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## Art Museum as a Purveyor of Culture

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# **Art, Life and Culture**

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# The Museum as a Purveyor of Culture

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The term museum has its origins in the Greek word *mouseion* which referred to a sanctuary dedicated to the muses of Greek mythology. In the second century A.D., the Greek author Pausanias reports that a building adjacent to the Propylae on the Acropolis at Athens contained a hall called Pinakothekē where a collection of paintings could be viewed by the public.<sup>1</sup> This gallery was in fact one small part of a grand scheme of public art envisioned by Pericles in the Athenian democracy of fifth century B. C. in Greece. Pericles selected Phidias, a prominent sculptor,

<sup>1</sup> "Museums and Art Galleries," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1958, vol. 15, p. 994; also, Edward P. Alexander, *Museums In Motion* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), p. 7. Vidya Dehejia, curator of Indian and southeast Asian Art at the Smithsonian Institution Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Washington, D. C., pointed out that there are also references in Indian texts of the fifth century citing picture galleries in the villages. There may well be instances of precursors of modern museums in cultures that are not considered here.

to create a system of temples, monuments, theaters, and other public buildings to reflect the accomplishments of Athenian citizens. In a broad sense the project made some of the finest art of the times fully accessible to the citizens of Athens as well as to visitors.

Although not known for artistic innovations, the Romans, through their conquests in Greece, India, and elsewhere, amassed a significant body of art treasures which appeared in Rome in the third century B.C. and thereafter. During the time of the Roman Empire, Rome enjoyed a thriving art market supplied by the sale of conquered spoils of war and collectors eager to advance their status by adorning private villas with art. A notable portion of the art in ancient Rome was designated for public display in temples, colonnades, the Forum, and other public venues. At the beginning of the Empire, Agrippa had proposed that all pictures and statues should become public property. Needless to say, the leaders of Roman society did not agree, preferring to retain their holdings as private property.

Although there was no tradition of museum curating in these early examples, two important ideas emerged. First, the notion of the museum as a place of cultural patrimony where art can be seen by the public, and secondly, the notion of the museum and its collections as a source of inspiration and cultural knowledge. Both concepts have important consequences for the future roles of museums as purveyors of culture. The next important step in the development of art museums was the establishment of collections initiated by the princes and the nobility throughout Europe. This took place during the Renaissance and continued through the eighteenth century in Italy, France, Scandinavia, and later in England. Access to princely collections was primarily limited to “members of their elite circles of the nobility, members of the court, and distinguished visitors from abroad”<sup>2</sup> and occasionally to persons training

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<sup>2</sup> Per Bjurström, “Physiocratic Ideals and National Galleries,” in *The Genesis of the Art*

to be artists. The collections served as symbols of wealth and status and were also to inspire and provide knowledge to those able to view them. A common mode for displaying art during this era was the *kunstkammer* style where art is arranged on the walls, extending more or less from floor to ceiling. Works of different subjects and national origins were freely mixed and augmented with cultural curios of a broad range.

The most notable change in the development of the art museum was the establishment of the Louvre in Paris in 1793. Initially planned for Louis XVI's grand cultural scheme and orchestrated by his minister of culture, Comte d'Angiviller, the Louvre was conceived with three main objectives in mind: to reestablish state control of the arts, to show the artistic supremacy of France in the international community, and to commission artists to create art that would educate the public. The art planned for the Louvre drew upon French history and contemporary affairs and was intended to influence public support in favor of the monarchy. With respect to curatorial practice, a new system of classification was instituted for displaying pictures based on national and regional schools, and chronology.

Museum culture at the Louvre and elsewhere in Europe underwent even more radical changes with the coming of the French Revolution. After the collapse of the monarchy, the revolutionaries established the first national public art museum, giving all persons, irrespective of rank or profession, access to the art treasures previously reserved for privileged audiences. The words of the painter Jacques Louis David at a festival in conjunction with the liberation of the museum capture the spirit of the day:

All individuals useful to society will be joined together as one; you will see the president of the executive committee in step with the blacksmith; the

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*Museum in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 1993), p. 28.

mayor with his sash in color, beside the butcher or mason; the Black African, who differs only in color, next to the white European.<sup>3</sup>

