

CREATIVE ENTERPRISE

CONTEMPORARY ART BETWEEN
MUSEUM AND MARKETPLACE

MARTHA BUSKIRK

VOLUME 3

INTERNATIONAL TEXTS IN CRITICAL MEDIA AESTHETICS
FOUNDING EDITOR: FRANCISCO J. RICARDO

Creative Enterprise

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VOLUME #3

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For Fred and Mary

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Martha Buskirk

INTRODUCTION

It would be easy enough to dismiss the Brooklyn Museum's decision to honor the winner of *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist* with a 2010 solo exhibition as a craven publicity stunt, calculated to ride the slipstream of media exposure surrounding the Bravo network's art-based foray into the world of reality television. The work of Abdi Farah, the 22-year-old champion who had only recently completed his undergraduate art degree, did indeed seem a bit immature. But the idea of the museum survey as crowning achievement awarded (and only rarely at that) for a lifetime of artistic struggle and exploration had long begun to slip, with younger and younger artists feted under the rubric of the "mid-career retrospective." Collectors have likewise been eager to chase down new talent, in a feeding frenzy that has invaded the MFA studios of certain high-prestige schools known (in a self-perpetuating cycle) for their track record in launching art world stars. It was apparently coincidental, however, that the title Farah gave his assembled work, "Luminous Bodies," was based on a line from *The Empire Strikes Back*, returning it full circle to a 2002 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum showcasing costumes and other props from the *Star Wars* cycle that was heartily criticized for its shallow populism. A rather defensive sounding introductory wall text insisted that "contests such as *Work of Art* are not unfamiliar to art museums," situating this morsel of twenty-first-century synergy as "a direct descendent of the juried-exhibition tradition" central to nineteenth-century salon displays at the Louvre.

Nor was the Brooklyn Museum the only art world institution marshaled to put its imprimatur on this freshly anointed luminary, since the jackpot included (in addition to a sizable cash prize) the honor of having a work put up for auction. "For an artist to go to an auction house," declares Chuck Close, "is a little bit like taking a cow on a guided tour of a slaughterhouse."¹ Try telling that to Takashi Murakami, however, described as a "habitué of the auction

circuit,” or to Farah, still under the wing of Simon de Pury (who served as mentor to the contestants on *Work of Art*) when he made an appearance at the November 2010 Phillips de Pury & Company contemporary sale and saw his drawing, appropriately entitled *Baptism*, go for \$20,000.² The idea of an auctioneer as a worthy guide for young artists could be written off as just another broadcast absurdity, were it not for the ascendant role of the contemporary art market, together with the increasingly dominant position of auction houses within that context. Despite the fact that Bravo’s art “reality” was no less artificial than any of its television predecessors, the museum’s willing collusion with this media-driven talent hunt does say something about the actual state of the art world.

By almost any measure, contemporary art has never had it so good. There are, even in the most conservative estimates, thousands of noteworthy galleries in large and small cities throughout the world devoted to its display, hundreds of museums with significant contemporary programming, as well as scores of biennials and art fairs. Large numbers of art schools and degree programs, as well as an increasingly significant international network, ensure a constant supply of new material, and a closely related array of curators, critics, and academic researchers make certain that the recent and not quite so recent is properly contextualized. A vital, if at times dizzying, eclecticism means that monumental installations coexist with gestures that have no physical presence; art made using traditional modes of address shares its audience with experiments involving both newer media and alternate systems of distribution; and works that speak directly and critically to contemporary social or political issues intermix and overlap with subtly nuanced explorations of form. The challenges presented by this diversity of practice are being addressed by an equally formidable and varied assembly of interpretive methods, ranging from the foundational texts associated with the still relatively young discipline of art history to the cross-disciplinary riches tapped by the theoretical turn in the latter part of the twentieth century. Nor are these analytic tools being deployed in only one direction, since artists are part of a dialogue that therefore informs production as well as interpretation.

Yet somehow all is not quite right. Developments during the last century made it abundantly evident that romantic notions of autonomy and art for art’s sake were not only impossible to sustain, but often declaimed in precisely those contexts where art

was being used for the least disinterested of purposes. It is difficult, however, not to see a certain irony in what seems to be a smooth segue from strategies of institutional critique, which were once capable of provoking discomfort and resistance through unwanted scrutiny, to the institutional embrace of artistic projects that knowingly highlight aspects of establishment protocol. Likewise, post-studio practices initially seemed like a bracing challenge to the old-fashioned figure of the lone artist in the studio. These alternative approaches have nonetheless opened onto the reestablishment of workshop-type enterprises designed to sustain both high production volume and the logistics of international artistic careers. Alterations in the labor necessary for art's creation play off of and mimic broader economic transformations, with much contemporary work produced through the combined efforts of numerous studio assistants and specialized fabricators, and frequently emerging from various forms of cooperation between artist and curator. Roles blur in other directions too, with artists responsible for the work, but often involved in establishing its interpretive context as well (once thought to be the moment when the critic was supposed to take up the task). Although art remains an idealized activity, it is also understood as a profession, and in increasingly obvious ways a business, particularly as practiced by star artists who preside over highly developed art product lines.

The contemporary museum, with its multi-faceted agenda, is central to this state of affairs but equally filled with contradiction. It is tasked with guarding cultural heritage and promoting scholarship while simultaneously serving as an entertainment and tourist destination. Museums preserve the art of the past even as they actively help produce the art of the present. The objects on display are supposed to be priceless, in the double sense of valuable beyond measure and withdrawn from the economies of exchange. Yet exhibition programming is often linked to strategies of collection building, and contemporary selections are driven by what commercial galleries have already put forward. It is also an institution in a constant state of flux, despite the venerable stability implied by a certain era of Western museum architecture. Related to the emphasis on the new is a constant process of reassessing how to present art of the past, with old and recent sometimes linked by invitations to artists to respond to collection dynamics. And even where a direct examination is not in play, contemporary

art's extreme variety carries suggestive echoes of one of the art museum's historic predecessors, the cabinet of curiosities, thereby drawing attention to the process of definition by which the art museum was set off from such other museum types as natural history collections, historical societies, or science museums.

