

RESEARCH PLAN

Introduction

The contemporary art museum has many functions in modern society but perhaps the most obvious yet important one is keeping a record of our times. The art historian and contemporary artist Julien Delagrance states “Art is the blueprint of the society”¹, therefore the contemporary art museum becomes a place of reflection on the current state of the world. The architecture of contemporary art museums is often related to the ideas most present in the geographical and social context it was built in. An example of this can be seen in the Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP) designed in 1975 by Lina Bo Bardi. The design of the building allows many public activities to happen (Image 1), as well as decontextualizes the art by placing the artworks in one big space, without a clear order of hierarchy (Image 2). The main exhibition space is reminiscent of 19th-century industrial exhibition halls and markets which showed traces of the new liberal economy² The art from being a luxurious item transforms into an object closer to everyday life. Similarly, the area MASP was built in underwent a dramatic change, from a district full of villas to an area full of international companies (mainly banks).

MASP Lina Bo Bardi

However, before addressing the subject of the contemporary art museum, it is important to touch upon the theme of art itself. The very first question of “what is art?” seems to be the most basic yet crucial. The contemporary English artist Grayson Perry, in his lecture titled *Beating the Bounds*, tried to answer it by attempting to define the boundaries of art based on case studies of contemporary artworks and artists. Perry’s definitions mostly focus on the consumers of art, its contents and the setting it is placed in. Similarly, the importance of the space in which art is exhibited was highlighted by Mark Pimlott in the text *Visibility, spectacle, theatricality and power: the problem of the museum*, where he focused on the theatricality of the art museum and its relation to the art market. There the museum acts as a stage of an art market, however by the nature of this mechanism, museums are selective and therefore exclusive. The subject of how exclusivity influences the image of the museum was discussed by Darby English and Charlotte Barat in the text *Blackness at MoMA*, where the authors investigate the history of art exhibitions by black artists at MoMA. The other view on exclusivity was discussed in the podcast *Culture and Privilege by Thinking Allowed*, which focused on the dichotomy of the art world. On the one hand, the benefits of engaging with art were presented, but on the other hand, the difficulties some people within the art world face were pointed out. However, sometimes art is influencing people from behind the borders of the art world. The most famous example is discussed in the podcast *The Bilbao Effect #1* by fDi, where the director of the Guggenheim Bilbao is attempting to explain all the positive effects the museum had on the city of Bilbao. But perhaps an even more interesting case is the Documenta, presented in *The Dilemma of the Modern Art Museum* by Charlotte Klönk, where the whole German city of Kassel, becomes an art gallery once every 5 years.

Grayson Perry *Beating The Bounds*

In the podcast, *Beating the Bounds* by Grayson Perry, a first attempt is made to define art by a banal set of rules and the role of the museum as a “temple of art”³. A contradictory framework is built up that must be followed to draw the line between art and the ordinary. Although not all art falls within every bound, if something does, it is most definitely art. Perry adds several iconic examples, such as the *Fountain* (Urinal) by Marcel Duchamp from 1917, which emphasizes the fetish of the ordinary and grotesque within a traditional art context. There are links to be made to Functionalism and mass production, which significantly were

1 Delagrance, J. (2021, October 8). Why is contemporary art important? – Cai. CAI. <https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/why-is-contemporary-art-important/>

2 Oliveira, O. de, & Bardi, L. B. (2006). *Subtle Substances: The Architecture of Lina Bo Bardi*. Gili [u.a.].

3 BBC Radio 4, The Reith Lectures, Grayson Perry - Playing to the Gallery, Beating the Bounds. (n.d.). BBC. Retrieved 27th of October 2022, from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03dsk4d>

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influenced by Taylorism at the beginning of the 20th century. Questions of the value of hand-made/craftsmanship in the rapidly standardizing world and the upcoming white cube are raised. The connection between art and skill is altering constantly and “artists started questioning the nature of art until along came Duchamp who famously posited that anything could be art”⁴ with the beforehand mentioned Urinal.

Mark Pimlott
*Visibility, spectacle,
theatricality and power*

Different aspects of art are mentioned in *Visibility, spectacle, theatricality and power: the problem of the museum* by Mark Pimlott, which focus mainly on the history and impact of neoliberal economy in the art world and the act of creating a space for art which will mostly “serve the interest of those that drive and sustain the art market.”⁵ The “temple of art” from Grayson Perry has transformed into a “total theatre”⁶, which adds two essential layers to the museum, on stage and off stage. The function of the on stage is to express the authority of its possessor, whether it is a public institution or a private funder. Especially contemporary art is staged like a palace with a framework of rooms and displays, which function as the stage for the more public characters, such as artists and museum visitors, while curators and directors mostly act off-stage. During the discussions an intangible classification of art (skill/hierarchies) and the question of who decides the value of art became visible. Putting on “art goggles”⁷ in an art context strengthens the position of curators and directors of art institutions. In a world with fewer subsidies from governments, the art context slides into the private sector, which often requires private funding. With decreasing governmental dependence and influence, a rise in the staging of visibility can be noticed. These new, constantly changing circumstances required new forms of art.

