

*ART AND ITS HISTORIES*

Contemporary Cultures  
of Display

EDITED BY EMMA BARKER

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While Malraux's emphasis on photography's popularizing role has been proved correct in this respect, his conception of the museum without walls nevertheless fails to register the extent of its impact.<sup>7</sup> Today the status of an object as 'art' no longer depends on its unique existence as an original work from the hand of an individual artist. Certain forms of photography have now gained the status of an art form and are exhibited as such in museums. Many contemporary artists reject the traditional media of painting and sculpture and work instead with pre-fabricated materials and photographic media (see Plates 76 and 153). Admittedly, of course, the identification of such practices as art is a contentious issue for many people (inevitably so given that even early twentieth-century abstract art has yet to be uniformly accepted). To say that it depends ultimately on their presence in the museum might seem to confirm often expressed suspicions that modern art represents an art world 'conspiracy' perpetrated on the public. It can also, however, be seen in terms of the phenomenon that Malraux called metamorphosis: that is to say, the quasi-magical transformation of objects into art. From this perspective, the expanded definition of art now current can be understood as an extension of metamorphosis. The crucial point here is that the institutional power of the museum (considered more fully below) works against the levelling effect of photography and continues to uphold, however problematically, the distinction between what is and what is not art.

The museum without walls as it was formulated by Malraux certainly cannot be taken as an unproblematic concept. As we have seen, the rhetoric of diversity and openness is at least partly belied by his assumptions about the nature of art. Nevertheless, the term (especially in its translated form) has many resonances pertinent to the contemporary conditions for viewing art. It can, for example, be taken to refer to temporary exhibitions (discussed in Part 2) as opposed to museum collections. In a later edition of his book, Malraux described exhibitions as 'those brilliant and fleeting dependencies of the museum without walls' (*Museum without Walls*, p.160). The museum without walls might also be understood as the architectural counterpart to the works of art within museums, appropriately so since Malraux as minister was much concerned with the preservation of France's historic buildings (this issue is touched on in Case Study 2 and discussed in Case Study 8). Most apposite of all, perhaps, is to apply the term to open-air sculptures, otherwise known as public art; these certainly make art accessible beyond the real museum, as Malraux conceived the museum without walls as doing, but also raise difficult questions about the place of art in society (explored in Part 3).

<sup>7</sup> For postmodern cultural critique, the central weakness of Malraux's argument is the failure to grasp that the museum without walls would promote an endless recycling of the images and styles of the art of the past (identified as postmodernism); see, for example, Crimp, 'On the museum's ruins', pp.54-8 (this article was first published in 1980). Aspects of postmodernism are discussed in the first two case studies.

## Display

The condition of being on display is fundamental to the construction of the category 'art' in the modern western world. Art's autonomy – its definition as a specialized set of objects and practices set apart from the more mundane concerns of society – is bound up with the existence of the museum, which, in displaying works of art, stops them being used for any purpose other than that of being looked at. By thus promoting specialized, distinctively aesthetic modes of looking, art museums function (according to Carol Duncan) as 'ritual sites' dedicated to the religion of art (Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, pp.7ff). It must be emphasized that this notion of a 'religion of art' should not be taken at face value. For Duncan, as for many cultural critics, the cult status of art is precisely what makes the museum problematic. However, display itself is just as much an issue here as art. We can put this in focus by noting that display is a verb as well as noun, active as well as passive: the point being that display is always *produced* by curators, designers, etc. As such, it is necessarily informed by definite aims and assumptions and evokes some larger meaning or deeper reality beyond the individual works in the display. In short, it is a form of representation as well as a mode of presentation.

Museums first and foremost impose meaning on objects by classifying them. This is true of any museum; a natural history museum, for example, will order the objects that it contains in accordance with categories derived from the biological sciences (for example, species and genus). Within an art museum, the classifications employed are derived from the discipline of art history; the works of art will therefore typically be arranged by period, school, style, movement or artist (or a combination of these). At the same time, the presence of a particular work of art in a museum (at least, in major institutions such as the National Gallery in London or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) already represents a form of classification: it has been distinguished from others that were not deemed worthy of inclusion on the basis of its authenticity, originality or some other quality (hence the phrase 'museum quality'). The final arbiters here, the people who make the judgements justifying the acquisition of a work for a collection or its inclusion in an exhibition, are museum curators and directors.<sup>8</sup> The nature of their role has been nicely summed up by the French artist Daniel Buren, who, commenting on a 1989 exhibition that identified contemporary artists from around the world as 'magicians', 'suggested that the real "magicians" of contemporary society were the museum curators' (Deliss, 'Conjuring tricks', p.53).

The artistry of the curator has been foregrounded over the course of the last century or so as a result of the increasing care devoted to the visual effect produced by the display of works of art within the gallery space. A sense that display itself has something of the status of a work of art is suggested by the double meaning of the term 'installation', referring, on the one hand, to

<sup>8</sup> It should, however, be pointed out that they sometimes make compromises: for example, if a donor offers a collection to the museum on condition that it is accepted in its entirety. Donors may insist that their collection be displayed together, thereby disrupting the orderly classifications of the museum (as has happened, for example, in the Metropolitan and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris).

the picture 'hang' or arrangement of objects and, on the other, to a type of art work that has developed since the 1960s, which may be site-specific and typically has to be disassembled in order to be moved (see Plates 78 and 79). The curator Germano Celant, for example, notes that 'exhibition installation becomes the new pretender to originality ... [it] is in and of itself a *form of modern work*' (Celant, 'A visual machine', p.373).<sup>9</sup> The artfulness of modern display can produce an intensified aestheticization: careful spacing and lighting isolate works of art for the sake of more concentrated contemplation (as in the 'white cube' type of gallery space discussed in Case Study 1). Alternative strategies of display seek, by contrast, to recontextualize works of art in the world outside the museum. This can mean recreating the material setting in which they might once have been seen (as in the 'country house' style of display discussed in Case Study 8). In the case of exhibitions, it typically involves attempting to evoke their historical context with the help of information panels, documents, photographs, etc. (Plate 64). A recent example of such an exhibition was *Art and Power: Europe of the Dictators* (London, Hayward Gallery, 1995–6), which explored how art fared under the totalitarian regimes, both Fascist and Stalinist, of the period 1930–45.

Nevertheless, the fundamental aim of an art museum is to display works of art for the sake of their aesthetic interest. For contemporary museum critique, the particular significance of the aesthetic approach lies in the way that it seeks to bracket off or 'neutralize' the wider world beyond the museum. 'The alleged innate neutrality of museums and exhibitions', according to Ivan Karp, 'is the very quality that enables them to become instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience' (Karp, 'Culture and representation', p.14).<sup>10</sup> This is also the point underlying Carol Duncan's account of the art museum as 'ritual site'; participation in its seemingly rarefied 'rituals' serves to confirm a particular sense of identity (in terms of class, race, gender, etc.) and thereby reinforces the ideological norms of society. Analysing the Museum of Modern Art in New York (see Case Study 1), for example, she argues that the dominance of male artists and the prominence of female nudes mean that progress through the spaces of the museum produces a 'ritual subject' (or identity) that is gendered masculine (Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, pp.114–15). This type of analysis is problematic (as Duncan acknowledges) in so far as it assumes that museum visitors passively absorb a uniform message rather than actively respond to display in different ways (for an example of a museum that has proved amenable to diverse 'readings', see Case Study 2). However, it does have the value of alerting us to the possible ideological significance of particular displays.

From some critical perspectives, however, all museum display is inherently problematic. For anyone who disputes the validity of the 'aesthetic' as a specialized domain (as, for example, does Bourdieu), display is necessarily

<sup>9</sup> Celant is one of a number of influential international curators; he was the curator of the 1997 Venice Biennale, for example. The essay quoted here was originally published in *documenta vii* in 1982 (for these international exhibitions of contemporary art, see Case Study 4).

<sup>10</sup> Although the point about 'neutrality' is most easily made with reference to art museums, it is not just aesthetics ('experience') that is at issue here but also (as the 'education' reference indicates) the claims made by all museums to be disinterested, objective sources of knowledge.

understood as a form of fetishism.<sup>11</sup> That is to say, by isolating objects for purposes of aesthetic contemplation, it encourages the viewer to project on to them meanings and values that have no real basis in the objects themselves. While the full logic of this argument is unacceptable to anyone who believes that it is possible to make distinctions between objects on purely visual grounds, the concept of fetishism is helpful in so far as it allows us to understand why some forms of display are more problematic than others. A case in point is the now standard practice of placing objects under spotlights in otherwise dimly-lit spaces so that they seem to glow of their own accord, endowing them with an air of mystery and preciousness. The problem here is that this kind of lighting is typically used for ancient and (as Case Study 6 shows) 'primitive' art – in other words, precisely those objects that are most alien to a modern western viewer – and can thus inhibit any engagement with the meanings and values they would have had in their original context. This does not mean that such lighting should not be used but rather, it can be argued, makes it important to ensure that the display as a whole fosters a degree of self-consciousness on the part of viewers about the cultural distance between themselves and the objects on show.<sup>12</sup>

The concept of fetishism also has relevance, however, to the display of western fine art and, in particular, to the Old Master and modern paintings that are the most highly prized objects in our society. Here, it is specifically Karl Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism that applies: the suggestion is that the special value attributed to such paintings serves to obscure or 'mystify' their real condition as commodities in a system of market exchange.<sup>13</sup> Of course, this may seem irrelevant to the present discussion given that the primary function of the museum is to take works of art out of commercial circulation and make them accessible to people who could not afford to buy them. Nevertheless, it can be argued that an awareness of the prices that a work of art *would* fetch *should* it come on the market profoundly informs the experience of display. Consider, for example, Vincent van Gogh's *Irises* (Plate 3), which (temporarily) became the most expensive painting in the world when it was auctioned for just under \$54 million in 1987 (though, in the event, the Australian businessman who bought it proved unable to pay) and now hangs in the world's best endowed museum (no other could afford it). While the unique 'aura' (in Benjamin's term) of *Irises* ostensibly derives from the 'genius' of Van Gogh, the experience of the painting is now inescapably bound up with the fascination of sheer concentrated money. Clearly, this is an extreme case but not a wholly unrepresentative one. Moreover, in so far as the commodity status of art is here being not so much denied as celebrated, it takes on further significance as evidence of the contemporary culture of spectacle.

