

THE POLITICS OF PRESENTATION:
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK



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In the history of art, as in more materialistic matters, money talks vividly.
Alfred H. Barr, Jr, 'A new museum', *Vogue*, October 1929¹

The world center, institutionally speaking, of the modern movement in the fine
and applied arts is the Museum of Modern Art.

The New Yorker, 1953²

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MoMA) in New York is without doubt the single most important institution devoted to the history of twentieth-century art. It was the first museum to be exclusively concerned with modern art and its collection is generally regarded as the most comprehensive in the world. In the minds of many – historians as well as the public – the Museum of Modern Art is virtually synonymous with the modern movement and, as such, has been a target for attacks on modernism.

This chapter will investigate how the Museum of Modern Art achieved this special status, how it came to be considered the archetypal modern art museum and how it was able to sell the idea of modern art to a wide public. Whereas previous studies of the museum have centred on the postwar years my analysis will focus on the first decade of its existence.³ The decade from MoMA's foundation in 1929 to the opening of its permanent residence in 1939 was a crucial one in the institution's history. It was during this period that MoMA established its organisational structure, formulated its basic policy and developed strategies for the propagation and presentation of modern art. The procedures applied by the museum in the transformation of European modernism into an aesthetic conforming with the specific requirements of

America's culture, politics, capitalist economics and continuing Puritan tradition will be investigated. Through its foundation, programme, organisation, administration, departmental structure, as well as its institutional practices (such as acquisitions, exhibitions, publications and education), MoMA contributed to the redefinition of the concept of modernism. The second part of this chapter will focus on MoMA's establishment of a paradigmatic mode of display during the 1930s. The museum building, the decoration of its galleries, methods of installation and hanging were all crucial instruments in the Americanisation of modernism. In its 1939 building, the Museum of Modern Art seemed to have achieved a perfect harmony between art and its architectural container. An analysis of the museum's exterior and interior will reveal MoMA's adherence to the separation of art and life, its negation of avant-garde art's political potentials, and its restoration of the autonomy of the modernist work of art.

Foundation and early success

The foundation of most museums and other cultural institutions in the United States has been the result of the philanthropic activities of private individuals, rather than state or municipal initiatives as in Europe. The establishment of the Museum of Modern Art, likewise, developed out of the combined efforts of three public-spirited private collectors. In early 1929, Mrs John D. Rockefeller, Miss Lillie P. Bliss and Mrs Cornelius J. Sullivan discussed the idea of founding a museum in New York devoted to modern art. They all came from extremely privileged backgrounds, including some of America's oldest and wealthiest families.⁴ In May 1929, the three women enlisted the help of A. Conger Goodyear, a collector and former President of the Albright Gallery in Buffalo. He was to become the first president of the museum, a position he occupied until his retirement in 1939. Goodyear organised an Advisory Committee which comprised, besides himself and the three women, Frank Crowninshield, editor of *Vanity Fair*, Professor Paul J. Sachs, director of the Fogg Museum of Harvard University, and Mrs Murray Crane.

However, the individual identified most with the museum and its programme was without doubt Alfred H. Barr, Jr (1902–81). It was Professor Paul J. Sachs who recommended Barr, then a young scholar, to the Advisory Committee. In July 1929, Mrs Rockefeller gave her seal of approval to Barr's appointment as the museum's first director: 'I liked Mr. Barr and felt that his youth, enthusiasm and knowledge would make up for his not having a more impressive appearance.'⁵ Barr was trained as an art historian in Princeton and Harvard and had first-hand experience of the European avant-gardes. He

occupied the post of director until October 1943, and continued his influential work as director of museum collections from 1947 until his retirement in 1967.

MoMA's 'manifesto'

In August 1929 the seven founders of the museum issued a brochure drafted by Alfred Barr that described the function and programme of the new institution:

[The] immediate purpose is to hold . . . some twenty exhibitions during the next two years. These exhibitions will include as complete a representation as may be possible of the great modern masters – American and European – from Cézanne to the present. The ultimate purpose will be to acquire, from time to time, either by gift or by purchase, a collection of the best modern works of art.⁶

The museum, as envisioned by its founders in 1929, was to limit its activities to painting and sculpture.⁷ However, Barr had something very different and far more radical in mind. In 1929 the museum had announced a possible expansion 'beyond the limits of painting and sculpture in order to include departments devoted to drawings, prints and other phases of modern art.'⁸ This was a toning down of Barr's bold proposal which had envisioned a much more complex and comprehensive approach to the presentation of modern art:

In time the Museum would probably expand beyond the narrow limits of painting and sculpture in order to include departments devoted to drawings, prints, and photography, typography, the arts of design in commerce and industry, architecture (a collection of *projets* and *maquettes*), stage designing, furniture and the decorative arts. Not the least important might be the *filmtok*, a library of films.⁹

It was the attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of contemporary visual culture that made the Museum of Modern Art such an unique institution. Barr acknowledged a number of influences on his original conception of the museum as a multi-departmental structure, the Bauhaus being the most decisive: 'I read particularly about the Bauhaus, a fabulous institution, where all the modern visual arts . . . were studied and taught together in a large new modern building. Later, in 1927, I visited the Bauhaus for several days. Undoubtedly it had an influence not only upon the plan for our Museum . . . but also a number of its exhibitions.'¹⁰ Elements of Barr's original plan were also retained in the Provisional Charter of the Museum, granted on 19 September 1929, which defined MoMA's mission as 'encouraging and developing the study of modern arts and the application of such arts to manufacture and practical life, and furnishing popular instruction.'¹¹ To the trustees,