Linked, inescapably, to these transformations, is the vastly expanded art market, which has proven itself capable of embracing not only unique objects, but all those less evidently rare or even tangible forms once conceived as resistant to art's commodification. The avant-garde's paradoxical, even destructive, success can be seen in the ways that dissent is not only embraced, but eagerly solicited—at least as long as it stays within certain bounds of good behavior and professional responsibility. In fact it has become painfully obvious that many of the very qualities that make recent artistic developments interestingly provocative can simultaneously provide the basis for cynical manipulation and instrumentalization. Too often there is a double agenda at work, with art based on a close mimicry of all manner of goods and services asserted as self-conscious critique, at the same time that such work is pursued in a highly businesslike fashion, with an eye to maximizing actual dividends. Yet, even in the face of the organization of art museums in conformation with business models, as well as resemblances between artistic creation and other forms of celebrity, branding, and commodity production, the notion of art as a privileged sphere of activity remains a dearly held and indeed essential tenet.

To the extent that the contemporary is taken as synonymous with the new, it is easy to fall prey to quick cycles of novelty and obsolescence. By contrast, this book takes a longer view, considering the interplay between art and institution in light of earlier forms of interdependence. It is impossible to talk about art without considering how it is shaped by the present context of its exhibition and dissemination. And, given that recent art builds on a long history of highly specialized conventions, an analysis of the contemporary has to be grounded on what has come before. Nor can the field of activities identified with the art world be considered in isolation from many other closely related practices. Finally, it is important not to allow the discussion of context to become an end in itself, with the result being an account that circles around the art in question without investigating it directly.

There is no single way to address these dynamics, but the chapters that follow offer an interweaving of telling examples or

situations that highlight shifting relations between artist, institution, work, and audience. One line of inquiry concerns the history of the museum, and how our contemporary experience is built upon, but also departs from, conventions developed in relation to earlier forms of art. Another unpacks the fortunes of the work of art as such, with a focus on how it is constantly defined and redefined in relation to the demands (and desires) of the many interested parties involved in its existence over time. The last part of the book takes on links between market and exhibition circuit, looking for interesting ways to talk about the corrosive impact of art as a growth industry, including the paradoxical claims emanating from a professionalized avant-garde. Over the course of the book, an examination of how distinctions between production and reception blur in the context of museum and conservation practices opens onto an analysis of the many ways that contemporary art has become deeply embedded in an expanding art industry.

Enter the institution

What city can aspire to world-class status without a museum of contemporary art? But does the ubiquity of such institutions necessarily make the concept any less peculiar? It wasn't too many decades ago that artists were mounting vigorous arguments against the museum and its impact on the art it housed. The museum as mausoleum was a common critique. And only a few centuries ago the museum barely existed as a concept, much less as the governing model for how works of art are expected to be viewed. Because the public art museum's establishment is a fairly recent phenomenon, dating largely to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the survey-type institution has a significantly shorter history than many of the objects it houses, meaning that much of the earlier work has been in some sense appropriated as part of its entry into the museum. But, if the initial history of the art museum was one of decontextualization, with objects made for purposes radically different than disinterested contemplation wrenched from their religious or ceremonial settings and obliged to serve new gods, it is another matter entirely when such institutions become filled with work made with the viewing and ownership conditions of the museum as an underlying assumption.

Early twentieth-century avant-garde movements were forward looking by definition, generally with little use for those monuments of the past interred in dusty museums. Even when New York's now venerable Museum of Modern Art was founded in 1929, a sense of incompatibility between museum and modern was evident in Alfred Barr's well-known image of the collection as "a torpedo moving through time," with the nose always progressing, and a corresponding proposal that older works be sold to other museums to make way for the new (which of course never happened).³ By the twentieth century's end, however, the vast expansion of museums of modern and contemporary art was accompanied by a somewhat paradoxical return of the antiquarian, not as a figure of ridicule, but as a guise taken up by artists turning their attention to histories of both objects and institutions. A burst of renewed interest in the earlier cabinet, with its admixture of natural and artificial curiosities, has been part of a broader engagement with a multiplicity of object types and associated patterns of collecting.

Artists play a key role in forging links between separate collection types, and Fred Wilson's 1992 *Mining the Museum* is particularly well known in this respect for its pioneering demonstration of the potential marriage of conceptual art and material culture through his rearrangement of the Maryland Historical Society's holdings to highlight previously overlooked evidence of African American and Native American histories. The expanding popularity of such interventions indicates the appeal of using artists to shake up the art museum's traditional order, with unexpected juxtapositions disrupting the authority of previously instituted narratives (though curators are increasingly taking up the charge themselves, rather than relying on artists to exercise such creative license). Curators solicit, in fact expect, the unexpected when they unleash an artist to respond to an existing collection, with artists invited to provide a counterpoint to the ostensibly neutral chronological order associated with the establishment of art museums as public institutions.

