

Research Plan - P1

Interiors Buildings Cities
AR3AI100

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Introduction

In this part of the project we had a preliminary preparation period in order to better understand the contemporary art museum that we will later work on, starting from the very core of what art is. In this systematic collaborative work phase, the texts we read, the podcasts we listened to and the consultations we had during this process allowed us to develop our thinking system that will help us understand the art-artist relationship and question the impact of architecture on it and to start developing our own appetite from the knowledge we collect; which has been our motivation from the beginning. In this research plan, the conversations, researches and ideas we had from the very beginning, were collected and turned into a report.

During the research seminar we analyzed texts and podcasts that revolved around the concept of the modern museum divided in three themes. "Art & Non-art" was the first theme of the responses. Here we looked at the problems museums encounter nowadays with displaying art and being independent. The accompanied podcast is about the boundaries in art and how they are (partly) broken by modernism. The theme of the second part of the research seminar was "Curate & Amplify". In the text we read about the art event Documenta and its festival-like way of presenting art to its viewers. The podcast this week was about the effect the Guggenheim museum had on the city of Bilbao. The last part of the seminar was themed "Racial inclusion & privilege". The text critiques MoMa and its unrepresentativeness of black artists. Also the podcast revolved around representativeness and privileges.

Literature Review Week 1.2

“Art & Non-Art”

‘Visibility, Spectacle, Theatricality and Power: the Problem of the Museum’

Mark Pimlott (2021) — Reading

In “Visibility, Spectacle, Theatricality and Power: the Problem of the Museum” Mark Pimlott describes the changing role and identity of museums. He states that the art museum has been “as repository of collections, a vault of treasures, whose exposure has been variously presented to impress, inculcate and educate its visiting public, and to express and reinforce the authority of its possessor, whether the State, the city, the institution, or, indeed, the collector.” Due to changing ideas on spaces of displays in the art world and a decrease of government subsidies, museums had to adjust in order to survive and became their own commercial operation.

In order to be successful, museums had to engage the public. The visitor's engagement was made larger by acknowledging them as an important factor or even an artifact themselves —making them aware of their own body and presence—, forcing them to seek relations between artifacts and the entire environment. Especially in white cubes where the construction of the space gave great significance to the artifact. By the simplicity of space making the art and the art-viewer connection to be more dominant, it also makes the interactions more present and fragile. Even though it consists of plain white walls, and simple floor & ceiling; the isolating aspect of the space becomes also another circumstance to think about, given that it is very much a de-contextualization of art in some cases.

Pimlott states that: “The supposedly neutral ‘white cube’ itself was staged; a ‘type’ which had become orthodoxy for the display of Modern art in particular following the construction of the Museum of Modern Art.” Viewers in such a neutral space were confronted with the undeniable presence of the exhibited works. Therefore, the white cube conferred value upon the works of art presented in it. Validation of sentiments are ties that bridge the relation of art to viewer, where people relate and seek legitimacy. The longer the self reflection takes, the longer it will be to face the actual art rather than the context in which it's put. Pimlott states that “Objects engaged with the various dimensions of their spaces of display, forced the viewer to see works of art in relation to and interdependent with the spaces in which they were exhibited.”

In a neoliberal economy and ecology the contemporary art museum has become a total theater in which there are tight bonds between artists, curators, institutions, public and collectors. It provides validation and value to the works of art that are represented in it, while preserving their appearance of their authority.

'Beating the Bounds' - BBC Reith Lectures

Grayson Perry (4 April 2020) — Podcast

In a lecture captured in St. George's Hall in Liverpool, Grayson Perry questions what the boundaries of art are. Over time the boundaries have become softer. Nowadays art is very much determined by its context where the boundaries are sociological, tribal, philosophical and financial. The change in perception of art arose in the mid/ late 19th century when artists started to question the nature of art and challenge its boundaries.