The ramifications of this revolutionary concept of the museum were substantial. People came to the museum lacking the basic education in matters of taste that had been previously assumed of visitors. And yet they came to see the art with a new sense of ownership, as the works now belonged to them. Still the presence of visitors lacking the conventions for viewing art posed new challenges for the keepers of collections, heretofore unaccustomed to having to address the needs of such visitors. Nevertheless, even less sophisticated visitors could appreciate that the trophies of victory assembled by Napoleon in his conquests represented a testament to their national honor. The new situation posed a dilemma for the leaders of the Republic. It was imperative that the Louvre continue to display art in keeping with standards of connoisseurship and aesthetics held in other parts of Europe, as a symbol of their political success. Clearly the new museum program must address the question of visual education for its new audiences, as well as satisfy those who were accustomed to the intellectual demands and learning opportunities provided by the museum's collections. The immediate task in this context, as Pierre Bourdieu would argue, was to equip the viewers with the necessary perceptual skills and artistic knowledge to appreciate and benefit from the experience of visiting the museum.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most radical challenges for museums emerged in post-revolutionary Russia after the Bolsheviks had trashed the imperial collections in the Winter Palace. The debate centered on who should be

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<sup>3</sup> J. L. David, *Rapport de décret sur la fête de la Réunion républicaine du 10 août* (Paris, 1793), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 37-70.

in charge of the museums and what should be their content.<sup>5</sup> It was determined by the executive board of the Visual Arts Section of the state that artists should be in charge of the museum and that a new kind of museum dedicated to the exposition of artistic culture should be established. The result was to place the responsibility for a new museum in the hands of the *avant garde* artists of the time.

The first program for the new museum, under the leadership of Kandinsky proposed that the museum be organized around the history of formalist or non-objective experiments in the visual arts. Kandinsky's plan rejected chronology and great masterpieces as a basis for organizing the collection, although he allowed art from all periods and places. Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko proposed that the museum should be a laboratory for living artists, focusing exclusively on the future. The Constructivists further defined the exhibition space as a laboratory archive, where it was possible to see art transformed into labor in the process of solving problems of construction. This shift in the museum as a place to show expression and contemplate masterworks, to a laboratory for showing experiment, invention, and production resulted in a radical shift in the relation of spectator to art works. Most notably, activity and production replaced representation and contemplation as the aims of the museum experience.

The state officials, largely in favor of the new program, nevertheless deemed Kandinsky's decontextualized proposal as being too narrowly professional and lacking in ideological and historical context. The Constructivist efforts to represent art as a form of labor might have proved more acceptable to the post-revolutionary Soviet Russian state,

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Maria Gough for information provided in this example of curating in post-revolutionary Russia. Maria Gough, "*Archives of Revolution: Refunctioning the Museum at the End of (Art) History*," unpublished paper, presented at the ... Center for Twentieth Century Studies. University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, April, 1998.

but it soon gave way to a narrative social realism more suited to the ideological program of the state for art.

The Soviet Union redefined the art museum, substituting for aesthetic contemplation the notion of the museum as a utilitarian tool for ideological purposes.<sup>6</sup> Its curatorial program was thus reduced to a single agenda of socialist realism, a type of art designed to maximize the continuity of art and life. Only art that eulogized the life of the workers and the values of the socialist state was permitted. *Avant-garde* art, which necessarily questions such premises, was categorically excluded. Curatorial practice was dominated by the prevailing ideology of the state.

The circumstances for museums in post-colonial settings such as India, Africa, and Latin America warrant special consideration. At least some of the museum structures of these settings were residual structures established by the British (in the case of India), and other colonial powers. Inevitably, the museums in postcolonial settings must assess their historical past and adapt curatorial and exhibition practices to current needs. This process may require adopting new strategies based on current developments in art and critical practices. Perhaps a first step would be to assess the cultural assumptions on which the colonial museums were founded and supply those assumptions necessary to achieve the aims of a postcolonial society faced with a changing art climate. In such instances it might be tempting to consider abandonment of the colonial art institutions of the past on the presumption that contemporary life needs only its own resources, as the Russian Constructivist Kasimir Malevich once proposed.<sup>7</sup> Given that institutions, as well as artworks, lend themselves to changing interpretations and uses, a more fruitful program might be to examine and reinterpret the existing institutions according to the needs of postcolonial life. The latter approach would provide for

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<sup>6</sup> David Besley, *Douglas Macagy and the Foundations of Modern Art Curatorship* (Simcoe, Ontario: Davus Publishing, 1998), pp. 114-115.

continuity in the evolving culture. A cursory look at the status of museum practices in India suggests that discussions of the role and nature of curating are just beginning to develop and that there is no established tradition of presenting or interpreting art. Among other issues will be a need to assess the impact of globalization and the attending migration of museum practices from across the world through the role of UNESCO and other international forces. The preservation of regional art traditions will be of particular concern in postcolonial societies eager to preserve existing forms of indigenous artistic life in postcolonial cultures.

