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*Museum and Curatorial Studies Review* seeks submissions for essays that explore contemporary issues related to collection, exhibition, and curation, as well as new approaches to historical case studies.

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**Article** (6,000-9000 words): send a fully-drafted, polished version of the paper to be blind peer reviewed. Include a separate title page with your name and contact information. The article contents should not include any information that can identify the author.

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Editor’s Introduction

Lucian Gomoll

This issue of Museum and Curatorial Studies Review will appeal to readers with an interest in art and exhibitions. It will also be evident that the various contributions offer a range of disciplinary and critical perspectives that exceed the traditional edges of art history. Last fall’s interdisciplinary call for submissions inspired a number of insightful papers that also discussed history, politics, new media, and culture. For this particular issue, however, I and the other editors were struck by how several themes and critical ideas recurred as central to the essays we received about art. Thus we decided to establish our first “art issue” to facilitate conversations between them and highlight their timely concerns.

By now it seems to be common knowledge in art circles that something changed with curation in the 1960s and 1970s, when artistic practice itself underwent major changes due to the “dematerialization” of the art object and the recognition that concepts and processes could be artistic mediums in their own right. Ivana Bago’s article recalls how during this period former Yugoslavia was very much at the forefront of innovative artistic and curatorial practice. She reveals to us the ways in which curators took very seriously the prevalent notion that dematerialized art should not be commodified, a position that seemed more genuine and robust in state-socialist Yugoslavia when compared to the West, where artists...
who claimed to resist the art market eventually let themselves be coopted by it. As Lianne McTavish argues in *Defining the Modern Museum*, reviewed by Carmen Ceballos Urzaiz, commodification has long been a central function of the modern museum. Bago shows us that various curators attempted to create alternatives to such a model in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s in ways that are still quite relevant today.

Paul O’Neill, in *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, reviewed by Meredith Goldsmith, like Bago recognizes the 1960s as the start of significant transformation in curatorial practice. O’Neill, however, focuses not on curatorial connections to conceptualism but on how at that moment curators began to lose their anonymity. Goldsmith explains how O’Neill’s history is one that portrays curation as increasingly discursive since the 1960s, culminating with our present situation where curators are largely preoccupied with “talking about each other.” Indeed, if exhibitions could become dematerialized in ways that corresponded with the art object, which is one of Bago’s primary points, I would add that O’Neill’s contemporary discursive curating may just be an outcome of such a parallel process.

Bago also explores the various exchanges between artists and curators and theorizes them as acts of translation that are mutually transformative for both roles. Similarly, Valentina Bin in her review of *Thinking Contemporary Curating* by Terry Smith notes how Smith devotes an entire chapter to role exchanges between artists and curators, which are often conceptualized via analogy (for example, the artist-as-curator phenomenon). Both Smith and Bago nevertheless recognize that artists and curators are not equivalent and neither writer supports the eradication of their differences. Bago, for example, advocates for a “radical interrelationality” between the professions as she also insists that they are distinct—an argument that does not rely so much on essentialism as on the institutional locations and self-identifications of the agents involved.

Ronit Milano, in her article that follows Bago’s, portrays Jeff Koons as an artist-curator who recently installed some of his most well-known sculptures in the French Palace of Versailles. In doing so he established critical new relationships between his art and a context that already featured important works from previous centuries. Installation artists such as Fred Wilson and Amalia Mesa-Bains—the latter who contributed to our inaugural issue—have long revealed the ways in which conceptualism may be mobilized in installation art through the careful juxtaposition of various objects which can endow them with new meanings. Koons’ foray in Louis XIV’s royal château engaged with the museum as a spatial palimpsest, an environment that has accumulated layers of pasts that testify to various historical power struggles. Koons’ installations, Milano argues, remind us of how Versailles was an attempt
to portray modern French art as superior to Italian Renaissance art. In the middle of the twentieth century, however, New York usurped France as the center of the art world. Koons benefits from these “centrality shifts” from Italy to France to the United States as an American citizen who has experienced great successes as an artist, and as Milano shows, he is unapologetic about exploiting this dynamic — which may be why so many French critics were offended by the exhibition or wrote it off as crude while North American critics often praised it.

Another installation artist who is associated with American pop culture is Wayne White, whose show *HALO AMOK!* at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art consistently drew large crowds. Emily L. Newman reviews the meaning and impact of White’s huge cowboy-themed art puppets, noting how they inspired eager interactivity from adults and children alike as they also referenced important movements in art such as relational aesthetics and Cubism. Like Koons, White drew from and contributed to the notion that there is such a thing as American art, albeit at a smaller scale and in a less aggressive fashion, with specific nods to the local community in Oklahoma City. Another exhibition that addressed the status and definition of American art was *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art*, hosted by the Smithsonian American Art Museum until March 2014. Richard T. Rodríguez’s review of this show evaluates the usage of the term “Latino” as its organizing principle. He insists that the term is more rooted in history than essence, that it successfully lays claim to Americanness for Latinos who are still too often understood as “foreigners” in the U.S. — an irony not lost on this editor, who continues to be perplexed at how anyone with zero indigenous roots in the region can assume any authority over what constitutes a foreigner.

Rodríguez’s review is itself a discursive intervention, and a poignant case at that, one that contributes to the politics of terminology engaged by the curator of *Our America*, E. Carmen Ramos, as well as other reviewers. The debates over Ramos’ conceptual framework seem to confirm O’Neill’s assertion that curation has become largely a discursive task, and in this case the politics of categorization are central to attempts to rectify the systemic exclusion of a social group from major institutions such as the Smithsonian. Rodríguez recognizes how categories that are mobilized in collection and display practices are anything but natural or innocent, but they all have histories of their own which should be acknowledged, especially if such efforts enable more inclusive programming. Indeed, Goldsmith notes how O’Neill observes that at present there is an incredible urge to historicize exhibitionary practices. Much of this is manifested in the rise of curatorial studies as a field, recuperative political interventions made by critics, as well as in *recurating*, Smith’s term for the relatively recent phenomenon of exhibiting works of art from the past a second time, as Bin points out in her review. Several exhibitions mentioned throughout this issue might be classified as examples of recurating, such as *Our America* and *Jeff Koons Versailles*, both of which involved remixes of
significant works of art from the past. However, none of them strive to be as faithful to an original display as the Whitney Museum of American Art’s recent reinstallation of Robert Irwin’s *Scrim Veil—Black Rectangle—Natural Light* (1977). Mary L. Coyne in her review describes the piece as an activation of “a pre-existing space by subtly altering our sensorial perception of it.” During her visits she observed how viewers in 2013 treated Irwin’s environment with great reverence now that it has been canonized as a “great” work of art (in the ‘70s, most visitors were disoriented and concluded it was just an empty gallery).

The initially baffled or dissatisfied reception of *Scrim Veil* is likely due to the lack of an understanding of its historical significance, which has been thoroughly deliberated and venerated with the privilege of hindsight. In particular, Coyne asserts that *Scrim Veil* is now identified as the “final dematerialization of the canvas as surface for Irwin,” which resulted in him approaching entire gallery spaces and even whole cities as mediums for his work. Coyne begins her review by suggesting that contemporary curators tend to value art produced in the past over that of the present, although we can see the irony of this position in the case of Irwin alone, given that his original audience first misunderstood or devalued *Scrim Veil*. Indeed, this type of negative reception has a history of its own, which can be traced back to the Parisians who spit on Manet’s *Olympia* at the Louvre, calling the prostitute featured in it a “gorilla” and a “sack of laundry,” even though the painting is now considered to be one of the most significant the history of art in the Western tradition.

Bago astutely acknowledges that contemporary critics and curators struggle with the paradoxes and problematics of contemporary art, and that we attempt to “resolve them by seeking refuge in the art of the 1960s and 1970s, only to come full circle and find the same questions there.” Perhaps this should motivate us to think twice before too quickly writing off any art produced in this second decade of our current century. Unique in the company of critics mentioned throughout this issue, McTavish offers a study of the curator that reaches back before the 1960s. Urzaiz writes that she offers us ample evidence of how, at the New Brunswick Museum, in the 1930s and 1940s the curator transformed from a janitor-like figure to one with a university degree and specialized disciplinary training. She explains that “this latter type of curator is represented by the Websters’ protégées, now well-recognized scholars in their own right: Alfred Bailey was commissioned by J.C. Webster to be in charge of the historical holdings, and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, appointed by Alice Lusk Webster, was to be responsible for the fine art collections.” When I first read this passage, I remembered that Hooper-Greenhill’s *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* was the first book I ever read about museums as an undergraduate student in the 1990s, when I never considered how the author’s own professional trajectory impacted the ideas I was trying to learn. It was a realization that swept me into memories of my own past and the development
of my interest in museum and curatorial studies over the course of many years. Perhaps readers of this issue of *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review* will also realize new or unexpected ways their own pasts can relate to art and exhibitions as they explore the essays that follow.
Dematerialization and Politicization of the Exhibition: Curation as Institutional Critique in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s

Ivana Bago

Harald Szeemann, who prosaically dubbed himself an *Austellungsmacher* (exhibition-maker) in the late 1960s, has since come to embody what Bruce Altshuler calls “the rise of the curator as creator.” This transformation from maker to creator, from craft to art, has been reinforced by a proliferation of critical discourses in the past two decades, leading to increased professionalization and the development of the field of curatorial studies. The ongoing theorization and historicization of exhibitionary practices, however, generally fails to take into account what has evolved beyond the prominent art world centers in Western Europe and the United States. Despite critical discourses that identify and deconstruct Western hegemony, and despite numerous artistic and research projects that have “restructured” the art historical canon, every new chapter in art history – which includes exhibition history – seems to open in the same way: by establishing a Western-based canon and only subsequently acknowledging interventions that are in conversation with it. By focusing on select projects in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s curated by Želimir Koščević, Ida Biard, and Dunja Blažević, this article challenges conventional exhibition histories, not by merely adding new examples to established paradigms, but by presenting case studies as generators of new models for understanding curation today. The projects I explore disrupted the boundaries between artistic and curatorial practice and enable us to conceive of curation as a creative and transformative work of translation,
informed by – or in Walter Benjamin’s terms, “under the spell of” – the then-emergent language of conceptual or “dematerialized” art. The initial enthusiasm about conceptual art’s transformative political potential in the 1960s and 1970s coincided, however, with what is today recognized as the dawning era of cognitive capitalism, and the realization that not only objects (or object-based art) but also ideas (or conceptual art) could easily be commodified and swept into the system.

Biard, Blažević, and Koščević all organized exhibitions informed by the urgency to respond to the co-optation of conceptual art by bourgeois institutions. Their endeavors were decidedly situated in Yugoslav self-managed socialism, which cultivated perspectives alternative to both the capitalist West and the state-socialist East. All three curators were directly or indirectly affiliated with either the Student Center Gallery (SC) in Zagreb or the Student Cultural Center (SKC) in Belgrade. Student Centers were hubs of progressive artistic and cultural practices in Yugoslavia, gathering new generations of artists, critics, and cultural managers on the front line of what would later become known as New Artistic Practice, the movement that embraced conceptual, post-avant-garde, and process-based strategies in Yugoslav art.

Student Centers were state institutions meant to incite and host the artistic and cultural activities of and for the youth. Today they are often described in oxymoronic terms, as places of controlled or relative freedom. Especially after the 1968 student revolts in Yugoslavia, the alternative youth culture was granted a space of social encounter and artistic experimentation, but was at the same time kept at bay, safely contained within one Student Center in each of the major cities. This is the perspective that Miško Šuvaković takes when he refers to centers as “reservations,” places where subversion was allowed but where its social impact and expansive potential were limited. The student “centers” were indeed actually the margins, but within those margins some of the most radical questionings of the social and political roles of art in Yugoslavia took place. They facilitated exchanges of people and ideas among different urban centers in the country, as well as between Yugoslavia and the international scene. They have also remained a key point of reference for later generations of artists and cultural workers.

New Artistic Practice evolved in an intense dialogue with neo-avant-garde practices of Western Europe and North America, where an enthusiastic discourse about “new art” was equally pervasive during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both in Yugoslavia and abroad, this enthusiasm was linked to the reactivation of leftist theory and activism, especially following the 1968 student movements. What distinguished Koščević, Biard, and Blažević’s curatorial undertakings was their critical stance – anchored by their Yugoslav situatedness – towards the production and reception of art in the West, after it had become evident that dematerialized art was subject to cooptation by the art market and institutions that were becoming increasingly corporate.
Most of their projects were included in surveys of the New Artistic Practice during the 1970s, which reveals that their creative contributions were acknowledged from the beginning. However, at the time there existed no analytical or theoretical apparatus that would situate them in a similar movement of “New Curatorial Practice.” When Davor Matićević wrote about Koščević’s accomplishments, for example, he attempted to articulate them as artistic, although he admitted that, “Želimir Koščević’s authorial approach cannot be fully identified because none of these exhibitions declared an awareness of the artistic act – what they [Koščević’s projects] emphasized was the precedence of ethics over aesthetics, which is one of the main characteristics of current art production that we want to review here.” Matićević did not have a name for what such practice should represent if not artistic, but he implicitly pointed to the creative processes of translation when he cited “ethics over aesthetics” as the key shared feature of art at the time. He then identified ethics as a key characteristic of Koščević’s un-artistic (i.e. curatorial) projects. Matićević was also aware of how such efforts blurred traditional roles, concluding that even if Koščević’s works would not be accepted as art, they demonstrated “how frontiers between professions can disappear.” Although he refers only to Koščević in his text, Matićević’s analysis is relevant for a whole line of curatorial practices from the 1960s and 1970s that were articulated as anticapitalist and antibourgeois institutional critiques, and manifested through the radical dematerialization and politicization of the exhibition.

Exhibition as Critical Intervention into the Discourse on Art
Želimir Koščević became director of the Zagreb Student Center Gallery (SC) in 1969, but he already began participating in its activities in 1966. Koščević was a young art historian informed by the New Tendencies exhibitions hosted at the Zagreb Gallery of Contemporary Art between 1961 and 1973, as well as international phenomena such as the Fluxus movement and the “conceptual turn” of the late 1960s. In 1969, he spent four months as an intern at Moderna Museet in Stockholm with Pontus Hultén, whose innovative approach to exhibition making encouraged Koščević’s own quest for new and experimental approaches to art and curation. However, Koščević had already presented his first curatorial experiment at the SC in 1966 with the exhibition Imaginary Museum, which consisted of a “free-style” arrangement of numerous ethnographic, archeological, art, and applied-arts objects taken from the storage spaces of several Zagreb museums. Imaginary Museum was located at a contemporary art venue, but instead of presenting art, it intervened into the politics of representation by granting visibility to objects that did not earn a place in the permanent programming of local museums. Besides disturbing the borders between high and applied arts, art and artifact, Koščević exposed what museums more generally conceal through the myths of objectivity and neutrality: that objects can be selected and presented in any number of ways that depend on the biases of curators and the demands of the moment.
Koščević therefore self-critically approached curation as a form of institutional critique with his very first exhibition at the SC.

After becoming the SC’s director, and presenting a series of exhibitions that featured the youngest generation of artists (most of whom would later become the leading figures of the New Artistic Practice), Koščević conceived and organized *The Exhibition of Women and Men* (1969). For this production, the Gallery opened its doors to reveal an empty space, while handouts informed confused visitors that they were to be the exhibition: “For god’s sake, be the exhibition. At this exhibition, you are the artwork, you are the figuration… you are socialist realism. Careful, your eyes are observing you. You are the body in space, you are a body that moves, you are the kinetic sculpture, you are spatial dynamism. Art is not situated next to you. There either is no art or it is you.”¹⁵ In 1969, when the exhibition took place, no defined movement of conceptual art or institutional critique had yet manifested in Zagreb, although some artists were experimenting in this direction.¹⁶ Its subtitle, “didactic exhibition,” functioned as a provocation for a new way of thinking about art; similar to John Chandler and Lucy Lippard’s theorization of the dematerialization of art in 1968, *The Exhibition of Women and Men* implicitly framed “art as idea and art as action.”¹⁷ Regardless of whether Koščević was at the time aware of the new terminology Chandler and Lippard proposed, the exhibition opened up the path for not only art, but also exhibitionary practices to be freed from the dictate of material presentation. Unlike Yves Klein’s *The Void*
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(1958), which was made by an artist and evoked an ontological questioning of emptiness, *The Exhibition of Women and Men* was developed by a gallery director and intervened into the structure of social relations between an art institution and its audience.\(^{18}\) The community that gathered at the openings in Zagreb took central stage, exercising an awareness of its own role as audience, while the curator and the institution relinquished control over the content they were presenting. Of course, the institution gave up control only in principle, as it still provided visitors with instructions, which the subtitle self-critically recognized as the Gallery’s educational and disciplinary functions. Nonetheless, *The Exhibition of Women and Men* pioneered gestures of institutional openness, self-reflection, and participation in exhibition making.

