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Excerpt from Chapter 3: *Culture to Go: From Art World to The World*

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*The Alternative Museum/Alternatives to Museums*

Historically, museums have been keepers of convention; upholding established aesthetic principles, underscoring chronological evolution, and rendering the past as precious. Museums attest to individual artists' genius, emphasize the monetary worth of artistic endeavor, and reinforce conventional views regarding the scope, nature and function of art. By the 1970s, many artists tired of these constraints and sought venues beyond the museum and commercial gallery, co-opting other-than-art spaces, and establishing cooperative and nonprofit alternatives. CoLab (Collaborative Projects) adopted a "parasite" approach to commandeer unused spaces, "sometimes extralegally." (CoLab's "The Times Square Show" was held in a former massage parlor and bus depot.) Another New York-based collective, Group Material, used storefronts and solicited its neighboring community's direct participation in exhibitions. Lucy Lippard describes such methods as "abrasively populist," allowing "the rough edges of the social stuff to grate against the smooth edges of the art stuff" (1989: 215-17). These artists did not so much overthrow the museum's authority, as reaffirm its

health by questioning its precepts, limitations and assumptions. By doing so, they helped delineate the museum's role, and conversely, identified the needs better served elsewhere.

In assessing the NEA's Art-in-Public-Places program (see Chapter 1), John Beardsley observed that art in a museum exists within a "protected context," bolstered by "professional opinion" and considered by viewers "predisposed...and receptive to it." He made a sharp distinction between museums and "public places" for a "more general audience," claiming that artworks encountered in the latter context, freed from the museum's "inhibiting authority," were open to greater public scrutiny and debate (1981a: 9; 1981b: 43). Andrew McClellan concurs that audience interactions with public art tend to be more "imaginative" than those within the museum: "For better or worse, public art objects lead a more active life—a life of greater risk (of invisibility, disdain, and vandalism) but also of more varied engagement by a larger cross-section of people" (2003: xiii-xiv). Clearly, we respond as much to the site at which art is experienced, as well as the attendant audiences and activities found there, as to the art itself (Senie 2003: 186-88). Though the museum is actually much broader minded than its elitist reputation, it remains underutilized in terms of public art. One way to reverse this situation is for museums to invite artists and the public to interrogate their nature, function and collections. Thus instead of an isolating container or decorative foil for art, the museum serves as a dialectical site to investigate and even contest its own aesthetic and cultural heritage. As the museum loosens its grip on a definitive account of history it becomes a more

pliable psychological and intellectual place, making “the social organizational and ideological operations of that space visible” (Deutsche 1992: 166). For example in January 1969, curator Jan van der Marck asked Christo and Jeanne-Claude to do an installation at the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. They decided upon what would become one of their trademark gestures, and wrapped the exterior and interior (including draping the floors and stairs) of the museum. In *Wrap In, Wrap Out* the museum became the “subject for examination...the container, is itself contained.” According to Brian O’Doherty, packaging the “museum (explicit) and staff (implicit) proposes that containment is synonymous with understanding” (1981: 334, 336, 338). As people sat on the floor, contemplating bare walls, their expectations of the museum as a host for art, and what that art is supposed to look like, were challenged. The museum, both concealed and revealed by the wrapping, actually became the art.

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill argues that in addition to information about objects on display, museum visitors also need to understand the history, layout, and collecting priorities of the institution itself, otherwise “the visit begins in a vacuum and it becomes hard work to make sense of subsequent experiences” (1994: 91). Artist Fred Wilson bursts such furtive bubbles, scrutinizing how the museum frames spectators’ gazes and expectations through its selective representations of history, culture and identity. As “an artist...African American and Native American...actually working in the museum at that time,” Wilson “was in a position to notice some of the incongruities of these spaces.” In 1992-93 he had a prime opportunity to use the museum as his “palette,” and created *Mining*

