

**NEW
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examiner

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MUSEUMS: What Has Changed and What Has Not

BLOCK

MUSEUM

OF ART

INSIDE

Museum Survey Finds Little Progress on Staffing

Learning to Unlearn: Abandoning Museum Neutrality

Two University Museum Directors Speak About New Challenges

Queer Encounters of Intimacy Shown in Video Game Exhibit

Exhibit Probes Themes of History, Migration and Belonging

\$8 U.S.

New Art Examiner

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The *New Art Examiner* is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

EDITORIAL POLICY

As the *New Art Examiner* has consistently raised the issues of conflict of interest and censorship, we think it appropriate that we make clear to our readers the editorial policy we have evolved since our inception:

1. No writer may review an exhibition originated or curated by a fellow faculty member or another employee, or any past or present student, from the institution in which they are currently employed. The *New Art Examiner* welcomes enthusiastic and sincere representation, so the editor can assign such an exhibition to other writers without the burden of conflict of interest.
2. There shall be no editorial favor in response to the purchase of advertisements.
3. The *New Art Examiner* welcomes all letters to the Editor and guarantees publishing. Very occasionally letters may be slightly edited for spelling or grammar or if the content is considered to be libellous.
4. The *New Art Examiner* does not have an affiliation with any particular style or ideology or social commitment that may be expressed or represented in any art form. All political, ethical and social commentary is welcome. The *New Art Examiner* has actively sought diversity. All opinions are solely of the writer. This applies equally to editorial staff when they pen articles under their own name.
5. The general mandate of the *New Art Examiner* is well defined in the statement of purpose above.

WANTED: WRITERS

The ***New Art Examiner*** is looking for writers interested in the visual arts in any major metropolitan area in the U.S. You would start with short reviews of exhibition in your area. Later, longer essays on contemporary visual art issues could be accepted.

Please send a sample of your writing (no more than a few pages) to:

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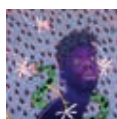
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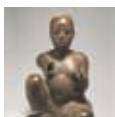
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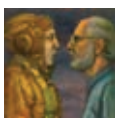
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Museums Can Change—Will They?

New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art was America's first encyclopedic museum when it opened in 1870. For most of the ensuing 150 year history, art museums have been seen as cathedrals of culture performing an invaluable public mission of educating the public through exposure to civilization's great works of art.

That defining mission has come under strong public criticism lately with public demands that museums be more diverse in their programming and staffing, more inclusive in their collections, more accessible to new audiences and the urban environment and less of an elite institution of art lovers, collectors and donors. Many museums are busy fashioning new identities and redefining what they offer in an effort to attract new audiences and stabilize their revenues.

They are adjusting to this new reality with more exhibitions by women and artists of color, like last year's heralded Charles White exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. The biggest recent sign that change has pierced the velvet curtain was last month's news that the Museum of Modern Art will rehang its galleries, putting a greater emphasis on overlooked women and artists of color.

This issue of the *New Art Examiner* takes a look at museums in a time of radical change. The diverse collection of articles looks at what changes have been made and what remains to be done. In the latter category, we feature the results of recent Mellon Foundation surveys of museum staffing and four critical essays by writers from the University of Illinois at Chicago's Museum and Exhibition Studies program that speak to museums' continued shortcomings.

We think that waiting for the major art museums, with their long programmatic lead times, to lead the change may not be realistic. That is why the issue shines a spotlight on the sector able to be more adventurous and nimble—university art museums.

You will find interviews with two new generation museum directors, Alison Gass of the Smart Museum of Art and Julie Rodrigues Widholm of the DePaul Art Museum. Also, artist Neil Goodman surveys four museum leaders—two

in the Midwest and two on the West Coast—probing what principles they follow on a variety of museum issues.

Demands for greater diversity, inclusion and accessibility, to name just three areas, are significant and long overdue. But they will take years of organizational change and the overcoming of entrenched attitudes. An article that appeared in the journal, *Democracy*, in its Spring, 2015 issue, offered a faster, much more controversial solution.

The author asked how museums can do more and be better. Show more of their collection. As of 2015, all top-ranked museums exhibited only about five percent of their collection. The rest resides in storage and may never see the light of day.

For example, the Met in New York shows just 27 of its 41 Monets. And for works on paper, it displays only 2 of its 23 drawings by Fragonard. Why don't the major museums recognize their unexhibited collections of duplicates and minor works as a financial resource?

The author, Michael O'Hare, suggests they might be redistributed to smaller institutions or even private collectors. The revenue raised by such a move would relieve the pressure on museums' operating budgets and greatly expand their community outreach.

O'Hare then estimated the value of the Art Institute of Chicago's collection, based on other cases where the collections were appraised. His estimate of the value of its 280,000 objects: between \$26 and \$43 billion. Were the Art Institute to deaccession just 1% of its holdings, it could offer free admission forever. And selling another 1% would pay for adding 30% more exhibition space, allowing more art to emerge from the basement.

Such a solution is currently forbidden. Yet, museum practices have been changed in light of changing circumstances. Selling unexhibited art would be in keeping with museums' mission of educating the public. It would also greatly expand the number and demographic diversity of who could attend.

It is time for bold thinking rather than nibbling at the margins. As the title of O'Hare's article asks, "Museums Can Change—Will They?"

Tom Mullaney, Managing Editor

Diversity Funding and Collaborations: Signs of Change?

by Ann Sinfield

It's been a busy few years for large initiatives within the art museum field around efforts to improve diversity, equity and inclusion—three key words, and a cry for change, from the title of the American Alliance of Museums' (AAM's) 2017 annual conference. This January alone saw three major moves addressing these issues. They included survey reports, substantially funded programs and collaborative projects with resource toolkits. There has also been important social media participation and less formal group efforts from within museums and other supportive communities.

These initiatives are all good steps by the museum community and private funders who clearly got the message. However, the recent release of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018 shows only slight progress in meeting those three aforementioned goals. Significantly more progress needs to be achieved.

The efforts are welcome signs. Let's review a few of them from a museum worker's perspective.

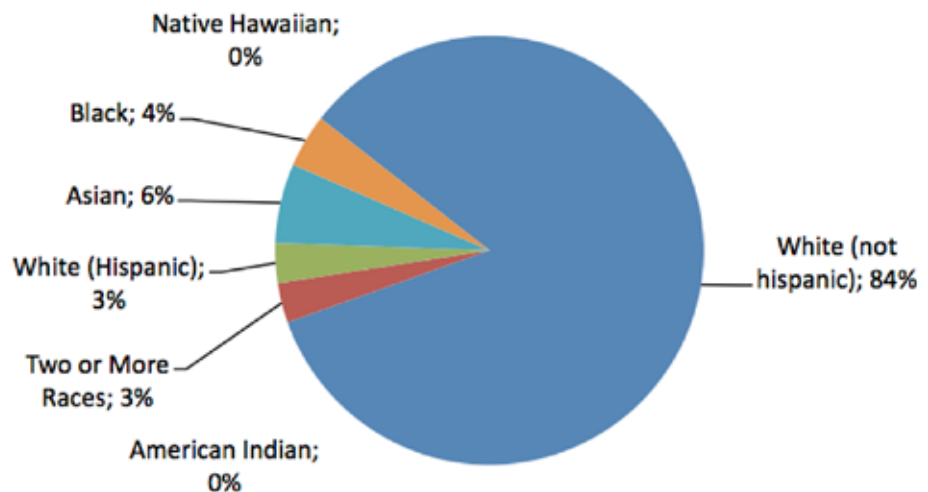
To begin, it is important for museum insiders to consider the potential impacts of these efforts, as they are related to two recent realizations within the field: first, museums are not inherently equitable places; second, museums need to reconsider their practices if they want to survive with-in dramatically changing funding structures and cultural demographics.

My focus here is on hiring practices because, ultimately, museums change or remain the same based on the people who lead them and who work in them. Of course, funding and external efforts impact museums as well. For example, women have finally been hired to lead two national museums: the National Gallery of

Art (<https://www.nga.gov/press/2018/kaywin-feldman.html>), and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/welcome-new-director>). These hires happened for many reasons, including perhaps the attention brought by #MeToo, but ultimately it was insiders who made decisions. Are these hires inspiring for the field? Of course! Will they impact the fight for equity within museums in this country? This has yet to be seen.

Plenty of digital ink has already been spilled about the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's 2015 Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey (<https://mellon.org/programs/arts-and-cultural-heritage/art-history-conservation-museums/demographic-survey/>). This project put numbers to what many museum workers already knew: with 84% of museum leadership positions occupied by "White (Not Hispanic)" individuals, the stark reality is that there are very few people of color in influential positions at this country's art museums. The more important finding of the survey related not to the current situation, but to potential opportunities for change. The data portrayed a depressing future, with consistently low numbers of people of color stretching across all generations of museum staffing. The result? There was no large, developing cohort of

Race and Ethnicity (Curators, Conservators, Educators and Leadership Only)



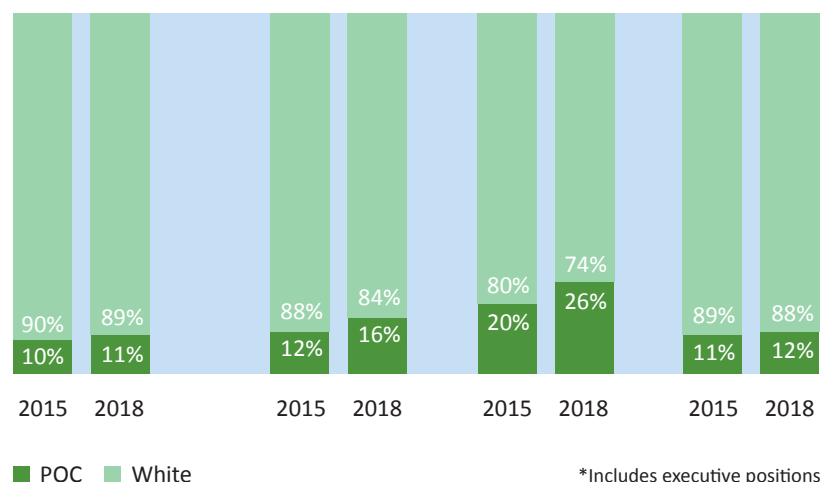
From the 2015 Mellon Foundation Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey

emerging museum leaders of color. The numbers were the same in the younger and older generations.

In response to the demoralizing news of the 2015 Mellon survey, some large funders and professional organizations stepped up to partner on a variety of attempts to change the course of the #MuseumsSoWhite leviathan:

- In November of 2017, the **Diversifying Art Museum Leadership Initiative** (<https://www.fordfoundation.org/the-latest/news/ford-foundation-and-walton-family-foundation-launch-6-million-effort-to-diversify-art-museum-leadership/>) announced its intention to provide \$6 million over 3 years to “support innovative strategies and programs to advance diversity” across the field. Funded by the Ford Foundation and Walton Family Foundation, the projects are focused mostly on educational and professional development efforts. They include internships, fellowships, and youth leadership programs at 20 museums across the country.
- In July of 2018, the Association of Art Museum Directors announced the **AAMD College Students from Underrepresented Communities Internship** (<https://aamd.org/for-the-media/press-release/aamd-announces-paid-internship-program-for-college-students-from>). This is a pilot program intending to “engage undergraduate students from underrepresented backgrounds and nurture their career opportunities in the art museum field.” With support from the NEA and AAMD, the program will offer paid, project-based internships during the summer of 2019. Including mentoring and attendance at professional conferences, the interns will work in exhibitions, evaluation, programming, communications, curatorial, and outreach at 10 academic and municipal museums (<https://aamd.org/for-the-media/press-release/aamd-announces-museum-partners-for-new-internship-program-focused-on>). The only Midwestern museum awarded an internship happens to be where I work: the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Intellectual Leadership by Race/Ethnicity (Repeat AAMD Participants Only)



From the *Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018*

- Just announced on January 15, 2019, the AAM’s **National Museum Board Diversity and Inclusion Initiative** (<https://www.aam-us.org/2019/01/15/deai-initiative/>) will provide \$4 million in grants from three foundations (the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Alice L. Walton Foundation, and the Ford Foundation) to “provide the framework, training, and resources for museum leaders to build inclusive cultures within their institutions that more accurately reflect the communities they serve.” Along with offering the usual AAM standards, sample documents, and case studies, the initiative will also provide support to 50 museums for “the development and implementation of sustainable inclusion plans.” Interestingly, also promised is a new tool to connect interested individuals with boards who are expanding their pool of talent.

