CASE STUDY 1

The modern art museum

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Introduction

In a groundbreaking and now classic series of articles first published in 1976, the art critic Brian O’Doherty emphasized the critical importance of modernist display or ‘the white cube’, as he termed it: ‘An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of 20th-century art’ (O’Doherty, ‘Inside the white cube, part I’, p.24). Anyone who has visited a modern art museum will be familiar with the type of gallery evoked by O’Doherty: a simple, undecorated space with white walls and a polished wood floor or soft grey carpet. Paintings are hung wide apart in a single row, sometimes with only one large work on each wall. Sculptures are positioned in the centre of the gallery with ample space surrounding them. The works of art are evenly lit, usually by spotlights hanging from the ceiling or by ambient neon light. In this specialized viewing context, mundane objects may be mistaken – momentarily at least – for works of art: ‘the firehose in a modern museum looks not like a firehose but an esthetic conundrum’ (O’Doherty, ‘Inside the white cube, part I’, p.25).

Although rarely acknowledged or even noticed, white has become the preferred background for the presentation of contemporary art in the twentieth century. Much of twentieth-century art has been produced with the clean spaces and white walls of modern museums and galleries in mind. The shaped canvases of the American artist Ellsworth Kelly, for example, are not conceivable without the white wall as background (Plate 8). Here the wall is an integral part of the work, defining as well as being defined by the painting’s irregular shape, its scale and bright colour, enhanced by the lack of frame. In the modern museum the white wall sustains a curiously ambivalent existence between vigorous presence and complete invisibility. On the one hand, it emphasizes the essential formal qualities of abstract painting and sculpture. On the other, its inconspicuousness suggests that it is nothing more than a neutral context for the works of art.

This case study investigates how and why the modern art museum evolved, and seeks to uncover the reasons behind the global success and continuing authority of the white cube. It examines the effects of this mode of display on the perception and understanding of works of art and demonstrates that, far from being a neutral context, the white cube impinges on the viewing experience in many subtle ways. Moreover, as we will see, this type of display has been subjected to forceful critique on the grounds that it conceals the ideological character of the modern art museum. At the centre of this study will be the Museum of Modern Art in New York (founded in 1929), the earliest and most influential museum of this type, which is credited with establishing the white cube as an international standard. A number of other examples will also be considered in order to show some of the ways in which the model set by the original ‘MOMA’ has been modified in the latter part of the twentieth century.
Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931) declared: ‘The painter himself must be white, which is to say without tragedy or sorrow ... The studio of the modern painter must reflect the ambience of mountains which are nine-thousand feet high and topped with an eternal cap of snow. There the cold kills the microbes’ (quoted in Wigley, White Walls, Designer Dresses, p.239).

Despite the important role played by MOMA in developing and disseminating the white cube, its genesis was complex and dependent on a variety of outside sources. Early manifestations of modernist display could be found in European museums and exhibitions after World War I, especially in Germany. Alfred H. Barr, Jr (1902–81), MOMA’s first director, and Philip Johnson (b.1906), then head of its architecture department, encountered them on their extensive travels through Europe during the 1920s and early 1930s. MOMA adapted and refined these new display techniques, opting for what we now recognize as a modernist approach at the expense of other modes of presentation which are now mostly forgotten. The Folkwang Museum in Essen, Germany, for example, contained an extraordinary Expressionist environment that reflected the artists’ intentions and influences (Plate 11). Expressionist painting and sculpture (including site-specific works created especially for the museum) were combined with medieval furniture and ‘primitive’ art. As in modernist display, the galleries recalled the artist’s studio but, in this case, did so by evoking the eclectic chaos and emotional turmoil of Expressionism. In addition to the by then common white walls, the galleries featured exposed brick and coloured walls. Although greatly impressed by the Folkwang Museum’s display, Barr was extremely selective in his adaptation of elements from it.

Plate 11 Gallery with paintings by Emil Nolde, African sculptures and medieval chest, 1929, Folkwang Museum, Essen, Germany.

