

'The Museum is History' Museum of American Art in the Van Abbe Museum

The Museum of American Art is no ordinary museum, but the re-enactment of a museum. It is engaged in making a virtually literal copy of the exhibition history of the MoMA. A discussion about a museum that presents itself as the only 'real museum of art'.

The Museum of American Art opened its doors in 2004 in Berlin, in a ground floor apartment on the Frankfurter Allee 91. The MoAA is filled with Abstract Expressionist masterpieces by heroes such as Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Marc Rothko, Willem De Kooning, Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell. Or rather, copies of them: the MoAA's collection contains paintings and objects that 'repeat' significant works from 20th century American-cum-International Art History. Large format paintings on canvas, often of a slightly sketchy nature, scale models of exhibition spaces, tracings of old photographs of significant art historical moments (important players installing shows, openings), reproductions of pages from watershed catalogues: these are the ingredients of what one could call a 'typical' MoAA installation. An installation that is quite literally a white cube (within a white cube) through which viewers can walk, delving physically and mentally into the 'artifacts' on view, wondering about their position *vis-à-vis* the reproduction, the facsimile, authenticity and, significantly, Euro-Western Art History and its accompanying politics.

The MoAA explores a timeline that is closed at both ends (1920s-1960s). Walter Benjamin – the museum's self-appointed spokesman – explains: 'Not only is the timeline closed but the institution is not an art museum. In fact, by not being an art museum it is the "real museum of art", a place where art, art history, and the art museum are being remembered.' The MoAA also collaborates on travelling exhibitions. Currently at the Van Abbe Museum, the MoAA's *Kabinett der Abstrakten (Original and Facsimile)* is on view as part of the exhibition *Play Van Abbe*.

Maxine Kopsa:

How would you describe the MoAA, generally? For example, what are its main characteristics?

Walter Benjamin:

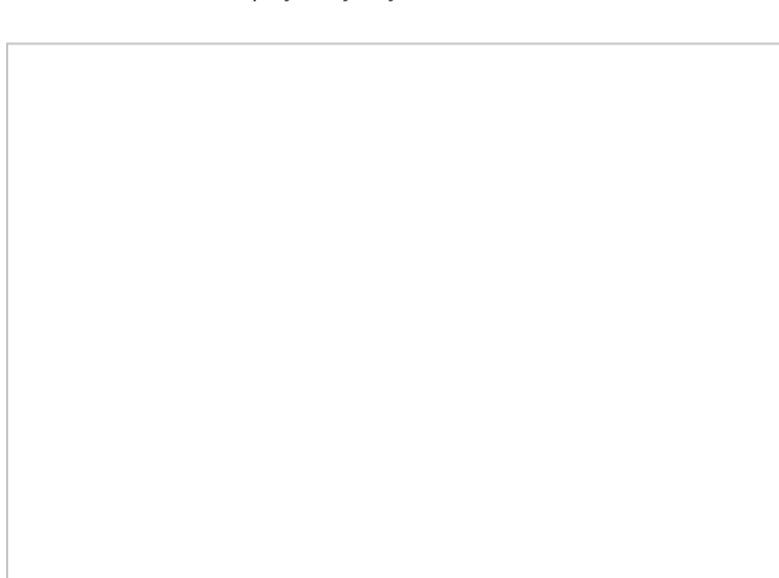
'When I visited the Museum of American Art for the first time, I think it was in spring 2005, I immediately realized that this was not an ordinary museum, but it took me some time to realize that it is not actually an art museum at all. It is true that artifacts on display in this museum are in traditional art forms (techniques), paintings and objects, but in this case, these are not works of art. The entire museum exhibit is about art, specifically about the development of the modern canon that was initiated at the MoMA just before WWII, and its influences after the war. Since the subject of the MoAA exhibit is the making of the modern art narrative, I concluded that this place could not be an art museum.'

Maxine Kopsa:

We were given your contact information by the museum's technical assistant, who told us you were more equipped to answer our questions than he would be. Are you the very Walter Benjamin we all know and have read?

Walter Benjamin:

'Although I was not in this museum from the very beginning, in recent years I became closely associated with it, primarily because it embodies certain ideas I am attracted to myself. One of them being how to find a way to position oneself "outside" of the art history narrative. The main feature of art history is the uniqueness of its characters: persons, objects or events. However, from the meta-position, art history becomes just a story and all these unique historical entities are now transformed into the characters in this story, like the characters in a theatre play. In that sense, we could understand Walter Benjamin as one of those characters. It is a role that can be played by anyone.'



'For me it is now clear that the entire art domain is a thing of the past and will continue to exist only by inertia, the way religion continued to exist after the Enlightenment.'

Maxine Kopsa:

You've often mentioned the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* by MoMA's famous director Alfred Baar. Originally, the MoAA was very much influenced by this and later shows that also toured Europe in the 50s, all organized by the MoMA's first curator, Dorothy Miller. Do you see these roots still being cited by MoAA?

