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The *New New* Museum: The Whitney May Have Just Won New York's Museum Arms Race

By JERRY SALTZ



Curatorial staff and art handlers placing artwork on the sixth floor for the Whitney's inaugural exhibition, "America Is Hard to See."

The *New New* Museum

How the Whitney might just solve the impossible problem of contemporary art.

Curatorial staff and art handlers placing artwork on the sixth floor for the inaugural exhibition, "America Is Hard to See." Photograph by Nic Lehoux, Courtesy of the Whitney



PART I: THE MUSEUM AS FAIRY TALE

I've spent much of my life in and in love with museums. When I was 10 years old, there was no mention of art in my home. But then my mother began driving me from the suburbs to the Art Institute of Chicago. There, she looked at art on her own for hours, leaving me to do the same. At the time, I liked being alone but hated museums. I felt they were old and dead, places where people just stood and stared. But one day, waiting, bored, brooding, I found myself absorbed by two beautifully colored adjacent old paintings. On the left, a pair of men standing outside a jail cell talk to a haloed man, inside the cell, while an incredible

leopard guards nearby. After a long time, I looked at the right-hand panel, where the setting was the same but the time was different. In place of the leopard, there is a man returning a huge bloody sword to its sheath; the haloed man inside the cell stoops down, both hands on the sill to support his body, extending his neck, which has been severed, through the bars. His head is on the ground, on a platter, as blood spurts all over. I looked back and forth; left, then right. Then something gigantic hit me. These images were telling a story. The paintings were from the 15th century, just when Renaissance painters were beginning to understand perspective. And yet they were not dead, they were alive, at least when I looked at them. Two paintings from the 1450s, still working their magic on me. Amazed, I looked around the gallery and saw gates open. I thought each work was the same — a voice, yearning or in pain or proud, but speaking to me, in visual tongues, down through history. Maybe everything in this suddenly amazing building was telling a story, I thought, a story I could discern just by looking (and without going to school). I wanted to spend forever in this cacophony, this living catacomb. A few months later, my mother committed suicide. I didn't return to a museum until I was in my 20s.

By then — in the 1970s, with no art in my background, just inchoate need — I had gathered together an idea of what a museum was supposed to be. That is, a place where old art is stored, preserved, and celebrated (sometimes only dutifully). I also knew that museums could be problematic, that they made imperious judgments, that they excluded whole vital populations. Of course they did: Museums were invented as royal showrooms, triumphal demonstrations of the power of some very brutal states (Napoleon's France, colonialist Britain) to gather up the cultural patrimony of the wider world. When museums first truly came to the United States, it was part of an American effort to claim a seat at the table of Western civilization by brandishing collections of antiquities and masterpieces (**the Met** (<http://nymag.com/listings/attraction/metropolitan-museum-of-art/>), our first world-class institution, was meant to be encyclopedic like its cousins the Louvre and the British Museum). Later, with **MoMA** (<http://nymag.com/listings/attraction/museum-of-modern-art/>) especially, the museum itself would become an arm of aggressive cultural diplomacy, promoting Abstract Expressionism as a campaign of the Cold War. So I knew early on that museums were not fairy-tale places — that the practice of enclosing and curating a history of art within marble walls enclosed prejudice and even bloodlust, too. But I also knew that those buildings enclosed touchstones, benchmarks, cultural skeleton keys, divinations, extraordinary probings of the human imagination, and masterpieces like that St. John the Baptist cycle by Giovanni di Paolo that had floored me in Chicago. I knew, in fact, that they contained something ecstatic and represented something eternal.

Maybe it's naïve and romantic, but, beyond the testimonies of robber barons, princely privilege, enforcement of accepted taste, colonialism, and worse, I do still see the museum's Platonic ideal: a communal effort, conducted over centuries, to preserve, interpret, and commune with artistic ancestors, archetypes, traditions, genres, and methods. Sumerian kings collected antiquities (one scholar interprets a second-millennium-b.c. tablet as "a museum label"). Collecting and display surfaced in China 3,500 years ago. The Greeks created a *pinakothekē* in the fifth century b.c. to honor the gods. Museums have been with us as long as memory has been with us — "quiet cars," in the **words** (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/19/arts/artsspecial/tuning-out-digital-buzz-for-an-intimate-communion-with-art.html?_r=0) of New York *Times* critic Holland Cotter, places where looking is a way of knowing the world and ourselves. And where the past is always alive, sometimes even more vividly than the contemporary moment, the two coalescing into the out-of-body grace of eternal presentness.