3 The German Expressionists were artists working around the turn of the twentieth century who sought to find ways of directly conveying feelings in their art and thereby to break with the dominant artistic and social conventions of the period. They turned for inspiration to ‘primitive’ art (African sculpture, for example), which they saw as more authentic, less sophisticated forms of expression.
MOMA's adoption of the white cube model can be connected to Barr's conception of modern art as developing inevitably towards abstraction. In the modern museum, abstract art and the white cube have entered into a symbiotic relationship. In their apparent exclusion of all reference to the wider world beyond the domain of pure form, they reinforce the decontextualization traditionally effected by the museum. The original function of a medieval altarpiece as an object of worship is obliterated in the museum as it is transformed into an object of aesthetic appreciation. This process is anticipated by abstract art (Plate 12), which has its natural home in the museum, as Philip Fisher has pointed out: 'For the museum, the abstractness that results from the effacement of specific religious, political, or personal symbolic features is ... the key feature. This process meant that, in its quest for authenticity, the museum culture in a factory world was inevitably tied in the long run to exactly the kind of abstract, imageless art that the twentieth century produced' (Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art*, pp.166–7). The white cube owes its success to this strategy of effacement and simultaneous self-negation: highlighting the inherent (that is, formal) qualities of a work of art through the neutralization of its original context and content while, at the same time, remaining itself virtually invisible and thus obscuring the process of effacement.

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4 Barr's conception of the development of modern art was visualized in a diagram for the cover of the *Cubism and Abstract Art* catalogue. It is important to keep in mind that the chart was originally conceived as a didactic tool for the benefit of visitors to the exhibition. It is reproduced in Fernie, *Art History and its Methods*, p.180.

5 The point being made here is that if (as Fisher argues) the museum houses objects defined in terms of their uniqueness and authenticity in opposition to mass-produced objects, then the abstract work of art can be seen as museum art *par excellence*. This is because (according to Fisher) its lack of reference to everyday life precludes it serving any useful purpose (usefulness being the most obvious characteristic of mass-produced objects). For further consideration of authenticity, see Case Study 3; for further consideration of 'use' with reference to contemporary art, see Case Study 4.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The Museum of Modern Art in New York was the first museum devoted exclusively to modern art, and its collection is generally considered to be the most comprehensive in the world. Since 1929 MOMA has played a crucial role in defining the modernist canon and in shaping the way that modern art is looked at and understood. During its first decade the museum’s activities were dominated by exhibitions (such as the epoch-making Cubism and Abstract Art show illustrated above), while the intention was to hand over the works of art acquired to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and other institutions once they had attained the status of ‘classics’ (this idea was renounced in 1953). From early on, MOMA not only displayed painting, sculpture, drawings and prints but also incorporated architecture, design, photography and film into its programming. At the time, the museum’s commitment to providing a comprehensive survey of contemporary visual culture and its use of the most up-to-date methods of marketing and publicity to popularize modern art made it a unique institution.

Like many other museums in the United States, MOMA was founded by wealthy private benefactors and its trustees continue to be recruited from America’s social elite. They determine the overall direction of the museum and, especially through the appointment of leading staff members, exert influence on its exhibitions policy. They have also decisively shaped the composition of the collection with donations of works of art. Accusations of undue influence date back to the early years of MOMA, when the museum was almost entirely financed by its trustees. The support of the Rockefellers (among other rich and powerful families) and their choice of modern art as the particular object of their philanthropy are significant. The introduction of modern art into the United States, it has been argued, happened from ‘above’ and was intrinsically linked to questions of class, taste, economics and politics. Modern art was elevated to the sphere of ‘high culture’, functioning as an indicator of social distinction. In the process, its original social and political agenda was obscured. Not only was MOMA itself run with all the efficiency of a business competing in the capitalist economy, but the political activities of its trustees sometimes had a direct impact on the museum. The appointment of Nelson Rockefeller, president of MOMA from 1939 to 1941, as Co-ordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs in 1941, for example, led to an expansion of displays and acquisitions (through a special fund) of art from Latin America. (For criticisms of the way that MOMA became caught up in the promotion of US political and economic interests abroad, see note 10 below.)

MOMA’s public identity is tied to its building on Manhattan’s West 53rd Street, completed in 1939, which at the time (when it was surrounded by nineteenth-century houses) functioned as an effective manifestation of its modernist principles and internationalist outlook (Plate 13). The building

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6 However, the departments have operated separately throughout most of MOMA’s history, perpetuating the traditional separation between high art and other forms of visual culture.