English and Barat
Blackness at MoMA

The text *Blackness at MoMA* by Darby English and Charlotte Barat looks into the history of art exhibitions by black artists at MoMA. It asks the question of how to deal with diversity in a museum and shows the different ways MoMA has approached this issue in the past, reflecting on, and criticizing this approach. A big part of MoMA’s history shows the museum taking a ‘colourblind’ approach, mixing the black artists in with their already existing (mostly white and male) artists. Contextualizing artists according to the characteristics of their practices, regardless of race, has become one of their informal policies. However, MoMA has been criticized a lot for taking this approach and not creating a separate wing for black artists. A big part of this criticism came from The Art Workers’ Coalition, a group of artists and others founded early in 1969 to push for reforms in cultural institutions. According to these critics, a separate wing would give a bigger and quicker boost to adding a lot of black artists’ work to MoMA’s collection: “Whatever the explanation, black artists can no longer wait for MoMA’s brand of integration, which is already 100 years late in coming.”⁸ This approach of grouping the artworks by the ethnicity of the artist, however, could also be criticized. The authors of the book stated: “We see no relief from segregation in further segregation.”⁹ A recent exhibition in the Stedelijk got criticized for taking a similar approach by grouping artworks by the gender of the collector¹⁰: “Once again, there is a focus on political and societal developments and on work by female and non-western artists. But it is a mixed bag of art works whose connection, content wise or visual, can not be understood.”¹¹ (image 4) This last approach would be inserting more variety into the ‘canon’. In the end, an important part of this topic comes down to what is part of the ‘canon’ and who gets to decide

4 Perry, *Beating the Bounds*

5 Pimlott, M. (2021). *Visibility, spectacle, theatricality and power: the problem of the museum. Oase 111, 2*

6 Pimlott. *Visibility, spectacle, theatricality and power. 4.*

7 Perry, *Beating the Bounds*

8 English, D. and Barat, C. (2019). *Blackness at MoMA: A Legacy of Deficity. Among Others: Blackness at MoMA. New York: MoMA. 52.*

9 English and Barat. *Blackness at MoMA. 90.*

10 Wesseling, J. (2022, 28 september). Propagandistisch Stedelijk wil zo veel, dat de kunst de vrijheid ontnemt [translation: propagandistic Stedelijk wants so much, that the art takes away the freedom]. *NRC Handelsblad.*

11 Translation from Dutch: “Opnieuw is er de focus op politieke en maatschappelijke ontwikkelingen en op werk van vrouwelijke en niet-westerse kunstenaars. Maar het is een allegaartje van kunstwerken waarvan de samenhang inhoudelijk noch visueel te begrijpen is.”

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what is? Does a museum have a social responsibility on deciding what to buy, showcase and store? How does it organize and display the works? How does the museum engage with the public?

Aside from the social responsibilities of the museum, the temporality of contemporary art is another topic of the 'canon'; for how long is something part of the canon? In MoMA's first press release, issued in August 1929, they stated: "The value of all contemporary art is debatable and much of it is certainly transitory, however important it may seem and be to us at present."¹² Barr, the museum's founding director, also discusses the temporality of the museum's acquisitions in this quote from the book: "Barr openly acknowledged the fallibility of the Museum's acquisition choices; MoMA "may often guess wrong in its acquisitions," he wrote in a 1942 catalogue. "When it acquires a dozen recent paintings it will be lucky if in ten years three will still seem worth looking at if in twenty years only one should survive."¹³ This brings up questions about the consequences of temporality in contemporary art museums. How to deal with the possibility of the irrelevance of the acquired works of art? How to decide what needs to be preserved? If museums would preserve all of the artworks, would the collection just keep growing?

Thinking Allowed
Culture and Privilege

The podcast *Culture and Privilege* by Thinking Allowed, like *Blackness at Moma*, discusses the exclusivity of the art world. The host talks about the book *Culture is Bad for You* by Orian Brook with the author. In the beginning, he mentions the title of the book feels counterintuitive. The author refutes arguments on why culture should be good for you and she mentions the negative sides of the art world, however, she does not explain why 'culture is bad for you'. Moreover, by discussing only a small range of the cultural world such as the opera or a fine art museum, the author excludes other types of art and imposes her narrow view of what can be seen as culture.

