

Edited by Paula Marincola

CURATING NOW: IMAGINATIVE

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QUESTIONS OF PRACTICE

***Curating Now: Imaginative
Practice/Public Responsibility***
Morning Session:
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Edited by Paula Marincola

PHILADELPHIA EXHIBITIONS INITIATIVE



CURATING NOW MORNING SESSION SATURDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2000

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts



HOW WE DO WHAT WE DO. AND HOW WE DON'T

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Under any circumstances, the idea of addressing a conference of one's curatorial colleagues is daunting. The reality is even more so, especially from where I am now standing, since, by glancing out into the room, I can see how much of the field is actually represented here today. With that in mind, I want to begin by encouraging you to believe that this really is the occasion for serious

conversations among us, and not a pro forma event with lengthy speeches and pre-scripted panels. There will, of course, be presentations, but I sincerely hope that people will take advantage of the opportunity to speak from the floor and not feel inhibited in raising difficult questions or in bringing their particular experiences to bear on the topics being discussed. If we cannot manage to make the best of this chance for free and open exchange, then the state of curatorial thinking and practice will have proven itself to be a sorry one indeed.

In a sense, I am the straight man in this situation. I was reminded of how true that was by walking over here with Dave Hickey, who was cracking wise and wisely all the way. He'll get to tell the jokes at the end; my job is to set things up.

In accordance with my way of thinking, I am going to speak historically. Our primary subject is contemporary art and the places it is shown: ICAs and MCAs (institutes and museums of contemporary art), colleges and university museums, big, mainstream venues, and alternative spaces. However new the art they concern themselves with may be, these spaces and their prototypes have histories. My understanding of how they do what they do—and sometimes fail to do it enough, or do it well—is rooted in an awareness of their origins. So, if you'll permit me, I am going to take some leaps backward, in order, I hope, to get to the present and stay there.

The first leap is to a phrase from a wonderful text by Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara entitled "How To Proceed in the Arts." It dates from 1961, when, as they say in the text, "Expressionism has moved to the suburbs." And, not long after, Pop, of which Rivers's work was a precursor, moved into the museums. It was the moment, in other words, when avant-garde met the general public on common ground in a way that had never happened before, and when the full impact of this new reality was just beginning to dawn on artists. Luckily, many from Rivers's and O'Hara's generation regarded this situation with a sense of

humor rather than responding with the anguish and resentment that were typical of the reactions of many of their elders, though some younger artists also took matters awfully hard. Among the numerous ironies Rivers and O'Hara noted was this: "Youth wants to burn the museums. We are in them—now what?"

The truth is that this paradox or contradiction had been a factor all through the history of modernism. Modern art was made in defiance of institutions because the institutions were not interested in it, or because those that professed to love new art loved it badly or in ways that distorted what the artists were trying to accomplish in their work. For me, the problems inherent in this situation become increasingly important and increasingly acute as I get older. In the past, as a critic, I wrote some pretty severe attacks on big institutions, including the one for which I now work. I might add, at this point, that not only was Rivers's work prominently embraced by the Museum of Modern Art around the time he made the remarks just quoted, O'Hara himself ended up as a curator there. So, I guess anyone can find themselves caught up in such a reversal of positions.

My experience is typical to the extent that a lot of us—particularly among sixties- and seventies-era "baby boomers" (although the generational spread here today is quite wide)—entered the art world protesting what the museums did and the way the art world habitually went about its business. Ten, twenty, or thirty years later, depending on when we made our entrance, we discover that, to a greater or lesser degree, we are the establishment. If the museums don't function properly, if the art world is unresponsive to the needs and achievements of artists, there are all kinds of people to blame for that, but, mostly, we must blame ourselves. I might also say that this unexpected set of circumstances gives great pleasure to critics—especially conservative critics—who think that the vandals have taken over the sanctuaries of art. If they had their way, they would get rid of both the vandals—us—and the art we have championed, which they have never liked—and it's worth emphasizing how little contemporary art they ever have liked. In any event, with or without this vengeful edge, we are constantly being reminded in the press that, once upon a time, so-and-so was throwing stones at glass houses, and now he, or she, is inside wearing a suit. Well, it happens. To my amazement, it's happened to me, and I figure the only thing to do is to wear it well, or as well as one can.

It's also true that younger generations of curators, critics, and artists are on the rise, and they have posed multiple challenges to the way museums operate. If we take our own oppositional stances of the past seriously, then I think we have to take these new critiques very seriously as well. In effect, they are coming from people who are now what we were a decade or two ago. The way in which they see us creating problems or failing to solve problems that have been on the table for a long time—in fact, since the time of our own greater radicality—speaks to

a life experience and a perspective that we have to appreciate is, in many respects, very different from what ours is or was; for precisely that reason, we must reach out to those representing it with both candor and curiosity. Inasmuch as we can't answer all the questions they raise, and, in some cases may remain in firm disagreement with the assumptions behind their arguments or proposed solution to a given problem—unless, that is, we want to become an establishment that behaves like one—now's the time to make sure that dialogue is engaged and that it is initiated by us rather than waiting for the citadel to be stormed while we seek cover. There are too many historical examples of former young turks becoming a self-protective old guard for this possibility to be treated lightly.

Moreover, having finally chosen to work inside rather than outside institutions, and having occupied the position I have for the past ten years—a position roughly comparable to those many of you in this room hold or look forward to holding—I have abiding doubts about many aspects of the relation of modern and contemporary art to the museums and other venues devoted to them. Those doubts become specific when I consider the ways in which what I, in all good will, do as a curator may qualify or denature what the artist has tried to do. This is not a simple problem, and walking away from it won't help matters. All things considered, I would rather be in a position where I can test certain options, in the service of what I believe in and what I think the artist believes in, and use my intuition and expertise to try to minimize the mistakes that can be made in presenting their work than to stand back and let someone else run those risks and indulge myself in the luxury of being right about how they were wrong. The fact is, I have been responsible for having “framed” or contextualized art in ways that subtly, albeit unintentionally, altered its meaning or diminished its impact. As a practicing curator, one has to be straightforward not only about the potential for but the likelihood of doing this in a given circumstance.

I also teach a good deal—at the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, at the Graduate Center at CUNY, at Harvard, and, on a hit-and-run or occasional basis, at a number of other places—and lots of you teach as well. All of us work directly with younger colleagues coming up through the ranks as interns and assistants, younger colleagues facing great uncertainties about the profession and their place in it, and not a few wonder whether there is a tolerable future in museums at all. Some want to know, better than we can probably tell them, what the trade-offs are going to be, and they want to know, having made those trade-offs, if, at the end, there really will be an opportunity to work in a museum context on the terms that allow them to do what they do best in a manner consonant with their convictions. Having learned what I have learned on the job, I take their doubts and discomforts very, very seriously.

Before I go any further, though, I want to offer some visual evidence.

Customarily, when I give talks, I try to do it without slides, or with as few slides as I can get away with. I am an object person, and I believe what counts in actual works of art doesn't translate well, if at all, into slides. Nevertheless, I often use slides as wallpaper so that people listening to me in the dark will have something to look at, something visual to get lost in if they wish. Here are some slides that might best be thought of as wallpaper about the museum profession. They're from a children's book I recently found in a secondhand shop. It was published around 1980, for kids around the age of my youngest daughter. The images stand for what some educator thought the museum world looked like back then. Not much commentary is needed; the pictures speak for themselves. As you will quickly see, they portray a reality that no longer exists—we hope—in which certain relationships among museum workers and the lack of certain people—women, African Americans, and others—in certain job classifications are conspicuously out of date. I will run through the slides without further remarks, but, in addition to the amusement the slides may provide, they are a reminder that in a relatively short period of time a good deal has changed for the better.

Another purpose for showing the slides is that, for all their limitations, they do constitute a useful cross section of the museum world. It is pretty widely thought that, in that setting, curators have the glamour jobs, and curators are often resented for that very reason. Some, I am afraid, conduct themselves in a fashion that fully earns them such hostility. Many, if not most of us, however, recognize that we belong to just one profession among many other professions that are essential to our institutions and to the proper presentation of the art they house and exhibit. As museums grow in scale and complexity, and as those working in them become increasingly specialized, it becomes ever more crucial not to lose sight of this basic reality; and it becomes ever more important that curators, who zip around to exciting places and have contact with exciting people, remember their place among other workers, which, though it may be at the center of a network of decision-making, is not at the top of an imaginary social or intellectual pyramid. If museums are to succeed at their task, and grow coherently with the times, there has to be active dialogue between curators and other professionals who contribute to the system—and in many cases contribute much more in time, effort, and ingenuity than they are specifically paid for. As you are well aware, MoMA has just been through a very difficult strike. One of the most painful aspects of the situation was that the people on opposite sides of the picket line understood that the issues that separated them did not altogether follow the pattern of a traditional labor dispute, but rather represented a disagreement within a group of colleagues who normally work extraordinarily long hours together to accomplish the same overall purpose.

On another level, this slide portfolio is a symbol of something called “The

Museum,” about which there is a lot of critical discussion in art schools, and academic journals, and on panels. “The Museum” is also the focus of a great deal of public attention. On the one hand, people seem to have almost too much respect for what is usually meant by this term, as if the museum were a religious order—a cloister with its priests. On the other hand, there is a backlash against this conception, a populist feeling that culture is being handed down from on high from a single source, “The Museum,” which is merely replicated in different sizes in different locales.

Contrary to this belief, however, museums are extremely various, and, of course, there are many art spaces that serve some of the museum’s functions, and yet are not museums at all. As the system made up of these diverse institutions evolves, we have to be more precise—and, perhaps, therefore, less theoretical—in our description and analysis of what the actual working connections among these distinct institutions are. First, we must carefully reexamine their differences; second, we must teach the public about what those differences are if we ever hope to dispel the phantom “Museum” that hovers over us all as cumbersome myth and easy target. All of the institutions for which we work, in effect, suffer from a form of ideological and social typecasting that adequately describes none of them.

Think, to open a brief parenthesis, of the number of institutions that can properly be called museums, as well as those—like the Drawing Center—that regularly mount museum-quality shows. Each has its own specific origins, its distinct mission or mandate, and its history of activity, of personnel, of relations with the public, and of patronage. The Guggenheim, for instance, was founded to promote nonobjective art, whereas MoMA was, almost from the start, an omnibus museum dedicated to whatever was thought to be modern—abstract or figurative—in whatever medium the artist chose to work: painting, sculpture, photography, film, architecture and hybrid forms. Meanwhile, the Whitney was created in response to the perceived neglect of American artists by MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was otherwise dedicated to art from all cultures and all periods. Then, there is the Asia Society, the former Museum of Primitive Art that was eventually enfolded into the Metropolitan, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Museo del Barrio, and so on. In a very real sense, these museums came into being to address areas the existing museums did not attend to, or didn’t attend to sufficiently; it’s what they don’t have in common that defines them, at least as much as what they do have in common.

I say all of this not because I want to maintain or reinforce distinctions in the abstract but to explore them in particular, and consider the ways in which they have changed, or come to overlap, in certain respects, without becoming the same thing. If the Drawing Center, which was originally devoted to showing the work of young, usually unrepresented artists, is doing historical shows that are the

envy of the large museums, one has to revise earlier ideas about the purposes of alternative spaces, but that doesn't necessarily reinvent the Drawing Center as a branch of "The Museum."

To be sure, there are gross distinctions to be made between kunsthallen and collecting museums, and these, too, are sometimes evolving distinctions. The New Museum of Contemporary Art has a collecting policy, according to which everything that has been in the collection for more than ten years must be deaccessioned, no matter how hard it may be to part with the best of the work that meets that criterion. What many people don't know, or may have forgotten, is that MoMA once had a similar policy for art that was over fifty years old, a policy that, fortunately enough, never went into full effect. The considerations that prompted Alfred Barr to contemplate that policy were close in spirit to the reasons Marcia Tucker imposed her ten-year limit—to make sure an institution dedicated to the new didn't become overly freighted with the formerly new. So, when people talk about the Modern as a grand old monolith, they should remember that it began as a kunsthalle—with no collection—and then operated for a while with the intention of periodically cutting its ties to the past—and only later turned into what it now is, a repository for the history of modern art in all its breadth and depth. Those shifts in emphasis, that gradual development is essential to grasping what kind of a museum MoMA is and the part it has played, and currently plays, in the wider network of museums of modern and contemporary art.

In this connection, it is important to mention that along with differences of this developmental sort go differences in curatorial practice—differences in the range of materials shown, the ways they are shown, and the speed with which they are shown. With that in mind, curators looking for work need to pay close attention to what's out there for them, not simply in terms of securing an entry-level job or moving up a given career ladder—although frankly, that may be the primary concern of many in a crowded, if not overcrowded, field—but especially in terms of which institutions—prestigious or not, in the middle of the art world or away from it—will offer them a situation sympathetic to the kind of work they ideally hope to do. For instance, think of what Ellen Johnson accomplished at Oberlin in the sixties or what Suzanne Ghez has done at the Renaissance Society, at the University of Chicago, in recent years; when these women made their commitments, neither situation would have seemed promising to most professionals. In some circumstances, meanwhile, it's a question of realizing that an institution is undergoing fundamental changes, and noticing that what once seemed impossible to do in a given place is not only possible but welcomed, in which case one may become the agent of transformation in a museum, even though it has a widespread reputation for sticking to old ways.

Thinking historically about the nature of institutions is fundamentally important; thinking creatively rather than reactively about them is equally so. On this score, I would say that in spite of the vogue for talking about curators as artists, I would strongly insist that they are not. I've been a painter, an unsuccessful painter, and I know the difference between that and being a fairly successful curator. The conflicts, the pain, and the satisfactions of being the former are categorically different from those of being the latter. Notwithstanding that conviction, I do think curators have a medium, and if they retain some humility and master their craft, their relation to that medium and to art itself is like that of a good editor to a good novelist. Although it's not the same thing as being a novelist, being an editor involves a deep identification with a living aesthetic. That aesthetic vantage point is as important or, in many respects, more important than what we usually call "ideas" about art. As a curator, you can work through problems by working with materials and working with artists who are working with materials, instead of always approaching things as if a curator was primarily an explainer or educator.

If there is a plurality of institutions, and a plurality of types of curatorial practice that are distributed unevenly around the various institutions, there might also be, in any one institution, big or small, a plurality of curatorial views represented. The great institutions—and, by that, I do not mean just the big ones—are those that foster internal differences, those that do not operate according to a uniform aesthetic ideology, and do not, in the currently fashionable way, think of themselves as a "brand" with a consistent product, although they may have an overall "style" or a primary focus on certain kinds of material. Instead, they are the ones that encourage a multiplicity of ways of framing and interpreting the material with which they are concerned. Gertrude Stein famously said that you can be modern or you can be a museum, but you can't be both. She was only half right, though, in the sense that being modern, or postmodern, and also being a museum, depends on constantly rethinking and recontextualizing the work that people come to see so that it stays fresh. It is not the work that grows stale in museums of modern art—or, at any rate, not the great work—but the way in which it is presented, the view that one has of it in relation to others' works, and the range of connections established by curators who may see the same work from very different angles. It is, doubtless, comforting for people to come back and find their favorite objects in the same place over and over again, but it stirs their imaginations more to discover what they know in a setting they do not expect, and thus discover previously ignored aspects of that work. Doing this well—which is distinct from simply recycling, or, to use a stock-market term, churning collections—means having curators with fully developed but dissimilar, even conflicting, ways of approaching the problem. The big institutions, and the

small ones that do their job best, recognize and take advantage of the fact that they have many voices rather than one. Since I work in an institution where profound disagreements exist and get aired on a fairly regular basis, I can assure you that it is possible to hold an institution together and to maintain a degree of collegiality and still have those disagreements show to beneficial effect in the way exhibitions are organized and collections are built. It is necessary that this happen because modern art itself, and postmodern art, too—though I take the long view and think that the latter is actually a middle chapter of the former—has been a debate about what art should be or become. The streamlined installation that presents a seamless unfolding of history, with elements as different as such contemporaneous movements as Surrealism and de Stijl, is, in reality, a gross distortion of history. In those situations where debates about modern art's essence have been most intense, the tensions should be palpable in the galleries, and if they are, they will contribute considerably to extending the "shelf life" of modern art beyond the fifty-year limit Duchamp once claimed was applicable. As curators, our task is to make those tensions clearer, more articulate, and more acute, and to do it both on behalf of the art and on behalf of the public, since there is absolutely no purpose in inviting people to come and see something that was intended to stir them up and have them soothed or lulled by it instead.