<sup>11</sup> For a brief discussion of this term, see Case Study 11 in Perry, *Gender and Art* (Book 3 of this series).

<sup>12</sup> The introduction of some element of cultural contrast is presented as the only solution to the problem of displaying other cultures in Karp, 'Culture and representation', pp.18–19. A similar element of self-consciousness about display is also often recommended as a strategy for museums in general; see, for example, Saumarez-Smith, 'Museums, artefacts and meanings', p.20.

<sup>13</sup> The fundamental question here is whether (as Benjamin argued) 'such outmoded concepts as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery' are *wholly* reducible to symptoms of commodity fetishism (Benjamin, 'The work of art', p.212). For a discussion of the relevance of the concept of the commodity to art, see Wood, 'Commodity'. As a related point, it can be noted that the type of lighting discussed in the previous paragraph originated in a retail context as a device for the display of commodities.



**Plate 35** View illustrating problems of display in lower galleries on the right-hand side of the central space in the Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Paul M.R. Maeyaert, Mont de l'Enclus (Orrior), Belgium.



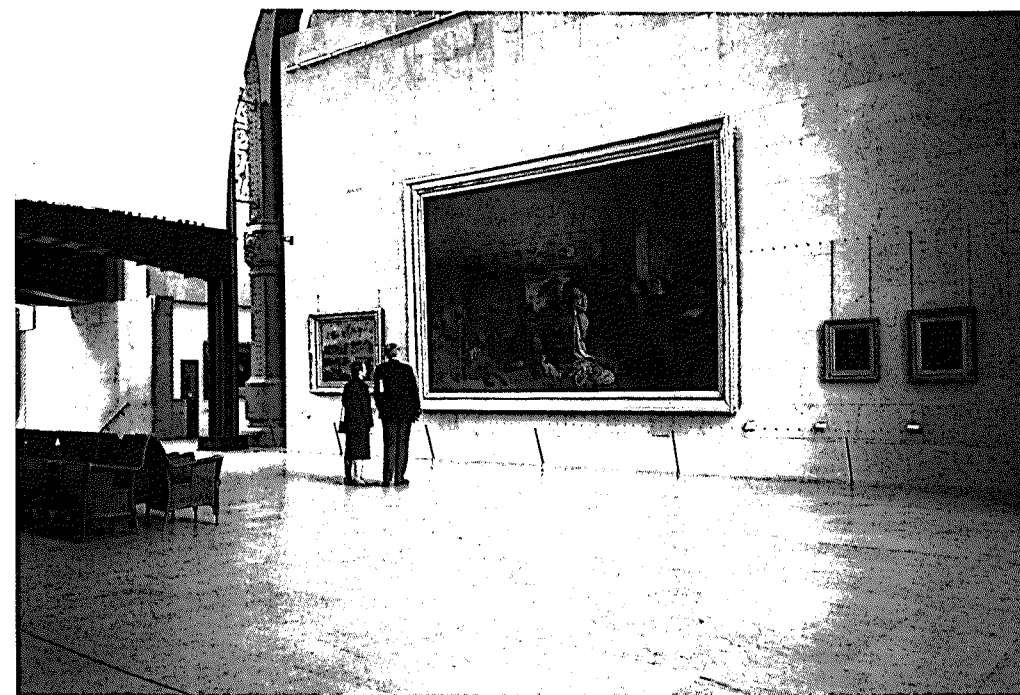
**Plate 36** Former hotel ballroom in the Musée d'Orsay, with paintings by Bouguereau and others on easels. Photo: Paul M.R. Maeyaert, Mont de l'Enclus (Orrior), Belgium.

## Display in the museum

Near the beginning of this case study we noted that some commentators have attacked Orsay for being too historical, too concerned with the social context of art. On the face of it, these remarks are very odd: as we have seen, plans to cover different aspects of nineteenth-century society and culture did not come off. In fact, when they are read in context it becomes clear that what is primarily being criticized is the way that the museum impedes reverent contemplation of the renowned masterpieces of the period, first because of the low standard of display (impressive but distracting design, poor lighting systems) and second because of the presence of paintings by less well-known

artists and of other art forms. The literary historian Stephen Greenblatt, for example, claims that 'the museum remakes a remarkable group of highly individuated geniuses into engaged participants in a vital, immensely productive period in French cultural history ... But what has been sacrificed on the altar of cultural resonance is visual wonder centred on the aesthetic masterpiece' ('Resonance and wonder', p.54). In fact, however, as further analysis of the museum will reveal, the basic principles of display applied to the canonical works at Orsay are actually the same as in many other art museums.

Take, for example, the display of the works of Gustave Courbet (1819–77), the leading avant-garde painter of the mid-nineteenth century, whose works are all grouped together on the lower level (Plate 37). This means that they cannot easily be compared with those of other exponents of the contemporary Realist movement in painting of which he is considered to be the key figure. Moreover, the fact that the space devoted to Courbet opens off the so-called nave of the museum, about half-way along on the left, endows it with something of the character of a side chapel or transept in a church. Without taking the analogy too seriously, it can be argued that this serves to promote an attitude of reverence towards one of the 'saints' of the established canon of nineteenth-century art. Elsewhere at Orsay, major artists such as Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) are similarly allotted their own gallery, thereby isolating their work from that of their contemporaries. This type of display, often termed chapel-like, is typically employed in modern art museums as well as in the Metropolitan's nineteenth-century galleries, many of which are dedicated to a single artist. Its overall effect is to reinforce a highly traditional conception of art history made up of individual geniuses whose unique creativity owes nothing to the world in which they lived.



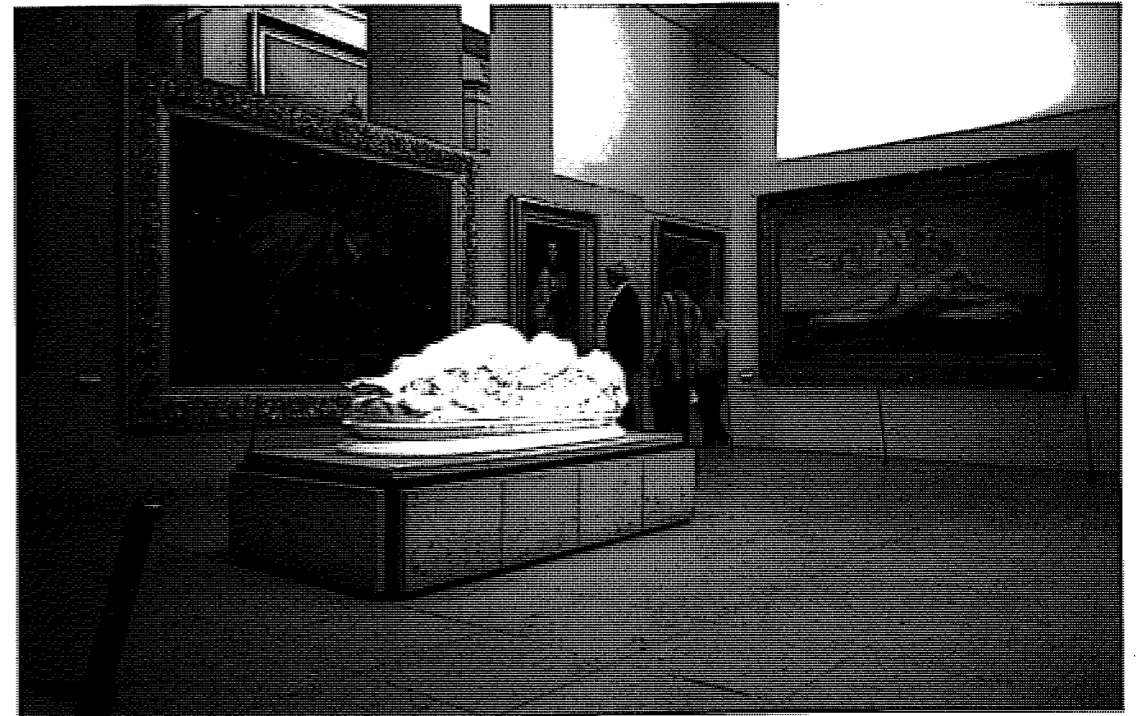
**Plate 37** The Courbet 'transept' in the Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Tim Benton.

The display is also conventionally chronological, which serves to uphold a notion of artistic development through time. (In this respect it conforms to the model of earlier art museums, not that of the non-linear postmodern museum.) Thus, Courbet is followed by Édouard Manet (1832–83), the next major figure in the modernist canon, whose early work hangs near by on the same side of the nave. The complexities of Orsay's layout mean, however, that the connection is not as clear as it is in the Metropolitan where, at the time of the reopening of the nineteenth-century galleries, it was possible to look from Manet's dressed, standing *Woman with a Parrot* towards Courbet's naked, reclining one (Plate 32).<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Orsay's policy of displaying academic and avant-garde art separately (also followed in the Metropolitan) means that Manet's famous *Olympia* (Plate 38) hangs on the opposite side of the nave from *The Birth of Venus* (Plate 39) by Alexandre Cabanel (1823–89). It has long been something of an art-historical cliché to contrast Manet's depiction of a naked prostitute, which scandalized its original viewers, with Cabanel's conventionally titillating mythological nude, which was bought by the Emperor Napoleon III himself. The historical justification for doing so is that both works were shown at the great art exhibition of the period, the Paris Salon, in 1865 and 1863 respectively. Undoubtedly, a thorough-going 'revisionist' display would hang them together even though the Manet/Cabanel contrast exemplifies the over-simplistic modernist polarization

**Plate 38**  
Édouard Manet,  
*Olympia*, 1863,  
oil on canvas,  
130 x 190 cm,  
Musée d'Orsay,  
Paris.  
Photo: Copyright  
R.M.N./Gérard  
Blot.



