is a dead place, a mausoleum. This point struck me while watching *National Gallery*, the terrific new documentary by Frederick Wiseman. For three hours it shows a good range of people in the great London museum, engaging with the art and with one another in the most diverse ways. Yet Wiseman still felt the need to end his tribute with a dance in the galleries, as if the pictorial figures there needed performing bodies to animate them. They didn't and they don't.

'Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association,' Adorno wrote in 1953 in 'Valéry Proust Museum'. 'Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art. They testify to the neutralisation of culture.' Adorno ascribes this view to Valéry: it is the view of the artist in the studio, who can only regard the museum as a place of 'reification' and 'chaos'. Adorno assigns the alternative position to Proust, who begins where Valéry stops, with 'the afterlife of the work', which Proust sees from the vantage point of the spectator in the museum. For the idealist viewer à la Proust, the museum perfects the studio: it is a spiritual realm where the material messiness of artistic production is distilled away, where, in his words, 'the rooms, in their sober abstinence from all decorative detail, symbolise the inner spaces into which the artist withdraws to create the work.' Rather than a site of reification, the museum for Proust is a medium of animation.

Just as the viewer must be posited as passive in order to be activated, the artwork must be deemed dead so that it can be resuscitated. This ideology, central to the modern discourse on the art museum, is also fundamental to art history 'as a humanistic discipline', whose mission, Erwin Panofsky wrote 75 years ago, is to 'enliven what otherwise would remain dead'. Here the proper retort in our time comes from the art historian Amy Knight Powell: 'Neither institution nor individual can restore life to an object that never had it. The promiscuity of the work of art – its return, reiteration and perpetuation beyond its original moment – is the surest sign it never lived.'

The upshot is this: viewers are not so passive that they have to be activated, and artworks are not so dead that they have to be animated, and, if designed and programmed intelligently, museums can allow for both entertainment and contemplation, and promote some understanding along the way. That is, they can be spaces where artworks reveal their 'promiscuity' with other moments of production and reception. A central role of the museum

is to operate as a space-time machine in this way, to transport us to different periods and cultures – diverse ways of perceiving, thinking, depicting and being – so that we might test them in relation to our own and vice versa, and perhaps be transformed a little in the process. This access to various thens and nows is especially urgent during an era of consumerist presentism, political parochialism and curtailed citizenship. In the end, if museums aren't places where different constellations of past and present are crystallised, why have them at all?

[*] One problem, not discussed here, is the rise of private museums that house the art collections of neoliberal billionaires. Contemporary art is a beautiful thing for these collectors: auratic as an object yet fungible as an asset. Although they get tax breaks (because they are nominally open to visitors who can book the pilgrimage), these neo-aristocratic institutions don't pretend to have any real connection to the public sphere. Usually at a remove from urban centres, they are museums of equity display, equal parts prestige and portfolio, and they compete for artwork with institutions that are at least semi-public.

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