What I am trying to emphasize, if it is not already self-evident, is that we should work out of the contradictions inherent in our institutions, out of the ambivalences we may feel toward them and toward the larger art world, and out of our disputes with each other over matters of substance, in order to create an entity—an institution or an exhibition—that accurately reflects the dynamics of the art that we are responsible for presenting and preserving. In some cases that means taking the museum itself as our focus. In recent years, there have been a number of exhibitions devoted to the relation between artists and museums. I am thinking in particular of Kynaston McShine's show "The Museum as Muse," which, though I am not well-disposed to the idea of an auteur theory of curatorial practice in general, was, in the best possible way, an auteur exhibition, in the sense that it summarized Kynaston's thirty-year involvement with MoMA and his equally long-standing involvement with conceptual artists who have made challenging the museum a primary focus of their work. It was the reflection or meditation on art of a dedicated museum man that questioned the basic assumptions of the institution to which he had devoted himself, an institution into which he had, during his long tenure, consistently introduced work that tested that institution's limits.

On that score, a couple of other historical details are in order. In 1928, Lincoln Kirstein and two of his friends created the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, which was, in many respects, the prototype or model for

what Alfred Barr set out to do when he created the Museum of Modern Art a few years later. The statement Kirstein wrote to announce the founding of his society declared that it was dedicated to “art that was decidedly debatable.” That, it seems to me, is a very good definition of what museums and institutes of contemporary art, and of modern art, should be doing.

It is easy to stir up phony controversies while, at the same time, suppressing or contributing to circumstances that suppress real, substantive debate of the kind that has any chance of significantly opening or changing minds. One of our principal tasks as curators and museum professionals is to see to it that what we do does not dampen spontaneous reactions to issues that are undecided. It is not our place to settle these matters among ourselves and pass our conclusions along to the public but, rather, in Brechtian fashion, to articulate the disagreements that may exist among us as fully and as well as we can, and then present our ideas about all the things the work might possibly represent and might possibly mean so that the public can make up its own mind, and add its own thoughts.

I also remember another thing that was told me by Rona Roob, who was, until recently, MoMA’s archivist and, before that, Barr’s assistant. She recalled him saying one day that the desk of the director of the Museum of Modern Art should be like the desk of a big city newspaper editor—that things should be moving across it all the time, that the director should be constantly aware of new events at the same time as he or she was tracking long stories, and that the whole surface of that desk should constantly be changing, as a reflection of the changes in the world being reported on. It’s a wonderful image, but things are different now. Given the scale of the museum’s operations, it’s impossible to work things that way anymore. We who work in big museums can no longer move that fast, which affects our relations with other, smaller institutions in the field—and I do not just mean P.S. 1. Even though you cannot really coordinate the activities of museums on a broad basis, there should be some ways in which all the major museums, and all the smaller institutions, keep each other in mind as they do their separate programs so that, collectively, they manage to express the zeitgeist in its actual complexity, variety and detail. It’s a matter of doing art history as it happens—which, given the periodic return and revision of old ideas, also means doing art history retrospectively from the present, revisiting and rethinking certain eras, or movements, or artists who suddenly seem relevant in ways that they had not been before, or, at least not for a while. I see nothing at all ironic in the fact that institutions that were known for presenting the canonical version of modern art—the Janson text of modernism, if you will—are currently engaged in reorganizing their collections around revisionist versions of that canon. That is what they should be doing, and should have been doing all along. The institution that Barr set up was designed for doing that, it was what he imagined—a place of

constant turnover rather than a place of fixed values and ideas. The museum he improvised into existence—the original Modern—is, in essence, what many people now think of as a postmodern museum, in that it was a multidisciplinary, truly international institution that “made itself up as it went along,” which is to say followed art history as artists “make it up as they go along.”

Another way to look at the problem is by analogy. Although there are certainly differences, it is useful to think of museums as being like libraries—libraries or public reading rooms of visual culture. They ought to be places where people who have dedicated interests or tastes, or merely an active curiosity, can, so to speak, be seduced by a book they find on the shelf while browsing—and the next book, and the next—or, to shift back to the world of galleries, the next painting, the next object, and the ones that come after. (They ought, like libraries, to be free, but that is another story.) In this respect, the function of museums is very different from that of kunsthallen, in that museums have collections where this pursuit of interests or tastes or curiosity can be played out over a lifetime, and over generations. Indeed, one of the nicest things you hear working at the Modern are complaints; they come from artists and repeat visitors when they discover that we have taken down a favorite picture. We hear from them right away; and they want it back up again right away—because, in a way, it’s theirs. One of the ironies of this situation, by the way, is that one of the most missed and requested pictures is Pavel Tchelitchev’s *Hide and Seek*, which is one of the curatorial staff’s least favorite works. Even so, it gets seen often enough.

Putting these things together, it seems to me that in a context where you are a resource for the at-will inventorying of art history, and a forum where tensions that modern art generates can be heard and discussed, it is quite possible to be both modern and a museum.

If you will accept the notion that the museum offers curators a medium, then within the scope of their use of that medium are distinct genres. One of the most discouraging aspects of much that one reads in the art press is the failure to understand or take note of the formal distinctions between different kinds of shows. Just as all museums tend to be spoken of as “The Museum,” all shows tend to be described in the same terms. In the area of contemporary or modern art, the most common is the monographic or retrospective exhibition, followed by the large-format show devoted to a movement or ism. Then, there is the focus exhibition—a miniversion of the first kinds, and the projects exhibition that zeros in on one artist, but is often commissioned rather than borrowed work.

It is useful, perhaps, to compare each of these formats to its writerly equivalent. Think of the larger ones as treatises on a period or style or individual, the medium-size ones as profiles that characterize an artist with a certain degree of economy or essays that push an idea strongly in a particular direction, and the last

as a report on new developments in the field. Then, there are the large-scale group exhibitions of new or relatively new art. These, too, have writerly equivalents—travelogue, field report, polemic, and, too often, the Ph.D. thesis proposal. Frankly, some of these shows are casting calls or quick takes on the scene. To the best of their abilities, curators can, for instance, make big group shows that are essentially shapeless but that, nevertheless, manage to capture the excitement of something happening in the world, as they render an accurate, albeit messy account of the breaking stories of art. Art as well as the public can be served by making such exhibitions; the best ones have the most friction and throw the most sparks. Another kind of show is the well-considered survey, either a contemporary one or an historical one, a show where the curator is really trying to make sense of a theme or moment in art. One of the things American museums need more of at this time is shows of this sort; there is a lot of sorting out that needs doing, a lot of education both inside and outside museums about what has really happened in contemporary art within recent decades, as well as about what has happened in other parts of the world, that have been overlooked too long by the museums.

Some of the difficulties we have faced during the culture wars of recent years are a consequence of the fact that people in this country are unfamiliar with much that has happened in contemporary art in the last twenty-five years because of a tendency to cover the same artists and movements over and over again at the expense of introducing others to the general audience. Whether the public likes this thing or that thing is less important than whether they understand that it is an integral part of the larger picture—if they are altogether unaware of something challenging or foreign, it is easier for them to accept the idea, foisted on them by hostile critics, that it really isn't something to concern themselves with. Museums need to devote more attention to historical movements that are anarchic or improvisational, like Fluxus—Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss's 1993 exhibition was a model of how this can be done—which will make it seem less surprising, less arbitrary for the ordinary museumgoer when contemporary artists do work in a similar vein. Again, it's not so important that people like the stuff; they will understand, as a result of repeated exposure, that such aesthetic ideas or practices weren't invented yesterday, and weren't invented simply to get their goat.

In any event, museum programs should reflect the full range of these approaches and integrate them in a way that incrementally builds an appreciation in the audience of the differences of approach being taken, and the correspondences that also exist. In reality, however, an awful lot of these distinctions get lost in the shuffle, both from a lack of planning and coordination on our part and from careless or inattentive reporting on what we do.

I have chosen literary metaphors—treatise, essay, polemic, etc.—because, having been a critic before becoming a curator, that is the way I think about things. For me, in fact, the motive for making exhibitions is very close to my motive for writing. The impetus usually comes from something I do not know about a certain body of work or am not sure of when I start out, rather than a clear-cut idea of how it will add up and how the show will look. The art I wrote about for *Art in America* and other magazines has often been art that gave me trouble. If one begins from that point, one can both present the information one has gathered and the puzzlement or mixed feelings that one has felt as an essential part of the text, instead of going about the task as if one had in advance a definitive point to prove and everything said was directed at that effort. Indeed, one serves the public best when you—like them—don't know where you're going to come out at the end. This means that the essays one writes or the exhibitions one makes won't be perfect, but they won't be canned either. The hardest cases are those in which you are working with artists who have been shown or written about many times. I am not suggesting that the first thing to be done in such cases is to strike an obviously revisionist stance, or to pretend that you don't have formed opinions about the work, but, rather, to clear your mind and start to work as if you didn't know what you thought, as if you were seeing the work for the first time. The result of turning off the ready-made ideas and responses is that you do see things in fresh terms. I am not going to do a Jasper Johns show anytime soon, but I often think about what it might be like to go back to that work and try to start from scratch. In this regard, the craft of making the exhibition is in allowing this process of being uncertain to show, in letting certain obvious correlations go unstated, in letting the work be seen in a suspended environment that the viewer can explore with greater freedom than didactic or strictly chronological exhibitions generally allow for, of leaving loose ends on purpose rather than building to a conclusion or a visual crescendo that definitively punctuates the whole experience they have had.

That said, curators need to be in full control of everything that bears on the presentation and interpretation of the work they're dealing with. Increasingly, in museums, there is a tendency to divvy up the labor. As institutions get bigger and more complex, all kinds of people with all kinds of expertise are being brought in to share the load. This is necessary and inevitable. But specialization and compartmentalization can make for serious problems when it comes to mounting shows. Ultimately, the way the public sees what's on the walls, or on the floor, is connected to everything, from the manner in which they are installed, to the press release, the wall labels—or absence of wall labels—the catalog, and the brochure. At each point of contact between the public and the work, or its interpretation by the museum, there is a different level of engagement—as, for example,

between those who read only the brochure and those who buy the catalog. All these aspects must be coordinated in the service of the work that is being shown. You want to make sure that the catalog is not just written for scholars, and you also want to make sure that the brochure doesn't talk down to the hypothetical "average" reader. Everything that shapes an exhibition, including the graphics, the color of the walls, the articulation of the rooms—all of this is part of the interpretation of the work, all of it bears on how the exhibition is "phrased." Even though this is a period of text-driven art, these spatial dynamics, this visual phrasing of the exhibition, are as crucial to people's experience and appreciation of art as anything that gets said in words. In many cases, this perceptual positioning of the work, the clues one leaves in how things are laid out and discovered, is a way of commenting on, raising questions about, even contradicting the conventional wisdom about what the work is, the preconceived ideas or "text" that people bring with them in their heads.

The pressures working against this concept of exhibition-making are considerable. The relations among curators and the architects, designers, educators, publishers, and other professionals who work in museums is an inherently delicate one. On the one hand, curators may have to fight for control of their projects within bureaucracies that have their own vested interests. On the other hand, curators must recognize their dependence upon the skill and goodwill of people who may know much better than they do how to realize the conception that the curator has devised. The ability to explain that conception and a realistic grasp of one's own strengths and weaknesses in any given aspect of the overall production of an exhibition are fundamental. Especially the ability to explain. Given current realities in small institutions as well as big ones, the curator's role as educator is not confined to finding ways to make what they do make sense to people outside the museum but to do so inside the museum as well. This means articulating one's needs, motives, enthusiasms and ways of problem-solving to curatorial colleagues, other staff members at all levels, administrators, and patrons. At the Modern, for instance, we have regularly scheduled tours of new exhibitions for anyone on staff who wants to come, and it is the exhibition curator who leads them. Everyone, from librarians to fund-raisers to guards, is invited, and they come in considerable numbers. These tours help in many ways. If fellow workers understand the logic of a particular show, it is easier for them to understand your reasons for saying "yes" or "no" to their suggested solutions to your problems in the next show; and it's easier for them to accept the response as something that does not just come from upper or middle management but from someone with whom they share a common interest in art.

Of course, increased scale of operations in the museum and increased specialization has stirred many new tensions or fears. One is the fear that

fund-raising imperatives will override curatorial prerogatives. This need not be true. At MoMA, we have a wonderful director of development, Mike Margatich, who came to the museum with virtually no background in modern art. My first reaction was, “How are we going to find a way to talk about shows? What hoops am I going to have to jump through to keep the quest for money from dictating or limiting my options?” I needn’t have worried. Mike has been clear from the beginning about the separation of powers inherent in our relationship. He knows how to raise money very effectively—something that has always been part of my job but never easy; however, when it comes to aesthetic questions, he calls me in to speak with donors or to clarify the issues for him. Out of those contacts, he and I have had some very interesting informal discussions about art we both like. It’s been a pleasure to work with him, and it’s reassuring to know that it’s possible to build up such a relationship without having our relative difference in uniforms—my downtown uniform and his uptown uniform—create barriers.

The opportunity to have that kind of exchange with museum colleagues, and the chance to feel out the misunderstandings that may arise, also represents an opportunity to imagine where similar misunderstandings and a similar basis for exchange with the general public might exist. Not only has Abstract Expressionism moved to the suburbs, people who live in the suburbs work in museums. Museums no longer are, if they ever were, a club.

The cultural differences and cultural prejudices that often divide museums and their audience also appear within the museum, and the prejudices exist on both sides of that divide. A curator’s ability and willingness to talk with his or her in-house constituency—or the failure to do so—is a fair test of how that curator will deal with the larger public. What one learns from engaging in such dialogue can be much more helpful than reading surveys that describe that public in the abstract, or try to summarize what and how it thinks about art based on stereotypical profiles.

