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passivity & power- keys to change

● In 1977 Umberto Eco published an essay entitled, *Living in the New Middle Ages*. In this text he drew several parallels between the 10th century and the late century. Prophetically he describes the necessary condition for the birth of the Medieval. In the years prior to the rise of the Middle Ages, out of the dark ages, rampant insecurity flourished, as it did at the close of the 20th century and continues now in the 21st. As a society we are fraught with angst, we are psychologically scared and are desperate to find meaning as we evolve in this age of technological and social fluctuation. After the horrid tragedy in the USA on September 11th, this state of uncertainty and social transformation has heightened. This is a time of rebuilding all the foundations of civilization and although alteration touches different people in vastly distinct ways, it is alters the lives of all of us. We are emerging from the security of our tribes, traditions, religions and world-views into a global civilization that is dazzling, and, overwhelmingly pluralistic and uncharted. Moreover because of the Internet, verbal and visual data without encumbrance is available to anyone who elects to log on. Culture today is neither geopolitical nor national, nor state-run, nor definable in terms of ethnicity but rather can be seen as a hybrid network ever being woven anew, a system passed on from generation to generation, a task of adaptation that surpasses limited social and political boundaries. What concerns me is whether the areas of education and communication are being adjusted so those viewers are prepared to understand this new visual environment that has undergone infinite change.

Over the past few years I have become bored with contemporary art. I am aware the expressing such sentiments puts me at risk of being labeled a conservative, a closed minded individual, and even an anti-progressive thinker. So be it! However, it is not my dislike of installation art, performance or time based electronically driven work that prompts this aversion. I remain respectful of arduous work and ideas, as well as a conceptual anti-object art aesthetic-when such work was unfashionable I organized Mel Bochner and Barry Le Va's retrospectives. What I have little tolerance for is trendy, trite work that purports to be profound, reaching "all" people but instead is nothing more than prosaic sameness

requiring volumes of text to decode. Yet curators, critics and artists make and show such work because it is the trend of the moment.

So many of us complain about the institutionalization of art and artists. Have we ever-considered how complex art systems really are and how intermingled universities, artists, and museums are with corporations, foundations, and the market itself? The field of publishing is a fascinating arena for starters.

Being a citizen of the USA I can only speak from an American's perspective. We as a society are impressed with brand names, impressive packaging, and logos - this attitude carries through to our perception of art and culture. In this paper I will examine how the museum/gallery going public, like any other, is subject to certain forms of conditioning. I aim to focus on two broad topics: 1) the impact of financial support of the arts; 2) how the lack of an integrated cultural education program across American society prevents people living outside an informed educated class stratum from evaluating and comprehending the art being presented in museums and galleries. I believe if interplay of enhanced cultural awareness between institutions, artists, and the public were established then perhaps a more discriminating audience, operating from a knowledgeable base would emerge.

People are drawn to museums, galleries and international art expositions because they offer a special type of experience. Frequently these experiences connect viewers to our humanity, history, and sense of discovery-art allows us to step out of the banality of the everyday life into new zones of cognizance when it in fact communicates. Viewers continue to delight in a broad range of subjects from the traditional to the eccentric. Exhibitions of Impressionist paintings continue to draw crowds, as well as Vermeer's paintings or Van Gogh's portraits, as do shows on Armani's fashion or the Carnegie International. The recent *LIGHT* exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art was a large achievement despite its very essence was about the history Light and not Art. The selection of the objects and installation format were scrupulously taken into consideration. This meticulous attention contributed to the exhibition's impact and communicative success. Although museums and international displays provide visitors with gath-

ering places that cannot be had in shopping malls, on television or even the Internet, in order for them to remain viable to human social fabric, they need to transcend trends and spectacle. Human beings welcome challenge and seek encounters that grapple with issues that deal with the past, present and the future. Dramatic displays illuminate multiple avenues of thought, as well as afford visitors with an engaging environment-how this is achieved takes individual exhibition planning and not the use of formulaic models. Perhaps a relevant point of departure might be at the inception of any exhibition is the simple question, Who is the audience for the exhibition and what does it intend on communicating?