For collections associated with an individual, by contrast, neutrality is generally not an issue. Private cabinets were inseparable from the antiquarian interests of their owners, not just in the composition of the assembly, but in the link between the objects and the collector as story teller, guiding the experience of visitors

to the collection.⁴ The historicist agenda associated with public museums, however, eradicated such antiquarian eccentricities in favor of an apparently authorless narrative, predicated on the unfolding of different periods and regional styles, which posits the examples in the specific collection as fragments of a larger, siteless totality. Without turning public collections back to private hands, planned disruptions generated by artists' interventions reintroduce something akin to the individual owner's personal engagement, as the permission granted to artists to manipulate, arrange, and tell unexpected stories resembles the authority typically exercised by a private collector over his or her possessions.

Of course the institutional narrative associated with traditional survey collections was never the least bit objective, examined for elided ideologies of race, gender, or class. In its early incarnation, the public museum was charged with helping to transform royal subjects into citizens through an experience of art that would no longer be synonymous with a visit to the king. But the idea of education, linked to the goal of providing alternatives to other more debauched forms of recreation, opens onto readings of the museum as an engine of social control.⁵ Nor can autonomy claims for the objects in art museum collections be sustained—which should hardly be surprising, given that this ideology of aesthetic self-sufficiency depended upon the context of the museum narrative for those assertions to be forwarded in the first place. Despite the long association between ideas of autonomy and the history of the museum, the relative synchronicity of their appearance suggests that there has always been a built-in contradiction. As Douglas Crimp has so persuasively argued, statements defending art's autonomy often functioned as ideological smokescreens, helping obscure the late-twentieth-century museum's relationship to wealth and power, the impact of patronage, and the organization of the institution along business lines.⁶ And, in recent years, the ability of museums to absorb, even foster, what once appeared to be critical discourse has helped align the institution with a larger marketplace for culture often described in terms of an experience economy.

Even the phrase used above, "contemporary museum," is open to a double reading. There is the twentieth-century phenomenon of museums specifically devoted to modern and contemporary art, but there is also the inescapable fact that all museums are contemporary in the sense that the access to the past they seem to promise

is firmly rooted in the present tense of the viewer's experience. The story told by the overall arrangement of the collection often promotes an illusion of permanence, of fixed identities and meanings adhering to the objects thus arranged. But this history—the narrative suggested in the encounter with the collection at any given moment—is subject to a constant process of revision. Another chronology, the tale of how the collection has been presented at successive points, is the saga of the museum's instability, evident in the sequence of different hanging schemes, each with its own proposition about the objects thus contextualized. No order can ever be definitive, given inherent tensions between the overall message of the museum's arrangement and contextual information relevant to specific objects—the significance of which becomes especially apparent when a work's situation in the museum's present narrative is interrupted by inconvenient news about illegal excavations or shady provenance history.

The gradual transformation of institutional critique into invited collaboration reflects the fact that neither museum strategies nor artistic responses have remained static. It is equally interesting, however, to note the degree to which resistance and embrace have operated in tandem. The counter-museum stance articulated in the context of Fluxus or in the writings of Allan Kaprow and Robert Rauschenberg appeared at a time when museums were reorienting their exhibition programs to encompass art of the present. Quite obviously the critique of the museum was linked to a certain fascination—evident, for example, in Rauschenberg's association between museum and tomb, at the same time that he was paying close attention to natural history collections (where many displays are quite literally dead).⁷ And witness, as well, the 1969 action staged by the Guerilla Art Action Group (GAAG) in front of the Metropolitan Museum to coincide with the opening of Henry Geldzahler's controversial *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970*. Calvin Tompkins, writing for the *New Yorker*, described an invasion of this staid institution by swingers in see-through blouses and a rock band performing in front of Frank Stella's paintings, even as the event was simultaneously protested by GAAG with a sidewalk dramatization of an artist being pelted by drinks and canapés.⁸ In the case of the GAAG action, the small demonstration in front of the museum was greatly overshadowed by the number of artists who joined the party inside. But an even more significant development

in the decades since has been the art museum's eager embrace not only of the portable objects that filled the Met's early manifestation of contemporary painting and sculpture, but even the type of intervention mounted outside on the sidewalk.

Made in the museum

Two exhibitions at Iris Clert's ground-breaking Paris gallery staked out certain extremes that have held true for many of today's museum interventions. Presenting nothing but the gallery itself, stripped down to bare, whitewashed walls, Yves Klein's 1958 *Le Vide* was nonetheless a major event, attracting a huge crowd eager to enter the otherwise empty space and partake of blue cocktails that Klein had spiked with a medical dye that would discolor their urine for days. In turn, Arman's 1960 *Le Plein* (Full Up) packed the same space so completely with rubbish that the exhibition could only be viewed as a solid, standing on the street and looking at the accumulated mound through the gallery's picture window. Considering the art museum's historic *raison d'être*, founded upon the preservation and fetishized display of highly prized objects, it is striking what an extensive tradition has developed of emptying out the displays in the name of art, or filling the galleries with a wholesale accumulation. For artists who have taken the former tack, sometimes the absence of art on the walls is exactly the point, while at other times static objects are superseded by experiences that play to senses other than sight. There are plenty of examples of excess as well, with all manner of material, sometimes in dizzying abundance, presented under the general auspices of installation art.