Nonetheless, one cannot underestimate the cultural fragmentation that has yet to be overcome. How we go about addressing that fragmentation and the hostility to art that does exist is sometimes part of the problem. One of the downsides to the way museums function in America derives from the country’s discomfort with things that probe too deeply under the surface of common-sense living and from a corresponding Puritan distaste for the purely aesthetic. Too often, art is explained and justified on the grounds that it is “good”—that is, not just of unimpeachable quality, which, by the way, we may not all agree is true in a given instance—but that it is also “good for you.” But some art is not really good for you. Some art does not love the art lover back. There is, in fact, a lot of art that respects the art lover, that treats him or her as an equal, as someone capable of interpreting complex ideas and feelings, but that also treats them roughly and addresses them

only on the condition that the art can be nasty, that it can ask them things they don't want asked, or make them think about things they aren't in the habit of thinking about. Conservative critics have exploited this. They have characterized the art public as virtually innocent, that is to say touchy, basically immature and unsophisticated, and, therefore, unable to absorb shock or make up their minds about art for themselves. Systematically and deliberately underestimating their fellow citizens, these critics act as if the museums were forcing something tainted onto the tender and unsuspecting. But that's not really the case, although a lot of the material may be disturbing. Here, after all, is a public that goes to Hollywood movies full of sex and violence, watches the same on TV, reads newspapers, reads crime stories and scandal sheets, and is prepared for almost anything, and, yet, that public is being encouraged to believe that the visual arts are only valuable if they are affirming and positive in their outlook.

A prime example of someone who corrects this false perspective is Bruce Nauman. Nauman speaks the languages of video, of neon, of signage, generally, languages the public is completely fluent in. They get him right away—because right away they can feel the urgency with which he tries to speak to them, and because they recognize immediately that the message he is trying to deliver is unlike anything delivered by those mass mediums in their ordinary applications. I remember that when Kathy Halbreich and Neal Benezra's Nauman show came to MoMA, we were concerned about its being attacked, since it was a time when there was a furor in Washington over the use of government money to pay for shows that might be judged "obscene" by conservatives. We also were worried that, given the aggressive use of new media, people might simply stay away in droves. In reality, though, it was one of the most highly attended contemporary shows we have had.

During the exhibition, I spent a lot of time in the galleries watching how people behaved. You could see them ping-ponging off all these unexpected works and absorbing the shock without difficulty. The show also demonstrated how people can connect with very contemporary art in ways that they don't always do with historical modernism. In fact, it's probably harder for most people to get Marcel Duchamp or even much of Picasso than it is for them to get Nauman. Which means that it's time to rethink the museological habit of explaining the present by the past in an academic way, as if the only way into new art was to know its lineage. During the Nauman show, most people didn't give a damn whether he came out of Duchamp or not; they were involved in what was right there in front of them. But having drawn them in, it is possible to switch the flow of ideas around and get them interested in Duchamp. Indeed, one thing museums ought to be thinking about more and more is the question of presenting art history in reverse, working from "now" back to "then" rather

than from “then” forward to “now.”

I have one other thing to say about the timidity that sometimes sets in as a result of underestimating the public. It has to do with where you exhibit the most challenging, most contemporary work in the overall scheme of things. In this connection, I remember, about five years ago, when Feri Daftari did a Project exhibition with Paul McCarthy called “The Painter.” In several ways, the Projects gallery was a pretty terrible piece of museum real estate—in size and configuration—but it had one big advantage: It was right at the corner of the main lobby as people passed by the ticket collectors. Everybody who came to see an exhibition or the collection had to go by it—on their way to Monet or Matisse or whatever. It was around that time that we were getting ready to do the late de Kooning show, which Gary Garrels had organized in San Francisco. When it went up, McCarthy’s piece featured a painter in a strawberry blonde wig who humps a painting, has collectors sniff his behind, and does all sorts of rude things while drooling the name “de Koooooning.” On top of that, it was Glenn Lowry’s first season as director. A junior curator, who might have been very vulnerable, had done the show and was quite nervous. I tried to reassure her that if anyone was going to get fired, it would be me, not her, since I ran the program. But I honestly didn’t think there was much chance of that. I went to Glenn, and said, “I just think you should be aware of what’s going to be on view in this centrally located gallery.” He said, “Fine, that’s what we’re here to do.” He made the point that I have also made, which is that it was really important that McCarthy’s work be right there where people would see it before heading up to the *Waterlilies*. And in the end, everything was fine; the public readily accepted the McCarthy piece.

As I said at the beginning, there are many types of museums rather than one. They vary in accordance with the different reasons they were founded and the different emphasis they give to their multiple functions. For many, the primary mission is educational. It is a mission that all must take seriously, in ways I have already tried to sketch. There is an old maxim in French literature, coming from Racine, I think, that says the purpose of art is to please and instruct. In America, we tend to privilege the idea of instruction, and, at this particularly didactic moment in the history of our culture and of criticism especially, we have taken that tendency pretty far. Acknowledging that, we should also recognize that the tone a teacher takes makes a good deal of difference. For instance, one can use Foucault’s ideas quite effectively without sounding like you’re in a university seminar. Don’t forget—for all the daunting intricacies of his thought and language, Foucault himself placed a premium on pleasure.

How highly one values pleasure, and how one uses it—painful pleasure as well as positive or pleasant pleasure—to draw people in is not a secondary issue but a primary one. On the whole, people have much less resistance to aesthetic

or sensory information than to strictly conceptual or analytic ways of addressing the same questions. If you can engage them by those means—and Nauman, once again, is a crucial example, but so, too, is Felix Gonzalez-Torres—they will open themselves to possibilities they may or may not welcome but will find they can't ignore.

In this connection, there is a term Virginia Woolf used that I find very helpful: “the common reader.” When she used it, she meant the people who are not a specialists in anything but who have books around, and who, though they may read haphazardly, read avidly. They may also read infrequently or, at least, irregularly, but they compose a dedicated public that continues to dive into books—detective stories as well as Jane Austen—and to try new things. The general audience for museums is composed in large part of people very much like them. Statistics tell us how often they come to museums, and, more important, prove that they keep coming back, but, so far, they don't really tell us why. They are not counted as part of the “art world”—at any rate, critics of museums tend to ignore their existence—and we ourselves tend to underestimate their importance when we talk to each other about what we do and who we are doing it for. It's easy to overlook them, to lose them in the larger crowd. But these common readers are essential to the future of museums, not just in terms of attendance but in terms of understanding. They represent the demographic and cultural threshold where the ideas cultivated by artists, critics, and museum people begin to become general knowledge.

There's always a lot of discussion about what the “field” is doing and who is doing it, who is making waves. On that score, I would say that, for all the competition among us and our institutions, there is less raw rivalry than is usually thought to be the case by outsiders who listen to secondhand gossip about the scene—but, altogether, we should, perhaps, be less concerned with staking out professional territory in the name of the new than in thinking about how the news of the new gets to the public at large. After all, most of us work for public institutions, or for private institutions designed to serve the public. It is our job to introduce that public to the art of its day, and to help it to see that that art is not just our concern but its concern as well. We want to make it possible for them to explore it for their own reasons and at their own pace—like someone opening a magazine and reading at their own discretion. Not everyone knows what we, who have the tickets to travel from city to city to see each other's shows, know. Out of the whole population of the art public only a small fraction is on “the circuit.” In any given place—big town or small—a given artist entirely familiar, maybe overfamiliar to us will be unfamiliar to the rest of the population—never before seen or not seen in a generation. It makes no difference to the person paying ten dollars to come to the museum that the “hot” young artist whose

work is on view has already been widely exhibited in art galleries that he or she never goes to or in towns they have never visited.

How you inform people in this situation is also crucial. You must never talk over their heads—as if they should already be aware of what you, the expert, are aware of—nor down to them—as if they are being given a remedial course. Just as you need to take care to phrase exhibitions in spatial terms, you must choose your words carefully, so that this common reader can enter into what you are saying on their own terms. On that score, I would cite another literary example, that of Virgil Thomson, the avant-garde composer and collaborator of Gertrude Stein, who, for many years, wrote music criticism for a New York daily newspaper. In that role, he was writing for a mass audience about something he understood far better than most critics; he was writing about modern and classical music for people riding the subways. His rule of thumb, which curators as well as critics should heed, is never overestimate the information your reader has and never underestimate their intelligence. If you condescend to people or treat them as if they are somehow incapable of more than rudimentary understanding, they will pick it up right away, and you will have lost them. Instead, one must assume that, in varying degrees and mixtures, they have much the same combination of general education, responsiveness, and appetite that we have, minus the opportunity to devote themselves full-time to developing those resources. In that sense, the common viewer—like the common reader—is not so much defined by their “commonness” as by their individual status as “amateurs” in a area where we are lucky to be experts, but where it is neither in their interests nor ours to take that discrepancy for granted, much less abuse it.

If you're inclined to think that your true public consists of the happy few who speak the language of the guild to which we belong, and you're prone to thinking that serious art writing must imitate serious texts in such other disciplines as philosophy and the social sciences, texts that demonstrate their seriousness by striking an anti-aesthetic tone, I recommend a careful review of Roland Barthes's *The Pleasures of the Text*, in which he says, “The text you write must prove that it desires me.” If the text does not desire the reader, there's no reason in the world that the reader—or museumgoer—should simply submit to its authority for their own good.

What we do as curators is a more or less sophisticated version of Show and Tell. One component is to impart information about things, the other to present the things themselves. There is a philosophical dimension to the latter that distinguishes it from mere display, and also from theatrically staged spectacle. It is a question of making it possible for correspondences to emerge in the mind of the viewer. There is a text by Wittgenstein that is particularly enlightening in this connection. It was his contention that certain areas of human experience fell

outside the scope of philosophical analysis because they did not give rise to statements about them that were subject to objective verification, statements that could be proven true or false. Those areas were religion, ethics, and aesthetics. But that did not mean that these areas should be disregarded. Instead, he maintained, one could arrive at an understanding of them, not through logically consistent means but by what could be *shown*, and how what was shown registered in the person who experienced it and weighed its possible significance. Yet, again, Nauman's work is exhibit A. Although he is a conceptual artist, he does not write syllogisms or argue points with the viewer; rather, he is an artist who has found ingenious ways of showing us things, putting us in situations where we can see or hear or feel things that belong to these most hard-to-pin-down, indeed never-to-be-pinned-down areas of our consciousness. We, as curators, are faced with the responsibility of finding appropriate ways to show those artists who have this rare capacity to show things within this fluid realm.

I am going to end with that thought. I want to invite the other participants up on stage to make their statements, and to open the more general conversation among us. I'd simply like to add that, as a practicing curator, whose job it is both to please and to instruct—and I try to do the teaching part well—if forced to make a choice between the two, I would favor the party of pleasure over that of instruction. By the same token, I would choose the party of the imagination in preference to the party of ideas. I value ideas enormously, but I think museums and art are about something besides ideas—and something more than ideas. We all are alert to the economic, social, political, and other “real world” pressures that overshadow and qualify what we do; during the course of the next two days, we will doubtless hear a lot about them. But, as we confront those factors—and are sometimes worn down by them—holding to the conviction that art has intrinsic value may become an act of faith. Given all that we have learned about the contradictions of the activity to which we are committed, all that institutional critique has taught us, all that the accurate diagnoses of our current cultural malaise have made us see, taking the position that what you do you do for the sake of the imagination, for pleasure, for all these intangible things, seems corny. Or just plain naive. And I suppose it is. But, basically, if you hope to sustain the effort it takes to be a curator, you must proceed despite such skepticism, despite the probability that, in part or in whole, you will fail in the endeavor of showing art as it should be shown. Even so, even if you assume that the art system is locked in and incapable of fundamental change, one must remember that that system or structure is not a monolith. There are cracks in it, and within those cracks and crevices possibilities exist. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, described himself as a pessimist of the intellect and an optimist of the will. So am I. It is the only reasonable, or at any rate, the only livable position. This

combination of pessimism and optimism seems to me the only point at which our situation as curators can truly be correlated with that of artists. We wonder, sometimes, why artists get up in the morning to make the things they make, considering how much of a long shot it is that they will fulfill their ambition of creating something that matters or has any chance of being recognized. Curators who get up in the morning and go to work in the hope of doing their job well face comparably long odds. The fact that they go to work anyway is a leap of faith of a comparable kind.

NOTE: This text has been edited from a transcript of comments made at the opening of “Curating Now” and amended in certain sections from notes made in preparation for that occasion. Rather than rewrite it in essay form, I have tried to retain the tone of the original, spontaneously delivered talk. —RS

NOTE: All of the following texts have been edited by the participants from transcripts of the proceedings. In every case possible, we have tried to keep the informal and conversational tenor of the event. —PM

PANEL STATEMENTS AND DISCUSSION



Paul Schimmel > *Chief Curator,
Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art*

Good morning to all of you. I appreciate that on such a beautiful day you should all come here and discuss curatorial practice—something that has undergone enormous changes since I first joined the profession some twenty-five years ago, in Houston, Texas. Perhaps the thing that brings us all together is our love of objects and our passion about working with artists. That remains the same, beyond other issues such as trustees and globalism. It keeps curators very much on a track and helps make the work satisfying and productive.

When I first began, there was a sense that curators came from art history; you went from being an assistant curator to an associate curator, to a curator, to a chief curator, etc. But, in the last twenty years, our whole sense of what a curator is has been blown apart. There used to be a clear distinction, for instance, between people who worked at galleries and people who worked at museums. I look at Kathy Halbreich sitting there in the audience, smiling, because she did something rather brilliant several years ago when she brought Richard Flood from a commercial gallery into the museum profession. It's something that twenty-five years ago wouldn't have even been considered; it was just against the rules. And yet, he is a terrific writer, someone very close to artists, and has done some amazingly important exhibitions.

Now, there are curators for private collections. When I first started hearing about this, I thought: That's not a curator at all—that's more a kind of registrar. But, then again, collectors like Kent Logan are buying not just dozens of pieces but hundreds. [Logan has bought nine hundred works in the last ten years.] That is a very empowered position for a curator, enabling them to have an impact on what is being made, what is being shown, and, finally, what is being collected today.

The most important change in curatorial practice today is, I think, the role of the independent curator—a kind of journeyman curator or wandering global nomad who doesn't have the shell of the museum to protect them, to carry around day to day, week to week. This has done the most to invigorate the museum. Although I share Rob Storr's concern about the curator as a star auteur, I'm also encouraged that curators are able to bring a personal vision and passion into the discipline. Many of these independent curators have raised the bar for those

of us who work in more traditional museum fields.

Another recent tendency—and you see it more often in larger institutions—is the curator as a collective entity. This is very promising, on the one hand, because it creates a great deal of dialogue, a multiplicity of viewpoints within the institution. On the other hand, it also has the effect of making you wonder: Who really made this? Or where is this exhibition coming from? You can't get your arms around these group practices sometimes, or you're not even sure what the point is that's being made. Early on in MOCA's history, there was a large-scale, thematic exhibition called "The Automobile and Culture." It seemed a wonderful place for MOCA to begin, because it established us in doing complex, thematic exhibitions. There were three or four or five curators, but, finally, when the show opened, there wasn't a single person around. No one knew who was supposed to show up for what; it was like a child with no parents. So, much as I am encouraged by this kind of collective exercise, I'm a little bit concerned that there isn't the same sense of responsibility.

It's been a great privilege to work at MOCA. The curatorial staff there has enormous opportunities. The space that we have is extraordinary—or, should I say, the *spaces* that we have are extraordinary; however, I admit I was a little upset when I read a wonderful and very positive review that Roberta Smith, of the *New York Times*, did of the "Out of Actions" exhibition, in which she said, "Real estate is destiny." My first reaction was, no, no, it's not that; it was my vision, my dedication, my tenacity that made it all happen. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that, in fact, she was right, to the degree that I don't think I ever could have imagined doing that kind of project without real estate. I don't mean real estate just in terms of physical space—I mean the real estate of possibilities that trustees and, most important, artists give you as a curator at an institution. It allows you to make something you feel very strong and very passionate about.

