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CONSTRUCTING HISTORY WITH THE MUSEUM: A PROPOSAL FOR AN EAST ART MUSEUM

I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

MUSEUMIFICATION/MUSEUM

The central achievement of museumification is establishing and securing perception as aesthetic perception. For all things that are not originally conceived as objects intended for perception—like artworks, for example—this entails that they be beheld as "things in themselves," that is, without any immediate reference to everyday living practice, and requires their being kept in this state. For it is only under this condition that it becomes possible to make the thing the object of multi-dimensional reflection that surpasses all practical references of everyday life. The goal of museumification is hence to make objects available for beholding, transform them into "semiophores,"[1] objects that signify something, that store a specific form of knowledge.

As a particular form of perception, museumification does not necessarily require a special building; it can be achieved merely by way of a framing within an everyday life situation that allows what is framed to be beheld divorced from its context and to be physically removed from this context in certain cases.[2] In this sense, a museum should be understood as a "fixed frame," a housing [*Gehäuse*] or enclosure in which things are not only shown as objects worthy of beholding, but also collected. As the collections of a museum grow, so does a museum come to be defined by its holdings, in the sense of inner frames.

As a container, a housing, a clearly defined frame that separates inside and outside and produces a space of perception, the museum is a special place. The museum fundamentally differs from other sites in that all things collected in it come from other sites, other social or natural contexts, and as a rule usually have lost their original function due to this translocation.

The art museum is a special case among museums, because in it objects are collected and shown that were conceived primarily as objects of beholding and therefore, in contrast to all other kinds of objects, do not rely on the museum as a site of aesthetic perception. The art museum, unlike all other museums, does not primarily have the function establishing the character of the objects collected within it as objects worthy of beholding, but can, precisely because the objects collected within it already possess this characteristic, reveal the special quality of aesthetic perception and make the visitor aware of its status as such a site, making this available to reflection.

THE MUSEUM: CONTAINER AND COLLECTION

Collecting that is rooted in an aesthetically based interest means categorizing the objects of the world according to certain aspects, and gathering and preserving these objects in one place as things to be beheld. This results in a collection if the criteria of distinction according to which the objects are found and selected is legible from their contextualization. Collections thus always have a structurally self-evident character.

Objects can on the one hand be defunctionalized on the mere basis of their translocation, or alternatively by being grouped to form a coherent whole within the context of a collection. Both result in aestheticization, which in turn is the prerequisite for objects being perceived as worthy of beholding. In so doing, the form of aestheticization determines and structures the form of their perception: if objects for example are collected on the basis of a certain common historical factor, they are seen primarily as

[1] See Kryztof Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums: Vom Sammeln*, Berlin 1988

[2] As art practice often shows, sometimes defunctionalizing an object or placing a sign on such a dysfunctional object is sufficient for such a framing and triggering a museumified mode of beholding.

historical objects, and are placed in a historical museum. If they are isolated from their original context under technological aspects, a technology collection emerges: if the criterion is an artistic one, an art collection can be the result.

As contexualizations of objects that possess their own *raison d'être*, collections on the one hand form a critical mass, while at the same time providing both an image of reality from which the objects come as well as for the worldview of those who collect the objects. Collections are thus not only the foundation for constructing views of the world, but also serve as the basis for their critique. But when it comes to developing collection criteria in both a formal and thematic sense, the fine arts are constitutive to the extent that they reflect various forms of perception and the various perceptions that can be obtained from this. Art collections thus rightly enjoy a higher status than collections of everyday objects.

Collecting Art

The modern or contemporary art museum is characterized by its special place on the border between the categories of rubbish and the durable.[3] As a museum, it is by definition an institution invested in the category of the durable, and might due to its older holdings stretch far back into the region of the unquestionably durable. As an institution concerned with contemporary art production, it treats objects where their value as long-term objects is (not yet) secured. The work of curators working in this kind of museum is accordingly difficult and riddled with contradictions: they not only have the task of preserving and presenting the collections of the museum in such a way that their special aspects can become clear to a general audience; they also have to supplement it on the other hand with contemporary artworks, that is, decide what objects from the category of rubbish can be transferred to the category of the durable.

