Art History 25

Museum Studies

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Contents

Art History 25: Museum Studies

- the **new museology** examines the frame of the museum itself:
    - how a museum imparts meaning, its authority, etc.
    - condition of displaying a work of art is integral to the meaning and interpretation of a work of art
    - vs. the more vocational "old" museology
- multiple metaphorical approaches to museums:
    1. museum as a temple
        - sacred, holy
    2. museum as a forum
        - discussion, experimentation, debate
    3. museum as a looking glass
        - reflections of our *own* cultural experiences and assumptions
- debate on the definition of museums:
    - since 1970: museums are nonprofit institutions in the service of society
        * they exhibit the heritage of humanity and its environment for education, study, and enjoyment
    - new proposed definition: museums are democratizing, inclusive, and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and futures
        * responsibility to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality, and planetary well-being
    - some criticisms:
        * more a statement of fashionable values
        * more like a mission statement or an idealogical manifesto
        * doesn't explain what a museum does
- museums are going through an era of change in the 21st century:
    - global expansion of the Guggenheim museums e.g. the Bilbao effect
    - much corporate influence and pervasiveness, "Hollywood"-like commercialism
    - many recent "mega-museums"
        * Louvre Abu Dhabi, National Museum of Qatar, Broad Museum, LACMA redesign
    - not all negative consequences
        * but whose interests are being served by these ongoing transformations?

History of the Museum

- the museum is fundamentally a western institution
  - i.e. belongs fundamentally to the history of the west
- earliest significant pre-modern form is the **wunderkammern** or cabinet of wonders / curiosities:
  - during the Renaissance
  - *private* collections formed by the wealthy
  - defined by being "quaint", eclectic objects
    * no active categories, a more eccentric random collection
- then, we have a shift of these private spaces into the first *public* institutions by the late 18th century:
  - museum moving into its Enlightenment era form
  - more of an encyclopedic or universal survey museum
    * complex systems of art historical classification
  - transforming from private to public institutions
    * the Louvre after the French revolution is the archetypal example of this
  - characterized by ceremonial and triumphal architecture:
    * e.g. taxonomies, periodization, scientific classification
    * emergence of "masterpiece culture"
  - primary function is now more idealogical:
    * no longer neutral spaces
    * museum stages the values and beliefs of the nation state
    * communicates a story that places the nation as heirs to the great cultures of classical civilization
- 19th century expansion and proliferation:
  - period of modernity, industrialization, capitalism, colonialism
  - museum development was a byproduct of an **exhibitionary complex** of this age
    * e.g. first famous World's Fair at the Great Exhibition in London 1851, circuses, apartment stores
  - connected with the rise of spectacle and commodity culture in modern capitalism
- 20th century sees the emergence of the white cube space for the display of modern art:
  - neutral, empty spaces with spaced out art rather than "sardine" packing
    * minimal and uncluttered with removed external stimuli

- – design inaugurated by MOMA
  - – Guggenheim, Centre Pompidou, etc. take more postmodern approaches
- comparing different museum thresholds:
  - – neoclassical style is famous in many museums
    - * harks back to the ceremonial architecture patterns of old
  - – more modern thresholds redefine this classical style
    - * e.g. LACMA's famous street light array, Centre Pompidou's external escalator
  - – in the modern day, many non-physical thresholds or entrances into the museum experience
    - * online experiences, catalogs, etc.

Museum as a Way of Seeing

- Alpers's *The Museum as a Way of Seeing*:
    - notion of "the museum effect"
    - emphasizes the aspect of "attentive looking" and "visual interest" in objects that the museum facilitates
        * comparing vs. nature
    - the museum effect of turning all objects into works of arts / objects of curiosity
        * vs. the other unsavory museum effect of isolating something from its world
    - "de-job" of dislocation, disruption, removal, decontextualization:
        * vs. "re-job" of relocation, recontextualization, reconstruction
        * poor reconstructions may objectify or exotify objects
    - museums making it easier to see e.g. severing ritual altarpieces from their ritual site enhances their visual interest
    - yet museums can make it hard to see e.g. typing and chronologically placing Dutch artwork may not make visual sense
        * history of objects vs. their visual culture
    - emphasizing differences can spur visual attention
        * visual conditions and placings greatly express how we react to objects
    - argues that visual interest is the most natural factor a museum exhibits, over say, cultural significance
    - educate by installation rather than communicating ideas about them
- Baxandall's *Exhibiting Intention*:
    - the exhibition as a "field" of play
    - precondition:
        * museum exhibit is an array of objects and artifacts offered for inspection
        * visitor is here to visually look at objects
            · may have judgements of value and analytics, based on their cultural backgrounds
        * interplay between three cultural perspectives of the maker's culture, the arrangers' culture, and the viewer's culture
    - viewer seeking cause i.e. intentions vs. exhibitor seeking effect
        * space *between* the label and the object
    - three recommendations:
        1. objects least likely to cause misunderstanding are objects intended for