Robert Gober's "Untitled" (1991) being installed at the new Whitney (the cones and warning sign are to protect the artwork, not a part of it). Photo: Tim Davis

PART II: BRAVE NEW WORLD

But museums have changed — a lot. Slowly over the past quarter-century, then quickly in the past decade. These changes have been complicated, piecemeal, and sometimes contradictory, with different museums embracing them in different ways. But the transformation is visible everywhere. Put simply, it is this:

The museum used to be a storehouse for the art of the past, the display of supposed masterpieces, the insightful exploration of the present in the context of the long or compressed histories that preceded it. Now — especially as embodied by the Tate Modern, Guggenheim Bilbao, and our beloved MoMA — the museum is a revved-up showcase of the new, the now, the next, an always-activated market of events and experiences, many of which lack any reason to exist other than to occupy the museum industry — an industry that critic Matthew Collings has called “bloated and foolish, corporatist, ghastly and death-ridden.”

The list of fun-house attractions is long. At MoMA, we’ve had overhyped, **badly done shows of Björk** (<http://www.vulture.com/2015/03/momas-bjork-disaster.html>) and Tim Burton, the **Rain Room selfie trap** (<http://www.vulture.com/2014/01/history-of-the-selfie.html>), and the **daylong spectacle of Tilda Swinton sleeping in a glass case** (<http://www.vulture.com/2013/03/jerry-saltz-moma-sleeping-tilda-swinton.html>). This summer in London you can ride **Carsten Höller’s building-high slides** (<http://nymag.com/arts/cultureawards/2011/museums-as-playgrounds/>) at the Hayward Gallery — there, the fun house is literal. Elsewhere, it is a little more “adult”: In 2011, L.A.’s MoCA **staged** (<http://sites.moca.org/the-curve/2012/01/05/marina-abramovic-an-artists-life-manifesto/>) Marina Abramovic’s *Survival MoCA Dinner*, a piece of megakitsch that included naked women with skeletons atop them on dinner tables where attendees ate. In 2012, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art paid \$70,000 for a 21-foot-tall, 340-ton **boulder** (<http://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/levitated-mass>) by artist Michael Heizer and installed it over a cement trench in front of the museum, paying \$10 million for what is essentially a photo op. Last year, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago mounted a tepid David Bowie **show** (<http://www2.mcchicago.org/exhibition/david-bowie-is/>), which nevertheless broke records for attendance and sales of catalogues, “limited-edition prints,” and T-shirts. Among the many unfocused recent spectacles at the Guggenheim were Cai Guo-Qiang’s **nine cars** (<http://www.guggenheim.org/video/cai-guo-qiang-inopportune-stage-one>) suspended in the rotunda with lights shooting out of them. The irony of these massively expensive endeavors is that the works and shows are supposedly “radical” and “interdisciplinary,” but the experiences they generate are closer, really, to a visit to Graceland — “Shut up, take a selfie, keep moving.”

In this way, an old museum model has been replaced by another one. Museums that were roughly bookish, slow, a bit hoity-toity, not risk-averse but careful, oddly other, and devoted to reflection, connoisseurship, cultivation, and preservation (mostly of the past but also of new great works) — these museums have transformed into institutions that feel faster, indifferent to existing collections, and at all times intensely in pursuit of new work, new crowds, and new money. We used to look at these places as something like embodiments and explorations of the canon — or canons, since some (MoMA’s and Guggenheim’s modernism collections) were narrower and more specialized than others (the Met’s, the Louvre’s). But whatever long-view curating and collecting museums do now — and many of them still do it well — the institutions that are sucking up the most energy are the ones that have made themselves into platforms for spectacle, as though the party-driven global-art-fair feeding frenzy had taken up residence in one place, and one building, permanently. Plus, accessibility has become everything. More museums are making collections available online — sad to say, art is sometimes better viewed there than in the flesh, thanks to so much bad museum architecture and so little actual space to display permanent collections. Acoustiguide guides have become more and more common, and while there’s much good they can do, it often seems their most important function is crowd control — moving visitors through quickly to make room for the next million.

The museums of New York can already feel alien with this new model taking over. And we’re really at the beginning rather than the end of the transformation. All four of Manhattan’s big museums — the Met, MoMA, the **Whitney** (<http://nymag.com/listings/attraction/whitney-museum-of-new-york/>), and the **Guggenheim** (<http://nymag.com/listings/attraction/solomon-r-guggenheim-museum/>) — have undertaken or are involved in massive expansion, renovation, and rebuilding. These are more than just infrastructure updates: We are witnessing a four-way competition for supremacy in the new art-museum universe, where the **Whitney is moving downtown** (http://www.vulture.com/2010/07/whitney_museum.html), near the heart of the gallery district. The stately Met has taken over the **Whitney’s old Madison Avenue Breuer building** (<http://nymag.com/arts/architecture/features/70253/>), making use of the new space not for its unrivaled permanent collection of 50 centuries of art but for contemporary work — to reimagine itself, for the first time in its 145-year history, as a serious contender for the postwar-and-contemporary-art crown (an ambition complemented nicely by the ascent of its Costume Institute, whose galleries are now named to honor *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour). MoMA bungled one renovation in this direction in 2004, producing inadequate galleries for the permanent collection but ample party space; a decade on, it’s doubling down, building an even worse edifice oriented around event spaces it calls “the gray box” and “the art bay.” And the Guggenheim’s crazed obsession with making more Guggenheims continues with a behemoth Frank Gehry in Abu Dhabi, presumably to be finished before sea levels rise to swamp it.