The curator at a museum for contemporary art is thus directly confronted with the problem of value, and must insure that his or her decisions for certain works of contemporary art do not question the role of the museum as an institution of the durable. There are four strategies that can be distinguished for solving this problem: these strategies usually appear in various combinations, and in these combinations with different emphases.

The first strategy is to wait until the value of individual art works has stabilized and then to bring them into the collection. This presumes being able to work over a long time frame and having access to very substantial financial resources. The risk of this strategy is no longer being able to get at certain works because they have already been acquired by other collectors.

A second strategy relies on specializing on a specific area of collection. Its successful realization presumes on the one hand an appropriate level of connoisseurship, and on the other hand the sufficient means to build up at least a critical mass of such objects, allowing the respective appraisals to take on clear contours and become stabilized. Here, one risks operating in a field that ultimately has no chance of growth or proves obsolete in light of overall general developments.

The third, perhaps most widespread strategy is to refuse making appraisals of one's own, instead relying on those of third parties, for example, that or the art market, and making use of its filtering function. The risk here is above all becoming a victim of the cartels of interpretation and valuation, thus buying only what everyone else buys: that is, uniformity.

The fourth strategy relies in contrast on the power of museumification: it expands the museum frame to include works where their value is not yet secure, creating for example a new division where these works can be presented and do not have to be perceived in competition with the works with a secured place of value. The risk of this strategy is the possible loss of value standards: the artworks in question might not

[3] On these concepts, see Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, Oxford 1979.

achieve the status of the durable, thus calling into question the significance of the museum itself.

All of these strategies operate with two kinds of security: on the one hand, the magazine as a more or less hidden rubbish category within the institution of the durable, to which those works that prove not durable can be banished. On the other hand, academic art history provides an external matrix that makes available the standards for appraising art works. While recourse to this matrix offers some security, this is only achieved at a high price: for its abstract categories refer solely to the things on exhibit, and block out the concrete considerations to which every museum as a "shell" or container is subject qua institution to specific conditions in a particular place. As a consequence, the collections are only perceived as more or less meaningful exhibits for the canon developed in art history, that is, mediated.

A fifth strategy, recently adopted by many museums, is the acquisition of entire collections of private provenance. Here, the problem of evaluation is avoided by pointing to private engagement, but here, in my view, bought at an unacceptable risk: the potential colonization of museums by private interests.

The public museum must, in contrast to the private collector, who without question can do whatever he or she like, openly pose the question of appraisal. In this context, the following demands are to be made of collecting at a museum of modern and contemporary art:

The criteria for building up and extending a collection must be developed on the one hand based on questions that go beyond the limits of art history, and on the other hand rooted in the concrete conditions that determine the "shell" of the respective museum in question and its own history. In other words, a museum should develop its own set of questions, or, as the fashionable phrase goes, its own "mission," and be able to clearly define it.

For the appraisal of (contemporary) art works, the questions raised by the artworks themselves are particularly relevant. Artworks are understood as answers to these questions, and analyzed in light of their complexity. In a second step, the attempt should be made to determine the extent to which artworks can contribute to developing and differentiating a museum program. In so doing, the question of whether the museum and the artwork can exist conceptually independent of one another is a decisive factor.

The inclusion of an artwork in the museum should be understood as an act of integration: the museum can and should be able to undergo a certain change by way of the artwork. On the other hand, the artwork should take up a relations with the already present works in the collection, in the sense of an association of free individuals become part of a collective project, but still maintain its own autonomy in this collective.

The decision to include an artwork should be made with the existing collection in mind. This does not necessarily exclude the possibility that the museum open new areas of work. These areas can also be developed in reorganizing the presentation or shifting the emphases of the collection. The precondition for this is the free access to the collections within the museum.

The goal of the curator must be to reveal at least in the presentation of a collection a certain approach to the objects. The curator is to there to serve the museum's collections, but should not hide behind so-called situational constraints, but present him or herself as an individual that has made certain decisions. Only in this way can it be made clear that the museum is a contingent construction: a site of aesthetic perception where the processes of selection and appraisal can be experienced.

