

Research plan

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10-11-2022

Reading Seminar_Week 1.2_15/09/2022

The modern art museum as public space

Mark Pimlott (2021), 'Visibility, Spectacle, Theatricality and Power: the problem of the museum'

What is a museum? We have all visited one, but have we ever wondered how it works or based on which factors we choose to visit one rather than another? Indeed, a museum is not a simple collection of objects. A museum is a complex machine fed by many figures: curators, collectors, benefactors and visitors. But also cleaners, visitors, receptionists, etc. All these figures together represent the actual 'engine' of the museum. An engine made up of people without whom the museum machine cannot function.

The most important and most in-demand artworks are those that bring the most visitors, but also those that require the most investment. Art should not only astonish and educate the public but also produce income, thus keeping the aura and authority of the museum institution intact. That is why a museum needs to promote its contents through specially designed exhibition spaces.

But how can a museum do all this? What are the recurring characteristics of today's and yesterday's exhibition spaces? Museums usually have a neutral and contemplative character to create an intimate relationship between the observer and the artwork. It was the 1960s and 1970s that marked the beginning of a new artists' awareness regarding the importance of exhibition spaces. In this direction, minimal art has played a fundamental role. Indeed, artists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris, through their non-allusive and non-representational works, forced the viewer to look at the artworks in relation to the spaces in which they were exhibited. It is because of those new needs of the art world that the relevance of the white cube has emerged. Indeed, the idea behind these white spaces is to create an atmosphere that allows the visitor to forget about the world around him or her. It is in this way that the exhibition space provides value to the work it houses.

However, it is not always the space that is subject to the artwork. For example, there are works by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Michael Asher that place the viewer's attention precisely on the space in which they are exhibited. The artwork made by Michael Asher in 1974 in Los Angeles is an example. The artist decided not to display any objects inside the white cube. The only thing he did was to remove the partition wall dividing the art gallery and the museum offices, revealing them to the public. Asher, therefore, did not limit himself to the artwork but also studied its visibility conditions.

In modern museums other exhibition strategies are emerging. A magnificent example can be found in the Tate Modern, where the old turbine hall has given way to an immense exhibition space with a strongly industrial character reminiscent of 1970s London. In this space, as in the entire building, there is a special atmosphere. An atmosphere that makes its visitors travel, dream and enjoy but also misplace, desire and spend. Indeed, the Tate Modern is not just a museum, it is one of London's most visited attractions. Access is free and open to all. Inside there are shops, bars, restaurants and bookshops. People can go there to see an art exhibition, grab something to eat, read a book, etc. This is what a modern museum is all about, a careful study of the conditions of visibility of artworks to make artists known and recognised, making collectors' investments pay off, giving a good public image of the benefactors and providing entertainment and spectacle for the public.

Grayson Perry, 'Beating the Bounds', BBC Reith Lectures, 4 April 2020

Art is people who point at things. I'm not fetishistically attached to the idea of handicrafts as part of the art process – Christopher Wren didn't build St Paul's Cathedral – if you end up with an amazing thing at the end of it. But I do question the waning power of the art gallery to add significance to anything you drag into it.

_Grayson Perry, in an interview¹ with Emine Samer for *the Guardian*

While we dig deeper and deeper into what contemporary art is and how we can distinguish it from crafts or ordinary objects, we understand that it is not only the particular work of art that we consider, but also its entire context, the complicated system it belongs to. Going to a museum is already an agreement that what we see is art. The art-world machine is based on such general understandings – that some people are artists and some are not, that a museum is a place where we see art, that the expensive or well-known piece must be worth seeing. Isn't it a paradox that art, which is stereotypically identified as a free and independent discipline, is in fact so restrained by those unwritten arrangements?

Why is a urinal perceived differently when Duchamp signs it and exhibits it in the gallery? Grayson Perry concluded his lecture "Breaking the Bounds" with a statement that the boundaries of contemporary art are not formed by **what** art could be, but **where**, by **who**, and **how**. Considering that since Duchamp's revolutionary act everything, even an object as commonplace and ordinary as a urinal, can become a work of art, we must understand that the contemporary comprehension of what art can be, is much more complex and broadened by various factors than its definition established for the historic works. Indeed, it is easier to position a considered piece within the bounds of artistry, when *why*, *where* and by *who* are usually already established – for instance, the European Renaissance usually operated within the framework of Christian motives. But today, and ever since the artists started questioning the common understanding of art (with Duchamp as one of the pioneers), we no longer associate the artwork's value with mere craftsmanship and skill, but take into account a whole network of relations and interpret its significance according to various contextual circumstances.