As we succeed, however, I wonder if we can, in fact, do more; this question applies especially to an institution like the Museum of Modern Art. As we build larger audiences and do the kinds of exhibitions other institutions can't do, are we, in fact, limiting where we can go? After our successes, can we, as curators, afford to fail? It's very important for a curator to be able to say, I want to try something and it could very well be one of the biggest disasters of my career. Can I go on? Will I be fired? Could I get another job? The truth is that after twenty-five years of relative success, there isn't a single big show I do that I don't wonder if it could finally be the last one. Thank you.



Mari-Carmen Ramirez > *Curator of Latin American Art**,
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

I want to thank Rob for his wonderful overview of how we do or don't do things in our curatorial profession. In my comments, however, I would like to step outside the institution of the museum and, instead, focus on the transformation of curatorial practices over the last ten or fifteen years. At the same time, I want to point out some of the creative and ethical challenges that, in my view, our profession confronts now.

First, however, I wish to address the general context that holds curatorial practices in place. It is impossible to consider the status of curatorship now without taking into account the broad and deep reorganization of the public, private, and symbolic spheres of culture brought about by the so-called new global order. This reorganization, in turn, has propitiated an intermingling of public and private interests that makes for some very strange bedfellows in our profession and in our institutions. There is no doubt that the new conditions have deeply impacted the way that contemporary art has come to be perceived in our society. When you have private entities taking over the public sphere for their own interest, or governments and private interests coming together to facilitate different forms of cultural endeavor, contemporary art becomes not so much the commodity it has always been but something else. In this context, art has increasingly come to function as a dynamic form of *symbolic capital*. One of the points that I want to make here is that curators are indeed playing a key role as mediators in that type of symbolic exchange. That's why I have referred elsewhere to the curator as a *broker*, but I will get back to that point later.

Less evident, perhaps, is the extent to which the artistic and cultural field in which curators operate has been altered and then absorbed into the dynamics of this new economic order—a phenomenon that generally lacks artistic reasons. Thus, the second contextual factor I wish to highlight concerns the unprecedented expansion since the late sixties of “The Art Institution.” I cannot think of any other period when more museums, galleries, or exhibition spaces have been built or more collections expanded as in the last thirty years. This phenomenon, as you all know, has even led to the franchising of museums beyond their local or national communities. The self-preservation of this almighty Institution has, in turn, become the straitjacket under which curators—whether independent or institutionally affiliated—are forced to operate. Within this system, not only are curators under constant pressure to deliver easily consumable and entertaining products but the imaginative and creative dimension of curatorial practice, that which Rob described for us this morning, is sacrificed to plain bureaucratic or corporate interests. This is a fundamental threat that must be stressed here. In this

*At the time of the symposium, Mari-Carmen Ramirez was Curator of Latin American Art at the Jack S. Blanton Museum, University of Texas, Austin.

uncontrollable context—as Saskia Sassen describes it—the *unstable status* of our relatively young profession, as well as our concern for autonomy, oscillates between power and powerlessness.

The main point I am trying to make, however, is that the aforementioned conditions have brought about a fundamental shift in the understanding and practice of the contemporary art curator. In other words, curators, as we understand them today, have been produced by these economic and social circumstances. The visibility that curators have today, for instance, was not there twenty or thirty years ago. Back then, it was the art critic or the intellectual functioning as cultural ambassador that had the spotlight. The curator's job was a "behind-the-scenes" job. By contrast, the *centrality* accorded to contemporary art curators in the new system is evident in the multiplicity of extra-artistic roles and the diversity of performative arenas that have come to define our current practice. As we all know, curators now have to function as aestheticians, art historians, and educators, as well as cultural diplomats, politicians, community organizers, and fund-raisers, among many other roles. The adaptability and skill of contemporary curators to manipulate ethically all these functions and contexts is no longer a desirable qualification but has, indeed, become an intrinsic feature of what Michael Brenson has recently called "the curator's moment."

Within the present system, the curator's allure stems from his/her potential to actively *mediate*, *broker*, or even *translate* the distance between those worlds. As a *broker*, his/her function depends on the ability to negotiate openly the financial or symbolic status of everything from concrete artworks and artistic manifestations to the intangible identities of emergent cultures and new social movements. As a *translator*, the curator's role is to decodify and interpret cultural and artistic values from one context to another. More important, the future success of curatorial efforts in this area will be largely dependent on the mediator's adaptability and engagement of the processes dictated by these combined forces—to put it simply—in an ethical approach.

Despite the restrictions I have outlined so far, or *precisely because of the challenge they represent*, curatorial practices, broadly understood, have come to embody one of the most dynamic forms of cultural agency available today. This *fluid space* allows us, as curators, to affect a series of interdependent areas in ways not accessible to other more restricted modes of cultural practice. Such a task involves everything from how to invent the spaces for art to how to reinvent the art institution itself, something that we have not yet touched upon in this discussion. Rob, indeed, seems resigned to the fact that we have to accept the art institution as an *act of faith* and operate within it with a "reformist attitude." I tend to think, however, that we have to, at least, pry it open and discuss it, fully aware that we are entering a new century and that that transition requires that we reinvent

ourselves, our practice, and our spheres of action.

Despite the positive gains in visibility and influence, the downside of the already mentioned shift lies in the ongoing erosion of the creative potential of curatorial practice and its intellectual reduction to the instrumental role of strictly facilitating and/or promoting private or institutional interests. As Olivier Debrouse has pointed out, ours is a practice involving mostly *the production of meaning* by means of exhibitions or other creative endeavors—meanings that are not only critical for the continued nourishment and development of art but for its positive impact in a democratic society. In my view, it is in this particular area that the gains and losses of the new curatorial roles must be duly assessed and their future potential must be mapped.

Finally, I believe that, in effect, curatorial practice entails a *creative and imaginative dimension* that is somewhat parallel to that of the artist and even closer to that of the critic. This is not to say that the curator should take the artist's place, as some recent detractors have naively suggested; instead, it implies acknowledging that curatorship involves a *propositional discourse* that invariably results in some form of scenic enunciation, whether by means of an exhibition or other concrete manifestations of the curatorial proposal.



Hans-Ulrich Obrist > *Curator,*
Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

I'd like to say a few things first about curatorial notions and then about changes that I see at the moment.

1. *Connective Possibilities*

Classical exhibition history emphasized order and stability. In contrast, we see now fluctuations and instability: the unpredictable. In nonequilibrium physics, you find different notions of unstable systems and the dynamics of unstable environments. Combining uncertainty and the unpredictable with the organization seems an important issue. Instead of certitude, the exhibition expresses connective possibilities. The question of evolutionary displays. An ongoing life of exhibitions. Exhibitions as complex, dynamic learning systems with feedback loops, basically to renounce the unclosed, paralyzing homogeneity of exhibition master plans. To question the obsolete idea of the curator as a master planner. As you begin the process of interrogation, the exhibition is only emerging. Exhibitions under permanent construction, the emergence of an exhibition within the exhibition. This idea of renouncing or questioning a master plan also means that, very often, organizing an exhibition is to invite many shows within the shows, almost like a

kind of Russian Matryoshka doll. Every exhibition can hide another exhibition (temporary autonomous zones).

At a moment when collaboration between museums and different exhibitions is driven more and more by economic reasons and the rentability of globally shipped and packaged traveling shows, I see an urgency and necessity to think about nonprofit-driven, but art-oriented, interconnectedness. As Indian economist Amartya Sen points out, there is a necessity for empirical connections that link freedoms of different kinds. This also means that, rather than further enhancing bigger and bigger museum conglomerates, which become more and more homogeneous, I see a necessity for collaboration between different models, which enhances differences and allows disparate conditions “to thrive through both protection and exposure,” as Cedric Price reminds us.

2. On the Move

This whole notion of the evolving display—that there is an ongoing life of exhibitions—becomes important. I’ve tried to develop this with “Cities on the Move,” together with Hou Hanru. It’s been a small sketch of something that has to be further thought about and further continued: the idea that complex and evolving exhibitions can, on the one hand, follow the ever-increasing exigency to develop traveling shows, because of economies of scale, global logistics, and budgets, etc.; on the other hand, exhibitions should avoid the kind of big problems traveling shows always include, such as the energy loss in the process of mounting the tour. An exhibition travels to the second venue and the third venue, and that, very often, is the end. An interesting alternative might be to invert and make the third venue the most exciting—make it a kind of ever-growing, evolving model that resists the fly-in and fly-out mentality of much current exhibition practice. Rather than a product, it is important to think about the possibilities of the museum and its exhibitions as a process, as a laboratory condition. This means that exhibitions are no longer switched on and off but that there is an almost organic, lifelike aspect where seeds grow—where sedimentation of display can occur—rather than the current condition of tabula rasa, where one display is always followed by the next display, and the memory of the previous display is not cared about enough.

With “Cities on the Move,” the traveling exhibition on Asian cities, there has been an ongoing, three-year dialogue. Little by little, very interesting things started to occur. Artists started to collaborate with other artists. Lots of things were triggered that also happened beyond the exhibition. The exhibition, in this sense, truly became “on the move.” On the one hand, it was very fast; on the other hand, the exhibition catalyzed a very slow process of emerging dialogues, of emerging collaborations.

“Cities on the Move” kept changing throughout its tour. An empty courtyard in Vienna—the exhibition’s first venue—was designed by architect Yung Ho Cheong. In London, Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren designed what they called an “accelerated Merzbau” for the Hayward Gallery. They tried to be “economical with their imagination” and recycled the exhibition architecture of Zaha Hadid, who had designed the previous exhibition at the Hayward, “Addressing the Century: 100 Years of Art and Fashion.” This and other previous Hayward–designed exhibitions were recycled and reassembled by Koolhaas and Scheeren. In a form of interior urbanism, the show became a process of sedimentation.

After London, “Cities on the Move” continued its evolutionary process. There has never been a fixed artist list. With “Cities on the Move,” Hou Hanru and I basically tried to trigger positive feedback loops. It was designed as a learning system, where knowledge was acquired and shared depending on the various urban contexts of the exhibition sites. The exhibition went to Helsinki, where it was designed by Shigeru Ban, the Japanese architect, who used paper tubes in different forms of appearance, creating an homage to Alvar Aalto.

3. Interior Complexity: Learning from Sir John Soane’s Museum

Patricia Falguières refers to interior complexity while linking Sir John Soane’s Museum to the Merzbau. She notes that the temporality of Schwitters’s marathon visits through the Merzbau were nurtured less by objects than by events/intensities. The exhibition is conceived not so much as an envelope but as a process of sedimentation that is never stabilized. Intricate and uneven structural elements unfold in a manner similar to Piranesi’s *Carceri*, with staircases mirrored into infinity, opening connections in all directions. Nonlinearity requires self-navigation, where the viewer discovers his own path.

4. Time—Time—Time

The time-marathon visits of the Merzbau lead us to the question of time-based exhibitions, which is something I’m very interested in. The time-based museum or the time-based exhibition is also important in relation to the time of the viewer and the time the viewer spends in the museum. The changes that are necessitated in terms of time are relative to the sum presence of film and video in exhibitions.

Many changes that I see at the moment are related not only to space but also to time—the whole question of the invention or reinvention of the time of the exhibition in order to create new temporalities. Toni Negri and Michael Hardt discuss in *Empire*—one of the most brilliant interpretations of globalization to date—their concept of “multitude,” whereby new spaces establish new residencies. Here, autonomous movement is what defines the proper place of

“multitude.” “Multitude” fights the homogenization of globalization; “multitude” constructs new temporalities—immanent processes of constitution.

Following up on Negri and Hardt’s emphasis on different temporalities, I want to continue this discussion based on a drawing by Cedric Price, a great, visionary English architect and urbanist who participated in different versions of “Cities on the Move.” He once noted that time is the fourth dimension of an exhibition. In the Bangkok exhibition of “Cities on the Move,” time was the key, because the whole nature, not the presentation of materials and ideas but the actual consumption of ideas and images, exists in time. The value of doing the show is an immediacy—an awareness of time that isn’t in a place like London or, indeed, Manhattan. In his *Fun Palace*, a project from 1961, Price proposed a building that would not last forever, or have to be renovated, but that would disappear after a limited life span of ten to twenty years. The *Fun Palace*, which Price developed out of dialogues with Joan Littlewood and Buckminster Fuller, was to be a flexible multipurpose complex in a large, mechanized shipyard, in which, according to changing situations, many structures can be built on top of one another. Price’s key idea is that the building can be altered while it is occupied. This loose social pattern would allow, according to Price, “the user to be free in what he or she would do next.” The *Fun Palace*, as a responsive building, responds to the necessity to connect disciplines and different practitioners within changing parameters. Price developed these ideas further in a vision for a cultural center for the twenty-first century that utilizes uncertainty and conscious incompleteness to produce a catalyst for invigorating change, while always producing the “harvest of the quiet eye.”

5. Against the Amnesia about the Laboratory Years of Exhibitions

If one observes the Bilbao effect and the whole focus on exterior spectacle in relation to museums, one will notice that there is a comparatively very strong amnesia about the interior complexity of experimental exhibitions as were mounted by Bayer, Duchamp, Gropius, Kiesler, El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Lily Reich, and Mies van der Rohe. Mary Anne Staniszewski, author of the excellent book *The Power of Display*, reveals a kind of amnesia, whereby the importance of the diverse set of exhibition and institutional practices that mediate our experience with art are often forgotten. She writes: “Seeing the importance of exhibition design provides an approach to art history that does acknowledge the vitality, historicity, and the time-and-site-bound character of all aspects of culture.” In a recent interview I conducted with the artist Richard Hamilton, he pointed out that most of the great exhibitions since 1851 have produced some display features of historic importance, a manipulation of interior spaces that commands respect to this day.

6. *Against the Amnesia of Curatorial History*

Amnesia not only obscures our understanding of experimental exhibition history it also affects innovative curatorial practice. I wish to mention a few pioneering examples of curatorial positions I find relevant at present and that are possible cures for the amnesia that haunts our profession. They not only contributed to the mutation of existing museums and exhibition structures but also pushed the boundaries toward the invention of new interdisciplinary structures.

In the early twentieth century, Félix Fénéon bridged different fields and continuously sought new forms of display and mediation. He made projects with daily newspapers, as they temporarily seemed the most appropriate space. He also founded his own magazines, published books, and organized exhibitions. Fénéon defined the curator as a *passerelle* (pedestrian bridge) between the artist and the world. Harry Graf Kessler also pursued mobile strategies of display and mediation. He was a junction-maker between artists, architects, and writers. From time to time, he organized exhibitions to put the art of his salons into a larger social and political context. Kessler also pursued publishing activities parallel to his exhibition-organizing. Herwarth Walden was a similarly open mediator between the disciplines. He founded the art school Der Sturm, his own publishing house, and ran an exhibition space as an open, hybrid laboratory for small exhibitions. In 1913, Walden organized the First German Salon of Autumn, with more than 360 works by eighty of the most important artists of the time.

I could discuss Sandberg, the former director of the Stedelijk Museum, in Amsterdam, at greater length since he was so influential on twentieth-century curatorial practice. As there is a lack of material on the history of curating, I have begun an oral history project on the subject, conducting a series of interviews with curators who are from the generation of Walter Hopps and Pontus Hulten. It has been very interesting to learn how many paths seem to lead back to Sandberg.

