



ARTWORKS AS MUSEUMS: ARTISTS AS CURATORS

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ABSTRACT

Given that public display is at the core of the visual arts, this research simultaneously explores the methods of the field itself while publicly sharing those results. It is both reflexive and reflective. By creating artwork that represent themselves as self-contained museums, many artists have adopted the role of curator as a means of subverting the established power hierarchy and altering the artwork's relationship with its audience. The examination of specific artworks along with relevant display conventions, both historic and contemporary, establishes a context and continuity for this format of work. Since all of these works rely upon a manipulation of established display conventions, examination of the politics and persuasive power of display is directly relevant. Primary research conducted at a range of institutions provides the foundation for the more specific discussion of artworks presenting themselves as museums.

Keywords: Fictive art, museum display, artist curators

INTRODUCTION

Art, by definition, requires the creation of a particular context in order to be considered and understood as art. Without this specific context, the relationship between the audience and the artwork is lost along with the potential meaning of the artwork. How the artwork is presented to the audience, using any number of a wide variety of approaches of display, is the primary way that this essential context is created.

CURATOR: One who has the care and superintendence of something; *especially* one in charge of a museum, zoo, or other place of exhibit origin: Latin, from *curare* to care, from *cura* care (retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/curator>).

Today's art curators do more than just look after or care for a museum's objects; they research and write for their fields of expertise. They are the people who choose what goes into a collection by fundraising and overseeing purchases for the organization. They are also the people who decide what items are shown during an exhibition from the collection. In essence, whatever the public sees or reads within an exhibit is the vision of the curator (Kuoni, 2001, pps. 57-58). By taking on the role of curator, an artist can



bypass the institutional voice of authority and control what and how their own work is seen by the audience.



Smithsonian Institution Building, West Wing, c 1903

Both artists and curators make use of the way that objects are displayed as a way to communicate the value and importance of the object. For the audience, the environment of the object and what related objects are also included in the environment are what determine how the object is to be understood. Although these fundamental principles seem very basic, their implications are profound. The belief in the authenticity of the object is at the core of the perceived value of the objects presented to the public. This perceived value makes the displayed object important, and, therefore, worth the resources that are used in its preservation.

Early museums did little to educate and direct the general museum patron; only providing what is now called 'open storage' to their visitors. Objects were often cluttered and gave little to no explanation. This practice changed after the Smithsonian Institute's Museum Director, Dr. George Brown Goode, wrote a book entitled *The Principles of Museum Administration* in 1895. Considered the father of the modern American museum, many of his principles on object viewing, preservation, and instructional labels became the standard for the museum industry, especially for those institutions whose missions included public education. (Miles, 1988, pps. 4-5) "An efficient educational Museum may be described as a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen" His methodology of leading the viewer through text, the selection and exclusion of objects exhibited, and display techniques was developed in order to change the museum from a place of amusement to one of serious study. (Goode, 1895) Many of



his recommendations on labeling and display can still be seen in art and natural history museums today in addition to his strict views on the separation of art and anthropology.

HISTORIC CASE STUDIES

What makes art different from other objects that are preserved in collections is their intended function and role in society. This intention, particularly in contemporary art, is often self-fulfilling: art is art because it was made to be art. The separation of the artwork from any other function in society other than to be art is a relatively modern concept. The manipulation and highlighting of this concept can be traced, somewhat arguably, to Marcel Duchamp's 1917 artwork, *Fountain* (Camfield, 1989).



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917

This is the first commonly accepted example of a found object being presented as a finished artwork. In addition to how the object was displayed, a significant part of its shift of context is the application of an invented artist's signature ("R. Mutt") and its date of "completion," as was commonly done with other artworks of the time. Through this artwork, Marcel Duchamp was placing greater importance on the intention of the artist over any other technical skills, traditions, or material value. However, to ensure that this object was understood as an artwork, Duchamp displayed it on a pedestal in exactly the same method as other traditional sculptures of the time.

The next development in the display of art objects by an artist is the work of Constantin Brâncuși. Throughout the 20th Century, Brancusi often subtly explored the relationship of the sculpture and its method of display by incorporating the pedestal into the piece and creating an ambiguity for the audience.



