

## **THE NEW TATE: A ~~post~~ Revisionist venture in Context**

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In a 1971 article written for *Art in America* titled, *Museums and radicals: A history of emergencies*, Linda Nochlin examined the evolution of the museum. She demonstrated how from the start they were conceived as instruments of cultural reintegration on a higher level within a radical political context. According to Nochlin, "The myth of art history came into being at the same time as its temple—the museum. Both were conceived in the optimistic days of the Enlightenment and borne on the waves of the French Revolution.... As a shrine of an elitist religion and at the same time a utilitarian instrument for democratic education, the museum may be said to have suffered from schizophrenia from the start".<sup>1</sup>

Over two centuries have elapsed since the fall of the monarchy in France and the opening of the Louvre to the public however, the debate continues about the role of a museum to its audience. The New Tate with its thematic organization of art meant to refresh audience attention—this reception<sup>is</sup> further enhanced in the presence of charismatic architecture.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century as visual art museums changeover away from a chronological linear narrative mode, oft the radical reinstallation of their holdings is confusing for viewers who have grown accustomed to traditional display methods. Nevertheless the tendency to break away from a traditional norm has been on the rise for several decades when in the 1960s Modernism, with its orderly canon, gave way to Post-Modernism and its ritual of diversity and fragmentation. Only recently have viewers begun to observe drastic reorganization of entire collections as curators adopt and apply revisionist theory to museum practice. This proclivity to break away from the established canon began with disgruntled artists who opposed formalism and the "white cube" nature of museums. As Robert Smithson noted, "Museums like asylums and jails, have wards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called "galleries." A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral."<sup>2</sup>

Since the outpouring of Deconstructionism with its penchant for exposing unexamined assumptions, museum curatorial practice has become fluid—what a museum is and how it should

<sup>1</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Museums and radicals: A history of emergencies," *Art in America*, July/August, 1971, p. 28.



operate have been confronted by academic social and political concerns. Both continue to deal with questions that address the validity of value judgments, collection bias, collection display, exhibition choices and the museum's relationship to the public.

Art that deconstructed social ills generally employed photography, text, and mechanical media to convey their ideas. By the mid-eighties, as painting once again rose from the dead and dominated mainstream art discourse, the advocates of conceptual mechanically reproduced work and those endorsing traditional media became engaged in verbal battle. A polemical battleground among competing ideologies raged and this unresolved critical argument continues today. The ongoing philosophical cultural argument impacts museum practice beyond contemporary art—this is clearly apparent at the New Tate as demonstrated by its collection interpretation. Moreover reformist ideas had radically shaken the art deck among artists, curators, critics, and historians—there is no going back!

Despite their staid appearance, museums continue to evolve over time. All museums have and continue to represent an attitude of their era, their nation, their staff, and trustees. Each generation of museum professionals is valid for its time and is shaped by the social/philosophical doctrines of their period. Museums are more than object repositories—even though many of us conceive of museums as places of objects—museums represent places of ideas of a society and a culture that is always in flux. In this Post-Modern era they are no longer silent mausoleums—today museums are schizophrenic agoras that must juggle scholarship, marketing, tourism, and entertainment. Besides grappling with shifting theoretical paradigms, museums must deal with the prevalence of advanced technology in a global culture and how it is shaping communication and the way viewers receive and accept information both verbally and visually.

We also are living in a time of intellectual and technical transformation. The ways in which historical, art historical and scientific studies are changing through the use of digital technology are legion. We now live in an era in which a vast proportion of our time is spent in reconstructing the factual evidence of past discoveries. A closed chronological presentation of art no longer perhaps applies in a society in which the computer has revolutionized our means of gathering information. As Maxwell Anderson, director of the Whitney Museum, noted, "hyper-linking (digital), rather than indexing (analog), is changing the way that we conduct research. Indexing retraces countless closed

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement", originally published in the *Documenta 5* catalogue, 1972, as Smithson's contribution to the exhibition.

circles of knowledge, whereas hyper-linking engages the infinite spectrum of fact and imagination.... Museums as centers of research, experience, and publication will be reshaped by this new technological world."

