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21ST CENTURY EXHIBITION RHETORICS

BY
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SUBMITTED TO PITZER COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF
BACHELOR OF ARTS

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“The work on the nature of that institutional speech called exhibitions has just begun.”

-Bruce Ferguson

Introduction

The desire to create a language through which reading artwork can be attainable to an inclusive audience is a relatively modern aspiration. Painting and sculpture have been longstanding ideals of elite aesthetic ambition, which are held in containers of cultural and social tradition, removed from the ebb and flow of mundane existence. These containers were initially created to encapsulate historic moments, providing insight into a creator and their ideas which were inaccessible to the audience of that era. Since the early 19th century, the conversation in art theory has turned toward the meaning, purpose, and justification for the design and function of these containers, specifically in regard to the exhibition of modern and contemporary art, much of which has yet to be placed within the bounds of a certain aesthetic period. Since the white cube gallery design was ingrained into mainstream museological culture in the early twentieth-century, the context of display has been exalted to the stature of the artwork itself. The pioneers of this debate include but are not limited to—Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss, Brian O’Doherty, Bruce Ferguson, and Carol Duncan. These writers critiqued the institutional structures of museum and gallery display and expressed the impulse for a canon of access to art and, as Ferguson described, a language of exhibition.

A language of critique was soon thereafter founded on the principles and ideas that these authors composed. This language served the unique needs of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and inspired opposition to institutional tradition in political art and, most notably, the

institutional critique movement.¹ The work that can best encapsulate this moment is Andrea Fraser's *Museum Highlights*.² For decades now, this style has dominated museum spaces and has served to question tradition. But a framework which encapsulates the ideas of institutional critique has not been foregrounded in major American museums and contemporary galleries, where progressive sociopolitical ideals still dominate much of today's artwork. Contemporary galleries have subsequently not been the focal point of progressive museum initiatives, since the majority showcase even controversial and provocative temporary exhibitions within the confines of their specific gallery tradition. At this point, the foundational principles of installation require more than just review. As Carol Duncan so aptly noted, "although fashions in wall colors, ceiling heights, lighting, and other details have over the years varied with changing museological trends, installation design has consistently and increasingly sought to isolate objects for the concentrated gaze of the aesthetic adept and to suppress as irrelevant other meanings the objects might have."³ Consequently, the creation and ordination of a twenty-first century exhibition rhetoric which reconditions the institutional canon is an imperative.

The art museum is an exploratory setting of personal and political expression, a liminal space in which the bridge between now and then is connected and debated. Marxist-feminist museum studies scholar Carol Duncan wrote in her influential essay, *The Art Museum as Ritual*,

¹ For the purposes of this essay, the definition Institutional Critique will come from the Museum of Modern Art: A form of conceptual art, which emerged in the late 1960s, centered on the critique of museums, galleries, private collections, and other art institutions. Artists working in this vein use a range of strategies to expose the ideologies and power structures underlying the circulation, display, and discussion of art. "Institutional Critique: MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art. <https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/institutional-critique>.

² Fraser, *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*

³ Carol Duncan and Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual," in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 484.

that ,“‘Liminality,’ a term associated with ritual, can also be applied to the kind of attention we bring to art museums.”⁴ The museum space continues to function in a highly technically ritualized manner. However, instead of providing a ritualistic basis for such a unique environment the museum space is often seen as one of such a sterile and lifeless nature that it cannot promote individual or communal engagement.

Today, museums appear to a large portion of the public to be institutions of personal and organizational greed, founded by problematic individuals with collections built through unethical practices. Compounded with heightened sociopolitical tensions in America, many patrons of the arts opine that the museum can no longer exist to promote social or artistic progress but only to uphold institutional wealth and systemic notions of race, gender, and policy that are quintessential to a traditional narrative of Art History as it exists in the western world.⁵ While institutional critique and radical political art—which usually exists outside the gallery space in order to posit itself in complete opposition to the institution—challenge these notions and the importance of this tradition, the foundation of presenting art, and especially contemporary art, has not shifted from methods of decontextualization and prioritizing the exhibition space over the actual artwork. In terms of the freedom to alter and work in conversation with spaces of exhibition, installation art—three-dimensional artwork which by definition is designed to transform a space—is granted a sense of priority, but this privilege is not granted to other media and formats. For this reason, contemporary exhibition strategies remain stagnant, rooted in the

⁴ Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” 477

⁵ As written in the 2016 book, *Remix: Changing Conversations in Museums of the Americas*: Holo, Selma, and Mari-Tere Álvarez, eds. “Introduction: Panarchy and the Museum.” In *Remix: Changing Conversations in Museums of the Americas*, 1st ed., 1–8. University of California Press, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt19rmbt3.4>.

institutional canon of the white cube, relegating viewers to the ideological implications of outdated artistic representations.

As the roles of critic and curator previously came together and blurred the lines between the hierarchy of their positions, so have the lines between curator and artist, as this partnership has evolved to be a more crucial factor to museum operations. Contemporary art historian Claire Bishop explains this relationship, outlining the “trend of inviting contemporary artists to design or troubleshoot amenities within the museum.”⁶ These partnerships particularly aid in the work deemed decolonization, the efforts of institutions to prioritize diversity and equitable representation in attempts to amend the wrongdoings of their historical practices. While this approach is sporadically successful in reimagining the complexes of superiority within geographical contexts and artistic identity, it does not address the implications of forced historical ignorance present in contemporary exhibition practices that reinforce institutional identifiers that are vehemently counterproductive to critical and progressive dialogue. Reimagining the structural context of contemporary display tactics, and centralizing individual artistic ideology, proposes an alternative that has the potential to reorient audiences and establish an innovative and inclusive language of exhibition. In the display of contemporary art, emphasizing the moment of production, the sociopolitical context, and the artist’s *representivity* is the foundation for creating a new language of exhibition.