Two follow-ups to the 2015 survey were just released in January of 2019 by the Mellon Foundation. The first is a series of case studies that demonstrate successful diversity efforts; the second is a 2018 update to the initial survey:

- Intended to showcase institutions that “have been successful in their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts,” **Case Studies in Museum Diversity** (<https://mellon.org/resources/news/articles/case-studies-museum-diversity/>), by the cultural sector consultant Ithaka S+R, in partnership with The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Association of Art Museum Directors, provides an in-depth

consideration of 8 different museums. Based on staff and constituent interviews, observations, and additional outside research, the findings are individualized and case-specific, but they are also useful. Two notable examples in the report are the MCA Chicago and Spelman College, where efforts to increase collaborations and build curatorial pathways have been developed, prioritized, and most importantly, are receiving funding attention.

- The Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018 (https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/e5/a3/e5a373f3-697e-41e3-8f17-051587468755/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf) is a progress report that follows up and expands on the 2015 effort. The results after a couple of years are mixed: the field remains majority female, yet directors are still mostly male; educators are now 26% people of color and mostly women at all levels of responsibility; people of color have been hired at an increased rate, from 26% in 2015 to 35% in 2018; and although museum staff have become slightly more racially and ethnically diverse—the numbers of people of color increasing by 4% overall, and the number of African-American curators doubling, for example—museum leadership, at 88%, is still very white.

These partnership efforts by big funders and professional organizations are significant, because it is clear that knowing about the demographic disparities does not always translate into action. Yet even when major funders in the humanities are devoting resources to making change, I am stunned by how long it takes for associated organizations to get the message. For example, a well-known museum leadership training program offers, according to their website, executive education “for the next generation of museum leaders,” but fails to address diversity, inclusion and equity in its curriculum. For any museum leader to be considered well-prepared without receiving training on basic DEI concepts is not only short-sighted, it is dangerous. As such, a refusal facilitates a continued ignorance of the museum field’s colonial beginnings.

Beyond the data, the inherent inequities in museums are dramatically demonstrated by more localized efforts to making museums responsive to current events. Related to the move to decolonize museums, social media engagements like #MuseumsAreNotNeutral are making the field conscious of its histories and roles. MASS Action (<https://www.museumaction.org/>)

is a collaborative project of museum staff (or “museum practitioners” as described on the website) who seek “to align museums with more equitable and inclusive practices.” Some of the questions the project pursues include the role and responsibility of the museum in responding to issues affecting communities, how to align the museum’s internal practices and their public practice, and considerations of how the museum can become a site for social action. It is important to note that this movement is not originating within museum leadership or funders: it is staff and people without much power who are joining together to redefine what their museums do.

Will the recent collaborations between professional organizations and big money effect much change? The 10 interns, 20 museum programs, and 50 museum boards that are seeded with these investments will hopefully see some improvement, and, optimistically, there will be positive, larger impacts as these seeds take root—the 2018 survey already demonstrates some progress. But, for perspective, art museums make up only 4.5% of the over 35,000 museums in the US that support over 726,000 jobs (<https://www.imls.gov/news-events/news-releases/government-doubles-official-estimate-there-are-35000-active-museums-us>). If museums are unable to make their hiring practices more responsive without relying on substantial help from big funders, it’s not clear how leadership, programming, collections, and exhibitions will ever become more inclusive. There is simply not enough philanthropy to support change on such a scale.

Why are museums waiting for big funders to lead the way? Puawai Cairns, Head of the taonga Māori collection, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, has written, it’s like “throwing fertiliser at our feet – we can grow or we can stand still and wallow in sh*t” (<https://www.aam-us.org/2018/12/17/decolonisation-we-arent-going-to-save-you/>). How long will museums stand in place, depending on generous funders to motivate change? Funding creates opportunity, certainly, but it will take more than money to secure sustained movement. Lasting transformations in diversity, equity and inclusion require clear priorities that stretch into all areas of practice. Make it part of the mission, and work to make it happen. ■

Ann Sinfield is an independent curator and writer, and was formerly the Exhibitions Manager at the Chazen Museum of Art.

The Justice Work of Culture

Shortly after the 2014 fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, museum workers and scholars Aleia Brown and Adrienne Russell used the Twitter-mobilized phrase #MuseumsRespondToFerguson as a challenge to museum silence in the face of urgent social events. The discussions that followed inspired a joint statement by a collective of museum bloggers and colleagues. They asked:

*Where do museums fit in?... What should be our role—as institutions that claim to conduct their activities for the public benefit—in the face of ongoing struggles for greater social justice both at the local and national level?*¹

The Museum and Exhibition Studies Program (MUSE) at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) attempts to answer these questions by building on the politically radical tradition within museum studies. This is epitomized by social museology and the movement for a “new museology,” which, from the 1970s to the present, has called on museums to act for justice.

Accepting that museums reflect and also reproduce deep social problems, we want to enmesh these public institutions with social movements and encourage a view of museum work as cultural activism. To those ends, our program decided in 2016 to create a journal of critical cultural theory and practice aimed at challenging and reimagining museums.

Fwd: Museums is produced by our graduate students and is published yearly by Chicago’s StepSister Press. It accepts submissions through an international open call and is peer-reviewed. The three edited articles in this section first appeared in that journal. Our fourth issue, focused on the theme, “Death to Museums,” will be released in May 2019.

Therese Quinn, Director, MUSE, UIC

¹ “Joint statement from museum bloggers & colleagues on Ferguson & related events,” 2014. Retrieved from: <https://adriannerussell.wordpress.com/2014/12/11/joint-statement-from-museum-bloggers-colleagues-on-ferguson/>



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The Missing Wall Label in Museums

by Kaycee Moore

It's a cruel fate that countless queer artists go ignored on the wall and in the texts of art museums, and to what end? To appear "neutral"? How often are even well-known queer artists, like Andy Warhol, put back in the closet in label text and exhibition catalogues? Why would a queer visitor to an art museum feel respected when the artists on the wall aren't?

Coming out is not an easy thing, nor is it a one-time thing. LGBTQ+ people fight their entire lives for acceptance and understanding. As a trans man, it would be great if I could just hit a button and everyone I encountered would get my identity pronouns right every time. Luckily, my museum, the Columbus Museum of Art, is fairly accepting and recently added the option to have such pronouns on our name tags.

This is a wonderful, easy move towards being more inclusive and has led to some excellent conversations with visitors, but it certainly hasn't stopped the mis-gendering or weird looks. Some days, people still just look at me like I'm an alien. Like somehow I, the guy with the name tag and security badge, am the person who doesn't belong in the museum. Then again, nothing on the walls says queer people belong. Certainly not the labels and, as a copy editor for exhibition label text, I should know. There is, at the time of this writing (2016), one label out of nearly 500 pieces that clearly identifies an artist as a gay man. No labels identify any lesbian or bisexual artists, and the collection contains no transgender artists at all.

Museums are not neutral. Everything you see when you walk into a museum is carefully selected and presented with a goal in mind. There is a particular story being told and, usually, only certain viewpoints and facts are used to further that vision. An artist's queer-ness is, more often than not, one of those facts that gets ignored.

Unless the exhibition is specifically about queer identity or the knowledge is absolutely essential to understanding a piece, the text will likely omit an artist's gender identity. As Joshua Adair put it in his contribution to the reader *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*, "Gay voices and opinions... are often present(ed) in museums we visit; nevertheless, visitors are typically unaware that they are experiencing gay men's



Keith Haring, *Altar Piece* (1990). Denver Art Museum, Gift of Yoko Ono. © Keith Haring Foundation. Photo by Michael Tropea. Courtesy of the Alphawood Foundation.

unique perspectives because the institutions that employ them refuse to acknowledge their identities... Honest presentations would not just set the historical record straight (or gay, if you will); it would pave the way for institutional change now.”¹

Plenty of nonessential information winds up on labels, and the choices of what is or isn't there establish the stance the museum takes on any given subject. Consider the opening example in Gail Gregg's 2010 article, "Your Labels Make Me Feel Stupid," in which the label for a Frank Lobdell painting goes from needlessly describing the visual aspects of a painting right in front of the viewer to a narrative about Lobdell's experience in WWII as a way to understand the piece.²

An artist's identity is an incredibly important piece of information to better understand who they are and what their worldview is like. It can also demonstrate inclusive representation. A key part of the Victoria and Albert Museum's guidelines for writing label text is to humanize the objects by connecting sometimes very impersonal or historically distant pieces with relatable concepts and stories. A piece they feature in the guide is a bust of Lady Morgan, an Irish novelist, where her work championing the rights of women as well as her disability are specifically mentioned.³



Devan Shimoyama, *Snake Baby* (2016).

As wonderful as queer-specific exhibits and programming can be, they can also be othering. This is especially true when these specifically set aside times and spaces are the only contexts in which a museum acknowledges queer people. Inclusivity should not be a last-minute addition. It needs to be woven into the fabric of a museum's design and language. Doing otherwise comes off as disingenuous and can feel like a cash grab. Make an effort to include a variety of perspectives and tell stories that reflect on a variety of experiences. Stories about the same type of characters get boring fast.

There is certainly no lack of queer artists. Look up a list of LGBTQ+ artists and see how many are on the museum walls: Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Paul Cadmus, Robert Mapplethorpe, Berenice Abbott, Alice Austen, Catherine Opie, to mention a few. They are there, but few, if any, are acknowledged as such. This is a problem.

Queer people have historically been oppressed and their stories hidden or censored. We deserve to know that someone like us created amazing works of art and that queer artworks are displayed in an art museum. We deserve the chance to see that our creations and output are just as important and valuable as that of straight, cisgendered artists. We deserve the opportunity to share our stories and inspire future generations. If LGBTQ+ artists keep getting put back in the closet, how can that happen?

Outside the museum environment, it is very distressing for someone who has been out for a while to be forced back into the closet. Sometimes, it is for safety concerns or when visiting less-friendly areas or less open-minded people. Usually, these situations are short-lived but, nonetheless, emotionally and mentally exhausting.