Undeniably museums are in a retooling mode. Beyond the curators at the New Tate museum, museums globally see their mission metamorphosing— a new generation of museum professionals refutes the concept of offering a passive venue for an elite, educated audience. Museums are becoming an active populist center for learning for publics of diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. Exhibition halls are shifting from crammed "open storage" toward an expository approach to selected objects that are arranged together by theme instead of by a narrative of chronological movements.

Intellectually what is driving much of the new reinstallation and exhibition curatorial strategy is revisionism with its attack on modernism—curators and historians are rethinking and reinventing the modern art tradition in a Post-Modern world. Richard Bretell in his book *Modern Art 1851-1929* questions the relevance of classifying art by movements because such narrow categories remove art from a larger social context. It appears that the curators of the New Tate are kindred in spirit with Bretell's ideas and his denouncement of Modernist movements. Bretell writes, "I will build a case for a simpler and more flexible binary system of aesthetic classification to extend the conventional history."<sup>3</sup> Shuffling a card deck provides one with random new opportunities—shuffling an art collection provides new associations however the new-fashioned production is guided by a curator's vision. *Let us not forget that*

As Foucault and others expressed, objects lose their meaning without the viewer's knowledge and acceptance of underlying aesthetic or cultural values. Without such knowledge, an object's reification even within its own society cannot be understood. Therefore the frequent discomfort of novice visitors to art museums that has to do with their lack of understanding of the cultural aesthetics that the art on display either challenges or affirms. Curators of museum exhibitions today are working to enhance the objects' value through the presentation of work and related educational programs. As museums determined that reaching a greater public was important, in the past few decades they began to realize that this demands more than simple displays, and the concept of the theme exhibit took hold.

<sup>3</sup> Richard R. Bretell, *Modern Art 1851-1929*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). p. 12.



Still, how a museum opts to interpret its collection changes over time with the emergence of new techniques, scholarship, and viewpoints—this is evident at the New Tate. For example when attempting to determine as to why the New Tate's curators favored to organize the collection in this particular manner, recall that its collection consists of a sizeable number of Modern works with a smaller percentage manifesting a Post- Modern idiom. The Tate's holding—both purchased and those received as gifts represent a set of aesthetic values that have been firmly established over a period of time but is essentially hidden from the visitor's view. When attempting to determine as to why the curators of the New Tate choose to organize its collection in a series of thematic zones influenced by 17<sup>th</sup> century French academic categories—

**Landscape Matter Environment    Still Life Object Real Life**

**History Memory Society    Nude Action Body**

One must consider what comprises the Tate's collection and the museum's previous curatorial mission—let us not forget that it was born from the Tate Britain. Also we must consider these themes are amplified through other related terms and their relationship to current revisionist concerns. I ask myself, from the curators' point of view, what specific theoretical idea do they believe justifies these categories that were only in part traditional. For example although historical painting was a conventional category, did the nude really exist as a topic through which to submit a painting to be judged by the academy for to the annual Salon? I doubt it.

Still and all, the Tate Bankside's curators are mindful of contemporary museum trends therefore their choice of thematic installation method might perhaps reflect an attempt to bridge a polemical gap between divergent canons as well as finding alternative way to exhibit its holdings outside a conventional art historical model. Furthermore, given the lack of stellar works within select juxtapositions, perhaps this thematic approach is an attempt to disguise the weaker components of the museum's collection. If the New Tate represents Britain's vanguard art repository of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is perhaps essential to shuffle the art history of the collection in order to propose new associations amid the work in this collection.

The theme show is sometimes the framework an institution uses to remount materials from its permanent collection as a temporary exhibition. Theme exhibits starts with an idea that lends itself to the exhibition medium and uses artifacts and collection support to amplify that idea. While artifact based exhibits tend to be narrow and focused, theme exhibits tend to be broad and general. Because of their typical breadth, theme exhibits tend to cut across many disciplines and can no longer be the

domain of a single specialist. This has necessitated a new model for the creation of exhibits, as in many cases no curator can have the full range of expertise or the communicative skills to address the theme fully. Ultimately showing works of modern and contemporary art in novel way forces viewers to engage with works on a new level—which was once familiar can provide a new dimension inviting anew insights and critical dialogue.