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Economics and patron support are bedrock to the museum world. Funding is essential to a museum's success, and over the past few decades' museums increasingly have become enlisted as corporate instruments. At the close of the last century, a radical shift with significant consequences has occurred in museums in the USA. Traditional sources of funding-such as deeply pocketed patrons and government agencies have become more tenuous and restricted. Operating costs have risen, as well as audience demands for bigger and more spectacular displays. Museums seek to retain their lofty status yet realize they must engage more diverse and larger audiences in order to compete with a powerful media driven entertainment industry. Museums try to maintain the appearance of being a public resource and a site of public creative expression however are evolving into schizophrenic agoras. The transformation of museums and galleries into public relations agents for the interests of the market and its ideological allies can be dated roughly from the late 1960s. It was around this time that the Metropolitan Museum of Art began its practice of draping in front of the building, for all to see, huge banners indicating the corporate sponsorship for its blockbuster exhibitions. These colorful flags announced the show and invite viewers to step inside and partake in the spectacle that has been carefully orchestrated not to provoke or offend. The public has become conditioned to live in a state of unquestioning because we have been led to believe

and trust institutions to be pillars of authority. Despite the rage of critical theory and revisionist history among academics and artists, the vast museum going public isn't involved in such dialogue. Most people are comfortable with being entertained-be it by sound or visual spectacle, especially when the presentation is hosted by a respectable institution and supported by a national corporate patron. If a show is at MOMA or the Whitney it must be significant-right? For many attending an art show in a museum, gallery, or international Biennale, it is analogous to a shared extension of watching television, passing the time, a form of passive entertainment. The lack of discretion is already established through our increasing tolerance for continuous noise and distraction. Indiscriminate visual or perceptual infantilism, together with a lack of aural sensitivity, prevails for the overwhelming majority of people who are sparsely informed about art or aesthetics.

In 1967 corporations spent \$22 million on the arts-at the close of the 20th century that figure had jumped to billions. What accounts for this surge in corporate spending on the arts? The answer is very simple: corporate support of the arts serves as a social lubricant. The most blatant testimony of this type of image manipulation can be found with Phillip Morris and its support of numerous art exhibitions and museum programs. A former CEO of Philip Morris has stated, "...we are cultured human beings like anyone else, not a bunch of killers or barbarians". Despite the opposition of artists, curators, and museum directors' to-tobacco campaigns and their awareness about lung cancer, many continue taking their money.

As much as commercial television responds to its corporate sponsors' pressure for top ratings (large audiences) by organizing its programming around star-studded, highly promoted, visually dazzling, contentless programs, museums in order to guarantee an allurements of huge crowds offer blockbuster exhibits or mount displays of market stars. This trend is not new but alarmingly getting worse. Impressive catalogues are compiled that include essays by contemporary art critics and scholars, for the purpose of endorsement, especially for exhibitions of lesser known but rising art stars. Apropos to contemporary art within a few years of an artist's debut into the art world, their art oeuvre becomes the

research topic for a doctoral dissertation. Already at Stanford University a graduate student is writing her thesis on Kara Walker whom has barely been part of the art discourse for 8 years. If one is surprised they should not be. Given the fervor for revisionist history and Walker's locus on issues of race and social injustice, her art fits well within the paradigm this time, as well as comfortably into large lofts and homes of hip collectors who serve on boards or influence to institutional sponsorship. It is not the issues underlying this work but instead the rapidity of how the art establishment readily adopts this new work and incorporates it into its sacred canon.