What makes this all so startling is that these museums have never been all-out competitors before. Until now, they had distinct missions, collections, and curatorial identities: The Met specialized in 5,000 years of art; the Whitney was about American art; MoMA was modernism’s Francophile Garden of Eden; and the Guggenheim — well, the Guggenheim has always been a bit confused, mostly distinguished by its incredible building. But now, all of a sudden and for the first time, it is not unusual for curators to speak of being unable to do shows because “that artist is already taken.”

Each of these museums still preserves, collects, and exhibits the art of the past. But with the action and big money centered on contemporary art, galleries, auctions, art fairs, and biennials, each is more committed than ever before to the art of the now and the cult of the new. I love the new. I am a member of that cult, in part because the art world has become my surrogate family of gypsies and dreamers (yes, I’m a mush). But that cult, and the ascendance of spectacle, may be the end of museums as we know them and has been the subject of countless conversations I’ve had over the past year with curators, artists, gallerists, and collectors, all of whom acknowledge a major shift under way. “The problem is museums trying to be as up-to-date with contemporary art as galleries are,” says painter and critic Peter Plagens. “The cultural distance between what a museum preserves (Cézanne, Joan Mitchell, etc.) and how it spotlights the present (Björk, interactive art, etc.) is greater than ever.” As former Venice- and Whitney-biennial curator Francesco Bonami puts it, “They’re like those in the fashion world who only follow the last collection and are content to have their shows look like those of other museums.” Plagens says that a few years ago, ex-L.A. MoCA director and impresario Jeffrey Deitch told him that “museums needed young audiences and that what young audiences wanted to see is events, whether the events are fashion shows, rock concerts, or exhibition openings.” And now? “I mean, fucking James Franco is everywhere,” Plagens says. “Miley Cyrus is on art-world tongues, curators are courtiers, museums are the runway.” Of course, he acknowledges, “museums will survive. But in what form?”



Willem de Kooning's "Woman and Bicycle" (1952–53) during installation. Photo: Tim Davis

PART III:

THE WHITNEY REBORN

The new Whitney, opening May 1 and designed by Renzo Piano, is the first totally new museum to be unveiled — an angular, asymmetrical, ship-shaped building at the base of the High Line, deep in tourist country and adjacent to the heart of the art-market beast, the bluest-chip gallery district in the world, Chelsea. The move marks the first time one of the four major Manhattan museums has abandoned its flagship for another neighborhood since 1966, when the Whitney moved into the Breuer Building (it moved in 1954 to West 54th Street from its original West Village brownstone). The move downtown is itself significant, returning the museum to its roots in a place of bohemian tribal identity, even if the downtown it's returning to has been built by developers for the

very rich, and the move itself will help make the area tonier still than the Upper East Side. For what it's worth, the museum looks directly down on the pier where *Titanic* survivors disembarked (the ship itself would have docked five piers north).

The audacity of the building shows that, yes, the Whitney will survive the new era. But the better question is whether it has found a way to thrive in it. And, believe it or not, I am in love with what this building represents — and with its perfectly titled inaugural show, “**America Is Hard to See**” (<http://nymag.com/listings/art/america-is-hard-to-see/>).” The show includes 600 works by around 400 artists, drawn entirely from the museum's collection of over 21,000 works by 3,000 artists, and it makes me think this museum might just point to one way through the current morass.

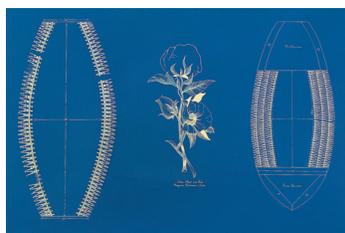
Why? Let's start with the building. I don't care what it looks like. It's “likable enough,” but my only concern as an art lover is with the inside of museums. Were I to judge the new Whitney exterior, I'd say it looks like a hospital or a pharmaceutical company. (**Our architecture critic, Justin Davidson, gives his opinion of the new Whitney** (<http://www.vulture.com/2015/04/whitney-museum-architectural-review.html>) .) But, for me, the genericism of the building suggests that what matters to the Whitney isn't vanity, grandeur, showboating, celebrity, or destination architecture — it's what goes on under its auspices.