Barr's plan seemed too ambitious and for the first two and a half years the museum exhibitions were limited to painting, sculpture, and occasionally some graphics. However, in early 1932 MoMA staged an exhibition of modern architecture (the epoch-making 'International style' show) that initiated an aggressive policy of expansion. An exhibition of photography followed in the same year; industrial design was presented for the first time in 1933; and in 1935 a film library was established. In 1940 all the media proposed by Alfred Barr in 1929 had featured in exhibitions or were represented by independent departments. Barr's vision of the penetration of all aspects of contemporary life by a modern style was best realised in his comprehensive survey exhibitions 'Cubism and abstract art' (1936) and 'Art in our time' (1939). Otherwise, the museum maintained the independence and autonomy of separate departments, and continues to do so.

In the early years of its existence, the Museum of Modern Art's activities were mainly restricted to exhibitions. This was partly due to its lack of a substantial permanent collection. The first two years were regarded as a provisional and experimental period in which the viability and public interest in a museum of modern art was to be tested through a large number of exhibitions. The institutional nature of art museums – based on sanctification and permanent preservation of masterpieces – was redefined by the Museum of Modern Art's deliberate concentration on temporary exhibitions. Eventually, the museum's activities were to be divided equally between exhibitions and the collection. This plan combined the functions of several types of European institutions, as Barr acknowledged: 'The balance between temporary exhibitions and "permanent" collection was a combination of the German *Kunstverein* exhibition gallery and the Luxembourg–Tate museums of contemporary art.'¹² Considering the novelty and unestablished nature of the art shown in the Museum of Modern Art, exhibitions seemed to be the most appropriate medium of popularisation.

'A torpedo moving through time': the permanent collection¹³

The status of the museum as a permanent institution was not confirmed until five years after its foundation. The Great Depression delayed the establishment of a collection and the generation of sufficient funds for an endowment. In a 1933 report to the trustees, Barr lamented the lack of progress: 'Of course the first two years were considered a period of trial. During this time temporary loan exhibitions were to indicate whether there was really sufficient interest in modern art to make a permanent institution advisable. But this policy was continued with little alteration during the third and fourth years and apparently will be during the fifth.'¹⁴ It was only in 1934 that the museum's

permanence was confirmed through the acquisition of the Lillie P. Bliss collection and the establishment of an endowment of \$600,000.¹⁵ The permanence of the collection was envisaged to be very relative, as the museum's president explained in 1931:

The permanent collection will not be unchangeable. It will have somewhat the permanence that a river has. With certain exceptions, no gift will be accepted under conditions that will not permit of its retirement by sale or otherwise as the trustees may think advisable . . . When a creative artist has not yet attained recognition from other museums, it should be the province of this institution to give him a full representation in its collection . . . The Museum of Modern Art should be a feeder primarily to the Metropolitan Museum, but also to museums generally throughout the country.¹⁶

In the first two decades of its existence, the museum understood itself primarily as a 'laboratory' for which the title of 'museum of contemporary art' might have been more appropriate. Barr defined the scope of the collection as a 'torpedo in motion', visualising the idea in a diagram which he described as follows:

The blunt end pushes into the advanced field of art by means of the changing exhibitions. The bulk is made of 'accepted' modern art. The tail tapers off into art which has become 'classical' and is ready for the general museum. The torpedo moves forward by acquiring and retains its length of 70 years by giving to other museums. A strong and well proportioned permanent collection gives body to the Museum and supplies a background to any changing exhibitions.¹⁷

The museum's experimental period finally came to an end in 1953 when the Board of Trustees decided not to sell any longer any works from the collection considered 'classical'. The Museum's 1947 agreement with the Metropolitan Museum of Art regulating the sale of 'classic' paintings and sculpture was terminated. This indicated the end of MoMA's heroic period: modern art had become widely accepted and fashionable, and the Museum of Modern Art itself became part of the history of modernism.

The business of modern art

More than with most American museums, MoMA's trustees have always played an important role in the definition of the museum's policy as well as its daily affairs. Much of the institution's financial support during the early years was supplied by the trustees.¹⁸ Though its benefactors and trustees (many of them collectors) have always been recruited from American's social elite, the interpretation of MoMA's success as the result of a high society conspiracy would be simplistic. The support of some of the most influential people in

business, politics and the media certainly contributed to MoMA's prominent position. However, a critical element in the establishment of the museum as the foremost institution in modern art was its continued insistence on high standards of excellence and professionalism. Especially during its early years, MoMA attracted a number of young and ambitious individuals, representing the most brilliant authorities in their fields.¹⁹ The museum employed the most advanced marketing and publicity strategies in the propagation and dissemination of modern art. MoMA resolved the contradictions of capitalism and modernism by turning modern art into a business, promoting it just like any other commodity.

Likewise, the Museum of Modern Art's organisation and administration resembled more a business enterprise than an educational institution. It published annual reports with elaborate diagrams charting its income and expenditures, sales of publications and number of visitors. Its administrative structure resembled those of public companies, including a president, board of trustees, director and executive director, and a large number of committees.²⁰ It was run with the professionalism and efficiency of a company competing in the capitalist market economy. In an early, confidential report to the trustees Alfred Barr described MoMA's operations exactly in these terms:

Analysis of the present organization of the Museum reveals two distinct types of work . . .