II. CONSTRUCTIONS

FOUNDING MUSEUMS

Building up collections and founding museums is always a process of original accumulation,[4] even if it is not based, as is the case for almost all great museums of cultural history, on more or less open forms of theft or expropriation, but academic interest,[5] amateur taste,[6] or cultural-political engagement.[7] In this way, almost all museum collections can be traced back to the initiative and special efforts of individuals who, if not with violence, then with significant financial means were able to build up collections, often despite great resistance, and who furthermore succeeded in materially insuring their maintenance over the long term by founding a museum or giving their collections to an existing institution, that is, a form of making their collections public, accessible to a general audience.

For the development and the self-conception of museums in particular in light of the art production contemporary to a respective period, the Museum Folkwang, founded in 1902 in Hagen as the very first museum for contemporary art worldwide, and the Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1929 in New York—which claims to be the first museum of modern art—are equally influential. Although the two museums differ vastly from one another, both museums were still borne of a similar pedagogical impulse. Necessary for the founding of both museums was the unusual vision of their founders coupled with great courage or more or less unlimited financial resources. In so doing, the history of the Museum Folkwang in Hagen, or that of its founder, benefactor, and director, Karl Ernst Osthaus, seems much like the typical artist legend from the nineteenth century,[8] while the history of MoMA embodies more the twentieth-century myth of a successful entrepreneurship.[9]

Both museums achieved their significance because they were able in a relatively brief period to build up a canon of art history that was exemplary and more or less binding for subsequent collections and museums, but also because they did not limit themselves to collecting art, but instead engaged with the applied arts and other areas as well, including architecture. In Museum Folkwang, Osthaus was able for the first time to trace out the contours of what today is considered early classical modernism: he collected the major works of the French Impressionists and German Expressionists, along with works by Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gaugin, Matisse, and the Fauvists; all the same, he remained clearly tied to the nineteenth century concept of the work. In contrast, the

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[4] See Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels, *Das Kapital*. Volume I, *Werke,* Volume 23, Berlin 1968, pp. 741–791

[5] How this can be linked to not so noble motivations, is shown and satirized in the Indiana Jones films.

[6] A classical example for this is the collection of Albert C. Barnes.

[7] An example for a museum collection founded and built with this motivation is Museum Folkwang, which Karl Ernst Osthaus called into being in 1902.

[8] At issue here is the story of the artist as an unappreciated outsider, who, after initially being rejected by his contemporaries due to his unconventionality and his uniqueness, if not declared mad, vegetates for his lifetime, then finally to be discovered and promoted by an unconventional collector, coming to fame late in life, or even posthumously revolutionizing art history, and making his backers rich. See on this Otto Kris and Otto Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler. Ein geschichtlicher Versuch* (1934), Frankfurt 1980. On the history of the Museum Folkwang in this light, see Michael Fehr, “A Museum and Its Memory: The Art of Recovering History,” *Museums and Memory*, ed. Susan A. Crane, Stanford 2000, pp. 35–59.

[9] The website of the Museum of Modern Art on the history of the museum: "In the late 1920s, three progressive and influential patrons of the arts, Miss Lillie P. Bliss, Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., perceived a need to challenge the conservative policies of traditional museums and to establish an institution devoted exclusively to modern art. When The Museum of Modern Art was founded in 1929, its founding Director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., intended the Museum to be dedicated to helping people understand and enjoy the visual arts of our time, and that it might provide New York with "the greatest museum of modern art in the world." (http://www.moma.org/about_moma/history/index.html). See also Kirk Varnedoe, Eine neue Art von Museum, *Die großen Sammlungen I*, Museum of Modern Art/Bundeskunsthalle Bonn 1992, pp. 15 ff., where the author describes how the museum found “the right man at the right time.”

MoMA collection begins in 1880: its claim to preeminence is especially rooted in its holdings from classical modernism from the first half of the twentieth century.