Decolonizing the Museum

Museum and gallery initiatives beginning in 2016 with the Black Lives Matter movement and subsequent Decolonize This Place organization have been working to decolonize and repair

⁶ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (2004): pp. 51-79, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379810>.

histories of unequal representation include strategies of reorganization, rewriting the language of timelines and historical labels, and including a more diverse array of artistic perspectives and events.⁷ These efforts include the reimagining of patrons of the arts as well as the setting and accompanying materials of the artwork. Like many western institutions, art museums and galleries now face consistent calls to diversify their staff, boards, and leadership, as well as the makeup of their permanent collections and continual temporary showcases.

These calls critique both the current practices of the institutions in question and the historic acquisition of their collections and funding. One such institution, in particular, is the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, a landmark for modern and contemporary painting and sculpture. Before the official founding of Decolonize This Place, its original organizers sought “to hold the Guggenheim accountable for the oppressive labor conditions of debt-bonded South Asian migrant workers building the museum’s branch on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi.”⁸ The group staged protests in and around the Guggenheim in New York, outlining the calls for workers’ rights, directing these demands to the board of trustees of the museum. Perhaps the most recognized display, and one that was so bold and controversial that it effectively ended

⁷ For the purposes of this essay, decolonization is defined by the terms and questions raised by the organization at the heart of the movement to reconstruct American art institutions, Decolonize This Place. Their definition from 2016 is as follows: “What we demand of our institutions must be beyond diversity, equity and inclusion. The demand for a decolonization process in the form of a commission is a single demand that allows us to think not just about demographic adjustments to the institution and simply reducing harm, but about rethinking the whole damn system. A process led by the people, in which the institution participates in good faith with stakeholders. No issue is off the table. Everything needs to be unsettled. Why does an institution need professional curators? An Executive Director? A Board of Trustees? These professionalized roles are elite concentrations of power. They have stunted our imaginations when it comes to what an art institution could be, how it is governed, and by whom. Why assimilate to a system that perpetuates so much harm? How can institutions become places not of curation but of collective care? How will the interest of the artworld in decolonization turn this into lasting material commitment? What are people willing to share? What are they willing to give up? Land is at the heart of all these questions.” “DTP,” DTP, <https://decolonizethisplace.org/>.

⁸ Decolonize This Place, “Decolonial Operations Manual,” <https://decolonizethisplace.org/>, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c5e0c57d86cc9226827c754/t/600b3b61caec9b2e049d6ca8/1611348841260/dtp_decolonial+om_readerspreads_final_lowres.pdf.

negotiations between the activists and the Guggenheim, was the projection of “Wage Theft” and “1% Museum” onto the facade of the museum (see image 1). These actions slowed the construction plans of the new museum, and their actions effectively created a spotlight on the human-rights issues of all American art institutions. The promotional materials and written histories of museums rarely if almost never include the problematic initiatives of their past or present, and more often than not they publicly pay homage and hold devotional space to controversial actions and figures of their past.

Decolonization efforts seek to unearth these histories in order to not only acknowledge malpractice and prejudice but to begin to repair relationships with those affected communities. Another component of decolonization involves the physical reorganization of the museum and gallery spaces. Geographic hierarchy is often enforced by organizational tactics, showcasing European and American art in the most prominent gallery spaces while relegating Asian, African, and Indigenous art to more inaccessible galleries on lower floors, asserting the notion that these cultures are alienated and separate from the canon of art history. Based on a study conducted by the Association of Art Directors in 2019, approximately two thirds of major American art museums were undergoing strategic initiatives to increase inclusive community engagement.⁹ These projects centered around “physical expansions and renovations—working to broaden their audiences and re-center themselves around their visitors and users, providing the necessary human resources and organizational structure.”¹⁰ Many of these proposals involved expanding not only the museum and gallery spaces, but also expanding the diversity of artistic material on

⁹ Roger Schonfeld and Liam Sweeney, “Organizing the Work of the Art Museum,” *Ithaca S+R*, July 10, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.311731>.

¹⁰ Schonfeld and Sweeney, “Organizing the Work of the Art Museum.”

view. Ultimately these initiatives all reflect conceptual ideas of museum performance, which involves taking public steps to physically reimagine the formal components of display.

While these specific efforts towards equitable artistic exchange and the broader terms of decolonization promote progression and restitution, they rarely reimagine the context of contemporary art and exhibition. These efforts instead take shape through the lens of inclusion and diversification, resulting in revisionist actions that address the past, not current or future work. And these actions shape the entire museum experience, as Duncan wrote: “What we see and do not see in museums—and on what terms and by whose authority we do or do not see it—is closely linked to larger questions about who constitutes the community and who defines its identity.”¹¹ The nature of these progressive initiatives becomes increasingly problematic when singular past wrongdoings are addressed, especially when contemporary art continues to be exhibited in such traditional and institutional ways. Art theorist and critic Bruce Ferguson proposed in 1993 that “ideas around issues of representation are at the center of what characterizes relations between postmodern theory and art. In particular, the politics of *representivity*, meaning who is represented, how and in what ways, is paramount to these accounts.”¹² While this definition of representivity is principally important to decolonization, it does not entirely encompass the methodology of creating a narrative for contemporary art to exist within. Instead, contemporary art heavily relies on its context in exhibitions. Ferguson continues to argue that “it is surprising then that exhibitions of art *per se* receive so little attention from theorists. Exhibitions are publicly sanctioned representations of the identity,

¹¹ Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” 475.