The outcome of these historic and current models points to a certain mandate for museums, embracing a set of assumptions which have in part guided their actions in the past. Among these assumptions is the belief that a primary function of the art museum is to assemble and care for works of art worthy of exhibition and to present them to the public for education and enjoyment.<sup>8</sup> This approach is not revolutionary, of course, but it is important to keep in mind as increasingly complex challenges from many sectors confront the museum as it has previously existed, in an effort to redefine the understanding of art in contemporary culture. In the twentieth century, these fundamental tasks have been challenged and are constantly being subjected to cultural and ideological critique. Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, once stated that “Museums should be platforms of the still controversial figures...as well as artists of classic reputation.” He emphasized the necessity for museums that are open minded and unafraid of advanced developments in art. These seemingly bold remarks, which helped to advance the state of modern art in the United States, nevertheless failed to anticipate the cultural challenges that museums would face in the late twentieth century and beyond.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>8</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1958, vol. 15, p. 999.

Here, it is useful to consider how the culture of the museum itself affects works of art placed in its custody. Curatorial practices developed for presenting art in the museum reflect in part the interpretive frameworks inherent in the conventions of the museum itself. When a work of art is transferred to a museum, it is stripped of connections to the outside world, perhaps coming from the artist's studio close to the means of production, or from a collector. In the museum context, art undergoes a transformation not unlike that which a patient undergoes upon entering a hospital, or a horse upon being entered into the system of racing. Each activity has its own conventions and rules. To be catalogued, insured, checked for conservation needs, assigned a number in a system, and eventually exhibited in a gallery with flat walls surrounded by other strange works, places the art into a specialized system of meaning, while isolating it from other connections to life outside the museum.

The conventions of the museum can be activating, as the philosopher Nelson Goodman has argued, to put the viewer in a context where subtle explorations of the art are possible.<sup>9</sup> Goodman sees the role of the museum as one of implementing the "workings of art" by sustaining and revitalizing its functional capacities with respect to enhancing the observer's experience. According to Goodman, activating art in a museum setting is a subtle and complex process, guided by whatever affects the object or the viewer. All of the techniques that enter into the practical aspects of curating and caring for art: lighting, choice of materials and colors, conservation, the choice of gallery spaces, labels, photographic and video reproductions, catalogues, educational texts, the architecture of the spaces, proximity to other works affect the viewer's experience. Similarly, concepts applied to the work, contribute to their interpretation and affect the viewer's engagement with the work. Goodman's analysis shows how the museum can be an important

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<sup>9</sup> Nelson Goodman, "Art In Action." unpublished paper, 1992.

activating force for enabling viewers to experience art.

An alternative role for museums is suggested by Tony Bennett who argues that the museum's function "is to assist groups outside the museum to use its resources to make authored statements within it."<sup>10</sup> Increasingly, museums find it necessary to extend their activities outside traditional spaces and into the community. The Anacostia Museum, a small museum dedicated to presenting African American arts and culture opened by the Smithsonian in 1967 in one of the District of Columbia's least affluent areas is an example of the type of museum envisioned by Bennett. The museum was established to bring cultural resources to persons who, for whatever reason, did not normally attend museums. Initially, the museum was intended as a bridge between the inner city Washington community and the museums located on the Mall. Later, it was "recreated by organized community groups, activists, neighborhood residents, and museum administration and staff into a cultural resource to serve the shifting needs and goals of the community."<sup>11</sup> The focus of this museum is on community-based programs that provide opportunities for residents to participate in the planning and implementation of exhibitions.

These two concepts represent very different notions of the functions of museums. The traditional view is based on the notion that the museum is the source of privileged historical and critical knowledge derived through research and reflection, and offered for the edification and enjoyment of the public. The alternative involves a more democratic, collaborative effort requiring the collaboration of community members and museum professionals in determining the content of knowledge and the mode of presentation. Museum programs based on to the second model are likely to include materials and ideas from outside the museum including

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<sup>10</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup> Information on the Anacostia Museum is in part from an unpublished paper, "The Arts in a Democratic Society" (1997), by Eric Bennett for the Les Aspin Center for Government project on the Arts in a Democratic Society.

immediate social, economic, and political concerns, instead of focusing exclusively upon art viewed as a specialized, autonomous set of practices. Curatorial practices founded on the second model thus tend to incorporate a wider range of cultural interests and values.

