The museum as muse: [brochure]  
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The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.
The public museum, since its inception in the late eighteenth century, has enjoyed a complex, interdependent, and ever-changing relationship with the artist. This exhibition explores this rich and varied relationship through a broad-based, international survey of works about museums and their practices and policies. Focused on the postwar period, it also features earlier artists, including American portraitist Charles Willson Peale, several nineteenth-century photographers, and Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky. New works have been created specifically for this exhibition by Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Janet Cardiff, Mark Dion, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson; Wilson and Allan McCollum have also created special Web projects. Collectively, the artists in this exhibition have examined nearly every aspect of museums—from their curatorial and administrative policies to their exhibition strategies and fund-raising practices—using a range of media to frame their critiques, including painting, sculpture, photography, installation, audio, video, and performance art. Many have appropriated aspects of museum practice as a conceptual or formal strategy, and some have even constructed their own personal museums.

Herbert Distel. Detail of Museum of Drawers. 1970-77. Chest of drawers containing miniature works by various artists. Overall (approx.) 72 x 28 ½ x 28 ½” (183 x 42 x 42 cm). Kunsthaus Zürich. Donation of Herbert Distel and The Foundation Julius Bar. Photo: ©1999, Kunsthaus Zürich. All rights reserved

Perhaps the most obvious way artists have studied museums is through the camera lens, using photography to document works in a collection, to capture visitors responding to art, or to direct attention to overlooked areas of museums. This exhibition includes examples of nineteenth-century museum photography by Britons Charles Thurston Thompson, Roger Fenton, and Stephen Thompson, and Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Gustave Le Gray, all of whom showcased the beauty and preciousness of the objects in exhibition spaces such as the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the French Salon.

While Zoe Leonard’s meditative photographs of mirrors at The Metropolitan Museum of Art relate to this tradition, more often twentieth-century photographers have focused on the vitality of museums, rather than on their collections. This is evidenced in the works by Henri Cartier-Bresson, David Seymour, Elliott Erwitt, Eve Arnold, and Lutz Dille in this exhibition. Thomas Struth’s conviction that museums may be compared to train stations is evident in his vivid, large-scale images of crowds at The Museum of Modern Art, the Accademia in Venice, and the Louvre. Jeff Wall’s sixteen-foot-long photograph Restoration (1993), a Cibachrome transparency displayed in a light box, depicts a staged scene: the simulation of restorers repairing a large-scale panorama. For Wall, however, this immediate theme is less important than emphasizing the massiveness and ultimate futility of the restorer’s task. Christian Milovanoff photographs feet depicted in major paintings in the Louvre’s collection, while Candida Höfer turns her attention to the unexpected and unseen in museums—vacant lounges and lobbies, for example—emphasizing their blandness and impersonality.

Vik Muniz created his Equivalents (Museum of Modern Art) (1995) shortly after visiting the exhibition Alfred Stieglitz at Lake George at The Museum of Modern Art. He photographed the Museum’s marble floor to create a series of enigmatic images referencing Steiglitz’s photographs of the same title and evoking skies, clouds, and the moon. Fred Wilson’s new work Art in Our Time (1998), created for this exhibition, is also rooted in visual experiences at The Museum of Modern Art. He chooses to examine the Museum’s memory of itself by mining its photographic archive, selecting images and presenting them in ways that reveal much about the Museum that cannot be apprehended from its public galleries. He further explores this collection of images in his special on-line project, Road to Victory (1999).

Duchamp worked on a similar scale when constructing the Boîte-en-valise, or box in principle to the production of art. Joseph Cornell, Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Broodthaers, who acknowledged a debt to Duchamp, also set up a personal museum, standing frames, diminutive Readymades hung in a vertical “gallery,” and loose prints number of items inside. Each box unfolds to reveal various works displayed on pull-out panels. Over a number of years Cornell amassed photographs, clippings, and other documents that he would arrange in mock-up boxes that serve as archives and a miniature exhibition spaces.

During the 1950s and 60s, he released an edition consisting of six different series that eliminated the suitcase, used different colored fabrics for the cover, and altered the mounting names, diminutive Readymades hung in a vertical “gallery,” and those prints mounted on paper, among them a reproduction of L.H.O.O.Q. Duchamp created L.H.O.O.Q. (1919), by taking an ordinary reproduction of the Mona Lisa and adding a mustache, goatee, and lascivious pun (understood when the letters lhooq are pronounced rapidly in French to mean “she's got a hot ass”). Both his boxes and his works were arranged, with somber evocations, on wire-mesh grills that recall the racks of museum storage areas. A certain sense of melancholy is heightened by the cramped, dimly lit room in which these photographs are hung.