¹² Bruce Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics,” *Thinking About Exhibitions*, March 6, 1996, pp. 175-190, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203991534-20>.

principally, but not exclusively, of the institutions which present them—exhibitions act as the visible encounter with a public which receives and acknowledges their import and projected status as important signs of important signs.”¹³ Since so many current exhibitions either consist of contemporary art or involve such contemporary sociopolitical theories, why is the focus of decolonization not on the individual institutional narratives of exhibition?¹⁴ In addition to the often futile attempts to right the wrongs of past figures—collectors, curators, founders, and directors—why not focus efforts on creating a modern institution not only sympathetic to these causes but primarily focused on engaging with them?

The White Cube Problem

With the advent of the field of art history and the reexamination of the curriculum in recent years, art museums are now home to a plurality of methods of both institutional and disciplinary relations that articulate knowledge and power dynamics. Decolonization initiatives seek to emphasize the articulation of developing knowledge and critique such pervasive power dynamics in all genres except for the exhibition of contemporary art. Contemporary wings and galleries of major American institutions still conform to the aesthetic and ideology promoted by that of the white cube. The white cube model of exhibition architecture and design has its most basic roots in the mid-1800s, when museums began experimenting with picture placement and hanging paintings at eye level. This isolation of the artworks drew more attention to the background wall and, as art historian Charlotte Klonk noted, “for the first time, the colour of the walls was

¹³ Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics,” 175.

¹⁴ In a New York Times review of the “Best Art of 2022,” only two of the twenty exhibitions mentioned could not be considered completely contemporary. Holland Cotter and Roberta Smith, “Best Art of 2022,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/arts/design/best-art-2022.html>.

explicitly up for discussion.”¹⁵ Art historian Andrew McClellan adds that “in addition to being more selective in what works of art went on display, there was a lot of interesting discussion in the early 20th century about what conditions should prevail inside the museum to heighten appreciation.” This involved many didactic details, and he continues to note that “there was an interesting round of experimentation with lighting in particular, but also other configurations of pictures on walls to arrive at what was thought to be the most successful overall approach to display.”¹⁶ An entirely uniform approach to displaying and hanging specifically painted works rose to popularity in 1918 along with the publishing of the first empirical study of the museum by Benjamin Ives Gilman. Gilman sought to reimagine the models of display, starting with discarding the salon style of exhibiting paintings. He felt that what he called ‘museum fatigue’ was brought on by an overwhelming amount of art. Isolating artwork and creating a more minimalist environment would combat this sentiment. Duncan refers to the white cube as the *aesthetic museum*, which maintained prominence well into the twentieth century. Accordingly, “its main proponents, all wealthy, educated gentlemen—the most influential statement of this doctrine is Benjamin Ives Gilman—[stated] the first obligation of an art museum is to present works of art—as objects of aesthetic contemplation and not as illustrations of historical or archeological information.”¹⁷

Art museums in the United States and across Europe began to favor white, the new neutral backdrop for displaying work (see image 2). This uniformity also aided in “transition[ing]

¹⁵ Abigail Cain, “How the White Cube Came to Dominate the Art World,” *Artsy*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-white-cube-dominate-art>.

¹⁶ Cain, “How the White Cube Came to Dominate the Art World.”

¹⁷ Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” 482.

between temporary exhibitions—a phenomenon which was becoming more and more important to museums as the 20th century progressed.”¹⁸ The whitewashing of the gallery space contributed to the isolation of political ideals prevalent across certain movements, and stark decontextualization of individual artwork furthered this separation. Perhaps because of these results, Hitler’s Third Reich standardized this exhibition approach across Germany, and soon after France, England, and the United States were using the white cube as the default method of display. One of the only examples of institutionalized art that rebelled against this burgeoning trend was found in Russia. One scholar has shown that “Russian museums began to present art within a communal social context promoting the collective, proletariat ideal—Russian museums relied heavily on supplemental material including maps, graphs, charts, photography, and didactic wall text, rather than allowing the art to speak for itself.”¹⁹ Even in this format, which rejected the ideas of geographic and genre-based hierarchy promoted by the Germans, the perceived political threat of art was still contained by their exhibition model. The founding director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Alfred Barr, believed all social factors “were irrelevant and even harmful to the creation of art, and therefore sought to eradicate such concerns from its display.”²⁰ His ideas influenced other major exhibitions of modern art on a global scale, as museums adopted not only the architecture of the white cube but also a minimalist display approach in general. This included limiting or eliminating accompanying materials, wall text, and other informational and aesthetic additions to the gallery space.

¹⁸ Cain, “How the White Cube Came to Dominate the Art World.”

¹⁹ Birkett, Whitney Fehl. “To Infinity and beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube.” Dissertation, Seton Hall University, 2012.

²⁰ Birkett. “To Infinity and beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube.” 38.

Though the white cube was consistently utilized to eradicate politics and social affairs from the museum space, its design was founded on and representative of intense ideological clashes. Curator Elena Filipovic succinctly argues that this gallery model “can be many things, but perhaps first and foremost it is not a neutral thing.”²¹ The white cube promotes capitalism in its most democratic form and elevates the artist and their paintings or sculptures to a position of great privilege. It emphasizes the viewer’s place as passive but “informed members of the consumer society.”²² The external architecture of art museums began to reflect that of the minimalist, mechanical galleries inside of them throughout the twentieth century, emphasizing the mass consumer culture that art was to participate in. At this point, the white cube gallery was not only aesthetically linked to cultural purity, capitalist intent, and a distinct social hierarchy, but also to marketing and commercial power dynamics.