There are other important developments affecting museums of late capitalist societies at the end of the twentieth century. Such issues are explored in the writings of Rosalind Krauss and other contemporary theorists.<sup>12</sup> Most notable is the shift in discourse to a description of the museum as a corporate entity and its collections as assets. Such thinking is driven in part by the demands of the art market for fresh material for resale, and also by the shifts in art production from unique irreproducible aesthetic objects to reproducible artifacts. The demand of the art market makes the stock lodged in museum galleries and store rooms irresistible. Corresponding needs on the part of the museums for operating funds, expansion, and flexibility in reshaping their collections, further contribute to the desire of museum administrators and trustees to function in a corporate mode. Museum officials in private institutions have increasingly shown a willingness to consider art collections as assets for leveraging growth and expansion. The Guggenheim museum's expansion into SoHo, MASS MoCA, Bilbao, Spain, Berlin, and elsewhere throughout the world, attest to the growing interest in applying the corporate model to museums. The demand for revenue has also inspired museums to rent their collections to other museums, and even to deaccession works from the collections as sources of operating revenue.

The corporate model represents a major shift in thinking about

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<sup>12</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," in *October: The Second Decade, 1986-1996*, ed. Rosalind Krauss, et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), pp. 427-441. Krauss's essay draws upon related essays. See Frederic Jameson, "Post-Modernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August, 1984), pp. 53-93; Philip Weiss, "Selling the Collection," *Art In America* 78 (July 1990), pp. 124-131; and Susan Hapgood, "Remaking Art History," *Art In America* 78 (July 1990), pp. 114-123.

museums as guardians of cultural patrimony responsible for providing cultural education for the public. Does the change suggest that curating would become merely a form of salesmanship and promotion; and that exhibitions would represent simply an alternate mode of displaying merchandise? Clearly the reduction of all social processes to commodity based operations would impose severe limitations on the type of art available and on the role of art as a stimulus to creative thinking and action. It would also place in jeopardy the art treasures that museums have traditionally reserved for public access by recycling them in the market for private consumption, leading to social consequences inconsistent with the function of art in a democratic social structure. Similarly the implications for critical and scholarly discourse on art would be problematic. Discourse on the corporate museum and art as commodity would cease to be a topic for aesthetics and philosophy, more appropriately reassigned to writers on economics and business

For the most part this analysis of museums has focused on the historical contexts within which curatorial and exhibition frameworks are developed, and upon the culture internal to the museum. Equally important to understanding museums as purveyors of culture are the changing developments in the arts themselves. Throughout the twentieth century, change and diversity have been the one constant in the development of art.

For instance, the legitimization of multiples and appropriated objects as original artworks available for sale to collectors and museums raised questions as to what type of objects belonged in art museums. The question took on a new life when Dada anti-art constructions of Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and others in the 1920s and 1930s began producing for sale multiples that resembled non-art objects. New questions appear dramatically in Minimalist art of the 1960s and 1970s when artists such as Donald Judd and Carl Andre began producing artifacts that

exemplified the industrialized processes of mass production, as an intended critique of commodification and technologization.<sup>13</sup> Their choice of materials (plexiglass, aluminum, and styrofoam), seriality, and shapes identified the works with the products of modern technology, and disavowed any immediate identification with the art of the past including modernist art as it had been developed through the mid-twentieth century. Ironically their affinities with industrial products and their capacity for refabrication as multiples inadvertently contributed to the very commodification that their authors eschewed, because, as Krauss suggests, the cultural codes of the world of commodities and technology are already imbedded in the structure of Minimalist art.

Dada, a salient voice in the arts of Europe and the United States from about 1914 to 1925, embodies a spirit of questioning and intervention that has required rethinking our approach to art-making as well as museum practices. The anti-rational forces of Dada, represent an aesthetic of action grounded in conflicting anarchist sentiments extending from idealism to nihilism.

The shift from art as consisting of as aesthetic objects to art as a vehicle for ideas, initiated in Dada and carried forward in subsequent conceptual art movements, forced museums to reexamine and modify their thinking about the very concept of art. Dada called into question the concepts of representation, formalism, and expression, which formed the major foundations of art production as well as museum curatorial practice throughout the nineteenth century, and of twentieth-century modernism..

It has been known for sometime that, in the words of Walter Pasch, “No one knows today where authority resides in matters of contemporary art... The final word is ultimately voiced by many, not by one, and museums everywhere must make the materials available for judgment”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum”, pp. 433-435.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Sachs, *Modern Prints and Drawings* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1954), p. 64.