Additional expressions of Koščević’s disobedience towards conventional models of curation and the art system materialized in *Postal Packages* (1972). The event was part of a travelling presentation of mail art from the Seventh Paris Biennial (1971), itself announced as the first comprehensive display of international conceptual art in France.\(^{19}\) The exhibition *Postal Packages* was first presented at the Belgrade SKC in January 1972, after which it was supposed to open in Zagreb.\(^{20}\) However, Koščević decided to exhibit nothing but the unopened package in which the works arrived, along with a statement printed in the gallery’s newspaper through which he rejected any complicity in the further commodification and institutionalization of conceptual art. The fact that conceptual art had become so harmless as to be included in a biennial signaled for Koščević the beginning of its demise:

Unconventional, brave and provocative, conceptual art has witnessed its own history by the establishment of a special section at the Paris Biennial. There were also earlier attempts, as some museums and corporations have tried to systematize artistic concepts and reduce them to the level of catalogued data. Many artists accepted this game. The positive valorization of the Paris Biennial officially marked the end of the life of this idea which, at its core, is not foreign or unacceptable to us.\(^{21}\)

Rather than offer local, peripheral Yugoslav audiences examples of the latest international trends, Koščević intervened with a critique of what he saw as conceptual art’s self-annulling complicity with commodification and institutional validation of art and artists. Concluding his written statement, he explicated his gesture:

Instead of participating in the further deterioration of conceptual art, instead of supporting its demise under the gallery and museum lights, we have
Figure 2: *Postal Packages* (1972), curated by Želimir Koščević. Student Center Gallery in Zagreb. Photo by Petar Dabac. Used with permission.
exhibited the content of this exhibition in its genuine state. We have exhibited — we believe — the sublimate of conceptual art — the postal package as postal package… Art is not to be found under a glass, under a glass bell, art is facing us.”

Koščević’s intervention was a curatorial translation of the conceptualist language game, by which he turned Kosuth’s art as idea into art as mail art as postal package, or art as postal package as postal package. He kept the original title of the presentation — “Postal Packages” (Envoi) — at the same time that he transformed it from a generic designation for mail art into a literalized manifestation of mail art’s materiality. This curatorial translation challenged the axiom, taken from the Paris Biennial catalogue and cited next to Koščević’s statement, which claimed that “transmitting information has become more important than transporting goods.” The unopened package placed in the center of the gallery space ironically pointed to the fallacy of such a claim and underscored how the transport of goods was still central to the art system and its material(istic) premises.

Koščević’s interventions were dematerializations, subversions, and politicizations of the exhibition format, motivated by a self-reflexive examination of the roles of the curator and gallery director in contemporary art and society. If we compare these projects with U.S.-based curator Seth Siegelaub’s January 5–31, 1969 (1969), also known as The January Show, an oft-cited example of exhibitionary experimentation, we will see that Koščević accepts and provokes significantly wider consequences of art’s dematerialization into idea, action, and information. According to Siegelaub, “the catalogue was primary, and the physical exhibition was auxiliary to it,” a line of reasoning that he supported to such a degree that the catalogue for The January Show was prominently on display in its own gallery room next to the one that featured artworks by Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Wiener, and other major conceptual artists. Siegelaub’s curatorial approach twisted the hierarchy that determines primary and secondary information as he called into question how we value originals and reproductions. The inclusion of text in the physical gallery space, according to Siegelaub, had no advantage over its reproduction in a catalogue or magazine, as the ideas were more important to the art than the visual-material components used to convey them. Still, both the exhibition and catalogue in the case of The January Show consisted of presenting works and statements by four selected artists, whereas Koščević showed that by radicalizing the conceptual approach through curation it was possible to present the new art even without involving artworks and artists. This does not mean that Koščević’s exhibitions were the attempts of a curator to take on the role of the artist; on the contrary, they were curatorial projects par excellence, in which he positioned himself as a disobedient translator, and not creator, of new art.
To further theorize Koščević’s praxis it will be helpful to turn to terminology proposed by theorist Lawrence Venuti, who distinguishes between two types of translation: *domestication* and *foreignization*. In the first case, a foreign language is domesticated, or tamed, by the act of its translation into the local language, while in the second case, which was advocated by Venuti, the foreign language affects the local language in a transformative way. In the latter type, the local language is under the influence (or Benjaminian “spell”) of the foreign language, and becomes reinvented and enriched. Koščević did not tame the language of new art under the gallery reflectors, subjecting it to the established lexis of museology. He rather used the language of new art to foreignize and reanimate institutional rhetorics and practices.

*The Exhibition of Women and Men* was thus a translation of one of the postulates of conceptual art – art as a practice of definition – which, as Peter Osbourne points out, is a cultural activity not limited to the definition of art. In Benjamin Buchloh’s terms, “the definition of the aesthetic becomes on the one hand a matter of linguistic convention and on the other the function of both a legal contract and an institutional discourse (a discourse of power rather than taste).” At *The Exhibition of Women and Men* the gallery director (with a defined position in the hierarchy of power in relation to the practices of defining the aesthetic) offers the audience a contract embodied in the performative statement: “For god’s sake, be the exhibition.” By accepting this instruction, the audience engaged with the institution in a shared process of redefining the borders as well as the social function and transformative potential of the exhibition as a cultural convention. On the other hand, *Postal Packages*, even while refusing to exhibit any individual examples of conceptual art, truly embodied – and, ultimately, exhibited – the “sublimate” of the radical anticommercial and politicized attitude of conceptual art. Even when art itself, according to Koščević, has betrayed these initial principles, it remains possible to practice them, not through showing more examples of conceptual art, but indirectly through transforming and politicizing the very language of exhibition which involves the discursive power and role of the curator within the system of art. Leaving the arrived artworks concealed or reframed in an unopened package yet – or therefore – revealing many of the characteristics that define conceptual art, *Postal Packages* embodied the enthusiasm with which John Cage wrote about the dissolution of the visual and metaphorical content of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*: “After careful consideration I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows. Hallelujah! the blind can see again; the water is fine.”

To be sure, we cannot claim that artistic language is fixed in some initial point from whence curatorial translation would start. Rather, to achieve the transformative effects of foreignization, we must acknowledge, and engage in, a continuous and multi-directional
process of translation whereby borders would constantly shift and transform, so that art and curation can reinvent themselves and each other. This does not mean a complete relativization of their different roles or an erasure of their boundaries, in which curators might assume absolute power of creation and supplant artists, as per some scenarios that pose a threat of “art without artists.” Koščević’s projects do not present themselves as art; the position he assumes – that of a gallery director, a curator who determines the rhetoric of a gallery program and opens it up to engagement with the public – is not ambivalent. His exhibitions are not instances of art without artists, but of curating without artists, which shows that curating is not merely a practice of secondary creative and political significance that should always come after, both temporally and hierarchically, artistic creation.

Against the Commodification of Art in the West: Mapping the “Third Way”
The problems raised by Koščević – revolving around the dichotomy of emancipatory cultural practices versus their commodification and institutionalization, as well as debates about biennial culture – sound only too familiar to us today. Ironically, we often resolve them by seeking refuge in the art of the 1960s and 1970s, only to come full circle and find the same questions there. Of course, to discuss the commodification of art, both in the 1970s and today, does not mean the same thing when one speaks from Zagreb or New York. A curator in Zagreb or Belgrade was not (and still is not) exposed to the challenges of corporate cooptation, nor was the art sphere in general linked to corporate funds or a developed art market. Culture in Yugoslavia was mainly funded by the socialist state, and opposition to art’s commodification was the expression of a leftist opposition to bourgeois ideology. What is characteristic of all the projects presented in this article is their resistance to market-driven and capitalist logic despite the non-existence of an art market or corporate sponsorship of the arts in Yugoslavia. For this reason, the resistance was often oriented towards the art of the West, or what has been deemed to be the negative influences of the West. Here we encounter a point in which translation shifts from the registers of art-exhibition/artist-curator to the translation and negotiation of relations between East and West. The Exhibition of Women and Men is not only an experiment with museological conventions, but it also plays with the expectations of audience members who were supposed to, before experiencing the event, interpret its announced display of women and men in the spirit of the “overall abuse of […] nudity imported from rotten capitalism.” Similarly, Postal Packages is a critique of the art system in the West, which followed the initial enthusiasm for the revolutionary potential of dematerialized art and its supposed resistance to art-market cooptation and commercialization. This enthusiasm is revealed by art critic Ješa Denegri’s response to the first international presentation of conceptual art in Yugoslavia that artist Braco Dimitrijević and art critic Nena Dimitrijević organized as a one-day show at the doorway of a building on Frankopanska Street in Zagreb, entitled At the Moment (1972).
Denegri argued that such a prompt reaction to most recent events in the world of art could not be expected from museums, but from self-organized individuals. He presumed that the participating artists were in any case too radical to even work with institutions: “it is certain that many of the artists presented here would not be willing to participate in events that would resemble an official or even conventional exhibition.” Soon it became obvious that most conceptual artists in the West willingly became part of the conventional institutional and market-driven system of art, just like their predecessors that made the so-called object-based art.

The critique of the Western art system resonates with a much broader social fear of contamination by the West at a time when Yugoslav socialism was undergoing a major economic crisis that involved the rise of unemployment and the emigration of the work force to capitalist countries, coupled with an increased presence of Western commercial products and advertising patterns, epitomized by the image of the nude female body, which Koščević denounced. Another form of translation was thus operative in the exhibition projects discussed here, albeit never explicitly articulated as such; expressions of disenchantment with the (global) revolutionary potential of conceptual art inexplicitly triggered an anxiety about the failure of the idiosyncratic revolutionary potential of the Yugoslav path to socialism and the idea of socialist self-management. As already noted, protagonists of the 1968 student revolts believed that the state betrayed the principles of social justice and equality that were the very basis of the Yugoslav socialist revolution and the formation of the Yugoslav socialist state in 1945. They therefore demanded a genuine application of those principles when they protested, or in Jelena Vesić’s formulation, they were “fighting socialism with socialism.” Students criticized the bureaucratization of the revolution and the increase in social and economic differences, which resulted in a new ruling class that held high political positions and nominally declared socialist principles but was in fact evolving into the oxymoronic “red bourgeoisie.” The artistic and cultural scene at the time emerged in the midst of this paradoxical and ideologically-charged social environment, which radicalized the critical potential of conceptual art and its anticapitalist stance. In terms of practice, this did not mean that artists were more engaged with activism or daily politics than in the preceding decades or in concurrent art developments outside of Yugoslavia. Their field of struggle was mainly the bourgeois institution of art, but projects such as October 75 at the SKC Gallery in Belgrade placed that struggle in direct relation with the state structures and political models governing culture.

According to an interview between the Prelom kolektiv (Infraction collective) with Dunja Blažević, she initiated October 75 as an attempt to question the role of art in the framework of self-managed Yugoslav socialism, although there is no consensus on the exact
Figure 3: Counter-exhibition poster for *October 75* (1975). Student Cultural Center in Belgrade. Used with permission.

Figure 4: *The Case of Student Cultural Center* (1975) by Prelom kolektiv. Student Cultural Center in Belgrade. Used with permission.
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genealogy of the project. Dunja Blažević was a Belgrade-based art critic and curator, and the first “editor” of the visual arts programme of the SKC Gallery, from 1971 to 1975. October 75 was part of a series of alternative Octobers, organized at SKC from its beginning in 1971 as a response to the October Salon, an annual exhibition in Belgrade that featured mainstream and modernist art. The October Salon could be seen as another manifestation of the Yugoslav oxymoronic structures that the students who revolted identified, as it glued together the revolutionary symbolism of “October” (an evocation of the October Revolution) and the quintessential bourgeois institution of the salon. However, according to Jelena Vesić, alternative Octobers did not merely represent the confrontation of an alternative scene with the official one; rather, they challenged this dichotomy, as the very space of the SKC was an “ambivalent combination of horizontal and vertical forms of organization,” while at the same time a state institution of culture and “the site of spontaneous, occasionally subversive gatherings of heterogeneous communities of artists, intellectuals, and political activists.”

Similarly, with October 75, Dunja Blažević, as the institution’s art program editor, symbolically withdrew from the position of authority by inviting these communities to horizontally engage in a “participatory artistic-curatorial-theoretical project,” a discussion about the relations of state politics and cultural production.

Instead of creating another exhibition (even if it were one of “progressive” art), Dunja Blažević invited artists and art historians to rethink their attitudes about art in the Yugoslav context, particularly in relation to the economic and ideological model of socialist self-management. Their ideas were documented in writing and the exhibition was then presented in the form of a publically distributed hectographed notebook, an experiment that resulted in a dematerialization of the exhibition and a radical departure from the “salon” idea of art that it confronted. Not everyone accepted participation in the project; the invitation to rethink self-management was, as Vesić suggests, seen by some as an imposition of “homework” in line with the ubiquitous state and Party-line propaganda of Yugoslav socialist self-management. On the other hand, the SKC Gallery as an institution founded by the state was already in such “collaboration,” and Vesić ultimately encourages us to read October 75 as a stage where the Belgrade 1968’s appeal to “fight socialism with socialism” was re-enacted seven years later, but this time as “the translation of common social demands … into artistically specific demands.” The official project of socialist self-management, originally conceived as a path towards achieving communism and a withering away of the state, was, as it were, taken by its word: by addressing the theme of self-management, the participants of October 75 truly put it into practice and questioned its emancipatory potential, at least as it was refracted in the field of art and culture.
Blažević’s curatorial gesture thus involved a literal translation of the discourse of self-management from the register of state to that of art and cultural politics. We could say that she demystified her own position as someone in whom, as a representative of the state institution, the two registers merged and revealed their interdependence. This also enabled a more general discussion on the existing models of interrelations between culture and politics. Repeated references in the texts to the inadequacies of the Western market-oriented and l’art-pour-l’art models, as well as the Eastern statist and instrumentalized notion of art, made apparent the need to find a “third way” for art. This is especially true for contributions by Blažević herself, but also Denegri, Raša Todosijević, and Zoran Popović, who gave his contribution the explicitly advocating title “In favor of self-managed art.” The model of socialist self-management appeared to be a possible pathway for art that would at the same time be autonomous and socially engaged. However, culture in Yugoslavia was identified to have remained trapped within the petit-bourgeois frameworks where it existed merely as decoration, or, in Blažević’s words, “while we keep on creating, through the private market, our own variant of the nouveau riche or kleinbürgers, art will remain a social
appendage, something it is not decent or cultured to be without...Is it not extremely comical to build a self-managing social system using the political means of a feudal or bourgeois structure?” In other contributions art was portrayed literally as a political tool, its transformation and “permanent revolution,” as Raša Todosijević described it, also a way towards social revolution. In his contribution to *October 75*, we encounter yet again a critique of the appropriation and commodification of engaged art, primarily by the Western art establishment: “A CONSOLIDATED ESTABLISHMENT accepts art at a moment when its revolutionary and subversive spirit wanes. Thus the bourgeois society of the West today appropriates historical avant-gardes as their own history of art, and yet, did not the avant-gardes of that time spit in the face of that same society?”

The institutional critiques expressed in *October 75* thus surpass the tautological and art-for-art’s-sake twists that are often present in Western art of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, we can trace such critical characteristics throughout all of the projects presented in this paper. The undeniable links between the Yugoslav exhibitions and international events, plus the awareness of the artists’ and curators’ own marginal positions in relation to the international events, did not result in an emulation of Western art practices. Instead, exhibitions at the student centers enacted forms of translation that critically maneuvered between the “foreign” discourse on conceptual art and the “domestic” artistic landscape dominated by what is often dubbed “socialist modernism.” On a broader level, they triggered negotiations between these art spheres and the geopolitical landscapes of the liberal-capitalist West, the statist socialist East, and the non-aligned position of Yugoslav self-managed socialism. Such a transformative curatorial practice of translation thus established an imperative to search for new articulations of art and its relations to concrete social and political realities.

**Curation Outside of the Museum and Gallery System**

Curator and critic Ida Biard committed her practice to an examination of how the relations between art and politics shift, depending on geopolitical and institutional contexts. Her performative double perspective was enabled and shaped by connections to cities in both Eastern and Western Europe. Biard grew up in Zagreb and later studied in Paris. Starting in 1971 she initiated numerous projects in both cities, as well as others such as Belgrade, Novi Sad, Budapest, Dusseldorf, London, and Milan. Her long-term project, *La Galerie des Locataires* (Tenants’ Gallery), was a search for the autonomy of art so it could be free from both state and corporate sponsorship, including the affiliations and complicities such sponsorship implies. Although it was founded in Paris and known for its collaborations with artists that would later become key protagonists of the European conceptual art scene – such
as Daniel Buren, Christian Boltanski, Annette Messager, and Sarkis—La Galerie’s link with the Yugoslav (and specifically the Zagreb) scene was crucial.

The conceptual beginnings of La Galerie in 1972 were closely related to Biard’s collaboration with the artist Goran Trbuljak, and it is precisely his approach to institutional critique that found its correlate in Biard’s curatorial practice. Before their collaboration in Paris began, Trbuljak produced several projects in Zagreb, the most notable of which was his first major solo show at the SC Gallery in 1971. There he displayed nothing but the poster that advertised the exhibition which included his photographic self-portrait and the text, “I do not wish to show anything new or original.” What Trbuljak aimed to exhibit in this and related projects were the very operations and ideologies that conditioned the production of art exhibitions, dependent upon canons, institutional hierarchies, and the myths of novelty and originality. In one interview, he called his projects “works-exhibitions,” revealing how they could be read as an artistic translation of the curatorial.⁴²

In 1972, Trbuljak visited Paris where he walked into galleries and other arts institutions without identifying himself or showing any documentation of his work. He asked their directors to fill out a survey on whether or not they would exhibit the artwork he presented them, which was the survey itself.⁴³ Collecting the answers, he mapped the Paris gallery
scene in terms of its readiness to judge art not by the biography of the artist, or her or his oeuvre, but immediately as it were, at first sight. Trbuljak would continue to pursue his examination of art and the artist’s potential anonymity, claiming a sort of transcendent ideal of “an art without artists, without criticism, without audience.” It is this utopianist belief in art, liberated from the constraints of its institutional conditioning, that La Galerie des Locataires and Trbuljak shared. Ida Biard and Trbuljak’s acquaintance precedes his visit to Paris, and it would be impossible to claim any unidirectional “influence” between the two. Their relationship is better described in terms of synergy; it was a multidirectional web of translations, in which Trbuljak appropriated and incorporated elements of the critical, curatorial, and institutional art apparatuses, while Biard construed an experimental and nomadic gallery, with creative input and freedom usually ascribed to artistic endeavors.