7. *Bridges between the Disciplines*

“We cannot understand the forces which are effective in the visual production of today if we do not have a look at other fields of modern life.” (Alexander Dorner)

Another crucial issue is the necessity to go beyond the boundaries of disciplines. This transdisciplinary drive can be observed right now in all kinds of productions. It is evident not only among artists but architects and designers. Exhibitions should reflect this, too, as curators also practice a kind of transdisciplinarity. This is an issue of some urgency.

8. *Slowness/Silence*

I also want to say something about what has not changed, because all of this is about change. Something that has not changed is that the collection remains the

backbone of museums. The museum's main function as a site for "time-storage" is unchanged. Pontus Hulten, in an interview with me, said that this collection/backbone element is very important as a kind of a shelter into which to retreat, and a source of energy. I think the collection is a source of energy both for the curator and the visitor.

To have moments of silence and slowness are an integral part of a museum visit. At a time when the fast lane and noise dominate over the slow lane and silence, it is important to think about how to reinject slowness and silence into current museum conditions. In an interview I conducted with Rem Koolhaas, he discusses this idea in reference to his museum and library projects: "I don't think you can have a laboratory visited by two million people a year, and that is why, in both our libraries and our museums, what we are trying to do is to organize the coexistence of urban noise experiences, and, at the same time, experiences that enable focus and slowness. This is, for me, the most exciting way of thinking today, the incredible surrender to frivolity and how it could actually be somehow compatible with the seduction of focus and stillness. The issue of mass visitors and the core experience of stillness and slowness, taken together with the work, are what is at issue in these projects."



Thelma Golden > *Deputy Director for Exhibitions*
The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York

In my twelve or thirteen years in this field, I've worked in a major institution, I've worked in an alternative space, I've worked as a curator for a private collection; I now work in a culturally specific institution. According to Paul's model, I just have the auction house left.

Paul Schimmel : We'll probably all end up there.

T.G.: I've had titles that have ranged from curatorial assistant to assistant curator, to visual arts director, to curator for special projects—to, now, something called deputy director for exhibitions and public programs, whatever that means. When I think about the nature of the change in this field, it is in relation to this idea that curatorial work, at this moment, is so defined by context. My own work has been defined very much by context. In some ways, I feel like a relic, because I've chosen to work most of my career in institutions in one way or another. In the age of the independent curator, or the curator working in the in-between spaces, as Hans-Ulrich has described but also exemplifies in the best way, I still believe that there is a need for deep institutional change. That has to happen through this

connection to the institution in some form of permanence. I know better than others that there's no such thing as permanence. I say that in terms of permanence in the sense of the field, in the sense of where one chooses to exist. I also think, however, in the way Rob talked about different kinds of exhibitions, that there are very different kinds of curatorial practice. The challenge becomes, as one understands their context, defining what kind of curator one can or might be.

A couple of years ago, when I was working on this exhibition at the institution I was working at at the time—I've learned how to do that very well, right?

P.S.: And no one got it!

T.G.: I was interviewed by the architecture critic for the *New Yorker*, Paul Goldberger. He was writing a piece, and his hook, at least when he started the piece, was the idea that there was a kind of “branded curator,” that there was this “star” curator notion—that one defined curatorial practice by who one was, and then other people would come along and try and be that kind of curator. In discussing this, he forced me to come up with some analogies so that he could write about this. This was a “Talk of the Town” piece, so it was meant to be buzzy. In trying to come up with an analogy of how that then plays out—what are the different kinds of curators—he used architects, of course, as the example, and how one understands them in the world through their practice.

I couldn't come up with an analogy for him, except one that was prompted by being in my doctor's office and waiting for her interminably. They always put you in a room and make you take your clothes off, and then no one comes for forty minutes. I'm sitting in there, and there was this chart about eating habits or diet types. It started with vegan, then it explained what a vegan was, then it went to, like, ovo-lacto vegetarian; then, there was some other kind of vegetarian that was not ovo-lacto. Then, there was something before carnivore that was chicken, fish, but no red meat, then there was the straight carnivore. There was this other interesting thing—the situational eater. They described situational eating as something that didn't happen so much in the developed Western world, necessarily, but developed in other parts of the globe where access to different foods was not necessarily a matter of choice, like in the supermarket. When I was talking to Mr. Goldberger, it made me realize that, in some ways, curatorial practice can be like that. Some of us have the luxury of being able to live out our lives as vegans: to focus on one thing and know that's the one thing we do and be very pure about it, and never get swayed by a piece of dairy that might be lurking on the edge of the plate. Others of us, of course, have become, for one reason or another, situational eaters: You get to an institution, and this is what the institution does, and this is what you become. Most of us are probably some form of omnivore

that tries to develop what we do around a wide palate, but picks and chooses, and certainly has its favorites. We might like lamb better than veal. We come up with some way to understand ourselves as curators through a wider plane. For me, particularly now, as I look back over the time that I've worked, it is this notion of figuring out what our practice is, then finding a way for that practice to exist within an institution that might be something else. It's like being in a relationship. It's like you're a carnivore and you marry a vegan. In some ways that probably isn't going to work. But there are other ways. The combination of one's practice, the way one sees oneself, and the world in which one decides to work in as a curator—by bringing that into an institution, one finds a way for the institution to adapt and transform.

I also think that nothing makes us understand ourselves or what we do or “how we do it or how we don't do it” as actually looking for a job. One of the changes in this field, of course, is the way in which that does define this field, not only the elasticity that Paul has described, of people moving back and forth, but the nature of change in time, in institutions, that often requires this kind of redefinition over and over again, as one might try and make a career around the desire to make certain kinds of projects in different kinds of places. The change, now, that at least emboldens me is the idea that context, as we understand all of the things that face institutions at this time—whether it be money and space or audience or any of them—is really a context in which we define ourselves. As Rob implied, I have this funny job where one foot is in the director's office and one foot is somewhere else, which we hope is the curatorial department, by being a deputy director. This insistence on administration is real, whether it's made plain, as it is in my case, or it's a little bit more subsumed, as it can often be in the title “chief curator.” Rob has indicated in his talk one way that it is, which is to see oneself as a curator within the very complex ecosystem of an institution rather than set aside from it. Another way is to transform radically the notion of the administration that we all know is necessary to run institutions no matter how big or small. That's the thing I've learned; the size of an institution doesn't matter, administration is there, no matter what. We must inform it with the same passions that go into making an exhibition or engaging with an artist.

The biggest change—at least that faces me and that, I imagine, faces some curators of my generation, as we constantly negotiate these choices between independent and institutional, between directorial administration and a purely curatorial position, as we negotiate the changes between different spaces in the institutions—is the notion of not to tell a curator what can exist in an institution, or even outside of it as an independent, but how a curator can exist in the world, and how our practice can engage with our audiences outside of the institution, and how the curatorial voice becomes less a voice speaking to each other and

ourselves but can speak in a larger context that allows our vision to move in a significant way out into the world. Thank you.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Robert Storr: I'm going to ask some general questions. I invite anybody to interrupt, mix it up, scrap, or do whatever is necessary along the way; I just want to get the ball rolling. Then, at a certain point, we'll open it up to the floor. If you can't contain yourself, speak up, but if you can contain yourself a little, let them speak.

Mari-Carmen, you were talking about new curatorial spaces and so on—and that seemed to overlap with Hans-Ulrich. Could you spell out in more detail what you actually are trying to describe, practically speaking? Where is one the broker for these things? Do we invent the occasion or does the occasion exist in the interstices of something that we all know?

Mari-Carmen Ramirez: I think it's both. To the extent that the curator can have the power to manipulate any kind of situation, he or she should be able to invent the spaces, whether it's inside a museum, trying to open up the museum, create a special gallery, for instance, or make an exhibition outside in the courtyard or some other place. Or try to take over a part of your city to do an exhibition, and not only to do an exhibition, in the traditional sense of taking the artwork there, but making certain elements of that city or that community come together to discuss a particular issue that may pertain to art, but may also pertain to how that art functions within that particular urban context. A site can also be a publication. It does not necessarily have to be an art object or an exhibition with art objects; it may be the case where you can effectively communicate a number of ideas that relate to artists you're working with, or particular objects in a publication, without necessarily having to do an exhibition. Sometimes, the conditions don't allow you to do the exhibition, so you have to resort to the publication. In each case, this is a very broad way of looking at curatorial practice, but it enables us to come out of these categories that we've been dealing with, as well as these institutions and structures that are holding us in place. You don't necessarily have to be the peripatetic curator to be able to engage in some of those activities. I don't know if that answers your question.

Paul Schimmel: We're not really considering the impact that architecture is

having on our programs in general. Some of the most successful museums to come on the scene in the last decade, in fact, continue this legacy of larger, more monolithic structures, designed by one or two individuals, that, for the most part, have very consistent spaces and, therefore, almost demand a certain kind of program. Museums are not really keeping up with the various interests of artists. What both of you are talking about is trying to go outside the museum, because, in fact, the space within the museum doesn't exist.

The hope that I've had is that a museum could be much more like a campus of a university, with different kinds of opportunities—not just physical opportunities in terms of different kinds of spaces. Obviously, I think about having two very different types of spaces. I couldn't see the Gober installation being in the Izosaki building. I couldn't see the Reinhardt exhibition being in the Temporary Contemporary. It needs to go far beyond a warehouse and a clean, well-lighted box. That includes places where artists can create and play in, it includes nontraditional sites that are of a temporal or time-based nature—that a museum should have something that looks like the newsroom at CNN, on one hand, and a contemplation garden from Kyoto, on the other hand. As we start thinking about taking museums into the future, we better start thinking about design and architecture, which reflects all the programs that we, as curators, want to see artists realize within our facilities. If we don't, they will surely go elsewhere, as they ought.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: The big change right now is to develop a complexity where all these different experiences are made possible within one building. That, at the moment, is the big change for the twenty-first century for museum architecture.

To come back to your question of different spaces—for me, what has been very, very fundamental has been discussions with Felix Gonzales-Torres about this issue, at the very beginning of the nineties. He always pointed out that it is not about an opposition, it is not about doing a billboard project because of leaving the museum, but actually by doing the billboard exhibition—and not only that, but that a museum is the key to maybe doing the billboard. So, it is “both/and” instead of “either/or,” instead of “nor, nor.” Somehow, there is a very huge potential for that—that museums can open up new spaces. At the moment, they are all over Asia, and they are starting to be in more and more places, such as New York and several European cities—these large-scale, electronic billboards. They are mostly used for advertising, but I see a possibility and necessity to make them public. At the same time, it's very, very interesting to connect billboards to museums, to connect them to what happens within exhibition spaces. Exhibitions become sort of network conditions.

R.S.: Do you think we've built ourselves into corners we can't get out of, or do

we have to hire a whole set of architecture people to deconstruct the museum, literally in some cases, to make those spaces, since we've got another set right now?

P.S.: In the most extreme case, the program inside the institution almost seems irrelevant to the public. It will come to see the facility for its grandeur, for its entertainment, for its sense of bringing people together, all of which are very positive things; what's going on inside the institutions is slightly irrelevant. Artists recognize that, and, to some degree, don't want to participate in that kind of venue, and will, instead, say, I prefer to create and work on something for three, four, five years. I'd like to find someplace where it can exist and be appreciated by a significantly smaller audience that's really focusing in on what the artist has created. So, I do see it as a critical problem. And I think we're going in the wrong direction, in that respect.

R.S.: I want to talk about the global issue. A lot's been said about the global culture and its commercial, political side. I don't know how long it will last, but, in a positive sense, the international culture of art is much more fluent and more truly international than it was for a time. I wonder how you see the particular institutions you're involved in as related to that more free-floating thing. You're working with a particular community, a particular ethnic group, for the most part. You're working essentially with Latin Americans. But it's all connected. Whereas we're working—I'm working—in a big monolithic institution that, in theory, is connected, but maybe isn't as connected as it ought to be. Somewhere between those extremes is a world of activity.

Thelma Golden: One of the first things that Lowery Sims, my director, and I did at the Studio Museum was to rewrite immediately our mission to acknowledge the global as primary to what we did. It was an important act, but one fraught with a lot of political implications. Because, basically, I work now in an institution that was founded around the idea of African-American art in a context that was specifically American, and American only. In rewriting our mission to say that we now present, preserve, collect, and interpret African-American art and artists of African descent, locally, nationally, and internationally, acknowledges, not just in political terms, the presence of black people all over the world. But it takes away what was a late-sixties into the seventies notion of the African diaspora and, perhaps, how Africa's history and African Americans in the present would inform it. For me, though, in curatorial terms, it allows us to exist within the world in a way that is somewhat normalized around just artists' practices. It makes sense that now I'm showing Martin Puryear and Isaac Julien at the same time; there's nothing strange about that. We still are a culturally specific institution. That's really how it's playing out.

How it gets further defined, particularly around the notion of Africa, is going to be, perhaps, one of the greatest challenges of the time we're at the museum. Sort of understanding Africa in the global, international, contemporary art context.

M-C.R.: I can speak to that at great length, if you wish. We just finished putting together a book about this issue of globalization and Latin American art. We invited a group of curators and critics and museum directors and artists and everyone to comment about some of these changes. In the case of the field that is known, for better or worse, as Latin American art, the whole impact of globalization has been very, very strong, and actually offers some very, very beautiful case studies of all these transformations. The results are both positive and negative. On the one hand, yes, we've seen, over the last ten or fifteen years, incredible attention bestowed upon Latin American art and Latin American artists. There is a greater circulation among the different countries and the centers, and, there, the circuits have somehow been activated in one way or another; however, when you actually talk to people in the different countries, whether it's Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, etc., or even people here within the Latino communities of the United States, for them the whole issue is extremely abstract. It's something that has not touched many of their lives. In some cases, it's very negative. What we've seen is that, in the context of countries and regions that have suffered from chronic political and social situations that you may associate with underdevelopment, or something like that, where art institutions have never really been very solid, they're, at most, very fragile, very vulnerable. This whole issue of globalization and integration into the circuits has imposed a series of pressures on those structures. You have museums that need to be responding to their communities, trying to catch up to this global ideal, and trying to structure their programs around MoMA, for instance, or other institutions, instead of really responding to their constituencies. In the case of artists, we ran a questionnaire to a very large number. We asked them very specific questions. The most surprising aspect was to find artists who have been very much in the limelight and who feel that, yes, they have been participating in all of these exhibitions and biennials and their work has gotten a lot of recognition, but it has not translated into any kind of economic gain. They have not sold works; their condition has, basically, not improved very well. What does that say about globalization? We have to be very careful about not falling into the idea that, yes, because all these things are closer, and there is more of an exchange, that the situation has changed or that we really are engaged in some kind of global dialogue. We are very, very far away from that, and we need to be very well aware of what the pitfalls are.

R.S.: Do you think there is the beginning of a sufficient dialogue among the big

institutions that have now begun to deal with world art as a world phenomenon, or do you think we're still pretty far from having that dialogue? And, basically, if the Modern does a Latin American program or if we show African-American artists, is this part of the solution or part of the problem, or, at least, a new phase of the old problem?

M-C.R.: No, there definitely is more dialogue. That's unquestionable. We are at a point where institutions cannot go back to the previous position. Certain advances are in place, but it is important to bear in mind that the dialogue has to be a true dialogue. It cannot be just a dialogue of "I'm going to look at you and really take what I can identify with in you, what is familiar to me or what looks like something that I have already in my museum." It has to be a dialogue of truly understanding what that difference is, accepting it on those terms, and not trying to impose any other kind of standards.