Arthur Danto, the American philosopher-critic, has echoed a similar sentiment in an essay called "Art After the End of Art," in which he articulates his notion of post-historical art, that is art created under conditions of "objective pluralism." Objective pluralism refers to the current context of art practices where there are no historically mandated directions for art to go.<sup>15</sup> In effect, an artist can do anything from figuration to abstraction to conceptual to installation to performance to restaging Dada experiments in "accidental" poetry, music, anti-theatrical performances and anti-art paintings and sculptures. In this respect, the Dada revolt against tradition has been successful in unseating the artistic conventions of the past.

One consequence of this decentralization of art practices throughout the world is that art, especially in its most experimental forms, speaks in opaque languages that are accessible only to a small circle who share a feeling, an ideology, or some other means of bonding. Much of the art of today is therefore virtually inaccessible to the public at large, requiring new strategies and spaces for curating and exhibiting art. The situation is vastly different from that of the eighteenth century where there existed a direct link between artistic production and the major social and political enterprises.

Such changes in art practices call for a corresponding decentralization of curatorial practices. One response to this challenge is the proliferation of independent curators who organize exhibitions and discussions of contemporary artists works around non-traditional settings including alternative gallery spaces, cafes, factories, storefronts, abandoned monasteries, parking lots, the mail system, and now, the internet.<sup>16</sup> Much important art is being curated in such spaces outside of the formal

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur Danto, "Art After the End of Art," *Art Forum* (April 1993), p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> An example of the independent curators working in Mexico, which began in the 1970s, is represented in Guillermo Santamarina's exhibitions with young Mexican artists working in new media. See *Flash Art* (Spring 1997), p. 62.

museum systems. Alternative spaces also invite experimentation in the use of space, lighting, and other means of exhibiting art. In some instances the emphasis of curating has shifted from the artists and art itself to expressions of political and social concern.<sup>17</sup>

The implications of these changes for curating and exhibiting art within the museum today are largely unexplored; but there are signs of questioning and changes in curatorial practices that warrant attention. Within the museum itself, experiments using novel approaches to curating are constantly challenging traditional approaches. Post-modernist artists from the 1960s to the present have used their art in simulated and actual museum settings in an effort to decode conventional curatorial practices. Some artists have assumed the role of curators, offering various critical strategies for examining museological practices. The aim of these experiments has been to critique the ideological assumptions of museums and to unmask links between the museum and the dominant political and economic powers operative within the larger culture.

Joshua Decker has provided a useful analysis of artists working in this mode.<sup>18</sup> A few examples provided by Decker will illustrate the direction of such efforts. Using Dadaist inspired tactics, Marcel Broodthaers in 1968 created his own "Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, Nineteenth-Century Section," locating the enterprise in his private Brussels apartment. This project consisted of an installation piece intended to analyze the traditional museum institution's role in creating representations of cultural matrixes within particular social contexts. Broodthaers devised a pseudo or mock museum consisting of an arrangement of postcards, crates, inscriptions, and related paraphernalia intended to form a parody of the museum and its curatorial practices.

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<sup>17</sup> See Hal Foster, *Recodings, Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Decker, "Decoding the Museum." *Flash Art*, (November/December 1990), pp. 140-142.

Within this structure he simulated for inspection and analysis the actual processes that museums would use in creating exhibitions. In one instance he borrowed 200 images of eagles from various institutions, dealers, and collectors and proceeded to create a mock exhibition, which emulated the practices of “real” museums. Through the use of parody, irony, self-effacing critique, and game playing, Broodthaers re-invoked the subversive manner of a Dadaist critique of culture, applying it to the museum and its curatorial conventions.

Other artists such as Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, Andrea Fraser, Hans Haacke, and Louise Lawler each attempted to reconfigure the perceived codes and structures of the museum and reframe the institution so as to expose its ideological assumptions and affiliations. These artists shared a concern with the role of the museum in constructing values, authority, and norms that affect the practice of art and its interpretation, as well as its affiliations with dominant economic and political institutions.