COMING-OUT PARTY

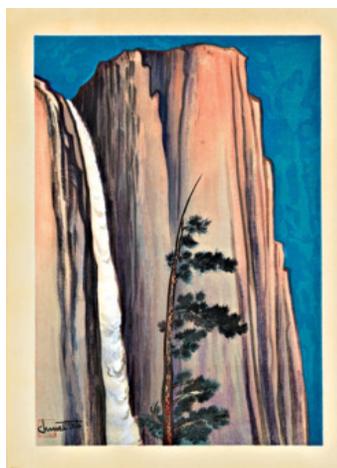
Eight especially exciting works from the new Whitney's first show, drawn from its permanent collection, that have not been seen in public since at least 2000.



CHARLES WHITE
Wanted Poster Series No. 4, 1969



MALCOLM BAILEY
Untitled, 1969



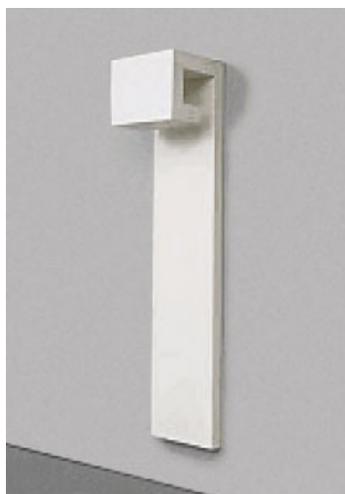
CHIURA OBATA
Evening Glow of Yosemite Fall, 1930



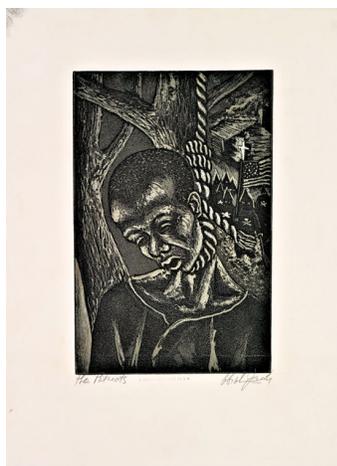
DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE
Drawing which Makes Itself, ca. 1973



HUGO GELLERT
The Fifth Column, 1943



SOL LEWITT
Wall Structure, 1965



ABRAHAM JACOBS
The Patriots, 1937



MALCOLM BAILEY
MAYA DEREN, 1944

So what is inside? First, space. By today's bombastic standards, the new Whitney is modest. The place could become overcrowded overnight. Yet there's lots and lots more space than the museum has ever had before, and more of it will be devoted to showcasing the permanent collection, which is crucial. Until now, the Whitney had only meager galleries for its permanent collection, about 7,725 square feet of the museum's approximately 32,000 total square feet of exhibition space. The fifth-floor galleries were converted offices and never suited for this collection. When the Whitney moved into the Breuer, it had 2,000

works in its collection and, in 1970, a staff of 105; now it has a collection of 21,000 and, when it opens, a staff of 300. (This place had to move.) The Piano building has about 50,000 square feet of indoor exhibition space (plus 13,000 outside), of which 20,500 over two floors is devoted to the permanent collection. (There is even more space to claim on an adjacent lot currently occupied by a rare remaining meat-processing facility, which you get the sense the Whitney is already eyeing lustily.) There, the space is open, simple, Shaker-like; the wide-plank pine floors are perfect. This means the Whitney spent \$422 million in part to do something that the other three big Manhattan museums haven't done: make a lot more and a lot better space for older art and also make a lot more better space for newer art. What an elegant solution: Why should a museum of this stature have to choose? And yet others have.