Since the Robert Mapplethorpe controversy with the exception of a few institutions as the Brooklyn Museum, vis-à-vis the *SENSATION* exhibition and its recent inclusion of the nude, bare breast exposed Last Supper Madonna, museums exhibition however ambitious, generally are non-provocative and unquestioning of mainstream social/political policy. The large majority of exhibitions receiving corporate finance evince centrist ideals and uncontroversial subject matter and feature very established historical artists or sanctify contemporary ones whose work fall within a certain safe zone, despite the surge of interest by artists and curators in political art or gender based themes. By promoting certain forms of art and cultural treasures, private corporate interest become veiled-such is the case with Phillip Morris. As I discussed in a previous paper on the New Tate Modern, the organizational structure of collections differs from country to country. However, in the United States the majority of our museums are predominantly private institutions thus derive much of their funding more or less directly from corporate sponsorship and wealthy patrons who have connections to various private funding sources. Sponsorship of art exhibitions by corporations help to conceal the conflict between humanitarian pretenses and the neo-imperialist expansion of multinational capitalism by providing both the museum and the corporation with a tool for enriching the public while suppressing real cultural and political differences.

ART MUSEUMS: CHANGES?

Currently conventional ideas about "elite art" and popular culture are being challenged as revisionist history infiltrates its way across all disciplines. Even if changes in art museums have been ongoing for several decades, the impact of these shifts are being more felt in museum culture not only in the themes of exhibitions mounted but also in their delivery.

Whether or not the changes that art museums have undergone in recent decades are to be wholly or even largely welcomed remains an open question. The expansion of facilities (shops, restaurants, members lounges, courtyards, etc.) in order to attract a more populist public has given to rise to fear among some who feel that museums are being transformed into leisure time attraction environments.

Relatively speaking, major American museums have a considerate track record in the field of education, even though the level of implementation is often less impressive than it is claimed to be. Understanding the patterns of educational programs is made difficult by the fact art museums vary so much it is nearly impossible to consider them under a single rubric or policy. Museums in the USA range from huge public institutions with encyclopedic collections to small ones hardly removed from what one might define a gallery. Some collections may be so specialized that they contain the work of a single artist, [Andy Warhol] or they may have no permanent collection at all.

The sociologists Paul DiMaggio and Paula Brown carefully analyzed the results of many studies of the public in relation to performing artists [theatre, music, and dance] and a broad range of art museums carried out over several years. They found that institutions vary in their attraction to a broad section of society. Income or educational attainment or both stratify their publics. Living performing arts tend to draw more affluent groups because of their relatively high ticket price-take the case of opera or symphony tickets and compare these with an entry fee of a museum.

Strangely museum-goers are somewhat more representatives of the American population in general than the audience for live performances. However art museums were among the least likely to bring members of the middle-middle or lower-status

groups into their purview while science and history museums attract a more popular stratum. Surveys have shown that the visitor, “public” to art museums were better educated and wealthier, older and composed of more professionals than history, science, or other museums. Despite increasing pressure to open access to as wide a social spectrum as possible, and even though large numbers of visitors have flooded in since WW II, nevertheless art museums have made fewer inroads into reaching out to lower income groups.

Why is this the case? Is art more abstruse than science and history that understanding it requires more training of the general public? It is clear that the complexity of the subject matter of these fields is not at issue. On the other hand the relationship between art museums and the world of art differs from that among science museums and science or between history museums and history. These differences shape the manner in which works are presented to the public, and what kind of public is targeted. As a rule, science, natural history, and history museums are much more oriented to the widespread public than to professional scientists or history. They devote a great of attention to educational programs, and recently, less to collecting genuine specimens. Conversely, art museums appeal to artists, historians, collectors, dealers, well-educated public, and corporations because of the rarity of what they present and the emphasis on authentic works. Despite the ephemeral nature of current installation work and media interactive displays, uninformed viewers overall do not feel comfortable in art museums. Given these conditions, it is necessary to ask whether art museums really want to attract visitors who are least likely to come of their own accord or have no financial value. Furthermore the subjects of history, science and natural science comprise a foundation for a portion of the general population’s educational experience from grade K through high school. Newspapers, television, and magazines, address these topics in one way or the other while the arts despite inroads made in making them a part of the educational curriculum are perceived as being rarified and non-significant to human survival. As a society, we in the USA tend to value only things that are perceived as being practical and functional. Art does not fit either category in the minds of