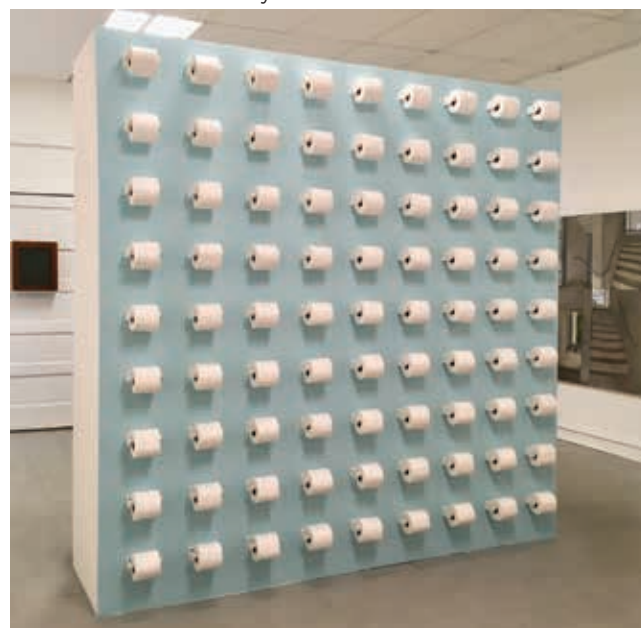
Then there are the times queer people are forced back by others. How many stories of trans people have ended in their families dead-naming them and misgendering them after death? How many gay people have had their wishes ignored and partners pushed out of the story by bigoted family members who couldn't handle their reality? When done by oneself, going back into the closet can be a benign experience, but when someone else is making the choice, it is an act of cruelty and erasure.

So, what do we do? There are plenty of options as far as tombstones and extended label text goes ("Tombstone labels" meaning labels with only some description or narrative about the piece, artist or exhibition). Mention it in the text. Add symbols identifying queer artists. Have a different font/format/color of label to identify different groups. Make handouts or maps pointing out diverse artists. Make it clear that the museum values the work of people beyond the straight, cis, white, male perspective.

Beyond making it clear that their collections are diverse, museums need to train staff about inclusive

Continued on page 22.

Puppies Puppies, *Toilet Paper Grid* (2016). 81 rolls of toilet paper arranged in a 9 x 9 grid, installation view. Photo courtesy of Lawrence and Clark Gallery.



The Museum Prism and Chasm

by Marjorie Schwarzer

Museums have persevered over the last century in their quest to accomplish something more than the mere storing of private collections. Yet today, museums of all disciplines and sizes are circling back to the era when they were beholden to the values of ultra-wealthy collectors.

A chasm exists between the collectors who control museums and the people who work in them. To understand it, we first need to review museums' efforts during the 20th century to advance from private repositories into civic-minded institutions. Two 21st century economic trends threaten to undermine this progress.

Let's first go back to 1907, the year Congress amended tariff laws and enabled tycoons like J.P. Morgan to import European art into the U.S. American captains of industry needed places to store and display their treasures—hence the founding of museums, often on public land. As the century unfolded, technological innovations, public education, and social and economic advances like the civil rights movement helped to democratize the museum, bringing more voices into the galleries and corridors of decision-making.

Politicians saw the potential of museums to serve as platforms for civic pride. Federal programs, such as the Works Progress Administration and the founding of the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, respectively, provided money for progressive programs. Tax incentives encouraged collectors to donate works to museums. By the late 1970s, art museums were no longer solely the purview of an elite class of collectors.

During the Reagan years, two formidable waves with the potential to erode prior progress began to form. The first was economic inequality; the second was a changing art market. The museum field, so committed to its public face and progressive ideals, was willing to ignore these trends, or at least ride them out, rather than confront them.

While researching my 2006 book, *Riches, Rivals and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America*, I theorized that American museums, looked at as a whole, could be seen as prisms of American democracy, reflecting our struggles and triumphs as a people and a nation.¹ If one compares the experience of visiting a museum today to

that of a century ago, there is no doubt that museums have evolved into something more.

In 2008-09, the Great Recession hit. The two waves came crashing down on museums. Income distribution in our nation became dangerously lopsided over time. As beneficiaries of that wealth, mega-wealthy collectors began to re-exert their command over public institutions. As of 2013, the annual income of the top one percent of Americans was roughly 25 times higher than that of the bottom 99 percent.

Digging into the 2014 tax forms of 25 top-tier art museums...the median salary of their directors was \$650,000, with the Museum of Modern Art's head's salary and benefits package at \$2.1 million.

Despite their rhetoric of serving the public good, most art museums' payrolls mirror this pattern. Charity Navigator tracks the finances of more than 4,000 nonprofit organizations. Analysts found that the median annual salary of CEOs of arts and cultural nonprofits in 2014 was \$150,000, while executives of large nonprofits earned a median salary of \$256,000.

The case is much different in major art museums. Digging into the 2014 tax forms of 25 top-tier art museums across the United States, I found the median salary of their directors was \$650,000, with the Museum of Modern Art's head's salary and benefits package at \$2.1 million. This puts art museum directors at the very top of all nonprofit executives.

My cross-comparison of CEO salaries with those for entry-level professional staff at the same institutions on the crowd-sourced website, Glassdoor.com, showed an average starting salary for an assistant curator of \$50,000. That amounts to about seven cents for every dollar earned by the same museum's CEO. In high cost-of-living areas like New York City, that figure drops to five cents.

Why do governing boards of art museums approve such out-of-kilter salary disparities? The answer is complex, but I believe it relates to the contemporary art market and its culture of excess and celebrity.

The Return of Art Insanity

The Great Recession saw a boom in biennials and art fairs. They put the art market into overdrive, catering to status-seeking billionaires and A-list artists. When interest rates are low and the stock market uncertain, the ultra-wealthy park their excess assets in what the IRS calls “treasure assets,” which are luxury items like gemstones, antiques and artwork. Since 2007, the wealthy have purchased more art than ever.²

During the 2008–09 recession, as endowments deflated and museums laid off staff, art sales shattered records. Prices rose dramatically. Contemporary art museums were priced out of the market. The question then became: How could privately-held art find its way into the public museum?

In 2006, after years of chipping away at incentives for collectors to donate art to museums, Congress eliminated the “fractional art gift,” one of the last loopholes that helped museums curry favor with collectors.³ Absent favorable tax deduction mechanisms, the new class of collector bypassed public institutions.

Rather than collaborate with existing museums, with their pre-existing missions and bureaucratic staff structures, some prominent collectors decided to go it alone. Witness legendary homebuilder Eli Broad, hedge fund billionaire Mitchell Rales and Walmart heiress Alice Walton. To show off their personal art collections, each built a “vanity” museum: The Broad in downtown Los Angeles (2015), Rales’ Glenstone in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. (2006) and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas (2011).

During the 2008–09 recession, as endowments deflated and museums laid off staff, art sales shattered records. Prices rose dramatically. Contemporary art museums were priced out of the market.

To each founder’s credit, their museums employ professional staff, admit visitors free of charge and offer educational programs. The art is well cared for and beautifully displayed. Yet who is setting the agenda? Do professional staff have license to advance the field’s progressive values? Or are they beholden to their founder’s personal narratives?

Falling into the Gap

What if a city rebuffs a mega-collector’s desire to build a vanity museum? This happened in San Francisco, adding a twist to the intersection between private wealth and art collecting.

In 2016, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) tripled its gallery space with a successful downtown expansion. The top three floors are now known as the Doris and Donald Fisher Collection Galleries in honor of The Gap store founders.

The cloud hanging over the project is a string-attached agreement that is reshaping the museum’s curatorial program and policies. Seven years earlier, the city rebuffed Doris and Donald Fisher’s plans to build a private museum on public land for their collection.⁴ To keep the extraordinary collection from leaving the city or going to auction, SFMOMA came to the rescue.

Long is the list of urgent social and environmental issues discussed in museum conferences and publications such as decolonizing the museum, diversifying the workforce, and fighting for pay equity.

But there was a catch. The family’s foundation added 1,100 artworks to the museum’s collection but did not relinquish ownership of the art. The complicated loan arrangement stipulates that, for the next 100 years, 60 percent of the art on display in the formal indoor galleries must, at all times, come from the Fisher hoard, a collection largely consisting of work by A-list white male artists.⁵

“Welcome to the winner-take-all art history,” wrote critic Jason Farago, after he viewed the opening installation.⁶ The Fisher loan agreement is difficult to parse. As SFMOMA explained it to me in personal correspondence, 35 percent of the museum’s current art display spaces must be at least 75 percent Fisher. If the museum expands again, the Fisher allocation percentage will go down. But this doesn’t change another stipulation of the loan agreement: every ten years, the museum must mount a year-long exhibition in the Fisher Galleries featuring *all* Fisher art.

Going forward, art historian Kellie Jones reminds us, “Art allows us to dream, to think, to imagine something different,” to visualize a way to change the world.⁷

The museum workforce increasingly echoes this humanistic vision of changing the world. The theme of the 2017 American Alliance of Museums' conference—"Gateways for Understanding: Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion in Museums"—is evidence of our field's progressive ethos and aspirations toward using museums to advance social justice values.

Long is the list of urgent social and environmental issues discussed in museum conferences and publications such as decolonizing the museum, diversifying the workforce, and fighting for pay equity. But are dreams and talk enough to move us forward?

Why does our society, and particularly the elite portions of it, prioritize things and status over the social good? Are museum workers complicit in letting the system get away with this disparity of values?

The Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart) advocates for the rights of Walmart retail workers. In 2015, its union organizers visited the company's headquarters in Bentonville to press for living wages. While there, they visited Crystal Bridges and recorded their visit on their phones.

"So how do you feel being here?" asks one organizer to a longtime Walmart worker, Zahia, as they stroll through Crystal Bridges' gardens. Zahia doesn't know that the museum paid its founding director a salary of over \$700,000. She also doesn't know that the museums' security guard's hourly wage is fifty percent higher than her own wages.

Nonetheless, her gut tells her something is very wrong. "I have mixed feelings," she begins in a measured tone. "I mean the potential for it (the museum) to be great is there, but I think they did the wrong thing." Her voice then breaks. "All our hard work and the wages that we don't earn goes to this building filled with these nice things that are only for a few people to see. If they did the right thing, it would have incredible potential to impact everybody."

Fighting tears, Zahia continues, "This art is nice. But it only reflects a small part of what we as Americans stand for and who we are. We are something so much more than this."⁸

Museum workers need to ask why our field's economic equation leans more to "nice things" than to people. How can museums justify the costs of building

and maintaining pristine environments for art purchased by billionaires over paying fair wages to their own workforce? Why does our society, and particularly the elite portions of it, prioritize things and status over the social good? Are museum workers complicit in letting the system get away with this disparity of values?

Museum workers have always struggled to balance our institutions' economic underpinning with our professed humanistic values. We have much to learn from union organizers, economists, attorneys and others who stand up to large systems, expose their biases and fight for change.

The ride across the current waves will be rough. But the quest is worthy. When we look back on history, how do we want America's museums to reflect our nation back to us: as a prism or as a chasm? And who do we want to answer that question: the top point one percent or the rest of us? ■

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Learning to Unlearn: Deconstructing Museum Neutrality

by Megan Moran

In order to be considered truly “public,” American museums must be held accountable to represent the stories that reflect the diversity of the country. A commitment to this pursuit inevitably exposes the myth that museums are and should strive to be neutral, authoritative spaces that convey universal truths.

New museum theory, also referred to as critical museum theory, calls for museums to be sites of “discourse and critical reflection that [are] committed to examining unsettling histories with sensitivity to all parties.”¹ Indeed, Janet Marstine, editor of *New Museum Theory and Practice*, asserts that, “museums are not neutral spaces that speak with one institutional, authoritative voice. Museums are about individuals making subjective choices.”² How does teaching and learning in the museum change to align with critical museum practice?