Such intrusions are often eagerly solicited by curators and their respective institutions, suggesting an almost masochistic attraction to willfully resistant work as well as dramatic evidence of changing institutional priorities. In this respect the Guggenheim that summarily cancelled Hans Haacke's 1971 exhibition is and is not the same institution that happily collaborated in the 2010 presentation of Tino Sehgal's *This Progress*. The logistics involved in hiring and training the teams of performers (interpreters, in Sehgal's terminology) who engaged visitors in tag-team conversations on the general theme of progress are clearly of a very different order

than presenting rotating displays of objects. And there is the added twist that Sehgal not only forbids photographic documentation, but refuses to employ any form of written instrument in the transmission of the work—relying instead on oral contracts and instructions. In his rejection of such records, Sehgal has insistently slammed shut a back-door approach to performance and related practices, where claims about the work's immediacy have coexisted with widespread dissemination through enduring documentation. Yet the point-by-point refusal of key institutional conventions has clearly not dampened interest in his constructed situations, given that Sehgal was the youngest artist to be accorded the entire Guggenheim rotunda. In fact his gaming of conventions clearly appeals to curators and other professionals steeped in their daily practice. Nor have his gambits precluded marketability, evident in his representation by one of New York's leading contemporary galleries, or the fact that the second work shown at the Guggenheim, his 2003 *The Kiss*, was on loan from the Museum of Modern Art. By selling rights to the situations themselves, rather than related documentation or video, Sehgal's ostensibly resistant work has in fact helped to extend the ways performance-based work can be marketed and collected.

In their turn, large-scale works have inspired ever-expanding spaces of display, as part of a cycle that then challenges artists to find new ways to fill these vast containers. But a significant presence can be achieved by various means, as Olafur Eliasson demonstrated with his 2003 *Weather Project*, when he took over the Tate Modern's massive Turbine Hall with nothing but reflections, light, and mist. A mirrored ceiling completed the artificial sun generated by a half-circle of lamps mounted on the adjacent wall while simultaneously reflecting back the fog-shrouded viewers cavorting on the floor below. And the possibility that such spaces are participating in a form of arms race, with each side (artist and institution alike) escalating to ever larger scale, might be one way of reading Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's 2008 *TH.2058*, for the same venue. In the context of her evocation of the future, fifty years hence (when the artist posited that London's inhabitants might need to use the hall as a refuge from an incessant deluge that would also cause its urban sculptures to grow and swell), already monumental works by Louise Bourgeois, Alexander Calder, and others became even bigger in replica versions that loomed over her gridded play between refugee shelter and reading room.



1. Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003. Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machine, mirror foil, aluminum, and scaffolding, dimensions variable; installation view, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London. Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and neugerriemschneider, Berlin. Photo: Jens Ziehe.



2. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, *TH.2058*, 2008. 3 reproduced sculptures (125% of original size) or 6 reproduced sculptures in original size, LED Screen, 229 shakedown beds, approximately 10,000 science-fiction books, sound, approximately 100 × 22 × 20 meters; installation view, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

The larger the project, however, the more that can go dramatically wrong, as the Tate found in 2010 when it had to close public access to Ai Weiwei's field of millions of individually fashioned ceramic sunflower seeds because of dust generated by friction as they rubbed together under the weight of people's footsteps. But the intensive logistics, as well as potential pitfalls, in the process of turning huge spaces over to monumental projects are most dramatically illustrated by the implosion of *Training Ground for Democracy*, Christoph Büchel's ultimately unfinished installation for MASS MoCA, which devolved into a bitter and protracted legal battle between artist and museum. As per now standard procedures, the museum was charged with the logistical and financial support needed to realize the vision of the invited artist, which in this case involved a setting in which viewers could play out different roles and tensions associated with democratic society, in the context of a spatial arrangement inspired by simulated environments used in military training. Working toward an opening that was initially slated for December 2006, the museum assembled such key items as an entire movie theater, two-story house, mobile home, multiple shipping containers, various vehicles, and many tons of other material. Yet there were also elements that hadn't been procured, and the museum's instance that the airplane fuselage on Büchel's list would take it too far over budget became part of a larger conflict that extended to funding as well as control over creative decisions in a situation where a significant part of the fabrication was delegated to the museum.

The conflict laid bare a fine but nonetheless important distinction: for an institution to take responsibility for a significant share of a work's creation is not the same thing as creating a collaborative work. Among Büchel's grievances were decisions being made by members of the museum staff during construction, without sufficient consultation with the artist—a tension that was only exacerbated when the museum continued to work on the project in Büchel's absence. Even more striking, however, was the museum's controversial decision, once the exhibition was officially canceled in May 2007, to go to court in a bid for legal authority to show the unfinished installation that Büchel had already disowned—a course of action that brought a cascade of negative publicity and which the museum abruptly reversed, despite an initial court victory, when it proceeded to disassemble the installation without official public display in September 2007.⁹

Regardless of the potential fault lines revealed by this conflict, there is certainly no sign of museum production abating—particularly as it dovetails with the installation-heavy approach favored for biennial-type exhibitions. The reasons why museums get into the business of producing the work on display are, however, many, ranging from presenting work created specifically for the site to the desire to exhibit otherwise unavailable historical examples. Nor is it particularly remarkable, despite the traditional importance of original objects for the art museum's mission, to encounter exhibition copies of contemporary work. Once ephemeral or otherwise experimental phenomena, made with little concern for posterity, are judged historically important, such replicas can give the work a tangible presence in the embodied version of history told via museum-generated historical surveys.

It is equally true, however, that a great many of the paintings and sculptures in survey collections were no more created for the museum than these recent forms, only becoming paradigmatic museum objects through their display in an institution conceived and designed to present them as such. But, despite the underlying premise of the museum, providing a vision-centered experience does nothing to guarantee that museum audience members will actually stop and look. The literature on museum management abounds with statistics on the short period of time (generally measurable in seconds rather than minutes) visitors are likely to accord to the vast majority of works on view. As destination points for the secular ritual of tourist pilgrimage, museums may have replaced religious or cult value with exhibition value (pace Walter Benjamin), but that does not necessarily add up to a leisurely examination of objects already familiar from reproduction.¹⁰ Museum success can amount to a kind of failure in this regard, as the fame, along with marketing, responsible for drawing crowds to a particular exhibition or object can make the work both literally and figuratively difficult to see.