Artworks of Constantin Brâncuși

Although a very subtle distinction, this approach to sculpture can be seen as a significant step forward in the ability of the artist to control the means of display of their artworks as opposed to the personal choices of curators and other museum staff. (Hultén, P., Dumitresco, N., & Istrati, A., 1987).

Later in the 20th Century, building upon the approach of Constantin Brâncuși, Donald Judd, in his Minimalist sculptures, moved the work directly onto the floor, eliminating the pedestal and the perceived distance from the audience. In the piece, *100 untitled works in mill aluminum*, Donald Judd had the Lippincott Company of Connecticut, USA, fabricate one hundred different aluminum boxes to his specifications. The building in which they were to be permanently installed was also significantly altered in direct relationship to the aluminum boxes. Not only was the hand of the artist removed from the work, the entire building and all its contents became the artwork, forcing the audience to literally enter the artwork in order to experience it. This artwork, along with many others, helped to create an entirely new type of artwork, "installation art," where the entire space and all of its contents are to be considered the artwork. This is in contrast to the prior view of considering only the individual objects within a gallery space as artwork (Stockebrand, 2010).



Donald Judd, *100 untitled works in mill aluminum*, 1982-1986

CONTEMPORARY CASE STUDIES

“Fictive art” is a term coined by Antoinette LaFarge in 2001 to “describe a particular form of aesthetic production that doesn’t belong to any one field. Fictive artworks have clearly fictional elements but extend outside the realm of the purely fictive in various ways, principally through the creation of realia. A working definition of the term might be: *plausible fictions created through production of real-world objects, events, and entities.*” (retrieved from <http://fictive.arts.uci.edu/>)

Many artists that have been creating fictions about their art objects also make use of display conventions as a means to reinforcing their fictional narrative. The use of commonly accepted display approaches from galleries and museums is a way to create credibility and believability, often at the expense of the audience. In addition, it can function of as a critique of the currently existing dominant power structure of the museums and galleries over the individual artists.

David Wilson’s Museum of Jurassic Technology is an entire building in Los Angeles, California, USA, that promotes itself as “an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic.” The “museum” is filled with man-made objects despite the fact that no humans yet existed during the Lower Jurassic period. What further complicates its classification and understanding is the authenticity and accuracy of many artifacts and text. However, the genuine objects are presented in the exact same manner as items with obviously inaccurate supporting text. Not only does this provoke the audience to question the authenticity of objects presented by other museums, thus attempting to subvert their cultural power, it also challenges the assumptions of whether any or all of this work



could be considered art. If the Museum of Jurassic Technology is not an artwork, then remains the question what it is? (Weschler, 1996)



Interior display of *Museum of Jurassic Technology*

In 2009, fiber artist Elaine Bradford produced an installation artwork entitled “The Museum of Unnatural History” (retrieved from <http://elainebradford.weebly.com/museum-of-unnatural-history1.html>) Bradford’s installation gave exhibit attendees the feel of grade school nostalgia coupled with whimsy by using the display style of older natural history museums to showcase her designs.

Based on a fictional scientific expedition, Bradford presented the specimens “discovered” by Dr. Thomas Harrigan. One display showed two stuffed mountain goats that were spliced together; the meeting of their forms covered by knitted striped outerwear. Called the pushmi-pullyu, a reference to Dr. Dolittle, the rams were placed on a wood pedestal with their Latin name below in gold letters, a common natural history display method. Other animals, such as the trapeze squirrel, also in knitted skins, occupied reconstructed environments with text panels which explained their behavioral habits. Despite the appearance of the strangely combined dead animals incased in colorful sweaters, the setting for the creatures—complete with environment dioramas, “scientific” illustrations, a small gift shop, and a live docent—provoked a feeling similar to an educational field trip. By replicating the familiar museum format, Bradford succeeded in not only controlling the space to tell a story but also created a parody concerning the voice of authority. (Klaasmeyer, 2009)



Elaine Bradford, *Tragus Januali (Pushmi Pullu)*, 2009

Beauvais Lyons' artistic career is based on humor and pranks. His website, the Hokes Archives, presents the collection of Everitt Ormsby Hokes, a Victorian publisher who had an interest in archeology and was an avid collector of antiquities. Lyons portrays himself, a professor of art, as the curator of Hokes' collection which encompasses artifacts from Neolithic cultures, American folk art, elaborate medical diagrams, and lithographic prints published by the Association for Creative Zoology. The fact that Lyons is an art professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville is indeed true but the existence of Hokes and his collection is not; the objects, prints, research, and extensive documentation were created by Lyons himself. (Retrieved from <http://web.utk.edu/~blyons/>) Like Elaine Bradford, Lyons uses the museum display format to tell stories of fictional scientific discovery, but unlike Bradford, Lyons work is created and presented to look completely authentic.