The white cube design, and specifically Barr’s enforcement of the gallery display, was not free from lasting criticism but clearly withstood those inquiries and prevailed as the most formally accepted method of contemporary exhibition. American art historian Meyer Schapiro was one of the most notable critics, claiming “there is no 'pure art,' ... all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience, and non aesthetic concerns.”²³ He accurately reasoned that any narrative of history, let alone art history, cannot be genuinely understood without context. Concerning these choices, Duncan stated that, “the sparse installations—take the aesthetic ideal to an extreme, as do installations of modern art

²¹ Elena Filipovic, “What Is An Exhibition?,” *When Exhibitions Become Form: A Brief History of the Artist as Curator*, January 28, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.17517>.

²² Birkett. “To Infinity and beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube.” 39.

²³ Meyer Schapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art,” in *Modern Art: 19th' and 20th' Centuries* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978), 196.

at many institutions.”²⁴ This extreme tradition undermines historical accuracy and placement, upholding modern and contemporary art as somehow timeless and placeless, separate from the viewer. And though the ideas of the white cube claim to allow audiences the liberty to analyze art free from external influence, in reality they limit artistic comprehension and patronize even the most slightly uninformed viewer. Esteemed art critic Brian O’Doherty wrote in 1986 in his classic essay on the crisis of the modern gallery, *Inside The White Cube*, that “we have now reached a point where we see not the art but the *space* first.”²⁵ The environment promotes superficial engagement with art, prioritizing certain audiences and alienating others. This is especially true in regards to contemporary art. In academic and history painting, a large majority of viewers are able to deduce meaning from identifiable figures and time periods. This applies to other genres and well known works of art, such as cubist painters or impressionists, known through historic fame and attention in popular culture. However, with modern and contemporary art, many symbols and personal effects are virtually incomprehensible without given context, especially when a depurate gallery space is the most recognizable content.

Any possible narrative that emerges from an exhibition is thwarted by the white cube model. The artwork in a white cube gallery is removed from even an awareness of the outside world. It serves as an enclosure that elevates the artwork to such a privileged status that the display is therefore exalted to that of an almost religious setting, where silent observance is provided as the only acceptable form of interaction. O’Doherty commented on the lack of interaction that the space cultivates: “Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial—the space is devoted

²⁴ Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” 484.

²⁵ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 14.

to the technology of esthetics—your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion.”²⁶ The visual impact of this sparse, sterile environment effectively removes the artwork from any traceable art historical placement, much less the sociopolitical conditions under which the work was made. Furthermore, the white cube exhibition framework has not been altered since the Second World War. It is a quintessential icon of the modernist movement, symbolic of decades of art grouped under the labels of *modern* and *contemporary*. Not only are these works now separated from their contextual origins, but in a way separated from an art historical narrative, isolating them from the world and from their predecessors and influences. The white cube model has prevailed over time, holding a monopoly over any other imaginable format of exhibition. Contemporary art exists in spaces that have become almost oppressively monotonous. The works inside them cannot suit this era of desire for nonconformity, anti-institutional rhetoric, and in a sense a new avant-garde. The white cube promotes passive consumption and institutional interaction, both of which pose ideas antithetical to the current time. This model proved that the space in which art lives defines it as art, but it objectively fails the unique needs of the twenty-first century, where instead the space must represent the art and artists ideology themselves. In the twenty-first century, when living artists are working and exhibiting their works on a larger scale than ever before, perhaps more than just the wall color could finally be up for discussion.

Imagining New Exhibition Models

Today, the white cube in contemporary galleries is rarely questioned until it is critiqued for promoting racist, sexist, or other prejudiced messages within an exhibition.²⁷ Only then is the

²⁶ O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, 15.

²⁷ As outlined in the 2018 Art Basel Magazine: Brian Droitcour, “Breaking Away from the White Cube,” *Art Basel* (Art Basel, 2018), <https://www.artbasel.com/news/breaking-away-from-the-white-cube?lang=en>.

model debated and its historic appreciation by oppressive authoritarianism considered. Many galleries and museums in the 21st century have begun experimental processes of fashioning divergent realities for their collections to be displayed within, though a cohesive alternative has yet to coalesce. One such example is The Shed museum in New York (see image 3). In 2018 the new institution presented their state-of-the-art operations plan alongside generous new funding from Michael Bloomberg. Curator Dorothea von Hantelmann argued that this “museum of the future”²⁸ would be “a bold new kind of cultural space, one that goes beyond the museum’s spaces of individualistic contemplation.”²⁹ Even with this manifesto and purported new vision The Shed seems to be yet another idealized, billionaire-funded, commercialized art venue which falls short in creating an approachable venue that doesn’t just cater to a specific, elite audience.³⁰ Instead, then, of fashioning overly-ambitious new institutions to fit the needs of the twenty-first century, reworking the models of already established markers of contemporary art is perhaps a better and more straightforward alternative. The need for a viable alternative is a continually urgent request as so many of these initiatives and well-meaning new institutions continue to miss the mark. As institutions seem mired in the past, failing to make needed structural changes, faith in art museums to adequately and appropriately promote artistic expression is dwindling. O’Doherty perfectly sums up the sentiments generated by experiencing art in the white cube and provides a rationale for overturning such a model:

²⁸ Paddy Johnson, “The Shed Plans to Be the ‘Museum of the Future’-Is This the Future We Want?,” *Observer*, April 9, 2019, <https://observer.com/2019/04/the-shed-opens-at-hudson-yards-diversity-in-arts-programming/>.