Contemporary art's expanding reach has to be understood in relation to a broader project of art promotion. Many have identified the 1976 opening of "The Treasures of Tutankhamun" at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art as the beginning of a new era of museum spectacle, but Alan Wallach posits the Met's 1963 Mona Lisa exhibition as the true inauguration of the blockbuster. Drawing over a million visitors in a single month, the exhibition's appeal was nonetheless also a failure of sorts, with any type of

extended ability to commune with the object at the center of all that fuss ultimately foreclosed, despite its much touted presence.¹¹ And one has to wonder, in the same vein, just what exactly the six million or so annual visitors who make the pilgrimage to the Mona Lisa at the Louvre actually see as they herd past Leonardo's painting, surrounded by milling crowds and protectively encased behind bullet-proof glass. The Louvre's decision to hang the Mona Lisa alone on its own wall constitutes a tacit acknowledgment of how little attention is accorded to the works that once hung around it, and in that respect how irreparably this particular object's renown has interrupted the historical narrative within which it would otherwise be situated.



3. View of the crowds around the Mona Lisa at the Louvre, June 2008. Photo: Masako Kamiya.

While the Mona Lisa dates to the first decade of the sixteenth century and is mentioned in early literature, including Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, it did not begin its true ascent to notoriety until the mid-nineteenth century. In that sense it only became a masterpiece as such some time well after its entry into

the Louvre. (Even the term masterpiece, now so securely associated with this painting, acquired its own amended meaning around the same time. Formerly a work produced to qualify for the status of master within the guild system, the masterpiece of the romantic era took on a new mythic status.¹²) For this work and so many others, the general emphasis on a specific point of origin in its dating draws attention away from the impact of later interpretations—the ensuing stories, or histories plural, as the production of the work’s meaning unfolds in the temporal space between origin and successive moments of reception.¹³ In his 1817 history of Italian painting, just prior to her full stardom, Stendhal didn’t hesitate to question the Mona Lisa’s lack of eyebrows; but it is not clear how many of the painting’s current visitors even get close enough to fully examine her features and, for those who do, whether they feel authorized to find fault with this object of touristic desire.¹⁴ The painting has been both made and unmade by the museum, with the latter apparent in the tension between the present circumstances of the work and qualities it is supposed to convey, despite one’s actual viewing experience. Nor is this process confined only to works subject to frenzied attention, since they provide just one example of the obstacles that potentially impinge upon a viewer’s ability to access the qualities a work is reputed to embody.

It is not so much that contemporary practices have destabilized artistic conventions associated with the museum; rather, the eclecticism of recent work, including art now produced in active collaboration with museum exhibition programs, has helped highlight a process of constant evolution that already existed. Shifting conceptions of art are reflected in altered collection arrangements and hanging schemes, including the salon-style approach that went out of fashion early in the twentieth century but has been resurgent in recent years, or the question of white versus richly colored walls, which has been subject to similar tidal pulls. Witness, too, the abrupt shift in fashion away from plaster casts. Yet another complication to the story can be found in the connections historians have drawn between the nineteenth-century history of art museums and related modes of display or address found in world fairs, commercial arcades, and the newly emergent department store. Plus there is the clear parallel, emerging in the twentieth century, between the role of the artist’s proper name

in authorizing the work and the importance of brand image or identity in the larger universe of consumer goods and services.

“However a problem is solved, the solution is false,” writes Adorno in an oft-cited essay on the museum, where he suggests that the only thing more distressing than the loss of a work’s original surrounding would be an attempt to create a false approximation—paintings presented in a baroque or rococo castle, for instance, or, in a parallel example, the fetishism of using original instruments in performances of Bach.¹⁵ For him, the afterlife of the artwork implies a form of destruction, as dislocation from the moment of origin is the basis for its ongoing efficacy. But, while he notes the tendency to relegate “every work of art to the museum, even Picasso’s recent sculpture,” he does not articulate the next step, where museum procedures and art making become so intertwined that the works starts and ends in the museum, with no relocation as part of the process.¹⁶

For just about any object, the museum in some sense creates the work. Museum manufacture is, however, quite literally true for many forms of contemporary art where institutions actively collaborate with artists in the process of organizing, staging, and documenting their site-dependent or event-based projects, with the works therefore linked to the museum from their inception. As part of the increase in art production that has accompanied (and indeed far outpaced) museum growth, the already large volume of work created in artists’ studios for museum-style conditions of exhibition has been supplemented by an expanding band of itinerant post-studio artists who transform the site of exhibition into the space of assembly. The assimilation of earlier avant-garde gestures has also opened the way for new generations of artists who often walk a fine line between critique and entrepreneurial professionalism as they realize their mutual undertakings with curators and institutions.

The museum as mass medium is Andreas Huyssen’s characterization of the institution that has emerged, not from the museum’s triumph over the avant-garde, but a form of reversal, which he characterizes as the pyrrhic victory of the avant-garde over the museum.¹⁷ Nor does it seem entirely accidental that the blockbuster strategy has come to resemble, in certain key ways, what should be its polar opposite: the recent event and situation-driven works championed by Nicholas Bourriaud under the banner of relational

aesthetics, which de-emphasize the object in favor of audience experience and participatory exchange.¹⁸ While Bourriaud draws a contrast between the continuous availability of art objects and the establishment of ephemeral situations, where the artist summons the audience, museum success, in the business sense, is predicated on parlaying the cult of the original into selling the museum as overall experience and the visit as event. The willing embrace of an expanding definition of art within the galleries is only one aspect of a multi-part institutional agenda encompassing merchandise operations, live music, film, family days, singles nights, and a whole host of other functions designed to make the museum into a full-service culture and entertainment destination.