At the beginning and at the end of his lecture Perry mentions the important moment in art history when “the Fountain” (a urinal) of Duchamp (see *Figure 1* below) was put in an art gallery. Duchamp took the power to say the object was art, and therefore it could be considered as such. This work becomes very significant to create a correspondence to the definition Perry is making, when it comes to defining the framework of art and what it takes to be an art piece. As an artist, saying that something is an artwork makes it become one. Even though it is an everyday object that is mass manufactured millions of times around the world, the artist breaks the barrier and brings it into his own reality of art. As the podcast progresses, Perry addresses the issue again by stating that this art piece is later reproduced and handcrafted by a sculptor. Ironically the original icon for beating the boundaries of the art “The Fountain” had been destroyed. So the work had to be handmade by a potter as the original model is no longer manufactured. Therefore, the idea of Duchamp —taking a mass-manufactured everyday object and putting it in an art context— is kind of undermined by the craftsmanship it takes today to exhibit it. Since the 60s artists have gone out of their way to broaden the boundaries of art. The idea of this pluralism and doing anything while calling it art has become common. Art has become “ this incredibly sort of permeable, translucent, fuzzy bag.”

While questioning who determines the value of art, Perry mentions Banksy who is claiming his art can no longer be perceived as such when it is taken out of its context - with what has happened with his work on the poundland shop wall. His art, that is made for the people in a public setting, can no longer be perceived as such when it is taken out of its context and sold for private or museum collections. By stating that it is no longer art, the work has attracted attention by the public and therefore has risen in value; even though the artist itself is claiming that it's no longer valuable. It seems that the institutional framework around an artwork makes it valuable. And for Banksy, this situation is rather not the best. He thinks that the worst context for an art piece to be looked at is when it's surrounded with other art pieces.

Perry continues by giving examples of the undeniable (cultural) value artworks can have. By having these undeniable significance, the artworks lose their status as art. Works of art like the “Mona Lisa” are so famous and expensive that they have become culturally embedded and can hardly be seen as a work of art. Therefore the example of Duchamp is very important. As it builds upon its significant value and therefore invites people to intellectually engage with it.

Perry wants to know what art is and therefore sets up boundaries to identify a work of art. He sets up eight markers to identify art:

Is it in a gallery or an art context?

Is it a boring version of something else?

Is it made by an artist?

How do you tell if a photo is art?

Is it limited edition?

Are people of wealth/good education interested in it?

Is the work noticed in a rubbish dump?

When am I looking at a web art?

With the blurry boundaries of what is considered art, this roaming space gives the audience and the artists the power of uncertainty. The artists have the benefit of calling something “art”, and the viewers have the unguided pathway that explores “art” in a less restrictive way. While the concept of “art” on itself might be jeopardized furthermore. Nowadays artists are living a life of applying for subsidies, where the constitutions decide who gets funding and can live a life as a practicing artist, and who can't. All in all, in a place where nothing is clearly distinct, and a lot of variables are in play, the definition of art continues to be questioned, and remains decisive.



"the Urinal" of Duchamp

Figure 1

“Curate & Amplify”

‘Spaces of Experience – Art Gallery Interiors From 1800 to 2000’

Charlotte Klonk (2021) — *Reading*

This text is about the art exhibition event “Documenta” (see *Figure 2* below) which found its origin in 1955 as a reaction to the problem art institutions were facing to stay at the forefront of developments in modern art and as an attempt to replenish German cultural significance after WWII. Documenta — also known as ‘Museum of 100 days’ — exhibits art every five years with an event-like character, spread out over numerous locations in the city of Kassel by offering its visitors an experience that is short-lived and non-repeatable (as the exhibitions are temporary). “As a temporary but recurrent international art show, it has served as a model for many curator-led biennales and contemporary art festivals in the last few decades.” The success of the temporality of Documenta has caused today's art institutions to focus mainly on temporary exhibitions. Even existing permanent collections are changed frequently to stay interesting for its visiting public.

Arnold Bode, the initiator of Documenta and a Kassel resident, saw an opportunity to organize an art exhibition when Kassel was chosen to host the National Garden Festival (Bundesgartenschau) in 1955, a mere decade after WWII. Bode described Kassel as the predestined city to host Documenta as it was close to the East German border, was heavily bombed during the war and was actively reconstructed after. He wanted to demonstrate the rebirth of Germany after years of devastation caused by the Nazi regime. This first Documenta allowed Germans to reconnect with the art world after years of repression. The art event conveyed “an energized sense of freedom after the constrictions and gloom of wartime.”