Among the first exhibitions that La Galerie organized in 1973 in Biard’s Paris apartment was Information on the Work of Young Yugoslav Artists (1969-1973). The cover page of the exhibition brochure featured photographic documentation of Koščević’s The Exhibition of Women and Men, which could be read as La Galerie’s acknowledgment of a direct link to the experimental practices of the SC Gallery in Zagreb. In November 1973, Biard curated in the SC Gallery Another Opportunity to Be an Artist, with the participation of 44 artists from Yugoslavia as well as other European countries such as France, Germany, Hungary, Chechoslovakia, Poland, and Great Britain. Biard’s curatorial statement, published in the SC Gallery newspaper, insisted that “The opportunity to be an ‘artist’ is not given by chance,” which was a nod to an intervention by Trbuljak in 1973 at the Zagreb Gallery of Contemporary Art, where he exhibited only a poster of the Gallery’s building with the words, “The fact that someone was given the opportunity to make an exhibition is more important than what will be shown in it.”

Alongside La Galerie’s ties to the Yugoslav scene, its intervention in the bourgeois system of art and its distribution of “opportunities” have been strongly informed by its embeddedness in the Parisian context, with the city’s pressures to commercialize and institutionalize conceptual art. We have seen similar concerns in Koščević’s and Blažević’s projects; however, for them the threat of the art market was primarily external, a potential infiltration from the West. Their work was anchored in thinking about the transformation of public art institutions within given socialist contexts, whereas Ida Biard almost utopically insisted that fully autonomous ways of producing and mediating art were possible beyond, or on the very edges of, the art system. Although it was based in Biard’s Paris apartment, the “gallery” had no permanent residence, nor did it have a director or owner. The apartment functioned more as an index of La Galerie’s credo of uniting art and life; it was somewhere to meet and communicate, rather than a programmatically governed exhibition space. As noted in a text that could be considered La Galerie’s manifesto, “La Galerie des
Locataires is a state of mind. It exists where it decides to be. It has no walls or decrees; it is not impossible. Its reason for existing: the artist is one whom others give the opportunity to be an artist.” By subverting the idea of the artist as predestined genius and asserting instead that to become an artist is a socially conditioned process, La Galerie intervened into the very architecture of the bourgeois art system and its distribution of “opportunities.”

Contrary to what its name suggests, the activity of La Galerie des Locataires was not localized but nomadic. For a number of young artists, La Galerie opened up a platform through which their projects and ideas could be “communicated,” a term La Galerie used to describe its activities in opposition to “exhibited.” Artists were invited to send proposals to mailboxes at post offices in Paris, Milan, Zagreb, Dusseldorf, and New York. Biard realized the proposals according to instructions and presented them either in the window of her apartment or other public places throughout various cities. For example, in 1974 she realized Daniel Buren’s public interventions Blue and Orange Stripes in Budapest, and in that same year she also reproduced Sarkis’ signature, following his instructions, whenever and wherever she wished. Interestingly, conceptual art’s potential to be formulated as idea, and so overcome temporal and spatial divides, inadvertently created a new division between immaterial and material labor: La Galerie (i.e. Ida Biard) was outsourced to physically realize the “dematerialized” proposals, a practice that in many cases stemmed from a lack of funds and the impossibility for an artist to actually be present everywhere that La Galerie operated. Authorship remained tied to the artists, but it is important that the realization, the curation, was conceived also as a creative act. For example, the impressum of the French Window catalogue credits Goran Trbulja with the “idea” (idée) for the project, while Ida Biard is credited for the “concept and realization” (conception et réalisation). It is unclear from the documentation where they drew the borders between the “idea” and the “concept,” but it is clear that the concept as the key substance of conceptual art was translated into curatorial practice.

French Window also enables insight into La Galerie’s approach to a more conventional feature of curating: selection. Here, the choosing of proposals was deemed unnecessary as La Galerie counted on “a parallel state of mind,” a form of mutual recognition that privileged “ethics over aesthetics.” An invitation to artists published in 1973 in Art Vivant magazine summed up this principle in the following way: “The artists whose works (work + action) transcend the boundaries of the aesthetic and are rather situated in ethics are informed of the existence of FRENCH WINDOW. This space is exclusively oriented onto the street. The works will be presented in the order of their arrival to the address listed below.” In other words, “ethics over aesthetics” was a kind of passcode that unlocked the door – or window – of opportunity that La Galerie offered: one of becoming or continuing to be an artist. An artist who agreed with such a stance towards art production was admitted into the program
without further judgment on her or his work. A mere submission to one of the mailboxes was proof enough of the “parallel state of mind,” as those who did not share that “state” would not desire to participate in the first place.

La Galerie additionally commissioned and produced artist projects in the “living spaces” of the city among its residents – the streets, marketplaces, post offices, cinemas, and taxis – experimenting with strategies that communicate art to the public and, again, distancing itself from conventional gallery and museum presentations. André Cadéré’s contribution was to secretly “infiltrate” into the opening of a solo show at the prestigious Maeght Gallery in Paris, which created an exhibition within an exhibition, and intervened directly into the existing market-driven distribution of opportunities. In the framework of the Ninth International Malerwochen (“painting week”) at the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum in Graz (1975), instead of showing works of art, Biard presented a living person, Nina Kujundžić, as someone “who wished to become an artist.” In Zagreb, Biard produced curatorial interventions such as placing artworks on billboards (The Yugoslav Vitrine, 1973), as well as in movie theaters (Balkan Cinema, 1974) where she projected slides with works of art to replace advertisements during the breaks.

Figure 8: André Cadéré and La Galerie des Locataires, intervention at an exhibition opening at Maeght Gallery, Paris (1973). Image courtesy of Ida Biard. Used with permission.
La Galerie’s anti-commercial stance was not a mere statement that reflected the global new-leftist spirit of the times; it was rather a manifesto exercised by almost militant rigor. Reasserting its critical position in relation to the art market and art institutions, La Galerie introduced in 1975 the Moral Contract, by which the artists who signed it promise(d) to “analyze the relation of the space where she/he exhibits with the work that is exhibited” and to “explain the aims of her/his interventions in traditional exhibition venues.”53 La Galerie for its part agreed to “remain an open field of communication,” and to “intervene in the structures of existing relations between artists and galleries.”54 Here, the earlier postulate of “ethics over aesthetics” was translated into a “moral” commitment, but now the requirements for admission became more strict and formalized in the form of a contract. The Moral Contract implied that the complicity of artists in the “traditional” system of art institutions and galleries was a much more personal question related to the moral integrity of the artist as an individual, with a choice to either resist or perpetuate that system, posited as a choice between good and bad. At the same time, in order to give weight to the raised stakes, La Galerie appropriated the contract form used to determine the ownership and value of artworks whose “dematerialized” state now threatened that everything could be art and everyone an artist. In order to assure authenticity, the artists’ signature was no longer required on paintings, but on contracts. In its typical gesture of translating the institutional into a utopian language of art, La Galerie used the contract not to warrant the authenticity and value of individual artworks, but to assert its very own oppositional position, to which it simultaneously committed the artists.

Unlike Koščević’s first exhibitions in Zagreb that evolved in the context of a highly active but nonetheless peripheral scene, Biard’s projects featured individuals who would soon become the most well-known artists of the 1970s. However, in 1976 Biard detected an important change that had been occurring in the Western art world since the beginning of the 1970s: artists were increasingly breaking the Moral Contract as they uncritically collaborated with, and profited from, the commercial and capitalist art world. Biard thus sent a letter to all of her previous artist-collaborators, proclaiming that, “In order to express its disagreement with the conduct of artists/so-called dissenters and the avant-garde within the current system of the art market, LA GALERIE DES LOCATAIRES is on strike and will not communicate any so-called artistic work as of the 7th of March 1976.”55 Inverting the logic by which artists are expected to rebel against the system while curators and critics perpetuate it and secure their positions within its hierarchies, Biard as a curator/gallerist protested against the integration of artists into the commodity system thereby betraying the “essence” of conceptual art and their own earlier practice. The strike was not an empty gesture; it lasted until 1981, when La Galerie resumed its activities, although with less intensity, occasionally entering into new collaborations and initiating new projects.56
The parallel with Koščević’s act of disobedience in *Postal Packages* is telling. In both cases – and less explicitly in *October 75* – we have a curator refusing to exhibit, an exhibition-maker launching a boycott on any further exhibition until basic questions about the purpose of art within established social, political, and economic relations are addressed, until a “moral contract” that clearly defined an oppositional role for art is articulated and endorsed. They each showed how a curator’s responsibility is not only to exhibit, but also to not exhibit. Their acts of censorship were not directed against the freedom of artistic (or any other) expression, but were overt political statements that called for a reconsideration of art and curation in the broader social relations that govern the conditions of im/material labor and the distribution of wealth.

Interestingly, Biard noted that the *Strike* was initiated precisely after she moved back to Zagreb from Paris in 1975, after which she occasionally visited Paris, where she witnessed the increasing power of the market and art institutions. The vantage point of the periphery, which starkly contrasted to the French context, is what enabled her to see with more clarity the paradoxes of conceptual art and the art system. In 1979, the Belgrade artist Goran Đorđević initiated another boycott gesture: the *International Strike of Artists*, for which he sent out letters to Yugoslav as well as international artists and called for an end to any activities
within the art system. The responses he received from most international artists revealed that they considered his idea to be meaningless and naïve. However, it is precisely this “ naïveté,” this stubborn rejection of the art system that was the basis of La Galerie des Locataires’ strike, that can be traced throughout many other examples within New Artistic and Curatorial Practice. Yugoslav artists and curators of the period ultimately dared to pose questions about alternative ways to create and curate art, either by searching for an “outside” (as in the case of La Galerie), or pursuing autonomy from “inside” a state institution and the ideological framework of socialist self-management (as in the case of the Student Centers).

Historicization and the Political Potentials of Curatorial Practice
Želimir Koščević, Dunja Blažević, and Ida Biard shared a politics and methodology that eschewed the logic of curation as a stable exhibition of art. Their projects did not merely show dematerialized or critical art; they searched for modes of dematerialization, critique, and intervention in their own right. Curation for them became about idea and action, with all the political implications and potentials that such transformation from object to praxis, from commodity to activation and activist gesture, implied. They did not assume the role of the artist, or merely copy existing artistic procedures, but rather they radically undermined the borders that have traditionally divided artists and curators. Their projects engaged in the processes of translation, which, as Benjamin warned, is not a mere transfer of information or a message, but is a transformation of both the original and the translating languages. In Rudolf Panwitz’s words, which Benjamin famously quoted, “The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.”

We may understand Koščević, Blažević, and Biard as early examples of curators who rejected the domestication of artists and artistic practices into a fluent and stable vocabulary of curatorial discourse, into institutional and market-driven agendas or the easy flow of global capital, where the art world reveals itself to be nothing but a micro-model of global geopolitical and economic relations of power. Through gestures directed against artists’ complicity with the spectacle- and career-oriented world of art, they also challenged the persistent sacrality of art creation and the artwork – which was deconstructed but not annulled by conceptualism – proving that curation (and other practices, by implication) yields equal creative and political potential.

Instead of perpetuating artist-curator dichotomies and warning about a newly arisen “power” of the curator (presently a prominent issue), we should advocate for a radical interrelationality between these two positions, which ultimately means a critical deconstruction and rearticulation of both. Such an approach could enable an exploration of the ways in which artistic and curatorial practices may be mutually empowering and
transformative, in order to resist “preserving” the state in which the art world “happens to be.” This, however, should not be understood as an annihilation of differences between artistic and curatorial practices. Nor should the constant process of translation be understood in this way – especially not today, when there is so much hype around curation, which itself relies upon perpetuating a limited set of methods and discursive mannerisms. If we were to characterize La Galerie des Locataires, October 75, Postal Packages, and The Exhibition of Women and Men – as well as other projects that are similar to them – as artistic endeavors that have eliminated the distinctions between artists and curators, we would negate the transformative political potentials of curatorial practice. At the same time, we would allow curatorial practice to hide behind the alibi of its dependence on art production and institutional frameworks. Critical examples of the dematerialization and politicization of the exhibition in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s, as modes of institutional critique, reveal to us the transformative power and responsibilities that curators still have in our present moment. This is why the historicization and theorization of exhibitionary practices is so crucial: to establish a foundation and wider political significance for working in the present.

Notes:

1 Altshuler (1998), page 236. Altshuler also refers to “dematerialization” in relation to curatorial practices of the 1960s and 1970s, citing projects by Lucy Lippard, Seth Siegelaub, and Harald Szeemann.

2 “It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.” Benjamin (2004), page 82.

3 New Artistic Practice was informed by its opposition to the modernist understanding of art as an autonomous and self-contained field, as well as the bourgeois approach to art as a source of aesthetic enjoyment. Instead, it called for a decommodification and democratization of art, a critique of institutions and the art system, as well as active engagement of art in social processes and ideological discourses. Some of its protagonists include: Sanja Iveković, Mladen Stilinović, Goran Trbuljak, Braco Dimitrijević, Tomislav Gotovac, OHO Group, Marina Abramović, Raša Todosijević, Goran Đorđević, and others. See Susovski (1978).
It should be noted that, unlike the Zagreb Student Center that was formed already in 1957, the Belgrade Student Cultural Center evolved as a direct response to the 1968 student protests.

See Prelom kolektiv’s interview with Šuvaković in Prelom kolektiv (2008), page 85. Šuvaković refers to a statement by Achille Bonito Oliva who, during a visit to Belgrade, said that the Center’s activities were admirable, but represented a sort of reservation, in which the state enclosed them in order to prevent greater impact. As insightful and provocative as such interpretations are, they are themselves conditioned by a limited, if never explained, notion of “impact.”

See for example Vesić (2012) and her analysis of the SKC Belgrade as a performative “institution-in-movement” or “institution-movement,” which challenged the stability of the boundary between the state and self-organization. See also Denegri (2003); Koščević (1978).

For example, Szeemann (1968).

For an extended discussion of how dematerialized art has been commodified, including how artistic critiques of capitalism have been integrated into its systems, see Lippard (1997), pages 263-64. See also Boltanski and Chiapello (2005).

See for example Susovski (1978; 1982). Activities of the Student Center Gallery in Zagreb have been documented regularly through the Gallery’s Newspaper, as well in the book published on the tenth anniversary of the gallery (Koščević 1975). See also Koščević (1978).


Matičević (1978), page 23.

Many other projects shared similar ideological propositions, as well as the idea of artistic and exhibition practice as a socially-constructive and transformative activity. This is primarily the case in numerous exhibition projects realized in public space and the city in the beginning of the 1970s in Zagreb, whose history and present repercussions could be read through a line of curatorial practice as a democratization of art by going beyond gallery walls and activating direct participation of citizens. These are, for example, the section Proposition at the 1971 Zagreb Salon (“The City as the Scene of Visual Happening”), the exhibition Possibilities, organized by the Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb, 1971, the project Popular
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Festivities in New Zagreb (1975) which could be read as precursor of community art in the local context. Even this short list reveals that curatorial practice is not merely a presentation of art, but one that often instigates the very production of individual artworks as well as whole artistic trends (for example, the famous works Landed Sun by Ivan Kožarić or Accidental Passer-By by Braco Dimitrijević have been produced as part of the above projects and would not be possible without wider institutional support and critical and ideological valorization of such art.

Another potential line could be formulated as curatorial interventions into art critique and art history, encompassing numerous projects that set relevant ground for interpreting and historicizing new artistic practices simultaneously as they developed, or that included some earlier phenomena in the interpretative and ideological framework of “new art.” These are exhibitions such as Examples of Conceptual Art in Yugoslavia, by Ješa Denegri and Biljana Tomić, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade (1971); Documents on Post-Object Phenomena in Yugoslav Art 1968-1973, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade (1973); Gorgona by Nena Dimitrijević, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb (1977), and key exhibitions that historicized the new art: New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1968-1978, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb (1978), Innovations in Croatian Art of the Seventies, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb (1982), New Art in Serbia 1970-1980, Individuals, groups, phenomena, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade (1983).


14 Moderna Museet had, under the directorship of Hultén, among the most experimental approach to exhibition making. See Obrist (1997).

15 Excerpt from the exhibition statement addressing the visitors, published in the gallery’s newspaper. Novine Galerije SC (1968/69), page 21. The text is not signed, but according to Koščević, it was written in collaboration with Vjeran Zuppa.

16 This refers primarily to the work of Braco Dimitrijević and Goran Trbuljak, both concerned with the mechanisms by which something becomes art or someone becomes an artist within the art system.

17 Cited in Lippard (1997), page IX.
This project could also be read from the perspective of historical and ideological propositions of exhibition, or what Tony Bennett calls the exhibitionary complex. Referring to the first world exhibitions in the 19th century, Bennett discusses the architecture of the exhibition and its panoptic qualities, framing the audience as those who observe but are also being observed. Bennett (2005), pages 58-80.

The Seventh Paris Biennial was also presented as a major break with its previous editions, by focusing on more experimental approaches to making art. Three main programs were presented at the biennial: conceptual art, hyperrealism, and interventions. The mail art section (“Envoi”), according to the organizers, was an “annexed section” gathering projects that are “close to,” but are not quite, conceptual art. See Boudaille (1971).

See Denegri (2003), pages 27-29.

Novine Galerije Nova (1972), page 135. My translation. It is published next to an unsigned text that reads as a curatorial statement of the section “Postal Packages” (Envoi) at the Seventh Paris Biennial. The text is in fact composed of excerpts from Jean-Marc Poinot’s “La communication à distance et l’objet esthétique,” published in the framework of the Biennial. See Poinot (1971).

Novine Galerije Nova (1972), page 135.

Novine Galerije Nova (1972), page 135.


Venuti (2005), page 19 and onwards.