<sup>12</sup> The label noted that 'this picture, for which Victorine Meurent posed in 1866, was probably Manet's answer to Courbet's *Woman with a Parrot*, exhibited in the Salon of 1866' (quoted in Bal, 'The talking museum', p.105). The display ignored another possible connection, between Courbet's painting and Cabanel's *Birth of Venus* (Plate 39), of which the Metropolitan owns another version.



**Plate 39** Alexandre Cabanel, *The Birth of Venus*, 1863, oil on canvas, 130 x 225 cm, *in situ* (far right) in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Tim Benton.

between 'good' avant-garde and 'bad' academic art. In refusing to do so, Orsay affirms that the display functions to uphold the established aesthetic hierarchy rather than to foster understanding of the complexities of the history of art.

More fundamentally, the mode of display adopted at Orsay and elsewhere means that *Olympia* or any other canonical painting of a female nude is presented primarily as an example of the work of an individual, almost invariably male, artist. From a feminist perspective, we may regret the failure of the museum to take account of broader issues of gender and power, in relation to authorship and representation, which have informed art-historical discussion of nineteenth-century French painting in recent years.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, it is possible to note that paintings of the nude can reveal something fundamental about the nature of display in art museums. In this respect, Courbet's *Origin of the World* (Plate 40), which entered the museum's collection in 1995, is an especially pertinent example. On the one hand, its acquisition can be hailed as bringing to light a key work by a great artist which had long been thought lost. On the other, the pornographic character of the image might be considered highly offensive to women and, as such, its public display in the museum could be deplored. The fact remains that *The Origin of the World* could hardly be shown in any other more or less public setting, such as an office or a hospital, where it would be seen by people who had no choice in the matter. The museum, as a space dedicated to display to which visitors come specifically to look at works of art, neutralizes the subject-matter

<sup>13</sup> On this subject see the Introduction to Perry, *Gender and Art* (Book 3 of this series).



**Plate 40** Gustave Courbet, *The Origin of the World*, 1866, oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N. / H. Lewandowski.

of Courbet's painting and foregrounds its aesthetic dimension.<sup>14</sup> More generally, we may conclude that the museum continues to function to uphold the specialness of art as a category completely separate from everyday life.

### The museum as spectacle

As was noted above, Orsay has proved a great popular attraction. What draws the public in large numbers is, above all, the presence of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings. One of the major reasons for establishing the museum in the first place was the inadequacy of the existing Jeu de Paume Museum (which formerly housed them) to cope with the ever-increasing crowds. The unique appeal of the modernist canon of French nineteenth-century art was confirmed when the attendance levels rose by more than 25 per cent in 1993 on the occasion of Orsay's showing of French paintings from the Barnes Foundation.<sup>15</sup> Although temporary exhibitions attract a largely Parisian audience, the majority of visitors to the museum are foreign tourists: over 70 per cent of its public are there for the first time. Many of these are likely to follow the set route around the museum, starting with the pre-1870 works on the lower level, though no doubt quite a few also make straight for the top floor. Some of the least frequented spaces are the middle-level galleries containing post-1870 works that fall outside the modernist canon (including non-French art), though whether this is because the mostly first-time visitors are exhausted before they get this far or because paintings such as *Cain* (Plate 41) by Fernand Cormon (1845–1924) remain devoid of interest or pleasure for present-day viewers should perhaps be left open.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, this statement assumes that visitors to the museum are not simply willing to view images they see as art, but also have the knowledge and skills needed to perceive the stylistic aspects of the work. The neutralization process does not function for all viewers: this much is apparent from the many attacks made on paintings of the nude. For a discussion of the cultural status of the nude in art, see Nead, *The Female Nude*.

<sup>15</sup> On this and other comparable exhibitions, see Case Study 5.



**Plate 41** Fernand Cormon, *Cain*, 1880, oil on canvas, 380 x 700 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Copyright R.M.N.

Above all, of course, Orsay is undoubtedly a spectacular place to visit. At the time of its opening, different commentators offered contrasting evaluations of this aspect of the museum. Some saw it as rivalling the works of art for the visitors' attention. Two writers reported that the most popular display appeared to be the model of the Paris Opera (completed 1875) and its *quartier* (district) installed under a transparent floor. They described it as 'very like the whole museum, a spectacle which demands viewing of and for itself' (House, 'Orsay observed', p.73) and as 'something of a high culture Disneyland', marking the transition from art to 'mindless forms of mass entertainment' (Mainardi, 'Postmodern history at the Musée d'Orsay', p.36). However, Orsay was also hailed as 'a dazzling, highly articulated fusion of past and present, station and museum, observer and art work ... a kind of postmodernist *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art], providing a transmedia architectural spectacle (in the best sense of the word) of a kind not seen in Paris (apart from the International Expositions [Universal Exhibitions]) since the opening of Garnier's Opera in 1875' (Marvin Trachtenberg in 'The Musée d'Orsay: a symposium', p.105).<sup>16</sup> The terms 'postmodern' and 'spectacle', allusions to Disney theme parks and the Universal Exhibitions, were all combined in Rosenblum's similarly rapturous account of the museum in the same forum.

On the basis of these accounts, both positive and negative, we can suggest that the traditional model of the art museum as an exclusive, quasi-sacred space has been displaced at Orsay (at least in the central space created out of the former train shed) by a new populist model of the museum as spectacle. As such, it can be associated with other, commercial environments which make use of spectacular architectural imagery, such as the Disney theme parks,

<sup>16</sup> *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a term coined by the composer Richard Wagner (1813–83), who aspired to turn opera into the ultimate artistic experience, combining music, painting and poetry.

which are often taken to be exemplary of postmodernism. The combination of up-to-date technology and nostalgic make-believe that is characteristic of such sites of visual consumption can also be traced back to the Universal Exhibitions. These associations make it possible to applaud Orsay as a form of postmodern spectacle which succeeds (even if only inadvertently) in evoking something of the larger culture of the nineteenth century. From a more critical perspective, it speaks rather of a continuing deployment of spectacle as a form of social control; the building of the Paris Opera formed part of the massive city redevelopment project of Napoleon III that 'raised many of the same questions raised today by urban renewal, slum clearance and gentrification' (Mainardi, 'Postmodern history at the Musée d'Orsay', p.36). Not just Orsay, it can be argued, but central Paris itself functions today primarily as a glossy, nostalgic tourist attraction from which the poor of the region are effectively excluded.<sup>17</sup>

Arguably, Orsay is above all significant for its expansion of the canon of nineteenth-century art, on the one hand, and its immense appeal to a mass public, on the other. In neither case, however, does it appear that the museum has brought about any marked revision of existing hierarchies. As we have seen, implicit within the display is a continuing allegiance to the modernist canon of aesthetic value, while most of the visitors are tourists and thus, by definition, at least modestly affluent.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, everything suggests that Orsay's great attraction for them is based on the presence of the acknowledged masterpieces of Impressionism. It follows that the notion that the canon of nineteenth-century art has been decisively revised as part of a broad cultural shift towards postmodernism needs to be treated with some caution. A case in point is Robert Rosenblum's claim that the ubiquity of photography has helped to bring about a new appreciation of academic painters who would formerly have been dismissed as 'worthless artists who chose brushless, glossy, mechanical truth over personal facture and significant form' (Rosenblum, *Paintings in the Musée d'Orsay*, p.17).<sup>19</sup> Academic paintings have certainly been popularized through photographic reproduction (you can even buy a fridge magnet of Bouguereau's *Venus*, complete with trendy clothes to dress her in), but this does not necessarily mean that their status as art has been enhanced. The fact that people do not apparently go to the museum in order to see paintings of this kind suggests that they remain non-canonical. Rather than being singled out as works of art worthy of reverent contemplation, they form part of the overall spectacle of Orsay.

<sup>17</sup> For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Case Study 7.

<sup>18</sup> However, it is at the very least debatable whether the broadly middle-class public that Orsay and other art museums attract today can be defined as an élite (as Bourdieu would have it) in any meaningful sense of the term. A major difference between the 1960s (when Bourdieu did his research) and today is the much greater provision of visitor services aimed at promoting access; for those at Orsay, see Schneider, *Creating the Musée d'Orsay*, pp.84–7 (this informative book appeared after the present study was completed).

<sup>19</sup> This can be related to more general claims about the saturation of contemporary society by photographic imagery as one of the prime features of postmodern society; see Introduction. The sharp contours and smooth surfaces of many academic paintings undoubtedly lend themselves to reproduction: with the Bouguereau fridge magnet mentioned below, for example, *Venus* is cut out of her setting and reproduced alone.

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### CASE STUDY 3

## The Sainsbury Wing and beyond: the National Gallery today

EMMA BARKER AND ANABEL THOMAS

### Introduction

Since its foundation in 1824 the National Gallery has existed to bring the best possible pictures to the widest possible public.

(*National Gallery Report*, 1993-94, p.5)

In the previous two case studies we have been concerned primarily with the foundation of new museums. In this case study, by contrast, our aim is to explore the various ways in which the National Gallery currently seeks to fulfil its historical commitments or, to put it another way, how an art museum established in the early nineteenth century has adapted to the very different world of today. On the one hand, we will examine some of the more recent additions to the collection and assess the extent to which it can now be said to present a revised view of the canon of Old Master painting. On the other, we will consider the steps that have been taken in order to facilitate public access to the collection and, more broadly, to promote enjoyment and understanding of works of art. An issue of general relevance to this case study is the question of authenticity; underlying the aim of making great art accessible to everyone is the assumption that the gallery functions to allow people to see 'the real thing'.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, as we will see, recent modifications testify to a recognition that the visitor's experience will inevitably be coloured by the method of display and the architectural setting. To start with, therefore, we will consider its most recent extension, the Sainsbury Wing, which opened in 1991.