7 This social and political agenda is addressed in Wood, The Challenge of the Avant-Garde (Book 4 of this series).
represented a radical departure from the temple-like museum architecture that dominated the United States until after World War II: no ceremonial staircase but access at street level; no grandiose columns but a flat, clean façade set flush with the street front. Every means available was employed to attract visitors into the museum. Its name was prominently displayed on the side of the building, visible to pedestrians on nearby Fifth Avenue, home of New York’s most exclusive shops. The glass-fronted ground floor with its gentle inward curve was designed to ease the transition from the street into the museum. Creating an effect similar to a department store, MOMA carefully exploited the lessons of contemporary commercial architecture. An affinity between the museum and the display of merchandise was noted by Walter Benjamin: ‘The concentration of works of art in the museum approximates them to commodities which – where they offer themselves in masses to the passer-by – rouse the idea that he must also receive a share’ (quoted in Grunenberg, ‘The politics of presentation’, p.201). While the design of MOMA may reveal something about art museums in general, it can more specifically be connected to its mission to ‘sell’ modern art to the American public.

At the same time, MOMA made every effort to remove art from any association with the sphere of business. The galleries were intended to provide a neutral environment for the contemplation of art – without any distraction from decoration, neighbouring works of art, or indeed any external influence at all (Plate 14). These calm, contained spaces (often said to have the ‘intimacy’ of a private home, a reminder that many works in the museum previously belonged to wealthy collectors) provide relief from the bustling metropolis outside and, more broadly, from the material world of production and consumption. In the design exhibitions organized by MOMA during the 1930s, utilitarian objects were displayed in a selective and aestheticized manner, the gleaming commodities being elevated to the status of works of art through a highly dramatic or isolated presentation (Plate 15). The effect of these displays was to make the objects seem even more desirable, effectively identifying the museum visitor as a consumer – rather than simply a disinterested viewer of art – and thereby confirming Benjamin’s dictum. Above all, this isolation of the gallery space from the world outside the museum functioned (and continues to do so today) to reinforce the notion that art has nothing to do with money or politics but belongs to ‘the universal and timeless realm of spirit’ (Duncan and Wallach, ‘The Museum of Modern Art as late capitalist ritual’, p.46). MOMA’s galleries are spaces for contemplation, producing an atmosphere of reverence reminiscent of a church free from the clutter of ordinary, everyday life. While this is true to some extent of any art museum, it can be argued that it is especially so in the case of modernist display: ‘the more “aesthetic” the installations – the fewer the objects and the emptier the walls – the more sacralized the museum space’ (Duncan, Civilizing Rituals, p.17).

At MOMA the visitors do not simply contemplate isolated works of art, but are also subjected to a compulsory course in the history of modern art. The plan of the opening exhibition for the new museum building, Art in Our Time (1939), illustrates the careful guidance of the public through space (Plate 16).

While the layout is surprisingly varied (subsequently the walls were predominantly organized in right angles), visitors progressed (and still do) through a series of galleries with little or no option of changing course, 'following the development of modern art in clear logical sequence' (Barr quoted in Read, 'Art in our time', p.339). In place of the display of works of art by national school typical of nineteenth-century museums, MOMA substituted an installation illustrating Barr's conception of modern art as a sequence of movements developing out of each other. His classification of modern art in terms of movements or styles on the basis of the formal features of works of art, with special attention being accorded to the achievements of individual 'masters', conformed, however, to the traditional practices of art history. Certain movements, notably Cubism and Surrealism, which were singled out by Barr as being especially significant to the development of modern art, are still central to MOMA's displays of early twentieth-century art. This schema has since been extended to include subsequent movements such as Abstract Expressionism, which is presented as another high point in the unfolding of modern art (Plate 17).

According to Barr, the aesthetic judgements made manifest at MOMA were based on 'the conscientious, continuous, resolute distinction of quality from mediocrity' (words later inscribed on a plaque at the entrance to the permanent collection). The museum's critics argue, however, that this emphasis on quality obscures the role that ideology plays in the selection and ordering of the works of art. According to Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, MOMA only 'appears to be a refuge from a materialist society, an ideal world apart' while, on a more fundamental level, it 'would reconcile

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8 See footnote 4 above. Significantly, the Cubism and Abstract Art exhibition was followed by one devoted to Surrealism, conceived both as a successor to and reaction against the movements represented in the earlier exhibition.