Rob had a phrase in his speech this morning about how we think we understand these things, but we don't. There is an issue of context, as Thelma has addressed, that is very important. On the other hand, I don't want to give the impression that I'm putting myself in the position where you really have to be Latin American to understand Latin American art, or Brazilian or Argentine art. Art speaks in very broad terms, and we have to have that very much in mind. I don't, at any point, want to appear like I'm talking about keeping the art of these peoples in their own little realm—not at all. It needs to be integrated on a very, very broad level; even using the category of Latin American art should be discarded with altogether. But it's important to understand that these things are coming from a completely different context—that there are particular reasons why the artistic production of artists who are very widely recognized in some of these countries looks so different or so out of step and so out of place with the things that we're accustomed to seeing here as modern and contemporary art.

R.S.: Hans-Ulrich, you've worked in a lot of different places, particularly in Asia, or, at least, brought components of an Asian reality into these exhibitions. I've heard often from European curators that many of these problems of cultural identity and multiculturalism are a specifically American problem. I wondered if that is, in fact, the broad perception? Is it your perception? Do you see these things in some other manner?

H-U.O.: In relation to globalization, one can observe, in the museum world, new mergers. So, there might be bigger conglomerates similar to what is happening in the economy. What is very relevant—leading it back to the laboratory discussion—is that these fragile laboratories are not lost in the process.

I recently visited Johannes Cladders, in Krefeld. He was the first person to organize museum exhibitions of Beuys, of Buren, of Lawrence Wiener, etc., and his museum was like a laboratory. Well, at that time, it wasn't really a museum, it was a small house—a temporary solution—right in the middle of Mönchengladbach. I thought, after this visit with Cladders, we can't stop the fact that museums are getting bigger and bigger, but how far—it was more a question than an answer I was raising—would it be possible to inject Mr. Cladders's house as a metaphor into a very big structure? How could we integrate Mr. Cladders's house into a museum? That's something that is incredibly important in terms of globalization and museums.

R.S.: One way not to do it is like at the Ransom Center, in Texas, where they have Erle Stanley Gardner's writing shed right in the middle of the library.

P.S.: At MOCA, we have succeeded in certain areas, failed in others. Being in Los Angeles, we have a very large Latin American community; that was the reason Richard Koshalek made a decision to have a single curator who specialized in Latin American art. We brought in curators from all over the world to discuss this with us, and we have done some half-dozen monographic exhibitions of Latin American artists, but I don't think it had a very significant impact on changing the profile of the museum in relation to Latin American art. One of the main reasons is that we treated Gabriel Orozco or Kcho, to a large degree, the same way we treat any other artist, and have not, in a sense, emphasized that aspect of it. In our larger thematic exhibitions, however, and the ones that are of the broadest nature, whether it was Richard's "End of the Century" architecture exhibition or my "Out of Actions" exhibition, we have succeeded very well. The history insisted upon us bringing in artists from all over the world, in that a kind of structure within the theme of the exhibition created a context in which to see these artists from a very level playing field. They were not being distinguished because of a certain background or geography, they were being seen as artists. Out of that, the context, the broader context, of where they grew up, where they came to maturation in the broader world in which their work has been seen, seemed much more appropriate.

M-C.R.: I completely agree with Paul. That's really the way to go in these cases. Exhibitions like "Out of Actions" or "Global Conceptualism," which was at the Queens Museum last year, and has been traveling, I think, are the ones that do more favor to the field in the long run. They show how these people were on par with other artists working in other places. That is what is really interesting. The agenda for this field is to show those connections, to show and to translate.

When I talked about the curator as broker, the other side of it is the curator as translator, which is where I see myself more than anywhere else—that constant labor of translating what the values of one context are to the values of another context. For that, you need to know the history of the twentieth century, or whatever art you're dealing with, and how these other traditions fit in. The issue of collections is the same thing. I've been called by museum directors who want to do some work in this area, who want to discuss whether they should have a separate gallery for Latin American art. I say, no, that's ridiculous, put them where they belong, next to whomever they belong—whether it's Warhol or whomever. That's really the way we should be going.

H-U.O.: There's one thing I have to say, because it didn't come to mind when you asked me the question about European concepts. A current project we are developing at Musée d'Art de la Ville de Paris is with Suzanne Pagé, who's organizing an exhibition on the École de Paris. The idea was to invite Hou Hanru, a Chinese curator who has lived in Paris since the early nineties, to curate an exhibition on the diaspora in the Paris arts scene, and bring these shows together. Also, in a certain way, to create the link to show basically the kind of very diasporic notion of the avant-garde and the current situation.

R.S.: I remember at Bard, when I was teaching class, and was talking about a show we had wanted to do on the European avant-garde practice from Fontana onward. A Czech student got very angry. He said, "What do you mean Europe stops there? It's all the way over here." Indeed, when I went to Croatia and found there a whole conceptual body of work of which I was ignorant, it really was clear.

H-U.O.: Earlier this year, Zdenka Badovinac, director of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, curated this incredibly interesting show. It's actually a collection—she put together a collection about conceptual Eastern European art. It was a real revelation.

R.S.: Let me ask Paul—but not only Paul—a particular question. It has to do with somewhat of an American situation—but it's beyond that, too. If our world is really global, in a sense, it's also polycentric in a way that it always was, but was not recognized as being. Certainly, the balances of the different centers have shifted dramatically. There was an exhibition at the Modern some years ago, about which I drew very severe criticism from a colleague whom I respect. He said it was a terrible show, and for a number of reasons. I said, after all, this is a show of local New York artists. The assumption is that every time you show New York artists, you are showing people who, as of the moment they appear

on the scene, particularly if they appear in that room, are suddenly to be treated as if they are the next contenders for the front edge of the avant-garde. But there are local art scenes even in New York. There are local art scenes in Chicago. There are local art scenes in Los Angeles. There are local art scenes everywhere. I wonder how people think about balancing the responsibility to artists around them, as well as the artists that they bring in from elsewhere? Your show of California art, “Helter Skelter”, was, in a sense, both a local art show and a rewriting of national art, but it was the first, too. I wonder if you could say a little bit about that.

P.S.: To connect what you’re saying about our discussion on the global, people somehow think global implies something other than provincial, but, in fact, that’s not necessarily the case. You can be global and be provincial, and we’ve all had a chance to see that in various museum programs. It’s the same group of global artists that are flopping down in different cities all the time. I had hoped with “Helter Skelter” that I could do a regional show that wouldn’t be provincial, and would have an international impact. It did, to a degree that even surprised me and the artists, but that had a lot to do with changes in the air that one wasn’t even aware of—the entire flattening of the contemporary art world circa 1990 and 1991. It seemed like all the air had come out of all that we had been supporting and developing throughout the eighties. Then, out of nowhere, or so it seemed, came this new generation of artists that clearly was addressing issues of international importance, but was doing it very much in a regional sense.

We should focus more, as curators, on the notion of regionalism. I know it’s a funny word in American art history. If you go back to the thirties, regionalism was sort of a dead end of American art. But there is a lot to be said, when you look at it today, about the particular strengths that come out of any community—whether that is regionalism as seen in the art of Tokyo today or what’s going on in Berlin. Sometimes, the more you get into the specific, the more you can understand the general.

R.S.: There is a very nice quotation in the catalog of Marina Abramovic’s show from the Venice Biennale. A Serbian philosopher, I forget his name, said that the universal is the local without walls

T.G.: This notion about the local, or local group of artists representing it, has to do with the rhetoric of museums around the issue of community. The reality, having been in a big institution, is that community can be defined very generally. If one is a big institution with an international reach, you can speak of your local community within that context in some way. An institution like the one I work in now,

the Studio Museum, comes out of a rhetoric that was formed through a notion of community—Harlem, very specifically—but also with this idea of reaching out into the world. This issue of what you do then, how you deal with that group of artists, is finding a way to make that local, whether it's the artist or the audience, exist within this context that we defined as global. The Harlem artist's community exists within the larger notion of what it is we are doing. But it is still very fraught and very complicated, because of the different ways in which an institution has to be in order to engage various communities.

H-U.O.: When Hou Hanru and I curated “Cities on the Move,” we conducted research, basically, in lots of Asian cities, and felt that the situation in many of these cities was extraordinary. What has happened—actually something that is not necessarily a problem, but, at the same time, might be something to think about—is that many, many of the artists we've met in these different cities have moved to Paris, to London, to New York, because they feel they have to move there in order to make it. It's a problem in the sense of talking about a multiplicity of centers; it creates a situation in which the energy of these artists is missing incredibly. A similar thing has happened in the Nordic context. In Stockholm, in Copenhagen, there was a fabulous energy at the beginning of the nineties, and through the decade, but many of the artists have left. Obviously, it's one thing if the artists decide to move to another city—this is important for many artists—but there is this idea that many artists still feel that they are obligated to move to the center, to the capital. At the moment this is changing in some contexts. I think about the amazing energy of Fernando Romero and others who work in Mexico City.

R.S.: What happened to the Russian art scene has to do with many, many factors, but that's also one of them. I want to shift to the ugly question of money. That will be my last round, and I hope that others will step forward. Not the money that we're paid. I have no complaints, but I know lots of my colleagues are not paid nearly enough. Something we should advocate for are real professional wages for professional work. Again, this is not a personal complaint at all. We've been through the eighties and the nineties, two amazing run-ups in the market for objects. I thought the first round was surrealistic, but the second round has really been something else again. Could you talk a little bit about both the cost of doing exhibitions and the cost of collecting works? If you're in a collecting situation, or simply trying to do whatever kind of work you're doing, everybody is looking at cost primarily—and looking at, as Peter Schjeldahl called it, the sex life of money. That's a predominant thing on people's minds. How does this affect your work, the way you feel your work is interpreted, and the way in which you relate to artists?

T.G.: I'll start, because I don't have any money.

How does it affect my work? It hasn't yet. How will it affect my work? I'm now working in a situation completely unlike, say, the other kind of situation, which exists, within money, as a total abstraction, like in the lands of the capital campaigns of \$600 million. Six or six hundred—it's the same thing in that environment. Where I work, we just don't have any. How it's affecting work, though, is very interesting. There is a mentality that can exist in the world of institutions like mine, where sometimes not having any for so long creates the way in which you work. I am seeing the work I'm doing now as a big conceptual-art project. So, is it possible to work in an environment where finance truly is a day-to-day, minute-by-minute concern, and not the concern it is in a big institution, like, are you going to make the capital campaign?, but, literally, payroll, and all of that kind of stuff. At the same time, you work on an edge that's interesting and exciting. I think, right now, I can. These forces of the market are an abstraction that's outside of that. Somehow, in a way, it's also oddly liberating. A year from now, I might be in deep debt. Still, there is something about this economy of scale where going from nothing to a little more than nothing is a very small step. To me, it's a very, very exciting way to be. Alright, Paul, you have money—you can talk about it.

P.S.: It's like that line from a Janis Joplin song, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." I work at a much bigger institution, an institution that is both very youthful and, in fact, kind of solid. We have two buildings, a rather remarkable collection for such a young institution, and an endowment of \$50 million. To a large degree, MOCA has operated until now like a large mom-and-pop store, running around the block trying to gather the money you need to do projects, project by project. But we have made some significant increases in our budget, not in the area of exhibitions but in the overall services of the institution. Quite frankly, we don't have the money at this point. I have every reason to believe that the trustees will buy into that for a year or two, but if there are any kind of concrete results—more membership, greater attendance, larger retail sales—there will come a day when people say, well, it's the program. That's something we really have to be concerned about at museums, about how far we want to take us to that edge, and whether we can back off it, because I do believe—and this may sound very conservative—that we need, as museum people, to protect the assets of the institution. The assets of the institution are the independence of its program. We quickly observe in the museum profession those museums that have gone over to the side being controlled by a handful of collectors who have enormous capital interests; our job is to enhance those capital interests through the promotion of their collections. Extremely significant relations with a handful of galleries that not only, in a sense, promote what we're doing, but, in fact,

define a program to a degree that is, frankly, unacceptable to the artist. They know when we've turned over our program to a commercial entity. I don't know where that point of balance is, and I certainly don't imagine that a museum can stay still and hope that it will all remain the same. But we have to be very wise about how we expand and in what manner we give up certain prerogatives having to do with the scholarship and the independence of the institution.

H-U.O.: It has to do with a permanent process of negotiation, and where they think the independence has to be maintained. I want to mention something that was said much earlier. I think it was in your speech [Robert Storr's keynote address], when you mentioned the curator as generalist. The funding of an exhibition the curator curates is very much part of the exhibition. The independence of the exhibition can only be maintained if the whole funding structure is very much in strong ties with the exhibition. When an exhibition has a particular topic or an exhibition deals with a specific aspect, it's extremely important that the whole funding situation is brought in conjunction, so that it is not just a funding department trying to find the money for the show and, at the same time, the curator curating the show; it has to do with bridging the gaps. This notion of bridging the gaps is incredibly important within museums. In big institutions, there is this danger that the different departments don't talk to each other enough. I definitely think that it's extremely important to try to bridge these gaps. Gaps between departments, between disciplines, between geographies. Bridge the gap!

M-C.R.: I have been in a situation for the last twelve years, similar to Thelma's, of operating from an institution that is basically linked to a university—a big state university—which is a completely different kind of deal. But I'm feeling that that was an asset more than a liability. I've always believed that money is not, ultimately, the issue. You know what you want to do, and the money is going to come from anywhere. I really feel that, ultimately, it's to the advantage of the curator to master the area of fund-raising. It's a source of empowerment. What I'm saying may sound incredible, but that's my experience throughout the years—that no institution, no matter how big, is going to turn down a project you're doing if you come with the money. That is a fact. The reality is, how do you get that money? If you come up and say, I want to do such and such an exhibition, it doesn't matter how crazy it is. I have the backing, I have somebody who's going to pay for it. I've gotten in planes and gone all the way to Brasilia to discuss, with ministers of culture, how to fund an exhibition. And the money has appeared. You just have to be incredibly creative about it. Ultimately, it is a source of empowerment to what you're doing.

AUDIENCE QUESTION AND ANSWER



Roberta Smith: I write for the *New York Times*. I have a couple of questions, or just things that I feel like you're talking around and have come close to saying. First of all, I was struck by Mari-Carmen Ramirez's remarks about artists who were showing in the international circuit who had no benefit to their careers. Basically, we haven't quite spoken of the incredible expansion, diversification, and fragmentation that's happening in just the contemporary art world right now. Now, you have at least three layers, three strata, that sometimes operate very independently of each other. You have these expanded strata of the international shows. You have museums, on the local level, functioning nationally, internationally, or locally, depending on their mission. Then, you have galleries. I'm specifically talking about New York. But we have a situation now where there isn't that kind of trickle-down, where, if you want to talk about consensus being formed and people having careers, it's like we're all voting on different issues, or for different candidates. I just wanted to say how huge and complicated it has become. The same thing refers to curators. I'd like you to address the fact that, in many ways, your activity, and what I seriously consider the curator's art, is under threat. It has directly to do with funding—and with sponsorship. Again, to just talk about New York right now, I love hearing you talk about your own work, but the fact is that there are a lot of different people who are now doing your work—and they don't have the same passion or commitment or training. You have, for instance, the hip-hop show in Brooklyn, which is organized and commissioned by an historian of hip-hop. You have the Armani exhibition at the Guggenheim, connected to a \$15 million gift to the Guggenheim by Armani. Coming up in February, we have "Jackie Kennedy: The White House Years" at the Met, only it's not going to be in the Costume Institute, it's going to be upstairs. At this moment, we have a show sponsored by Shiseido at the Gray Art Gallery, which is, basically, an exhibition that looks like a makeup counter in a store.