“Conceptual art, one might say, is art about the cultural act of definition – paradigmatically, but by no means exclusively, the definition of ‘art.’” Osbourne (2011), page 14. In fact, we are dealing here with the appropriation of critical and theoretical discourse by art, or their translation into artistic practice.

Buchloh (1990), page 118. Here we could also talk about translations of the administrative language into artistic practice.

Cited in Buchloh (1990), page 118.
39 Vidokle (2010).

30 Novine Galerije Nova (1968/69), page 21. Here the reference is to the various magazines with erotic content that started appearing in Yugoslavia during this period.

31 Denegri (2003), page 23.

32 For an analysis of representations of femininity in popular culture as a sign of the threat of invasion of Western decadence, see Bago (2013).

33 Vesić (2012), page 32.

34 There are two versions of the history of October 75. One claims that it evolved without individual authorship and under the influence of the discursive practice of the Art & Language group and their presentation in Belgrade in 1975. The other refers to the exhibition as initiative of Dunja Blažević, also according to her own testimony in the interview given in the framework of the project SKC in ŠKUC. See Prelom kolektiv (2008), pages 82-83.


36 Vesić (2012), pages 35 and 43.

37 Vesić (2012), page 35.

38 “In other words, one may say that the protagonists of October 75 used Kardelj’s self-management as a starting point, embodied in a critique of the state as the constitutive element of state praxis, in order to actually criticize the state, or rather the state institution of art.” Vesić (2012), page 45.


41 “Socialist modernism” is used to refer to Yugoslav modernist, i.e. autonomous, art supported by the state – unlike most other socialist countries that advocated socialist-realist art, or art directly engaged in the building of socialism.
The form included an image of the gallery exterior, the question, and the three available answers (yes, no, and maybe), as well as the space for the signatures of the gallery director and the “anonymous artist.”

It is thus Biard’s response to Trbuljak’s anonymous artist Paris query in November 1972 that can be read, as I have suggested elsewhere, as the marker of this synergy, a symbolic “initiatory encounter” that shaped La Galerie’s entire mission: “to construe a gallery as a space without walls, and one of lived experience; to renounce the system of art driven by spectacle and the market; to profess that an ‘outside’ was possible; and to constantly invite others to join this pursuit.” From a text-based work by Goran Trbuljak. Cited in Trbuljak (1973), no page numbers.

Analogously, the activities of La Galerie were regularly announced in the Student Center’s newspaper, and there were a number of direct collaborations as well: La Galerie’s project in the Zagreb “Balkan” cinema (1975) was made in collaboration with the SC Gallery, which was also a publisher, in 1975, of the book documenting Biard and Trbuljak’s collaborative project, The French Window.

Novine Galerije SC (1973), page 2. Trbuljak had already introduced the theme of opportunity in an earlier work: in July 1972, he performed in Zagreb the piece Referendum, in which he asked the passers-by to vote whether he was or was not an artist. The work was performed under the motto that the “artist was the one whom the society grants with an opportunity to be an artist.” Cited in Trbuljak (1973), no page numbers.

Even when a market can be identified as having developed in Yugoslavia, the threat does not extend to the New Art Practices, but to conventional art forms and genres connected mostly to paintings for home interiors.

For an analysis of La Galerie des Locataires as an alternative concept of autonomous space of merging life and work, as well as its work with artists through a constant negotiation of contracts of hospitality, see Bago (2012).

Dematerialization and Politicization of the Exhibition

51 French Window (1973).


53 My translation of the text from an example of a signed moral contract; digital reproduction from my research archive.

54 See note directly above.

55 Simplon-Express (1989), page 93.

56 In June 2012 the Galerie realized the project Simplon-Express: the Return, taking place in a train from Zagreb to Paris and referring to the journey that took place in the opposite direction in 1989 (Simplon-Express).


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(Re)Staging Art History: Jeff Koons in Versailles

Ronit Milano

In 2008, Jeff Koons exhibited a controversial retrospective of his work in the Palace of Versailles located about 20 kilometers (12.5 miles) southwest of Paris. Jeff Koons Versailles marked the beginning of an ongoing practice: each year Versailles now hosts a show of a major contemporary artist throughout spaces that already feature important works of art from previous centuries. While such encounters between the art of the past and that of the present are motivated by political and economic concerns, they also provide opportunities to restage – and to reread – the history of art. Indeed, the display of contemporary art in historic sites has become a prominent phenomenon in recent years. In addition to the “Versailles platform,” one may recall Tino Sehgal’s 2008 retrospective in the eighteenth-century Villa Reale in Milan, Susie MacMurray’s 2010 Promenade in the eighteenth-century Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, Wim Delvoye’s 2012 Wim Delvoye—Au Louvre in various locations of the Louvre Museum such as the Napoleon III apartments, and recurring encounters between contemporary art and older architectural settings, such as the Monumenta exhibitions in the Grand Palais in Paris. Despite the overwhelming differences between these various exhibitions, they can all offer new readings of the history of art fashioned by how they re/stage the past and present. Such a methodology is examined in this essay, harnessing Koons’ exhibition in Versailles as a case study.
Donald Preziosi, in his essay “Art History and Museology: Rendering the Visible Legible,” points to the dual nature of the museum (art) object as simultaneously referential and differential. He suggests that museums “are not simply utopian but rather heterotopic sites within social space,” and that museum objects operate “(a) as documentary indices of a (narrative) history … and (b) as simulacra of a rich cornucopia of subject-positions.” Museums are heterotopias because of their different temporal parameters – particularly how they often set out to accumulate the past – and because of the multi-layered contexts connected to the objects exhibited in them, which can bring together in a single place various other places that are often incompatible with one another. Objects in museums refer to specific historical (social, cultural, geographic) contexts of production, yet at the same time they can be reread according to a particular (and, some will add, ever-changing) array of staging and viewing conditions. Whereas Preziosi focused on a historic collection of works of art on display, I employ this theoretical framework to examine the ways in which contemporary art installed in historic sites refashions the heterotopias as well as the history of art. Both the historic space and the contemporary works – in this case, the Palace of Versailles and Koons’ art – are tied to the specific spatiotemporal conditions of the contexts in which they were made and are being displayed. Yet, when the objects of the past and of the present are juxtaposed, these spatiotemporal conditions cease to seem hegemonic and call for new readings of the art, as well as of both history and art history.

In the analysis that follows, I focus on five of Koons’ installations in the King’s Suite in the Palace of Versailles that generated a dialogue between Koons’ art and works commissioned by Louis XIV and his successors. Despite the extensive polemic and the controversies that swirled around that exhibition, its juxtaposition of past and present has not yet been analyzed in a scholarly study. The underlying idea of a retrospective usually suggests a diachronic and progressive presentation of an artist’s oeuvre. However, this approach conflicts with the new meanings acquired by contemporary works from their encounters with the histories and aesthetic themes of the spaces in which they are displayed. Indeed, in this retrospective, Koons’ artworks were not exhibited chronologically but were rather chosen through a consideration of the thematic, aesthetic, and historic characteristics of each hall, with a single object displayed in each one.

It is important to note that Koons personally supervised the installation of the works and was responsible for most of the curatorial decisions. We can thus understand his project as a twenty-first century expression of the artist-as-curatorial phenomenon. In the Hercules Salon, the first hall inside the palace, Koons displayed one of his most celebrated pieces, Balloon Dog (Magenta) (Figure 1). This sculpture, conceptualized and constructed in 1994 as part of Koons’ Celebration series, was originally interpreted as related to an experience of
Figure 1: Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog (Magenta)* (1994–2000). Mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent colored coating, 121 x 143 x 45 inches. François Pinault Foundation. Photo: Laurent Lecat © Jeff Koons. Used with permission.
transiency. The reference to a rubber balloon, which could explode at any moment, as a modern emblem of *memento mori* stood in contrast to the work’s large size and evident strength. The enduring, shining stainless steel, which reflects its surroundings, is actually empty inside and evokes dialectic relationships between existence and eternality, between mortality and ephemeral realities.

Setting *Balloon Dog* aside for a moment, let us examine the Hercules Salon, which, as it stands, embodies a multi-layered history and art history. Once a part of the royal chapel, the room was designed at the behest of Louis XIV, beginning in 1710 by the architect Robert de Cotte, in order to properly host one of the King’s great masterpieces, Paolo Veronese’s *The Feast in the House of Simon* (1570). This sixteenth-century painting was given to Louis XIV in 1664 by the Venetian Doge who wanted the French King to support him in a war against the Turks. Work on the room was, however, interrupted by the King’s death in 1715 and recommenced only in 1725, during the reign of Louis XV. In 1730, Veronese’s painting was brought from the Louvre to hang in the Hercules Salon. Opposite *The Feast in the House of Simon*, above the fireplace, hangs another painting by Veronese, *Rebecca and Eliezer* (c. 1580), which was purchased by Louis XIV. The fireplace, in turn, is adorned with bronze Rococo sculptural elements by Antoine Vassé. The room was completed in 1736 with the ceiling painting by François Lemoyne, *The Apotheosis of Hercules*. The four corners are decorated with representations of the Four Princely Virtues – Justice, Fortitude, Constancy, and Courage – separated by putti pointing to the Labors of Hercules. In the center of the ceiling, Hercules arrives in his chariot on Mount Olympus, after his successful labors raised him to the rank of a god. The painting was a metaphorical allusion to the merits of the French King. Compliant with this show of power, the *Apotheosis* is the largest ceiling painted on canvas in Europe at 480 square meters.

The Hercules Salon thus offers a hybrid visualization of history, as well as of art history. It refers to the political status of Louis XIV, implying his power through the elaborate sculpture, through the ceiling analogy to Hercules, and through Veronese’s painting. Within the interlinked narrative of political history and art history it recalls, through the Italian invocation, Louis XIV’s ambition to turn Paris and Versailles into “the new Rome.” The shift of artistic dominance from the Italian arena to the French one under Louis XIV’s rule is demonstrated by the Veronese paintings that hang in the Hercules Salon under Lemoyne’s grandiose ceiling – attesting to a French victory. At the same time, this room evokes more general notions of power and glory, alluded to by the ancient Greek mythology adopted by the French Sun King. The narrative of ancient history, politics, and virtue is embedded in the history and mythology of Louis XIV’s own royal line, the Bourbon monarchy, which was exploited also by Louis XV in an attempt to preserve his predecessor’s image and status. To construct a cohesive historical narrative in the viewer’s mind is not simple; even within the
French arena alone this Salon bears indicators of at least two substantial periods (excluding the contemporary period to which French viewers belong), two kings, and two artistic styles. The learned viewer is confronted with: France at its artistic zenith, but with the parallel gradual weakening of the French political system throughout the eighteenth century; the powerful model of absolute monarch and the beginning of the fall of the Bourbon dynasty; and the extraordinary ceiling of Lemoyne, aimed to shadow Veronese’s works and yet with Lemoyne’s suicide that followed the completion of the painting. All contribute to an environment that simultaneously recalls victory and failure.

It is with these intricate art historical narratives that Koons dialogues through Balloon Dog. Set in the Hercules Salon, this monumental dog, a mundane image ostensibly made out of an elongated balloon, was charged with new meanings from the extrinsic conditions specific to its setting. Referring to the stainless-steel sculpture, Koons declared, “It’s a very optimistic piece… but at the same time it’s a Trojan horse. There are other things that are inside.”

Balloon Dog’s sense of optimism, its invocation of childhood, playfulness, and joyous events, operates in this room in a continuous manner, offering an aesthetic linkage between the Baroque/Rococo setting and itself. However, Koons’ reference to the Trojan horse seems puzzling at first: does his work declare war on the others in this room? If so, we must take into consideration that the installation in the Hercules Salon opened the exhibition within the Palace, which suggests that all of the other installations might wage war on the museum environment in some way. We must acknowledge, too, how Balloon Dog offers a thematic continuity; it juxtaposes Louis XIV’s and Louis XV’s challenges to Italian Renaissance art vis-à-vis the modern French art of their times with Koons’ challenges of Baroque and Rococo art vis-à-vis the contemporary art of his own period. This hall thus presents a historiographic alignment that makes possible an inter-textual dialogue between presents and pasts.

Jeffrey Koons was born in York, Pennsylvania in 1955. As a young man, he copied Rococo works to sell in his father’s furniture store. Concerning this period, Koons notes: “Art helped give me confidence… Art was something I could do better. It gave me a sense of self.” Koons has used the term “optimistic” to refer to his art on multiple occasions, implicitly tying his artistic tendencies to the carefree and joyous nature of the Rococo. Nonetheless, in spite (or because) of its fame and popularity, Koons’ art has been extremely controversial. He has, on many occasions, been accused of charlatanism, banal use of appropriation, and self-promotion. His works often betray their carefree and playful traits, and as such they are an easy target for criticism and disdain. Yet this is precisely the point that makes the analogy between Koons’ art and eighteenth-century art – with particular emphasis on the playful nature of Rococo tendencies – so fascinating. As noted by Lucy Davis, he “blends the grandeur of traditional art with the primitive thirst for delight.”
Koons’ description of his personal formation is indeed central to how others read his art.\textsuperscript{16} And it is of major importance for the interpretation of the Koons-Versailles exhibition that the flourishing of Rococo art around the middle of the eighteenth century historically paralleled the formation of the individual and of the “self” as a Modern concept.\textsuperscript{17} These developments were crucial to the destruction of the absolute monarchy and are still fundamental in the modern democratic perception of the potential of every individual to govern. In the Hercules hall, then, Koons provides viewers with an art historical dialogue between the objects as well as with his own gaze into the past that is embedded in his personality and in his nature as an artist.

Thus, on the one hand, in the Hercules Salon \textit{Balloon Dog} pays homage to its (art) histories, reflecting and re-reflecting the room on the shiny colored steel. In this way the Baroque and Rococo setting is a physical part of the contemporary sculpture and is conceptually embedded in it. On the other hand, the size and physical strength of the stainless-steel dog imply power and durability, which stood in comparison to – if not seeking to surpass – the eternal aspiration of the Palace of Versailles and of the cultural and artistic heritages that the Palace memorializes. \textit{Balloon Dog} acknowledged and conserved the greatness and endurance of Baroque and Rococo art, while it confronted them both from a contemporary perspective, one informed by knowledge that can only come from hindsight.

The installation in the Diana Salon, Koons’ 1988 sculptural group \textit{Ushering in Banality} (Figure 2), enables an extended rereading of art histories and personal histories.\textsuperscript{18} The famous marble bust of Louis XIV created by the Italian sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini in 1665 stands against the main wall.\textsuperscript{19} Its placement between two ancient Roman busts led to one of the major aesthetic discourses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: “The Quarrel of Ancient versus Moderns.”\textsuperscript{20} While major French voices within the \textit{Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture} supported a classicist style, Bernini’s bust, which was commissioned by the Royal Court, represented a modern style that reflected the “genius” and “originality” of the artist as well as a preference for realistic design over the idealist-classicist style.\textsuperscript{21} Bernini’s stance with regard to the debate was clear: modern art can be, and in some cases is, superior to ancient art.\textsuperscript{22} This declaration of the superiority of modern art over the venerated art of the past was enhanced by the placement of Louis XIV’s bust on a plinth higher than the pedestals of the Roman busts that flank it. Here, too, the reading of the artwork is shaped by a rereading of earlier art, recognized as the glorious source of Western culture.

\textit{Ushering in Banality}, when exhibited in this context, enhances the practice of rereading art histories via the repositioning of past and present, particularly of ancient and modern. The
piece revealed a new layer of modernism that positioned Bernini’s bust and the ancient statues (its sculptural forerunners) as the sources from which Western contemporary art evolved. The notion of childhood memories and, more generally, of the past as founts of
contemporary identity endowed *Ushering in Banality* with new meanings that were not likely to be attributed to it outside of the Palace of Versailles. This work, which was based on a photograph by the artist Barbara Campbell, was one of several pieces for which Koons was accused of plagiarism.\(^{23}\) The reception of this sculpture was thus preoccupied with issues of intellectual property and authorship, as well as the aesthetic discourse on originality and appropriation. At the same time, however, the work invoked Koons’ image as a youth – the very youth who was copying the paintings of Boucher and Fragonard, to be sold in his father’s shop. Koons the emulator, the appropriator, is thus leveled in this room with Bernini – the man who preached the incessant copying of ancient works but always added a modern and original touch to his works. Koons joins Bernini in being a major participant in the art historical discourse of emulation-appropriation-originality. Whereas this discourse is conventionally associated with the twentieth century, in this hall Koons presents it as a thread that runs throughout the Early Modern period as well.

The sculptural group shows a child pushing a pig from its rear, assisted by two cherubs, one on either side of the animal. Koons identifies the child as a self-portrait of the artist as a boy.\(^{24}\) His explicit purpose was to evoke ideas of childhood and playfulness – ideas accentuated by the original function of the Diana Salon as Louis XIV’s billiard room. Moreover, Koons ties the work to memory and the perception of childhood as the early source of the adult self. There is, however, another “earlier source,” another level of “childhood,” in the Palace: in addition to the personal sphere, in which the artist identifies his selfhood through the child in the sculptural group, his contemporary piece gestures towards the art of Versailles itself as an earlier source of contemporary art and culture.

*Ushering in Banality* has been recognized by scholars as inspired by the small sculptural groups known as “Hummel Figurines,” which were popular in Europe and North America during the 1930s.\(^{25}\) Hummel groups, in turn, drew on an earlier aesthetic tradition – that of the porcelain groups representing children and the concept of childhood – which became popular in Europe in the eighteenth century.\(^{26}\) The Palace of Versailles itself symbolizes the period’s fascination with childhood. In 1699, when the Palace was being enlarged, Louis XIV commented on one of the reports submitted to him by his chief architect, Jules Hardouin Mansart, “When you come, bring me plans, or at least ideas. Childhood needs to course through every element.”\(^{27}\) The development of new ideas about childhood during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been thoroughly discussed in historical scholarship on the period.\(^{28}\) The imaging of children during that time has also been widely researched by art historians.\(^{29}\) What has received far less attention is the connection between the intense interest in childhood as an autonomic phase in the evolution of man and the development of a new idea of individual selfhood, the Modern self. Within the discourse on
the self, the child became a prefiguration of the adult identity and was perceived as the source from which the constitution of the adult evolved.