To help us understand this complex chain of different relationships and determine what kind of object is it that can nowadays be perceived as art, Perry comes up with the authorial theory of "8 Boundary Markers", which he in turn explains in his lecture. Starting with a notion of the so-called "borrowed importance", he introduces the essential, but also difficult relation of the artworks with its spatial context. *Does art need to be in a context where you might find art? Is "art context" a lame excuse for art?* - he asks. Perry has evoked an example of Banksy's mural being torn from the wall and put on display in the gallery. The street artist, in an act of disagreement, publicly declared that ever since that moment he cannot be considered an author of this particular work. Is it then the mural itself that carried the significance? Or was it the circumstances that made this piece a "Banksy's mural"? This logic can also be reversed – as in the case of works such as Duchamp's "Fountain", where the significance came with the moment of a carefully staged exhibition display. At this point, it is important to notice the valuable lesson that comes from understanding an undoubted authority of a museum space, and the consequent weight it carries as a medium that can shape the public's perception. It is never a blank canvas. A piece's interpretation and positioning within or beyond the boundaries of art also rely on the relation with, and the nature of its spatial context.

¹ Perry, 2021

Among the listed “Boundary Markers”, we also found the one called “handbag and hipster test” particularly interesting, because it again refers to how our perception is shaped by general cultural understandings. In a humorous way, Perry states that *if the people gathered around a piece of work were oligarch’s wives with expensive handbags and beardy blokes who ride single gear bikes, then it’s probably art*. By characterising such a specific audience, he draws our attention to the fact that the art world belongs to the privileged group of people, who enter the realm of culture with *a good education and a lot of money*. Thus, returning to the question quoted at the beginning, **who** is therefore not only referring to the artist, but also to the people to whom the art is addressed.

Even though Grayson Perry’s lecture was carried out in a comical manner, it still reflects critically on crucial aspects that concern the contemporary understanding of the world of art. For us, the awareness of the complexity that entails the various relationships of artworks with its circumstances is important, because it also manifests itself in the very nature of the museum. Who are today’s cultural institutions made for? What is their role in shaping people’s perception towards artworks? Thanks to Perry we will ask ourselves such questions and reflect on the whole network of contemporary art’s relationships in the upcoming design process for the extension of M HKA in Antwerp.

Reading Seminar_Week 1.3_22/09/2022

The modern art museum as urban event

Charlotte Klonk, *'The Dilemma of the Modern Art Museum' in Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009)

Going to a museum nowadays in many ways feels like attending an interesting and exciting event. It seems only natural that the museum keeps providing new exhibitions and that the way the art pieces can be experienced is, often, similar. This has not always been the case: the start of the Documenta in the 1950s, a series of exhibitions occurring every four or five years in Kassel, Germany, can be seen as a turning point in this regard. In her book 'Spaces of experience', Charlotte Klonk describes the significant and lasting effects the Documenta has had on the exhibition of art.

During the 1950s, West Germany was slowly beginning to overcome its recent past, trying to regenerate the market economy and looking towards the future and other Western countries, in which consumerism played (or had just started playing) a central role. During this particular period the Documenta was conceived, reinventing the way an art exhibition could be approached. Its event-like nature and unprecedented approach to its interiors, created the possibility for West Germany to embrace a Western lifestyle and to start letting go of its difficult history.

How did the Documenta revolutionise the experience?

The Documenta's organisers rejected the idea of the established art gallery with its own, permanent collection and worked with a different exhibition each edition, thereby moving the experience of art towards a form of an event, instead of being able to return to the same collection over a longer period of time. This strongly aided the development of the spectator as tourist. Also, they radically innovated display strategies, by putting the curator in a position of 'curator-as-hero'. The Documenta demonstrated how to keep au courant of artistic development, stay relevant as a gallery of contemporary art and created a consumer-centred model for its visitors.

How are these effects still visible in museums and galleries nowadays?