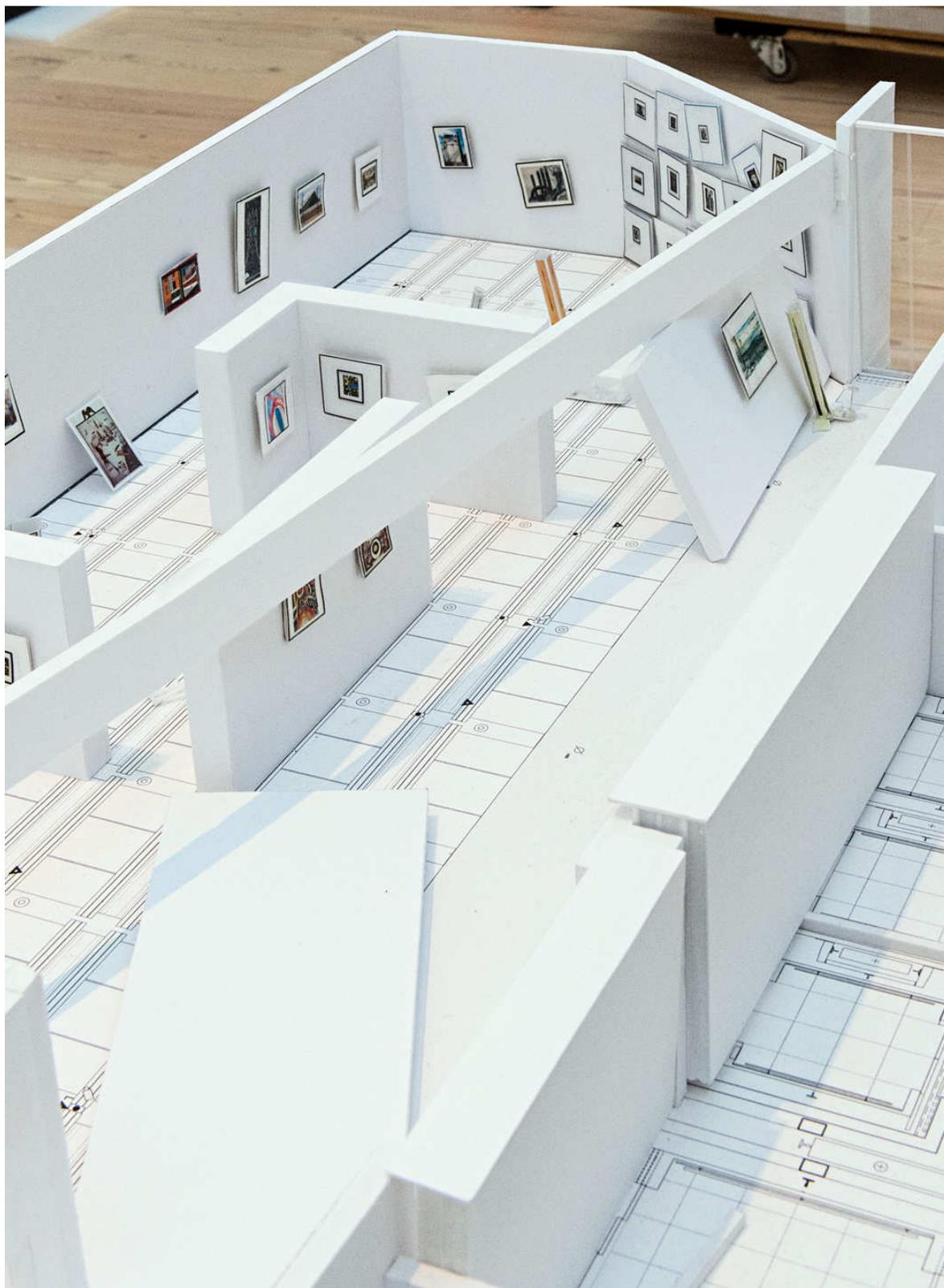
Second, a team of curators with the wisdom to not go craven on contemporary mania — to make use of new energy without pandering or prostrating themselves. These days, the museum and its staff are the objects of much affection and admiration in the art world — and while goodwill might seem like an intangible quality for which to praise a museum, it does reflect something, namely that artists have faith in these people and this institution (which is instrumental). And it shows that the Whitney has learned from past mistakes, which is a relief, given that the Whitney's road here has been rocky at best — including decades of fizzled or highfalutin plans to expand its uptown building; getting branded overly p.c. in the early 1990s (when it was actually often spot-on); running afoul of the art world in the early aughts with a corporate mind-set and dubious shows; the departure of two of its directors in less than six years. In each of these moments, the problem was the museum trying to change too erratically. Things were so bad in 2003 that, had the museum hired a less capable director, I believe the Whitney might have been lost.

In fact, much of the guarded optimism around the new building has to do with the museum's director, Adam Weinberg, and his modus operandi. Dressing like a disheveled professor, with unkempt curly hair, Weinberg, 60, is scruffier than his director brethren, generous, quick to give credit, eager, affable, earnest, an old-school true believer in art and artists, and never imperious or autocratic. Like other top-tier museum directors, he goes to Venice and Documenta. But when I've seen him there, it's in the weeks after the opening, when the crowds and money have moved on. Often I find him looking at art alone, map in hand, scribbling notes, eating pocketed hotel sandwiches on the run. He can be spotted doing the same in galleries with his daughters and no sandwiches.

But Weinberg and his team — most notably, chief curator and deputy director Donna De Salvo, and curator and associate director Scott Rothkopf — are also operating under unusual terms, thanks to the unusual mission of the museum, which is the third reason the Whitney seems so well suited to the new era. As De Salvo said, "The Whitney is not a building. It's an idea." The idea is actually a question, and the question is "What is American art?"