Over time, Documenta has pushed the exhibition standards. “As the scale of consumption expanded and became for more and more people a leisure activity with independent entertainment value, so galleries came to offer a more immersive, spectacular experience.” Documenta became an event in which the curator gained great influence. As a result artists were caused to make installations. “The expanding art market of the 1960s had strengthened artists’ positions and they had become increasingly critical of museum curators for installing their work in ways that flouted their intentions.” In response, contemporary art museums created spaces that provided neutral backgrounds for the artists’ installations.



Fridericianum Building, where part of Documenta takes place in, Kassel

Figure 2

'the Bilbao Effect #1' - BBC Reith Lectures

Seth O'Farrell (4 April 2020) – Podcast

In the podcast Seth O'Farrell meets Juan Ignacio Vidarte – director of Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (see *Figure 3* below) to speak about the impact that the museum had on the city. The realization of the Guggenheim was part of a much broader project aimed to boost the economy of a declining town. When opened in 1997, it became a magnet for visitors and a driver for urban renewal. By strengthening the cultural sector, the city gained revenue to renew itself. Key investments have been made including a new metro line and cleaning a polluted river. That spectacular success, got to be known as “the Bilbao Effect”.

For the urban success to be obtained in the totality of the city/area, one could argue that the museum needs to be very successful in itself first. The enlarging effect is arguably seen affecting the psychological state of the city as well; it was undergoing a massive economical change, and the unemployment was high. Therefore given this difficult transformation, and what the museum has attained in the sense of a confidence & level of reliability were unmatched in order for a city to (be ready to) undertake the challenge of change.

The critical approach of the Bilbao Museum not being contextually & nationally connected, therefore the disbelief of the public in the project made the building itself very exposed. As one could argue that a trending subject always benefits from the exposure one way or another, the building of the museum itself has also been put through this demarche. The sculpturality and uniqueness of the building was not only a discussion topic but also became a part of the bold characteristic of the “Bilbao Effect” too.

The influence of this effect is factual, although the repetitiveness is not. This museum could be called as proof of how culture could help change the city with the vernacular conditions. The pivotal decisions made through the design process and the conduction of the daily projection of the museum into people's lives are two anchors that keep the “ship” fixed and directed.

After the apparent success of the Bilbao Guggenheim's debut, the “Bilbao Effect” became well-known among urban managers throughout the world. In the architectural world it is argued that cultural mega-projects are mere fronts for an urban rejuvenation approach to real estate that is having severe negative effects on cities and regions. These famous structures frequently have unanticipated and detrimental effects on the urban fabric. Because the majority of urban authorities have not recognized the inherent limitations of famous structures affecting urban socio-economic regeneration, the relative success of has been difficult to replicate elsewhere. The socio-economic and political environment of Bilbao in particular, as well as the wider municipal rehabilitation strategy - of which Guggenheim was only one element among so many others - have not been considered or understood by urban authorities elsewhere.



Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao

Figure 3

“Culture, Race and Privilege in the Modern Art Museum”

'Blackness At MoMA: a Legacy of Deficit' - Among Others: Blackness At MoMA

Darby English & Charlotte Barat (*New York: MoMA, 2019*) — Reading

Blackness at MoMA has strategic significance as people and organizations are urged to change the way they view race, representation, and decolonization. As they go through the fluctuating tides of its periods of inclusion, which varied in impact and innovative thinking, Charlotte Barat and Darby English find the museum lacking in the first essay “Blackness at MoMA: A Legacy of Deficit”. As the museum clings to modernism, the many conflicts and effacements it has created as well as the paradox of its professed universalism and its effort to change in the face of reckonings about representation, identity and diversity come into play.

The writers compel viewers to confront the upsetting truth about MoMA's past. They claim MoMA failed to treat black artists and the exhibitions it showcased with the respect they merited. “African Negro Art” of 1935 was the first exhibition of black art that took place at MoMA and one of the most popular among the black audience at the time. It presented objects made by African artisans, however lacked understanding of meaning, purpose, and relation of those objects to each other. It tried to present the objects regarding modernist painting and sculpture based solely on visual similarity. As a result, a contrast between anonymous production of black craftsmen and individual creation of modern “masters” was staggering. Even the term “primitive art” widely used to describe the former clearly constitutes the place of black art in MoMA's hierarchy at the time. Even if the exhibition was successful in terms of introducing African art to the public, it was far from treating black artists equally to their white, American counterparts.