many American, especially policy makers in Washington. Notwithstanding the recent focus by artists and curators on community outreach and the emphasis on expanding audience awareness, considerable evidence demonstrates that art museums do very little to reach out to the uninitiated with the exception of mounting blockbuster theme exhibitions. The Blockbuster is used to draw in a more diversified public because of the attributes of the art or artist. However, people’s reasons for going to see such extravaganzas vary from an existing interest in a particular artist to a wish not to miss what they have heard is a must, once-in-a-lifetime experience. Others go in order to say they’ve seen it and to engage in hip cocktail party chatter.

Just as museums differ greatly in what and how they collect, art museums do not offer unified educational program. Whereas some have virtually none, others offer extensive programs. Although less than welcoming attitudes are not necessarily representative of all museum professionals, they underlie the reluctance of many art museums to support educational efforts beyond token public relations or family membership recruitment. In many cases the main purpose of establishing educational programs in museums, in spite of the scale, often they exist to really qualify for state and national grants, as well as private money. The same reasoning governs why certain American art museums engage in counting the number of visitors and members. Aside from the self-congratulatory aspect of the exercise, it serves as a means of certifying to the public authorities of the city, state, or federal government that their museum is deserving of public and private funds because of the “service they are providing to their communities.” If a museum demonstrates that it is making a substantial contribution to the community’s cultural welfare then it becomes exempt from real estate tax, and gains other rewards.

Aside from such practical economic goals, some boards and directors worry about what impression a visitor takes away from their museum experience. They believe that the museum educator is the advocate of the visitor, while the curator is the advocate of the artwork. It does not bode well for the educational mission that in the hierarchy of status internal to the art museum, that educators are by far out-classed by curators, both in the USA and

elsewhere. At best the museum educator is viewed as a technician lacking the appropriate academic art historical training and viewed as being subordinate to the real purpose of the museum-to acquire and care for artworks, relate to wealthy donors and create a public image. Even though some museums even carry outreach beyond their buildings to schools or adult groups many prefer to have art historians from universities rather than education curators or docents. Prestige is factors into this attitude despite the fact that often education curators have spent time developing methods on how to reach the public and work with school programs. Frequently they have contacts within the school systems and understand the diversity of community at large. Besides, the power, politics, and people principle of the art world establishment do not sway most.

We are aware that professionals gain standing and self-esteem in part from contact with their clientele, however art museum educators, poorly rewarded materially, are also short on symbolic support compared to other museum professional, especially directors and curators. In the USA, unlike curators whose expertise can benefit donors and trustee by tips on buying or appraisal value, museum educators have a clientele that is among the least prestigious groups who come to Art museums. Education specialists train part-time volunteers-docents-who guide groups of children and adult dilettantes through special shows and their permanent collections. If educators were more closely integrated with other museum people-curators, administrators, boards, etc.-their moral might be enhanced and their usefulness to the institution might be better recognized. I am of the opinion that the most stellar art educational outreach program is offered by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC under the leadership of its former education curator Linda Downs.

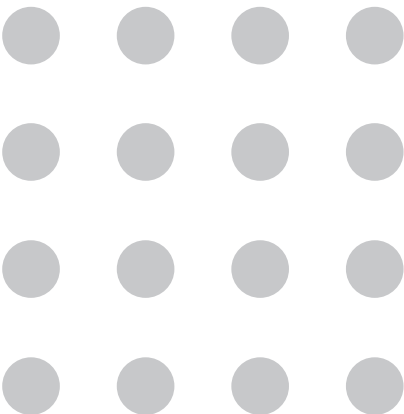
The hierarchical ordering within the museum parallels that found in the field of education more generally, where teaching a subject competes with teaching a pupil. Proponents of the former assume that if students are not prepared to learn, then there is no point in wasting time and resources on them; those favoring the latter may have skills for reaching the pupil but little substance to give. At best the already motivated pupil gains; at worst nothing is

taught. It is no surprise that the biggest losers are the children who are most poorly prepared for education. As long as the situation is not improved, the schools can truly be said to have failed in their democratizing mission. Can this apply to museums?