1. 'Production.'

Basically, the Museum 'produces' art knowledge, criticism, scholarship, understanding, taste. This is its laboratory or study work . . . This preparation or 'production' work is the stuff of which the Museum's prestige is made.

2. 'Distribution.'

Once the product is made, the next job is its distribution. An exhibition in the galleries is distribution. Circulation of exhibitions catalogs, memberships, publicity, radio, are all distribution.²¹

From its foundation in 1929, the Museum of Modern Art employed the most up-to-date methods of distribution. It used publicity to shock and to attract attention, to get its name into the newspapers and the public to visit its exhibitions. The museum's van Gogh exhibition of 1935 was promoted by an extensive publicity campaign and is one of the first instances of a blockbuster show. MoMA was also one of the first museums to use radio broadcasts for publicity and education.²² For decades the museum's publications were unrivalled in their scholarship, size, quality of layout and illustrations. Similarly, the exhibitions established new standards of excellence, not only in their selection but also in their presentation and installation.²³ In the early years of its existence, MoMA transformed the definition and function of the museum as institution: the emphasis was no longer on collection, preservation and classification but

instead on education, communication and public participation, always with the insistence on the highest standards. The museum was selling a product – modern art – and this it did better than any other museum:

Consider the Museum entirely as a *business*. If the product is good its duplication and distribution can be endless. There is no need for 'burning up' the product on hand by an extravagant policy of too rapid and too thin distribution and without studied replacement that should in any rate exceed the distribution... The distribution of the Museum's product will improve once it is looked at apart from its preparation. Just as it is unfair to judge preparation from a 'popular' angle, so it is unfair to make distribution a purely scholarly affair. It should be impossible to corrupt a good product by intelligent distribution.²⁴

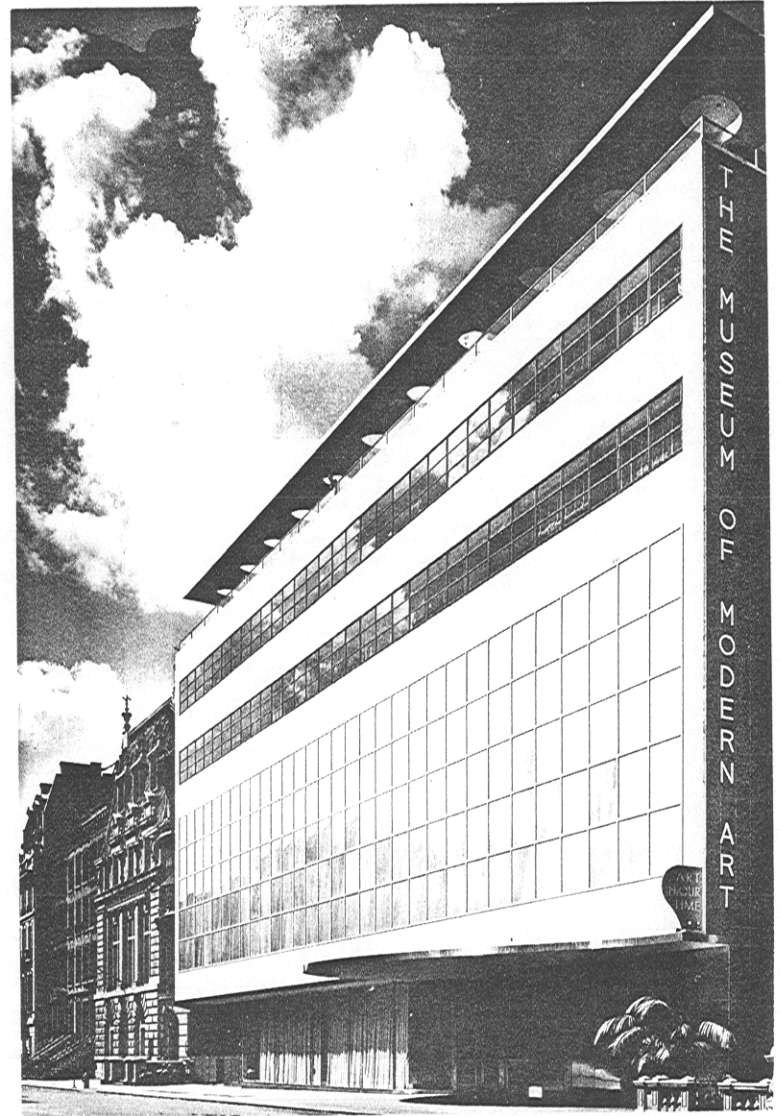
'A machine to show pictures in':
the Museum of Modern Art's permanent home²⁵

The announcement of the Museum of Modern Art's establishment in 1929 concluded with a prophetic statement: 'It is not unreasonable to suppose that within ten years New York, with its vast wealth, its already magnificent private collections and its enthusiastic but not yet organized interest in modern art, could achieve perhaps the greatest modern museum in the world.'²⁶ For the first decade MoMA occupied a number of temporary spaces, including a twelve-floor skyscraper and a former Rockefeller town house on the site of the present museum. By 1939 when its new building opened to the public the museum had already realised its ambitious goal of assembling a remarkable collection that included many icons of twentieth-century art (Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, for example, had entered the collection the previous year).