Nonetheless, that what we are seeing at the New Tate with its non-linear thematic deliverance, this collection installation is well done but is not unique—it is representative of current museum fashion. The New Tate's overture mirrors the growing trend of museum thematic organization however doesn't go far enough. Cases in point includes: MOMA's 2000 three-part reinstallation series, the Guggenheim's 1900 exhibition, PS 1's Greater New York display and the presentation of the Studio Museum's permanent collection. All of these exhibitions evince a shared philosophical curatorial penchant that debunks Modernist interpretation and seeks alternative meaning. Moreover, the new Tate Bankside also mirrors an international museum boom that is spawning satellite museums such as the phenomena of the Guggenheim and MOMA.

The New Tate's current exhibition demonstrates a deconstruction of the past by its curators in an attempt to present art in an invigorating manner. Its objective is to expand knowledge and understanding, and, to transcend the restrictive definitions of Modernism. Its curators attempt to reexamine the scholarship of their predecessors, just as their predecessors reassessed the work of their forebears. But it also follows that if the curator can deconstruct the belief of others, then those others—including the public—should be allowed to criticize and deconstruct the work of the present-day curators. So allow me to indulge myself with the following points.

- Artists in the 60s critiqued museums—today curators are critiquing institutions and the established canon. Curators create through their installations however often subordinate the power of the art and artists in order to make the art thematically fit. Again, I call to mind Smithson's words from *Documenta 5*: "Cultural confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories."
- If a museum such as the New Tate aspire to be afresh in its museum display, why did its curators elect to thematically install a collection based on 17<sup>th</sup> century French academic categories as cited above. I do question whether these are appropriate and broad enough categories for the art being addressed.



- Despite the diversity of artists interpretation, the city, light, psychology, technology have been all influential forces in shaping 20<sup>th</sup> century thought—why are these themes absent? Urban discourse of modernism was fluid and transformative under a veneer of monumental permanence. This cosmopolitan world knew greater speed of communication, rapid movement, and new social interactions.
- And what about the themes of war, capitalism, and global political change?
- What about photography—its widespread domination of the most modern media, photography is an essential factor in the definition of the primary role of painting in modern representation. Very few modern and post-modern artists or intellectuals deny the influence of mechanical reproduction—one can hardly read an article without seeing a reference to Walter Benjamin.
- What about gender, race, and the inclusion of artists in its collection who are not members of the art world's top **100 CLUB** given the New Tate appears to subscribe to a revisionist ideology? What and how we exhibit depends primarily on the professionals within the museum—individuals with differing points of view, admittedly affected by both their personal and professional experiences and preferences. Nevertheless, the public is not aware of who the creators of exhibits or the authors of explanatory texts are; it is the museum as institution that appears to be speaking. When an institution speaks it carries more weight than an individual—more than an expert does. The museum profession is ever conscious of the fact that the institutions essentially authenticate the objects and ideas of an exhibit. Such institutional power of speech carries with it great privilege and even greater responsibility to the audiences.
- The New Tate's unique architecture and its reinvention are undeniably striking and innovative—it works to elevate the viewers' experience and their delight in being there. We as consumers delight in both the eccentric and elevating museum; however, one must ask does the exciting architecture cloud the pluralistic viewpoints and does the immense space of this bygone industrial monument rule and overpower us that we loose sight of the buildings new function—being a museum? Are the art housed within its cavernous halls secondary and the perhaps the arrangement of the collection is irrelevant because ultimately the architecture is called on to assimilate and compose the museum's multifaceted personality?

In conclusion I am pleased that New Tate has opened, however it like many museums in this century face the challenge of being places that are flexible yet significant, useable yet exhilarating—invigorating sites that can educate, inspire, and reach the broad audience of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Will future installments of the New Tate's collection encourage exploration, critical thinking, and dialogue and continue to identify its own view point as a work-in progress, open to ongoing debate and revision? Let us hope so because for now it is a wonderful thing!

And, let us hope that in the future a genuine pluralist mix of art will be found in its collection that represents ~~various~~ work by women, people from Central Europe, Asia, of Latin heritage, as well as people of color.

Thank-You!