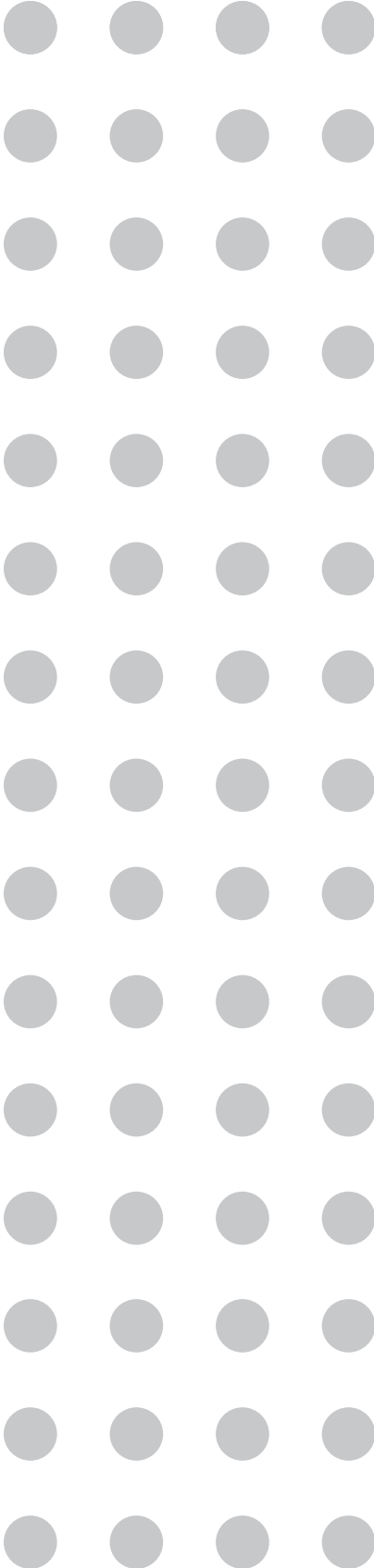
Some believe, art museums while providing society with enrichment about the social cultural fabric of their time, as well as the past, cannot be held to the same standard as the primary education of a citizenship. Taste celebrated in art museums is an individual matter with no social consequences. From this perspective, art museums are not a perceived as a social necessity but one of cultural enrichment and prescribed taste.

Back in the 1960s, the sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, wrote a book titled *Distinction* addressed that embeddedness of social taste and its consequences for maintaining inequality in society. Bourdieu's analysis demonstrates a relationship between culture and power in the reproduction of inequality in a larger society. He saw the art museum and distinct art events as helping to propagate and maintain certain controlling myths. According to Bourdieu the myths about great art and taste justify the maintenance of hierarchical distinction among different social categories. It has such force that it has come to be imposed on the self-conceptions of members of specific groups that either are part of the "informed" or those excluded from access to the fine arts and high culture at an early age. In a Kantian sense, those who have been exposed to culture as a natural part of their daily life, because of their social rank and environment, compose a quasi aristocracy who have pre-empted to themselves the right to withhold their discourses from those outside. Many assume that if you dare to challenge the taste established by museums then you will be perceived as being a philistine, lacking in cultural sophistication. In an increasingly homogenous culture, we prefer to pretend or accept rather than to question. Education in the broad sense of the term involves acculturation and integration into a common culture, and that acculturation is not confined to formal schooling alone.

It is evident that there exists a need for a bridge to the arts for a vast segment of the population. As critics and curators we can play a role in this cycle of power and passivity. For three years now, I have not voted



for the AICA BEST SHOWS/ARTISTS AWARDS because I had grown tired and frustrated with the same old, same old. As professionals some of us are guilty of propagating an insular closed system. Let's break this mold and unlock closed doors as we move into a new millennium and a period of AFTER-POST. ●



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