



# CURATING THE CONTEMPORARY IN THE ART MUSEUM

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ART MUSEUMS AND EXHIBITIONS

EDITED BY MALENE VEST HANSEN  
AND KRISTIAN HANDBERG



# Curating the Contemporary in the Art Museum

*Curating the Contemporary in the Art Museum* investigates the art museum as a space where the contemporary is staged – in exhibitions, collecting practices, communication, and policies.

*Curating the Contemporary in the Art Museum* traces the art museum back to the postwar era. Including contributions by established and emerging art historians, academics, and curators, the book proposes that the art museum is engaged in the contemporary in a double sense: it (re)presents contemporary art, while the contemporary condition itself also has a significant impact on art and the museum that houses it.

Presenting a diverse range of international cases of exhibitions and curatorial practices, which hail primarily from Europe and Scandinavia, the essays examine the politics of staging “national”, “international”, and “global” framings of modernism, as well as the new public spaces shaped in digital practices and changing political frameworks. The book investigates both the seminal and the unknown exhibitions and institutions that created contemporary art as we know it today.

*Curating the Contemporary in the Art Museum* provides a historical perspective on the museum of contemporary art. It constitutes a step towards differencing the canon of modernist and contemporary art and a more complex understanding of the politics of curating the contemporary in the art museum, why it will be of interest to academics and students engaged in the study of museums, curating, exhibitions, and art history.

**Malene Vest Hansen** is Associate Professor of Art History in the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, The University of Copenhagen. Contemporary art and critical curatorial and museum studies are her main research areas. Currently, she is PI of the research project *Curating the Contemporary: An Exhibition History of the Museum of Modern Art* as a new *Bildung* institution funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research.

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Edited by  
Malene Vest Hansen and  
Kristian Handberg

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# Introduction

## Curating the Contemporary in the Art Museum

*Malene Vest Hansen and Kristian Handberg*

The focus of the present book is to examine how art museums curate the contemporary. Art museums and their histories chart the changing concepts of art, publics, and politics in order to authentically reflect and be relevant to contemporary societies. The form and content of the art museum thus require consistent and attentive consideration, especially today. Recent events and challenges – continuing claims for more focus on gender and ethnic cultural representation and justice, vast waves of immigration and displacement, the growing awareness of climate change, the global Covid-19 crisis, and newly waged war in Europe, to name just a few – incontrovertibly remind us, indeed demand, that museums must respond to and take part in their own time to have significance for people today. In the current public sphere, which is increasingly dominated by social media and digitized globalization, art museums function as central cultural institutions of the signification and authorization of cultural values. Thus, even as the art museum today continues to attract large audiences and attention, it also faces more and ever-expanding demands for adaptation, change, and new approaches.

As many curators, critics, and art historians have demonstrated over the last 25 years, contemporary globalization has fundamentally affected art museums.<sup>1</sup> In economic terms, the rise of neoliberal systems, facilitated by digital technologies and global markets, has significantly contributed to major shifts in approaches to funding and state-sponsored support of cultural institutions. And of course, it has also fueled the speculative art market, which has an impact on the museum's ability to acquire works for its collection, and on what art is brought into media fame and focus.

Globalization also continues to inform new perspectives on concepts of art, the writing of its history, approaches to how it is made visible to its publics, and to a rethinking of the narratives and identities a museum can help shape. Art museums, with more than a century long history as a predominantly Western institution, are today found in most parts of the globe and new museums of contemporary art function on all continents, often closely tied to art markets – most recently booming economies in the Middle East and Asia present spectacular new art museums and exhibition

venues. At the same time, the utopian, Enlightenment notion of the universal art museum as a *Bildung* institution is being questioned and rethought at its very foundation. In some cultures, art museums can be among the few spaces advocating for openness towards history, social differences, cultural ethnicities, and experiments of art. According to Vietnam-based curator and writer Zoe Butt, that is why “museums should mediate dialogue between audience and object; between object and expertise; between object and critic; between observed and lived experience so as to be in constant process of inquiry into the definition of ‘contemporary’ across cultures.”<sup>2</sup>

Butt’s statement was published in *Museum of the Future* from 2014, a book compiled of responses to a questionnaire that was sent to 30 different figures working in the contemporary art world – artists, architects, collectors, and curators. The survey sought to assess what the editors, Christina Bechtler and Dora Imhof, defined as a crisis of the museum of contemporary art at that time – one that they viewed as closely related to the expansion of the museum and the art world in general.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly a decade on, the new challenges described above call for a further rethinking of the art museum.