This essay aims to a) assert the value of unlearning as essential to critical museum practice; b) illustrate how tactics of unlearning facilitate agency among both museum visitors and staff and c) provide resources for how museum workers can begin to engage unlearning with critical museum praxis.

Much has been debated and written about learning in museums, the implicit assumption being that the goal of museum learning is to acquire new knowledge. Much less attention has been given to exploring the possibilities of what happens during the process of *unlearning*. Unlearning is my term for describing the act of transforming and rejecting previously learned knowledge, behaviors and ideology in light of new information.

The process of unlearning cultivates the opportunity to empower visitors and museum workers to exercise agency over the experience of the museum space.

In the summer and fall of 2017, I served as the Education Coordinator for an exhibition at Alphawood Gallery in Chicago titled “Then They Came for Me: Incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII

and the Demise of Civil Liberties.” The exhibition made connections between the harmful mid-20th century rhetoric of “enemy aliens” and the enemy aliens under attack in America today, namely, undocumented immigrants and people of Muslim faith. Unlearning and, in some cases, reclaiming such pejoratives and euphemisms was crucial to the gallery’s educational programs.

Unlearning Content Knowledge

We cannot expect visitors to take new information presented in the museum at face value, especially when it may be in stark opposition to deeply held values and beliefs. Instead of aiming to replace knowledge, museums can offer new knowledge as an opportunity to critically examine the narratives one has been taught without dictating an ultimate end that supersedes all prior knowledge. Let us use an example:

“When I [museum educator] say the word ‘camp,’ what immediately comes to mind? Just shout it out.”

“Fun!”

“Arts & Crafts!”

“Scouts!”

“Outdoor Activities!”

“Ok, so I’m hearing mostly positive memories of what sounds like summer camp. Now, when I say the phrase ‘concentration camp,’ what comes to mind?”

“The Holocaust.”

“Death.”

“Horror.”

“From that example alone, we can see how when we add just one word, one modifier to ‘camp,’ it drastically changes how we understand it, right? That is the power of words to shape history.”

At the outset of every tour I led at Alphawood Gallery, I used this short exercise that draws on visitors’ prior knowledge and associations with terminology shaped by their personal experiences. This example underlaid the discussion about the gallery’s “Words Matter” panel. The panel included a chart comparing

two lists of words, one labeled “Original Terms” and the other “Preferred Terms.”

Words under original terms, such as internment, evacuation and assembly center, were compared to newer terms preferred by the Japanese American Citizens League, such as incarceration, forced removal and temporary detention center.³ The preferred terms more accurately portray the experience of the mass incarceration from the perspective of Japanese Americans, compared to the “official” euphemistic terminology created by the U.S. government.

The chart of original and preferred terms exemplifies a dialogue between past and present, offering visitors an alternative perspective to the dominant narrative. Thus, from the beginning of the exhibition, viewers are invited to engage in questioning all the narratives they have heard, not only about this particular period, but all of American history.

Terminology was a subject we returned to frequently on tours at Alphawood Gallery, pointing out how euphemisms were deployed in official government documents and propaganda alike. My objective was to complicate the euphemistic language without necessarily condemning it.

I would explain to visitors that the intention was not to create a dichotomy of right versus wrong terminology but to illustrate how unlearning old terms can open us up to new, more just, understandings of history from the perspective of those who have been ignored or silenced. Given decades of discourse and textbooks that use the word “internment,” many visitors chose to continue using this deeply internalized term, including those who had been incarcerated in the camps.

Unlearning the Ego

Museum educators are traditionally trained to be subject matter experts or, at the very least, to serve as proxies for the institutional voice. Ideally, having human beings serve in the role of educator (as opposed to audio guides or other didactics) helps transcend information delivery and facilitate dialogue between the public and the museum.

The museum educator is therefore constantly challenged with juggling the subjective perspectives of the institution, curators, historians and visitors—not to mention their own. How does the exchange of multiple subjectivities facilitate the transformation of deeply-held values and understandings of one’s own place in history and society at large? Whose perspective does the museum educator privilege above all others, and why?

Paulo Freire’s radical pedagogy provides a useful starting point for the importance of unlearning the ego in order to deconstruct hierarchies of knowledge and power. Freire is well-known for seeing education as a collaborative dialogue amongst teachers and students in contrast to a top-down exchange wherein the teacher imparts knowledge to the passive students.⁴ Museum educators can take this model to heart when facilitating guided tours by making space for multiple perspectives alongside the institution’s narrative.

With a subject so politically and emotionally charged as Japanese American incarceration during World War II, naturally the memories of each individual’s experience varies greatly. Since the events transpired only 75 years ago, I was privileged to have survivors of the camps join my guided tours at Alphawood and share personal accounts of their lives before, during and after incarceration.

This experience was an important lesson in unlearning the museum training that favors my “authoritative” perspective in order to make space for the perspectives of those with truly intimate, firsthand knowledge of the subject matter. Humbling oneself in this manner makes space for visitors to take agency over their learning, oftentimes enhancing the learning of everyone in the group.

Unlocking Agency

The process of unlearning cultivates the opportunity to empower visitors and museum workers to exercise agency over the experience of the museum space. By helping visitors to unlearn beliefs and practices rooted in internalized racism and white supremacy, I am better able to step back and create the necessary space that privileges more diverse voices that deserve to be reflected in the museum and beyond.

When we choose to think and act in accordance with what we have unlearned and relearned, we exercise the agency necessary to challenge the status quo.

Although we are rarely aware of it, the process of unlearning involves making the choice to continually reinforce new learning. It isn’t an isolated action to be completed only once. When we choose to think and act in accordance with what we have unlearned and relearned, we exercise the agency necessary to challenge the status quo.

Margaret Lindauer, an art history professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, posits a critical typology of museum visitor, one who notices the implicit and explicit biases projected by the written, visual and spatial features of an exhibition.⁵ Lindauer acknowledges that, currently, there are few models for exhibition development informed by new museum theory; in fact, she recognizes the risks involved for some museums, most especially the economic risk.⁶

However, I argue that they are risks worth taking and fighting for if we are to foster critical museum visitors. When we allow visitors to critique our institutions, we give them a practice ground for exercising free speech and challenging systemic oppression beyond the walls of the museum. Furthermore, we create an opportunity to model transparent, trusting relationships between the public and institutions of power that might be replicated elsewhere in society.

Resources and Actions

Museums must unlearn the internal practices that have traditionally excluded marginalized people and their stories. What does that process look like, and where do we begin such an endeavor? I have found the following resources to be helpful for engaging in critical reflection and transforming ideas into collective action.

The Dreamspace Project, a workbook and toolkit developed by a museum educator, is an excellent starting point for all museum professionals. The book is organized under three umbrella themes: Deconstruction, Decolonization and Democratization.⁷ It invites challenging discussions around racism, white supremacy and the multitude of oppressive systems operating within museums, the United States and global society.

In addition to unlearning and deconstructing at the institutional level, it is imperative that educators engage in critical self-reflection. Dr. Melissa Crum (Mosaic Education Network) and Keonna Hendrick (Brooklyn Museum) lead workshops and trainings using the “multicultural critical reflective practice” (MCRP) paradigm to help museum educators “identify, analyze and challenge the cultural beliefs, values and assumptions that color our interactions with artworks and learners.”⁸

The difficult and emotional work of institutional and self-unlearning cannot and should not be attempted in isolation. We build power for our movement when we collaborate as an interconnected community of museum workers.

In order to integrate new museum theory into long-lasting practice on a systemic level, we must share successes, best practices and resources as well as turn to each other for support. A wealth of knowledge already exists amongst museum practitioners locally, nationally and globally to unlearn practices that perpetuate inequity in museums.

Some online networks of museum workers that you can join today include #MuseumWorkersSpeak, #MuseumEdChat, “Ed Conversations” and the blog, ArtMuseumTeaching.com.

Cultivating agency within ourselves, our colleagues and our visitors is one of the most effective strategies we can deploy to empower museums to break through the façade of neutrality, help visitors and educators unlearn internalized systemic oppression and serve as sites for contemporary cultural discourse.

Change will not happen overnight, but by using the tenets of new museum theory as a blueprint and collaborating with each other, we push incrementally closer to a more equitable and democratic future for our institutions and, by extension, their cultural relevance to society. ■

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Four Directors Address Museum Practices

by Neil Goodman

“The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast, the slow one now will later be fast, as the present now will later be past, the order is rapidly fadin’.”

Bob Dylan, *The Times They Are a-Changin’*

When I was younger, I always thought of museums as repositories of culture, staid in their confidence of collecting fixed moments of time for eternity. Culture had made its decisions, value imbedded, and the decisions final. As I aged, I began to see the situation more organically, as posing a set of questions and answers for each generation, with the answers as fluid and viscous as the questions themselves.

If absolute truth perhaps evades us, my hope was still that the work institutions collected and showcased embodied those values and gave a permanent voice to artists whose careers had been vetted by the long view, in which judgments were layered by both the pedigree of time and a significant exhibition history.

But the times have indeed changed, and museums are changing with them. Those values are still imbedded within that culture, yet other questions are pertinent and influence museum programming and decisions. With this matrix in mind, I asked four geographically diverse, university-based museums to respond to a set of questions that address this rubric and shed light on how their decision-making is influenced by our time’s norms and concerns.

The participating museums were the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University

(Lisa Graziose Corrin), the Brauer Museum of Art at Valparaiso University (Gregg Hertzlieb), the Hammer Museum at UCLA (Claudia Bestor), and the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) (Lawrence Rinder).

Three of the museum directors responded to the questions via email, while the Block’s responses were based on a phone interview. As the answers were significantly longer than this article’s intended length, the responses have been edited. Quoted responses are verbatim.

The Questions

1. *What demands from outside groups have been most prominent in the last two to three years? (i.e. Greater artist representation, more community input, more contemporary programming?)*

Block: “The goal should be that when a visitor comes to the museum, they see themselves as in some way reflected within the walls and offered ways of seeing and thinking different than what they grew up with.”

Brauer: “Contemporary programming is relevant to our community by drawing attention to issues of identity... and something we can feel through discussion.”

The Hammer: “We have a long history of programming that covers the most crucial social and political events of our time through a long-standing forum series and we carry that thread throughout our other programs...”



(Left) Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois

(Right) Lisa Graziose Corrin, Director

(Left) Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana

(Right) Gregg Hertzlieb, Director and Curator



We try to be a platform for people to speak out in their own voices about things they care about.”

BAMPFA: “The inspiration to diversify our program comes not from outside pressure but from the values and sense of mission of our own staff. We are highly cognizant of the importance of presenting a program that is balanced in gender representation and which redresses the historical under-exposure of artists of color.”

2. How does cultural diversity affect your programming?

Block: “Responsible organizations will be diverse, challenge conventions and present a multiplicity of viewpoints.”

Brauer: “Cultural diversity causes us to think more consciously about how we are speaking and to whom our programming is directed. We at the Brauer think today with greater awareness about stories that need to be told and about those who could benefit from the telling of the stories...I want to appeal to human concerns but also want to share many voices, each with the capability to inspire.”

The Hammer: Our mission “believes in the promise of art and ideas to illuminate our lives and build a more just world. The director felt everyone at the museum actively seeks out different perspectives and points

of view in trying to fulfill that mission. As a result, a broad scope of representation exists in all their programming.”

BAMPFA: “Cultural diversity is our programming. As an encyclopedic museum, our collections-in both art and film-are global in scope.”