9 The term 'Abstract Expressionism' is applied to painters working mainly in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. Although the 'drip' technique of Jackson Pollock's One (Number 31, 1950) (Plate 17) is very different from the large areas of colour in Barnett Newman's Vir Heroicus Sublimis (Plate 12), both are typical of Abstract Expressionism in their large, even monumental scale, which identifies these paintings as belonging most appropriately in the public space of the museum.
you to the world, as it is, outside' (‘The Museum of Modern Art as late capitalist ritual’, p.47; emphasis added). Their basic contention is that, in presenting works of art not as the products of a specific society or statements of political engagement but rather as the expressions of individual genius, MOMA supports the ideology of individualism that underlies the capitalist social order. Moreover, critical analyses of MOMA contend that it has become increasingly preoccupied with preserving and enlarging its collection of historic modern art and has thus failed to maintain its engagement with contemporary art. A relative decline in its influence is generally held to have taken place since the 1950s, the decade when the museum’s austere functional architecture became ‘a ubiquitous symbol of corporate modernity’ and which also witnessed the ‘international triumph of American painting, a “triumph” which MOMA did much to engineer’ (Wallach, ‘The Museum of Modern Art’, p.79). The critique developed by Duncan and Wallach (among others) has been extremely influential but, it can be argued, itself needs to be understood as part of the reaction to MOMA’s institutional authority that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the context of the cultural and political radicalism of the period, the museum came to be identified not just as the embodiment of an entrenched modernist orthodoxy but also as ‘the cultural arm of “American Imperialism”’ (Sandler, American Art of the 1960s, p.298). More generally, it needs to be emphasized that this critique, no less than the museum itself, can be seen as political or even ideological in the assumptions on which it is based.

10 Artists protesting against the Vietnam War drew attention to Rockefeller business links with armaments manufacturers, for example. More broadly, this accusation referred to the museum’s international exhibition programme, its determining role at major international exhibitions such as the Venice and São Paulo Bienais, and its long involvement with government agencies in helping to promote American culture and, by extension, its economic and political interests abroad.
Challenges to the white cube

From its earliest manifestations, modernist display has had its detractors and opponents. Among them are those artists who have sought to challenge the authority of the white cube. One objection is that it functions in support of purified and autonomous works of art and at the expense of less unified or formally contained statements. By contrast, the Pop artist Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) in his installation *The Street*, first presented at the Judson Gallery in New York in 1960, transformed a basement gallery into a celebration of the gritty urban environment. Oldenburg filled the space with large amorphous cardboard shapes painted in black that sprawled over the walls, hung from the ceiling, and were scattered across the floor (Plate 18). It was everything the modern art museum was not: dirty, chaotic, fragmented, concerned with the excitement and depth of everyday life rather than with abstract notions of beauty or lofty ideals, as Oldenburg famously explained in 1961:

I am for an art that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum. I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero. I am for an art that involves itself with the everyday crap and still comes out on top. I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary. I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life, that twists and extends impossibly and accumulates and spits and drips, and is sweet and stupid as life itself.

(Quoted in Johnson, *Claes Oldenburg*, pp.16-17)


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31 Pop Art, which emerged in the late 1950s, engaged with popular and consumer culture by appropriating imagery from advertising, the media and everyday life.
Some museum officials reacted quickly to these developments and invited contemporary artists into the sacred spaces of the museum. In 1962, for example, Willem Sandberg, director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, staged *Dybalaby* (Dynamic Labyrinth). This exhibition not only redefined the relationship between artist and museum but, more importantly, also attempted to make the visitor an active participant rather than a distanced observer. The artists (Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, Daniel Spoerri, Martial Raysse, Robert Rauschenberg and Per Olof Ultvedt) were given complete freedom in the creation of their environments, which were largely constructed out of junk that was afterwards discarded.\(^{12}\) Spoerri’s gallery turned on its side by 90 degrees was symptomatic of the visitors’ experience in the labyrinth (Plate 19); it suggested that the museum visit was to be a thought-provoking, inspiring, and enjoyable experience that would close the much lamented gap between art and everyday life. Instead of expressing grand ideas, the aim of art here was above all to create a sense of carefree playfulness, providing a variety of visual and tactile sensations leading to an almost anarchistic sense of enjoyment and temporary suspension of all traditional rules of museum behaviour as visitors were encouraged to touch and operate the works of art. *Dybalaby* materialized ideas that were to define museums over the next two decades: the re-establishment of a significant relationship between art and society.