That mission is a real key. Since it is an evolving question governing an evolving collection, the mission liberates the museum from many of the obligations that burden its competitors, in particular historicization and periodization. The result is much more flexibility, in both what the museum chooses to collect and how it integrates the new work into shows alongside the old. The Met, even as it expands into contemporary art, retains a straightforward standard of world-historical excellence and a very traditional tendency to categorize work in terms of its era and origin. MoMA remains committed, in principle, to its postwar project of canonizing each successive, telescoping iteration of the avant-garde — a problematic mission now that the term has lost so much meaning and new movements evolve in a far weirder, more idiosyncratic and personal, less linear fashion than they used to. When the art history of this era is written, it will not be with a lot of isms.

The Whitney hardly knows how to curate with isms. It was founded in 1930 to collect, explore, explain, and interrogate American art, and has always had a fluid sense of its own mission, one that can shift with changing times (this is its fourth location!) and allow the institution to dedicate itself always to living, working artists. (In fact, the first three Whitney curators were artists.) But its curators have also brilliantly reimagined their mission for our new crazy era — an era defined not just by commerce but also by globalization and encyclopedic knowledge, an art world full of people who can access every iota of art history online but who know it less as a narrowly defined art-historical teleology than as a messy bunch of almost ahistorical source material.



A model of the new Whitney's eighth-floor gallery, used as a reference during the installation of artworks.

The Whitney knows how to consider new work alongside old, how to throw together pieces produced in entirely different contexts and watch the sparks fly. Freed from the need to consign works forever to, say, a room (or collection) dedicated to Ashcan School painting or Pop, curators could hang a single painting in multiple shows over decades alongside different paintings from different decades each time, and each time prompt a different reckoning — in one case with the use of color, in another the use of line, then gesture, compositional strategies, relation to madness or Romanticism or urban experience, to music, materiality, process, to television or cinema or Continental philosophy. The list will be as long as the curators are creative.

The **first show** (<http://nymag.com/listings/art/america-is-hard-to-see/>) demonstrates the advantages quite powerfully. More than a quarter of the works on display have not been seen in decades, and many have never been shown before at all. The effect is to recast ideas about American art history by bringing new

work into the fold without surrendering the tradition to people born since 1975 — to treat those artists and their work as part of a running conversation, and one that is designed to be constantly reevaluated. Over and over, artists whose work I thought I knew looked brand-new and suddenly relevant; second-stringers step forcefully to the fore as more prescient and pertinent than they've ever seemed. It's thrilling, for example, to behold, in the gallery of vaunted Abstract Expressionist masterpieces like de Kooning's *Door to the River* — maybe the best work in terms of sheer originality in the museum right now — and Rothko's tremendous painting *Four Darks in Red* emanating like a Buddhist television set, Hedda Sterne's electric *New York, N.Y., 1955* with spray paint looking absolutely of the present. Miraculously, Alfonso Ossorio's scratched and splattered canvas more than holds its own against Jackson Pollock. Revelations like this are more than the exception — and they are one very vital way to leverage the fresh energy of contemporary art into new insights about the past without entirely handing over the keys to the museum to the galleries up Tenth Avenue.

Thankfully, the museum is already endowed with a permanent collection perfectly suited to this project, which is the fourth reason I think the Whitney is in such good shape. Everyone poo-hoo-hoo the Whitney's holdings, but I think that the collection is not only singular but also that we've never really seen it before, and probably the most heartening thing about this first show is how eager the curators seem to be to bring those works, hidden for so long, into conversation with new ones. See Allan D'Arcangelo's *Madonna and Child*, an empty-faced image evoking Jackie Kennedy, and Malcolm Bailey's hand-painted 1969 depiction of a slave ship take their places in a wall of Pop masterpieces by Warhol, Johns, and others. Encountering Alma Thomas's brightly colored part-by-part painting *Mars Dust* (1972) in the Whitney at the same time that one of her works hangs in the Obama White House only makes you realize how much optical DNA still lies buried in this supposedly lesser collection. And while MoMA rightfully gives Cézanne pride of place in beginning its story, here pride of place goes to side-by-side paintings by Marsden Hartley. With these two works, we're instantly communing with the striving, desperation, will, and individuality of American artists up against almost insurmountable aesthetic odds. In these two paintings, we see an artist synthesizing Cubism with German Expressionism but adding mystic, visionary American twists. One abstract composition's brooding blacks, paradelike reds, banners, squares, and crosses are all veiled symbols of Hartley's lover, a German officer killed in World War I. I've referred to Hopper as the Whitney's Picasso, but this show shifts that mantle to Hartley. I love that. The striking, large 1932 painting of boat parts by I. Rice Pereira gives us almost Guston-like levels of gaga gnarliness. And the salon-style wall depicting America in convulsion in the 1930s will stop you in your tracks. One floor down, in addition to a 1935 painting by Alice Neel of coal and steel strikes, there's Harry Sternberg's 1935 satanic lithograph, *Southern Holiday*. It portrays the hell on Earth suffered by 23-year-old Claude Neal. He was accused of raping a white woman in Florida; his lynching had been advertised in newspapers. Vigilantes kidnapped him from jail, tied him to a post, cut off his fingers and toes, castrated him, and forced him to eat his penis. His broken body was then dragged behind a car and delivered to the home of the alleged victim. America is "Hard to See."