Immediately noticeable are the similarities within the interiors of museums and galleries. The curator is still seen as the hero, but at first glance the prevalent setting comprises white walls and the possibility for the artist to position their work as they'd envisioned it, as conceived for the Documenta. Temporary exhibitions, but also the rearranging of the permanent collections, form an inevitable part of the museum's approach to attracting vast amounts of visitors, most of whom are tourists.

The model of 'spectator as consumer' is discussed on multiple occasions in the text. The author describes that it is no coincidence that the model first appears during the periods historians see as the beginning of modern consumer society (in the United States between the First and Second World War and in Europe after the Second World War). During these periods a transition of consumption occurred from necessities towards lifestyle goods. The consumption of luxury goods became a common leisure activity and so did attending art exhibitions, starting with the Documenta. The author compares the experience that is provided by art galleries to a shopping experience, even in terms of architecture. In this regard, nothing has changed since. When envisioning a new design for the M HKA therefore, the developments started by the Documenta should not be overlooked.

The Bilbao Effect #1: Bilbao, Spain Guggenheim Bilbao's director general discusses the city's world-renowned transformation

Can culture boost economic development?

The topic of the Bilbao Effect raises an important question about the objectives of creating museums, which, as it turns out, can go beyond the realm of culture. Last week, by analysing the text written by Mark Pimlott and the lecture given by Grayson Perry, we have focused on the field of art by talking about the relationship of such institutions with artists, curators and visitors and reflecting on the place of art in today's world. We considered the ways in which architecture can influence our perception when looking at works of art, and the importance of the institution's imagery, which can highlight its authority and, by referring to typological patterns, can position the artworks in the 'right' context. However, after listening to this week's Bilbao Effect podcast, we understand that sometimes investment in a museum is not as much connected to the world of culture, but results from a decision that is primarily political and/or economic.

Indeed, every museum is a building situated in a wider context, not only architectural and urban, but also that of the local market, tourism, and the current political scene. Museum's architecture is not only important in its relationship to art, but also as a component of the urban fabric or landscape - often fundamentally influencing its immediate surroundings and reshaping its identity. Sometimes its construction is motivated by factors largely unrelated to the world of culture. Such was the case with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which has now become a symbol of the region's development and the transformation of its capital city from a degraded industrial agglomeration into one of Spain's most visited tourist destinations. Museum director Juan Ignacio Vidarte explains in the podcast that the success of this project depended not only on the specific situation the city of Bilbao found itself in at the end of the 1990s, but also on the fact that the investment in the cultural institution was only part of a larger plan to transform the neighbourhood. Without components such as the construction of a metro line or the cleanup of a polluted river, 'the museum by itself would not be able to achieve the same goal'. What is important, however, is that the whole transformation plan needed a magnet to attract visitors and a catalyst of the whole process of change - something that was achievable largely due to the building's iconicity and the recognisability of its architect's name.

Although we consider this type of architecture as representative of an international franchise, which has little to do with the promotion of local culture or history and is designed mainly to attract the widest possible audience from outside the region, it is difficult to say unambiguously that the approach of designing an icon-building is entirely wrong in terms of responding to the local context. We often examine buildings of such an approach with regard to their integration into the architectural and urban identity of a place - in this respect, Gehry's Guggenheim Museum is indeed an alien, imposed creation. However, it is worth recalling that the city, which was in the midst of an unemployment crisis, has gained 907 new full-time jobs², that hitherto neglected neighbourhoods have been developed and that Bilbao has become a recognisable location on the European art and culture scene. The strategy of creating a new 'branding' for the city - especially at a time when the Internet and global media were beginning to sprout, creating instant sensationalism and international appeal - has proved successful from the point of view of the local market and has therefore benefited the whole region far beyond initial expectations. While it is true that the city's residents are not the target audience of the museum's exhibitions and services, would it be fair to say that the Guggenheim was not created with them in mind?

We will soon be facing similar dilemmas ourselves, choosing the right strategy for the M HKA extension project in Antwerp. Does the Zuid district need a new icon? In a city where there is already a local

² Plaza, 2007

variant of the Bilbao effect in the form of the MAS museum, and a number of other architectural landmarks, would a new building even have a chance of becoming an icon? Where would funding come from to hire a starchitect - and if it is public money, can the museum avoid becoming a politically charged institution? The podcast on the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao opened our eyes to a number of questions, by drawing our attention to the fact that understanding the role of a museum institution only through the prism of its relationship with the art world is incomplete.