Art and commerce

When Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God*, his infamous diamond and platinum skull, went on display at the White Cube Gallery in London in 2008, people lined up to get a brief glimpse of the heavily guarded bauble. If one wanted to give the work the full art-historical treatment, one might choose to discuss it in relation to the earlier cabinet of curiosities, with its sometimes startling mix of natural and artificial wonders. Or, given the wow factor of its £50 million asking price, it could be dismissed as yet another brilliant publicity stunt in a career filled with such maneuvers. It is also part of an integrated market strategy ranging from high-end prints to posters and t-shirts. There are plenty who would dismiss Hirst out of hand, and even if one grants him a certain historical significance in the context of the young British artist phenomenon, it is difficult to overlook his frequent recycling of earlier works. By most quantitative measures, however, his success is unquestionable—with his work represented by top echelon international galleries, collected by major museums, and bought by wealthy collectors whose ranks he has joined as a multi-millionaire. If this represents a certain pinnacle of artistic achievement, what does it say about the current state of art?

The possibility that an everyday object might become a work of art merely through the artist's declaration, posited by Duchamp via the ready-made in the 1910s, and the further option that the work

need not be identified with a physical object at all, as elaborated most consistently in conceptual practices of the 1960s and 1970s, would both seem to be major turning points in the shift away from a notion of art based on assessments of style or the presumption of an innate connection between work and artist. It is, however, not quite so simple, since a lot of the works in the museum that Duchamp helped to interrupt already resemble the readymade, in that their entry into the museum meant that they had been removed from an earlier use. Svetlana Alpers notes a similar move with respect to cultural materials, which can be transformed into objects of aesthetic contemplation as a result of the museum's emphasis on the visual, isolating and highlighting paintings and artifacts alike.¹⁹ And, even in the context of painting, are those retasked portraits encountered in the museum as examples of canonical artists' works really so radically different from Duchamp's redesignated objects, given their general realignment from paintings *of* a particular subject to works *by* a noteworthy artist?

"Use a Rembrandt as an ironing board." Such is Marcel Duchamp's suggestion for a reciprocal readymade, in the companion notes for his *Large Glass*. Most obviously it is a direct inverse of his procedure of taking an everyday object out of use and, by declaring it a work of art, setting up the conditions whereby it might indeed enter art history as such. Yet the notorious Rembrandt Research Project (RRP), with its agenda of vetting the authenticity of all paintings ascribed to the Dutch master, has demonstrated the high stakes resulting from another form of declarative statement with the potential to change the status of an object quite dramatically without altering its physical presence. Although the destination of such Rembrandt favorites as the *Man with the Golden Helmet*, cast out of the oeuvre some time ago, or the *Polish Rider*, questioned by the RRP, is more likely to be museum storerooms than ironing boards, the attendant controversies show how much money as well as prestige is riding on these secondary judgments. Matters of interpretation can be politely debated among scholars, but attributions are another story, and heated disputes about artistic authorship provide one more piece of evidence regarding what is at stake as art of the past is retrospectively assessed according to contemporary priorities. Connoisseurship would seem to privilege the object, but the radical shift in perception following a changed attribution confirms the importance of authorship as a function in itself.²⁰

Author, designer, brand—the categories quite evidently overlap, since all are part of a crucial organization of both objects and desires, where pleasure in the thing itself is wedded to a shared recognition of cultural authority. Yet, even as workshop practices cause untold headaches for retroactive judgments about the authenticity of past art, it seems to matter little in the contemporary context whether a name denotes an individual creator or a corporate entity. In the present environment, strategies based on the readymade are hardly a disruptive force; rather, they have been smoothly integrated into a system where notions of style, and even production, have become increasingly inseparable from patterns of consumption.

Just as artists have been playing with modes drawn from non-art sources, so, too, have museums. Duchamp did not elaborate the further possibilities of the reciprocal readymade—use a Van Gogh as an umbrella; use a Munch as an inflatable plastic toy; use the Mona Lisa as a shower curtain or refrigerator magnet—but others have stepped up to the challenge of extending his idea, albeit via the reproduction, with these examples and so many more now found in museum gift shops around the world. Different types of objects have also made their way into the galleries, with the Guggenheim particularly notorious for an inclusive purview that has extended to the flip side of modernism in Norman Rockwell, and even further afield with displays of motorcycles and Armani fashion, in conjunction with forms of packaging and brand identity activated through its far-flung museum projects and partnerships. The spectacle of a now defunct Guggenheim outpost in a Las Vegas resort presenting an exhibition of motorcycles raised rather interesting questions about the role of an art museum within all of this. But, if artists can claim just about anything as art, maybe this is simply an example of museums getting in on the same act? And the connection between museum expansion and tourism, which itself has been described as the selling of an experience, helps make it seem like a mere hop, skip, and a jump from the visit to the survey museum to the foregrounding or framing of experience itself in the event-driven works championed under the banner of relational aesthetics.²¹

“How can we let works of art speak for themselves?” Such is museum director James Cuno’s plaintive question in an argument for retrenchment to counter this very state of affairs.²² Despite periodic aspirations, however, it is implausible that the museum

or any other context can be willed into neutrality. There is a back and forth process, as the work is inevitably defined or redefined in relation to the circumstances of its reception, even as that context is transformed in turn. And, in the contemporary setting, it is not art doing the talking, but artists, whose claims for their works are often parroted back in assessments of their efficacy. Frequently voiced complaints about criticism's diminished role have their obverse in various forms of direct engagement between artists and curators or collectors, in the context of a marketplace largely impervious to whatever critical caveats may still be lodged.