Although the aims of these artists are inspired in part by Dada, their tactics are analytic and focused directly on the museum, in contrast to the broadly directed nihilistic revolt of the earlier Dadaists, as Decter has pointed out.<sup>19</sup> Their approach is based on expertise acquired with respect to the rules of museological practice to which they apply strategies of cultural critique when acting as curator-agents operating within the museum, as well as its cultural critics and saboteurs. The irony of all such efforts, however, is the parasitic relationship of the artist-curators to the very institutions which they attempt to critique. The artists in such projects are in the end absorbed into the institutional womb of the museum system, with the result that their critical efforts risk being neutralized or perhaps contradictory. Even Broodthaers, whose “fictional museum” operated independently of the institutional museum, could not

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.

escape its power to absorb the views of its critics, as a recent exhibition on Broodthaers organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis shows. In the Walker exhibition, his “fictional museum” project is fossilized as a set of objects and placed on display, thereby silencing his efforts to subvert such curatorial practices.<sup>20</sup>

Decter’s queries aptly summarize the dilemma:

[I]t is crucial to ask what the aforementioned types of institutional critique offer... Do they function primarily to de-construct so-called “dominant” systems of cultural organization, so as to unveil sublimated political, economic, and ideological interests? And if these practices do indeed facilitate a “critical knowledge” for the viewer ... what is to be done with that knowledge? Should cultural institutions be made to undergo some type of reform? Should museums divest themselves of their necessary relationship with various economic sources? ... [D]oes this result in something more than a cyclical mode of institutional “de-mystification”?<sup>21</sup>

Such questions call for answers from the critics of the museum.

Where does this state of affairs leave the problem of curatorial and exhibition frameworks? The challenge to understand the questions of curatorial and exhibition frameworks in the present world cultural contexts is formidable. Here I return to a theme introduced earlier. There exist rich and diverse historical traditions of art to be interpreted by curatorial practices founded on the premises that the role of art museums is to collect and make accessible to the public for education and enjoyment these evolving traditions of art. In a democratic culture, the content of messages conveyed through art involves constant debate and revision, addressed to the prevailing systems of patronage, as well as to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

ideas embedded in the art and the curatorial processes. That the institutions of art represent the broader cultural struggles is apparent, and not always in ways that reflect satisfactorily the interests of all the diverse constituencies. In the United States, for example, women artists and ethnic minority artists have questioned whether they are adequately represented in the main cultural institutions.

Contemporary cultural criticism has attempted to address the perceived injustices manifest in the museum through an attack on the museum itself and its curatorial processes, charging that the museum functions as a perpetrator of the dominant ideology for the culture at large. In its extreme forms, cultural criticism appears ready to abandon the museum in favor of alternative sites for presenting art. My view would be rather to nurture both the museum and alternative venues for presenting art as laboratories for exploring and experiencing a broad range of cultural statements past and present in a wide range of media. Despite dissatisfaction with the museum, culture ultimately relies on such institutional frameworks to make accessible to the public the important and lasting cultural ideas of the past and present. Even Marcel Duchamp, a leading Dadaist and practitioner of the avant-garde, recognized the power and importance of the museum when he affirmed that things become art by convention when they are placed in museums.<sup>22</sup>

An alternative to abandonment is to assure that the flow of ideas and artistic representations represented in museums adequately reflects the pluralism of ideas, values, and art practices representative of the public including the art public. In order to be effective, reform efforts directed to the museum and its curatorial practices must also be addressed to the greater economic and political processes and structures of the culture as a whole, a topic which is beyond the scope of this discussion.

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "The Impressionist Revolution and Duchamp's Myopia," *Arts Magazine* 63:1 (September 1988), p. 62.

When there are so many choices and possible directions to pursue, it is often wise to adopt a simpler solution. There is a simple answer attributed to the Talmud, which may well sum us the state of the problem of curating and presenting art at the present moment. "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there." Perhaps the best course for cultural policies at this moment is to make certain that all such roads are kept open to allow for the maximum freedom of exploration, and to resist the efforts of all fundamentalist ideologues, whether political, economic, or critical, to take the museum in other directions or to abandon it. Ideally, curating at its best is a reflexive process which involves the viewers in the process of critically sorting through and synthesizing a variety of possible interpretations. Curating, as Goodman suggests, involves activizing art so as to facilitate the viewer's task.

Put another way, sorting out the connections between art and life is an engaging challenge, if often an irritatingly complex one, as is illustrated by a story told by art critic Ellen Handy. Her narrative offers a fitting end to this discussion.

At the Brooklyn Museum, I saw a teen aged mother slump tiredly onto a [Jenny Holzer] bench in the front row one day [of the exhibition called "Signs and Benches"] while her baby sat in its stroller beside her. She used the bench as a bench, ignoring both the light boards and engraved messages. Having a radical text underneath one's posterior is an interesting experience, but you simply can't interpret it by the seat of your pants.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ellen Handy, "Jenny Holzer," *Arts Magazine* (September 1988), p. 91.