Reading Seminar_Week 1.4_29/09/2022

Culture, race and privilege in the modern art museum

Darby English and Charlotte Barat, 'Blackness at MoMA: A Legacy of Deficity', in *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA* (New York: MoMA, 2019)

New York's MoMA is one of the most powerful and influential modern art museums. However, beyond its global importance and fame, MoMA is also a human system with its merits and flaws. Indeed, human beings have difficulty changing, they are creatures of habit and they have prejudices. Curators and artists included. Therefore, it is not surprising that the history of this institution has been marked by inequality and injustice. The text written by Charlotte Barat and Darby English focuses on the complex relationship between the institution and black artists. From pioneering initiatives such as the opening of 'The Studio Museum' and the 'Museum's Children's Art Carnival' to the divisions between black and white artists in exhibitions. The text provides a detailed chronological analysis of different exhibitions to bring out the changes that have taken place over the years. To show an example, in 1934, primitive and modern artworks were shown separately. Oppositely, in 1948, the two collections were exhibited together to show affinities and similarities. This is an important point: *why separate artworks? why group them?*

In 2018, 75% of the more than 10,000 artists exhibited were white men. However, since 2010 MoMa has acquired more than 570 works by black artists, a figure close to the total of works collected between 1929 and 2009 (640). *Can inequalities be solved by doing fifty-fifty?* Absolutely not, that is the problem. Although big steps forward have been made, one gets the impression that these numbers are the result of a kind of 'compensation' rather than a natural artistic selection. As early as 1963, Malcolm X said that all you get from these practices is just "tokenism, one or two Negroes in a job or at a lunch counter so the rest of you will be quiet"³. Unfortunately, it is an approach that has often been used at MoMA in New York. Just think of the Studio Museum, where the idea was to provide a forum for communication within the contemporary arts for the entire community, black and white. In reality, this small museum was a kind of MoMA transplanted to Harlem, i.e. an institution with a predominantly white orientation. Similarly, in 1970 the MoMA organised an exhibition of Bruce Davidson's photographs. Once again a white man's vision of Harlem. In short, what the text shows is how MoMA's good intentions have not always been reflected in reality. A problem that will finally be solved when a black artist is just one artist among others. Indeed, quoting Achille Mbembe "*the Black Man is the one (or the thing) that one sees when one sees nothing, when one understands nothing, and, above all, when one wishes to understand nothing.*"⁴

³ Malcolm X, 1963

⁴ English and Barat, 2019

'Culture and Privilege', BBC, 8 September 2021 (first half)

We all agree on the importance of culture in our society. Culture is in fact a kind of 'social lift' that can change people's lives. That is why we are all clamouring for governments, institutions and private companies to invest in schools, academies, museums, etc. *But are we sure that culture is the cure to all problems of society?* Orian Brook, through her book titled 'Culture is bad for you', wants to make us think. Indeed, while culture educates and enriches people, both humanly and financially, it is also the cause of profound inequalities. The best schools and universities are only accessible to the children of wealthy families. Furthermore, not everyone can afford the costs of a painting, drawing or music course. So it is not surprising Orian Brook mentions that in the UK only 17% of the population paints in their spare time and only 12% can play a musical instrument.

In short, culture is a 'social lift' only for those who can afford it. Especially in the arts sector, where stress, unpaid work and the almost total absence of meritocracy rule. A system that is so unfair that even those who benefit from it are ashamed. Those privileged by this system, usually white middle-class males, practise what Americans call tokenism, in other words, the fake charity that the rich give to the poor. It also happens in art institutions, where by employing a non-white person in a predominantly white occupation or a woman in a traditionally male profession, they only want to create an appearance of inclusiveness to deflect accusations of discrimination and impartiality.

Even access to those spaces that should be more 'inclusive' is a privilege for the few. As mentioned in the podcast, in the UK only one-fifth of the population visits art galleries and museums. Compared to the past, today it is not so difficult to see libraries, workshops and community spaces within a museum. What is truly difficult is to see these spaces open to everyone. Indeed, access to these areas is often denied or reduced: paid courses and workshops, libraries open only to researchers or museum visitors with a ticket, etc. It is disheartening to think that even in a museum it is not always easy to have access to culture. *If not here, where?*

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