Walter Benjamin:

'As far as I understand, one part of the museum's permanent displays are the artifacts which relate to the post WWII period and come from various important travelling exhibitions curated by the MoMA, such as *Twelve American Contemporary Painters and Sculptors (1953)*, *Modern American Art from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art (1956)*, *The New American Painting (1958)*. These were key to MoAA's foundation, and this is why, I believe, one of the galleries in the museum is still named after Dorothy Miller.

Another part of the museum display relates to the pre-war period, to the origin and early history of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The museum also holds several collections relating to the MoMA's circulating exhibitions. It is interesting to mention that one of the most recent additions to the museum is the collection *Kabinett der Abstrakten* which relates to El Lissitzky's famous room for abstract art built at the invitation of Alexander Dorner in the Landesmuseum in Hanover 1928 and destroyed in 1936 during the Third Reich period. The story of the *Abstract Cabinet* and the Landesmuseum is also connected to Alfred Barr and the MoMA: all the Malevich works in the MoMA today were brought to New York in 1935 from the Landesmuseum for the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* and have stayed on public display continually ever since.'

Maxine Kopsa:

Are the MoAA's artifacts straightforward copies? Could you say something about their status?

Walter Benjamin:

'As far as I know, all of the paintings exhibited in the Museum of American Art are some kind of copy. There are copies of paintings at different scales, some are 1:1, some are just a bit smaller, and some are quite small. In the case of copies, size doesn't matter. Those are not unique entities, but rather symbols. A small copy of Motherwell as well as a big one have the same meaning, and can be indefinitely multiplied just like any other symbol, without changing its meaning, while the original by definition cannot be multiplied.'

Maxine Kopsa:

You often talk about lessons the past can teach us about our future. What does the MoAA tell us about our present?

Walter Benjamin:

'Places like the MoAA first of all exist in our present, but in any present there are traces of the past and glimpses of the future. In this case, the past, the present and the future are relating specifically to art, art history and art institutions. For me it is now clear that the entire art domain is a thing of the past and will continue to exist only by inertia, the way religion continued to exist after the Enlightenment.

To be an artist today is like being a priest at the time of emergence of natural philosophers. It is an obsolete category. There is nothing to be said any more through the first person discourse characteristic of most artists. In order to make sense in the "new paradigm", art museums will have to change. A few of them will most likely continue to exist, not as living places but rather as some kind of "time capsules" where people who are outside of the art narrative will go to see what art and art museums were. Former art works will acquire the status of specimens, equal in value and importance to all other artifacts (copies, objects, books, catalogues, etc.). They will continue to be appreciated as such only by those who are still within the art history narrative, who are still "believers" in art.

Also, completely new places will emerge, dedicated to remembering art and certain episodes from art history without exhibiting any works of art. One such place is the Museum of American Art, where we see a reverse situation from the one established by the ready-mades almost one hundred years ago. In the case of the ready-mades, we have non-art objects transformed into art objects by changing their context, while in MoAA we have traditional art objects like paintings transformed into non-art paintings/artifacts.'

Maxine Kopsa:

When the MoAA goes on tour, so to speak, like to the Istanbul Biennial and the Van Abbe Museum, does it lend out works from its home on the Frankfurter Allee, or are new copies simply produced for the sites in question?

Walter Benjamin:

'In fact, in both those cases the MoAA has exhibited already existing collections. The collection *Savremena umetnost u SAD ("Modern Art in the USA")* was shown at The Istanbul Biennial. Its theme is the 1955-56 MoMA travelling exhibition, which started in Paris and ended in Belgrade, after stopping at several other European cities. Although this was perhaps the most important exhibition of modern art ever exhibited in Belgrade, it was completely forgotten, and it is through this MoAA collection exhibited in Belgrade 50 years later that it was brought back to our memory. *Kabinett der Abstrakten*, now at the Van Abbe Museum, is a collection that was first exhibited in January 2009 in the Halle fur Kunst Luneburg. But in principle, regarding the production of new copies for a particular context, I would say the answer is yes. New copies are produced and slight alterations are made. I have noticed a couple of artifacts in the MoAA exhibit in Istanbul not shown previously in Belgrade and I expect that there will be some artifacts in the Van Abbe Museum exhibition of *Kabinett der Abstrakten* not shown in Luneburg.'

Maxine Kopsa is editor of METROPOLIS M

The MoAA's presentation of *Kabinett der Abstrakten (Original and Facsimile)* is on view at the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven as part of the exhibition *Play Van Abbe*, which runs until the end of August 2010. In March, the exhibition *Sites of Modernity* will be added to this.

Walter Benjamin is a well-known philosopher and theoretician in the area of art history, originality and reproduction. In 1935, he published his famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Many years after his tragic death, he reappeared with the lecture *Mondrian '63-69* organized by the Marxist Center in Ljubljana in 1986, and the next year appeared on the TV Gallery in Belgrade. He later published the thesis *On Copy* (2003), *the article Provinzial-Beute* (2009), and the interviews *My Dear, This is Not What it Seems to Be* (2005) and *Places of Re-remembering* (2009). He also co-curated (with Inke Arns) *What is Modern Art?* in 2006. In recent years, he has been associated with the Museum of American Art in Berlin.