Beauvais Lyons, *Aazudian Fresco: Ulbok (the God of Beer)*



Beauvais Lyons, *Vessel with an Inverted Spout*

Lyons first fictive work was completed in 1980 in an exhibition entitled “The Arenot Ceremonial Complex in the Noawa River”. His imagined civilization, the Arenot people, was “discovered” through ceramic burial items. It is through documentation and display that the objects, and therefore the fiction, received validity and credibility. At the exhibition, Lyons would introduce himself as archeologist, Heinrich Dreckmuller (German for “dirt or filth” miller) and tour unsuspecting patrons through the exhibit. (Mason, 1989) His theatrical role as expert and public educator would appear in later fake archeological exhibitions. Since the Arenots, Lyons has created and exhibited two other civilizations, the Apasht and Aazudian cultures.

Using artificially aged artifact fragments of tablets and exquisitely detailed prints from fake scholarly works—all of which he makes himself—Lyons presented mock-documentation to an unwary public. “It’s a kind of theater,” said Lyons. “All of the objects are props in a story”. So thorough was his academic writing style interspersed with accounts of factual archeological digs, that even viewers who were told it was imaginary didn’t always accept that the civilizations were fake. Lyons’ work underscores the need for healthy skepticism when viewing or accepting expert information and brings attention to the public’s willing participation in its own gullibility. (Mason, 1989)



Deanna Ooley, *Bear Brooch*, 2010

Deanna Ooley's current work, *The Penumbra Holding Group Collection* is a series of objects presented in a museum-style exhibit. The installation is a combination of business ephemera with hand-crafted elements and uses the resulting pseudo-artifacts to narrate an imagined tale concerning a fictional secret society discovered by two friends in the New York Wall Street district. Ooley uses graph imagery, market icons, and currency extensively, revealing chief interests of the organization and the need for symbolism to reinforce belief systems within the imaginary group. The collection can be divided into three separate series; the masculine, the feminine, and the sacred. The objects' forms give hints to their use and purpose within the group but the actual rite is left uncertain to non-members (the viewer). Several pieces illustrate the parable of the bull and the bear- a stock market creation parable invented by Ooley. Like Beauvais Lyons, Ooley sees the objects in her installation as props for the narrative and uses panels and museum-style labels to lend credibility to the storyline. In order to create an authentic museum experience, she contacted the Smithsonian's exhibition staff concerning display methods and researched accepted text conventions.

Fascinated with how the method of presentation and display affects the perception of the object, James Thurman's recent work uses the format of a natural history museum as a cultural critique. In his "Ancient Artifacts of the 21st Century" installation, he uses objects of his own creation as the subject for a fictitious future's misinterpretation. Through this humorous misinterpretation, issues of material culture hierarchies, consumerism, and environmentalism are explored in a playful and accessible manner.



James Thurman, entry to *Ancient Art-i-facts*, 2009

The “McMuseum of Anthropological Archaeology” is a fictitious museum of the 24th Century that has humorously misinterpreted these “ancient artifacts of the 21st Century.” The artifacts are actually components of an art installation created to serve as a critique of contemporary consumerism. The imaginary future created as a setting for the McMuseum is one where corporations have assumed control of all aspects of society and are using the discovery of these artifacts to support their consumption-based society. All objects included in the exhibition are comprised of relevant recycled materials, such as paper, books, flatware, and dishes.

CONCLUSION

As shown through the variety of examples and approaches, the means of display is a critical component of any curated object or environment. Although often overlooked, it is potentially the most influential factor on the perceptions and conclusions of the audience. No presentation is entirely neutral since every component is part of a larger narrative, whether that agenda is determined by curators or individual artists. Artists that consider and incorporate the method of display into their artworks have found this strategy to be a successful approach to maintaining greater control of the dynamic relationship between their artworks and their intended audience.

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