I agree that there are many, many different ways of being curators right now, and that you represent them. But there are also a lot of different forces and a lot of different people who are making decisions about who's going to do your activity. They have lots of different motivations. I wonder if that could be addressed? Boston is about to have a show about guitars. I'm interested in it. I'm as interested as anyone in the expansion of the definition of art, or the expansion of the definition of curatorial practice, but is there a point at which it sort of

dissipates or becomes completely diffused?

Paul Schimmel: I agree. I'll elaborate a little bit on that.

You've given some very interesting and very problematic examples, and I'm not sure if I can think of one curator associated with any of those exhibitions. I know who the museums are, I know who the funding is, but I can't quite place where the curator is in the picture. Usually, when I hear about shows, I hear about a curator saying, this is what I'm doing, and then you hear about the funding, and then you hear about the tour. In that respect, the cart has gotten before the horse. Quite frankly, I'm very concerned for MOCA. We have made a decision to go into the area of design. We've obviously had a very active program in architecture, and, I assure you, there wasn't an architect in Los Angeles, or beyond that, who didn't see the opportunity to show at MOCA as some kind of enhancement to their ability to get jobs and to have a broader international profile. As complicated as it is in the area of architecture, it's even more so in the area of "design." On a bad day, I'll, quite frankly, say, gee, the reason why they call it design and art is because, like design, they got everything else. They got all the showrooms, they got the storefronts, they got the advertising, they got everything else. Leave the damn art museum alone. That's why they call it an art museum. On a good day, I think, well, you know, we're deeply committed to an artist like Jorge Pardo. Does it make sense to try to understand the relationship of what Jorge is doing as an artist and the sources that he's drawing from; is that part of the history that we need to bring into the museum? But I can assure you of one thing. If it begins with a funder, it's probably not going to be an exhibition. If it begins with a curator, it, at least, has the possibility.

Robert Storr: If I could just respond. What Roberta asked is a very pressing issue. And it is a question, really, for directors and boards. It's a situation where curators can make things happen that are interesting, but it is a question of who has the actual power to decide that this will or will not happen. The Modern has had an architecture and design program for fifty years now. Yes, there are situations where we've shown works of art that are available at Knoll downtown right away. Chairs and stuff like that. But, of course, if we show paintings in galleries, they're often available across town in galleries. I don't think that the lesser economic tie-ins—although there are occasions when it's unseemly—are as significant as when the exhibition itself becomes a form of advertising.

There's another thing to think about. One of the ways in which the nose of the camel got into the tent here was when the discourse about visual culture became so broad, and when people who are serious about how clothes and objects and so on and so forth began to dissolve some distinctions that are now

much harder to put back in place. Only a scholar in those fields, only a genuine curator, can do it.

Kathy Halbreich: I think we will discuss this later this afternoon. It seems to me that Roberta's question is absolutely on target. But it isn't only related to museums; in fact, it is related to her own field. The intersection of marketing and editorial has become questionable, not necessarily in her newspaper but certainly in California, for instance. I've actually been waiting for the *New York Times* to tackle this as a bigger issue in terms of the museums in New York and across the country, the examples of which you gave. It deserves a serious policy discussion coming from the newspaper many of us most respect. Frankly, it would even help some of us, as directors, to talk about this with our boards.

Thelma Golden: I also think, Roberta, you posed this as to how it affects us as curators, that other people are doing this. It profoundly affects many of us in choosing where we work and how we work. A lot of the movement, whether spoken or unspoken, that happens now often has to do with the pressures that Rob refers to as coming from boards and directors about institutional priorities, and how those priorities will be played out. If they can't be played out with curators, they will be played out with someone who wants to come in and do one of these kinds of exhibitions for a funder or for the funding itself.

P.S.: Or, in fact, the curator is supplied by the funder.

It was fascinating. There was a huge article—and it was surprising that it was on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*—about the Eames exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum. It went on and on about potential conflicts of interest; the funder and the objects are sort of one and the same. What shocked me, and I pointed it out to the critic, was that, in fact, part of the “curatorial team” came from the very institution, the company, that manufactures those objects. I thought, how can you write this whole article? That's the crux of it. How could you miss that?



Peter Plagens: I write for *Newsweek*. I want to start this question with an anecdote. It's related to the question that Roberta asked, only it's without the funding, ethical part. It has to do with the art, and maybe returns it to curating a little bit.

I'll start with an anecdote. A few weeks ago, one of these annoyingly bright twentysomethings, editing a section at the magazine called “Periscope”—these little short items up front—said that he had just seen a movie called *The Cell*, with Jennifer Lopez, and it was very derivative. He

thought there were a couple of art things in there. Would I be interested in going and seeing it? We do a little short item on how many art refs are in a film. I went to see it. Not a great movie, but I was really struck by (a), the number, there were a lot, and (b), it had Matthew Barney all over it. I'm an early, or medium early, great admirer of the work of Matthew Barney. With that—plus a remark that Mr. Obrist made about public art and the LED light boards, etc., etc., maybe being a new form of public art—my question is this: What is the essence of curating in the museum, and what do the curators in the museums offer, if, for purposes of discussion, the real world, or the entertainment industry, does it as well or better? Other than some information and some didactics that the example that's in the museum instead of out there in Times Square, or in *The Cell*, is actually a Trojan Horse, transgressive, etc., etc.

T.G.: I guess, Peter, you're assuming some of us don't see ourselves as part of that world. I'm not against it necessarily. For some of us, the line between them is not necessary; it's also not pure. What we do different is that we do it differently—whether it's done well there, or even well on our side of the museum, are things that can be sort of questioned. But, in some ways, just the approach some of us—and I speak for myself—might take to the way in which we work is as informed by that world as any. It allows our work to exist in a dialogue with it in some ways. I thought *The Cell* was a really bad Matthew Barney rip-off. There are lots of good Matthew Barney rip-offs out there, though, in popular culture. That was not one of them. But, seemingly, I don't necessarily think it's a question of how as a curator do you live in the world—do you work in the world? Is the museum a fortress? Is it not in some way infected by all these other things, and is that infection interesting and/or good? Again, it's a question of position and context, and not so much what do we do different, or better, than that world might do.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Concerning video clips on large-scale, electronic billboards, I should say how my interest in this started. It started out of a discussion with Alexander Kluge, the German experimental filmmaker, who infiltrated all kinds of media. In the last two decades, he has occupied an hour every week on two channels in Germany, and somehow developed a temporary autonomous zone that seems to last forever within television. He said that in the seventies, among experimental filmmakers, the idea was that if maybe they could produce television only out of clips, it would be like a kind of meteor shower—he would have all these one-minute clips—that could eventually go on for a few hours and trigger a program. That, in combination with the fact that more and more artists are working with clips, trying to carry them into different sorts of supports and actually experimenting with this medium, gives this idea legitimacy. If I said that

maybe this could be the public art of the future, I didn't mean that it would replace the museum, because, obviously, the museum *is* a public space.

R.S.: I don't want to use the Modern as a paradigm for everything, but there is a specific history there. There is a film department at the Modern that's been going on for fifty years. The idea that such a popular medium produces works of art is not debatable. The question is, which works of art in that context are debatable? The irony of the situation is, there's no film curator at the Modern who's interested in Matthew Barney. On the contrary, most of them are quite skeptical of Matthew Barney, whereas it's always the painting and sculpture curators who think Matthew Barney is really interesting. I haven't seen *The Cell* yet, but, judging from what you said, I doubt if they're going to bring *The Cell* in as an example. It is entirely possible, though, that you might have a film festival of Jean Cocteau and Matthew Barney. Try and work out how this might work. It doesn't come at you as film, but it is in the film medium, relates to film traditions. In that case, a museum is exactly the place where these issues should be debated, particularly because they are differences of opinion.

M-C.R.: I agree with Thelma that we are operating in a field that is extremely contaminated. But what we do that's different from what a film like that would do is that we are trying to convey something through our work. Any exhibition or any kind of undertaking carries a proposition. It is something that is out there—it is an idea, it could be an idea, it could be a way of looking, it could be stimulating peoples' perceptions to do something—but there is an idea that is conveyed. The curatorial proposal, inevitably, is like an essay. It's like a piece of writing; it conveys something. If you take something away from it, it's like taking away pages from a book, or taking away parts of the film. So, there is a basic difference. It doesn't mean that we don't operate in the same contaminated space, but there is a difference in the intention that drives our particular practice.

Dave Hickey: I had a question. Would I be incorrect in my impression that you all are reconceiving curatorial practice as a form of higher patronage, to intervene between actual patronage and the audience?

M-C.R.: I'm not sure that we are reinventing it. I think it's been reinvented already.

D.H.: You're patrons, then. I get the impression you're thinking of curatorial practice as a form of patronage?

M-C.R.: No, not really.

D.H.: Oh, really.

R.S.: Brokerage.

D.H.: Exactly.

Naomi Nelson: I'm education director at the African American Museum, in Philadelphia. There are a couple of remarks that struck me. One was the curator as broker, as you just mentioned. One of my questions had to do with that, as well as the notion of pedestrian bridges. I thought that was very provocative.

I'm thinking of a question that Thelma Golden responded to regarding the ability to act as a curator, given financial restraints. There are far too few persons of color in the role of curator—as I look around this room, I'm in a situation that I find myself in all the time—and that makes me wonder, if the curator is indeed broker, broker via institutions, collections, galleries, and funders or patrons, then where in the global picture do we find the broker for African-American art, or for contemporary African art? Do we find ourselves in a position where if the curator is indeed broker, and broker in the larger sense, even broker in terms of community—if our notion of community varies from the notion of community of the curators who are in the majority—then where do the voices of artists of color enter the picture, and who decides how they enter?

T.G.: Naomi, you know the answer to that question. You're posing it just to enter it into the room. Clearly, the issues around inclusion and exclusion are still very much with us—it's just that they're spoken about differently now in the age of globalism. During the multicultural moment, the idea of a dialogue around these issues was sanctioned and allowed and we all spoke too much about it—and some of us even got sick of it. But did the arena change? Not exactly, from that moment to now. So, somewhat like Mari-Carmen has spoken about the plight of many Latin American artists, even though this greater visibility has brought them renown, it has not brought them a real sort of root benefit. Similarly, we are still in that place in institutions. Where are the voices coming from? Although, perhaps, we are still not seeing as many African-American curators, even African curators, in institutions, we are seeing more African Americans as trustees of institutions. I would like to believe, in some way, that, at least at the fundamental structure powering institutions, there is a voice. And there are brokers. Again, not enough, but they are there. The rise of the independent curator is the thing that, perhaps, makes at least a little sense that things are changing, because, while there aren't people like me who are institutionally bound, there are many people existing between and around and in front of and behind many institutions who speak

for African-American, Asian-American, all sorts of American artists. Their voices are heard often in the context of dialogues that, as curators, we might have with each other in this global, globetrotting, show-to-show world we exist in. Is it solved? No. Can it be solved through simple actions? Probably not. But the dialogue is somewhat open, and what we have to continue to do is keep the dialogue there, even if it has to be reformed in a newer language than it was in its beginning, to make real change happen.

R.S.: I would like to speak to that, too. The heaviest weight here falls on the question of having African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and others—I'm not trying to make a list, I'm trying to make a basic point—on the committees that buy art and on boards. There are, in fact, a lot of curators who came of age with the Civil Rights movement and after, who have acted the best they can in these circumstances, absent African-American or other curators there. There should be many more of them in the profession, for all kinds of other reasons. But what you need are people who make the decisions, who vote the monies, who comment on programs. One doesn't want to have a program dictated by trustees, but you want to hear from trustees on whether they think that there is the kind of balance needed, to have that happen from that level, because it's an argument among peers. There's a limit that curators can say at that level. It needs, frankly, a very wealthy African-American person to look at a very wealthy white person and say, I think it's time we did something about this.

M-C.R.: I have a comment about that. This is something I've obviously been involved with for a number of years, and I have a very different take on that. That kind of question presupposes that African Americans and Latinos, or whoever, are somehow vying or knocking at the door to enter into this big institution. That is very important, that needs to happen, and, certainly, it's happening, but there is a lot more to be done. I also want to stress that these communities need to develop their own voices in their own spaces, in their own locales, and develop their own models. They need to think through what some of these issues in culture are all about and come up with an answer of their own. That's the real sense of a democratic society. It's not about where we locate them in this big pie over here that's been going on for a number of years. That can happen, but it's never going to change the picture completely. There needs to be another kind of reinvention taking place at the level of our communities.



Susan Cahan: I'm the director of arts programs for the Peter Norton Family Foundation, in Santa Monica, which, as some of you may know, has supported a lot of work by African-American

artists and work in museums and elsewhere that has dealt with culturally complex issues in many different ways.

I want to make a comment and then ask Rob a question. Your observation, Rob, that there are people working in museums now that came of age during and after the Civil Rights movement, people of many different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds who are committed to a diverse practice and a practice that serves multiple, interesting constituencies, is absolutely true. In terms of funding, we're at a moment of enormous opportunity in our society right now, with the amount of wealth that has been generated in recent years. In the last five to ten years, we have more billionaires in this country than ever before, we have more millionaires in this country than ever before, and they are younger than ever before. They have come of age during a time when Civil Rights issues are in a different place than they were for some of our older board members, trustees, and supporters.

I just wanted to make that comment. I also wanted to ask you a question, Rob, because I was interested in your making an analogy between the museum and the library. You said that, for you, the library is a model for museums, and that you would hope that people would access museums in the way they access libraries. My question has to do with what you would propose in terms of structural institutional changes that would enable museums to function more like libraries. One big distinction between the library and the museum is that the library is absolutely inclusive, whereas one of the museum's purposes is to make distinctions and to take things into their collections that are considered of certain standards of quality. I was wondering if you were proposing that aesthetic criteria should be changed, or what other structural changes do you have in mind?

R.S.: This will get us into the quality debate, and maybe that's where we should end up at some point. As far as that goes, I don't think, first of all, that libraries, except for maybe the Library of Congress, have everything that's been published. Libraries choose what goes on the shelves. Curatorial choice is essential at museums. Economically, it's essential, and for other kinds of reasons it's essential. But the curatorial choice cannot be determined by a single view on what's out there. It can't be because there are debates about what art is of what quality, that are aesthetic in principle. There are different bases of information. I know certain things and don't know other things. You have to have a process of acquisition for the library, as you will have for the museum, that cross-references all those different things, and tends to favor the iffy propositions rather than to push them under the water in order to exalt the things on which everybody pretty much does agree. The other thing about the public library analogy, which is not precise, is that access to this material is limited. It is increasingly the case, for economic

reasons and others, that people are rotating their collections, and that rotation does not begin to create the library effect, but, at least, makes sure that things come back into view. The art of the twenties and thirties that is unpopular doesn't disappear from everything and forever. From time to time, and within reasonable periods of time, you see a lot of things that are out of fashion. How much work that was bought in 1980 is on gallery walls right this minute, in the museums? Bring back some of it. It may not be the greatest art you've ever seen, but it may look fresh in a way that you wouldn't have imagined. If you're constantly tilling this field, basically, making sure there's no single category that disappears altogether, that things have some real variety, then people can come and select.