Also, within ICOM, the International Council of Museums, how to define a museum is being contested. Thus, the official museum definition agreed upon in 2007 was proposed and revised ten years later in 2017 to be replaced by a new definition stressing values such as “inclusion,” “ethics,” “diversity,” and “sustainability.”<sup>4</sup> This caused heated debates among the world’s museum professionals in the ICOM community, and while a new definition has not yet been agreed upon at the time of this writing, it leaves no doubt that the role of the museum is increasingly contested and subject to new and rapidly changing interpretations.<sup>5</sup> Such concerns call for a closer examination of the art museum today and its attempted reorientations, to which the chapters of this anthology will contribute.

## The Paradox of the Contemporary

Taken as a whole, the contributions to this book reflect that the contemporary art museum is undergoing a profound and socially relevant transformation. Rather than simply focusing on museums of “contemporary art” – the concept itself has been subject of countless books, articles, and disputes over the last two decades – the aim of this volume is to reflect upon and contribute an active and open dialogue about *how* art museums curate “the contemporary” by their traditional core activity of collecting and exhibiting artworks as well as in para-curatorial practices.<sup>6</sup> Thus, a main ambition of the chapters collected here is to address the shift in the role of the contemporary art museum by scrutinizing curatorial and exhibition practices, public and pedagogical programming, and the politics of staging the contemporary. In doing so, the book proposes that art museums are doubly engaged in and with the contemporary: it can (re)present

contemporary art, while art institutions themselves also (re)present contemporary conditions.

As stated earlier, there is no general agreement on how to define “the contemporary,” “contemporary art,” or “the contemporary art museum.” Art historians Beatrice von Bismarck, Heike Munder, and Peter J. Schneemann describe this as “the paradox of the contemporary” in their 2017 anthology *Now-Tomorrow-Flux: An Anthology on the Museum of Contemporary Art*.<sup>7</sup> The paradox represents not only the simple fact that what is of the present will inevitably become part of the past but also that museums function as archival institutions of history. This dichotomy also points to the modern-contemporary slippage within art history: if “modern” used to be a term equivalent to “contemporary,” or the now and still alludes to this in everyday language, in the specialized terminology of art history, “modern” now defines a specific category and historical period of the past. Within the context of the art museum, the modern-contemporary dilemma is apparent in the many museums of modern art established in the post-World War II period as contemporary in the sense that they should be of and for the(ir) present time – but often gradually shift from spaces of progressive art and publics into conventional and established institutions. The museums of contemporary art are thus “premised on a thorough re-conception of the very category of the museum.”<sup>8</sup>

The boom of international contemporary art biennials during recent decades, with their preoccupation with the very new, has had a profound effect on museums of contemporary art. Paraphrasing the much quoted definition on the imperative cultural importance of exhibitions “as the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art,” as phrased by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne in their groundbreaking *Thinking about Exhibitions* from 1996, the 2010 *Biennial Reader* argues for the new dominance of biennials: “If it can be said that for more than a century museum and gallery exhibitions have largely been ‘the medium through which most art becomes known,’ then it is the *biennial exhibition* that has arguably since proved to be the medium through which most contemporary art becomes known.”<sup>9</sup> Many art museums orbit biennialization and the circulation of artists and exhibitions in search for the very new, the “new contemporary,” new trends of art and artists.

Claire Bishop’s 2014 book *Radical Museology or, What’s “Contemporary” in Museums of Contemporary Art?* is one of the most influential critiques of the chase of the “new contemporary” and its related spectacular blockbuster shows.<sup>10</sup> Art museums showing the contemporary as focusing on whatever is the new are “presentist,” according to Bishop. In contrast, she calls for a strategy of the “dialectical contemporary,” and argues that “museums with a historical collection have become the most fruitful testing ground for a non-presentist, multi-temporal contemporaneity.”<sup>11</sup> The modern-contemporary dilemma can thus be turned inside-out as a constructive friction.

## Differencing Canons

The research fields of critical museum and curatorial studies have intensified focus on representation and the ideological workings of the museum institution and its exhibition apparatus, described as the “exhibitionary complex” by sociologist Tony Bennett. These fields have contributed important rewritings of (art)history for our contemporary times, with de-colonizing, feminist, and critical curating of “difficult” material, of contested histories, of gender and representation, and patterns of cultural blind spots.