3. Do you feel that you have overlooked contemporary artists that work in more conservative traditions?

Block: “We believe that all forms are equally valid, avoid hierarchies, and embrace human creativity in all forms.”

Brauer: The museum is “steeped in conservative or traditional art-making approaches personally and so is more likely to be overlooking artists working in newer media.... Meanwhile, we as curators continue to learn about the contemporary scene in order to offer it as inspiring new material.”

The Hammer thought this question was more applicable as a question for curators.

BAMPFA: “I assume that what you mean by ‘conservative’ is for the most part, representational painting. We have continued to present artists who work in this media and mode.”



(Left) Hammer Museum of Art, UCLA, Los Angeles, California

(Right) Claudia Bestor, Director, Public Programs

4. What changes have you made in the last several years in the field and what changes would you like your museum to make?

Rather than change, the **Block** emphasized what makes the museum different from anything else in the university is the importance of art as a material manifestation of human thought. This materiality is transformative to our way of thinking and understanding of the world.

Brauer: “We have truly increased our commitment to diversity in the collection and in our exhibitions, and we will continue to do that. I feel proud as an educator to be able to share powerful works of art created by women, by African Americans, by artists working in a variety of faith traditions and from a variety of backgrounds.”

The Hammer noted that, in the past few years, it has experimented with some longer single topic series: “Los Angeles is home to one of the largest Armenian populations in the world and, in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, we did a year-long film series exploring multiple facets of Armenian culture, history and landscapes....”

BAMPFA: “Since opening our new downtown Berkeley location, we have added a number of programming threads, such as the Black Life and Fall event series, that not only enrich the museum with diverse cultural perspectives but which are themselves programmed through cross-sector partnerships and by curatorial authority delegated to members of diverse communities. In the future, an area of focus for BAMPFA will be to acquire key works by 20th century artists of color whose work was relatively overlooked at the time it was made.”

All of the institutions have developed different approaches to these questions. Interestingly, though, they consistently have seen their mission as shifting and engaging their communities with these thoughts as an organic part of their mission. They are seeking to move with the world as well as move the world, and all four institutions contribute to engaging their communities with a core set of values based on diversity and a multiplicity of viewpoints.

Most of the additions to programming naturally reflect how conversations about race, gender, and ethnicity have become part of the dialogue. They also show a more elastic definition of boundaries. While each museum reflects its vision, its funding and its directorship, another indication of change would be to see what curatorial positions have been added and which departments have been added to over the past several years. Designated resources are the material evidence of change, and curatorial positions and job descriptions reflect and respond to those changes in values and definitions.

If we could look forward one hundred years from now, it would be interesting to see how museums had once again reconfigured their mission and responded to their times. University museums are less cumbersome ships to maneuver and, as their stewardship is strongly connected to academic freedom, perhaps they have a certain timeliness and flexibility in programming that differentiates them from larger institutions. As we look ahead, it is also equally interesting to see what is remembered and what is forgotten and how our values and norms bring the past into the present and anticipate the future. ■

Neil Goodman is the Los Angeles correspondent for the New Art Examiner.

(Right) Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, California

(Left) Lawrence Rinder, Director



Interview with Alison Gass

Director, Smart Museum of Art

Alison Gass started at the Smart in July of 2017. She came from the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University where she was the chief curator and deputy director. Prior to that, she was the founding curator at the Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University.

Tom Mullaney—When you interviewed, I assume you told the search committee that you had a certain vision of what you wanted the Smart to be. Can you encapsulate that?

Alison Gass—I think what's really exciting about university art museums in general is that they're not driven by the door like big private museums. They have to do blockbusters in order to sell tickets, whereas the blockbuster at the university museum is more like a seminar. It's a chance to think and learn through the lens of art practice.

What became exciting for me about the Smart was thinking about what are the great university art museums in an already rich cultural city full of museums. What makes us different from the Art Institute, the MCA, the Renaissance Society?

We came to a couple of conclusions. One was the really exciting opportunity to reflect the University of Chicago's particular commitment to freedom of

expression...to ask anything about the history of the world and try to answer it from different points of view. But then we also think about the place of this museum beyond just being at the University of Chicago. We think of ourselves as being very much of the South Side of Chicago.

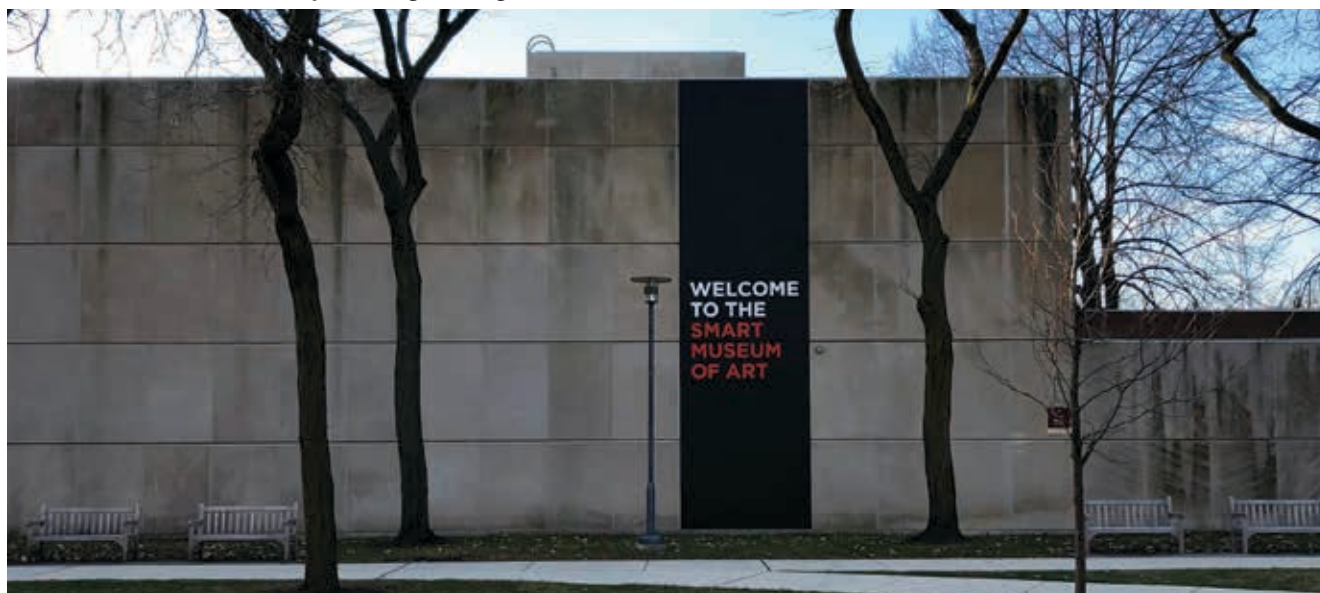
The main thing we are really focusing on is reflecting the university's commitment to global diversity, questioning the received thinking that many Western institutions have been teaching for years and years and the way many museums are organized around a certain version of the history of art. We're really interested in expanding that canon. Who are the women artists, artists of color, artists from different countries who were very much involved in the stories but weren't always the ones who came to the top of the market?

TM—You used several key words in your previous answer: place, diversity, inclusion. These have become museum buzzwords. These are not words museums



Alison Gass, Director, Smart Museum of Art

Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois



have traditionally used. What is it in the moment that museums, big and small, now say they are committed to these values?

AG—Well, think about what’s happening in the world today. Look at our political climate. A movement called “Museums Are Not Neutral,” a very interesting movement, says museums should not pretend that they are just standing there, not taking a stand. Yet, it has been artists who have really been real movers of progress and protest.

Looking back over 20th century movements (feminism, civil rights, anti-Vietnam War), you see artists who have been the real movers of progress and protest. Museums have not always been in step with the artists. I think, right now, museums realize two things: that people have access to visual information like they never had before, and that they don’t even have to come to museums to see pictures online.

If you want museums to be relevant, you have to have some reason people would want to come. And it doesn’t have to be for the elite anymore.

TM—To what extent do you think the Art Institute has gotten that message?

AG—From what I know, I think they’re trying really hard to be inclusive. I know they have board committees that are designed to look at issues of inclusion and expanding the canon. But what I’ll say about the difference between [the] Art Institute and a place like the Smart is that we are more nimble. So we can move pretty fast.

We can say ‘Oh, this thing is happening.’ Since we’re not planned out five years ahead in our exhibitions calendar, we can put together something faster. Right now, we’re thinking pretty closely about 2020, an election year. What kind of exhibitions do we want to have when we know the country will be going through something pretty tough?

There’s a reason why I choose to make my career at university museums. There is this possibility to be both reactive and proactive. Proactive in the sense that we can help people shift their perspective or rethink their place in the world.

TM—I mentioned those buzzwords earlier that everyone is talking about.

AG—Yes, that’s exactly right. People are trying to figure out what is the role of the museum in an era now

where people don’t have to go to museums. They can go to museums on websites or read a lot of reviews online. They don’t have to live in real time and real space as much as they used to. That’s a real shift.

How do museums tackle the technological revolution? I don’t think the answer is putting a lot of gadgets in the galleries. The answer is in making people feel like a museum is a space of leisure, is a space of social [sic], is a space of learning, a space of conversing. And a real chance to introduce an element of excitement.

TM—I think museums still have a big educational role to fill. I mean the major ones. There is this real acceptance and wanting to learn by visitors. The Art Institute is getting a lot of young people through the doors, but I think they are mostly leaving without a whole lot of context and history.

AG—I agree with that. You have to be very careful not to lose the context. I had a funny moment just this morning. I have a 10-year old-daughter who’s doing a global reading challenge. She was reading about the Iranian revolution, and I happen to know a lot about the Iranian revolution which I learned through art history. I also learned about Christian history—and I’m Jewish—by studying art history.

I’m a big believer in learning the history of the world through art. Which is also why I choose not to be at a strictly contemporary institution. You will see our historic exhibitions. We’re figuring out how to make them still feel really relevant today. What happened in the French Revolution that feels rather similar to what may be happening today? How can we look at the lens of history and understand?

TM—Would you have been able to do some of these large exhibitions in the past year without funding from the Terra Foundation, or were they always in your game plan?

AG—That was planned before I got here. But Terra definitely helped a lot with support for “South Side Stories” and “The Time is Now.” If I had been director back then and there hadn’t been funding for that, I still would have committed to doing that show. It’s too important. ■

Tom Mullaney is the Managing Editor of the New Art Examiner.

Interview with Julie Rodrigues Widholm

Director, DePaul Art Museum



DePaul Art Museum,
Chicago, Illinois

Tom Mullaney—Can you tell me when you arrived at DePaul and what one or two of your previous positions had been?

Julie Rodrigues Widholm—Sure. I arrived in this position in September, 2015, so about 3 ½ years. And prior to that, I was a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art for about 16 years. I started there right out of graduate school at the School of the Art Institute [of Chicago].

TM—Some of us at the *New Art Examiner* feel that the sector that is doing the most in terms of exciting, engaging exhibitions is the university museum sector. Your museum's emphasis, in recent years, has been to really shift toward under-represented artists, artists of color, the very issues facing the field. Tell me how you have shaped the exhibition program?

JRW—I think you are correct to identify that aspect about our exhibition program and our collection. We have a collection of 3,500 artworks, and we are building that while thinking about the role we play within the City of Chicago and how we can augment what other institutions are doing.

We also are bolstered by the University's mission, which is very focused on service and social justice. So that, coupled with my own frustration and interest in how museums can do a better job of representing our communities and our cities. Whose stories are not being told and why is that?