exhibition
2. install the element of cross-culturality inherent in the viewer's position into the exhibition
3. recognize viewer's active viewing experience
- exhibitors cannot represent cultures, but instead be tactful and stimulating
  * leave the rest to the viewer
- Clifford's *Contact Zones*:
  - the museum as a "contact zone" or the space of colonial encounters
    * focuses on the trauma from the "de-job"
  - emphasizes the cross-cultural clashes inherent in the museum
    * centralized collections of minority cultures that reveal a history of inclusion vs. exclusion, inequality, colonial conflict, etc.
  1. reciprocities (historically, very *uneven* reciprocities) explore the responsibilities museums have with the cultures of their objects:
     - two-way interaction
     - what can museum do when given stories and cultural context?
     - e.g. Stanford and New Guinea interactive sculpture collaboration
  2. exploitations acknowledge the turbulent history of cultural exploitations
     - e.g. in shows, movies, world fairs etc.
  3. contentations reference some cultural controversies that have occurred with museums
     - e.g. *The Spirit Sings* oil sponsorship, *Into the Heart of Africa* heavy-handed use of irony and juxtaposition
- Rugoff's *Beyond Belief: The Museum as Metaphor*:
  - Jurassic natural history museum in LA:
    * but most exhibits do not have to do with Jurassic time or location!
    * includes objects such as Noah's Ark, Tower of Babel, carvings, battle maps
  - dimly lit, maze-like, cluttered:
    * inspired by nineteenth-century roots
    * very verbose labels, didactic, audio components
  - some of the exhibits seem exaggerated... exploiting viewers' cultural literacy?
    * "exhibits slip from the factual to the metaphorical", full of conspiracy theories?
    * ironically a meta-commentary on the institution of museums?
      · unreality of its own recreations
      · memory is a figment of the imagination
    * "artifacts dematerialize into questions about display and the nature of knowledge"

* leads viewers beyond belief, scrambling perception of boundaries
* metaphor of the "fallible self" vs. traditional museum's objectivity

Primitivism

- McEvilley's *Primitivism at MOMA*:
    - MOMA 1984 exhibit with goal of juxtaposing modern and tribal objects:
        * "primitive" describes tribal objects with intentionality of shamanic vocation and psychology
        * "primitivism" is a projection of desire onto non-Western tribal cultures by thinkers and artists in Europe and America
            · rooted in the Enlightenment era concept of the "noble savage"
    - primitivism usually entails a simplistic understanding of other cultures and is bound up in some racist and hierarchical assumptions
    - McEville argues there is a idealogical subtext to the exhibit director's goals:
        * he is defending a personal belief in the "universal aesthetic" of formalist modernism
        * framing modernism as innocent and universal by comparing it to "primitive" art
        * director ignores "primitive primitivists," calls recent primitivist work "sinister"
    - exhibit works were chosen with a "sterilizing eye"
        * "aestheticizing of primitive religious objects is a way for the civilized Westerner to ignore violence in ancient religious practice"
    - exhibit also gives no context on the tribal object, ignoring the anthropological point of view
    - opposing views:
        * primitive "looks like" the modern validates the modern by showing its values are universal and permanent canon
        * primitivism invalidates modernism by showing it to be derivative and subject to external causation
        * "etic" vs. "emic"
    - McEville highlights some of the weaker arguments used on the other side and flaws in the exhibitions:
        * e.g. negative arguments, violating their own precondition, interpreting objects as art vs. shamanic tools
        * exhibit has no labels, dates, context, function for the primitive objects
    - McEville argues that modernism is directly caused by a deep infusion of African and Oceanic foreign influence, not some pure return to aesthetic form
        * "this exhibition shows Western egotism still as unbridled as in the