### The Sainsbury Wing

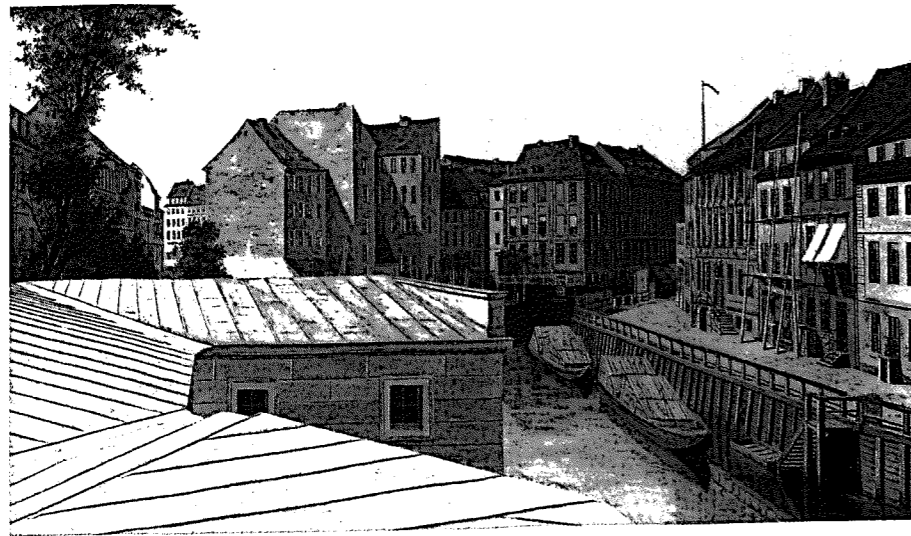
The completion of this last major addition to the National Gallery is the final chapter in a long story of debate, indecision, official prevarication and uncertainty.

(*Amery, A Celebration of Art and Architecture*, p.18)

Although the National Gallery has always had to contend with official reluctance to spend public money on the arts, previous building work had been financed by the government. However, the proposed extension on the 'Hampton site' immediately to the west of the gallery, acquired for the purpose in 1959, finally became a reality only as a result of an endowment from

<sup>1</sup> In this context 'the real thing' may be taken to mean an authentically historical work of art (as opposed to a modern fake), a genuine work by a renowned artist (as opposed to one by an associate or other contemporary of the artist), or a work preserved in a condition that represents some kind of truth about the essential identity of the object (this can mean either returning it to what is believed to be its original appearance or respecting the changes that the work of art has undergone over time). This case study will touch on the second of these aspects and consider the third more fully.

**Plate 55** Eduard Gaertner, *The Friedrichsgracht, Berlin*, probably 1830s, oil on paper laid down on board, 26 x 45 cm, National Gallery, London. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London.



(1801–77). Their acquisition, in 1993 and 1987 respectively, doubtless represents a certain modification of the existing canon but can hardly be said to reflect a major shift of taste. They can be aligned, on the one hand, with a long-standing European tradition of topographical painting and, on the other, with an equally familiar modernist preference for formal clarity and pictorial restraint. A further point to be noted here (for reasons that will become clear below) is that these pictures, one by a British and the other by a German artist, hang in the same room in the East Wing of the National Gallery.

## Displaying the collection

Over the last eight years, the London National Gallery has been sumptuously redecorated in a style more splendid than at any other time in its history.

(*Palaces of Art*, p.64)

The programme of redecoration being carried out at the National Gallery since the mid-1980s has revealed the splendours of the main building which had been hidden from view for several decades. Partitions and false ceilings have been swept away, original gilding restored, walls rehung with damask, and drab carpets given way to gleaming wooden floors. The barrel-vaulted Duveen Room, for example, which had been divided up into low-ceilinged spaces for the display of small Dutch pictures, now provides an opulent setting for seventeenth-century Flemish painting (Plate 56). It has also acquired state-of-the-art lighting systems and air-conditioning. All this has been made possible by an anonymous benefactor, while similar alterations elsewhere in the building have also relied on private funding. Several galleries now bear the names of sponsors; for example, one housing seventeenth-century Parisian painting is called the Yves Saint Laurent Room (Plate 57). This space forms part of the northern extension, which was only built in the early 1970s but completely redesigned in the late 1990s; poorly proportioned, dark rooms with no distinguishing features have been replaced by spacious, well-lit galleries with a traditional architectural character (notice the marble trim and coved ceiling).



**Plate 56** Duveen Room, National Gallery, London. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London.



**Plate 57** Yves Saint Laurent Room, National Gallery, London. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London.

Broadly speaking, the redecoration of the National Gallery represents a return to tradition in the display of public art collections.<sup>11</sup> As the recent redesign of the North Wing suggests, this does not simply involve restoration of historic interiors to the way they used to be. Rather, it is predicated on a new concern for and appreciation of the ways in which the setting affects the experience of visitors. After World War II, imposing museum architecture tended to be covered up in the belief that it was not only a distraction but also had an off-putting élitist character. Thus, the typical wall-covering in galleries at the time was rough hessian rather than rich damask. Today, by contrast, the National Gallery seeks to rediscover its own past splendours in order to display canonical masterpieces in an appropriately grand manner and to enhance the visitors' enjoyment of them. This does not mean that democratizing art has become less of a priority (as we shall see), but rather that the gallery has developed a heightened self-consciousness about itself as an institution with a history, not just a collection of pictures. In this respect, this new historicizing approach to display can be aligned with the recent proliferation of writing about the history, theory and practice of museums (of which this book forms part).

One of the aspects of display to which such writing has drawn attention is the way that the arrangement of works of art (or indeed any object) in a museum necessarily involves imposing a certain order and meaning upon them. 'All museums are exercises in classification', Ludmilla Jordanova argues ('Objects of knowledge', p.23). In the case of the National Gallery, there has recently been a revision of the principles underlying the presentation of the collection. Since 1991 the traditional display of pictures by national school has been replaced by a new division into four broad historical periods. The Sainsbury Wing, for example, contains paintings from 1260 to 1510, with Italian, Netherlandish and German pictures hanging in close proximity (though usually still in separate spaces). When it opened, it could be seen to give greater prominence to the early northern schools, which had previously languished in the dreary North Wing, far from the main entrance. One critic even declared that, by challenging the old dominance of the Italian school, 'the new hang at the Sainsbury Wing radically rewrites the history of art' (Richard Dorment, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 1991). While the Italian paintings still dominate numerically and also dictate the architectural character of the Sainsbury Wing, the period-based display enables new connections to be made between schools. Thus, for example, *St Jerome* can be compared to contemporary painting from Italy which Dürer had just visited and the Flemish influence on Bermejo's *St Michael* can be effectively demonstrated.

As a result of these shifts, the National Gallery now offers a chronological route through the collection, starting with the Sainsbury Wing and ending in the East Wing. From a critical perspective, this could be seen as an authoritarian approach, forcing visitors to view every painting as a canonical example of the art of a particular period. In practice, however, they do not have to follow this curatorial classification of the collection but can move around the gallery as they please. Many are likely to make straight for their

<sup>11</sup> See Case Study 8 for other galleries that have adopted a similar approach to display. It should, however, be noted that unlike the National Gallery of Scotland (for example), the London gallery almost without exception displays paintings in a single row so as to avoid problems of visibility.

personal favourites (such as the perennially popular Impressionist paintings in the East Wing). According to MacGregor, people need a clear intellectual framework in order to make their own decisions; the gallery's job is 'to enable the public to move around the past with confidence. The confidence they need is that there are fixed points, individuals objects which have been identified, dated, established; and various routes through those fixed points which they can follow' (MacGregor, 'Scholarship and the public', p.193). For this reason, the policy is that paintings should stay in the same place as much as possible so that visitors know where to find them (the gallery thus assumes a preponderance of regular visitors, a point we shall return to below). Indeed, the Sainsbury Wing was built with certain spaces designed for specific works of art, assuming a fixed canon of value and leaving relatively little room for manoeuvre; for example, *The Baptism of Christ* by Piero della Francesca (c.1415/20–92) forms the centrepiece of a chapel-like gallery dedicated to this artist, commonly revered as one of the greatest masters of the fifteenth century (Plate 58). By contrast, paintings thought to be of lesser quality hang on the lower floor, many of them crammed together on screens. The public is thus offered a two-tiered view of the art of the past, separating off canonical art from more obscure works.<sup>12</sup>

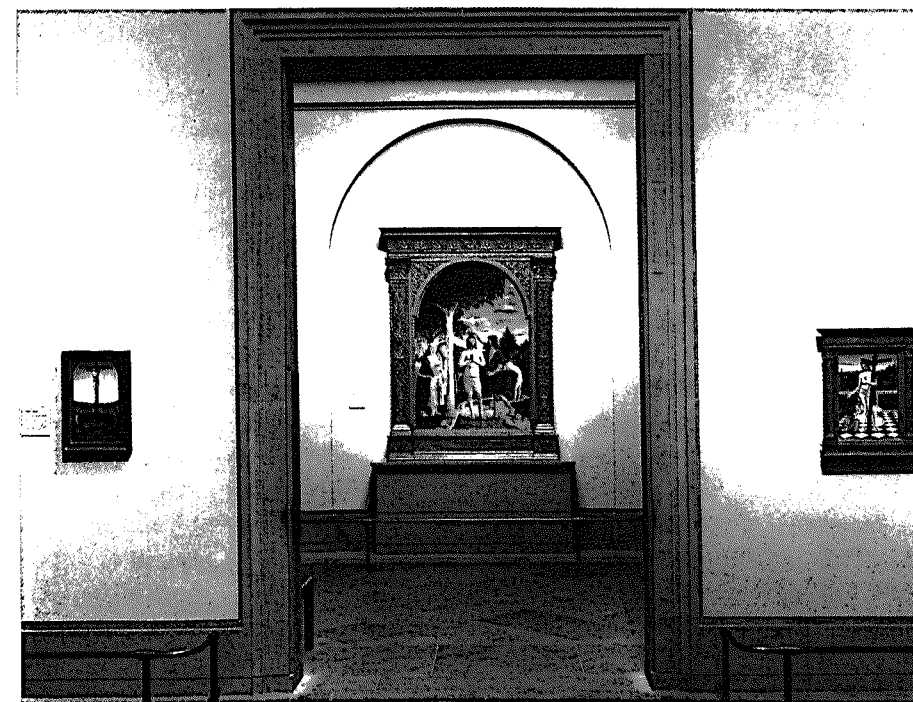


Plate 58 Piero della Francesca, *The Baptism of Christ* (in situ), National Gallery, London. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London.