Portraits of children were displayed during the eighteenth century as visual representations of their parents’ inner selves. Sculptors such as Jean-Antoine Houdon and Louis-Claude-Antoine Vassé, for instance, regularly exhibited portraits of their children in the Paris Salon as symbols of their own interest in self-exploration.30 Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s 1787 portrait of her daughter Julie (Figure 3) demonstrates that intention.31 As I have shown elsewhere, Vigée-Lebrun designated a central place in her oeuvre to her daughter and to her own essence as a mother, to the extent that in her paintings Julie came to emblematize her mother.32 The artist’s explicit purpose in this painting was to represent her daughter both frontally and in profile. However, on a deeper level, she constructed an interpersonal gaze that involved both Julie and her mother: because the painter and the viewer share the same point of view in relation to the canvas, the mirror, which is aimed at the viewer, displays Vigée-Lebrun’s perspective, gazing at the reflection of her daughter, who represents the painter’s inner and early self.

Figure 3: Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Julie Lebrun (1787). Oil on panel, 28.7 x 23.7 inches. Private collection. Work in the public domain.
Ushering in Banality includes Koons’ own image as an adolescent, thus echoing this Enlightenment discourse on the child and the eighteenth-century exploration of selfhood. Referring to the Banality series in the catalogue of his 1992 exhibition in San Francisco, Koons wrote: “You were a young child and you went to your grandmother’s place and she had this little knickknack, that’s inside you, and that’s part of you. Embrace it…”

Knickknacks, such as the 1930s Hummel figurines that Ushering in Banality cites, carry their own aesthetic histories. Since the second quarter of the eighteenth century, mantels have been populated by garniture – statuettes, decorative clocks, and especially small sculptures made of porcelain or low-cost materials that often depicted groups of children absorbed in play, celebrated philosophers, or the King in the form of a bust. The monumental size of Ushering in Banality, however, breaks with the conventional dimensions of both the Hummel and the eighteenth-century porcelain traditions. Koons positions it as a symbol of power equal or greater to that of Louis XIV’s bust due to its scale, both paying homage to and challenging the superiority of its historical sources. Moreover, whereas the King’s bust radiates solemnity, Ushering in Banality delights in its own status as a playful recollection, in its childish nature, and in the histories embedded within it. The sculptural group violates older social conventions that would have prevented the banal from being displayed in the Palace, a space reserved for greatness, which is a contemporary maneuver made possible in a very different contemporary art system, one that privileges capital, artistic notoriety, and visitor desires over royal aspirations. With Ushering in Banality – and indeed with his entire exhibition – Koons the artist-as-curator thus “ushers in” a critical conceptual dialogue between past and present, repositioning old and new as a part of a present whole, a reconfigured heterotopia.

Excited polemics were in evidence from the earliest stages of Koons’ preparations for the retrospective and continued well after its opening. The gap between the American and the French perspectives, as expressed in critiques and reviews of the exhibition, indicate keen sensitivities and emotional involvement engendered by the intrusion of the iconic American artist into the shrine to the glorious French Enlightenment. In a critique published in Art Review, the American artist and critic Christopher Mooney concluded his comments with the phrase “Vive le Roi” (“Long live the king”), referring to Jeff Koons. To contrast, in the French periodical Le Journal des Arts, Roxana Azimi scorned what she considered to be the overrated value of Koons’ art, insisting that “when Americans love [something], they do not count [the cost],” overlooking the irony of France’s past expenditure on the creation and maintenance of Versailles. In a more analytic essay published in Espace Sculpture, Nycole Paquin argued that this rather brave curatorial project bred a monstrous spectacle that resulted from a sort of nuclear clash between different types of arts and cultures.
Regarding the Koons-Versailles exhibition in a national-cultural perspective, the artist first invoked the tension between American contemporary culture and French glorified history with his installation of *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (Figure 4) in the Venus Salon, the hall preceding the Diana Salon. Jean Warin’s monumental statue of Louis XIV dressed as a Roman emperor, sculpted between 1665 and 1670, when the King was about thirty years old, stands within a niche at the center of the main southern wall. As was the case with Bernini’s bust, Warin’s sculpture furthered the discourse of “Ancients versus Moderns” by adding an elaborate Baroque wig to the King’s classical garb.

When installed in a hall that celebrates Louis XIV as a victorious king with historical imagery of heroism and sovereignty, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* became an American parallel in porcelain. Koons created this sculpture in 1988, when – similar to Louis XIV in Warin’s image – Michael Jackson was exactly thirty years old. The American star, then at the height of his success, was known as “The King of Pop.” Koons therefore juxtaposed a king of contemporary culture with a king whose reign is identified with the dawn of the French
Enlightenment, the source or starting point of modern Western culture. The porcelain makes reference to that period through its evocation of the popular porcelain figurines, blown up to a monumental size, as in the case of Ushering in Banality. The statue’s gold and ivory white echo the colors of the room in which it was placed, combining the white marble of Louis XIV’s statue with the gold tone that dominates the hall.

Koons’ intervention into the space of exhibition reactivates ancient, modern, and contemporary elements. Michael Jackson’s pose imitates The Dying Gaul (Figure 5), the well-known ancient Hellenistic sculpture commissioned between 230 and 220 BC by Attalus I of Pergamon to celebrate his victory over the Celtic Galatians in Anatolia. Michael Jackson’s image, when paralleled with that of Louis XIV, echoes the French King’s victory over Spain in the War of Devolution in 1667-1668, as did Warin’s sculpture, which was designed for the room that was built at that point in time. Nonetheless, this glorious French victory is downplayed by Koons’ sculpture and its response to the existing displays: Jackson is imaged in a lively manner, as if leveraging the brave and celebrated essence of the Gaul who is portrayed in the ancient prototype as nearly dead. In Versailles, Jackson’s image

Figure 5: After Epigonos, Dying Gaul (1st century BC). Marble, h. 36.6 inches. Rome, Capitoline Museums. Work in the public domain.
paid homage to Louis XIV’s past victories, but at the same time it suggested the glory of present-day America, considered by some to be a “barbaric” or crude culture in comparison with “genteel” France. The inclusion of Bubbles the chimpanzee adds another layer to this hierarchy of gentility and barbarism by suggesting parallels between France-America relations and man-monkey ones. Michael Jackson, moreover, was whitened in the statue by Koons to render him as a member of the social stratum appropriate for kingship. This sculpture, which invokes ideas of victory and dominance, thus accumulates new meanings when displayed in this densely layered room and in proximity to Warin’s statue. We can see two threads emerging from these analogies, one woven into the discourse on past and present and the other into comparisons between a new American kingship and an older French one. Recalling Preziosi’s perception of the museum art object as both referential and differential, one realizes the particularly intricate nature of Koons’ works in this specific context: they constitute a reference to contemporary art, while they embody (and offer to the viewer) a reference to their sources (namely, the older French works) and are synchronically merged with and differentiated from them.

The conflict that Koons established in the first hall with Balloon Dog reached its zenith in the two last halls of the King’s Suite. In the Mercury Salon, the American artist installed a stainless-steel bust of Louis XIV that he created in 1986 as part of his Statuary series (Figure

Figure 6: Jeff Koons, Louis XIV (1986). Stainless steel, 46 x 27 x 15 inches. Athens, The Dakis Joannou Collection. Photo: Laurent Lecat © Jeff Koons. Used with permission.
The choice of this particular hall for his statue was not coincidental, for this was the room in which Louis XIV’s body lay in state for a week after his death in September 1715. On the wall, immediately above the spot where Koons placed his bust, we find a portrait of Louis XV’s wife, Maria Leszczyńska, painted by Louis Tocqué in 1740. The queen, who is imaged alone, is pointing to an elaborate crown on the table next to her.

It is significant that the crown, which according to conventional scholarly interpretations was her own, is neither on her head nor presents an implicit reference to the King who is often alluded to in such portraits in the form of a bust in the background. In this case, the crown’s position on the table implies the absence of the King and emphasizes its conceptual character as an emblem of power and glory. One can identify elements in this room that symbolize the absence or death of Louis XIV and the crowning of a successor. That idea was enhanced by Koons’ sculpture of Louis XIV being wrought in stainless steel. On the one hand, stainless steel evokes iconic stereotypes of power and sovereignty, but, on the other, it is a material identified with industrialization, the working class, and the French Revolution, and thus with the fall of the Bourbon dynasty at the end of the eighteenth century. Through these three elements — the invocation of Louis XIV’s death and the painted crown awaiting a successor, which were already present in the space, and the addition of a proletarian material by Koons — the museumized Mercury Salon that documents the end of Louis XIV’s reign in Versailles becomes reconceptualized with references to cultural contexts that were systematically excluded from the Palace. The bust’s utilitarian quality also recalls the transient nature of the Sun King’s symbols and the worldly limits of his wealth and power, such as the magnificent silver works of art that adorned the Palace of Versailles until 1689, when he was forced to melt them down to finance the War of the League of Augsburg.

In the next room, the Apollo Salon, which is the most luxurious in the Palace of Versailles, Koons’ can be read as declaring his nominee for a successor to the crown. Here, in what was at one time the throne room, the prime symbol of royal continuity, eternity, and power, Koons installed a self-portrait bust from his 1991 *Made in Heaven* series (Figure 7), which presents himself through a meticulous working of the marble as a Classical hero with a bare chest and idealized features. The bust is adjacent to the main wall, facing the visitors’ lane and flanked by two elaborate gold standing lamps. A glorious carpet hangs on the wall behind the bust, functioning as its background. This juxtaposition invokes the memory of the throne, which during Louis XIV’s reign was placed on a platform covered by a Persian carpet with a gold background.

The point of view represented by the single relevant image Koons chose to display on his website is equally suggestive (Figure 8). The bust is shown in profile, with Hyacinthe
Figure 8: The Apollo Salon, featuring Koons’ Self-Portrait (see Figure 7) and in the background Louis XIV’s painted portrait by Hyacinthe Rigaud (1701). Oil on canvas, 80.7 × 59.8 inches. Versailles, Musée national des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo: Laurent Lecat © Jeff Koons. Used with permission

Rigaud’s famous 1701 portrait of Louis XIV en face in the background. In terms of the composition of the photograph, Louis XIV faces the sculpture of Koons; King Louis’ arm stretches to his right, again in Koons’ direction, leaning on a wand pointed at the royal crown that is on an upholstered stool. The crown is thus positioned between Louis XIV and Koons, while the King is turning toward the artist, and Koons, who is facing Louis XIV within the photographic composition, has an elevated head and closed eyes, as if awaiting a divine coronation.

Koons’ self-positioning as a king was enhanced by the way in which the artist-curator chose to display his self-portrait. Whereas the bust was originally created with a simple thin base, for the installation in Versailles Koons sculpted a marble pedestal that is almost identical to the one that holds Bernini’s marble bust of Louis XIV in the Diana Salon. The imitation of the latter – in height, design, decorative elements, material (the actual marble from which the bust is made), and the elevated posture of the head – suggest an explicit analogy between the image of Louis XIV and that of Koons, the new king of Western art. In an interview with Laurent Le Bon, one of the two curators of the retrospective, Koons admitted that the reference to Bernini’s bust and pedestal was intended to “set up a dialogue with the portrait of Louis XIV.” But Koons had already expressed grandiose aspirations long before this visual conversation, declaring in 1992: “My art and my life are totally one. I
have everything that I want at my disposal. I have my platform, I have the attention, and my voice can be heard. This is the time for Jeff Koons.  

There is yet another meaning to the self-portrait that is relevant to the construction of identity suggested in Versailles. When he created this bust as part of the *Made in Heaven* series, Koons did not initially refer to the image of Louis XIV that was invoked in Versailles; rather, the sculpture alluded to the image of another glorified French sovereign, Napoleon Bonaparte. Koons designed the bust identically in height to the famous figure of Napoleon known as *The Apotheosis of Napoleon I* (Figure 9), sculpted by the Dane Bertel Thorvaldsen around 1830. Koons appropriated Thorvaldsen’s neoclassical style in order to represent himself and his art as virtuous, similarly featuring a bare chest and an elaborate base. The overall composition was borrowed, but with the eagle, a conventional symbol of national power, replaced by crystals directed diagonally upward, repeating the angle of the bird’s stretched-out wings.

![Figure 9: Workshop of Bertel Thorvaldsen, The Apotheosis of Napoleon I (c. 1830). Marble, h. 37.5 inches. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Ben Weider Collection, Montreal © Photo: MMFA, Christine Guest. Used with permission](image-url)

France, the spiritual mother of twentieth-century art and culture, historically lost its crown to the United States. The American position in Western art became stronger in the 1930s and 1940s, thanks in large part to the widespread interest in Abstract Expressionism that emerged from New York City, as well as the country’s successes in the two World Wars.
Indeed, America saw itself as a hero that saved the world from evil powers in the wars. Whereas in earlier European culture heroism was personified by the king or sovereign, in the democratic United States heroes derived from the cultural sphere. Around the time that New York became the art world’s center, the most famous painters, particularly Jackson Pollock, were consistently portrayed as heroic, as “action painters.” Similarly, Superman, Captain America, and other comic book characters flooded the country’s visual productions. The cultural superhero, venerated by the people, became a figure with a public responsibility. Reexamining the crystals in Koons’ self-portrait suggests that they are made of the material associated with Superman known as kryptonite. Reading these crystals as kryptonite explains the substitution of the eagle’s wings, which symbolize the ability to fly, and endows the figure with divine traits.\(^5\)

Yet such a reading raises an internal complexity that is relevant to the operation of Koons’ self-portrait in Versailles: Superman’s planet was made of kryptonite, hence pointing to home, childhood, or a source, but kryptonite is also Superman’s Achilles’ heel, the material that destabilizes, weakens, and robs him of his superhuman powers. Kryptonite can be seen as the memory that comes from an individual’s source and destabilizes his current personality or selfhood. Invoking the myth of Superman, Koons’ relation to Napoleon thus not only exploited the American ethos of the superhero but also acknowledged the internal complexity of an individual’s relationship with the past. Moreover, whereas kryptonite weakens Superman, it gives an ordinary man supernatural powers. Therefore, in the context of Versailles, Koons can be perceived as robbing Louis XIV of his strength to become the new king and hero who will save his people from the distress caused to it by the Bourbon monarchy. The bust thus embodies the shift from France to the United States as the Western center of art and culture on multiple levels, a gesture consistent with the interventions the artist made in the other halls.

*Self-Portrait* concludes the narrative woven throughout the king’s suite, and in it Koons’ eyes are closed. A part of the *Made in Heaven* series, it was originally designed to give worldly images characteristics of the sublime, something that is so large, excessive, or wondrous that it is ultimately unrepresentable. The shut eyes, which convey a meditative state, were charged with additional meaning in Versailles: Koons’ gaze is directed inward, toward his inner self, his childhood perhaps, the past that generated what he is today. His placement of the work in the Apollo Salon charges this conceptual gaze with another past: France as a source and predecessor for American art and culture, both embraced and confronted. Offering a visual genealogy of dominance – from Louis XIV and Napoleon Bonaparte to Superman, Michael Jackson, and Jeff Koons himself – the American artist saluted the endurance of an older array of artistic and cultural leaders. But above all, *Jeff Koons Versailles*
offers us an alternative way of looking at the history of art through the visual and spatial relationships established by the artist.

Instead of following the conventional parameters of art history, based on the time and place associated with a work of art’s production, such an exhibition offers a unified history, or, better put, a unification of histories. It does not simply suggest that the past is embedded in the present; rather, exhibitions of contemporary art in historic artistic or cultural settings engender new platforms for the reading of art and of art history. These platforms operate as distinct heterotopias that are different from the hegemonic parameters of normal time and place. They invite us to look beyond each work’s isolated ontological meaning, to interpret it based on its visual and spatial relationships to other objects in the room. Will our interpretations of Koons’ art ever be the same now that the show has concluded? How might future artists and curators add meaningful layers to historical spaces such as these? What might a conceptual intervention into the Palace of Versailles, the Villa Reale, or the Louvre look like in 100 years, with or without the contemporary art being placed in such spaces today? Only the reconfigured heterotopias of the future will tell.

Thanks are due to Merav Yerushalmy and Ruth E. Iskin for their valuable comments on various drafts of this article. I am indebted also to the journal’s editors Lucian Gomoll, Lissette Olivares, and Lindsay Kelley, as well as to the anonymous readers, for their insightful reviews and suggestions. I thank the studio of Jeff Koons and The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts for their kind permission to reproduce the works.

Notes:

1 The show was curated by Elena Geuna and Laurent Le Bon. For the exhibition catalogue, see Criqui, et. al. (2008).

2 This phenomenon is still understudied. For some sources on the theme of contemporary art in historic sites, see Gianni Salvaterra (2002), Massimiliano Gioni (2010), Philip Jodidio (2010), and Lianne McTavish (2013).

3 Donald Preziosi (2006), page 53.

4 Preziosi (2006), page 52.

5 For the Foucaultian definition of heterotopia, see Michel Foucault (1986), pages 22-27.
6 The two additional works that Koons exhibited in the King’s Suite – Rabbit (1986, private collection) in the Abundance Salon and Lobster (2003, Collection of Michael and B. Z. Schwartz) in the Mars Salon – are omitted from the discussion so as to avoid repetition of ideas.