As Varnedoe suggests, MoMA's founder Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in contrast to Osthaus, who died an early death, was able to develop a clearly defined notion of what modern art is and how a collection of modern and contemporary art should be set up and conceived.[10] In the early 1930s, Barr used the metaphor of a "torpedo" to describe the permanent collection, a torpedo moving through time. Its "tip," Burr said, is the eternally progressing present, while its tail is the past.[11] Accordingly, not only was a constant renewal of the MoMA collections planned, but also their permanent shift along a temporal axis, so that the museum would focus at any one time on a period of only fifty years. But this concept was discarded after bitter controversies over the systematic sales of holdings that it would have required, and silently abandoned in the early 1950s.[12] The MoMA thus became a normal museum in structural terms.

True of both the Museum Folkwang and the Museum of Modern Art is that they operated in their first decades focused on a time frame (the years 1840 to 1940) that is clearly recognizable as a closed period of artistic transformation from today's point of view. According to Varnedoe, modern art was now no longer seen as a continuous, ever intense process of "seceding" from past cultural counter movements, and was instead given its own sense of tradition. In this view, there was a definable era of revolutionary transformation, followed by the historical development, extension, and establishment of modernism.[13] This closed period of development was the prerequisite that allowed both museums to found an art historical canon.[14] A similarly convincing construction of artistic development and/or art history was no longer possible after World War II. MoMA, like many other museums of contemporary art, has attempted to face this problem by expanding its acquisitions of contemporary art. The numerous new art museums founded in recent decades can also be understood as a reaction to this development.

East Art Map – East Art Museum

Even if the development of art after World War II cannot be represented in a diagram as clear and simple as the one Barr developed for classical modernism, it clearly remains necessary to be able to define a system of relations to order contemporary artistic work. For on the one hand, contemporary art production refers in many ways to the art history of the past two centuries and builds upon its "achievements." At the same time, the products, the forms of distribution, and the economic importance of the media present artistic work with many forms of competition. Artists not only need to reflect on this competition; this competition also forces to reconsider the function of artistic images in the visual world.

These factors, along with the omnipresent economic problems, are compounded by additional issues that determined art production in those countries where practicing the artistic professions was limited for political reasons or controlled by the state. Hence,

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[10] See Varnedoe 1992, p. 17

[11] See Varnedoe 1992, p. 17

[12] This development is reflected by New Museum for Contemporary Art, a museum founded by former employees of the MoMA with the old goals in mind, and which intended to sell its collections every ten years. "Founded in 1977, the New Museum of Contemporary Art is the premier contemporary art museum in New York City and among the most important internationally. The Museum is guided by the conviction that contemporary art is a vital social force that extends beyond the art world and into the broader culture. Our purpose is to engage diverse audiences ranging from arts professionals to those less familiar with contemporary art" http://www.newmuseum.org/info_about.php.

[13] Varnedoe 1992, p. 18; interestingly, both museums originally excluded the work of Marcel Duchamp, in MoMA he only came into the collection later.

[14] In building up MoMA, it was, to put it euphemistically, in particular the devastation and upheavals of the Second World War that gave the museum unheard of possibilities of acquiring the main works of early modernism; in other words, the specific form of original accumulation that only became possible through the flight and death of countless people in the context of the Holocaust and the war.

one can in fact speak of an "East Art," to the extent that "in Eastern Europe (also known as the former communist bloc, Eastern & Central Europe, or New Europe) there are as a rule no transparent structures in which those events, artifacts and artists that are significant to the history of art can be organized into a referential system accepted and respected outside the borders of a particular country. Instead, we encounter systems that are closed within national borders, most often based on arguments adapted to local needs, and sometimes even doubled so that besides the official art histories there are a whole series of stories and legends about art and artists opposed to this official art world. But written records about the latter are few and fragmented. Comparisons with contemporary Western art and artists are extremely rare."[15] But it should be pointed out that the phenomenon of an "eastern European art" is not only limited geographically to the 21 formerly Communist countries, but also is limited in a temporal sense: the years between 1945 and 1990.