*the Museum* at Baltimore's conservative Maryland Historical Society. The artist was in concentrated residency at the Society for a month and a half, and after that returned throughout a year. Wilson found it to be an "alien environment," but "realized it wasn't so much the objects as the way the things were placed that really offended" him. Through an exhaustive process, which included speaking to literally everyone who worked at the Society and looking at every object in its collection, Wilson was able to "mine" (to "dig" or "blow up" or to make it his own) the museum. The artist had a full floor of the museum and unrestrained autonomy, which he used to make interventions that created "a new public persona" for (and shed some unflattering light upon) the Society. Wilson conceptually shifted objects already on view, and displayed many others that usually languished in storage observing, "what they put on view says a lot about the museum, but what they don't put on view says even more." In one display he turned the backs of "cigar-store Indians" toward viewers "so that you couldn't look in their faces and accept the stereotype." On the wall behind these were photos of contemporary, local Native Americans, which the artist found outside the museum's collection after being told, "There are no Indians in Maryland." For another part of the exhibition, Wilson placed slave shackles in the same vitrine as ornate silverwork, so that the "beautiful" would be forced to acknowledge and coexist with the "horrific." Though Wilson's role in *Mining* is often perceived as that of a curator, he maintains that he acted as an artist, exploring how museum display shapes our views of the world and each other (Wilson in Karp and Wilson 1993: 251-56, 258). Rather than "repressing the social conflicts" that constituted

the museum's "very conditions" (Deutsche 1996: xviii), Wilson aptly exposed these, allowing exhibition visitors to draw their own conclusions.

Podcasts are another effective means of intervening in museum frameworks. In 2004 Art Mobs, a collaborative project by students at Marymount Manhattan College under the direction of David Gilbert, a professor of Organizational Communication, began providing unofficial tours of the collection at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Art Mobs' audio guides offer lively alternatives to the official recorded tour, a standard feature in many museums in which an expert, often a museum director or curator, takes the visitor on an audio tour of a particular museum or exhibition. Although these official tours have evolved greatly since their inception (allowing visitors to choose the works they wish to hear about while bypassing others), they are still fairly linear and decidedly authoritative affairs. There are always those works they do not discuss, a particular viewpoint they do not represent, or a curious question they cannot answer. While making the museum a more hospitable, user-friendly place for many people, these audio tours still reinforce a stratified hierarchy in which the legacy of art history and clout of the museum reigns. Podcasts by people other than museum professionals cleverly intervene at particular physical sites, while interrogating the conceptual paradigms of all such institutions. Art Mobs' podcasts can be quite informational, but are more "entertaining," "playful" and "opinionated" than the standard audio tour ever dares to be, mixing casual observations, expert commentary, and music. Though the tone is irreverent, it is also loving: Art Mobs offer an apologia to MoMA on their website, proclaiming

that they “hack a platform out of respect for it, because its elegance invites participation.” The group seizes upon digital culture’s inherent democracy (see Chapter 2, *Art as the Agora*), which erodes institutions’ proprietary controls over their images and content. Art Mobs capitalizes on the ubiquity of MP3 players and ease of podcasting, imploring those outside the group to “Help us hack the gallery experience, help us remix MoMA!” (art\_mobs 2004). The group hosts these other “homemade” audio guides to MoMA on its own feed. Taking up the notion of “Remix Culture,” Art Mobs prompts us to become more proactive consumers of media (museums included), and encourages museum visitors to experience the artworks on their own merits as well. Gilbert conceives the Art Mobs guides as personalized “soundtracks” through which to “sample” the museum: “We are democratizing the experience of touring an art museum; we are offering a way for anyone to ‘curate’ their own little corner of MoMA” (Gilbert qtd. in rocketboom.com 2005; art\_mobs 2004).

Such anti-elitist rhetoric and action is not new. In 1970 Alanna Heiss spearhead the Institute of Art and Urban Resources, working with the New York City Housing Authority to locate abandoned or repossessed buildings and saving them from demolition. Such places were revamped into studio spaces and alternative art venues, the most famous of these being P.S. 1, a defunct public school in Long Island City co-opted for use as an art institution. The Institute received funding from a variety of sources, including the New York Council on the Arts and the NEA, and cultivated audiences drawn from the general public as well as art world initiates. Heiss de-emphasized the financial aspects of art and

focused on its potential for social commentary and change (Smagula 1983: 31-32, 34), countering the officious, unapproachable image of the museum with a friendly welcome in more familiar venues. But ultimately, these types of endeavors remain the purview of those who are in-the-loop about the constant flux of happenings in the art world. Undoubtedly P.S.1 offers an alternative to the staid museum, but over time it has become institutionalized too (it is now an “affiliate” of MoMA), and its primary audience is ultimately an art crowd. If venues like P.S.1 cannot shake the art world’s social boundaries, are there other places where these borders could be, if not completely overcome, at least more effectively mitigated? I keep thinking of the shopping mall.