<sup>12</sup> However, this does at least mean that these works are not simply relegated to the storeroom. Moreover, the division is not absolutely hard and fast – there is some movement between floors. After *The Young Michelangelo* exhibition discussed below, for example, two small paintings by Domenico Ghirlandaio (to whom Michelangelo is believed to have been apprenticed) and his brother David which took a prominent role in the exhibition were not returned to their previous obscurity but hung in the Sainsbury Wing.

## The culture of exhibitions

By the 1980s Britain could be said to have produced a 'culture' of contemporary exhibitions, something that Paris had had from the turn of the century and New York achieved in the 1950s. The range of exhibitions is fed by the much increased numbers of students at the many art colleges in the London area and by the growth of non-specialist audiences for whom looking at contemporary art is one of a range of available leisure activities. In any week now in London, *Time Out* magazine will list at least 90 venues showing contemporary art, ranging from major institutions with their own collections like the Tate Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery, to the larger venues dedicated to temporary loan exhibitions like the Hayward and the Barbican, to the medium-scale public galleries like the Whitechapel, the Serpentine, the ICA, the South London Gallery and Camden Arts Centre, to the many commercial galleries featuring exhibitions of new work and the temporary and less formal spaces often organized by artists themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The exhibitions staged at these venues vary in format. Most obviously, there is the standard one-person show, which might be a display of an artist's recent work in one of the smaller galleries or, in the case of an established figure, a major retrospective at the Tate or the Hayward Gallery. Group exhibitions may have a unifying theme or, at the other extreme, be selected by open submission (as with the annual Whitechapel Open). There are constant performances, events, discussions, a number of serious journals debating the full range of contemporary art (such as *Art Monthly*, founded in 1976, and *Frieze*, founded in 1991), regular coverage in the broadsheet newspapers, a diverse array of art prizes (from the Tate-administered Turner Prize set up in 1984, which is offered for the best contribution by a British artist under 50, to the Jerwood Painting Prize, which was established by a private charitable foundation in 1993), and a regular London Contemporary Art Fair. Although the contemporary art scene is centred on London, there are also important exhibitions and events in cities such as Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle and Brighton.

This activity needs to be understood in terms of the relationship between exhibitions and their various purposes, audiences and locations. The commercial gallery dealer selects artists with sales in mind and chooses a building with clients in mind, the question of where they will travel being critical. Artists running their own space will show work by other artists who are sympathetic to their own philosophy and choose a space on the basis of lowest cost and proximity to where they work, with studio and exhibiting space often overlapping. In London the smartest commercial galleries have traditionally been located in the West End and Mayfair, an area associated with the sale of luxury goods. Galleries can now be found in the East End and Hackney, which have become the areas where artists live and work since they are most likely to provide low-rental space for their use. A converted paint factory in St John's Wood (a smart residential area) houses the Saatchi Gallery (opened in 1985), which shows changing groups of works from Charles Saatchi's very extensive collection of contemporary art. This highly influential gallery creates the impression of being not so much a private enterprise as a public institution.

<sup>9</sup> The Whitechapel Art Gallery and the South London Gallery originated in attempts by late nineteenth-century philanthropists to bring art to the working classes: on these developments, see Case Study 8 in Perry and Cunningham, *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art* (Book 1 of this series). A descriptive list of exhibition venues in London and beyond can be found in Buck, *Moving Targets*.

The emergence of a 'culture of exhibitions' corresponds to the post-war commercial and popular success of British artists. From an older generation including David Hockney and Anthony Caro, to a middle generation of artists such as Richard Deacon and Antony Gormley, to a younger generation whose best-known representatives are Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread, their works are exhibited and purchased around the world.<sup>10</sup> This is often with the official support of the British Council, which plays an influential role through the exhibitions that it organizes abroad.<sup>11</sup> Foreign promotion often starts through the initiative of private galleries, hoping to sell the work on to collectors or museums, or through the influence of collectors themselves. While any artist's success will owe a great deal to the efforts of dealers and curators working on their behalf, the publicity around the current generation of yBas (young British artists) makes much of the fact that they helped launch their own careers through their skills of self-promotion.<sup>12</sup>

The same generation received its most high-profile London showing to date with *Sensation* at the Royal Academy of Arts in the autumn of 1997, the contents of which were selected entirely from the collection of Charles Saatchi (Plates 73 and 74). The artists' apparent obsession with death and sex (and above all the inclusion of Marcus Harvey's painting based on a notorious

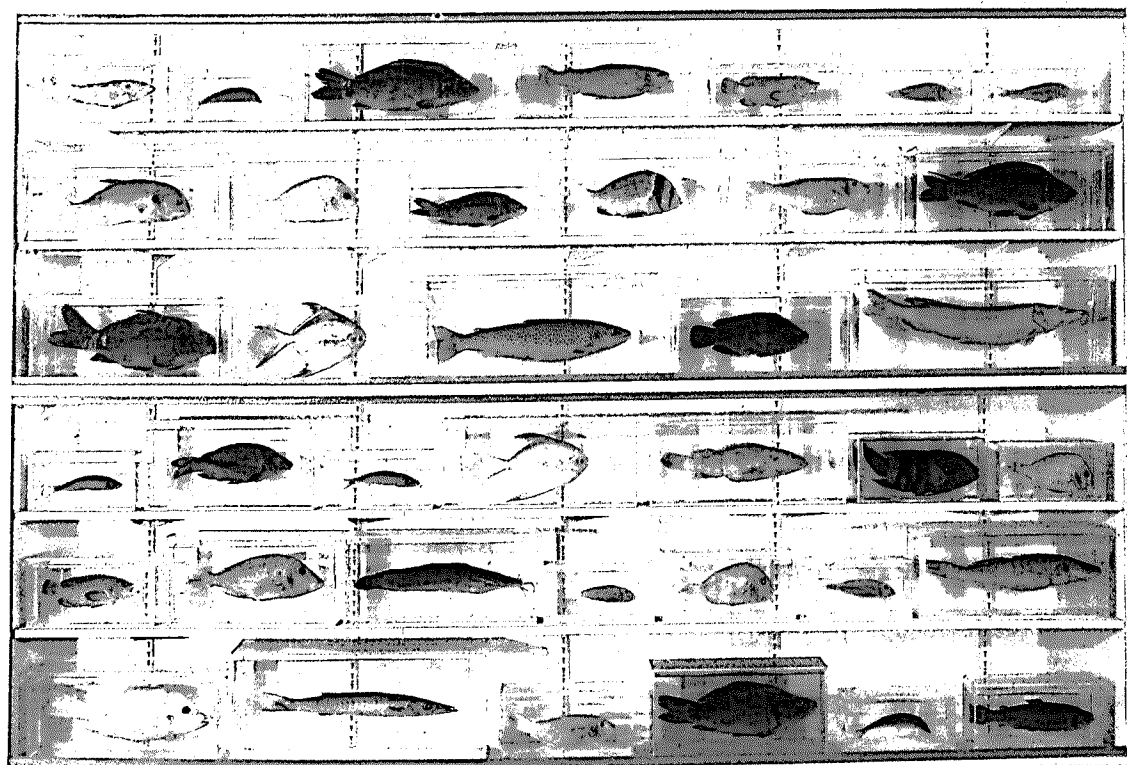


Plate 73  
Installation view of *Sensation* exhibition, looking towards Marcus Harvey's *Myra* and with Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years* on the left, 1997, Royal Academy of Arts, London. Photo: courtesy of The Saatchi Gallery, London/ © Stephen White.

<sup>10</sup> Both Deacon and Gormley belong to the generation dubbed 'New British Sculpture' when it came to prominence in the early 1980s. Deacon won the Turner Prize in 1987 and Gormley in 1994. Whiteread and Hirst also won the Turner Prize in 1993 and 1995 respectively.

<sup>11</sup> The British Council (founded in 1934) is the official body responsible for promoting cultural exchange between the United Kingdom and other countries.

<sup>12</sup> In particular, the exhibition *Freeze*, organized by Damien Hirst and others in a disused Port of London Authority building in 1988, 'occupies a mythical place in the written and verbal history of recent British art' (*Sensation*, p.13).



**Plate 74** Damien Hirst, *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding*, 1991, MDF, melamine, wood, steel, glass, perspex cases, fish, 5% formaldehyde solution, 183 x 274 x 31 cm, The Saatchi Gallery, London. Photo: Anthony Oliver, London.

photograph of the child murderer Myra Hindley) aroused a storm of controversy, resulting in the resignation of four Royal Academicians. Was this a genuine example of the avant-garde subverting conventional values, or did it simply demonstrate that exhibiting the yBas in this 'establishment' venue was a stage-managed piece of theatre to gain media attention? What is certain is that *Sensation* received large numbers of visitors (285,737 in all) and provided a much needed boost to the Royal Academy's finances.<sup>13</sup>

While the yBas seem a distinctly British phenomenon, the way that some of them have been singled out for special attention can be understood in terms of the priorities of the international art system. The commercial network is reinforced through the most influential art magazines (such as the New York-based *Artforum*), which contain reviews of exhibitions around the world, filtering artistic activity to concentrate on artists whose work is perceived to fit an 'international' agenda. The exchange of ideas has been speeded up by the development of cheap air-fares since the 1960s, which facilitates travel by the artists, curators, dealers and critics who take part in this 'international' system (on the limits of this internationalism, see below).

<sup>13</sup> On the financial implications of successful exhibitions for the institutions that stage them, see the following case study.

**On the basis of the above account, what specific features and underlying factors can you suggest to explain the expanded showing of contemporary art in London?**

### Discussion

A solid institutional infrastructure for the arts is provided by the art colleges, public galleries and organizations such as the Arts Council and the British Council. At the same time, there seems to be plenty of flexibility as, for example, in the emergence of informal, artist-run spaces and the way that Charles Saatchi's private collection has been able to take on a quasi-public role. The emergence of a 'culture of exhibitions' is connected more widely to the growth of a service economy geared to the provision of leisure facilities and, we may assume, to a higher demand from buyers (though Saatchi is obviously an unrepresentative case). The artists' works and achievements have also generated these developments, although some commentators believe that they may simply be catering to a commercially inspired demand for novelty and a media-oriented taste for notoriety and sensationalism.