After the museum became a permanent institution, a chronic shortage of space made the need for its own building increasingly urgent. In 1936 Philip L. Goodwin (1885–1958) and Edward D. Stone (1902–78) were commissioned to design a modern museum (fig. 10.1).²⁷ The final product of their collaboration fulfilled the demands for a material manifestation of MoMA's principles and ideology:

[T]he design of the building became, in all truth, itself a part of the museum collection – the only part permanently and indefinitely on display. Whatever type of building was erected could not but be judged rigorously, by the outsider as part and parcel of the whole contemporary art movement, and by the insider according to the high criterion set by its own contents.²⁸

An analysis of the building will reveal how the museum successfully accommodated a diversity of demands, balancing commercial display techniques



10.1 Philip L. Goodwin and Edward D. Stone, *The Museum of Modern Art*, New York, 1939.
Photo: Museum of Modern Art

with formalist aesthetics, intimacy with authority, and flexibility with an impression of permanence. As the building reached completion in the spring of 1939, New Yorkers were confronted by the museum's unadorned and resolutely modern façade:

The façade has been disturbing New Yorkers, even the most up-to-date of them, during all the months of its construction, by its stark and machine-made simplicity. It contained nothing, so it was feared, that resembled architecture in any way, but now that the scaffoldings have been removed and the chromium and glass have been polished up the extreme cleanliness of the affair mitigates somewhat the nudity, although the unregenerate will doubtless insist that the front calls loudly for some flagpoles and other ornament.²⁹

The museum's flat, white and polished façade anticipated the austerity of the galleries and the severity of the art historical judgement applied to modern art, or, as Barr defined it: 'the conscientious, continuous, resolute distinction of quality from mediocrity'.³⁰ The entrance was designed to ease the transition from the street into the museum (fig. 10.2). The ground floor opened in a floor to ceiling glass wall with curved entrance bay giving full sight of the entrance



10.2 Philip L. Goodwin and Edward D. Stone, *Entrance hall, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1939*. Photo: Robert M. Damora, courtesy of Photographic Archives, Museum of Modern Art

lobby. The layout is reminiscent of commercial architecture, in particular department stores with their wide and visually accessible expanses of glass.

The deep, recessed, curved loggia lined with metal opens invitingly from the sidewalk, and the column projecting through the open space gives a pleasant sense of the stability of the building; the whole hallowed form leads one inevitably into the building through welcoming glass doors. An imaginative feature is the way in which the curve of the counter of the entrance carries through the curve of the wall outside; the entire entrance and lobby are most interesting examples of that weaving together for outside and inside which is one of the great marks of best contemporary design.³¹

The museum's name on a background of blue tiles on the side of the building attracted visitors from Fifth Avenue, New York's most elegant shopping street. The prominent placement of the museum's name was a programmatic allusion to the Bauhaus in Dessau (Walter Gropius, 1925–6). The street façade of the museum conformed to all the requirements of contemporary shop-fronts:

1. Be sufficiently distinctive to be easily recognized from a distance.
2. Display name signs that are easily read from afar, from nearby and by those looking into windows.
3. Reflect, in character of design, the type and quality of merchandise sold inside the store.
4. Provide windows for most advantageous display of merchandise.
5. Provide an easy, direct and attractive entrance.³²

The affinity of museum and department store continues in the twentieth century. Walter Benjamin has remarked on the strong affinity between the museum and the distribution and presentation of commodities: 'The concentration of works of art in the museum approximates them to commodities, which – where they offer themselves in masses to the passer-by – rouse the idea that he also must receive a share.'³³ The Museum of Modern Art effectively employed the most advanced presentation and display techniques, derived from American commercial as well as European architectural and artistic sources. On the entrance level the museum presented itself as an open and democratic institution. However, the austerity of the façade's central zone, with its polished steel and translucent glass grid, anticipates the authority and seriousness inside the galleries.³⁴

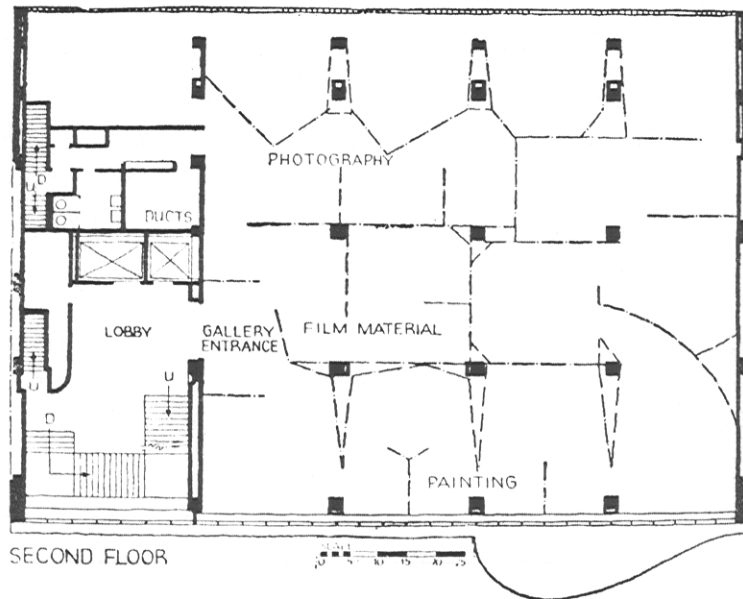
In the art historical labyrinth

The interior of the museum repeated the play in the façade between organic and geometric forms. Decorative elements were restricted to the circulatory spaces, such as lobbies and staircases. The floor plan of the galleries possessed

all the elements of functionalist architecture: an open plan with steel post construction allowing complete flexibility in the division of the gallery space. An exhibition plan for the museum's opening exhibition, 'Art in our time', with the actual walls in place illustrates the spatial division of the galleries (figs 10.3, 10.4). The installation represents the result of the careful balancing of practical and didactic considerations:

In the effort to gain the maximum wall space for the present very large exhibition, the space has been divided into a large number of small rooms, one entered from the other, and it is here perhaps that the sacrifices contingent upon the gaining of flexibility are most apparent. The screens run straight from floor to ceiling, and the effect is that of permanent rooms; and, where there are so many of them, with the circulation from one to another so irrevocably fixed, a rather disquieting feeling as of being in a *labyrinth* almost necessarily results.¹⁵

The spaces were surprisingly varied, many of them cut irregularly, with curved walls and oblique angles. This asymmetrical arrangement of spaces



10.3 Philip L. Goodwin and Edward D. Stone, *Second floor plan, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1939*. Photo: Robert M. Damora, courtesy of Photographic Archives, Museum of Modern Art



10.4 Upper floor gallery at the time of the 'Art in our time' exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Robert M. Damora, courtesy of Photographic Archives, Museum of Modern Art

fulfilled practical needs but also contributed to a sense of dynamic modernity. The powerful appeal of asymmetry and its mixture of practical and ideological foundations permeated the museum building on many levels. This contrasts with classical architecture where symmetry denotes lack of spontaneity, controlled regularity and defence of the status quo. In the MoMA's spaces visitors had to progress through a series of galleries without the danger of digression. In the labyrinth of MoMA's galleries, the visitor is subjected to a compulsory course in recent art history following 'the development of modern art in a clear logical sequence'.¹⁶ Barr's attempt to organise modern art according to the principles of traditional art history is exemplified in the famous chart he created for the 1936 'Cubism and abstract art' exhibition. This chart presented the evolution of modern art developing towards two types of formal expression: 'Non-geometrical abstract art' and 'Geometrical abstract art'.¹⁷

The intimacy of modern art

After the simplicity and coldness of the façade visitors were surprised by the intimacy of the museum's galleries:

If the facade of the building confirms the suspicion that I have entertained this long while past, that New York simply cannot afford a curved line, the interior refutes the impeachment arrogantly, for the exhibition space is divided into innumerable alcoves that weave into each other like rose leaves on a larger scale. This provides the intimate approach to the pictures that is now deemed essential.³⁸

Everything in the design of the galleries was done to evoke a feeling of intimacy: the space was divided into small units with irregular plans and the ceiling was kept deliberately low (12 to 14 feet). The domestic scale was not restricted to the galleries but penetrated the whole building, beginning with the entrance area: 'Burnished chromium doors open into a large foyer which gives no idea of a museum but resembles a modernistic residence with lounging chairs, a counter for catalogues and receptionists standing to offer information.'³⁹ Other elements of the museum, such as its limited number of floors, the penthouse and balcony, as well as the lack of representative spaces and the extensive use of decorative plants, furthered the analogy to typical New York residential buildings.⁴⁰ The gallery spaces were domesticated and approximated to the private collectors' homes so closely associated with the institution.⁴¹ The galleries' intimate character facilitated the aestheticisation of art, allowing the beholder to establish a personal relationship to the objects exhibited. Walter Benjamin described the transformation occurring in the collector's home:

The interior was the place of refuge of Art. The collector was the true inhabitant of the interior. He made the glorification of things his concern. To him fell the task of Sisyphus which consisted of stripping things of their commodity character by means of his possession of them. But he conferred upon them only a fancier's value, rather than use-value. The collector dreamed that he was in a world which was not only far-off in distance and time, but which was also a better one, in which to be sure people were just as poorly provided with what they needed as in the world of everyday, but in which things were free from the bondage of being useful.⁴²

MoMA reproduced the escapist strategies of the Victorian interior: the works of art were detached from their original context of production and their social and political implications were effaced in a fictitious process of appropriation and domestication. In the Museum of Modern Art the Victorian profusion of objects was replaced with modernist isolation and sterility. The negation of the exterior world has become an essential part of MoMA's politics of presentation, continuing to the present day: 'You won't know which building you're in when you're in the galleries', William Rubin, curator of painting and sculpture, stated in 1983.⁴³

The 'white cube'⁴⁴

The same critic, who above had praised the possibility of an 'intimate approach to the pictures', continued in his review to criticise the hostility and coldness of the galleries: 'I must also add that these picture alcoves disdain coziness. Apparently, in the new museums, we shall be expected to stand up, look quickly and pass on. There are some chairs and settees, but the machin-like neatness of the rooms does not invite repose.'⁴⁵ The paradigms of modernist aesthetics have penetrated not only the works of art but also their presentation – distance and autonomy is practised in art and in its installation. The simple stereometric spaces, the white walls and the lack of ornamentation present a conscious claim for the seriousness and relevance of modern art. The so-called 'white cube' liberated modern art from its common association with decadence, insanity, sensuality and feminine frivolity; simultaneously, it revealed the inherent masculinity and authoritarian character of formalist aesthetics:

[O]ne of the greatest barriers to the healthy development of Art interest in America is unquestionably the fact that it has been so largely cultivated hitherto as an interest peculiar to women. Whatever may have been the causes for this extraordinary fact in our national history and however deeply our society is indebted to women and women's organizations for the preservation of aesthetic interest during a century or more of cultural chaos, there are no good reasons at the present time for perpetuating the anomaly. On the contrary, we are confronted on every hand with indications that the time has come in America when Art is again taking its proper place among the normal interests of men. Indeed it may be said quite bluntly that no really significant development of contemporary art can take place in this country without the whole-hearted participation of men whose intimate relations with commerce, industry, and productive enterprise of all sorts makes them, rather than women, the immediate instruments for 'applying the Arts to practical life.'⁴⁶

MoMA's policy represented a conscious attempt to resolve the ideological contradictions between modernism's political and social agenda within the American system of capitalism and the Puritan suspicion of the fine arts. The integration of modern art into the male sphere of production and economics transformed it into an aesthetic acceptable to American businesses without disturbing the social order. At the same time, modern art and design – abstract and simple – provided an outlet for philanthropic activities liberated from the dangers of extravagant ostentation:

The [Protestant] campaign against the temptations of the flesh, and the dependence on external things, was . . . not a struggle against the rational acquisition, but against the irrational use of wealth. But this irrational use was exemplified

in the outward forms of luxury which their code condemned as idolatry of the flesh, however natural they had appeared to the feudal mind. On the other hand, they approved the rational and utilitarian uses of wealth which were willed by God for the needs of the individual and the community.⁴⁷

The white, neutral and ideology-free gallery space constitutes the physical materialisation of MoMA's selective amnesia. More than anything else, the 'white cube' epitomised the attempt to escape from the realities of the external world, belying modernism's original claim for the integration of art and life. The museum's spaces functioned as a defence not only against the metropolitan cacophony of New York but also, and more importantly, against the material world of production and consumption, the contradictions of class society and political conflicts. The 'white cube' constitutes an ideological vacuum, an immaculate space in which art is restricted to the realm of ideas and pure aesthetics:

The ideal, to be sure, was conceived in such a fashion that its regressive and apologetic, rather than its progressive and critical, characteristics predominated. Its realization is supposed to be effected through the cultural education of individuals. Culture means not so much a better world as a nobler one: a world to be brought about not through the overthrow of the material order of life but through events in the individual's soul. . . . Culture belongs not to him who comprehends the truths of humanity as a battlecry, but to him in whom they have become a posture which leads to a mode of proper behavior: exhibiting harmony and reflectiveness even in daily routine. Culture should ennoble the given by permeating it, rather than putting something new in its place. . . . The beauty of culture is above all an inner beauty and can only reach the external world from within.⁴⁸

In the museum's galleries, modern works of art are implicitly defined as self-contained entities, limited in scale and demanding contemplative perception. The physical confinement and limitations imposed by the installation reveal MoMA's selective appropriation of modernism. There is no space for art transgressing the traditional separation of media into painting, sculpture, graphics, architecture, design, photography and film, as reflected in MoMA's departmental structure.⁴⁹ This automatically excludes large-scale murals, collaborations between architects and painters, environmental designs, and convergence of fine and industrial art. Above all, the Museum of Modern Art's politics of exclusion deliberately ignored or defused the penetration of art by social and political issues in the Soviet and German avant-gardes.⁵⁰ Despite the fact that Alfred Barr was one of the very few art historians with first-hand knowledge of Soviet art, which clearly fascinated him, it was to lead a rather subordinate role at the Museum of Modern Art.⁵¹ The austere gallery spaces

with their pristine white walls epitomised MoMA's ambition for purity and neutrality, historical accuracy and objectivity: modernism became history. MoMA's politics of presentation replaced political engagement with formalist aesthetics, anarchy with rationalisation, internationalism with individualism, diversity with absolute purity, and fragmentation with aesthetic autonomy:

[T]he *autonomy of art* is a category of bourgeois society. It permits the description of art's detachment from the context of practical life as a historical development – that among the members of those classes which, at least at times, are free from the pressures of the need for survival, a sensuousness could evolve that was not part of any means–ends relationships.⁵²

Notes

- 1 Reprinted in I. Sandler and A. Newman, eds, *Defining modern art: selected writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr*, New York, 1986, p. 73.
- 2 D. MacDonald, 'Profiles: action on West Fifty-Third Street – I', *The New Yorker*, 12 December 1953, p. 49.
- 3 The critical texts are: C. Duncan and A. Wallach, 'MoMA: ordeal and triumph on 53rd Street', *Studio International*, 194, 1978, pp. 48–57. A revised version of this article was published as 'The Museum Of Modern Art as late capitalist ritual: an iconographic analysis', *Marxist Perspectives*, 1, 1978, pp. 28–51. C. Duncan, 'MoMA's hot mamas', *Art Journal*, 48, 1989, pp. 171–8. The museum's role in the dissemination of abstract expressionism is investigated by E. Cockcroft, 'Abstract expressionism: weapon of the cold war', *Artforum*, XII, 1974, pp. 39–41. A. Cox, *Art-as-politics: the abstract expressionist avant-garde and society*, Ann Arbor, MI, 1982. S. Guilbaut, *How New York stole the idea of modern art: abstract expressionism, freedom, and the cold war*, Chicago and London, 1983. M. Kozloff, 'American painting during the cold war', *Art-forum*, XI, 1973, pp. 43–54.
- 4 Russell Lynes gives an detailed account of the museum's founder's social background in *Good old modern: an intimate portrait of the Museum of Modern Art*, New York, 1973, pp. 3–8.
- 5 Letter from Abby A. Rockefeller to A. Conger Goodyear, 12 July 1929. MoMA Archives, NY, A. Conger, Goodyear Papers, vol. I.
- 6 Barr, *A new art museum*, brochure August 1929, reprinted in Sandler and Newman, *Defining modern art*, p. 69.
- 7 'Unless I am mistaken, the founders of the Museum originally intended it to be a kind of Luxembourg or purgatory for non-academic painting and sculpture, which in 1929 could rarely be seen in New York save at dealer's galleries.' A.H. Barr, Jr, *Notes for the reorganization committee*, typescript dated 23 February 1938, p. 5. MoMA Archives, NY, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. [AHB] Papers, Archives of American Art, Microfilm 2166, Frame 670.
- 8 Barr, *A new art museum*, p. 71.
- 9 A. H. Barr, Jr, 'Chronicle of the collection of painting and sculpture', in *Painting and sculpture in the Museum of Modern Art, 1929–1967*, New York, 1977, p. 620.
- 10 Alfred H. Barr, Jr, *The 1929 multidepartmental plan for the Museum of Modern Art: its origins, development, and partial realization*, typescript dated August 1941, p. 2. MoMA Archives: AHB Papers [AAA: 3266: 71].