Academics have probed the mall for decades. They debate its use of social engineering, examine intersections of urban planning and retail consumption, and critique the capitalist system. Many believe the mall is an unfortunate “cocoon” proffering instant gratification and protecting us from “assorted discomforts” (Huxtable 1997: 107), while others concede that it might be public but is not “communal” (Lippard 1999: 76). Margaret Crawford describes shopping malls as spectacles of accumulated goods, meant to stimulate the consumptive desires of their demographically targeted audiences (1992: 3-17). But a visit to the mall is not so inherently passive, even when our interactions there are carefully managed. The mall brings together people diverse in age, ethnicity, and socio-economic class. They come there to shop, but also to interact in a social space that—whether scholars like it or not—has come to function as a town square in many communities. There is little concern that the

mall is for us; after all, without our patronage the businesses would close. While this overtly commercial nature can be crass, it is refreshing too: we know what the mall wants from us, which might help us better determine what we want from it. People often feel comfortable at the mall and confident in their actions while there, which directly opposes how many would characterize their feelings when in a museum—overwhelmed, intimidated or unprepared, without mastery over the situation. Not everyone will be more receptive to an art experience presented in the context of a shopping mall, but it seems reasonable to assume that some viewers will thrive away from the pressuring weight of museum authority. As a site for public art the mall strikes a populist note. Its business enterprises keep unrealistic utopian sentiments and esoteric academicism at bay, while rendering other egalitarian aims more attainable; transcending the museum's perceived elitism while making art experiences widely available. Anyone whose interest is piqued by the art can engage in aesthetic contemplation and critique; those who are indifferent to it can continue shopping. Self-described "social architect" Dolores Hayden enumerates the difficulties in creating "an American sense of place," proclaiming that malls are "placeless" representations of "the common language of American speculative real estate development...the production of space as a commodity" (1992: 263). On two counts she is correct: most malls lack architectural distinction, and their tenants are usually focused on less than noble goals. But the mall's familiar vernacular and unvarnished commercialism forge a space in which a multitude of American ideals are produced and reflected; as such it is a place where public art could thrive.

While touting the mall's advantages as a site for public art, it becomes necessary to acknowledge a related phenomenon—the prevalence of art galleries in malls. Personally, I do not object to this other than most of the art sold in these venues is not very engaging; reproductions of Impressionist landscapes, photographs of local landmarks, and colorful abstractions that match the couch. The success of Thomas Kinkade, whose galleries have proliferated at malls, is endemic of the situation. His quaint images of stone cottages, arching footbridges, and promising rainbows are easily dismissed as lightweight fluff. But it is not Kinkade's subject matter that is problematic; it is his disregard for viewers' critical faculties. At his galleries and online, Kinkade provides specific interpretations for his pieces; he more than guides our encounters with them, he tries to dictate these. Although his mass appeal might suggest that Kinkade is a populist, he is anything but; in his work meaning is wrought primarily by the artist. This approach inscribes a limited world view on the viewer's experience, which is not encouraged to expand beyond the confines of Kinkade's own imagination. It also assumes that viewers must rely on Kinkade to interpret and homogenize their experience for them, thereby neutralizing the potential for alternative or less enthusiastic readings of his art.