Looking at the contemporary situation in historical perspective, the most crucial long-term development is the loss of a single system of judgement, such as the Royal Academy broadly provided for much of the nineteenth century. Today, by contrast, the position of artists, their status and reputation have to be charted through a more diverse set of institutions. Therefore, the increasing number of exhibition venues, both private and public, despite differing aims and approaches, are the common ground through which collectors, critics and curators are connected. Exhibitions are central to the economic and social system within which all art is produced, distributed and debated.

### Exhibitions and value

We will now examine in more detail the role of exhibitions in establishing the value of contemporary art. Works of art can be considered to have two kinds of value: use value and exchange value, a distinction formulated by Karl Marx with reference to the nature of the commodity in the capitalist system. Art differs from literature or film in having no immediate mass market (where the price is fixed for identical and mass-produced versions of the same object or experience); it depends very largely on the production of individual, unique works. While some works of art circulate widely in the form of reproductions, these cost far less and serve a primarily decorative function. Arguably, one of the most important functions of contemporary art is that it may promote critical or even moral discussion among its viewers. This *use*, while dependent on the nature of the art itself, is linked both to commentary, to professional critical assessments, and to the setting in which it is seen, to the institutional context of gallery and museum exhibitions in which works of art are not simply displayed but also accompanied by programmes of talks and seminars.

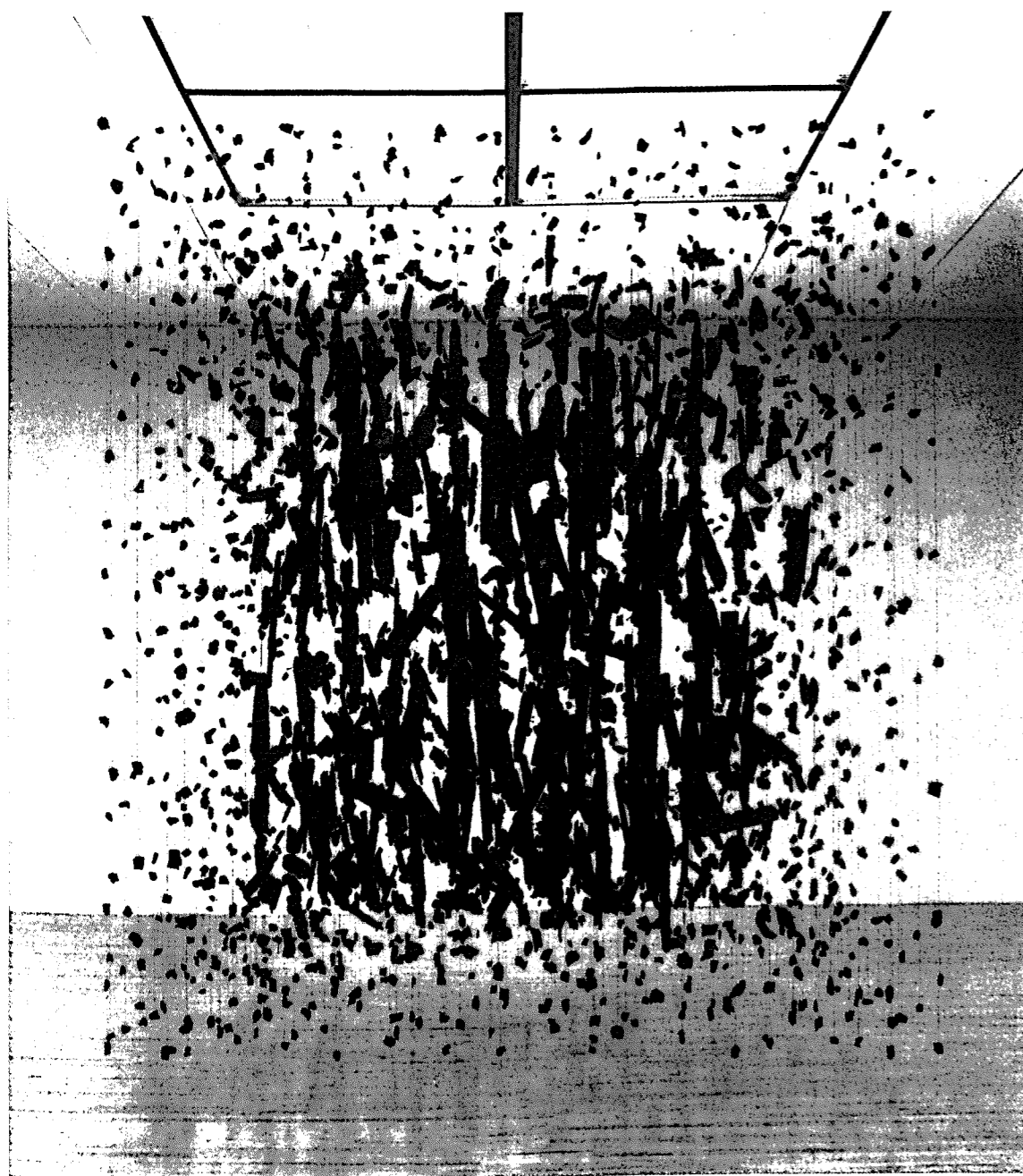


Plate 79 Cornelia Parker, *Mass (Colder Darker Matter)*, 1997, charcoal retrieved from a US church struck by lightning, 366 x 320 x 320 cm, at the exhibition of short-listed artists for the Turner Prize, Tate Gallery, London. Photo: Marcus Leith/Mark Heathcote. Courtesy of the artist and the Frith Street Gallery, London.

## International exhibitions and biennials

Several of the large international biennials such as those in Venice, Sydney or São Paulo, together with international exhibitions such as *documenta*, can have a very considerable impact on an artist's reputation and influence. As noted above, biennials sometimes involve a competition, although the art world provides its own constantly competitive system in the market without having much need for official prize-giving. While its internationalism is largely confined to Europe, North America, and some Pacific rim countries such as Japan and Australia, the boundaries are not entirely fixed, and exhibitions are one of the most visible determinants for cultural change.

For many years, for example, the Venice Biennale seemed like a fixed and selective map of the world, with the national pavilions in which each country exhibits its own artists set in the rather formal layout of the public gardens. Indeed it took Australia more than a decade to gain agreement and a site for its own pavilion. In 1993, however, the number of countries represented in the Venice Biennale was expanded, albeit in the form of add-on East and South African, Irish and Turkish delegations (that is, without their own pavilions). The choice of 'cultural nomadism' as the Biennale theme reinforced the decision of a small number of countries to select artists for their pavilions whose hybrid citizen status put into question definitions based on a nationalistic agenda. Even before the Biennale theme was proposed, Austria's curator acknowledged its complex cultural identity by selecting three artists, only one of whom was Austrian.

International exhibitions usually function to suppress the power relations between countries and cultures. However, a crucial strand of recent curatorial debate has highlighted the issue of cultural identity and national stereotyping. The assumptions of most western museums and galleries that the artists of Europe and North America are those of the greatest interest have been challenged over several years. Those artists who have crossed borders themselves, critics and magazines broadening debate, and the struggles for recognition and self-determination by the indigenous artists of the American and Australian continents have all been influential. A few high-profile international exhibitions have also questioned cultural assumptions, drawing attention to art which might differ in materials or forms of construction. *Les Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris, 1989), for example, controversially endeavoured to realign the prevailing internationalism by mixing 50 artists from the 'centre' with 50 from 'peripheral' positions (Plate 66). As Gavin Jantjes put it soon after:

*Les Magiciens de la Terre* laid open the Western/Eurocentric consciousness like a surgeon dissecting his own body without an anaesthetic. It revealed that the Eurocentric gaze has distinct and daunting problems when fixed upon the 'cultural other', its achievements and methodologies. To imply that equality in the cultural arena is signified by everyone exhibiting together is both illusionistic and historically unsound.

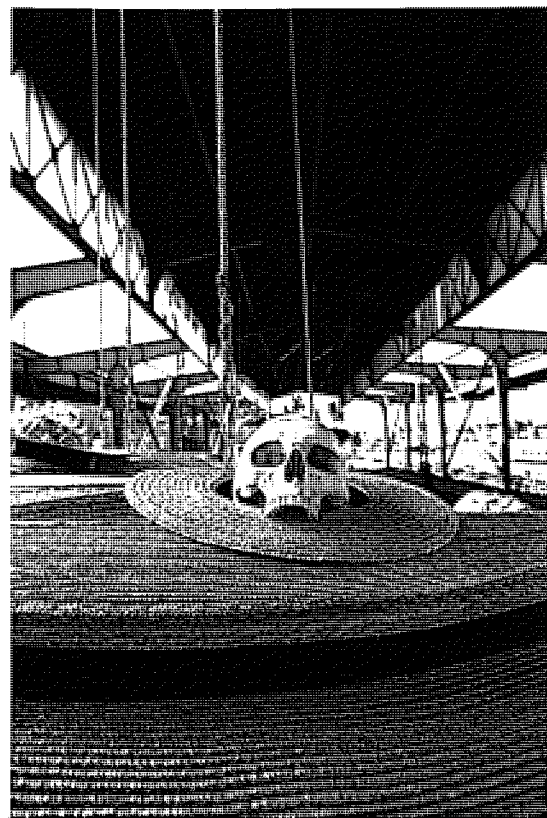
(Quoted in Ferguson *et al.*, 'Mapping international exhibitions', p.37)<sup>17</sup>

The influential role played by powerful curators who select the themes and artists for international exhibitions tends to work against any decisive break with established practice. They bring their own agenda to the task and may

<sup>17</sup> For further discussion of this exhibition, see Case Study 6.

be unconcerned with what others see as the pressing issues in contemporary art; the director of the 1995 Venice Biennale, Jean Clair (director of the Picasso Museum in Paris), was widely criticized for focusing on figurative art, for example. The *documenta* series has reflected the obsessions of successive directors but still addresses current artistic issues. The most prestigious of the international exhibitions, it is now visited by around a million people during its 100 days, an audience which comes from across Europe and beyond. Critical reactions (and images) are taken back across the world to join debates about contemporary art in colleges, galleries and museums elsewhere.