7 The exhibition catalogue presents the juxtapositions but avoids a discussion of the synthesis between the particular works and the spaces in which they are placed. See Criqui, et. al. (2008). While disregarding the many non-scholarly reviews of the exhibition, one nonetheless must mention Jailee Rychen’s analysis of it, which focuses on aspects of display: Rychen (2011), pages 1-11. Catherine Wood, writing for Artforum, was the only one, to the best of my knowledge, to discuss the thematic issues arising from the re-contextualization of Koons’ works in Versailles. She argues, “This all added up to a pretty bold proposition about the role of the artist and his relationship to contemporary networks of power. Koons’ statement about the meeting of surfaces implies a disinterested, aesthetic relationship between the Baroque and Rococo of Versailles and his own practice, but such juxtapositions set up somewhat grander claims of equivalence.” Wood (2009), pages 87-88, 90.

8 Writing for the catalogue of another exhibition that juxtaposed contemporary works and older ones, in Liebieghaus, Frankfurt, Babette Babich claimed that such encounters are particularly relevant to Koon’s art, which “works against, with, in dialogue with its spaces.” Babich (2012), page 64.

9 In the exhibition catalogue, Le Bon emphasized this concept, stating that it was Koons himself who set the radical principle of one room, one sculpture and made precise and specific choices of placing a particular work in a certain room. See “Interview with Jeff Koons by Laurent Le Bon: Versailles, July 2008,” in Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 108.

10 Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 134. This work has been mentioned or discussed in many exhibition reviews. See the full bibliography in Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 183, as well as Koons’ website: http://www.jeffkoons.com/ Last accessed on May 15, 2014.


12 Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 134.

Robert Hughes, for example, is one of the most important art critics who referred to Koons as a charlatan, criticizing the commercial nature of his works. See Hughes (2004).

Davis (2012).

Koons’ preoccupation with the representation of himself is evident in his art. He is a slim intellectual known for his classy business suits who likes to represent himself as a porn-movie star or a pumped-up muscleman. In the series Made in Heaven (1991), Koons displayed himself and his wife at that time, Ilona Staller (La Cicciolina), in various erotic poses. Koons also portrayed himself as a pumped-up muscleman in Hulk (Friends) (2004–2012), exhibited in Jeff Koons. The Sculptor, Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, Frankfurt, Germany, 20 June – 23 September 2012.

There is vast body of scholarship on the rise of individual identity in the Age of Enlightenment; for example, see Raymond Martin and John Barresi (2000) and Dror Wahrman (2006).

On this work, see Robert Rosenblum (1992), pages 102-3 and Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 140. For a complete bibliography, see Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 184.

The bibliography on Bernini’s marble bust of Louis XIV is extensive. The most complete study is still Rudolph Wittkower (1951). See also: Wittkower (1955), pages 272-73; Charles Avery (1997), page 93; and Irving Lavin (1999), pages 442-79. For the famous bronze cast in the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, see Andrea Bacchi (2008), pages 266-69.

For the aesthetic aspects of this quarrel during the French Enlightenment, see June Hargrove (1990).

Such a notion is also apparent, for example, in Bernini’s addition of the modern mattress, while restoring an ancient sculpture of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite in 1622 from Scipione Borghese’s collection (Paris, Musée du Louvre). Traditionally, the figure would be placed on a rocky, natural surface, as in the copy exhibited today in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, restored in a classical manner in 1600 by Ippolito Buzzi for Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi.


Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 140.

Graham Bader (2008), page 450.

See, for example, the biscuit porcelain group La Tourniquet designed by Étienne-Maurice Falconet in 1757, h. 6.3 inches, London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

Louis XIV, in The Versailles Manuscripts (1699).

To mention only the main sources: Philippe Ariès (1962); Linda Pollock (1983); Colin Heywood (2001); and Hugh Cunningham (2005).

For some sources, see: Anne Higonnet (1998); Higonnet (2002), pages 200-06; Christine Kayser (2003); Erika Langmuir (2006); Anja Müller (2006); and Emma Barker (2009).

See chapter 3 in Ronit Milano (forthcoming).

For more on this painting, see Joseph Baillio (1982), no. 25.

For a full analysis of this thesis, see Milano (forthcoming), chapter 3.

Jeff Koons, quoted in Koons (1992), page 89.

A major controversy, which is beyond the scope of this essay, focused on the political and economic concerns that were behind the show. Jean-Jacques Aillagon, President of the Château de Versailles since 2007, was responsible for the initiative of annual solo exhibitions of contemporary art in the Palace. However, before his presidency of Versailles, he was the director of Palazzo Grassi in Venice, a property belonging to the billionaire François Pinault, who purchased the Venetian palace to display exhibitions drawing on his collection of Contemporary art. Non-coincidentally, the five contemporary
artists hosted in the Palace of Versailles since 2008 have close connections with Pinault. Five out of the seventeen works exhibited by Koons in Versailles belonged to Pinault; Elena Geuna, one of the curators, has a long history of work with Pinault; Laurent Le Bon, the second curator of Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris worked under Aillagon when the latter was chairman of the Center. These connections reach even deeper once we consider Pinault’s economic interests as the owner of Christie’s and the effect of such a retrospective on the value of the works.

35 Christopher Mooney (2008), page 131.


38 Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 138. See the full bibliography on this work in Criqui, et. al. (2008), pages 183-84.


40 Press references to Jackson as a music “king” appeared as early as 1984 after he swept the Grammy Awards, and “King of Pop” appeared as early as 1987. See, correspondingly, Yardena Arar (1984) and Sacramento Bee (1987).

41 The Dying Gaul is a Roman marble copy of a Hellenistic work of the late third century BC.

42 Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 144. For the complete bibliography on this work, see Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 185.

43 Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 146. For the complete bibliography on this work, see Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 185.

This portrait (oil on canvas, 80.7 × 59.8 inches), which was also commissioned by Louis XIV from Hyacinthe Rigaud, is a copy of the original: Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Louis XIV of France*, 1701, oil on canvas 109 × 76.4 inches, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

On the historiography of art history through photography as methodology, see Geraldine A. Johnson (2013).

“Interview with Jeff Koons by Laurent Le Bon,” in Criqui, et. al. (2008), page 111.

Koons (1993), page 120.

Thorvaldsen’s original bust, of which there are five marble copies, is kept in the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen, and its height is slightly higher. Here, I am relating to the marble replica displayed in Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, which Koons was most likely to have seen and referred to. On this bust, see: Elena di Majo et. al. (1989), page 200, no. 65; Sebastien Allard et. al. (2007), pages 385-86, no. 120; *The Magazine of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts* (2009), pages 13-14, no. 6-7.

The American icon of Superman originated in a comic book superhero who saves American society and, by extension, the whole world from the forces of evil. Created by the writer Jerry Siegel and the artist Joe Shuster in 1932, the character first appeared in *Action Comics*, no. 1 (1938).

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Exhibition Reviews
Claiming What Is Ours
Review of Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art
Curated by E. Carmen Ramos
Shown at the Smithsonian American Art Museum
October 25, 2013 to March 2, 2014

Richard T. Rodríguez

One of the main criticisms of the exhibition Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum is that it lacks coherence because of the inadequate function of “Latino” as an organizing concept. Philip Kennicott, one of Our America’s most vocal critics, maintains in his Washington Post review:

Latino art, today, is a meaningless category. Historically, there are movements and periods when the category is interesting, for example the politicized Chicano and Nuyorican art movements of the 1960s and ’70s, whose artists provide some of the best material on display. There are also subdivisions of ‘Latino’ art that might make sense as a focus for a more targeted exhibition (such as Cuban art dealing with themes of exile). There are also myriad stylistic and formal categories that might narrow the subject enough to see useful detail: abstraction of the 1960s, conceptual art, video, poster and mural work. But to throw it all together and try to argue that it’s a virtue rather than a failure of curating to stress the fluidity of definition, the unbounded categories, the many trajectories, and you get a big mess.¹

Artists and critics swiftly responded to Kennicott’s review, charging him with ignorance and an unwarranted hostility for his heavy-handed dismissal of the show featuring 92 pieces by 72 artists. One such artist/critic was filmmaker Alex Rivera who, in a debate with Kennicott also published in The Washington Post, asks the reviewer, “Why attack categories like ‘Latino’ when they’re used pro-actively to organize a show, while other vague categories are left unquestioned?” While Rivera offers a forceful rebuttal to Kennicott’s take on the exhibition, his declaration that “Latino” – like “American” – is a “vague category”

unfortunately confirms his opponent’s view. Yet despite this faulty assertion, Rivera is wise to what makes “Latino” more than a vague category when he insists that those who fall under this umbrella term are similarly “‘outsiders’ in spaces which claim to speak for the nation.”

The work in Our America makes this point clear given how the exhibition represents—in both art and artists included—many regional and national Latino/a perspectives. While at first blush the exhibition that encompasses painting, lithographs, 16 mm black and white film, photography, sculpture, and installation may appear to lack narrative coherence, it is important to consider how its name alone—Our America—serves a dual function. To claim America (as in the United States of) as ours despite the persistently flawed belief that Latinos/as in the U.S. are still “foreigners” and to reference Cuban thinker José Martí’s formulation of nuestra América in a letter penned in New York City as a hemispheric rather than national idea support a critical endeavor aiming to reassess spatial divides and scatter
“the seeds of the new America across the romantic nations of the continent and the suffering islands of the sea!” Thus the capaciousness of the term “Latino” and its ability to index the transnational and translocal flows of people and cultures of Latin American and Caribbean descent allows for the representation of a vast range of conceptual forms whose linkage may be lost on viewers unaware of (or choosing to ignore) this fact. While a series of subthemes to frame and suture the content and form of each piece in *Our America* might be absent, it might behoove us to remember that without inclusion in such a show (a show that is indeed rooted in an historically rather than essentialized notion of Latino/a identity) this work that encompasses an impressive expanse of temporal and spatial terrain – from representing the various “brownies of the Southwest” (Melesio “Mel” Casas’ 1970 *Humanscape 62*) to capturing New York City quotidian landscapes in predominantly Latino/a neighborhoods (Emilio Sánchez’s late 1980s *Untitled, Bronx Storefront, “La Rumba Supermarket”*) – might have never been granted “American” significance had advocates not called attention to the historical exclusion of a movement of Latino and Latina art in mainstream institutions.
Chicago-based Chicana writer Ana Castillo has written of “the Latino movement that burned throughout the Midwest” in the 1970s. The Latino movement Castillo refers to — a movement that broaches more than one ethnic or national-origin group — has not burned out. In fact, the activism emanating from the Midwest and beyond remains aflame in the enduring cultural practices that arose from the civil rights era and continue to proliferate and hold powerful influence in the present moment. And while many of the artists represented in Our America played pivotal roles in forging the politicized Chicano/a and Nuyorican art movements Kennicott singles out, artists like Adál, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Harry Gamboa Jr., John Valadez, and Ester Hernández represented in the exhibition must not be calcified as figures of the past and mired in static categories but should necessarily be centered in the formation of what is now commonly identified as Latino/a and American art. This is precisely what the exhibition’s curator E. Carmen Ramos has done. As she writes in her essay, “What is Latino about American Art?” for the exhibition catalogue, “What is needed are frameworks that look to Latino art not solely as excluded context, but as an element that reconfigures notions of American art, history, and culture.” Indeed, Ramos’ display strategies denote such a framework by placing side by side the various communal constituencies representing the diverse Latino/a populations whose social realities
intermingle and overlap not only in the space of the gallery but within the wider spheres of American history and culture. Thus the use of the word “presence” in the exhibition’s subtitle is precisely about throwing light on the long-established, crosshatched experiences of Latinos and Latinas in the U.S. that are too often rendered nonexistent (if not “meaningless”) by those who lack the knowledge to know better. Furthermore, while the category “Latino” (and its recognizably more intractable sibling “Hispanic”) is often deployed as a means to interpellate subjects against their will, denouncing the term as empty or irrelevant is to my mind taking a view more myopic than utopic. Indeed, I see Our America following the lead of the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz by attempting to “cruise utopia”; that is, imagining an idea of “Latino art” that is grounded in an historical genealogy, but which extends into previously uncharted terrain identified as “Latino” based on a “renewed and newly animated sense of the social.”

While I felt the exhibition would have benefited from more gallery space (at moments I felt the pieces on display were not provided sufficient room as some walls cobbled together as much work as possible), Our America nonetheless illustrates how a movement identified as “Latino art” might be successfully situated within established institutional structures like the Smithsonian American Art Museum while attentive to the relational dynamics that hold the ever-fraught politics of inclusion and exclusion in productive tension. As art historian Tomás Ybarra-Frausto argues, “Social structures and critical spaces must yet fully register the more problematic, more liminal sense of a shifting, multivalent, borderline between and within national communities: a turn towards a social practice of multiplicity that is neither assimilative nor separative, but relational. Perhaps a more difficult differential commonality held in place by mutual trust and respect.” This position fittingly dovetails with Martí’s call for nuestra América. And this is what gives Our America its sense of urgency and stunning signifying force.

Notes:


3 José Martí (2002), page 296.
4 Ana Castillo (2004), page xxii.

5 E. Carmen Ramos (2014), page 34.

6 José Esteban Muñoz (2009), page 18.

7 Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (1992), page 29.

Works Cited:


Robert Irwin: *Scrim Veil—Black Rectangle—Natural Light* (1977)
Curated by Donna de Salvo
Shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art
June 27 to September 1, 2013

Mary L. Coyne

It is a trend for some critics to locate the best art only in the past, and the most powerful exhibitions more in history than in the comparatively mundane present. Yet, the institutional tendency to theorize the present by turning to the past allows museums to provide the unique experiences that supported some art, by design. The possibility for success within this exhibition model surfaced recently in Robert Irwin’s installation *Scrim Veil—Black Rectangle—Natural Light* (1977), hereafter *Scrim Veil*, re-presented by Donna de Salvo, Chief Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. From June 27 to September 1, 2013, the fourth floor of the Whitney’s iconic Breuer building on the Upper East Side of New York became a time capsule as the museum recreated this pièce de résistance first constructed for the 1977 Robert Irwin retrospective also hosted by the Whitney.¹

Although the 1977 exhibition unified the scope of the artist’s work up to that point, which included his early dot and line paintings in addition to his luminous hovering discs, it has also been historicized as providing Irwin with an opportunity to test his Venice Beach-formulated theories of light, space, and perception against the New York metropolis. Irwin developed a practice in California that honed in on the fundamentals of looking via a meticulous peeling away of all extraneous elements of the art experience. At the Whitney, he did what he does best: activate a pre-existing space by subtly altering our sensorial perception of it. For *Scrim Veil* he hung a nearly transparent twelve-foot scrim – weighted by a black bar – horizontally across the center of the 120-foot gallery. The bar, set at Irwin’s eye level, is a visual feature derived from the artist’s prior experimentation with his line paintings and a similar scrim installed in a small unused gallery at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970.² Contextualized by Irwin as the result of this systematic development of key forms within his work, *Scrim Veil*...
underscores the remarkable cohesiveness with which the artist developed his practice both prior to and after the project. It is indeed worth noting how *Scrim Veil*'s role in the construction of Irwin’s artistic practice contributes to its significance within the museum, to the link between his object-based work of the late 1960s-1970s, and to his site-generated installation and architectural practice that defines his more recent undertakings.

The Whitney has made a concerted effort to contextualize the installation as a pivotal moment in the artist’s career. The experience provided by the scrim in 2013 is altered by the work’s aura, its presence in time and space since 1977, which parallels the solidification of Irwin himself within the canon of great living artists. Mythologized in the documentary *The Beauty of Questions* (1997) and Lawrence Weschler’s *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* (1982), *Scrim Veil* is part of the Whitney’s history at the Breuer building. The site-generated nature of the piece activates and relies on the fourth floor museum space. The scrim and its black aluminum beam disappear seamlessly into the walls, mirrored directly with a black matte vinyl stripe – like an overgrown wainscot. These details define Irwin’s
practice. Exhibited adjacent to the installation are Irwin’s architectural drawings that convey his meticulous measurements for the project. His minimal additions are highly effective; upon entering the space on a summer day at the height of the visitor season, there is an audible hush, a shared attitude of reverence akin to that which is expressed in a house of worship or in the presence of a site of great importance or grandeur. Whereas visitors in 1977 mistook the installation for an empty gallery, queues of over one hundred people encircled the museum in summer 2013 expecting to encounter a watershed work of art. Retrospectively identified by the artist as “the x marking the spot from where I jumped off” (a quote repeated enthusiastically by the museum’s curatorial department), the work has developed an historical significance, an aura that would have been missing from its original presentation. Scrim Veil, in retrospect, can be pinpointed as the final dematerialization of the canvas as surface for Irwin; since its creation, his practice would be defined by a highly-attuned sense of space and its properties.

Irwin’s treatment of perception is markedly different from that experienced just twenty blocks uptown at the Guggenheim’s retrospective for his one-time collaborator and fellow Los Angeles-based artist, James Turrell. This comparison is striking because the Whitney and the Guggenheim have been elemental to the narrative of post-war American Art, yet the approaches of the museums and the curators that organized the installations read as fundamentally different. Whereas Turrell’s illusionistic manipulation of light transforms the iconic Frank Lloyd Wright-designed museum from an architectural showpiece into a complete sensorial field, Irwin’s contribution to the Breuer building is more of a commentary on existing structures. The simple addition of a scrim and black line allow one to, in Irwin’s own words, “see oneself see,” while Turrell seeks to give form and draw attention to light itself. Irwin’s goals for Scrim Veil are underscored by his site-determined work around the city, the preliminary sketches for which are displayed in the small gallery accessed on the far right side of the scrim. Although presented as a footnote to the installation, these contextual pieces, previously understudied in scholarship on Irwin, are significant in how they expanded his thesis for Scrim Veil. Black Plane (1977), a darkening of the square intersection between Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street with black pitch, and Line Rectangle (1977), a fragile rope construction suspended between the newly constructed towers of the World Trade Center, subtly framed the sensorially stimulating urban locations. Where the Scrim Veil heightens the viewer’s perception of the Whitney gallery, Irwin’s interventions in the city streets commanded a pause in the busyness of downtown Manhattan in order to recognize the presence of the place.