The scholarly interest in the curating of exhibitions and their histories has exploded in recent years. Critical studies of the specificity of contemporary and past curating practices are important in the growing field of exhibition histories within curatorial studies. The book series *Exhibition Histories* (which introduced the term as the research excavation of a specific exhibition of the past) by the academic publisher Afterall marked its ten-year anniversary with the anthology *Art and Its Worlds: Exhibitions, Institutions and Art Becoming Public* in 2021.<sup>12</sup> As a survey of exhibition activities in the global art world since 1989, the book highlights an array of exhibition formats and practices tied together where art is “becoming public.” This implies the exhibition as something that is constantly changing, on the move, and manifested through the experiences of its participants – as a “mobile location of the entangled differentiation of art’s producers and its publics.”<sup>13</sup> According to the anthology’s editors, the field of exhibition histories strives to offer new possible histories of art through exhibitions instead of singular artists and their works – with a preference for experimental practices and inclusion of global contexts as a premise for the studies of past exhibitions. Despite such expanded perspectives, exhibition histories also tend to focus on singularly identifiable exhibition projects and curator-personas rather than focusing on the art museum and its institutional developments.

Instead of “cherry picking” those exhibitions that fit into an already established canon, the focus on less known case studies can contribute with important perspectives to broaden and question the canonization and hegemonization of modern and contemporary art history, both in its conventional Western-focused form and in more recent global models.

*Curating the Contemporary in the Art Museum* traces the art museum back to the post-war era, particularly in Europe. The diversity of the case studies based on specific experiences of the contemporary and its installation across the field of art museums demonstrates how much the differencing of canons is still needed.

Museologist Simon Knell emphasizes this need to continue differencing canons in our current global context in his introduction to the 2019 anthology *The Contemporary Museum – Shaping Museums for the Global Now*. He writes, “the global contemporary is a museological age,” because digitation and social media have “replaced the need for historical authentication

and legitimization with a freeform need to curate the cultural resources that surround us.”<sup>14</sup> In a world where information is viral and infectious with “fake news,” our volume echoes this call by arguing for the importance of art museums as key authorizing institutions. Following art historian David Joselit, who views the struggle over the authorization of images as the most significant aesthetic challenge of our time, the chapters included here all in some way engage with Joselit’s call for both a continued *de-authorization* of toxic institutional structures and a *re-authorization* of images.<sup>15</sup>

## Researching the Contemporary Art Museum

The main objective of this book is to propose a diverse yet focused understanding of the art museum from the post-war period to the present day, especially highlighting the diverse European landscape of art museums. From each chapter’s situated perspective, the texts excavate genealogies and practices since 1945 up to recent case studies. Covering a wide range of exhibitions and curatorial practices, the essays examine the politics of staging “global,” “national,” and “international” framings of modernism, the new public spaces shaped in digital practices, and differentiated perspectives on the past affected by awareness of decolonization and feminism.

The book focuses on how art museums curate the contemporary in three thematic sections: (1) the curatorial now: performing the museum; (2) politics of curating the contemporary-modern in the art museum; and (3) mapping exhibition histories of the contemporary. Each section features essays written by carefully considered writers from different stages within the museum research field. Included here are writers well-established within the curatorial and institutional critique, as well as emerging international scholars, museum curators, and independent writers.

The texts presented here grew out of the international conference *Curating the Contemporary in the Art Museum*, planned by the University of Copenhagen and at The National Gallery SMK, Denmark, to take place on March 12–13, 2020, as part of the ongoing research project *Curating the Contemporary: An Exhibition History of the Museum of Modern Art as a New Bildung Institution* funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark.<sup>16</sup> However, on the evening of March 11, the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen announced a national lockdown due to Covid-19. All invited international speakers had to leave Denmark immediately before the conference could take place. As we know now, this was just the very beginning of days, weeks, and years of the global pandemic crisis. Prevented from exchanging our research with papers and discussions in person, we decided to focus the dialogue by publishing the present anthology. All articles included here were written specifically for *Curating the Contemporary in the Art Museum*, with one exception: the essay by Claire Bishop is an updated and revised version of a previously published text. We hope the essays compiled here will help differencing and broadening the

canon of modernist and contemporary art with the analysis of specific and positioned case studies, constituting a step towards a more complex understanding of the politics of curating the contemporary in the art museum.

At the time of the writing of this introduction, we are witnessing yet another profound crisis: Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 has started a war in Europe that threatens not only to bring terrible devastation and the displacement of millions of civilians but also to create a frighteningly reshaped world order of cultural confrontation. How and when this war will end is impossible to say. But to be sure, we will face renewed culture wars, where art museums and exhibitions play significant roles – also as political agents – which will have historical precedence; indeed, several of the essays in this book testify to this dilemma with cases from earlier political conflicts. Whether the conditions will limit museums as spaces of differences, “difficult” material, controversies, and complexities in years to come is an open question. But it will not diminish the importance of continuing research in specific politics and histories of the art museum.

