

EXHIBITION REVIEW

THE MUSEUM AS MUSE: ARTISTS REFLECT

At the Museum of Modern Art,
New York

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Reflection on the role of museums usually conjures up a long-standing debate about the museum as *temple*, with reference to the *mouseion* or home of the muses, and the museum as *forum*, a civic crucible for dialogue, negotiation, and the testing of values. The recent exhibition *Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York added an additional twist by considering the museum as a source of inspiration in and of itself. Curator Kynaston McShine created a dense assemblage of the work of over 60 artists who have responded in a variety of ways to the notion of *museum*.

I saw the exhibition on the last week of its run, having flown into New York the night before with only one chance to visit during my brief trip. I had this critique in mind, so I brought with me a greater sense of expectation and urgency than my usual visit to a museum exhibition. On that particular Sunday, rains brought a humid embrace that extended into the lobby of the museum, packed with damp visitors. After going through the obligatory initiation—standing in long lines to be admitted finally by the gatekeepers—I was thrust into a space that actually functioned as a second lobby crowded with people trying to orient themselves, find the restrooms, or locate the other members of

their groups. I headed through the crowds looking for the exhibition and stopped at several installations, which, I later realized, were part of the show. Without context, these artworks were not given the attention they deserved, since people in the area seemed distracted and rarely stopped long enough to look at anything.

The buzz of distraction quickly dissolved, however, when I entered the first enclosed gallery of the exhibition, hung with photographs that ranged from 1850s images of interiors of the British Museum to contemporary museum lobbies and exhibition halls. I was particularly drawn to Elliott Erwitt's images that focused on the visitor's gaze, from a young woman dwarfed by Michaelangelo's *David*, to a man intent on videotaping the interpretive label next to a work of art. Thomas Struth's large Cibachrome prints of people in museum galleries mirrored my own personal experience in the exhibition at that moment in time, making me feel surprisingly self-conscious. The voyeuristic quality of these photographs set me firmly in the realm of the museum visitor. Even in Gunther Forg's images of empty halls, bathed in an ethereal temple-like light, I could almost hear the echo of visitor footsteps.

From this initial gallery, I could see into the next room, where Charles Willson Peale's life-sized painting *The Artist in His Museum* filled the frame of the doorway. An adjacent audio tour by Janet Cardiff took me on a choreographed walk out of the exhibition, up the escalator, and through several galleries on the second floor. The brisk pace kept me focused on her voice in my head, and I had no time for anything outside the realm of her

intention: Look at this painting; Sit on that bench. The sound mix made it impossible for me to distinguish the voices on the audio from visitor voices around me. Distanced by the audio tour, the rest of the museum became an archetypal setting—Sunday afternoon at the Museum of Modern Art—with people sitting on benches, milling, wandering, and watching other people.

After divesting myself of the audio equipment back inside the exhibition, I turned my attention once again to Peale. The placement of this iconic painting in the second gallery (rather than the obvious choice of locating it at the exhibition entrance) seemed to shift my frame of reference from visitor to artist. While this exhibition had much to say about museums in the broadest sense, it was clearly about artists' considerations of the idea of *museum*. And here was Peale, the artist, inviting me in, but with a curious expression and a slightly hesitant gesture.

Duchamp's valises and Readymades were well positioned in the next area, but I was disappointed that the accompanying labels didn't provide more information about his influential role in turning artists' attention to museums in the early part of this century. A visitor who didn't know much about Duchamp might even wonder why so many of his pieces were in the exhibition. Cornell's *Romantic Museum*, in an adjacent case, didn't have that problem. Some of the works, such as Claes Oldenberg's *Mouse Museum*—a walk-in structure in the shape of a Mickey Mouse head containing hundreds of objects found, made, and altered by the artist—and Lothar Baumgarten's *Unsettled Objects*, a series of photographs from the Pitt Rivers Museum, focused on aspects of ownership and collecting. Others, like the

photographs of exhibition openings and exclusive parties by both Larry Fink and Garry Winogrand, provided a disturbing view into the elite social shadow side of philanthropy and connoisseurship.

I was thrilled to see El Lissitzky's *Design for Exhibition Room in the Hannover Museum* and *Sketch for the Kabinett der Abstrakten*, since recent writing on museum exhibitions often refers to his design work of the 1920s and 1930s. Susan Hiller's *From the Freud Museum* was one of my personal favorites. Hiller gathered bits of objects and images into 50 small collection boxes, each evoking a fragment of memory and meaning. For me, they elegantly reiterated the tension in museum display and collecting between what is accumulated and shown in museums and what is left out. I was delighted by Herbert Distel's *Museum of Drawers* with its hundreds of tiny spaces, each installed by a different artist. I also enjoyed Kate Ericson's and Mel Ziegler's *MoMA Whites*, eight jars of different white wall paints, each favored by a particular curator at the museum.

Two videos of "docent tours" by Andrea Fraser, one at the Wadsworth Atheneum and one at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, were at the same time hilarious and pointed—if you could hear them. But most of the time I couldn't. A visitor next to me suggested that maybe the artist intended the pieces to be inaudible, but judging from the subtleties and nuances in the material, I guessed that the poor sound was probably a design and installation problem.

About halfway through, my attention started to wane, and I took advantage of one of the seats scattered throughout, with exhibition catalogs attached for easy reading. I had already spent several hours in

the show and wished I had time to make another visit. Here were artists, over the past 100 years, stretching the boundaries of our thinking about museums and exposing inherent yet often invisible tensions. I wondered why an exhibition with such a rich accumulation of perspectives on museums was only open for ten weeks altogether. It deserved more time and attention.

Leaving the exhibition, I returned to one of the works in the lobby area—General Idea's *The Boutique from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*—that called for a consideration of the business side of museums. Its unfortunate placement so removed from the exhibition seemed ironic. After all, in the real world of museum enterprise, the stores are increasingly designed to capture people on their way out of an exhibition, and in some cases, before they even leave. (My biggest disappointment on this visit was the dearth of materials in the real store. The museum missed a great opportunity to offer some examples from the growing body of critical literature on museums that is hard to find in mainstream bookstores.)

As I made my way out of the museum, the sense of the muse was everywhere. Dialogues between visitors and guards seemed scripted with hidden intent. People sitting on the benches in the lobby appeared to be intentionally choreographed in that classic scene—bags in hand, drowsy, and spending time. Even a visitor's disappointment with the quality of coffee in the cafe served up a snippet of social critique.

Perhaps the most nagging question still in my mind is whether the general museum visitor—someone who may attend museums two or three times a year—appreciated the exhibition as much as I did. Most of the people around me appeared to be intensely engaged in looking at and discussing the works, despite the plethora of inside jokes and visual puns. Clearly, this was an audience of experienced museum-goers, and most likely art museum-goers at that. How would this play in Peoria? I have no idea. But I do know that this exhibition, about how museums have inspired and stimulated so many artists over the last century, really inspired and stimulated me.

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