²⁹ Dorothea von Hantelmann, “What Is the New Ritual Space for the 21st Century?,” *Multitudes* n°79, no. 2 (2020): pp. 123-132, <https://doi.org/10.3917/mult.079.0123>.

³⁰ Tiana Reid, “The Shed Sucks: A Dispatch from New York’s Latest Cultural Megaspace,” *The Nation*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-shed-hudson-yards-vessel-essay/>.

For many of us, the gallery space still gives off negative vibrations when we wander in. Esthetics are turned into a kind of social elitism the gallery space is exclusive. Isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewelry, or silver: esthetics are turned into commerce - the gallery space is expensive. What it contains is, without initiation, well-nigh incomprehensible - art is difficult . . . here we have a social, financial, and intellectual snobbery which models (and at its worst parodies) our system of limited production, our modes of assigning value, our social habits at large. Never was a space designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self image of the upper middle-classes so efficiently codified.³¹

These views, evoked by the white cube gallery present little to no flexibility in properly showcasing contemporary art, especially when it requires sociopolitical information and background. The formal tools presently used as the models for display must reflect vastly different ideas than those of the white cube, posing not simply an alternative but a radical successor that can coexist with the current political climate. Any alternative to such an esteemed model will face backlash from established and influential patrons of the arts. Especially in the wake of the Whitney Museum Board protests in 2019, high-ranking museum board members are in much more precarious job positions, where their funding sources are under a microscope from the art world.³² Because of this, institutional critique is crucial to expunging elitist doctrine from the museum itself. Effective decolonization is a crucial precursor to these initiatives to maintain confidence in the idea of a formally and socially successful art museum.

Revisionist exhibition models seek to stimulate active engagement with artwork and foster meaningful discernment of both artistic expression as well as intention. In order to accomplish these goals, all areas of display decisions must be considered to reorient audiences away from the

³¹ O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, 55.

³² Robin Pogrebin, Elizabeth A. Harris, and Graham Bowley, "New Scrutiny of Museum Boards Takes Aim at World of Wealth and Status," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, October 2, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/arts/design/whitney-art-museums-trustees.html>.

expected environment of the museum gallery. Ferguson describes these as a “strategic system of representations,” which he outlines:

Its architecture which is always political, to its wall colorings which are always psychologically meaningful, to its labels which are always didactic (even, or especially, in their silences), to its artistic exclusions which are always powerfully ideological and structural in their limited admissions, to its lighting which is always dramatic (and therefore an important aspect of narrativity and the staging of desire), to its security systems which are always a form of social collateral (the choice between guards and video surveillance, for example), to its curatorial premises which are always professionally dogmatic, to its brochures and catalogues and videos which are always literacy-specific and pedagogically directional, to its aesthetics which are always historically specific to that site of presentation rather than to individual artwork’s moments of production. In other words, there is a plan to all exhibitions, a will, or teleological hierarchy of significances, which is its dynamic undercurrent—[the exhibition] is where the systems of representation which formulate and uphold identities (artistic, national, subcultural, “international,” gender- or race- specific, avant-garde, regional, etc.) are more available for investigation and, perhaps, treatment of even exorcism. The will to influence is at the core of any exhibition.³³

Ferguson defines this medium of exhibitions in 1996 in an anthology of writing about exhibitions, *Thinking About Exhibitions*³⁴, as an artistic and institutional language, but one that can and should be altered in order to change perceptions of representation. He argues that the art world that exists outside the museum is a much more innovative force, reflective of these changes so desperately needed within the museum context. Without offering a concrete plan of execution to enact a new age of exhibition rhetoric, Ferguson’s proposal on exhibition genres provides a powerful start to rethinking the revered white cube. Furthermore, as he emphasized, exhibition aesthetics reflect that “site of presentation rather than [an] individual artwork’s moment of production.”³⁵ Thoroughly highlighting that unique moment of production would

³³ Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics,” 178.

³⁴ Reesa Greenberg, Sandy Nairne, and Bruce W. Ferguson, *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 2010).

³⁵ Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics,” 179.

undoubtedly be another manner of reorienting the audience, providing crucial contextual detail, and constructing a new language of exhibition strategies. This is not to say that contemporary artists and their exhibitors have not experimented with the tactical nature of exhibitions, and occasionally, successfully. However, this experimentation has been most prevalent with performance and installation art and has not been successful in establishing itself as the precedent for exhibition. Dismantling traditional exhibition design is vital to the creation of a deliberate alternative, and fostering engagement with new and previously excluded audiences.

Artist-Centered Contemporary Exhibitions

As the partnership between curators and artists has become a more crucial involvement in exhibition choices in the past few decades, this collaborative effort offers an incredibly appealing opportunity for a gateway into a new language of exhibition. As Ferguson argues, exhibitions very often convey a form of “public presentations of private intentions, like court cases or religious services, they raise the stakes of individual expression to the level of the social.”³⁶ This argument results in a very unique individual ideology of each exhibition, which is blatantly suppressed by a white cube model. Reorienting the thinking of exhibitions as a medium in itself allows greater flexibility in the curatorial and exhibition choices that can aid in communicating context and facilitating emotional and intellectual engagement. In first reimagining the capacity of exhibition, Ferguson asserts that genre-based exhibitions would offer an initial understanding of this decontextualization. He outlines this as “the exhibition’s representivity then is an exemplary identification of the direct political tendencies (democratic, nationalist, feminist, regionalistic, postcolonial or whatever) on offer—the exhibition [has] what might be called a

³⁶ Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics,” 179.

character.”³⁷ This assertion implies that the exhibition context and supposed language communicate just as much content as the artwork on display. Not only does this language communicate on behalf of the artists represented, but especially the institution and its representative patrons.