Chrissie Iles: I wanted to talk about space in relation to what you just said, and also what Roberta said. I'm a curator at the Whitney Museum. I've worked for most of my career in England. There are some things I want to say, one in relation to Paul's comment, one in relation to Rob's, and one in relation to Roberta's.

I worked in an alternative space in the early eighties in London, called Matt's Gallery, where we worked with the artist Richard Wilson, producing a piece called *2050*. It's a very complicated piece. It took three months to build. Then, we just showed it for a few weeks, reversing the usual pattern that took place in museums. I was very interested in that, in working with an artist. Basically, we turned the gallery into a studio, or created a time span that is impossible in museums. When I went to the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, I invited this artist to do something, and wanted to try and translate that. The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, isn't the most rigid of institutions, but, even so, it was very hard to ask institutionally for the artist to be there for six weeks to create something instead of the normal week's installation. A lot of what gets shown in museums is determined by a museum's inflexibility in terms of space, because there is a turnaround. One must get the customers in, one must get tickets sold; it's all about audience and all the rest of it.

That relates, Rob, to your comment about film, because I now find myself film and video curator at the Whitney Museum, even though I'm actually a sculpture curator. I'm very interested in that, because we have what might be called a rather inadequate film and video gallery, which I love; it's a black box with uncomfortable chairs that turns into a gallery space. MoMA has a wonderful film department and two great auditoriums, but never, ever will you see an avant-garde film screened in a gallery, which is what I've been doing with a couple of benches, so that it almost looks like a Shirin Neshat. What's been very interesting to see is that if you screen an avant-garde film with two benches in, basically, what looks like an installation space, you completely reframe the way in

which an experimental film can be shown. Likewise, if you have a black-box, white-cube situation, you can ask questions about that.

All these things have much to do with the pragmatics of space. As I've learned living in New York, gallery spaces are talked of in terms of real estate—as everyone's trying to buy a loft, it's extraordinary—and how one spends that real estate in curatorial terms. Museums tend to be extremely rigid in the installation time they give to a project. There was a very important space—alternative space, again—in London, in the seventies, called Acme, where Stuart Brisley knocked the ceiling down to make two spaces. The new Tate Modern, in London, asks artists to go and actually look at spaces in Europe that they want their museum to look like. What were the most wonderful spaces in Europe? Of course, Schaffhausen comes out as a wonderful example of that. When they showed the Beuys piece, they just knocked the ceiling down, because that's a private space and they could do what they wanted to; they weren't constrained by all the institutional factors that exist. The key issues, to me, are those kinds of issues, the issues that Donald Judd brought up; he disliked museums for the way they mangled art. It's a huge problem, because the amount of power that designers seem to be allowed to have, or architects, goes absolutely against art.

R.S.: I agree with about seventy-five percent of that. One cannot imagine, or I cannot imagine—realistically speaking, ideally perhaps—that one institution can serve all of these functions properly. There has been a lot of discussion about a black-box space in the new Modern. I don't know the upshot of it, frankly, but it's keenly felt in a lot of different corridors. There are limits, and that's part of the fact that this whole system is very diverse. If there was one institution that could do it all, that institution would swallow all. It's better that there be a variety of opportunities, and that, somehow, more effort was made to move the audiences to places where these things were done best, rather than creating a kind of Bloomingdale's of art in which there's a department for everything.

P.S.: MOCA's been very fortunate in that we have not designated either curators or spaces. The fact that we are not departmentalized, to the degree that some other institutions are, has allowed curators and, therefore, the spaces to reflect a variety of media, and not, in a sense, be dependent on the relative power of one department over another. As you create project galleries or black boxes, one has a tendency to always say, well, we have to put that artist into that space; that can be very limiting, both for the artist and for the curatorial practice. On the other hand, if you don't designate spaces and you don't designate curators, you have to work doubly hard to make sure that your program is, in fact, inclusive of all of those areas of art that are not necessarily in the pecking order, as the trustees see it.

R.S.: Let's have a few more questions. Then, maybe, we should give ourselves all a break.



Terry Myers: I'm a critic and independent curator. I may be stirring up a little trouble, but in response to Roberta and Peter, this isn't necessarily supposed to be the critic's corner here.

I'm about to say something that's going to sound very American, but I mean it symbolically and as a comment. I walked in here knowing that in a month I'm going to vote for Ralph Nader. Now, I know even more. I'm curious—I've been hearing what I would call sort of Bush-Gore answers to the questions being asked here—and I'm wondering, do you think we need a Ralph Nader in the curatorial community? I can elaborate. In terms of this idea of waiting for more billionaires, and more of this idea of appealing in terms of coming out of the Civil Rights movement, there was another part of me looking at this—once again, in relation to what Thelma was talking about—as a classic what I call heterosexualized moment. This thing that's never said in the room, this assumption of a certain way of working, a certain way of being in the world. I'm confused here; maybe a little nauseous about this. And I'm just curious, is there any sort of agency? Maybe Hans-Ulrich is someone who has specifically gone out in the so-called global setting, who tried to cause some trouble. I admire him for that. But, maybe, we all need to be doing that a little more than assuming that, especially in terms of what Peter was saying. How do we want to react to this fact that's happening all around us, in industries that have, relatively speaking, unlimited resources and unlimited access to audience?

R.S.: Except for the fact that you make an awful lot of assumptions about us, I'm still not clear what the precise complaint is.

T.M.: I sense a sort of waiting for things, and I'm just wondering about making things happen. I'm too young for the Civil Rights movement directly, but my understanding was, that was a moment where people went out and caused things to happen. Speaking as someone who's tried to function as an independent critic among, let's say, an art magazine conglomerate that is set up against me, there are editors I refuse to work with because I see conflict of interest, and I see colleagues who don't do that. I'm curious—where's the space for that, in terms of what I think is the goal that we're all looking for here? I want some more specifics, and I'm not getting them.

R.S.: You have to accept some of the terms that we have accepted by agreeing to work for institutions. Then, if you accept those terms, look at what is actually

possible. You will find that there've been real changes as the result of the activities of a lot of the people who are present here. In my days of being twenty-five, thirty, and wanting to do it from the outside, certain things seemed very possible that turned out not to be. Until you get your hands on certain levers, you can't do very much except write out an idea about how it ought to be, how it ought to turn out, and what's wrong. I see every reason in the world that people should write protest criticism, that they should push very hard; it actually helps, in many circumstances, to do the work from the inside. But we are now working from the inside—we can't pretend not to be. And we won't. But that doesn't mean we're Gore and Bush—and certainly not Bush. There's Al Checchi, who ran for governor of California and said it's easier to teach a Democrat about economics than a Republican about compassion. Some of that's in there, too.

T.G.: In response to Terry's question, as someone who's made a lot of trouble, and had both the cause and the effect on every level, it's not a question of waiting necessarily—or the waiting that you're referring to is not, at least, how I've seen my own work. It's more waiting for the rest of it to catch up. So, yes, there are some things I am waiting for. Maybe they'll come, maybe they won't. But the way in which I work, in whatever moment of whatever context I'm in, usually is with some informed sense of not necessarily trouble for the sake of trouble but the sense that what it is I represent, by default, is, in particular environments, particularly the ones I've worked in, going to cause some trouble. The sense of change, perhaps—in what Rob referred to before about what the legacy of certain political actions might be—is that there's more room for that trouble to happen. And there's more room for it to happen, perhaps, on the inside, both for factors that people want to acknowledge and those they don't want to acknowledge at all. Maybe the question is not a Bush-Gore thing necessarily as much as that we are in a very interesting place right now. It comes down to the choices people make about how they want to work. And that can or cannot work out in some ways to exhibit something that's visible as trouble, or perhaps more invisible—that can't really be felt until it's really understood a little bit better.

R.S.: I want to add one thing. One has to be very careful about assumptions about the rich. There's a funny thing in Billy Wilder's *Sabrina*. The daughter of the chauffeur is about to marry the head of the family, and she says, this is a very funny democratic culture where it's not all right for somebody poor to marry somebody rich; democracy only works in the reverse direction. But the fact is, there are certainly a considerable number of patrons. Peter Norton is mentioned as one. Aggie Gund, who, when she introduced me for the first time to the Committee of Painting and Sculpture, said, "This is Robert Storr, who I met at a

Visual AIDS program, and we were discussing a whole lot of the politics around that.” It is simply counterproductive and it is also, I think, arrogant to assume that people who have a lot of dough are automatically in this category or that. As a practical matter, if you find allies, it’s snobbism not to deal with them as peers, and deal with them directly on problems you have in common.

DeDe Young: I’m the program director and curator at a site that just opened three weeks ago in Wilmington, Delaware, called the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts. I left the museum field and an academic institution in Florida to get away from the frustrations that I felt as a curator—not being able to work quite so directly with artists—and to get involved with this new model of an alternative site. The risk for me was going to a place completely unknown, to Wilmington, Delaware, where nobody really thinks of art as being the center of the scene.

The site that we opened has taken the risk of creating a new model. Along with six galleries, we have an artist-in-residence program, where artists are invited to come and live in a studio apartment, for eight weeks, and then exhibit their work. At the same time, they go out into the community and work with a so-called underserved audience at a wellness center or a boys and girls club or a homeless shelter, or something of that nature. But we also, side by side, invite artists to come and participate very actively in creating their exhibitions. Like some of the panelists, I’m involved in a place that has very little money, but gives artists an opportunity to get outside of their studio to some place where we hope, a new audience will form. On this site, we also have twenty-six artist studios, a cyber cafe, an auditorium for 125 seats that will eventually have a time-arts program. What we’ve tried to do is look around at the models that you are all speaking about, and add alternative sites and create something new that can include not only curatorial practice, in a very traditional and ongoing sort of innovative format, but also invite artists as the best resource. They seem to be very eager to interact in a program that would not necessarily get a lot of press, but to have the opportunity to work in a space where they can see their work looking really great, because the architecture is very factorylike and large and allows big installations, and so on. Inviting artists in to see what they can do is something that alternative sites are able to do, and to avoid any kind of Bloomingdale’s hybrid of what a museum and alternative site and a gallery can be together.

I agree—it’s important to look around at the many models that there are, and how everything fills a gap that something else can’t do. Curating in that way can continue to be very innovative. I can invite such artists as Willie Birch, who was willing to come and donate his time to resurrect a piece, which had lost its

place in the world, called *Spirit House*. It was a collaboration with one hundred other artists. Willie does not need to show in Wilmington, Delaware, but he was so engaged with the idea that *Spirit House* could be resurrected—and we could do an education outreach program around it—that he was willing to come and donate his time and be there for a few days, in exchange for us giving him some dinner and some paint and paste to put this beautiful papier-mâché and wood house back together. He felt it could create a place for the community to come and understand how the art site can be part of the community, how that division between inside and outside could begin to dissolve—that what's going on inside institutions and outside of them can come together in the same way that many curators are dealing with.

I wanted to say that alternative sites are doing some of the things that museums can't. At the same time, I wanted to ask the panelists, how much are you really dealing on a day-to-day basis directly with artists? Do you find that that is part of the heartbeat of your program as well as your collections, which obviously you have to be paying very much attention to? How long do your relationships with artists go on before you are able to give them space in the museum?

T.G.: There are some value judgments implied in the way your question is framed. What you describe you're doing is great, fabulous. I resist this idea of the alternative as this construct that embraces that, and the museum as one that doesn't. Many of us here, and in the audience, work in different kinds of institutions and relate to something that might be defined in these ways as the traditional alternative more than, say, the ways of the museum. The question is not so much how much we engage with artists day to day, because I think we all do, but how long is that engagement before it becomes a project? It depends on the project; it depends on the nature of how we work. But it's more about what I think you're getting at as being part of the alternative, which is artists at the center. As contemporary art curators, that is the case for all of us. It's not necessarily different just because we're working in a place that might have a collection or have other administrative details that define it.

R.Sm.: I have three reactions. First of all, in the discussion of Matthew Barney, what got left out was just saying, Matthew Barney's work was first visible in museums. So, they start a process of dissemination, of presenting of information, that is now getting extended and expanded and accelerated by a lot of other forms of culture. But curators, at least, should be given credit for that. Hollywood did not go out and find Matthew Barney and decide to be influenced by him. Second, to respond to Kathy about what you said about the *New York Times*: I'm not here out of idle interest. Leave it at that. Third, I had some of what Terry was

reacting to, but I'm not going to put words in his mouth. But, I felt, Rob, that when you first responded to my question and said it was in the hands of trustees and directors, that, to a certain extent, is true. But, to another extent, that's sort of passing the buck, because I really feel that your jobs are threatened. Thelma knows exactly how a change in director can threaten her job. I just wanted to get the feeling like you're opposing something or fighting for something, which I know you are, but I just wanted it . . .

R.S.: The nature of those discussions has to take place within the institution. What my guess about the arts are, at any point, goes up and down. If you're going to work in a direct way with other people in a situation like this, you cannot take your business out into the street. It is the responsibility of advocates outside the institution to make these points, and make them very, very forcefully. It is not a measure of how passionately or how persistently those of us inside institutions argue these cases and whether or not you hear them in quotes or in panel discussions; some of this stuff has to be a one-to-one conversation. And on many of these issues, it is very direct and very pointed. But that's it; that's all I can tell you.

R.Sm.: It seems like one of the reasons for what's going on at the Guggenheim is that there aren't a lot of curators there. There's a kind of absence of them.

R.S.: I would assume that some of my colleagues there have also spoken up, as much as can be done.

M-C.R.: I want to add something to that. Yes, I agree that, in a certain way, our curatorial practices are threatened at the present moment. There is a perception that I'm sure is present here in the United States in the art world, but I'm seeing it in Latin America, which is a very good case study. We've seen, first of all, the emergence of the curator where there was none before, so it's easier to track these changes. There is a very strong reaction right now on the part of institutions and collectors in certain sectors that we view the curator as having a lot of power—as being too empowered.

What happened to Ivo Mesquita in the São Paulo Biennial is one example of that—and the debate that came out even before, in the biennial that Paulo Herkenhoff did; if you read all the criticism, it all goes in that direction. In that sense, our practice is threatened. But that's what gives it more relevance, and reveals how important it is in our present structure to have these kinds of practices that, as I said before, mediate between all of these levels and, therefore, have a potential to impact upon all of these levels of the social structure. In that sense, I'm not quite there with Rob, because I feel that he's continually bringing the

issue back to the institution. The institution is what needs to be completely reinvented. Our curators, as such, in the way that we are operating right now, have to go beyond the institution. We can make a choice to work inside the institution, but our perspective on our purview cannot be circumscribed to the institution. It needs to move outside of that and kind of contaminate other spaces, and become involved with that.

T.G.: In response to Roberta—and I only say this because in some ways it's purely semantics—because this panel is about curatorial practice, I'd like to make the distinction that, yes, the change in director at the Whitney threatened my job, but it didn't threaten my curatorial practice.

R.S.: I'm not defending the permanent state of my institution. My institution, in fact, has changed enormously in recent years—not as much as it needs to—but the particular part of the problem that I've tackled is over in that corner; it's not to the exclusion of the other problems at all. It's very much aided by the activities of other people in other areas, who have essentially demonstrated and said, look, this is not only possible, it may be a whole lot more interesting, so move this way. But, if I'm being cautious, it is because I don't think palace revolutions are possible. You can have a wholesale revolution, or you can have reform. At the moment, I'm in the reformist's job.