\(^{12}\) All these artists were associated with Pop Art or its European counterpart, *Nouveau Réalisme* (New Realism).
With the emergence of the counter-culture in the late 1960s, challenges to the modern art museum took on an overtly political character and a more confrontational approach. In a project for his 1971 one-person show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, for example, the artist Hans Haacke (b. 1936) used photography, text and statistics to document the concentration of real estate in New York: specifically, exploitative practices of corporate owners of slum properties occupied by deprived ethnic groups (Plate 20). In so doing, he aimed to expose what he called 'the socio-political value system of society' (Haacke, 'All the art that's fit to show', p. 151). Insisting that politics had no place in a museum, the Guggenheim not only cancelled the exhibition but also dismissed the curator responsible. Haacke went on to produce a piece documenting the Guggenheim trustees' connections to several linked corporations. This kind of strategy on the part of artists has become known as 'institutional critique'. In this context, the term 'institution' refers not only to 'agencies of distribution' (museums, galleries, etc.) but also to 'aesthetic institutions', including the formal elements and organizing principles of works of art: 'it is a recognition that materials and procedures, surfaces and textures, locations and placement are not only sculptural and painterly matter to be dealt with ... but that they are always inscribed within the conventions of language and thereby within institutional power and ideological investment' (Buchloh, 'Conceptual art', p. 136). The crucial point is that, in avoiding traditional media such as painting and sculpture, an artist like Haacke defies the art museum's demand for major works. Most aspects of


13 This period witnessed the formation of protest groups such as the AWC (Art Workers' Coalition) in New York, who staged demonstrations and put forward a number of demands including greater representation of black and women artists. For examples of protests directed against MOMA, see Lynes, Good Old Modern, pp. 437–41.
their traditional range of activities – collecting, preservation, display and mediation – have been challenged by artistic products that are ephemeral and transitory, of little or no commercial value, and defy the usual categorization according to medium.

However disruptive the artists' interventions and however radical their attempts during the period to escape the confines of institutions and the pressures of the art market, eventually most of them returned to the white cube (this includes Haacke, who continues to show in major institutions in Europe and the United States). Nevertheless, their investigation of the mechanisms of the art world formed part of a growing awareness of the exclusiveness of modern art museums and of the extent to which they are controlled by a social and cultural elite whose tastes they reflect. Numerous attempts to transform them into more open and democratic institutions followed. Probably nowhere was this programmatic shift in the conception and function of the modern art museum more pronounced than at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, which opened in 1977 (Plate 21). Housed in a massive building of futuristic design with exposed structural support system and brightly coloured service pipes, it is much more than a traditional museum – as its full name indicates: Georges Pompidou National Centre for Art and Culture. In addition to the national collection of modern art and exhibition galleries, it contains a public library, a centre for industrial design, cinemas and a music centre. The integration of a range of cultural resources within one transparent and dynamic container was intended to bring about a democratization of culture, breaking down conventional boundaries between high and low.

In many respects, the Pompidou Centre was judged a triumph, exceeding the most optimistic expectations, but it has also been criticized: ‘Walking through the complex, which has been designed to make every visitor, even the most museum-shy, feel at home, it almost appears as if the proverbial fear of culture had flipped over into its opposite, namely indiscriminate enjoyment of a mixture of painting, sculpture, interior decoration, cafeteria, and place where the kids are persuaded to paint’ (Spies, ‘Canonization of the cynic’, p.130). According to another critic, the philosopher Jean Baudrillard, the presence of the museum contradicts the building’s exterior: ‘A body entirely composed of flux and surface connections chooses for its content the traditional culture of depth’ (‘The Beaubourg-effect’, p.6). More broadly, Baudrillard argued that the Pompidou Centre merely undermines the culture that it is supposed to democratize by attracting more people than the building can cope with (in fact, the building had to close for several years in the late 1990s for major refurbishment). Even without accepting Baudrillard’s proposition that it represents a containment of the violent energies that had found a more positive outlet in the political activism of 1968, it can be acknowledged that the popular success of the Pompidou Centre points to the implicit dangers of the marketing of art and culture as spectacle.