The gallery installation provided Irwin with a point of realization, which he articulated in his seminal essay “Notes on Model,” published in the original 1977 retrospective catalog and scanned into the online-only brochure for the recent exhibition. According to him, the
linchpin of his practice since that time has been the realization that “perception is the essential subject in art.” Irwin explains how he at one point began “questioning the frame as containment, the edge as the beginning and end of what I see.” Irwin developed this observation by re-focusing his practice on the design of environments as opposed to objects. His visions for the Central Garden at the Getty Center, the Miami International Airport (unrealized), and the Dia Beacon would help define the second half of Irwin’s practice. In each, Irwin understood his subject to be a seamless experience of the space, not a defined object or encounter.

The 2013 re-presentation of *Scrim Veil* thrives on inevitable comparisons to its first iteration. Furthermore, the experience of the re-installation is permeated by a bittersweet appreciation of it due to the institutional politics and legal restrictions that may prevent anyone from experiencing the work again. As part of the wall text for the original exhibition, Irwin explained the importance of the environment to his site-generated work: “assuming that context is not only the bond of knowledge but the basis for perception/conception, this exhibition has been developed contextually.” Irwin gifted his piece to the Whitney under the condition that it only be shown on the fourth floor of the Breuer building. Unaddressed by the museum is the elephant in the room, the fate of *Scrim Veil* after the recent exhibition’s closure. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which will soon utilize the Breuer building as a contemporary exhibition space until 2023, is unlikely to exhibit Irwin’s work. Given its acute determinacy, it would be inconceivable to install the scrim in Renzo Piano’s new building for the Whitney in the Meatpacking District, which will open in 2015.

In a discussion with de Salvo in July 2013, Irwin recalled spending hours on the fourth floor of the Breuer building, and emphasized the dramatic trapezoidal window that overlooks Madison Avenue, a unique feature that he believed will disallow any paintings to ever hang in the room. Irwin instead heightened the visual and spatial experience of the gallery’s grid ceiling, natural light, and expansive floor. As with his work outside in the city, *Scrim Veil* seeks to create an awareness of what is already present rather than add an additional element. The 1977 catalog presents this key visual dialogue between the grid of the city as seen from above, Irwin’s coy interventions at 42nd Street and 5th Avenue, and between the World Trade Center towers with an installation on the fourth floor. The outdoor interventions, none of which, unfortunately, were recreated in 2013, are fundamental to understanding *Scrim Veil* not as an “x marking the spot” of a final destination, but rather as a guide to lived experience that art can offer the viewer outside the museum walls. Standing in the center of the gallery on the Whitney’s fourth floor, one cannot identify an object or an authored aesthetic experience as much as a subtly powerful instruction on how to see
one’s surroundings. *Scrim Veil* loses its dependency on the building itself as Irwin reminds us that what the work reveals is, in effect, nothing new. Paradoxically, the museum, constructed to outlast the centuries and protect its contents from the realities of time, has failed. By detaching perception from an object, or even a site, and instead emphasizing a heightened awareness of presence, Irwin subtly negotiates a freedom from the museum’s walls.

De Salvo is aware of the work’s importance for Irwin’s practice and for the museum’s history. It is easy to read much into the simple installation. As critic Andrew Russeth hesitantly admitted after a visit in summer 2013, “this is the key inflection point of Irwin’s career and – at the risk of sounding overly dramatic – maybe also modernism itself.”¹⁵ *Scrim Veil* is a meditation on, a study of, an understated homage to the Whitney Museum and the city of New York. By eliminating objects, and even the temptation to alter or create a new space, Irwin sought to create a break in our mediated sense of being where we could be more aware of our own presence.¹⁶ Quietly apolitical, Irwin presents no overt critique or argument; he simply steps back and allows us to look – the purpose, as some would insist, of the museum itself.
Notes:

1 Curator Richard Marshall organized the 1977 retrospective.

2 See Lawrence Weschler’s discussion of Irwin’s installation at MoMA under suggestion of junior curator Jennifer Licht. According to Weschler, Irwin’s work at MoMA occurred largely without the museum’s recognition or invitation, and resulted in an unusual situation in which the work existed within a major art institution such as MoMA but without the benefits it offers. Irwin recalls feeling as if the installation had never even occurred at all due to a lack of recognition or dialogue in the art world. Lawrence Weschler (1982), page 163.

3 Irwin has, on multiple occasions, including at a public conversation with the artist July 25, 2013, discussed the importance of Scrim Veil for his practice.


5 Irwin recounted the confused reaction of some visitors to his scrim installations at MoMA and the Whitney during a public conversation with the artist on July 25, 2013.


7 Irwin and Turrell worked together with engineer Ed Wortz for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art or LACMA’s Art and Technology project in 1967-1971.

8 Roberta Smith referred to Irwin’s installation as the “Anti-Turrell.” See Smith (2013).

9 Robert Irwin (2013), page 27.

10 Irwin (2013), page 16.


13 Carol Vogel (2011). The future of the space remains undetermined. The Met was granted a temporary lease period of eight years, and if the space becomes as intrinsic to the parent museum as the P.S 1 space has become for MoMA, it appears likely that the acquisition of the building by the Met may become permanent.
14 Proving his observation, the Whitney’s fourth floor has consistently been used for installations that occupy and utilize the space’s drama. Lutz Bacher’s also utilized the unique space for his installation *Baseballs* (2011) at the 2012 Whitney Biennale.

15 Andrew Russeth (2012).


Works Cited:


HALO AMOK!
Wayne White at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art
Shown at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art
The sixth installment of “NEW FRONTIERS: Series for Contemporary Art”
June 6 to October 6, 2013

Emily L. Newman

In 2002, the Oklahoma City Museum of Art (OKCMOA) moved from the state fairgrounds to the increasingly vibrant downtown area. The newly renovated facility’s atrium prominently featured the ten-ton, fifty-five foot tall glass sculpture *Eleanor Blake Kirkpatrick Memorial Tower* (2002) by notable artist Dale Chihuly. The grand opening also included a major exhibition of his drawings and other glass pieces entitled *Dale Chihuly: An Inaugural Exhibition*. Such installations proved to be wildly popular – enough so that upon the closing of the exhibition the museum created an impressive fundraising campaign to purchase all of the works featured in the show. Ever since, OKCMOA has worked to recapture the fervor and popularity that the inaugural Chihuly programming inspired.

*HALO AMOK!,* shown over a decade later, seemed to come close. It showcased a site-specific installation that Wayne White created while in residence for the museum’s program “NEW FRONTIERS: Series for Contemporary Art,” an initiative that engages the local community with contemporary art through solo exhibitions. Previous artists who contributed to the series include Jason Peters, Jill Downen, and Julie Heffernan. White is an unconventional choice to receive a prominent show in a more conservative institution like OKCMOA, known for its programming that focuses on a combination of regional shows as well as national and international traveling exhibitions on American and European masters. Yet his eccentric and eclectic professional background in television, film, music, popular culture, and art prepared him well to create a dynamic show that energized the institution.

No stranger to conservative America, White was born and raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1957. After attending Middle Tennessee State University, he moved to New York City in 1980, where he later became one of the primary puppeteers and set designers for the
television show *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*. White built a career on engaging popular audiences with inventive and exciting characters, which he often created from discarded materials and found objects. His large puppets differed greatly from those furry creatures on television programs such as *Sesame Street* and *The Muppet Show*, however. Composed of easily accessible and cheap materials, White’s puppets have a homemade aesthetic that is engaging because it renders the familiar extraordinary. While the materials could make his works feel reproducible or common, that idea is undermined by White’s uncanny skill to make them perform in lifelike ways, coupled with his creative ability to design humorous and memorable characters including Randy, a red-headed marionette bully who was a reoccurring character on *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*, and *Snapple* bottles turned into humorous personas for a series of commercials.

In the 1990s, White began to enter into the art world when he created inventive paintings that resembled the iconic work of Ed Ruscha, who has utilized the power of single words in
a wide variety of media. White, however, moved beyond isolating words to overlaying clever and often personal reflections onto generic backdrops of picturesque mountains and expansive horizons that he did not paint himself, but rather found at thrift stores or flea markets. Furthermore, his phrases are humorous and often rely on puns, sound parallels, or dirty humor. These paintings are central to the expansive catalogue *Wayne White: Maybe Now I’ll Get the Respect I So Richly Deserve* (2009), edited by popular designer Todd Oldham, and the documentary film *Beauty is Embarrassing* (2011), which celebrate the artist’s multi-faceted and wonderfully bizarre career.

Despite the burgeoning success of his paintings, White never fully abandoned puppetry. He often returns to making interactive exaggerated sculptures for workshops or exhibitions in locales outside of New York and Los Angeles. *HALO AMOK!* is White’s interpretation of the Oklahoman cowboy, as the title even functions as an anagram of the state’s name. The show’s three giant puppets and one large cowboy figure each center on themes aligned with
the commonly accepted identity of the state as cattle-ranch territory. But, of course, Oklahoma City is no longer a cowboy town. Nonetheless, many Oklahomans, like White, embrace cowboy and Western themes, evidenced by the abundant references that can be found across the state from restaurants at the Oklahoma City Will Rogers World Airport to the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.

In the wall text, White describes *HALO AMOK!* as a “cubist rodeo” that incorporates a rodeo bull rider, a bronc rider, a calf roper, and a cowboy on a high horse. The materials he used are easily apparent upon close examination: cardboard, Styrofoam, wood, and various simple machines such as pulleys. The layered and divided nature of the puppets’ construction does seem to allude to some of the cubists’ engagement with space. However, White is not only challenging our conception of space and how we see it; the ramshackle materials coupled with the way he uses spatial depth combine to create forms with lively
senses of character, playfully encouraging visitors to fully experience a space made strange by a layered three-dimensionality and flat shapes projected onto the walls and floor.

The materiality of White’s installations contributes to the noise heard throughout the exhibition. As people interact with the puppets by either pulling on a rope or turning a crank, the various components whistle and creak. Nothing operates smoothly or easily; instead, a wheel hitches as it is turned and a rope catches as it is yanked to make one of the animal’s limbs move. But the expanded energy and slight strain is worth it to participate in the charm of the installation. The visitors’ effort allows the bull to kick up its legs or makes the horse trot. The interactivity of the work is paramount. As I attended the exhibition, children scurried from one puppet to the next, impatiently wanting to test out the pulleys and see the artworks move and dance. Yet, it was not just kids who responded. Adults, while expressing a bit more trepidation, perhaps because they have been conditioned to behave quietly in traditional museums, eventually became just as playful. Pulling and tugging, moving from one work to the next and back again, visitors spend much more time with these puppets than paintings or sculptures on view in other galleries throughout the museum. HALO AMOK!’s location next to a room full of vibrant Washington Color School artworks makes this point evident. The exhibition of boldly-colored abstract paintings was almost always empty – except when people rushed through it seeking out White’s installation.

Figure 6: Child interacting with installation in HALO AMOK! (2013). Image courtesy of Emily L. Newman. Used with permission.
Significantly, White’s exhibition also recalls the legacies of installation art, a genre established in the mid-twentieth century, and relational aesthetics, which rose to prominence in the early 1990s. Relational artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Carsten Höller create open-ended exhibitions that depend upon interaction and engagement. French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who coined the term *relational aesthetics* in the late 90s, described these works as encounters, as spaces that intervene between things. Tiravanija has provided free home-cooked meals to exhibition goers and insists that what happens between people in his art is more valuable than the material components; Höller’s slides and swings depend upon the visitor’s engagement for full realization of his “museum playgrounds” that are intended to disorient viewers in museum spaces.

White distinguishes himself from these artists by heavily relying on play and enjoyment while prioritizing the art object, amplified by his emphasis on tactile materiality. He encourages viewers to touch his creations, to make them move in ways that seem much more similar to interactions at a children’s museum than an art museum. In this act of touch that is still illicit in traditional institutions, White has pushed viewers to break from their expectations and understandings of acceptable behavior. In his one sculpture that is not a puppet, the cowboy holds a ring that offers guests the exhibition handout, a simple piece of paper that encourages children to draw their own rodeo character. A visitor can take the paper directly from him, though if he or she does not feel quite comfortable with such interactivity it can be taken from the conveniently placed folder on the wall.

Simultaneously nostalgic in content and current in exhibitionary practice, by all accounts White’s installation seems successful. By the last weekend of the exhibition, the machines are not running quite as smoothly as they did at the beginning. Similarly, the horseshoes on the floor that guide the viewer to the points of interaction have started to fade and scuffmarks are apparent. None of that seems to matter. The kids continue to dart around the pieces and the adults chase them with giant smiles on their faces. Visitors take pictures and show strangers the hidden surprises of the large men and horses. Memorably, when peering into the belly of the bull, a large hidden guitar can be discovered. Being made by White, however, this is no ordinary musical instrument; rather, he has created a unique guitar in the shape of the state of Oklahoma. References to major issues in art, both past and present, are joined by nods to local culture throughout *HALO AMOK!* These are the details and moments that matter. In a museum seeking to connect to viewers, the exhibition feels right at home.
Figure 7: Installation detail of Wayne White’s *HALO AMOK!* (2013). Image courtesy of Emily L. Newman. Used with permission.

**Works Cited:**


Book Reviews
What We Talk About When We Talk About Curating

Review of The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)
Paul O’Neill
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Meredith Goldsmith

Paul O’Neill’s recent book, The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s), traces the advent of the contemporary art curator from the 1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century, a period when temporary group exhibitions and events emerged as the main subjects of art world discourse. O’Neill walks his reader through a methodical examination of an ever-increasing accumulation of material – publications, statements, ephemera, interviews – ultimately comprising a professional landscape that is made of, and by, texts.

His argument is clear from page one: “Curatorial practice and discourse are dialectically entwined, a consequence of a recoding of practice as discourse during the last twenty-five years” (my emphasis).¹ What propels this dialectic is the tension between the curator’s urge to mediate new art forms that critique art’s autonomy, and the ethic of self-critique to resist the curator’s (or the institution’s, or the West’s) authority. This makes the dialectic particular to contemporary art in a postcolonial era rather than modern art or antiquities, and to group exhibitions rather than solo shows or retrospectives.

While many recent publications have sought to analyze the rise of international biennials of contemporary art, O’Neill connects global curating as such to the augmentation of the curator’s role in the late 1960s and the intellectualization and professionalization of curating from the late 1980s through today. Moreover, as curating became a field of study, many late 1960s figures, such as Harald Szeemann, have been discursively historicized as isolated geniuses. O’Neill’s book makes an important contribution by embedding the biennial phenomenon, the work of individual curators, exhibitions, and all the accompanying texts within a single history. His history resembles an “evolution” of the contemporary art curator that inevitably merges with the contemporary artist.
In chapter one, O’Neill outlines the three factors that produced this evolution. First, beginning in the late 1960s, the profession of the curator transfigured from one anonymously serving in the care of collections in perpetuity to one idiosyncratically articulating narratives about and through relationships among art objects and sites in a temporary format. Second, by the late 1980s, curators were considered authors of exhibitions, and exhibitions were speech acts. Third, by the 1990s, this curator-centered discourse, fed by the popularity of poststructuralism and critical theory, was consolidated to constitute the history of curatorial practice.

The 1960s witnessed the rise of the independent curator, an intellectual eager to assess and interpret the challenging art of the day, while at the same time demystify his/her own role. O’Neill cites the work of Germano Celant, Lucy Lippard, Seth Siegelaub, and Harald Szeemann, who “began to contextualize divergent contemporary art scenes – with artists linked to Fluxus, Arte Povera, post-minimalism, and conceptualism from the United States, Europe, the United Kingdom, and Latin America – into international group exhibitions for the first time.” By doing so these individuals cultivated their cultural capital, which was enhanced once their individual styles of exhibition-making emerged. Furthermore, the work of making art and facilitating art’s presentation – traditionally separate jobs – became less distinct as these art works frequently needed both curator and artist to create them in situ.

As the discursive turn made “art as a verb,” so did curating become a verb and exhibitions speech acts. These new art forms needed explication. Yet these curators, mindful in their positions as mediators, were keen to make their roles more transparent. Paradoxically, by highlighting (i.e. “demystifying”) their individual practices, any autonomy of the artworks they presented was subsumed by their personality as curator, which was always more clearly articulated. In the subsequent decades, independent curators extended their individual styles and points of view to ever-larger exhibitions of discreet objects from a wide range of cultures and eras.

O’Neill uses Raymond Williams’ theory of dominant, residual, and emergent cultural utterances in order to understand how “demystification” was institutionalized as a “residual active element,” resulting in the re-mystification of the curator in the 1980s. “The term is residual because it is an idea that was originally formed as an oppositional force to the mystification of the artistic process in the 1960s; it is active because its meanings and values are sustained in its widespread contemporaneous use within curatorial discourse.” He continues, “In being assimilated into the dominant culture, demystification has effectively been incorporated, reinterpreted and diluted as ‘visibility’ for the curatorial position.” Thus, by the 1980s, we witness a “re-mystification” of the curator’s process. He offers as example Harald Szemann’s 1983 Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk (Penchant for a Synthesis of the
Arts), which was so large with such a diversity of eras, media, and styles, displayed in arrangements whose logic was so encoded, that any other symbolic meanings individual objects might have expressed were subsumed by Szemmann’s subjective decision-making, which elevated his power as a taste- and meaning-maker.