Both the book and the podcast are questioning what is art or culture and what should be shown in a museum. Taking the 'colourblind' approach when deciding what to show in a museum, means not acknowledging what has been happening for many years and what still is happening now, allowing privileged people to be privileged. Whether a wing solely for black artists in the MoMA or an exposition ordered by the gender of the collector, like in the Stedelijk, would be the best option, is hard to say. However, museums should at least be conscious of the choice they make and the repercussions that choice might have in the cultural world.

Kassel
Documenta

Sometimes art influences the diversity of people from behind the boundaries of the art world, as seen in the cities of Kassel and Bilbao. Both towns are remote but attract huge numbers of visitors because of their art. Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain reaches more than one million visitors each year, thanks to its diverse art collection wrapped in a "flashy" museum. *Documenta*, a 100-day event of contemporary art spread across the German city of Kassel, attracts an increasing number of nearly 900.000 visitors once every five years. Although they have some similar features and effects, *Guggenheim* and *Documenta* are very different from each other. The *Guggenheim* in Bilbao is, apart from its appearance, a regular museum with great attraction. *Documenta*, on the other hand, is a quinquennial event throughout the city of Kassel, which changes (a lot of its) locations every time and is spread over multiple locations at once. The *Documenta* can be seen as

¹² English and Barat. *Blackness at MoMA*. 18.

¹³ English and Barat. *Blackness at MoMA*. 18.

an event, due to its festival-like character. It was the first of its kind in 1955 and with its temporary character, without a permanent collection, it was called the “Museum of 100 days”. The art at the *Documenta* often reacts to current (political) events, because the event is held quinquennial. The event allowed many artists to exhibit their work, but due to its vast size visitors might not experience the art fully. The curator of *Documenta* plays a very important role as he or she is often determining the layout and contents of the exhibition. It undermines, or at least affects, the role of the artist and perhaps changes the intended perception of the work as seen at the *Documenta* of 1964, where the curator “dramatically hung three paintings by Ernst Wilhelm Nay not on the wall, as had been intended by the artist, but at an angle on the ceiling in a long, corridor-like room”¹⁴ (image 5). The debate about the role of the curator in the contemporary art gallery is still ongoing and raises questions such as: Should artists have a free hand and decide about every aspect of his or her work, including the exhibitions, or should this decision belong to the curator? What is the role of a curator in the contemporary art museum?

The *Bilbao-Effect*, however, raises other questions. It has caused much positive change in the Spanish city of Bilbao, as the definition perfectly describes: the event of economic prosperity after years of decay, resulting from the construction of an iconic landmark of contemporary architecture. However, there is criticism that the museum faced over the years, which the Guggenheim director seems to ignore. In the podcast about the *Bilbao-Effect*, the interviewer asks if it is true that building a flashy museum helps other cities as well, to which the director responds: “I think that is a major misunderstanding, a major mistake (...) There needs to be a role that responds to the context, to the program.”¹⁵ It is precisely the relation to the context that has been criticized over years, as the museum does not include the local community and is not displaying local artists. The *Bilbao-Effect* proved the economic and tourist benefits but did not solve Bilbao’s identity crisis. Along with *Documenta*’s vastness, it raises questions: Does a contemporary art museum need a global impact or local strengthening?

14 Klonk, C. (2009). *Spaces of experience: Art gallery interiors from 1800 to 2000*. Yale University Press.

15 The Bilbao Effect #1: Bilbao, Spain Guggenheim Bilbao’s director general discusses the city’s world renowned transformation. (n.d.). Retrieved 27 October 2022, from <https://play.acast.com/s/fdipodcast/thebilbaoeffect-1-bilbaspainguggenheimbilbaodirectorgeneraldiscussesthecity-sworldrenownedtransformation>

IMAGES

Image 1
MASP Belvedere, public space



Image 2
MASP main exhibition space



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Image 3
Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917



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Image 4
Current exposition in the
Stedelijk Museum



Image 5
Works by Ernst Wilhelm Nay curated by
Arnold Bode at *Documenta 3*



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Image 1
<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/view-of-masp-s-picture-gallery-in-paulista-avenue-paolo-gasparini/WAGEsxxSJ4y2iA>

Image 2
<https://brazilianconcrete.wordpress.com/2016/08/08/visit-masp/>

Image 3
<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-duchamps-urinal-changed-art-forever>

Image 4
Wesseling, J. (2022, 28 september). Propagandistisch Stedelijk wil zo veel, dat de kunst de vrijheid ontnemt [translation: propagandistic Stedelijk wants so much, that the art takes away the freedom]. *NRC Handelsblad*.

Image 5
<https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-21-spring-2011/white-cube-and-beyond>