This kind of show — this kind of museum-shaping — would have been impossible in the Breuer, and the Whitney has built itself an environment much more suited to it than those the other museums have managed to. In part, this is because the Whitney has had the brilliant instinct to make the setting, not the building, the spectacle, which is the next reason for optimism. On my first visit, I walked in and out of the building, onto roof decks and terraces, up and down outdoor steel staircases, through galleries, stopping to marvel at firsts-for-the-Whitney: a works-on-paper study center, a theater, classrooms, not to mention infinitely better restoration facilities with the best views and space in the building. My heart started beating faster as it occurred to me that these outdoor and indoor spaces might actually be integrated — and that the exterior space won't just be forlorn "sculpture courts" for boring geometric sculptures. If solo and group shows integrate these spaces, this redoubles the possibilities of the whole. The free lobby gallery is a dream, not just an afterthought or ghetto, and could become an engine of artistic exposure. The light inside the building is extraordinary, and the views so panoramic that they become living Saul Steinberg cartoons of New York looking to America and the world. They might be selfie traps, but I love them. Most important, all of this seems like it has been built for art and artists — which is the last reason for my optimism, and probably the one that feels most like wishful thinking.

PART IV:

HOW DID WE GET HERE, AND WHERE DO WE GO NEXT?

How did the museum go from being a contemplative quiet car to the very center of a commercial frenzy, one that required an especially incisive group of curators endowed with an especially appropriate curatorial mission to be navigated responsibly? In America, one "corporatist" figure looms large as seer and bogeyman. As recently as 1990, **the art world looked askance at then-Guggenheim director Thomas Krens** (http://www.vulture.com/2008/02/jerry_saltz_on_thomas_krens_ou.html) when he began prowling the moneyed precincts of art fairs and biennials with celebrities, clients, and marketers, moving fast, doing deals, playing loose, looking for funds, all in plain view. Back then, museum directors didn't do such things — at least not so blatantly and gleefully. Soon, he'd sold off works by Kandinsky, Chagall, and Modigliani to raise money to buy newer art from the collection of an Italian count. In 1998, BMW underwrote Krens's blockbuster "The Art of the Motorcycle." Krens dismissed criticism as "a nonstory," flatly asking and answering, "Who do you get to support an institution? People who have relationships with it." As he tried to open a Guggenheim Brazil, his museum presented "**Brazil: Body & Soul**" (<http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/art/reviews/5467/>). As China became an economic powerhouse, the Gugg presented "**China: 5,000 Years**" (<http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/art/reviews/2188/>). These shows were sprawling, incoherent messes. Somewhere in there was a Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, a Soho Guggenheim, and even a Guggenheim Las Vegas located in the Venetian Resort Hotel Casino. I think there's actually a Guggenheim Helsinki in the offing. Whatever; Krens famously said that future successful museums should have "great collections, great architecture ... two shopping opportunities, two eating opportunities, a high-tech interface via the internet, and economies of scale via a global network." Many now do.

At the time, **Krens was seen as an outlaw** (http://www.vulture.com/2008/02/jerry_saltz_on_thomas_krens_ou.html). Yet it turns out he was really a prophet, the first to see that museums, far from a shelter from the tawdry bustle of commerce and fashion, could traffic in it. Might have to, in fact, if they wanted to retain the attention of the global wealthy who would become their patrons. "They're treading on thin ice," the collector, writer, and gallerist Adam Lindemann warns. "In this money and popularity frenzy, new art drowns out the old. I'm not a romantic but the good ole days are gone for good."

Believe it or not, you can actually pinpoint the year that the rest of the museum world caught on to this vision. The dam broke in 2000. Museums had staged crowd-pleasing architectural spectacles before — the Centre Pompidou and Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the Louvre defacing itself with a glitzy glass pyramid, Berlin's immense Hamburger Bahnhof, and Krens's own great-for-tourism, bad-for-any-artist-except-Richard Serra Guggenheim Bilbao. But the new era of gigantism mushroomed in the enormous, state-funded, 370,000-square-foot **Tate Modern** (<http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern>) in London, complete with a new footbridge across the Thames to the museum. (Imagine the cultural message of New York building a bridge across a river to get to a museum — another mammoth Tate is now under construction on the Thames.) When it opened, British artist Jake Chapman clairvoyantly observed that the new Tate was about popularizing art: "The Tate's like an all-welcoming, beneficent parent. It only says yes. They don't present art as implicitly resistant, but as pleasant." Legendary curator Clarissa Dalrymple concurred: "Tate Modern is a giant palpitating termite queen: It must be fed in order to produce."