TM—It seems to me that the major museums have only lately begun saying their purpose is to be a “catalyst for change.” MoMA just announced an expanded focus on formerly overlooked women and artists of color. What forced the major museums to embrace change?

JRW—I think the public is increasingly demanding it. Museums are being held accountable for the decisions they make and for them to become more transparent about how they make those decisions. What is their role in the community and to come down from their ivory tower. Their language and institutional approach to being a museum is being questioned and challenged.

And that's also part of a cultural shift, right? Now, you can get information at your fingertips. So, they are thinking about a changing culture that is demanding changing institutions.

TM—Other than [former Met director] Tom Hoving and maybe [former Guggenheim director] Tom Krens, museums have tried to portray themselves as, “This is the way it's been.” They never felt the need to justify [that] since the culture felt the museum was a special place. It seems that now, they have been shaken to their roots and are aware the prevailing model will not survive.

JRW—Well, I think that the roots of many museums are colonial and patriarchal, so that's being called into question... the kind of European, white, male art history that has dominated our history for more than a hundred years. It's not that there weren't women and artists of color around in the past hundred years. It's that they just were not invited in and seen as doing quality work.



Julie Rodrigues Widholm,
Director, DePaul Art
Museum

And I also think you have my generation, Gen X if you will, now coming into positions of power and leadership, so we have a different approach from the older generation, who came up from different traditions and conventions of museum work.

TM—What is a recent exhibition that most represents your thinking?

JRW—Last fall, we had a solo exhibition of the artist Brendan Fernandes. He is an artist originally from Kenya, who grew up in Canada, and is a former ballet dancer. His work is fascinating because we have this collection of 200-plus African objects, made in the 20th century but not considered “modern art.”

So, I was grappling with the question, “How do we treat this material in an art museum and a teaching museum?” Brendan is an artist who’s very interested in how museums collect African objects—how do they display them, how do they research them. His exhibition is so multi-layered but essentially about how museums collect.

Most museums don’t have a lot of information about these objects because they weren’t considered important. Brendan’s show is one that is interdisciplinary. That is something we aim to present in our exhibitions.

TM—What area do you feel that museums, in general, but also university museums need to tackle most?

JRW—I really think museums need to better tackle community engagement and outreach. How are we involving communities in our projects earlier in the process and getting buy-in throughout in thinking about public programs, thinking about exhibitions? I think we can do a better job so that we don’t do all of

the work behind the scenes, present it to our public and then hear from them for the first time.

TM—Who of your colleagues in the university museum field do you admire most and are your thought leaders?

JRW—I greatly admire the Hammer Museum at UCLA, which some people say has transcended the category of university museum. But I’ve long admired what Ann Philbin has done there and transformed it from a smaller museum to a vibrant, challenging, relevant place for social discourse and artistic innovation.

TM—Do you see somebody locally who is doing something a little different from you?

JRW—Gallery 400 is doing amazing work. Their program is ambitious, very outward-facing to different communities around the city and committed to social justice as well. I love what the Museum of Contemporary Photography is doing. They have a dynamic program that is globally focused.

TM—Is there anything you would like to add?

JRW—Well, I think university museums may have a reputation as being more stodgy, traditional places, showing a lot of works on paper. But I believe they can be very dynamic and risk-taking and really leading the way for how museums are thinking about how they function in community, especially being critically important for our next generation of cultural workers.

TM—What one word describes the best quality of a university museum?

JRW—Generous. ■

Tom Mullaney is the Managing Editor of the New Art Examiner.

The Missing Wall Labels in Museums

Continued from page 9.

language and promote their institutions as spaces for all people to enjoy. Support LGBTQ+ staff members and take their feedback about inclusion seriously. Encourage empathy and foster conversations about diversity with staff and visitors to better serve and represent the community. Inclusion and representation are ongoing struggles, but we can make a difference and make more people feel welcome in museums. ■

Kaycee Moore is a transgender activist and museum professional. He is currently working on his

dissertation about the experiences of transgender artists and staff in museums for his Master’s of Research in Collections and Curating Practices at the University of Edinburgh.

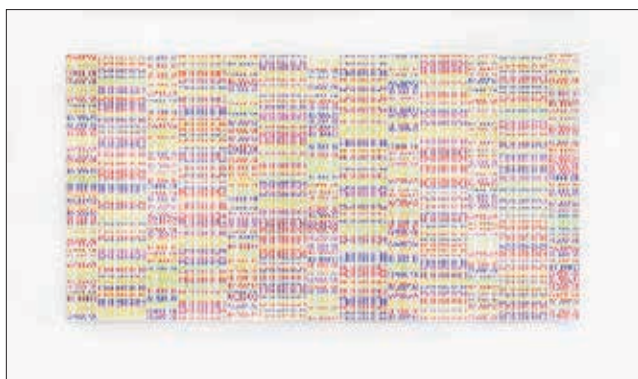
- 1 Adair, Joshua G., “House Museums or Walk-in Closets? The (Non) Representation of Gay Men in the Museums They Call Home,” *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*, 2010, p. 264-78.
- 2 Gregg, Gail, “Your Labels Make Me Feel Stupid,” *ARTnews*, July 1, 2010. <http://www.artnews.com/2010/07/01/your-labels-make-me-feel-stupid/>
- 3 Trench, Lucy, “Gallery text at the V&A: A Ten Point Guide,” Victoria and Albert Museum, 2013.

“Signs and Systems”: Modernist Abstraction 2.0

Rhona Hoffman Gallery

“Signs and Systems” at Rhona Hoffman Gallery presents recent work from contemporary artists that explores somewhat less recent but still relevant modernist ideas. The role of the grid in the organization and presentation of visual information as well as the inclusion of codified systems are present in five works from 4 artists who deploy color, line, image, and space in different ways.

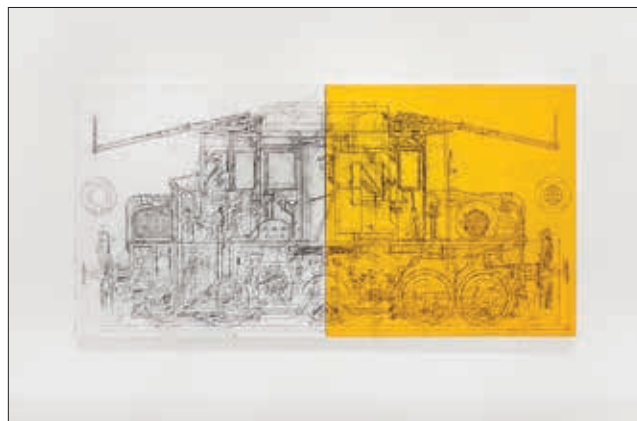
The tradition of painting is a dominant force in this selection of works even when the pieces are in 3D. Though four of these large-scale works are in the main gallery, Lawrence Kenny’s *Is You Is or Is You Ain’t My Baby* hangs on the wall over the office. The finely printed, multicolor text is still legible, but the piece could benefit from more distance so that it could also be viewed as an abstract color composition. The tension between text and colors organized on a grid is evocative of modern day digital data systems and signifies the absorption of cultural material into systemized spaces.



Lawrence Kenny, *Is You Is or Is You Ain’t My Baby*, 2018. Digital print mounted on Dibond board, 58.6 x 112 inches. Image courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

This exploration of tension between systems and imagery continues into the main gallery. Kenny’s second piece in the show, *Wirework*, stands in contrast to *Is You Is or Is You Ain’t My Baby*. Composed of four steel wire structures on the wall, these spare, intersecting squares bear few differences as objects. Their arrangement and interaction with light extend their visual form beyond that of the steel wire itself, allowing the shadows to complicate the spatial realm of the forms

with geometry and perspective akin to architectural imagery.



Matt Mullican, *Untitled (Pantagraph)*, 2016. Acrylic, gouache, and oil stick rubbing on canvas, 78.75 x 157.5 inches. Image courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

Matt Mullican pushes perceptual boundaries of the architectural and mechanical in *Untitled (Pantagraph)*, a mixed media rubbing on two adjacent square canvases. A mostly symmetrical drawing alludes to the aesthetics of vintage technical schematics while hybridizing the structure of a railroad car with a building. The result is an ambiguous, machine-like structure that undermines an established phenomenology of forms. Mullican accentuates this with a kind of micro and macro binary key system. The canvas on the right is a vibrant pollen color, while the one on the left is a cool, light gray. Within the image on the far sides are two floating squares. In the left square, there is a circle; in the right, a globe. These signs may be clear symbolic references, but even to the unfamiliar, they lend to a playful ambiguity. Think NASA’s pioneer plaque.

Ambiguity also abounds in Allan McCollum’s *The Shapes Project: Collection of Seventy-two Perfect Couples*. Perhaps the most laborious undertaking in the exhibition, this grid of form cut from wood appears as a single piece and is priced as such but is still described as a collection of multiple works. The organic shapes are ambiguous enough to simultaneously reference microorganisms, Incan glyphs, jigsaw puzzle pieces, and so on. Titling them as “perfect couples,” however, suggests something more human, and the variation of

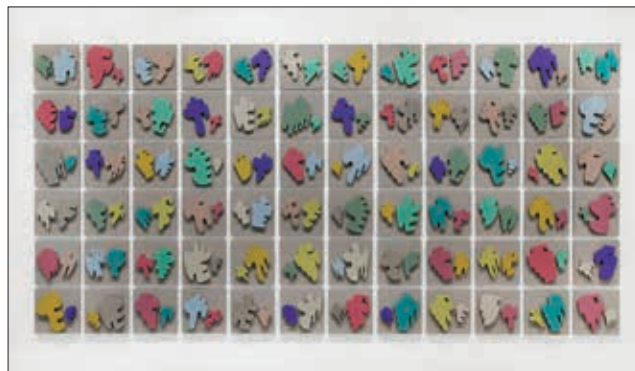
color and size relationships between the shapes opens the door for this piece to be read as an archival monument to inclusive relationships and body positivity, though I doubt this was a motivation for McCollum.

Last but not least is Caroline Van Damme's *Green Horizon—Staccato*. Harking back to the spatial inquiries of sculptural works from artists like Donald Judd, Anne Truitt, or even the paintings of Blinky Palermo, *Green Horizon* uses what seem to be basic hardware store essentials like dowels, wood trim, and lacquer to produce simple objects that complicate space. Even more so than Kenny's *Wirework*, Van Damme's piece activates the space of the gallery, performing a subtle forced perspective through color that serves as kind of metric for how we perceive the space we move through.

Ironically enough, a number of other works in the annexes of the gallery that are not part of this exhibition nevertheless seem to be in dialogue with the themes. I found it refreshing to see codified systems and the grid being explored in a wider range of aesthetic modes and processes. It would serve this exhibition well to extend the work beyond the familiar minimalist aesthetics to include the more painterly, such as with Judy Ledgerwood's 2006 *Grandma's Flower Garden* or the 1988 instructional drawing *Community House* by Vito Acconci.



Judy Ledgerwood, *Grandma's Flower Garden*, 2006. Acrylic mica, acrylic gouache, and oil on canvas, 84 x 120 in, 213.4 x 304.8 cm. Image courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.