Clearly art cannot be isolated from the institution of the museum—developed to preserve and exhibit historical material, but also motivating the production of work made with the conditions of display as an underlying assumption, or even direct collaborative ventures between artists and institutions. While a comprehensive museum history is not the goal here, the first two chapters look at how contemporary art's diverse forms can be related to conventions established in response to earlier traditions. Different collection types are an important point of reference, as art's recent heterogeneity echoes the eclecticism of earlier curiosity cabinets, yet does so from the vantage point of the art museum's eventual separation from other related institutions. The first chapter uses the Victoria and Albert Museum as a fulcrum for considering how works based on a play with everyday objects draw attention to ways that this museum of art and design charted an alternate course from other survey-type collections, as well as how changing institutional narratives are a symptom of art's unstable relationship with the museum. This examination opens onto the second chapter's consideration of authorship over the assembly as a point of intersection between artists, collectors, and institutions. When consumption becomes a basis for production, there are varying reasons why collections by artists may or may not be treated as works, along with suggestive parallels with vernacular collecting practices.

Production and reception blur in other ways as well, as the construction of the work not only emerges from a process of negotiation between artist and institution, but involves a temporal dimension evident in the process whereby the work's definition is shaped in retrospect by the expectations of later audiences. An extended discussion of the multiple configurations of Allan

Kaprow's *Yard* in the third chapter raises issues that are relevant to many other ephemeral works that have been brought back to existence in recent years, as the exigencies of historical exhibitions have inspired museums to undertake the production of the work to be shown. Newly created works by already deceased artists, however, present only one of many challenges to our understanding of what constitutes the contemporary, and the fourth chapter therefore looks at the varied circumstances in which art is not just reassessed, but at times literally remade, as part of its interface with later audiences. Nor would it be wise to ignore the role of the market in the linked processes of rediscovery and refabrication. A great deal can happen in the space between initial conception and subsequent reception, with pressure to recapture temporary or even never realized works reflecting a later audience's reading of their historic significance. And artists are likely to be involved in the work's ongoing interpretation as well, from interviews and other contributions that establish its discursive field to controlling the circumstances of exhibition.

Recognizing that it is impossible to untangle contemporary art's current profile from exponential growth in both exhibition opportunities and market hype, the last two chapters address the impact of the current networked art world, from biennial circuit to auction house. It is clear that art is deeply enmeshed in a larger economy of branded goods and services, even as a belief in art's exceptional status remains central to its power to command sometimes extraordinary prices. Yet there is an obvious irony in the connection, starting with pop art, between rarified art market success and the use of imagery from everyday life. Contemporary art's international reach is likewise significant, as it has played out in such phenomena as the global Guggenheim or the art fairs and biennial-type exhibitions that have increased in frequency and geographic dispersal while relying upon an overlapping roster of artists chosen by an interconnected network of curators. The overlay of art and social scene, with artists, curators, dealers, collectors, and critics jetting off together to biennials and fairs in different parts of the world, presents ample grounds for cynicism. Yet it is equally true that the art world's expanded global reach has opened spaces for new voices and alternative narratives.

Perhaps the only point of accord in discussions of contemporary art is that there is no consensus. There is no shared or universal

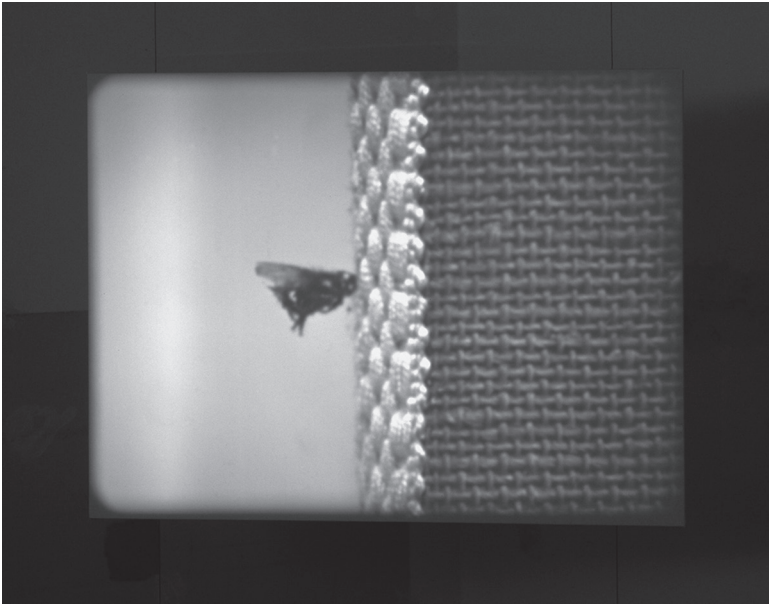
standard of judgment and no comprehensive narrative, except for perhaps the grandest claim of all—that contemporary art has to be understood as a global enterprise. Nor is there any agreement about what form art should take, as well as how it should address its many audiences, even though the destabilization of art as a category has been accompanied by the artist's ever-greater prominence, exercising his or her authorial power within an elaborate complex of production and reception. And there is certainly no shared conclusion about what the term "contemporary" actually designates, despite the growth industry of art-world and academic professionals operating under its umbrella. What all of this adds up to is a complex set of relationships, even a process of negotiation, taking place in the intersection of the figure of the artist, the construction of the work, and the activities of the institutions responsible for presenting art to its different audiences. None of these are static, so articulating their interrelationship with one another, not to mention a much larger social and economic fabric, can only be accomplished partially, through telling examples and, just as often, points of tension that indicate non-synchronous expectations.