On top of this, many artists that come from the countries behind the "Iron Curtain" already left their home countries in the 1950s or 1960s, making their careers as émigré artists in the Western art world. This presents the problem of whether or not they should be included in the East Art Map, especially when these artists are now returning to their roots. But the same is true, if with an entirely different emphasis, for those artists who for whatever reason cooperated with their countries' regimes or were tolerated because of their prominence. Should they be included or excluded from the East Art Map? Who makes this decision; who can take the responsibility for such a decision?

In the many exhibitions made over the past decades on Eastern European art, these questions have usually been pragmatically avoided, or detoured by declaring that the exhibition is only temporary, and that in another exhibition the list of artists would be different. To counter this, our suggestion in making the East Art Map the foundation for an East Art Museum is the attempt to take the offensive on this question. For when considering the establishment of a museum, the question is immediately raised of how the collections should be built up and how such decisions should be made, and who should make them. This is also true of the suggestion to sketch the East Art Museum in the form of a (temporary) exhibition.

"The basic idea of the exhibition 'East Art Museum' is to present a proposal for the establishment of a Museum of Modern East European Art (EAM) to collect the seminal works of art from Eastern Europe from the period after World War II and could over the long run develop into an institution of relevance and reputation comparable to the position achieved by the Museum of Modern Art for Western Art. But in setting up this task, the East Art Museum project is by no means a naïve attempt to reach an insurmountable goal, but rather a complex work of Concept Art that reflects the conditions of creating and establishing an art-historical canon as well as its institutional housing."[16]

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[15] IRWIN, Concept for East Art Map, 2002

[16] Quote from the concept of the show (2005). It continues: "The exhibition East Art Museum will consist of three parts: Part I is a selection of about 50 works by different artists from different countries chosen from the catalogue East Art Map as published by IRWIN and *New Moment Magazine* in 2003. This selection was made by IRWIN in January 2005, according to the following criteria: works should date from the period between 1945 and 1989, be representative for the works chosen for the East Art Map, and be accessible for a (possibly traveling) exhibition. Part I will present these works in the best possible way with a representative exhibition.

Part II consists of 1:10 scale reproductions of arrangements showing all 250 works included in the EAST ART MAP; possible arrangements can be based on chronology, theme or subject matter, state or origin, art movement, or a combination of such taxonomies.
These arrangement will be commented on by further arrangements of 1:10 reproductions drawn from other exhibitions/collections representing East European Art, such as 2000+, Ljubljana; After the Wall, Stockholm; L autre moitie de l'Europe, Paris; Aspects and Positions, Vienna; Osteuropäische Kunst, Bochum; as well as a documentation of "official" art shows in the different countries displayed in a similar form.

The East Art Museum is to be understood to reflect on the concept of art history as embodied in MoMA, whereby art is seen as a permanent process of innovation driven by individual developments, and the related claim of comprehensiveness, to covering all of modern art history. The critical engagement with the MoMA here will take place by way of its radical affirmation in an attempt to copy the successful concept for use with East Art. The necessary failure of this attempt will reveal that MoMA does not present a universal model for understanding modern art, but that its success is due to a specific historical situation, in terms of both its holdings as well as the founding of the museum. Furthermore, by playing with the canon of Western forms of art history and the implicit taxonomies that govern it, we can find out whether or not an East Art Museum must find a form all its own if it wants to hold its own against Western museums like MoMA.

Translated by Brian Currid

In principle, this part of the exhibition will be open to additional contributions, as long as they are validated according to art-historical standards, and match the criteria named above.
Part II will also include a 'reading room' displaying relevant documentary material as well as a 'mapping room,' within which all schemes depicting the historical development of East European Art are on display.

Part III will be dedicated to the question of how to fund and construct an East Art Museum. It will display space allocation plans as well as architectural models, financial and organizational planning, considerations on possible locations, on staffing, and funding, and will include promotional material such as logos, flyers, and prospects.
While Part I of the exhibition will be conceived like an ordinary art show, part II and III will have the character of a studio or research-room, a flexible working space that is open to the comments of the visitors to the show."