This cycle of visibility, public displays, and discourse O’Neill calls a reputational economy – my favorite invention of his in this book. It explains why exhibition history became a key feature of curating-as-discourse in the 1990s, effectively turning curatorial practice into a field of study and curatorial activities into legitimate contributions to it. In addition to the mushrooming publication of curatorial histories and critical analyses of exhibitions, he writes:

Through public discussions, conferences, and publications about curating, those who curate high-profile exhibitions attempt to convey a sense of ‘commonality’ and ‘connectivity’ in order to situate their individual positions within a broader discourse and insert themselves into a hierarchy.

The chief strategy of inserting oneself into that discourse is through the exhibition catalogue, and confirms for O’Neill that, “text is often privileged over the experience of art, and the curatorial thesis overrides the intention of the exhibited artwork and its relationship to other fields of inquiry.” Much more than mere accompaniment to the international biennial, these catalogues appear necessary when the size or distant location of the event makes it impossible to see.

Having methodically and convincingly argued for the emergence of curating-as-discourse in his first chapter, O’Neill makes global biennials and their curatorial discourse seem inevitable in his second chapter. He cites Les Magiciens de la Terre (1989) as the turning point because of its large scale and inclusion of contemporary artists from non-Western nations, but also because it set the discursive stage for subsequent global biennial curation. How can a curator produce an art exhibition experience that is global in ambition without reinforcing the center-periphery logic of colonialism? How can a curator profess global pluralism? Who is/are the public(s) for this speech act? O’Neill offers the curators and biennial exhibitions that answered these questions and key critical responses from the 1990s forward.

In his third and final chapter, O’Neill covers a very recent history of curatorial discourse. Rather than give the reader a methodical argument about the way things are, he offers up a variety of exhibition and exhibition-like artifacts that evince curators and artists speaking the same institutional language. Two important strategies he identifies for destabilizing the
naturalized power of the curator are collectivity and focusing on processes of artistic production.

These are both strategies that require people to travel to biennial locales, and to mobilize small armies of temporary employees to produce temporary projects. O’Neill touches on the larger economic forces that I believe have had effects equal to that of discourse on the emergence of the contemporary art curator, but only insofar as how the discourse of globalization has become part of curatorial discourse. To advance in this reputational economy, the global curator must be highly mobile and able to work anywhere, to develop and access thick networks of culture producers. To be a global artist requires similar mobility and a “practice” rather than discreet objects. To be a viewer or participant, then, requires the means to literally follow these figures around the world, or to settle for bookshelves that sag under the weight of multiplying and ever-larger catalogues. Is this what “evolved” curating and artistry looks like?

Alternately, I suggest that it has been the emergence of post-industrial economies based on horizontality, flexibility, precariousness, speed, and information that have produced the opportunity for contemporary art curators and their discourse to thrive. More than a discursive turn that gives contemporary art curators a field, political economies and their attendant social constructions of work produced curating as a profession and the manners of its practice.

O’Neill’s book is unquestionably a well-researched and timely contribution to a staggeringly vast subject, and the framework of curatorial practice as a dialectical discourse is convincing. His evolution of the contemporary art curator might just be summarized, albeit facetiously, like this: at first, curators talked about art; then they talked about themselves talking about art; then they started talking about each other talking about art; and now they just talk about each other.

Notes:

1 O’Neill (2012), page 1.

2 O’Neill (2012), page 16.

3 O’Neill (2012), pages 33-34.
⁴ O’Neill (2012), page 44.

⁵ O’Neill (2012), page 44.
Valentina Bin

To start a book review by acknowledging the sheer amount of recent publications on art curation is practically an unavoidable cliché, considering the current vitality of the discourse that surrounds the subject. As Kate Fowle, the author of the introduction to *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, noticed while she attended a conference organized by Independent Curators International (ICI) – held in 2012 at the New Museum in New York – the continuous and fruitful redefinition of the field goes hand in hand with basic misunderstandings of the terms and roles at stake. Terry Smith’s book, the first in a forthcoming series entitled *Perspectives in Curating* that will be published by ICI, responds to the necessity of offering a tentative theoretical, historical, and linguistic common ground that should facilitate the dialogue between the polyphony of different opinions and approaches within this expanding and still-forming field. In order to do so, Smith, an Australian contemporary art scholar, a former member of the Art & Language group of conceptual artists, and now a professor at both the University of Pittsburgh and the University of New South Wales, considers it crucial to outline “what is distinctive about contemporary curatorial thought.”¹ The book comprises of five essays that employ this concern as an underlying theme.

The first essay, entitled “What is Contemporary Curatorial Thought?” goes straight to the core of the question. Smith identified in 2000 three curatorial positions for contemporary art exhibitions. The first one was *Remodernism*, defined as the attempts of universal contemporary art history museums to readapt the white cube model, or *Retro sensationalism* (aka Anglo-American spectacularist art) in the case of auctions and private personal museums (like the Saatchi Gallery in London or the Pinault Foundation in Venice). The second position was defined as *transnational transitionality*, which concerns the diffusion of biennials around the world. The third one is represented by a post *relational aesthetics* “small-scale, interactive, DIY art.”² Once these curatorial trends have been identified, the rest of
the book provides an overview of their developments after the year 2000. Smith’s aim is to point to the fact that these currents (each denoted by a curator, respectively Kirk Vernadoe, Okwui Enwezor, and Nicolas Bourriaud) and their aftermaths offer perspectives on contemporary art that can be initially grasped only by curation’s praxiological way of thinking. This is because artworks are ready to be eventually interpreted, canonized, and historicized by the public, art critics, and historians only after they have been presented by a curator. The role of contemporary curation is not to formalize statements but to offer exhibitions capable of generating fresh insights.

In the second essay, “Shifting the Exhibitionary Complex,” Smith recognizes the gradual institutionalization of independent curating and the ossification of the biennale format’s subversive potential, symbolized by its structural inclusion in the regular programming of museums. To support his position through numerous examples of different exhibition formats, he suggests that real curatorial radicalism, which is often inspired by the work of artists, needs to shift contexts and interpretative frameworks and respond directly to the temporary essence of contemporary art itself. In Smith’s words, curators and artists must act as “infrastructural activists.”

With an attention to the analogies between the role of the artist and the curator, in the third chapter he clarifies the fundamental differences between curatorial and artistic thought by surveying some examples of respective “roles exchanges” between them. He pays particular attention to the history and recent developments of institutional critique and its “fusion” with the museum system. In the fourth chapter, Smith argues that exhibiting the contemporary, with reference to Georgio Agamben’s definition of the concept, should not be narrowed to the concerns of contemporary art but should instead “explore the actually existing contemporaneities of art’s past.” Effective examples would include revisiting underrepresented histories of modern art, feminist art, and decoloniality.

In the last chapter Smith explores some of the specific aspects of current curatorial practices. He starts with the premise that “the urge to historicize curating is one of the key turns that is making it contemporary” and goes on to investigate the inclination of historically recollecting and restaging past exhibitions, which he names recurating. Recurating makes the “exhibitionary exchange visible, exhibits it, brings it to publicity.” The urgency to continuously reinvent exhibition formats and institutional models – as expressed by the work of curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist, Okwui Enwezor, or museum directors like Charles Esche – follows the need to rethink our relationship to our current times. After a discussion of what has been called the educational turn of curation, Smith lists some examples of engaged and activist curatorial practices that are directly reshaping spectators’ roles. In
light of this, the author asserts that “spectatorship is the next big category of agency in the art world,” and thus in curation.  

As a conclusion Smith notices that “a contemporary model of cooperative caring for art, artists, institutions, and audiences is emerging on a scale and with a dispersive energy not envisaged before,” and then suggests that “the curatorial has expanded beyond the paracuratorial to become what might be called ‘the infrastructural.’” In light of this changed scenario, the author advocates the need for a critical reflection on the history of curatorial thought, on the stages of the conceptual formulation of exhibitions (which is different from a mere history of exhibitions), and on the theories and insights deriving from it. Smith prompts curators to compile, conserve, and make public detailed accounts and documentations of the conceptual behind-the-scenes of an exhibition, including how this was influenced or even prejudiced by contingences. Such an approach enables us to map the underlying curatorial thought of exhibitionary practices.

The author successfully surveys some of the most innovative exhibitions of the last forty years and he effectively organizes them thematically. The discourse is reinforced with the support of rather extensive quotes from fellow theoreticians, artists, art historians, and curators, which has the purpose of updating the reader with some of the most influential recent insights on the topic. This historically and geographically wide-ranging articulation of key curatorial trends, formats, and concerns points out the necessity of unmasking the specificities of curatorial thought in comparison to artistic and academic thought. The book highlights the vast unexpressed potentiality of investigating the instinctual, conceptual, affective framework which inspires and informs curatorial ideas, the connections between them, and their future implications.

However, despite Smith’s dexterity in navigating the history of curatorial practices, I was left with a final feeling of unfulfilled expectations. For example, the author does not ponder too much on peculiar methodologies, other than the classical art historical ones (the study of the genesis and biography of an exhibition through cataloguing its development and comparing it with a wider theoretical, stylistic, and historical context), through which curatorial thought should be approached. Unlike what the title and some introductory passages in the text might suggest, it seems more of a good survey targeted at the ever-growing number of curatorial studies students than a definition of what is “curatorial thought.” The book starts with the acknowledgment of the terminological quagmire that surrounds curation but it seems as though the writer is rather comfortable to adopt its revolving-on-itself jargon, as testified by his conclusive slogan-like list of the “constituents” of contemporary curatorial thought:

This definition sounds more like a “best practice” checklist than a delineation of contemporary curatorial thought. Similarly, the book preaches the agreeable necessity of exploring curatorial peculiarities but instead of providing a deep examination of the thought behind a selected number of exhibitions, it ends up offering another review – albeit a theoretically coherent and broad one – of “contemporary curating issues.”

Note

1 Smith (2012), page 9.
2 Smith (2012), page 34.
3 Smith (2012), page 99.
4 Smith (2012), page 146.
5 Smith (2012), page 186.
6 Smith (2012), page 204.
7 Smith (2012), page 236.
8 Smith (2012), pages 252-253.
9 Smith (2012), page 256.
Defining the Modern Museum:
A Case Study of the Challenges of Exchange
Lianne McTavish
ISBN-10: 1442644435

Carmen Cebreros Urzaiz

The entry point of Defining the Modern Museum is the claim that the modern museum, a synecdoche of the intellectual and physical World (singular and capitalized), has been a powerful yet mythical idea, impossible to be materially accomplished. Rather than focusing on theoretical — therefore ideal — paradigms of what a museum should be, Lianne McTavish’s goal is to apply critical theory to the (historically traceable) practices of one institution in particular: the New Brunswick Museum (NBM), the oldest continuing museum in Canada. Throughout the volume, the writer criticizes the abundance of investigations that use her same theoretical scope, yet to ultimately prove the democratic success of certain contemporary museum models, or the commodification and dissolution of this type of institution into mere massive spectacle. She warns readers that her endeavor in Defining the Modern Museum is to identify continuities and contradictions rather than offer a definite diagnosis of this institution or museums at large.

After she explains how she conducted extensive research in the archives of the NBM, located in the industrial port city of Saint John on the east coast, the author provides a study that spans from 1862 to 1950: a period marked by the foundation of the forerunner Natural History Society (NHS) of New Brunswick, and the last years in which Alice Lusk Webster and J.C. Webster were involved as donors and honorary curators (who were instrumental in the professionalization of this museum for three decades). McTavish addresses in her case studies the multifarious role that the NBM took up throughout its early years as an educational institution and museum of natural history, anthropology, history, and fine arts. By revisiting the wide array of objects collected, donated, exchanged, acquired, and displayed – first at the museum of the NHS, later the NBM – this book examines the interests and agendas behind the subjects who have transformed and defined the museum in their different capacities.
Defining the Modern Museum is structured into five chapters organized in chronological order. Nevertheless, the writer does not emphasize historical accounts; instead, periodization serves to frame her analysis after particular events under the scope of Marxist, postcolonial, and gender theory. “Exchanging Values in the Nineteenth-Century Museum Marketplace,” Chapter 1, exposes the operations of commodification within the museum, demonstrating that this is not exclusively a contemporary phenomenon but rather a consequence of any attempt to communicate and legitimize the attribution of value to objects in a collection; the author’s central argument here is that commodification has been a foundational aspect of the modern museum. In this chapter McTavish focuses on the NHS established in 1862 by a group of doctors, teachers, customs officials, and business men. The NHS was constituted with the conviction that empirical study of mineral and marine specimens served as a means of appreciation for local wealth; for the organization, this esteem should translate into civic motivation towards the exploitation of resources, industrialization, and economic prosperity in the region. The author traces the exportation of geology-specimen kits to larger prestigious museums (such as the Field Columbian Museum in Chicago). This initiative was devised to attract attention towards Saint John as an incipient yet rich industrial metropolis; at the same time, the NHS should gain recognition as an institution of knowledge while it increases the number of items it will acquire. Through this system of reciprocal gift giving, the Society and its collections were expected to become “more global,” thus more modern.

In “Learning to See: Vision, Visuality, and Material Culture, 1862-1929,” Chapter 2, pedagogy, knowledge, and the construction of citizenship are analyzed in depth and conjunction. McTavish reviews the ideas of a series of influential pedagogues (such as Henri Rousseau and Heinrich Pestalozzi), who championed object-based learning and drawing as methods to develop observational skills. Careful observation of nature is alleged to be the foundation of nineteenth-century positivist science and a drive for transformation of the natural environment. Here she describes the NHS endeavors to provide access to its collections by lending portable displays to a number of primary schools in Saint John. The purpose of these displays was to stimulate children’s curiosity and joy for the natural richness of the region, and consequently a sense of belonging. In this chapter, McTavish asserts that industrialization and economic growth became the backbone of citizenship and education in that period in New Brunswick.

Chapter three, “Offering Orientalism: Women and the Gift Economy of the Museum, 1880-1940,” addresses the ambivalent role of women in the NHS as unrecognized members, laborers, and donors. The author records the influence of women in the expansion of this institution (and its conversion into New Brunswick Museum) after the inclusion of fine art, costumes, and functional objects into its collections, most of them bestowed by members of the Ladies’ Auxiliary. The importance of this society, constituted by the NHS members’
wives, who had preeminent roles as fundraisers and guarantors of keeping the society alive and active, is profusely discussed here. The author conducts a meticulous analysis of how the Ladies’ Auxiliary gradually gained power and freedom, particularly through her case study on the Oriental Exhibition organized by the society in 1924. This exhibition, according to McTavish, reflected the furor for World fairs’ and replicated their forms of the exoticization of Asia. The author excels at tracing, in the minutes of both societies and in archival photographs, the disparate participation of these women who relocated objects from their private collections into the galleries, and how they dramatically refashioned the displays – while they also exposed their bodies in an orientalist mask as part of the exhibition. Also in this section the author introduces Alice Lusk Webster, sponsor and later honorary curator, whose preeminent role in the professionalization of the museum is discussed comprehensively in the fifth chapter.

A noteworthy account on the epistemological status of two kind of institutions of knowledge from 1830 to 1940 is offered in “Libraries and Museums: Shifting Relationships,” Chapter 4. Here, McTavish tracks the constitution, operation, and funding of three other societies in Canada, contemporaneous to the NHS of New Brunswick: the Natural History Society of Montreal, the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, and the Art, Historical and Scientific Association of Vancouver. She discusses how, in greater Canada, reading was acknowledged as a more legitimate intellectual activity, which lessened the relevance of displaying and studying material culture; the author observes that this situation changed deeply in the early twentieth century – evidence of which are the internships promoted for the professionalization of museum staff. This aspect is further examined in “Gendered Professionals: Debating the Ideal Museum Worker during the 1930s and 1940s,” Chapter 5, in which the author inquires about the kind of functions and skills that were expected to be developed by curators. McTavish traces the progression from a self-instructed multitask practitioner, caretaker, proto-museographer, and educator (embodied by William MacIntosh, the first curator of the NBM) towards a more specialized professional curator, a disciplinarily-differentiated holder of a university degree. This latter type of curator is represented by the Websters’ protégées, now well-recognized scholars in their own right: Alfred Bailey was commissioned by J.C. Webster to be in charge of the historical holdings, and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, appointed by Alice Lusk Webster, was to be responsible for the fine art collections. Furthermore, by reading between the lines of the correspondences between Lusk Webster and his advisor C. T. Currelly (director of the Royal Ontario Museum), as well as MacIntosh’s reports, in this last chapter McTavish demonstrates her expertise via thorough analyses of the body types and actions that characterize each kind of museum professional suited to perform physical, intellectual, or solicitous activities.
Based upon her exhaustive archival research, Lianne McTavish provides, in a compelling and straightforward style, an exceptional interdisciplinary analysis. She excels at clearly constructing her cases, while foregrounding multiple perspectives and voices (equally of historical actors or theorists). If something is missing from this volume it is a depiction of the configuration of New Brunswick’s public sphere at large and beyond the NBM. For example, the reader will find it difficult to determine which social groups were followers of the NHS and the NBM apart from their members, and to what extent these organizations transformed Saint John more generally. Similarly, identifying what enabled the NBM to continue up to these days is something we might surmise but would be unable to precisely identify from the book. The lack of documentation of visitor reception from the periods covered in the chapters is an absence worthy of interpretation too, especially since McTavish’s contribution is to broadly apply recent theories and methods into the scrutiny of the past (though almost all historical studies of museums are similarly limited). *Defining the Modern Museum* challenges museum theorists, administrators, and curators to further investigate our gender, race, and ability biases that determine the kinds of professionals and audiences welcomed by museums. Labor and administrative practices at museums are revealed to be sanctioning instruments that are equally as powerful as the discourses produced by institutions.