centuries of colonialism and souvenirism"
- Royal Ontario Museum *Into the Heart of Africa* 1988 exhibit:
    – a failed experiment in reflexive and self-critical museology
    – strong use of irony made it difficult to discern ironic vs. literal ideas
    – exhibitor assumed "ideal" visitors
- NYT's *Heart of Darkness in the City of Life*:
    – the Musee du Quai Branly opened in 2006 in Paris is a museum devoted entirely to non-Western art
    – "Will religious, ceremonial, and practical objects, never intended as art...be showcased like baubles, with no context?"
    – "museum as a kind of ghetto for the 'other'...an enormous, rambling, crepuscular cavern that tries to evoke a journey into the jungle"
    – argues the museum links together artwork for no reason, other than the legacy of colonialism
        * contrasts with the Louvre, where every work is given the "dignity of its own space" in "setting of pure aesthetic bliss"
    – physical architecture of exterior and interior of museum was very controversial
        * as far from the white cube as possible

Politics of Repatriation

- Walter Benjamin: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.":
    - human conflict is violent
    - the acquiring of art objects and cultural artifacts in many museums is no different
    - an example of **dialectical thinking**, where seemingly different things are "locked" together
- history of repatriation debates:
    - **repatriation** is return of the object to its original location
    - **provenance** is the biography of an object
    - **restitution** is about correcting a historical wrong, implicating questions of social justice
    1. art seized by Hitler's Nazi regime during WW II
    2. material culture and human remains of indigenous peoples of the Americas
        - led to the passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990
    3. objects acquired under conditions of colonialism
    - e.g. the Kohinoor Diamond is a diamond from South Asia, once one of the largest diamonds in the world:
        * in 1851, becomes part of the British crown jewels, in the tower of London
        * many different governments have claimed right to the diamond
    - e.g. the Benin Bronzes were seized by the British in a "punitive expedition":
        * seized and looted violently
        * currently held in the British Museum
        * lots of debate about reuniting and returning the bronzes
    - e.g. the Parthenon marbles are also held at the British Museum:
        * parts of a large frieze taken by Elgin from the Parthenon ruins in 1803
        * very vocal request by the Greeks to get the marbles back
        * the New Acropolis Museum is yet another large argument for restitution
- ICOM 2002 declaration argues that objects acquired in earlier times have become part of the museums that have cared for them:
    - should be sensitive to original context of the objects, but acknowledges that museums provide a valid and valuable context as well
        * museums offer great quality and a "universal" diversity in its collec-

　　　tions
　　– calls to the history of museums e.g. classical Greek art collecting, Renaissance Italy, etc.
　　– in terms of repatriation, argues that museums serve not the citizens of one nation, but the people of every nation
　　　* "museums are agents in the development of culture," and "narrowing the focus...would therefore be a disservice to all visitors"
　　– over time, acquired objects have become "part of the museums that have cared for them"
　　– antiquated enlightenment ideals
　　　* many problems with the argument, who decides?
• O'Neill's *Enlightenment museums: universal or merely global?*:
　　– argues against the 2002 declaration spearheaded by British Museum directory MacGregor, says declaration is greatly undermined by its subtext as a defense against repatriation
　　　* i.e. declaration is "a statement of self-interest" for some of the richest museums, rather than even the "international museum community"
　　– ideally, a coherent universal perspective on cultural difference is desirable
　　　* asks whether museums actually achieve this, or simply a "projection of western cultural values"
　　– critique of the repatriation arguments in the declaration:
　　　* MacGregor argues that the Greeks' claim to the Parthenon marbles is undermined by the fact that the ancient Greek empire owned slaves and exploited its constituent city states, also because it is a modern political play
　　　　· England has similar grey areas with its origins, and the British Museum has its own political goals vis-a-vis the status quo
　　　* MacGregor argues that the Benin bronzes, though taken violently, benefited the appreciation of African artistry in the West
　　　　· actually a very violent confiscation, and this sense of "appreciation" carries with itself a notion of Western superiority and flawed circular reasoning
　　　* MacGregor argues the Rosetta Stone is all-important as the pinnacle example of object-based scholarship
　　　　· the stone was actually deciphered by a French scholar
　　– argues that altogether, the defense against repatriation focuses on using objects to answer questions about the past:
　　　* this leads to presentism, where the present is viewed as the inevitable result of victories and progresses
　　　* selecting data to "justify rather than explain," and making "moral