## Notes

- 1 See, e.g., Julian Stallabras, *Art Incorporated*, (2004), Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology or, “What’s Contemporary” in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (2014), Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, (2011).
- 2 Zoe Butt interviewed in Christina Bechtler and Dora Imhof, eds., *Museum of the Future*, (Zürich: JPR Ringier, 2014), 53.
- 3 Ibid. The editors published a follow-up with interviews with 25 culture makers in 2022: *Museum of the Future: What Now?* (Zürich: JPR Ringier and Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2022).
- 4 The 2007 ICOM definition reads:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment.

See <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> (accessed November 2021).
- 5 For a summary of the debate, see <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/03/ideological-rift-persists-as-icom-restarts-museum-definition-consultation/> (accessed November 2021). In August 2022, ICOM will vote on a new definition at an extraordinary general assembly. <https://icom.museum/en/news/the-icom-advisory-council-selects-the-museum-definition-proposal-to-be-voted-in-prague/>(accessed May 2022).
- 6 The paracuratorial has been defined by commentators like Paul O’Neill and Simon Sheik as procedures and practices outside of exhibition-making that are still the outcome of the curator’s work. These can include talks, screenings, performances, discussions, and publications. See: Simon Sheik: “From Para to Post: The Rise and Fall of Curatorial Reason”, *Springerlin*, XXIII (1, 201), pp. 16–20.
- 7 Heike Munder in conversation with Yilmaz Dziewior, Francesca von Habsburg, and Lars Nittve “The Paradox of the Contemporary”, in Beatrice von Bismarck,

- ed, *Now-Tomorrow-Flux: An Anthology on the Museum of Contemporary Art* (Zürich: JPR Ringier, 2017), 19–31.
- 8 Beatrice von Bismarck, Heike Munder, and Peter J. Schneemann, eds., *Now-Tomorrow-Flux: An Anthology on the Museum of Contemporary Art*, (Zürich: JPR Ringier, 2017), 7.
  - 9 Elena Fillipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, eds., *The Biennial Reader: The Bergen Biennial Conference*. (Bergen and Ostfildern: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), p. 5. The quote refers to Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 2.
  - 10 Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology or, “What’s Contemporary” in Museums of Contemporary Art? 2.*, rev. Ed. (London: Koenig Books, 2014), 14.
  - 11 *Ibid.*, 23–24.
  - 12 Lucy Steeds, David Morris, Charles Esche, and Bo Choy (ed.): *Art and its Worlds: Exhibitions, Institutions and Art Becoming Public*, (London: Afterall, 2021).
  - 13 *Ibid.*, 18.
  - 14 Simon Knell, ed., *The Contemporary Museum – Shaping Museums for the Global Now*, (London: Routledge, 2019), 2.
  - 15 David Joselit, “Virus as Metaphor”, *October* (MIT Press 2020 159–162), 160.
  - 16 <https://artsandculturalstudies.ku.dk/research/curating-the-contemporary/> (accessed May 2022).



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## Part I

# The Curatorial Now

## Performing the Museum

*Malene Vest Hansen and Kristian Handberg*

This section takes as its central starting point the idea of performing the museum, a concept which revolves around how contemporary artistic work and curatorial projects use the art museum as material to be modeled and remodeled. This has occurred in recent years with projects that work directly with the museum space itself as an artistic product and interact with the museums to steer their ways of being institutions in new directions. The taking over the museum as a kind of stage is what we call the *Curatorial Now*; that is, it describes the contemporary temporality of these activities, which often have a performative character that takes place right before our eyes while also forming a distinct curatorial tendency in the most recent years.

This performative remodeling of the museum is related to significant changes in the identity, nature, and appearance of the art museum. Even though art museums are legislated and institutionally delimited in society, their actual form and content can appear as quite open. In this way, the classical image of the museum as a grandiose temple housing a grand tour through art history has been supplemented by new and other designs and ideas. What was once a relative uniformity in museum architecture and interior design has evolved over the decades, with the modernist model increasingly augmented by new tastes of architectural uniqueness, often using distinctly non-museal influences like the power station of Tate Modern London (2000), the former grain silo of Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town (2017), or in spectacular newly built “starchitecture” such as Guggenheim Bilbao (1997), M+ in Hongkong (2021), or MUNCH in Oslo (2021).

Once inside the museum building, the collection forms only part of the museum and is not necessarily the most central one. Also, the collection must be activated and put into motion in accordance with the contemporary through new displays, interventions, and active stagings. The educational role of the museum – what we might refer to as “Bildung” – is entangled with the demands for appealing entertainment, new experiences, and externally defined social missions. Finally, the museum is host to a vast array of services meant to cater to an audience that lie at quite a distance from the