What it needed to be fed was not art, not even crowds, but money, especially in an age of dwindling public funding for the arts and incredible competitive pressure for the attention of the very rich. The truth was, the whole art world had changed before our eyes — and while many understood early that the multipronged rise of biennial culture, art auctions, and art fairs meant a major shift, many fewer saw just what that would mean for museums, which had always seemed like bulwarks against consumerism and tulip mania. This year, there have been a string of stories about museums selling off masterpieces to fund new buildings and new acquisitions and cover bills. The most high profile was the news in February that **MoMA would be selling an 1887 Monet at auction** (<http://www.vulture.com/2015/01/momas-monet-fire-sale.html>) to "benefit the acquisitions fund." But a smaller item pained me more. Last month, the Westphalian State Museum in Germany announced that it is considering the sale of its St. John the Baptist panels by Giovanni di Paolo. Inevitably, these works will go to private collectors and out of public view forever.

So now the big question: Is this all bad? For starters, it isn't entirely new. Jasper Johns sold three paintings to MoMA from his first 1958 Leo Castelli solo; Frank Stella sold work to MoMA before his first Castelli show. Matthew Barney had a museum show less than 60 days after his New York solo debut. Despite worries about money corrupting art, money, museums, and contemporary art have been bedfellows since at least the advent of modernism. And despite persistent fretting about mixing high and low, art and pop culture have canoodled forever.

The main problem with the new era is that everything has started to look the same, with everyone curating the same way. Those Carsten Höller slides have also made appearances at Tate Modern, as well as in Berlin, New York, and Milan. I recall thinking I saw the same Shirin Neshat video installation in three shows in three cities in two weeks. It's like a curator virus that destroys the bone marrow that produces originality. Busy curator-bees now fly from show to show, participate in one another's panels, write texts for each other's catalogues, advise clients, organize exhibitions at art fairs and auction houses, teach at international art academies, judge prestigious awards where they give money to one another's pet artists, review one another's shows in art magazines (!), and curate like crazy. They scout at art fairs, like collectors; one look at Instagram confirms that many of these folks travel constantly. No wonder a lot of their shows look the same, like they were thought up in hotel lobbies, written on the backs of envelopes, and emailed to assistants. In an extraordinary confirmation of this nightmare of insularity, Julia Halperin **reports** (<http://theartnewspaper.com/news/museums/17199/>) in this month's *Art Newspaper* that "nearly one-third of major solo exhibitions held in U.S. museums between 2007 and 2013 featured artists represented by just five galleries" (Gagosian, Pace, David Zwirner, Hauser & Wirth, and Marian Goodman). This look-alike monoculture gets worse. At L.A. MoCA, the figure is 40 percent; at MoMA, it's 45 percent; at the Guggenheim, it's more than 90 percent. As Bonami observes, "Museums' wanting the same art lets them be fools among fools. If everyone's an idiot, then nobody's an idiot any longer."

Yet no one thinks that museums should stop showing current work. The new is a foyer to the past, reinventing, changing it — a mist one looks through, is refreshed and vexed by. To deny the new is as "death-ridden" as to obsess over it. So how much can these other museums learn from the Whitney's example? It's not a perfect template, and, to be sure, the Whitney is bound to mess some of this up, too. But there are a few lessons: Make enough space to show your permanent collections, and make them work with and for new acquisitions (and vice versa); concentrate on quality and original thinking, not quantity and entertainment; most of all, never forget that the reputations of museums are built on the backs of artists. If art is not the center of an institution, it turns out the institution cannot hold. As for the particularities of the Whitney mission, well, the Met just **unveiled details** (<http://www.metmuseum.org/visit/the-met-breuer/exhibitions>) of its first show in the Breuer building — "Unfinished," which will place old and new together, from Renaissance masters to the present, Titian to Luc Tuymans. This announcement came nearly a full year in advance, and just happened to be made right before the new Whitney opened. They must have been feeling competitive, though they had the right idea.

"Museums will find the right balance between the historical and the contemporary," Anne Pasternak, the forward-looking director of Creative Time, reassures me. And those that don't — they may just spawn new institutions, too. It's happened before, with spectacular results. MoMA was born in 1929 of the Met ignoring modern art. The following year, the Whitney was organized in response to the Met and MoMA shunning American art. When these two institutions began shying from "provocative decisions" in the 1970s, visionaries like Alanna Heiss created what has become PS1, and Marcia Tucker left the Whitney and founded the New Museum. That's how explosive museums being unresponsive can be. But maybe, just maybe, the new Whitney is being explosive enough, and showing us the way.

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