- 11 Quoted in Barr, 'Chronicle of the collection', p. 620.
- 12 Barr, *Notes for the reorganization committee*, p. 6. MoMA Archives: AHB Papers [AAA: 2166: 676].
- 13 Quoted in Barr, 'Chronicle of the collection', p. 622.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Miss Bliss, who died in 1931, bequeathed her collection to the museum under the condition that within three years 'the Trustees of the Estate should be satisfied that the Museum of Modern Art is sufficiently endowed and in judgment of said Trustees on a firm financial basis and in the hands of a competent board of trustees.' Quoted in Barr, 'Chronicle of the collection', p. 621.
- 16 A. C. Goodyear, 'The Museum of Modern Art', *Creative Art*, 9, 1931, pp. 456–7.
- 17 Barr, *Present status and future direction of The Museum of Modern Art*, typescript dated 6 August 1933, p. 11. MoMA Archives: AHB Papers [AAA: 3266: 132]. In 1936 the time frame of the collection was restricted to 'works produced within the previous fifty years, with a smaller number of works of earlier periods to illustrate the sources and aid in the understanding of contemporary art.' Barr, 'Chronicle of the collection', p. 625.
- 18 In 1933 it 'was decided to abandon a public drive to raise endowment funds and depend entirely on the Trustees and friends of the Museum'. Quoted in Barr, 'Chronicle of the collection', p. 622. 'In the early years, the trustees financed the Museum of Modern Art almost entirely. Besides making generous annual gifts for running expenses – as late as 1944, the Rockefellers were reportedly giving \$100,000 a year and Stephen Clark [Chairman of the Board] \$25,000 – they raised an initial endowment of \$630,000 (mostly out of their own pockets), provided the funds to erect the present building, on a site donated by the Rockefellers, and have given the Museum – either directly or by providing funds for their purchase – by far the greater part of the paintings and collection.' Macdonald, 'Profiles: action on West Fifty-Third Street – I', pp. 50–2. For a complete account of income and expenditures during the Museum's first decade, see A. C. Goodyear, *The Museum of Modern Art: the first ten years*, New York, 1943, appendix G.
- 19 The most prominent of the so-called 'young Turks' were Philip Johnson (later to become America's leading architect), Lincoln Kirstein (subsequently founder of the New York City Ballet) and Edward M. M. Warburg (also involved in ballet as well as a trustee of MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art). Eminent art historians involved with the Museum in its early years were Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Beaumont Newhall, James Johnson Sweeney and James Thrall Soby.
- 20 For a diagrammatic representation of the museum's administrative structure see A. H. Barr, Jr, *The Museum of Modern Art*, New York, mimeographed fund-raising brochure, New York, 1936, p. 16.
- 21 Barr, *Present status and future direction of the Museum of Modern Art*, p. 2. MoMA Archives: AHB Papers [AAA: 3266: 122].
- 22 In 1931 the Museum employed a public relations firm and from 1933 it employed a full-time Director of Publicity. For an account of MoMA's early use of publicity see Lynes, *Good old modern*, pp. 126–35. The 1932 opening of its quarters on West Fifty-third Street was accompanied by a radio broadcast.
- 23 A review of the opening exhibition 'Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and van Gogh', praised: 'Never before, either here or in Europe . . . has the art of these men been more favorably shown, both as regards the excellence of the examples chosen and the way in which these are displayed . . . the pictures, widely spaced on walls covered with a fabric of becoming color and admirably lighted by lamps concealed in recesses of the rafters of the ceiling, show to their best advantage.' B. Burroughs, 'The Museum of Modern Art', *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, XXIV, 1929, p. 320.
- 24 Barr, *Present status and future direction of the Museum of Modern Art*, pp. 3–4. MoMA Archives: AHB Papers [AAA: 3266: 123–4] (my emphasis).
- 25 H. McBride, 'Opening of the new Museum of Modern Art', *New York sun*, 13 May 1939, p. 10. Reprinted in D. C. Rich, ed., *The flow of art: essays and criticism of Henry McBride*, New York, 1975, p. 370.
- 26 Barr, *A new art museum*, p. 72.
- 27 Alfred Barr favoured a prominent European as museum architect and consulted J. J. P. Oud, Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe about a possible commission. Mies emerged as the most likely candidate, being both available and very interested in the project. However, the museum's president A. Conger Goodyear and most of the trustees thought an American more appropriate. They appointed Goodwin, who also was a trustee, and Stone while Barr was absent in Europe. For a complete account of the affair see R. Roob, '1936: the Museum selects an architect', *Archives of American Art Journal*, 23, 1983, pp. 22–30.
- 28 T. F. Hamlin, 'Modern display for works of art', *Pencil Points*, XX, 1939, p. 615.
- 29 McBride, 'Opening of the new Museum of Modern Art', p. 370.
- 30 Quoted in Macdonald, 'Profiles – action on West Fifty-Third Street – I', p. 49.
- 31 Hamlin, 'Modern display for works of art', p. 616.
- 32 L. Sukert, 'The retail shop: an opportunity for architect and merchant', *American Architect*, 142, 1933, p. 25.
- 33 W. Benjamin, 'Das Passagen-Werk', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, third edition, Frankfurt am Main 1989, vol. V:1, p. 522.
- 34 Rosalind Krauss has established the inherent authoritarianism of the grid in modernism: 'Surfacing in pre-War cubist painting and subsequently becoming ever more stringent and manifest, the grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility, to literature, to narrative, to discourse . . . There are two ways in which the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art. One is spatial; the other is temporal. In the spatial sense the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal . . . In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. In the overall regularity of its surface, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree . . . The grid declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic' ('Grids' in *The originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1986, pp. 9–10).
- 35 Hamlin, 'Modern display for works of art', pp. 618–20 (my emphasis).
- 36 H. A. Read, 'Art in our time', *The American Magazine of Art*, 32, 1939, p. 339. For an analysis of MoMA's galleries (as they existed in the 1970s) as labyrinth see Duncan, Wallach, 'The Museum of Modern Art as late capitalist ritual: an iconographic analysis.'
- 37 For a discussion of Barr's chart and concept of art history see S. N. Platt, 'Modernism, formalism, and politics: the 'Cubism and abstract art' exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art', *Art Journal*, 47, 1988, pp. 284–95; W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Ut Pictura Theoria: abstract painting and the repression of language', *Critical Inquiry*, 15, 1989, pp. 348–71; R. Rosenblum, 'Foreword', in A. H. Barr, Jr, *Cubism and abstract art*, third edition, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1986, pp. 1–4.