### Beyond the modern art museum

Today museums of modern art can be found in many cities in the United States and Western Europe. The German city of Frankfurt, for example, opened its Museum of Modern Art in 1991. Unlike its namesake in New York, this museum does not attempt to recount a comprehensive history of modern art from its origins to the present. Despite the name, it belongs to a group of museums of contemporary art founded since the late 1960s. This development results in part from the realization that a multiplicity of diverse movements and an endless flood of works of art make a complete survey all but impossible. Collections often start with art of the immediate post-World War II era, significantly with ‘national schools’ such as Abstract Expressionism in the United States: prominent, for example, in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, founded in 1979. Alternatively, they may begin with Minimalism and Pop Art of the 1960s as, for example, in Frankfurt. In both of these museums, the starting point and core of the collection was determined by the acquisition of a major private collection.

The first American institution to replace the word ‘modern’ in its name with ‘contemporary’ was the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, a non-collecting institution modelled on the German Kunstverein or Kunsthalle, which was established in 1936 as a branch of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As the ICA’s director, James S. Plaut, declared in 1948: “modern art was all over the world”.

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14 Surveys of visitors to the Pompidou Centre show that those who visit the permanent collection and art exhibitions (as opposed to other parts, especially those that have free admission) have much the same cultural and social background as those who visit other art museums; see Heinich, ‘The Pompidou Centre and its public’.

15 For a discussion of some of the reasons why a city may establish a museum of modern art, see Case Study 7.

16 These organizations are devoted to the promotion and display of contemporary art. The first examples date from the early nineteenth century.
art" describes a style which is taken for granted; it has had time to run its course and, in the pattern of all historic styles, has become both dated and academic' (Nelson W. Aldrich and James S. Plaut, "Modern art" and the American public, a statement by the Institute of Contemporary Art, formerly the Institute of Modern Art', 17 February 1948, quoted in Dissent, p.52). The term 'contemporary' has so far remained free from the historical, ideological and aesthetic implications associated with 'modernist' and 'modernism'. It suggests permanent contemporaneity, avoiding the inflexibility and emphasis on the preservation of the past typical of traditional collecting institutions. One director has suggested: 'As soon as single pieces of venture [avant-garde] art are recognised and become classics, they should no longer be exhibited and could be given to other state or municipal museums. It cannot be the objective of a Museum of Contemporary Art to earn itself a reputation by accumulating a collection of classics' (Klotz, 'Centre for Art and Media Technology, Karlsruhe', p.81). Clearly, this set-up resembles the conception of New York's MOMA in its early 'experimental' phase. However, as the history of MOMA demonstrates, such a policy proves difficult to maintain once the works of art have become valuable assets.

Recent museums break with the model set by MOMA not only in the scope of their collections but also in their architecture, exemplified by the 'postmodern museum'. One of the most celebrated and successful examples is the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt, mentioned above, designed by the Austrian architect Hans Hollein (Plate 22). Instead of a museum whose main distinction is its invisibility – a neutral container intended to promote

Plate 22
Photo: Rudolf Nagel, Frankfurt am Main.
Reproduced by courtesy of Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.

17 For further discussion of the concept of the postmodern museum, see the following case study.
the undisturbed contemplation of works of art – Hollein has created a building in which almost every room is different in size, plan, and height. The wide variety of original spatial solutions derived from its unusual wedge-shaped site (Plates 23, 24). Hollein acknowledges that ‘neutral space doesn’t exist: there are only characteristic spaces of a different magnitude (and access to them), with which the work of art enters into a dialogue – in reciprocal intensification’ (‘To exhibit, to place, to deposit’, p.41).

Even in this most ingenious and spectacular of museum buildings, however, we still find simple spaces following the premise of the white cube. Large areas of white wall provide a solid background for the works of art within a complex architectural structure that defies permanence and finality. A variety of windows and openings allow frequent views from the upper galleries into adjacent spaces or on to the surrounding buildings and streets. As Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, one of the most striking features of the postmodern museum is the vista:

the sudden opening in the wall of a given gallery to allow a glimpse of a far-away object, and thereby to interject within the collection of these objects a reference to the order of another. The pierced partition, the open balcony, the interior window – circulation in these museums is as much visual as physical, and that visual movement is a constant decentering through the continual pull of something else, another exhibit, another relationship, another formal order, inserted within this one gesture which is simultaneously one of interest and of distraction: the serendipitous discovery of the museum as flea-market.