Allan McCollum, *The Shapes Project: Collection of Seventy-two Perfect Couples*, 2005-2012. Acrylic with varnish on New England Rock Maple with cradled basswood panels, 10 x 10 inches. Image courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

Though the works in the main gallery are contemporary, they appear to be mired in historicity. Walking into the gallery and seeing the Sol LeWitt wall drawing set a historical tone, and the main works in "Signs and Systems" do little to upend that framework. Upon encountering Ledgerwood's *Grandma's Flower Garden*, which bears some similarities to McCollum's *Shapes Project*, the notion that exploration of signs and systems need to be relegated to the manufactured aesthetics and dry colors of the mid-twentieth century was immediately challenged. And the inclusion of Vito Acconci's *Community House* injects some much-needed absurdity into the minimalist field that, despite its efforts to present a universality of populist form, is often written off as hyper-intellectual and elitist.

Be that as it may, there is fine work to be seen at the Rhona Hoffman Gallery that serves as a good start to a new year of exhibitions.

Evan Carter

"Signs and Systems" was on view from January 11th to February 16th at 1711 W. Chicago Ave, Chicago, IL 60622.

Evan Carter is a contributing editor of the *New Art Examiner*. He earned his MFA degree in 2017 from the University of Chicago and wrote about documenta 14 in a prior issue of the *Examiner*.

Maia Cruz Palileo: “All The While I Thought You Had Received This”

Monique Meloche Gallery

Can paintings have humidity? Maia Cruz Palileo's do. They are thick with warm air and moisture. After entering Monique Meloche's space on North Paulina in the West Town neighborhood, my shoulders relax at the sight of saturated color, a relief from the gray February weather in Chicago.

The exhibition immediately introduces a spacious hang of modest canvases that look like jewels against the white wall. One thing is plain, even at a distance: Palileo is an excellent painter. Each work varies in size and complexity, but all emit the same heavy mood. Two books sit at the front desk and act as a contextual key. The first is *Dean Worcester's Fantasy Islands: Photography, Film, and the Colonial Philippines* by Mark Rice. The second is Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels and Tales of the Tropical Gothic*. She is setting a tone and building out a world, one that is neither wholly fiction nor history.

The artist is an American painter working from Brooklyn but native to Chicago. Her statement defines her practice as an exploration of her family's Filipino heritage while questioning “history, migration, and belonging.” Palileo's project grew out of a 2017 Jerome Foundation Travel and Study Grant to conduct research

among one of the world's most extensive archives of Philippine manuscripts and historical photographs, which happens, ironically, to be found at Chicago's Newberry Library.

At the Newberry, she combed through documentation of colonial occupation of the territory since the Spanish-American War, including photographs taken by American official and zoologist Dean C. Worcester. While the library boasts this sizable archive of Philippine history, these sources suffer from their colonial lens. The subject is defined by an observer representing difference rather than giving a voice to or seeing through the natives' eyes. They're more representative of the expansionist American gaze than the Philippine people themselves.

Worcester's ethnographic representations were the catalyst for Palileo to create a new bank of images, deciding to reimagine and “resuscitate” the exploited and dehumanized figures. This quest of reanimation became the collection of cutouts, graphite rubbings and paintings that are on view.

Palileo reimagines this past while taking cues from the watercolors of Damián Domingo. My knowledge of Domingo's legacy is lacking, along with my grasp on the history of American colonialism in the Philippines and its effects. Referencing them now, it's clear that his portraits' attention to dress and culture influence Palileo's figural painting in particular.

Each impression from Palileo's universe feels like it leads to the next. The length of the gallery space bridges two coves of painting with a survey of paper cut-outs and graphite rubbings in between. These react against the Newberry archives to become the artist's visual vocabulary. The paper figures, plants, and animals mimic Worcester's romanticizing of the tropics and combine in different iterations to create compositions that feel amnesic and hypnotic. But as the figures translate to paint, they mix with folklore and gain new spiritual power.

A Thousand Arms Offered (2019) is where I dove into Palileo's painted world. It has all the mysterious symbolic qualities of the show: the expert attention to color and a lingering feeling of affection. Hands and arms

Maia Cruz Palileo, *A Thousand Arms Offered*, 2019.
Oil on canvas, 34 x 30". Image courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery.





Maia Cruz Palileo, *Normal Boy*, 2018. Oil on canvas over panel, 8 x 6". Image courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery.

reach inward toward the center of the canvas, toward the dark hair of a young girl. It evokes ceremony and care while materializing at the point of touch to dissolve at the edges.

This show feels haunted. The best example of this is *The Parlor* (2019). The perspective of this interior is steep and suggests a grand room with wealthy figures in white sitting in the background. Color and pattern lead the eye to them. But the direct stare of a black deer confronts you, one of its legs intertwined with a noose-like rope. The dark greens, blues, and purples become a pattern and flatten the illusion like a barrier. The animal feels as much like a spirit as like a part of the painted room.

A foreboding tone permeates all the work as you catch glances from figures and eerie layers of shadow. *Water's Mirror* (2019) is a double portrait of a young boy and his reflection. His image in the water feels alive and is some of Palileo's boldest, unbound mark-making. Night time, dusk and the liminal space between present and past are all considered in this small painting. The loose and dreamy *Water's Mirror* and *Normal*

Boy (2019) are made with precision. However, the artist shows the breadth of her skill in the intricate and stunning *They Dreamed in English* (2018).

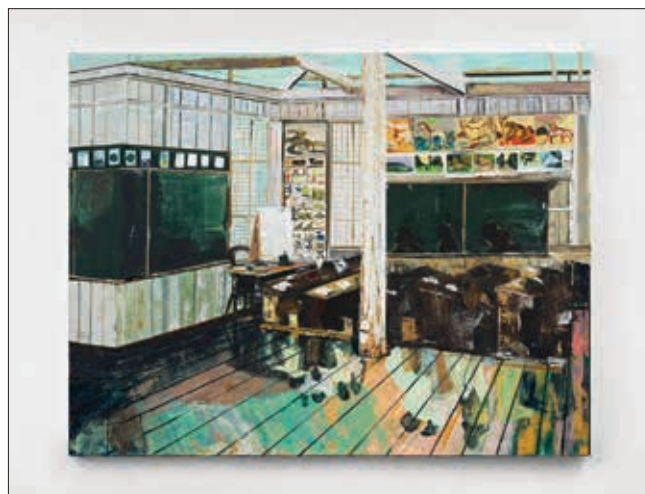
Palileo has collected accolades, including a residency at Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture and the Joan Mitchell Foundation. The exhibition, titled "All the While I Thought You Had Received This," is Palileo's first solo show with the Monique Meloche gallery and her first in Chicago. I imagine it's the first of many. The show leaves me wanting to see what's next for Maia Cruz Palileo and to seek out other contemporary Filipino and Filipino-American artists. Her research points to reclaiming space in history that she can't fill alone.

Sara Rouse

The exhibit is on view through March 30 at the Monique Meloche Gallery, 451 North Paulina St., Chicago, IL 60622.

Sara Rouse is an artist and writer living and working in Chicago, IL. She received her B.F.A from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in 2012 and her M.F.A. from the University of Chicago in 2015. Follow her work at www.sararouse.com and on Instagram @sararouse.

Maia Cruz Palileo, *They Dreamed in English*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 48 x 62". Image courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery.



"Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time"

Block Museum of Art

As part of the first stop of a national tour, "Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa" is now on view at Northwestern's Block Museum of Art. It brings much new research and over a decade of painstaking analysis together. This exhibition began while Block curator Kathleen Bickford Berzock was working at the Art Institute of Chicago.

At the start, it was thought that there were not enough artifacts available to create a full exhibition. Berzock worked closely with the Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Gus Casely-Hayford, along with several scholars from West Africa to assemble pieces that have never before left their home countries. They are on loan from an impressive range of world museums, making this a collection of artifacts from West Africa that has never been seen before in one place.

For historians and anthropologists, the exhibition is an amazing feat. The challenge for Caravans is with engaging an audience that might not have the same historical perspective as a historian. The accompanying catalogue is a highly useful supplement for aiding a visitor's understanding.

When the doors open into the entrance, light washes away a video projection of scenes from the Sahara. As the door closes, the scenes emerge again, putting the viewer in a desert setting at sunrise. The action is metaphorical and speaks to the theme of fragmentation and the fragility of things that have eroded over time.

Another theme of the exhibition is context. It is important to understand what the impact of the discovery of a one-inch piece of porcelain in an excavation is for archaeologists. The contextual aspect is a big hurdle for an exhibition like this because it relies on viewers diving into wall texts and video excerpts. The videos are not long, however, and capture the enthusiasm of the experts about their findings.

Visitors may be surprised by how little gold is on view in the exhibit. Trade commodities were not limited to gold but also included glass, porcelain, ivory and copper. Most of the gold that journeyed from West Africa was forged in the Sijilmasa mint. Sijilmasa, however, when excavated, did not have any gold remaining in it



Seated Figure, Possibly Ife, Tada, Nigeria, Late 13th-14th century, Copper with traces of arsenic, lead, and tin, H. 54 cm. Image courtesy of National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Abuja, Nigeria.

except a small child's golden ring that was found in a closed-up hydraulic complex or public latrine.

So, where is all the gold? In 1992, a shipwreck was discovered off the coast of Devon, England. It carried around 400 gold coins. Coins in the medieval period aren't used as currency the way we use them now. Glass beads, which are more readily found at excavation sites, were more widely and freely traded because they are easy to carry around. The gold coins and ingots from West Africa have for the most part been melted down and hammered into leaf and thread. It can be found in the gilding of European and Middle Eastern art and decorative objects.

The focus of this exhibit remains firmly set on Africa. Areas with walls painted a dark blue include examples of European and Middle Eastern works that are influenced by, or literally covered in, West African gold. The physical distance of the European art from the exhibit's main pieces is important because, for

too long, the history of African art has been filtered through the lens of European colonialism.

Trade routes went both ways, and at sites like Gao, copper objects and sculptures have been found that consist of copper from far-off regions. The seated figure found in Tada, Nigeria is cast in copper that was discovered, through isotopic analysis, to have originated in France. This figure is thought to be from Ile-Ife. The foundry at Ife and the surrounding area have been known for producing statues with extremely realistic features.



Ring excavated at Sijilmasa, Morocco, 9th/10th century. Gold, diameter 1.9 cm. Fondation nationale des musées du Royaume du Maroc, Rabat, 2006-1. Photograph by Abdallah Fili and Hafsa El Hassani.

Small fragments of artifacts excavated from various sites accompany examples of similar pieces that are still whole in order to provide context. The process of excavation is one that deals in fragments. The process is a slow unfolding of questions and answers. For example, the gold ingot mold found at Tadmekka, upon first glance, looks like a rock. It took months of careful cleaning and research to discover the purpose of the small divots carved into the rock's surface.

"Caravans of Gold" is the beginning of a new direction for historical research. After its stay at the Block Museum, the exhibition is travelling to the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto this September and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. in 2020.

Museums and historical institutions cannot go back and reclaim the lost artifacts and hundreds of years of history manicured by colonialism. What they can do is devote time to focus on revisiting and uncovering clues to piece together the rich African history that has been purposefully neglected in Western museums and historical institutions.

Rebecca Memoli

"Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa." Jan. 26 through July 21, 2019, Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston, IL, 60208.

Rebecca Memoli is a Chicago-based photographer and curator. She received her B.F.A. from Pratt Institute and her M.F.A. in Photography from Columbia College. Her work has been featured in several national and international group shows. Her latest curatorial project is "The Feeling is Mutual."