The ideological framework for this new language of exhibition revolves around the relationship between the institution and the artists, including, but not limited to, the curators, exhibition staff, and other actors involved in the formation of exhibitions. They must first consider the sociopolitical influence of each exhibition “as a system of critical representations, exhibitions must be seen in terms of their differentiating forms, media, content, and expressive force within the environment and historical conditions in which each of their solicitations are proposed and received.”³⁸ While the contemporary wings and museums of the top American institutions have not aggressively pursued radical approaches to reimagine exhibition rhetorics, some artists have taken this upon themselves to initiate. When given the freedom to enact curatorial decisions in line with their work instead of the dictates of the institution this new language emerges.

The ideas behind institutional critique undoubtedly act as a catalyst for the way many contemporary working artists think about museums and envision the display of their work. Particularly in academic settings, artists are indoctrinated into the traditional curatorial ethos like a textbook model of exhibition protocols. These of course vary by museum and gallery setting but are provided uniformly as a reflection of each individual institutional identity. This includes

³⁷ Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics,” 179.

³⁸ Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics,” 184.

font and color choices, exhibition and thematic texts, spacial limitations, brochures and gallery maps, and programming initiatives. Once an artist enters into a working contract with a gallery or museum the aesthetic and/or ideological counterparts that complement their work are replaced by those of the institution. These limitations are what make institutional critique such a narrow field and why so much of it manifests as a parody to expose the historical issues of institutional wealth and power in a perspicuous fashion. Alternative expressions of institutional critique are most successful when artists are given the freedom and leverage to alter the spaces in which they exhibit work. By changing and adapting these spaces to represent the artist's universally debated intent, accessibility and contextualization can be realized goals of an exhibition.

House of the Muses

One such exhibition which took initial but promising steps towards these goals is *House of the Muses*, a temporary showcase at Pitzer College with work by California-based artist Cammie Staros, curated by gallery director and curator Ciara Ennis. Cammie Staros is a multimedia artist, though she primarily works in ceramic sculpture. Her pieces invoke a sense of archaeological history, they are multi-faceted in their classical references and juxtaposition with modern media and technology. Her solo exhibition at the Nichols Gallery at Pitzer College focused on her ceramic vessels that pose as lightly abstracted versions of ancient Greek vases (see image 4). They are crafted of terracotta clay and painted with highly contrasting black and white glazes. Although the painted vessels' shape and decoration are appropriations of this ancient Greek style and imagery, the pieces are clean and bright, not forcibly tarnished or patinated to present as a part of a certain period. Even so, Staros' work is heavily involved with ideas of time and duration, and art outliving their creator and temporal context. She presents these highly classical

and recognizable tropes as the origins of the museum and museological display, which is highlighted more so through the work itself than through the exhibitionary accompaniments. Nonetheless, a genre that comments on the Anthropocene and orthodox Western art history becomes clear through the pedagogical choices.

The title, *House of the Muses*, invokes Greek mythology and a symbolic setting of archival and reliquary ruin. As an artist of Greek heritage herself, Staros has already crafted a space representing the venerable stature of the history she references through linguistic means alone. The audience enters the exhibition with clear notions of the canonical narrative with which the artwork claims association. With these elements, Staros' representative gallery explains that she "highlights the role that Encyclopedic museums play in the construction of histories and cultural narratives—while evocative of classical civilizations before their fall, the exhibition calls attention to the inevitable collapse and fragility of such empires, past, present, and future."³⁹ Upon entrance to the gallery space, Staros has hand stenciled the singular exhibition text onto a white wall in blue watercolor. The letters drip down the wall as if their initial coloring was washed away or has weathered over time. The large-scale vessels that inhabit the gallery space are situated on pedestals or contained within futuristic glass fish tank vitrines. The main gallery wall is painted a rich green, which Staros says is meant to reference the British Museum, home to many of the original Greek and Mycenaean vessels. A line of overgrown plants lines the upstairs hallway and spills over into the main gallery space. The fluorescent lights of both the fish tank vitrines and the lone neon-lit wooden sculpture imply an incredibly modern context,

³⁹ "Cammie Staros 'House of the Muses' Solo Exhibition at Pitzer College Art Galleries," Shulamit Nazarian, October 29, 2022, <https://www.shulamitnazarian.com/news/66-cammie-staros-forthcoming-solo-exhibition-at-pitzer-college-september-2022/>.

which creates palpable tension with the ancient imagery on and of the vessels themselves. The descending and decaying plant life alongside the fish tanks significantly aid in creating the other theme of the exhibition, the “construction of museal ruin overrun by natural forces [which] asks us to consider the fate of our own civilization, our impact on the planet, and the legacy and futurity of the human species.”⁴⁰ These gestures reference broad institutional ideas. This commentary in tandem with the display didactics produces a bold sense of institutional critique of Western art history, civilization, and the encyclopedic museum which exhibits these ideas. Though Staros and her exhibition criticize this institutional and historical rule and power, she also implies that museological authority has and will continue to withstand the test of time, even following an environmental collapse.