(Krauss, ‘Postmodernism’s museum without walls’, p.347)
No prescribed route exists in the Frankfurt museum. The collection has literally to be ‘explored’, so that the visitor risks going through the same space twice or even getting lost. Chronological or stylistic sequence is impossible to maintain and is therefore rendered insignificant. Instead, a concentrated experience of both art and architecture has become the critical element of the museum visit, thereby reinforcing a sense of the specialness of art and its separation from the wider world. Priority is given to the confrontation with powerful works of art, installations or groups of works by a single artist, often occupying an entire gallery. ‘Each individual room could thus be seen as an event, heightening the impact of its intrinsic contrapuntal dynamic’, the museum’s director has claimed (Ammann, ‘From the perspective of my mind’s eye’, p.49). The Frankfurt museum thereby breaks with the emphasis on the progressive development of art over time characteristic of museums like MOMA.\textsuperscript{18}

An alternative to postmodern museum architecture is provided by the conversion of existing, usually industrial buildings. This practice has developed since the 1960s when many artists moved beyond the traditional media of painting and sculpture to include mixed-media works, large-scale installations and performances. They discovered disused warehouses and factories which provided the space, flexibility and informality required for experimental works.\textsuperscript{19} (By contrast, the relatively modest scale of MOMA’s galleries can be seen as a contributing factor to its seeming ambivalence towards some forms of experimental art.) Today industrial spaces have become one of the most favoured settings (especially by artists) for the display of contemporary art. In Los Angeles, for example, while the new Museum of Contemporary Art was being built, an abandoned police garage was converted by architect and exhibition designer Frank Gehry (b.1929) into the ‘Temporary Contemporary’ (Plate 25). This proved so successful that it has become a permanent part of the museum (subsequently renamed the Geffen Contemporary after a major donor). At the Hallen für Neue Kunst (Halls for New Art) in Schaffhausen, Switzerland, a collection centred on Minimalist and Conceptual art is displayed in the large, well-lit spaces of a former textile factory (Plate 26). These spaces resonate with the ideals of anonymity, seriality\textsuperscript{20} and industrial production that are embodied in Minimalist objects and installations, focusing attention on their subtle material qualities. As in the early manifestations of the white cube, they isolate and ‘protect’ the art from the distractions from the outside world, confirming their status as pure art objects.

\textsuperscript{18} Rosalind Krauss has argued that the atemporal, postmodern museum ‘would forego history in the name of a kind of intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is ... radically spatial’. Its origins, she argues, lie in the distinctive perceptual experience offered by Minimalist art (Krauss, ‘The cultural logic of the late capitalist museum’, p.46).

\textsuperscript{19} The development can be traced to artists and galleries who first discovered the lofts of SoHo in New York in the late 1960s, moving into the huge commercial spaces originally built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for light manufacturing industries and as warehouses. See Case Study 4.

\textsuperscript{20} That is to say, works of art using a series of identical objects (as in mass production) arranged in a strict order as opposed to the unique art object. Minimalist artists typically employed sheet metal, perspex, bricks and other industrial materials to make regular, geometric constructions on a large scale.

Conclusion

This case study has sought to demonstrate that modern art museums are anything but neutral spaces. On the one hand, the white cube is a historically constructed type of environment that is associated with the canonization of specific types of art. On the other hand, such museums are controlled by trustees, directors and curators who bring their own socially determined tastes and priorities to bear on the acquisition and display of works of art. As we have seen, modern art museums have been widely criticized for their aesthetic conservatism, social exclusiveness and ideological biases, both from within the contemporary art world (for example, by artists) as well as by art historians. Nevertheless, the white cube as a mode of presentation has demonstrated a surprising longevity, as it continues to be constantly reinvented and transformed to fit the latest developments in contemporary art and the latest museum concepts.

The history of the modern art museum in the twentieth century can be described as a struggle between revolution and preservation, participation and protection, experimentation and isolation. Today, like most art museums, modern art museums are attracting unprecedentedly high numbers of visitors; many new institutions are being founded while existing ones go on expanding. (At the time of writing, MOMA was embarking on its third major building project since the 1960s.21) At the same time, much twentieth-century art continues to be widely regarded as difficult, and small institutions devoted to contemporary art struggle for audiences and funding. Although not alone in seeking to bridge the gap between high art and popular appeal, seriousness of purpose and commercialization, education and entertainment, the dilemma of modern art museums is undoubtedly an especially acute one.

References


21 In order to help give shape to its plans, MOMA organized a series of lectures and debates about the museum and its future; see Elderfield, Imagining the Future. Another work about MCMA that was published as this book was going to press is Staniszewski, The Power of Display.