There is a lot of art in America's malls, and much of it is not very good, challenging or engaging. It is visual Muzak, filling the voids in our view and marking meeting points, but unlikely to stop us in our tracks or invite lengthy consideration. With its diverse audiences and ample physical spaces, the mall is a missed opportunity for public art. Since the mall is a conglomerate of private

business interests, which do not want to dampen patrons' consumerism, it is unlikely that socially conscious art exploring issues like AIDS would proliferate there. But this does not mean that the mall is unsuitable for public art, just that it is not hospitable to all of it. Some artists have already explored the mall as a public art venue. In 1985 John Kavalos collaborated with "upper-middle-class" New Jersey teens to paint murals in three suburban malls (Cherry Hill, Echelon, and Woodbridge). The project, a joint effort of the Rouse Corporation's Art-in-the-Marketplace and the New Jersey State Art Council's Artist-in-Residence programs, benefited both the participants who learned by doing, and mall patrons who had firsthand experiences with the artists and artworks. There were many repeat visitors, including one elderly man who watched their progress daily. Kavalos provided art history and painting instruction and when completed, the murals were dismantled with sections given to each of the teen volunteers. By teaming up a professional artist with motivated though inexperienced collaborators (and an often accidental audience), Phyllis Rosser contends the project created a "sense of community" in the malls (1989: 132-33), which are often condemned for their lack of social engagement.

As Lawrence Levine reminds us, museums were sites of entertainment and amusement until they became "sacralized" in the middle of the nineteenth century (1988: 151). Though Phillippe de Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, worries that museums are less likely to challenge visitors if they are too concerned with attracting them, he perceives the museum's transition from "repository" to "activity center" (2004: 157-58, 160-61). One way in which

the museum has made this shift is to become more like a mall, a transformation often prompted by financial need. Almost every major institution features an array of cafes, restaurants, bookstores and gift shops (regional ones boast similar but more modest facilities). It is conceivable that a visitor might not delve any further into the museum beyond these amenities, which is troubling; at its most fundamental level, the museum is a place for direct encounters with art. Yet Gurian believes the museum's abilities to attract diverse audiences, build community, and tackle social issues are enhanced through such mixed-use spaces (2001: 99-100, 107-08, 112-13). These can enrich our "total experience" of the museum (Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 88); making us feel welcome, providing a respite so we can return to the galleries with fresh eyes, or hosting a good conversation about the art we have just seen. When the increased social dimensions of the museum are embraced, and the commercial aspects of its existence fully acknowledged rather than downplayed, the audience will be better prepared to participate in its culture.

In the mid 1990s when Kansas City's percent-for-art program was booming, critic Peter von Ziegesar noted that public art had not only "changed the physical landscape" of the city, but its attendant controversies had transformed "the cultural climate as well." He concluded; "For good or for ill, almost every Kansas Citian now has an opinion about contemporary art and is conversant with at least some of its terms" (1995: 55). I suggest there is very little "ill" to be found in this scenario. Kansas Citians engaged in critical discussions about the function of art in their daily lives, and cultural institutions such as the

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art directly impacted those dialogues. Although de Montebello does not wish to “demystify” art, insisting upon the “wonder” of its experience apart from daily life, he urges museums to put faith in the “public’s ability and willingness” to share in their missions. To do such is not a matter of pandering to or patronizing visitors, but respecting their aptitude: “To gain and keep the public’s trust we must not sell the public short” (2004: 116, 160, 168). In his impassioned plea for social inclusion, Fleming outlined an optimistic path for the museum’s future:

In creating a museum that inspires and uplifts people, that confronts them with ideas, that helps them understand a little more about themselves and their surroundings, you are doing the best a museum can do ...having this aim...refutes the accusation that, in order to have widespread mass appeal the museum must ‘dumb down.’ Not so, not if you want to make a difference to people’s lives. (2002: 224)

It is neither obligatory nor feasible for a museum to entice every individual to partake in its offerings; potential museum-goers must assume some liability if they reject or ignore the museum on a reactionary basis. But it is the museum’s responsibility to extend a sincere invitation to the public, and the public’s duty to make informed choices when accepting or declining such. The museum needs to lecture less *at*, and converse more *with* its audiences to forge a sense of “shared ownership” (Spicer 1994), striving toward “an open dialogue from the start” that is “potentially ongoing, not prescribed to a simple exchange” (Gamble 1994: 22). Only after museums better combat their elitist reputations, and their audiences

overcome any lingering apprehensions and anxieties, shall a truly public exchange take place between them.