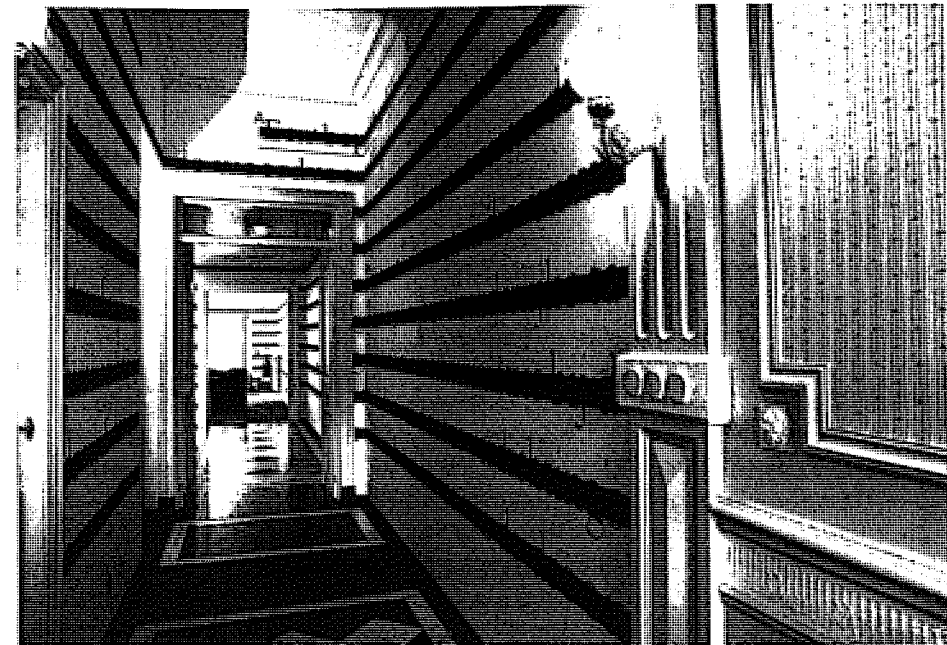
Catherine David, selected as the director for *documenta x* in 1997 (and the first woman to direct one of the series), sought to modify the way the exhibition was created and understood. Instead of using the large and magnificent park at the lower end of Kassel, the exhibition was moved up to the railway station, the symbolic site of transition and immigration (Plate 80). The conventional museum spaces were still used, but the works on display within them had a strong bias towards installation, film and video as opposed to painting or sculpture. An Internet site, a set of public discussions, and the catalogue also made up a significant part of the whole exhibition. A relatively high proportion of non-western artists were included, but the real priority seemed to be to reject the notion of art as spectacle and give space to a programme of self-consciously critical art. In so doing, it looked back to the *documentas* of 1968 and 1972 (prior to what were perceived as more market-influenced exhibitions in 1982 and 1986). An exhibition series which had originally been formed with a vision of social reconstruction was reversed to emphasize social fragmentation and contemporary social crisis. The modernist belief that art might supply a unifying philosophical purpose no longer applied.



**Plate 80** Sculpture and performance by TUNGA at Kassel Railway Station, *documenta x*, 1997. Photo: Richard Kasiewicz, courtesy of the *documenta* archive, Kassel.

Determined that *documenta x* should not be (as she termed it) a bazaar, a market place, David refused to give the press an advance list of the artists to be selected for the 1997 exhibition. It has become a matter of immense importance to dealers that 'their' artists should be included in *documenta*, with the result that enormous, if indirect, pressures are brought to bear on the directors. To counter this and to avoid simply selecting from existing works already seen elsewhere, David invited artists to make new works for the exhibition, many of them for specific sites in the town. This strategy was clearly informed by the practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when artists themselves sought to resist the formality of the museum and the demands of dealers by creating site-specific works and other types of art that went beyond what was conventionally exhibitible. At the same time, it followed a more recent trend on the part of curators towards positioning works beyond the walls of the gallery or museum.

In this respect, it is revealing that *documenta x* coincided with the third of the ten-yearly Sculpture Projects in the German city of Münster (first staged in 1977). It is one of a number of international exhibitions and commissioning organizations such as Artangel (UK based, founded 1985) which specifically address the question of location. In *Chambres d'amis* (Ghent, 1986), for example, artists created works in the homes of local people and then invited visitors to view them (Plate 81). Others involve artists being invited to make or hang their works in offices or public buildings. Does a new form of art emerge (different from the tradition of modern public sculptures permanently sited) and does a passing audience actually get interested in the works? Or is it only the more specialist and dedicated visitor who is prepared to spend time searching the city and following maps and directions into unlikely corners? The Münster Sculpture Projects started with the intention of providing the city with some large-scale public art works for its parks and open spaces. What has evolved is a more open-ended set of commissions in which some artists have moved from the physical (exemplified in 1977 by Claes Oldenburg's giant snooker balls) to the conceptual (exemplified by Janet Cardiff's work for 1997, an audio tour of the town led by the artist).



**Plate 81** Installation by Joseph Kosuth, *Chambres d'amis*, 1986, Ghent. Photo: Dirk Pauwels/ Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent. © ARS, New York and DACS, London 1999.

If (as was noted above) a tension between different kinds of viewer is inherent in contemporary art exhibitions, this holds especially true of international exhibitions. Extensive media pressures, and more complicated sites, mean that they present the danger of artists being parachuted into a city without being able to form any relationship with an audience beyond the art world visitors from elsewhere who are already informed of their concerns. (What, for example, did locals make of *documenta x*, which, for some commentators at least, was characterized by a high-minded intellectualism and disregard for visual pleasure?) A different approach was offered in Antwerp in 1993, when curator Iwona Blazwick sought to involve various local organizations in the formation of the exhibition *In Taking a Normal Situation...* Some of what was exhibited was developed out of discussions between local groups and the visiting artists. While most works were presented within a conventional museum context, the gallery had become the surrounding frame for a new and wider process of interaction. The international and the local were combined.

### Commercial and independent galleries

While the selections of the major international exhibitions, the public museums and art galleries are hugely influential in themselves, the international system depends on the relation between these choices and those of the commercial dealers. Specialist commercial galleries are found in most of the capital cities of western countries, but New York has remained the most powerful centre of the contemporary market. The art market boom of the 1980s had its greatest impact here, though dealers elsewhere also benefited. This section looks more closely at how smaller exhibition venues, both those run by dealers and those run by artists, form a part of the system, with particular reference to the rise and fall of the downtown area of SoHo as the centre of New York's contemporary art scene.

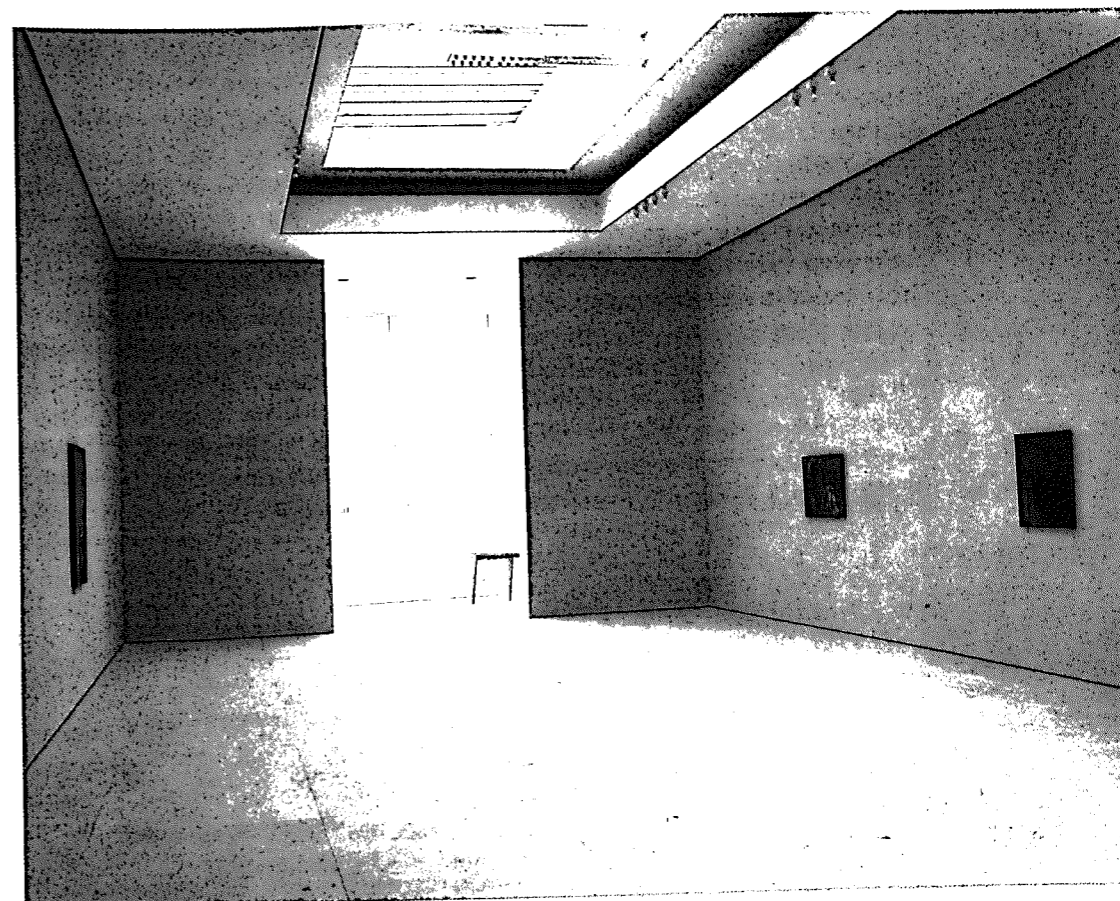
Commercial art galleries, although they stock some works in the manner of a shop, are mostly given over to the promotion of exhibitions which replicate those found in the public sector. Over the past 50 years dealers have moved away from plush, domestic-type spaces with carpets, wallpapers and comfortable chairs (associated with the sale of luxury goods) to adopt and adapt a cooler aesthetic, first from the museum and then from the warehouses favoured by artists for their own non-commercial (independent) exhibition spaces. This has allowed artists the chance to exhibit larger paintings and sculptures, and more recently installations, video and new media works, within commercial as well as more public contexts – and with some success. While installations may not sell so readily to collectors, the associated drawings, studies and images can generally be framed and made available in some form. For the artist, this situation creates a tension between a desire to limit the power of the market system and the need to sell works to finance the making of new projects.