Krauss, Rosalind (1990) 'The cultural logic of the late capitalist museum', *October*, no.54, Fall, pp.3–17.


O'Doherty, Brian (1976) 'Inside the white cube: notes on the gallery space, part I,' *Artforum*, vol.XIV, no.7, March, pp.24–30. The three articles were also published as *Inside the White Cube*, Santa Monica, Lapis Press, 1986.

Read, Helen Appleton (1939) 'Art in our time', *American Magazine of Art*, vol.32, no.6, June.


In order to analyse the experience of visiting a modern art museum, we need to take account of elements that can easily be overlooked: whether it is a public or private institution; the role of the board of trustees; the sources of its income (public funding versus private donations); the architecture (whether the museum occupies a purpose-built or a converted structure, for example); the design of the interior and the extent to which it follows the 'white cube' model; the layout of the galleries and the arrangement of the collection (by chronology, artist, medium, genre, etc.); the display of the works of art (the height at which pictures are hung, the lighting, etc.); the information supplied to visitors, whether on wall texts, labels, information sheets, guidebooks or through other means\(^1\) – in short, the context of presentation.

**Origins of the white cube**

The primary sources for the study of museum display are installation photographs of galleries and exhibitions. For a long time the context of presentation did not receive any special attention, which explains the lack of visual and written evidence, especially for the early part of the twentieth century. We need to view this material critically, bearing in mind that it follows

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\(^1\) In many modern art museums, for example, the labelling is kept to a minimum with only the name of the artist, title, medium and date of the work being given. The rationale for limiting the information available to visitors is to aid concentration and avoid distraction; artists may choose to call their work 'Untitled' for the same reason.
certain rules and conventions. Installation photographs are generally black and white and show the spaces without any visitors. The art museum in general and the white cube in particular are presented in their ideal state — as a pure and absolute space seemingly conceived solely for the undisturbed presentation of art, unadulterated by the intrusion of human beings. The installation shot without figures reinforces, according to O’Doherty, a conception of the spectator in the white cube as a disembodied eye. This conception can also be discerned in the rules of conduct in museums: the ban on touching the works of art, talking loudly, eating, etc.

Compare Plates 9 and 10, which show a gallery in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York dating from around 1900 and the Cubism and Abstract Art exhibition held by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1936. Consider their architecture and decoration, the arrangement of the works of art, and how all these elements might affect the experience of the viewer. Can you suggest any reason for the replacement of the traditional model of museum display by a modernist one?

Discussion
In the Metropolitan Museum of Art a large number of paintings with heavy gold frames are hung against a dark painted wall. They are stacked in two or three rows so as to form an intricate pattern, with a larger painting at the centre of the main wall. The arrangement is by genre, most of the pictures being portraits, though the right-hand wall seems to be given over to a single large work which you may have identified as a history painting (it is Emmanuel Leutze’s celebrated image of Washington Crossing the Delaware of 1850). Benches provide rest for tired visitors while railings serve to protect the paintings, together evoking a human presence in a way that the later photograph does not. In the Museum of Modern Art the paintings are hung at spacious intervals and in a single, though irregular, row. Instead of having wainscoting and cornices (as in the older gallery), the walls are completely undecorated. Nothing distracts attention from the works of art, implying a much more immediate, concentrated viewing experience than previously. A parallel can also be discerned between the light walls, right angles and overall austerity of the space and the abstract-geometric paintings (by Piet Mondrian) with their network of straight lines against pale grounds, suggesting that the display was conceived with this type of painting in mind.

Radical innovations in museum display have generally evolved out of developments in art itself. Throughout the twentieth century, artists demanded and obtained environments that reflected the principles embodied in their work. The white walls and simple structures of modern architecture provided an appropriate context for the display of art that emphasized simplicity of means, clarity of expression and purity of ideals. The origins of the white cube can be traced back to the artist’s studio and, above all, to the austere, simple laboratory spaces of the abstract artist in which creation is an act of rational and disengaged calculation. The architect and abstract painter

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2 However, this does not necessarily mean that the sources of inspiration for abstract art are strictly rational and scientific. The work of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), for example, was informed by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritualist theories. His balanced compositions reflected basic oppositions such as the material and spiritual, individual and collective, male and female, etc.
Plate 9 Picture gallery in the south wing, c.1900, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. All Rights Reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.