The “landmark” exhibition opened discussion about Blackness at MoMA which continued, becoming particularly active in the 1960s. As a civil rights movement arose, powerful and influential institutions such as MoMA were expected to act in favor of future change. Museum decided to reach beyond its walls by establishing its branch in Harlem – a district with most of the black population. Together with several programs aimed to promote art within Harlem's community it seemed to be the right contribution to the movement. However noble the intentions might have been, MoMA's actions were met with critique, mostly because of the selection of artworks displayed there. Policy of the museum to showcase “works by artists of all races” and being “not ethnic” was in practice still underrepresenting the black community. In fact, the first exhibition in the MoMA's offshoot Studio Museum didn't feature any black artist at all. Only further public criticism of the museum resulted in opening the groundbreaking “Invisible Americans: Black Artists of the 30s”. Public engagement of activists and artists however, slowly started to break existing paradigms and put pressure on the institution to change its policy of display.

The book by Darby English and Charlotte Barat critiques MoMA, which historically failed to fulfill its role as a public institution. The authors state that “Both historically and today, in neither art nor political culture can black subjects assume fair representation. We have had to pursue it, insist on it, insert it, stand witness to its withholding or diminishment or withdrawal—then again pursue it”. They emphasize the need for reflection on past and current practices of the museum such as still “staff's dismal diversity figures.”

In the group discussion we talked about the intentions of MoMa in contributing to this article. Probably it was just seen as a tick in a box, an attempt by the institution to distract itself from blame as no further actions were taken after the article was published. It shows best that even today, internationally renowned museums are reluctant to accept criticism and unwilling to change the course of its rigid policies. Sadly, despite the change in perception of race among individuals representing the world of art, institutional inertia in this matter is still holding back the real actions. We might only hope that thanks to relentless critics such as Darby English and Charlotte Barat the future of the museum is where “the black artist is not a special occasion or subject, but just one artist among others.”

'Culture and Privilege' - Episode of Thinking Aloud, BBC

Laurie Taylor (5 September 2022) — Podcast

In the podcast Laurie Taylor talks with Orian Brook -AHRC Creative and Digital Economy Innovation Leadership Fellow at the University of Edinburgh- about her book "Culture is bad for you: Inequality in the cultural and creative industries". The book explains mechanisms of exclusion in cultural industries that make women, people of color and those from working class backgrounds be disadvantaged in terms of getting jobs and progressing their careers.

Culture and art -generally associated with positive influence on people's lives in Brook's book- are being challenged in terms of economic conditions that make the art industry "saturated with social and spatial inequalities". Participation of the general public in culture varies depending on the type of activity. While cinema visits remain fairly popular with a 60 percent attendance each year, art galleries or classical concerts are much more exclusive with 25 and 17 percent. That raises the question of who makes art? And -perhaps more importantly- for whom art is being made? Research shows a strong relation between access to cultural education in childhood and later participation in cultural activities. Consequently making people from a socially advantaged background likely to be future consumers and producers of art.

The schematic norm of having a good reach is a head start to many; and also considering that a great amount of people are trying to get into "culture-gassed" industries, some debut their experiences with a consent of working unpaid. The elongation of this phase is preferred and maintained by the higher class, who have enough resources to stay resilient for much longer than other less affluent people. The material inequalities and the underrepresentation of the working class has been on a standard, and the pandemics intensified this issue even more. When governments were more keen on keeping the cultural institutions alive rather than helping the ones in need.

Common belief that meritocracy is the main factor shaping employment structure of the industry creates a false impression that the background of workers does not influence future accomplishments on a scale that it really does. Orian Brook suggests being more aware of the bias of schematic norms that are still present to try to break the image of how an artist, curator, or author may look like. She also would not disregard the influence that consumers may have when demanding a better and more diverse culture, as well as people from the industry that can share their stories. Luckily, the latter is already happening making a change one step closer.

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Figure 1:

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Figure 2:

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Figure 3:

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