The new wave of dealers prominent in the 1980s was represented for many by the figure of Mary Boone, who opened a gallery in SoHo in 1977. Her list of artists typified the 'return to painting' of the late 1970s and 1980s; it included such American 'stars' as David Salle, Eric Fischl and (until he moved to the

Pace Gallery in 1984) Julian Schnabel. She also exhibited German artists represented by the Cologne dealer Michael Werner (then her partner), such as Georg Baselitz and Marcus Lupertz, both of whom (with Schnabel) were featured in *A New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy. What characterized her operation was a more determined and high-profile manner, a cool and sharp style of presentation using architect-designed conversions (Plate 82), appearances in magazines and close links with well-known collectors. As Boone said at the time, she would have liked to be considered as a 'curator' herself, as if sharing the responsibilities of a museum for preserving and documenting outstanding paintings and sculptures (Nairne, *State of the Art*, p.67).

Mary Boone's slick operation was very different from the first commercial galleries to open in SoHo, originally a light manufacturing and distribution area into which artists started to move, often living and working in co-operatively owned buildings. When the Paula Cooper Gallery opened in SoHo in 1968, one of the first to do so, the location helped to define its 'alternative', artist-oriented character. Cooper states: 'I wanted to get away from the old pattern of uptown galleries ... I didn't want to be bothered with all the social trimmings, things that often counted more than the art itself' (quoted in Greenberg *et al.*, *Thinking about Exhibitions*, p.354). The advantage of SoHo, for both artists and the galleries that followed them, was the availability of large spaces at low rents. Over the following years, SoHo mapped the new

**Plate 82** Mary Boone Gallery, West Broadway, New York, 1993, building renovation and design by Richard Gluckman, with Bill Jensen's *Terre Verte, Dim* and *Untitled* on display. Photo: Dorothy Zeidman.



and expanding intersection in the contemporary art world between commerce (high prices and high profile), public interest (Saturday crowds and organized tours to galleries and studios) and fashion (designer stores and café-bars).

With commercial development and rising rentals in the 1980s, SoHo lost some of its influence to the East Village (a poorer neighbourhood), which briefly became an alternative spectacle, a kind of art fair in the city featuring both commercial and independent spaces (the latter including Group Material). By 1986 it was almost overcome by the self-conscious media attention which followed this new area. Writing in the *New Yorker* magazine, Calvin Tomkins described how originally:

a sense of neighbourhood solidarity and the frustration of not being able to have their work shown in SoHo galleries combined to produce the new art scene. Artists began turning their storefront studios into part-time galleries, several of which became full-time spaces. Since the time lag between innovation and discovery in today's art world now stands at approximately thirty-seven seconds, the public quickly appeared in droves.

(Quoted in Greenberg et al., *Thinking about Exhibitions*, p.402)

In the wake of the new clubbing scene, with such 'stars' as Jean-Michel Basquiat (also represented for a time by Mary Boone) and Keith Haring (who, like Basquiat, first emerged as a graffiti artist), a productive overlap emerged between new spaces as galleries and new clubs and bars. Art, music and performance shifted between each, leaving the museum increasingly isolated and less relevant. But with the burn-out of the East Village scene, the untimely death of several artists (including Basquiat and Haring), and the voracious commercialization of SoHo itself (now engulfed with tourists and shoppers), many commercial galleries headed either back uptown, like Mary Boone, or, like Paula Cooper, over to Chelsea on the West Side of Manhattan to extend the garage aesthetic a stage further. By the mid-1990s, while contemporary art maintained a strong presence in SoHo (enhanced by the Guggenheim's downtown branch housed in a former garment factory), Chelsea had become the prime area in which to open a gallery.<sup>18</sup>

**How have notions of appropriate gallery space and location changed in recent decades? What precedents, parallels and possibilities do developments in New York suggest for the contemporary art scene in London?**

#### Discussion

The fundamental move has been away from conventional museum-style galleries to the informality of the warehouse or industrial space, the use of which was first pioneered by artists before being taken up by commercial galleries and then also by public museums. These developments are bound up with a parallel shift away from smart shopping zones to less developed areas where spaces are available at low rents. Here, the shift from uptown

<sup>18</sup> The SoHo Guggenheim forms part of a more general trend for museums housed in disused industrial/commercial buildings; see Case Study 1. More broadly, the development and 'gentrification' of SoHo and the East Village, with working-class residents losing their homes, raise questions about the implications of using art for urban regeneration; see Case Study 7.

Manhattan to SoHo can be said to find an echo in the expansion of the London art scene from the West End to the East End. In both cities we can discern an overlap between the public and private sectors; both the Mary Boone Gallery of the 1980s and the Saatchi Gallery (as a converted factory typical of the new-style gallery space) can be said to represent the fusion of individual enterprise and curatorial aspirations. We may also wonder whether the now thriving London art scene might not produce (allowing for its more scattered geography) some of the problems that arose with the success of SoHo, with rising rents forcing out artists and dealers from the areas which they had colonized.

The point at issue here is that commercial and independent spaces serve different functions from the public gallery. The huge number of exhibitions that they present, together with reviews in the specialist art magazines, provide an essential backdrop to the purchases made by key collectors and museum collections. The independent and commercial galleries, however different their purposes, share an ability to concentrate on specific strands of art and to express distinct identities and identifications (whether by gender, race, class, location or political interest). The complexities of this culture cannot easily be expressed through mass appeal museums (now with audience figures in the millions each year). While developments both in and out of the museum have created new opportunities for interaction between art and a broad public, the smaller institutions continue to play a crucial role in the contemporary art scene.

#### Conclusion

Future exhibitions of contemporary art will continue to reflect the demands of artists, curators and, increasingly, visitors. Following the circular pattern of institutional changes, artists will seek new alternatives, and the commercial and museum sectors will almost certainly follow in adopting some of the aesthetic and manner of such new 'spaces'. In the future some of these spaces will be virtual rather than real, making further use of the Internet and also digital television as well as the low-tech solutions of using magazines and specially created publications as locations for an exhibition. However, the demand for an event, for spectacle – evident in the Turner Prize or the *Sensation* exhibition – gives greater force to exhibitions presented in real space and time. In the same way as the mass production of art postcards has driven larger numbers of people to travel to view the original, so the virtual exhibition may simply reinforce interest in the real.

Despite the changing nature of international exhibitions and the growth of new kinds of exhibition project outside the museum, the dynamic of contemporary art will continue to depend on the independent spaces. Although the large exhibitions and the museums have the greatest effect in forming new critical audiences for the future (where most people will find a use value in contemporary art), it is through the independent spaces that the loop between the museums, the international exhibitions and the commercial galleries can be influenced and market values altered. And if there is an

increasing variety of venues, it will strengthen the position of the exhibition as the central focus for selection and evaluation in the delicate ecology of the art world.

Who chooses and with what assumptions and values in mind? The role of the curator, the dealer and the artist *as selector* is central to our examination of exhibitions of contemporary art. We have seen how the number and range of exhibitions has grown, the growing tension between spectacle and contemplation and between public and private sectors, and how within a 'culture of exhibitions' the inter-relation between different parts of the contemporary art world provides a 'system' within which different kinds of value are expressed. Equally, we have seen how the types of spaces and buildings have been influenced by artists' own initiatives, by their resistance to the commercial and museum sectors. A central phenomenon has been the relationship between *new* art and *new* institutions: each has helped to change the other.

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## CASE STUDY 5

# Exhibiting the canon: the blockbuster show

EMMA BARKER

## Introduction

What, exactly, is a blockbuster show? One commentator has defined it as 'a large-scale loan exhibition which people who normally don't go to museums will stand in line for hours to see' (Elsen, 'Assessing the pros and cons', p.24). Another rejects this straightforward view of blockbusters as a popular phenomenon and emphasizes the calculation and even manipulation required to stage one. From this perspective, it is 'an exhibition that aims for maximum coverage and maximum publicity to attract maximum attendance' (West, 'The devaluation of "cultural capital"', p.75). Although large-scale, highly publicized art exhibitions drawing several hundred thousand visitors took place as early as the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>1</sup> the blockbuster show as we know it is a relatively recent phenomenon. This label covers different types of exhibition, but we will mostly be concerned in this case study with blockbuster shows of western art (primarily painting). These are usually shown in two or three venues on both sides of the Atlantic. The host institution has almost always received commercial sponsorship to help cover the costs of staging the exhibition. There will also nowadays be advance booking facilities so as to make it possible to see the show without queuing. However, not every exhibition with these characteristics attracts enough visitors (a minimum of 250,000, I would suggest) to count as a blockbuster.

From the positive perspective represented by the first of the above quotations, the blockbuster exhibition is a scholarly endeavour which serves to educate and entertain the public, bringing prestige and profit to the host institution in the process. However, as the second quotation suggests, much commentary adopts a more negative position. In this case study it will be our aim to explore and assess the blockbuster phenomenon, taking account of the various objections that have been raised. One of these is the claim that such exhibitions have a very narrow range of subjects and, contrary to the justifications put forward for staging them, seldom shed any new light on the history of art. Another criticism we will need to consider is that the seeming democratization of art brought about by the blockbuster is an illusion; the huge crowds attending the exhibition and the hype surrounding it mean that visitors are unable to have any meaningful or even enjoyable contact with the works of art. Above all, we must address concern about the commercialization that the blockbuster represents; this includes the commodification of art through the sale of souvenirs and the possibility that the demands of the business sponsor may take precedence over the host institution's own goals. First, however, we need to examine how and why the blockbuster exhibition has become such a significant phenomenon.

<sup>1</sup> On an early example, the Manchester Art Treasures exhibition of 1857, see Case Study 8 in Perry and Cunningham, *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art* (Book 1 of this series).