The multifaceted critique that *House of the Muses* initiates is made possible by the extensive involvement that Staros had in the curatorial process. Curator Ciara Ennis’ vision for the gallery spaces she directs is incredibly installation-focused. Especially with sculptures like Staros’, the physical space of the exhibition significantly impacts the reading of the work, so enhancing or changing the physical gallery is crucial in suggesting a cohesive exhibition narrative. Many commercial galleries are not as willing to enact curatorial changes to the actual space as nonprofit galleries, since the cost of constructing display elements counteracts the potential profit of a showcase. Museums are even less willing to contextualize exhibitions through these curatorial means because of the influence of their boards of directors, as any aesthetic or tangible change to these spaces can negate an established brand or lack thereof.

⁴⁰ “Cammie Staros ‘House of the Muses’ Solo Exhibition at Pitzer College Art Galleries,” Shulamit Nazarian.

Additionally, catering to a certain artist or initiative may introduce a distinct ideological ambition to a museum environment, which is historically avoided in such institutional spaces.

House of the Muses embodies three main themes through the exhibition narrative that it established. The artwork itself poses as the origin story of Western art history, representative of the aesthetic achievements of humanity and hubris. The elevated nature of the presentation of the vessels and vitrines along with the titles creates an encyclopedic museum environment, focused on the institutional tropes and objecthood of each artwork. The brochure that accompanies the exhibition adds to this theme, through the naming of each work with Greek and Latin titles, and the formal layout of the design. The lack of artwork labels on the walls, the bright lighting, and the addition of plant life encapsulate the space in a contemporary moment that reflects upon the past it represents. Staros' exhibition seems to update a sense of institutional critique for this certain era. Her artistic commentary on the Anthropocene is highly suggestive of the climate crisis, and she takes a cynical point of view as the exhibition is reminiscent of a post (climate) apocalyptic scene.

The Nichols gallery space, though marginally altered to reflect the aesthetic choices of the artist and her work, still represents contemporary exhibition protocols. Staros said that Ennis was the most willing curator she has worked with and that she encouraged her to push the installation aspect of the show. Even so, the principal components of the gallery were not changed to serve the themes of Staros' artwork and the use of museological display as a tool for critique. The British Museum green wall serves as an intervention into the space, but only for the particular audience that can recognize this allusion. In all other aspects the artwork, text, and accompanying materials are posed in contrast with such a modern, white cube gallery. Though

this juxtaposition helps to add a time-specific element to the artwork itself, the imagery does not necessarily benefit from this, as it already presents such recognizable allusions to specific antiquities. Staros stated that if given the opportunity, she would have entirely changed the grey-speckled vinyl floor tiling, and updated the outlets in the gallery. Even so, her ideal exhibition space for this collection of artwork is the Getty Villa, or the Greek wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, galleries that so dramatically represent the aesthetic components of the artwork through their architecture and interior design. Instead, the Nichols gallery space limited the understanding of the major themes present in Staros' work and conceived installation. Without presenting more context to the work, any gallery contains the art to what can be comprehensible in the given institutional framework.

Contemporary Exhibition Rhetorics

House of the Muses was a preliminary configuration of a gallery aesthetically embodying the goals of its featured artwork. The exhibition raises great questions over Ferguson's definition of *representivity* in different gallery conditions. In particular, in this age of extreme political polarization where the constitution of art institutions is called into question, how are contemporary galleries and exhibitions expected to provide adequate representation for working artists? The Western ideal of the art museum originated as a method of creating meaning for a sense of culture and identity through collection and observation. This methodology has historically established hierarchies of power through the exhibition tactics of prioritizing certain artists and regional concerns. Another category that has been othered through these systemic practices is living and working artists. Because of these traditions of art museum protocols there are virtually no established precedents for working with living artists to represent them and their

work. Ultimately, modern decolonization efforts and restructuring of museums revolve around the dichotomy of art institutions being sites of contact or conflict with art and artists. An effort to establish greater terms for artists and institutions to work together in exhibition processes and give artists more leverage and input on display decisions would aid in facilitating *contact* with contemporary art.

Contemporary art, more than any other genre, has been criticized for condescending to audiences, eluding meaning and explanation as a symbol of status. Yet contemporary art also holds the potential to connect with modern viewers and push past the boundaries that conventional, historical art hold in connection with institutional tradition. And since no new discernible period of artistic focus has emerged since the label of *contemporary*, establishing new genres through curatorial engagement can initiate progressive contact with similarly progressive artwork.

Staros' *House of the Muses* show in such an educational context facilitated interesting and relatable themes concerning institutional critique and the Anthropocene. This intense curatorial focus can be the precedent for a new proposal for exhibitions. The current overarching question for institutions that have already begun—or are in the process of creating—decolonization initiatives is still how to best encourage artistic engagement in a post-covid, post-truth, and technological age. Simultaneously, this question is posed in subtle contrast to how to best serve the artists these museums and galleries represent. The tension between these two ambitions is furthered by the tension between the desire for exhibitions to entertain and to inform. Curator Johanne Løgstrup writes that by reforming from within, the museum can become more responsive, engaging, and “contain the conflicts embedded in the museum, such as dominance-

awareness in contrast to alterity and differences, acquisition and reciprocity politics,—questioning whose story is to be told, whether it is relevant to tell it now, how it is told and by whom.”⁴¹ By redressing traditional policies through comprehensively engaging with artists and exhibitions museums and galleries can reaffirm their positions in society as emblems of close cultural contact.