- 38 McBride, 'Opening of the New Museum of Modern Art', p. 371.
- 39 E. Shaw, 'New York's art galleries draw universal interest', *Spokane Spokesman Review*, 16 July 1939.
- 40 Cf. Ricciotti, 'The 1939 building of The Museum of Modern Art: the Goodwin-Stone collaboration', *American Art Journal*, summer 1985, pp. 57-9.
- 41 In the years 1929 to 1940, the insurance value of paintings and sculptures acquired by gift (\$645,268) was more than ten times the value of the purchases (\$62,396), (Barr, 'Chronicle of the collection', p. 628).
- 42 W. Benjamin, 'Paris - the capital of the nineteenth century', in *Charles Baudelaire: a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*, London and New York, 1983, pp. 168-9.
- 43 M. Brenson, 'Modern museum closing until May', *New York Times*, 26 December 1983, p. C11.
- 44 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the white cube*, San Francisco, 1976.
- 45 McBride, 'Opening of the new Museum of Modern Art', p. 371.
- 46 A. Packard, *A report on the development of the Museum of Modern Art*, typescript, New York 1938, pp. 88-9.
- 47 M. Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, London, 1985, pp. 170-1.
- 48 H. Marcuse, 'The affirmative character of culture', in *Negations: essays in critical theory*, London, 1988, p. 103.
- 49 'By distributing the work of the avant-garde to various departments . . . by stringently enforcing what appears to be a natural parceling of objects according to medium, MOMA automatically constructs a formalist history of modernism' (D. Crimp, 'The art of exhibition', *October*, 30, 1984, reprinted in A. Michelson, R. Krauss, D. Crimp and J. Copjec, eds, *October: the first decade, 1976-1986*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1987, p. 244).
- 50 For a discussion of MoMA's and in particular Alfred Barr's treatment of Russian constructivism see: Crimp, 'The art of exhibition', pp. 240-7; and B. H. D. Buchloh, 'From faktura to factography', *October*, 30, 1984, reprinted in Michelson, *et al.*, *October: the first decade*, pp. 77-9.
- 51 MoMA's first exhibition solely devoted to Russian constructivist artists was the 1948 'Gabo-Pevsner' retrospective (though selected constructivist works were featured in survey exhibitions, such as 'Cubism and abstract art', 1936). Other victims of the museum's discriminating construction of the history of modern art were Dada and much of radical German modernist architecture and design - neglected because of their attack on the autonomy of the modern work of art.
- 52 P. Bürger, *The theory of the avant-garde*, Manchester, 1984, p. 46.

Select bibliography

The excellent Archives of the Museum of Modern Art provide a complete documentation of the museum's history from its foundation in 1929. The most important source are the Papers of Alfred H. Barr, Jr which are also available on microfilm in the Archives of American Art. Useful information about the Museum's activities can also be found in the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* (published from 1933) and the irregularly published *Annual Reports*. The Museum of Modern Art's annual *Studies in Modern Art* (no. 1 published in 1991) deal with works in the collection and the Museum's history.

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