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“Polymorphism: Queer Encounters of Intimacy in Games”

Video Game Art (VGA) Gallery

The show currently up at Video Game Art (VGA) Gallery is titled “Polymorphism: Queer Encounters of Intimacy in Games.” In biology, polymorphism describes the appearance of multiple forms within a single population, colony, or organismal life-cycle. Brice Puls, VGA’s Manager of Exhibitions, explained it is like bread. Bread is the base condition for sourdough and a multitude of other baked varieties. In the biological sciences, polymorphism codes an understanding of species as having multiple physical manifestations: organisms which may look very different but are closely related.

The show aims “to explore a variety of ways that queer people create their own branches off the base class of intimacy.” Think of intimacy in gaming being explored as not just a reward function of a game, but as the function of the game itself.

The idea of polymorphism is already queer. Thinking that there is an infinitude of expressions of sexuality and pleasure, that these can be fixed identities as well as flexible ones—all makes sense to me inherently. What interests me is that this is a gaming phenomenon. If games can code a response and permute upon the base figures of intimacy, it becomes instantly interesting in a sociopolitical context. The works run the gamut but almost all ask the player to engage erotically in some shape or form with the game.

In Robert Yang’s *Radiator 2: Anniversary Edition*, one sees three figures, all ostensibly the same character, in different positions and perspectives. The background glows lovingly—in even a heavenly way—and the

player moves a mouse in order to shove a corndog back and forth in the main character’s mouth. The character looks on, through sunglasses, in underwear. Not just any underwear, but the kind of tighty-whities that get dirty overnight. As the player engages the corndog with the figure, it slowly disappears and leaves trails of oil slipping down the character’s face. As the player nears completion, the figures in the background undulate wildly and, in some cases, start to dance around. It is orgasmic, clearly, and the entire purpose of the game is to essentially face-fuck the character with a corndog until the corndog is gone and you are rewarded with a humorous ending.

In Free Lives’ piece *Genital Jousting*, a friendly-looking penis ambles around life with various prerogatives such as asking another pair of friendly penises out on a date and trying to go on vacation. The penises are stand-ins and have multiple genders as well as anuses which feature prominently in the game.

As the player navigates through the game, butt plugs show up at various stages. The penis can pull these into its anus in order to ejaculate. While this generates pleasure, and the game seems to center around this function, another confounding factor is the presence of hazards such as cacti. Bumping into any number of these results in the projection of blood instead of semen. At the show’s opening, players seemed visibly wary at first to play, though it seemed to enthrall everyone with humor. There was not a moment that a crowd was not circled around this piece.

Stills from Robert Yang’s *Radiator 2: Anniversary Edition*, 2018. Video game. Image courtesy Video Game Art (VGA) Gallery.





Kara Stone, *the earth is a better person than me*, 2018. Video game. Image courtesy Video Game Art (VGA) Gallery.

In at least two other video pieces, the point was to kiss. One that caught my attention occurred in an 8-bit world where the player is given essentially two functions and one prerogative: to move a queer couple about a screen, occupied by small houses and police officers, and find the place where they can kiss without being “seen” by the police.

Again, I suppose because it is gaming, there is a humor and excitement to playing. However, the game is self-consciously built upon the criminal history of queer affection. Even as late as the mid-2000s, sodomy laws were being debated in state courts. The game not only riffs off of historical fact but also “gamifies” this history. As opposed to feeling like a trivializing gesture, the game feels relevant to a dynamic which many would still understand: the things which we do that are simply a polymorphic manifestation of living are often illegal and must be done secretly to avoid sociopolitical punishments.

I left the show thinking about how the world is inherently polymorphic. This concept serves as a stand-in for “queer” in the biological and computer sciences. We exist as polymorphic beings already. This does not exclude the possibility of a gender or sexuality which has heretofore been the traditional, handed-down category. It simply means there’s more. In fact, there is an infinite number—as many possibilities as there are people to feel them. What this show does provide is an awareness that within every binary is the automatic existence of infinitudes. The binary is just one way of thinking about it.

VGA Gallery itself is an interesting space. The opening was packed full of people, some from the world of

art, some from the world of computers and video games. It was diverse and interactive, surprising in its breadth and scope. I had the feeling that there is probably a lot more behind the idea than just the Chicago space.

When asked, Puls mentioned Baby-castles in New York, the Museum of Art and Digital Entertainment (MADE) in Oakland, the Computerspielemuseum in Berlin and the Digital Art Demo Space in Chicago. More mainstream art galleries and museums such as the V&A in London and Schwules Museum in Berlin are just two of many others catching on to this growing genre.

Despite the vivacity of the medium and its relevance to contemporary thought around art and culture-making, Puls noted that the idea of video game art still struggles to find validity in a traditional art world. “Video games are art just as much as any other medium,” Puls says, “and therefore, video game artwork as a core definition is, well, any video game. Unlike other mediums though, the outlets that people have to show off video games are most often blatantly commercial and have more similarities with a trade show than an exhibition.... So, I think we have a responsibility to not only show the history but show work that doesn’t have a real venue to be publicly displayed in the manner of a traditional fine art gallery.”

As the world becomes more and more deeply affected by the digitally parallel world, the effect that the aesthetics and interactions we have in this space has on the physical world can potentially become more pronounced. With this in mind, places like VGA Gallery will most likely be seen, in retrospect, as a burgeoning avant-garde location where these ideas first took hold.

Whit Forrester

Polymorphism: Queer Encounters of Intimacy in Games is on view through April 28, 2019, at Video Game Art (VGA) Gallery, 2418 W. Bloomingdale Ave., Apt. 102, Chicago, IL.

Whit Forrester is an artist living in Chicago. They have shown at the Satellite Art Show, the International Museum of Surgical Science, Aspect/Ratio, the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, and at Kuir Bogotá in Colombia. Their solo show opens January 11, and you can find their work currently exhibited in the show “Groundings” at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Leopold Segedin: A Habit of Art

Outbound Ike Publishing, Publisher, 2018

“As a painter, I am reluctant to talk about my own work,” writes Leopold Segedin near the start of his new book, *Leopold Segedin: A Habit of Art*. It’s an understandable impulse, though one belied by the extensive artist’s commentary that follows. Then again, and as this richly illustrated volume makes plain, Segedin is not afraid of visual paradoxes or, to phrase it differently, melancholy ironies made visible. His train station paintings, almost always set at the golden hour, are crowded with people yet lonely in the sharpest way.

If Segedin were from London, these works could be scored to the Kinks’ “Waterloo Sunset.” Happily, he is an American, Chicago-born—Chicago, that somber city—and, like Saul Bellow, dizzy with memories of the long-gone Jewish West Side. In an introductory essay, Professor David M. Sokol of the University of Illinois at Chicago locates Segedin within a local tradition extending from the Hull-House painters to the Depression-era Chicago Society of Artists and American Jewish Art Club.

In that same essay, Sokol notes the influence of Northern Renaissance painters on the artist. For example, Segedin’s *Approaching Storm: A View of Chicago* is a careful homage to Vermeer’s *View of Delft*. Additionally, Segedin writes that he created one of his Tower of Babel paintings (*Tower of Babel*, 1951) with full knowledge of Bruegel the Elder’s famous oil paintings of that same subject.

Segedin’s many renderings of kids playing “buck buck,” craps, and other games are reminiscent of Bruegel’s intricate *Children’s Games*. In the upper right corner of that piece, a child holds up a carnival mask that looks an awful lot like an adult’s face. Here’s Segedin expressing roughly the same idea in relation to his own work: “Childhood is still a part of my life. It’s not something I outgrew... We’re still playing games. We’re always playing games.”

All the world’s a playground, to torture Shakespeare a little. That’s not a hard lesson to learn in Chicago, where so much of local politicking and

democratic posturing seems to be a poorly concealed game of “king of the hill.” Sensing the country’s mood in 2016, Segedin seems to have arrived at a comparably cynical conclusion in his *Follow the Leader* series; “I put in these dogs following each other, sniffing each other’s rear ends,” he notes about *Follow the Leader* #3. And 1968’s *Polifiction: Hanging Man*, another monument to voter fatigue, is exactly as politically charged as one might expect of something painted in 1968.

Like Bruegel, van Eyck, and the other Northern Renaissance masters, Segedin has a clear affinity for symbolism. At times, his works bring to mind the “transfigured reality” that critic Erwin Panofsky appreciated in van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait*. In Panofsky’s words, Van Eyck’s “attributes and symbols are chosen and placed in such a way that what is possibly meant to express an allegorical meaning, at the same time perfectly ‘fits’ into a landscape or an interior apparently taken from life.” The symbolic vocabulary that Segedin uses in his Chicago paintings is sometimes, though not always, subtle. Only after viewing his works in sequence does one sense the significance of doors in his vision. Dynamism and density, gathered in and flooded with early evening light: this is the humanist’s transfigured Chicago.

Leopold Segedin, *L Station (Three Ages)*, 2002. Image courtesy of Paul Segedin.





Leopold Segedin, *Confrontation*, 1999. Image courtesy of Paul Segedin.

There is something paradoxical in Segedin's use of symbols. Take the role of flight in his paintings. In *L Station (Three Ages)* and several other works, the young Segedin plays with a model airplane on the gritty streets of the West Side. Does this figure yearn to escape his native soil, a neighborhood that well-intentioned reformers might have considered unwholesome and that Hizzoner considered an obstacle to the Eisenhower Expressway?

Young Segedin also dreamed of being a pilot. The older, wised-up Segedin meets with this fantasy in the book's cover painting, *Confrontation*. Despite this youthful escapism, Segedin has spent much of his adult career in a mood that could easily be confused with nostalgia. Perhaps escape is impossible—or perhaps, in reconstructing his memories through art, Segedin is reconciling himself to the limitations one experiences even in a long and eventful life.

Interestingly, the only mythological motif that appealed to Segedin was Icarus. Would New York have been too close to the sun? “Unanswerable,” answers Segedin. “What difference do the possible futures of my past make to me now?”

Segedin departed from Chicago in his *Parts of Man*, *Permutation*, and *Transformations* series, which reflected his reaction to the Holocaust. Segedin wrestled with the challenge of addressing this subject without lapsing into sentimentality, melodrama, or, paradoxically, the sort of beauty that might undermine his art's very purpose. In these acrylic paintings, grotesquely pink body parts melt away in what Segedin describes as “an institutional kind of space.” Though he says the multi-colored orbs in *Parts of Man II* are celebratory balloons, it is not hard to imagine them as oversimplified atoms, bouncing around in what is fundamentally a vacuum.

Segedin is not afraid of joy. His *Old Men Dancing* and *Old Man Dancing* paintings from 2009 and 2010 are, from one angle, an affirmation of life. Yet *Old Men Dancing*, 2010, #2 expresses something more than happiness. Set on an El platform in front of an indifferent crowd of 1930s/'40s Chicagoans, now long dead, it feels like a gesture of defiance. Life is not just for living—it is also for spitting in the face of death.

Edited by the artist's son, Paul Segedin, the book itself is a lovingly crafted tribute. I have no doubt it will adorn a few coffee tables. Although some design elements in the front matter look a bit clunky, in most of the book, the art is served well by its surroundings. Similarly, though the commentary can be somewhat repetitive, that's partly a result of Segedin's consistent subject matter and aesthetic choices over the last few decades.

A final paradox or riddle or—extending the Segedinian cynicism inward—questionable bit of wordplay: Segedin, a student of Chicago's architectural exteriors, is, in the end, a searcher after the interior. For those who see his Chicago in themselves, his search may prove worthwhile.

Nathan Worcester

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