CHAPTER 1

Now and then

With all deliberate slowness, the images of brown fabric walls fade from one to the next, forcing attention to small incidents, including stains and patches, unprepossessing architectural details, the legs or edges of vitrines, an exit sign, and even a fly. The eighteen-minute film, Tacita Dean's 2007 *Darmstädter Werkblock*, is the artist's homage to the environment within which Joseph Beuys installed the suite of works known in their aggregate as the *Beuys Block*. The appearance of Dean's film in fall 2007 coincided with a moment when the museum was closed for renovations, with plans that included a controversial proposal (later rescinded) to restore the Beuys installation by replacing the brown jute wall coverings with white painted surfaces, and taking up the worn gray carpet in favor of parquet floors.

The restoration scheme posed a host of issues concerning what aspects of the architectural environment should be defined as part of this site-specific installation, with particular challenges presented by the yellow line that Beuys painted onto one area of the carpet. The museum's definition set the parameters for Dean's film as well, since for copyright reasons she was not granted permission to film the arrangements of objects, only the space around them—integral to the installation according to many, but not part of the museum's definition of the work, centered on the vitrines rather than the enclosure. Nor was the film Dean's only response. She also weighed in with an essay advocating the retention of the present wall coverings and carpet and allowing them to continue to fade naturally, rather than remaking the walls with a similar material



1. Tacita Dean, *Darmstädter Werkblock*, 2007. 16mm color film, optical sound, 18 minutes; installation view, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(faux, but a second choice since it would still retain a similar ambiance), or the museum's far more radical proposal to transform the context into a conventional white box.¹

Beuys fans are especially passionate about the integrity of the Darmstadt arrangement because of the unusual opportunity he had to keep interacting with the installation after its initial 1970 appearance in the context of an exhibition of Karl Ströher's contemporary art collection. A number of the objects had been brought together by Beuys for a 1967 exhibition and then purchased in toto by Ströher as part of a transaction whereby the collector bought all the work that Beuys still owned, as well as right of first refusal for future production.² Typically the point of transfer, from artist to collector or museum, is a moment when something that might have remained fluid or provisional in the artist's studio is defined as finished, fixed. In relation to this evolving ensemble, however, Beuys was operating more akin a collector than a conventional

notion of the artist as the creator of individual, detachable works. Moreover, the move to the museum was in many respects a beginning rather than an end, since Beuys continued to work on the installation after 1970, despite the death of the collector in 1977 and the subsequent sale of much of Ströher's collection to another institution, and indeed until the artist's own death in 1986. The *Beuys Block* is therefore something of a hybrid, in that it is both a retrospective assembly of individual objects (many of which are relics from actions) and a single installation that continued to evolve as long as the artist was alive to intervene.

The long-term challenges presented by the *Beuys Block* relate to a larger set of issues addressed in other chapters of this book, including various points of overlap between artistic production and the collecting process, as well as questions raised by attempts to preserve or update aging works of art. Another striking characteristic of the *Beuys Block*, however, is its appearance in the context of a rather atypical museum, with a collection scope reminiscent of those early cabinets of curiosities that have proven so fascinating to recent generations of artists. Darmstadt's Hessisches Landesmuseum is a relatively unusual example of a general or encyclopedic museum, its broad scope suggesting a microcosm of the world with a mix of art, coins, weapons, scientific instruments, fossils, minerals, natural history specimens, and dioramas, which were not dispersed to separate institutions as part of the transition from private aristocratic collection to public institution. In this context, Beuys's arrangement of his own work in a series of glass cases plays in striking ways off of the natural history displays on the first floor.

Nature preserve

While encyclopedic collections are now unusual, references to various collection types, and to natural history displays in particular, abound in recent artistic practices. The sometimes remarkable admixture of materials entering art museums under the guise of contemporary practices contains suggestive echoes of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century tradition of the aristocratic cabinet, with its inclusive purview. To the extent that the art museum emerged

from earlier wide-ranging collections, however, its formation was linked to their destruction, with component elements dispersed to such different institutions as natural history museums, historical societies, or museums of scientific instruments, each with its particular arrays of object types and collecting imperatives. In yet another turn, however, today's art museums have begun to fill with a newly eclectic variety—with the important distinction that these objects, made for other purposes, are on display because they happened to catch an artist's eye, and entry into the museum is predicated on their secure redesignation as art.

Dean's project draws attention to the continuing fortunes of Beuys's installation, as the significance of this now canonical work continues to be articulated by later audiences, with debates about physical preservation only the most visible aspect of a process of ongoing historicization. Yet, if the idea of looking at its context (explored by Dean through her focus on the walls within the installation) is expanded to the surrounding galleries as well, the extended definition of art that Beuys developed in the twentieth century can be viewed in relation to a much longer history, revealed in the status of the Hessisches Landesmuseum as an anomalous holdover that evokes an earlier conception of the relationship between art and the museum.

As it happens, the Hessisches Landesmuseum is the present home of a key artifact from American museum history. The story behind a mastodon skeleton that stands as a centerpiece of the natural history collection links this German museum, with its unusual intersections of art and artifact, to Charles Willson Peale's Philadelphia Museum, which was one of the first public museums in the United States. And, in contrast to Europe, where aristocratic collections formed the core of many of the museums established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, museum development in the United States proceeded on a far more ad hoc basis, with the difficulties faced by Peale's enterprise foreshadowing tensions between education and entertainment that continue to be a major challenge, particularly for museums that rely heavily on private funding rather than state support.

Peale's encyclopedic museum, which he opened in 1786 and continued to develop over the next four decades, was an outgrowth of the painting gallery he had begun in conjunction with his portrait business. With its mix of natural history specimens and