To facilitate greater engagement with contemporary art, one only has to look to historical exhibitions which maintain such monumental popularity. To compete with the rise of consumerist artwork in galleries and have contemporary painting and sculpture contend with immersive exhibitions, the art field must look to those components which are so attractive to so many people. Immersive exhibitions are by definition, all-encompassing, transformative, and a total distraction from whatever temporal issues plague the patron. All aspects of these exhibitions are intended to enrapture the viewer in their specific environment. They transport you to the very momentary intention of the artist, and it is one that you cannot escape, and hopefully do not wish to. If one is to look at historical exhibitions of artwork that are as popular as such contemporary immersive ones, one will find that they are similarly immersive environments, but often designed to be much more informational. There is a “long-standing practice of museums borrowing architectural forms from monumental ceremonial structures of the past—[they] brought with them the spaces of public rituals—corridors scaled for processions, halls implying large, communal gatherings, and interior sanctuaries designed for awesome and potent effigies.”⁴² These monumental structures lend a greater sense of importance, establishing a ritualistic intent

⁴¹ Johanne Løgstrup, “Museums as Contact or Conflict Zones,” *ONCURATING*, June 2021, <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-50-reader/museums-as-contact-or-conflict-zones.html#.ZBp-j-zMLPZ>.

⁴² Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” 475.

that provides the viewer with a more immersive and interesting framework with which to receive artwork in a museum gallery. The establishment of individual purpose in any formal ritual results in a more personally meaningful experience. An exceptional example of such an aesthetic symbol of its collection is The Palace of Versailles, visited by over ten million people each year, with elaborate rooms and paintings complete with an abundance of historical context, guides, and a wealth of information on its former tenants.⁴³ Art museums that embody the specific moment in which the art was created, and the specific conditions under which the artists lived and experienced, hold this capacity to be a transformative, immersive, and pedagogic experience. In a report from the Select Committee on the National Gallery from 1853, this same question was raised. “Do you not think that in a splendid gallery...all the adjacent and circumjacent parts of that building should...have a regard for the arts,...with—objects of interest calculated to prepare [visitors’] minds before entering the building, and lead them the better to appreciate the works of art which they would afterwards see?”⁴⁴ This sentiment may be just as true today as it was then, when such affected institutions are far more popular than those that seek sterilization and decontextualization. These environments are also widely accessible because the experience of viewing in itself is an informative one. In them, “we are abstracted to another sphere: we breathe empyrean air; we enter into the minds of Raphael, of Titian, of Poussin, of the Carracci, and look at nature with their eyes, we live in time past.”⁴⁵ But with the contemporary domain, the viewer is abstracted to a sphere that disembodies the art from the artist’s mind and that time. If

⁴³ “Visitors to Versailles,” Palace of Versailles, October 26, 2017, <https://en.chateauversailles.fr/news/patronage-news/visitors-versailles-1682-1789>.

⁴⁴ Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” 476.

⁴⁵ Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” 481.

art institutions genuinely desire greater engagement with contemporary art, why do they continue to withhold so much information about the art and artists themselves? Instead, why not look to the most successful and popular methods of engaging with art, and invest in personifying exhibition spaces?

Contemporary exhibition curators can look to educational spaces such as the Nichols Gallery at Pitzer College to properly integrate artwork into a space that cultivates aesthetic and contextual connection. Instead of embodying a traditionally modern and vacuous design these contemporary spaces may function best as workshopable spaces or aesthetic identifiers of the artwork they intend to represent. This proposal includes not only letting the artwork generate the exhibition but also the architectural and interior components which make up the exhibition space.

This proposal in itself would reverse a major hierarchy present in traditions of art collection and exhibition. Instead of artists creating work to serve the museum, and to present as a part of canonical art history, the museum works to create a space representative of the artwork. In this way, contemporary containers of gallery spaces can do much more than contain. They can embody a contemporary moment, embrace political discourse, and establish new genres that serve the unique needs of our twenty-first century. This creation of exhibition genres would be much more than the conventional categories of biennial, survey, or retrospective. While performance in itself, this functional method would address these modern conflicts that transpire in institutional space and fully integrate unique artistic ideology into the museum. Carol Duncan wrote that “like the concept of liminality, this notion of the art museum as a performance field has also been discovered independently by museum professionals. Philip Rhys Adams, for

example, once director of the Cincinnati Art Museum, compared art museums to theater sets.”⁴⁶

Yet the museum rarely behaves in this flexible manner even with transient showcases, but certainly should. If not an entirely aesthetic presentation of the artwork it wishes to present, then being as versatile as a theater set is another manner in which to operate. New foundational identifiers that significantly alter the contemporary medium of exhibitions would not only satisfy the desire for more immersive artistic experiences but also radically change the representations of regnant power. In doing so, an exhibition model that revokes the ideology of the white cube and proposes a complex and avant-garde vocation for the display of contemporary art can emerge and establish a progressive twenty-first-century exhibition rhetoric that befits this singular era of artistic ambition.

⁴⁶ Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” 478.

Illustrations



1. The Illuminator (in partnership with Decolonize This Place, previously named GULF), *Projection on the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art*, 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/guggenheim-museums-facade-occupied-by-protesters-projection-7455>



2. Installation view of the exhibition “Cubism and Abstract Art,” on view at The Museum of Modern Art, March 2–April 19, 1936. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-white-cube-dominant-art>



3. The Shed, 2019, Hudson Yards, New York

<https://observer.com/2019/04/the-shed-opens-at-hudson-yards-diversity-in-arts-programming/>



4. Cammie Staros, *House of the Muses*, 2022, Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont, California

<https://www.shulamitnazarian.com/news/66-cammie-staros-forthcoming-solo-exhibition-at-pitzer-college-september-2022/>

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