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judgements about past societies"
- O'Neill gives empathy to the scholars who face quandaries in repatriation, and then attacks the declaration writers for lacking empathy to the other side i.e. the claims themselves
- ignoring the idealogical flaws, O'Neill considers the philosophical utilitarian argument:
  * good of more people seeing these objects in the British museum
  * weighed against the potential benefit of restitution for the origin cultures as well as the harm of non-return
- also considers just how good is the greater good of sharing the objects to a wider audience in the British museum:
  * museums do not necessarily encourage visitors to see the world as one, or generate tolerance and understanding
  * *global* but not *universal* (only narrowly metropolitan), too static temporally, not keeping up with modern liberal views
    · focuses on taxonomies of art and materials, detached, academic, decontextualized
  * displaying collections by techniques and schools, rather than comparisons, parallels, references, etc.
  * "well-disposed liberals may read a 'world is one' message in the displays, it is not inherent in them"
    · some people visit museums to complacently confirm the prejudices, rather than challenge their preconceptions
  * museums often assume a certain intelligence in its viewers
  * museum doesn't consider its own idealogical role in history!
- his suggestions for the ideal universal museum:
  * address the history and western tendencies of museums
  * recognize the importance of all interactions between cultures
  * combine aesthetic standards with communicate historical (including imperial and enlightenment) and contemporary contexts of objects
  * share historical and contemporary voices from the cultures of the objects
  * promote mutual understanding and respect among peoples, rather than a rationale for the inequalities in the status quo
  * exhibit more light and shade, stop avoiding painful historical issues on the grounds of taste or aesthetic and academic detachment
- Benin bronzes:
  - thousands of artifacts plundered from the Royal Palace of Benin by British troops in 1897
  - no commitment to full repatriation yet by any major European museum

- – "Digital Benin" is an online project to catalog these looted objects and increase awareness for the case of restitution
    - * Royal Museum in Benin City is the long term coordinator of the project
- Parthenon marbles:
    - – the New Acropolis Museum is a new museum at the base of the sacred Parthenon complex
    - – aims to convince the British government to return the sculptures and parts of the Parthenon frieze to their origin

Institutional Critique and Museum Activism

- **institutional critique** is artwork in dialogue with the museum:
  - i.e. an art practice that systematically inquires into the workings of museums and galleries
  - has changed dramatically over time
    * critique ends up getting co-opted by museums
  - relationship of artists and museums
  - artists challenging politics, ideologies, authorities of museums
  - famous key figure Marcel Duchamps
    * irreverent mockings and gestures e.g. urinal as a fountain in 1917
- first wave of institutional critique in the 1960s and on:
  - artists such as Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Merle Laderman Ukeles
  - methodologies of conceptual change
  - Buren's famous striped canvas that blocked artworks in the Guggenheim spiral
    * rehung in 2005, with no major controversy
  - Buren argues museum sterilizes the dynamism of an object in the studio
  - Buren's modern Observatory of Light exhibit has been criticized for being "defanged"
  - Hans Haacke showing of real estate holdings of slumlords as well as financial connections between the Guggenheim and the slumlords
  - Merle Laderman Ukeles performance artist, showing cleaning the museum
- possibility of toxic philanthropy in the arts:
  - private initiatives for the public "good"
  - in the modern day, more commercialized and begets elitism
    * as well as philanthropy by violent companies
  - e.g. Sackler family of pharmaceuticals has ties in the Opioid crisis
  - e.g. Decolonize This Place (DTP) protested against Kanders, boardmember on the Whitney museum, who runs a company creating weapons such as tear gas, riot gear, etc.

CASE STUDIES

Case Studies

Louvre

- origin of the Louvre as a modern museum connected with the French revolution:
    - was a palace before then, already important for its art patronage and "salon" culture
    - museums are intertwined with politics and the expression of power:
        * Louvre enacted a "ritual of citizenship"
        * places France as an heir to a civilizational timeline
- in 2017, Louvre expanded to Abu Dhabi:
    - "Arab-galactic wonder revises art history"
    - aims to construct a new narrative of a global and intercultural art history
    - religion, trade, and politics are its central themes
        * only 600 total objects, so display of objects is carefully organized and juxtaposed
- Carters at the Louvre:
    - music video filmed at the Louvre in 2018
        * led to historically unprecedented number of visitors
    - breaks the idealogical convention staged by the Louvre's history of the superiority of Western-European civilization
    - highlighted artworks:
        * references *Dancing at the Louvre, The Kitchen Table Series*
        * *Winged Victory* depicting Nike
        * *Coronation of Napoleon*
        * *Venus de Milo*
        * *Madame Recamier*
        * *Portrait of a Black Woman*