In Boltanski's work, the role of the museum is to act as a kind of “archive” of the past, collecting and preserving memories and experiences. The museum is seen as a place where history is created and preserved, and where the present is shaped through the lens of the past. Boltanski's work often explores themes of memory, loss, and the ways in which museums contribute to the construction of collective memory.

Artists and museums are the phenomenon of interest to me. The relationship between artists and museums is an intricate one, shaped by power dynamics, cultural narratives, and the desire to preserve one's own work. The use of museum storage areas as a site of artistic production and the role of the museum as a site of collection and display are central to my work. In my practice, I often use museum storage areas as a site of artistic production, using the space as a kind of laboratory for experimenting with ideas and concepts. The museum, in this sense, is seen as a site of artistic production, a place where the artist and the museum collaborate to create new works of art.

Charles Willson Peale, best known as a late-eighteenth-century portrait painter, was also the creator of the first American museum. In 1764, he founded a museum in Philadelphia that included an extensive portrait gallery and a taxonomic structure that can be seen in the Great Chain of Being (1822). In this painting, Peale depicted himself as the epitome of the gentleman, surrounded by specimens from the animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds, all arranged according to a taxonomic system. The museum included an extensive portrait gallery and a cabinet of curiosities, which Peale referred to as a “cabinet of curiosities,” in order to trace the “evolutionary” nature of the natural history museum, as an exploration of what gets to stand for natural history at a particular time or for a distinct group of people.

Peale’s museum was also the first American museum to collect and display objects. His museum (1764) presents primarily natural history specimens, including stuffed animals, fossils, and minerals. The museum also included a cabinet of curiosities, which Peale referred to as a “cabinet of curiosities,” in order to trace the “evolutionary” nature of the natural history museum, as an exploration of what gets to stand for natural history at a particular time or for a distinct group of people.
The subject of Lothar Baumgarten’s *Unsettled Objects* (1968–69) is the Pitt Rivers Museum, a Victorian anthropological institution and natural history museum in Oxford, England. This work includes eighty ektachromes showing artifacts in vitrines displayed much as they were when the museum opened in 1874. Removed from their original context and function, cluttered in display cases, and shackled to their descriptive labels, these objects invite an aesthetic—and exotic—appraisal, effectively becoming something else. The boxes of Susan Hiller’s *From the Freud Museum* (1991–96) evoke the cases and drawers of an anthropological museum, but hers is a museum created from “unspoken, unrecorded, unexplained, and overlooked” materials—personal mementos, private relics, and talismans. These materials are presented as precious objects in museum-style conservation boxes.

The animals and vegetation photographed by Hiroshi Sugimoto have also been decontextualized by their placement in dioramas at a natural history museum. Yet the photographs are deceiving because, appearing at first to capture animals in the wild, they ultimately prove to be still images of long-dead animals and synthetic models of other life-forms. Christopher Williams also explores the natural world in the museum context in his work *Angola to Vietnam* (1989). This series of photographs depicts the painstakingly accurate glass replicas of plants housed in the Botanical Museum at Harvard University. Williams opted to photograph plant models from countries where political disappearances had been recorded in 1985 and reclassified and renamed the flora according to their country of origin. Over the institution’s botanical classification, based on science, the artist proposes another, based on politics.

Crucial to this survey are those artists who have scrutinized and challenged the social and political dynamics of the museum as an institution. A notable figure in this tradition is Hans Haacke. His *Cowboy with Cigarette* (1990) takes issue with corporate sponsorship of museums by turning Picasso’s collage *Man with a Hat* (1912–13, from MoMA’s collection) into a cigarette advertisement. This commentary is directed at Philip Morris, as well as at The Museum of Modern Art which accepted sponsorship from the tobacco company for its exhibition *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (1989–90).

The works by Jac Leirner and General Idea in this exhibition study the relationship between museums and their marketing strategies. For her *Lothar Baumgarten. Unsettled Objects. 1968–69. Series of slide projections. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. Photo: Courtesy the artist*
Names (Museums) (1989–92) Leirner acquired shopping bags from various museum gift shops around the world and sewed them together into a wall-sized, quilt-like collage. General Idea's Boutique for the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion (1980), built in the shape of a dollar sign, functions as a museum shop within the exhibition space and blurs the line between art and commerce by offering a selection of General Idea's publications and multiples "for sale."

Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler, as well as Louise Lawler, have focused on the more-or-less invisible framework that a museum provides for the display of its collection. Lawler's new work for this exhibition consists of glass paperweights showing installation views of the Museum's permanent collection. Ericson and Ziegler drew attention to one of the most subtle of curatorial choices in their work MoMA Whites (1990), a collection of jars containing various shades of white paint preferred by individual curators at The Museum of Modern Art.

Sherrie Levine and Allan McCollum address the aura of artworks in the age of mass-produced objects. Each element in McCollum's Collection of Four Hundred and Eighty Plaster Surrogates (1982/89) is a plaster mold in the shape of a framed painting, but with blackness where the picture should be. By installing large groups of these surrogates McCollum creates a visual spectacle in its own right that suggests, perhaps, that the "face" of any one painting is less important than the overall impact of the gallery or museum setting. In McCollum's on-line project created for The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect, the obsessional nature of registrarial techniques in museums is explored in an exhaustive cataloguing of Collection of Four Hundred and Eighty Plaster Surrogates. Levine takes up André Malraux's notion that the world of reproductions forms a "museum without walls" and turns it inside out. Pronouncing herself a "still-life artist" who photographs art reproductions from books, she makes what she calls "ghosts of ghosts" whose relationship to the original work of art is "tertiary . . . three or four times removed."

Issues of memory and subversion, as well as museum security, underlie the works of Robert Filliou and Sophie Calle in this exhibition. Calle creates a poetic remembrance of a famous crime: the theft in 1990 of works by Degas, Rembrandt, Flinck, Manet, and Vermeer from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Gardner's stipulation in her will that the arrangement of the galleries remain static ensures that a sense of loss remains a permanent fixture of the museum. Calle interviewed curators, guards, and other staff members asking them to describe the absent works; their varied responses are displayed as a counterpart to photographs of the labels, empty pedestals, and bare hooks on the walls left behind after the theft. Filliou's series titled Poussière de Poussière (Dust to Dust) provides evidence of the artist's own act of vandalism—his surreptitious cleaning of renowned masterpieces in the Louvre and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Proof of this discreet act—documentary photographs and the actual cloth dusters, complete with dust particles—is displayed in archival boxes with mock solemnity. The funereal tones of the title reflect the metaphorical laying to rest that many artists equate with having works of art reside in museums.

Art & Language merge the sites of art's production and consumption—the studio and the museum—in Index: Incident in a Museum XXI (1987), part of a series of paintings depicting the galleries of the Whitney Museum of American Art. The performances of Vito Acconci documented in this exhibition similarly intruded upon the sanctity of the museum space. In Proximity Piece, created for a 1970 exhibition at the Jewish Museum titled Software, Acconci interrupted the contemplative privacy of museum visitors, chosen at random, by invading their personal space. "I'm standing beside that person, or behind, closer than the accustomed distance. I crowd the person until he/she moves away, or until he/she moves me out of the way." For Service Area (1970), Acconci forwarded his mail to a display case placed in The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition Information. Through this gesture, the Museum and the postal service were put into the artist's service, and the exhibition space was extended to include the transportation Acconci used to go collect his mail, the postal system, and the artist's start and finish point, his home.

The realm of museum education provides the basic structure for the works of Janet Cardiff and Andrea Fraser included in The Museum as Muse. In her new work commissioned for the exhibition, Cardiff continues her series of acoustic guided tours. By weaving words, music, and sound effects into her tour, which alters the perception of the surrounding gallery space, Cardiff transports her listeners to a realm suspended between the contexts in which they walk and a fictional one. Fraser assumes the role of a museum docent under the name Jane Castleton in Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk, a performance held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1989 and documented on video. She conducts a tour of the museum galleries, cafeteria, and lobby areas making comments largely drawn from institutional texts and speeches but synthesized in an incongruous fashion. For Fraser, Jane Castelon personifies a non-expert volunteer from an upper-class background who possesses "the leisure and the economic and cultural capital that defines a museum's patron class."

Garry Winogrand and Larry Fink document, in their photographs of openings and parties, the role of museums as social environments for the wealthy and genteel. Winogrand's images of exhibition openings read like a Who's Who of museum culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Fink's photographs zero in on a strand of pearls or a table full of place-cards and direct the viewer to the small but significant details that are politically important elements of museum culture.

THE MUSEUM TRANSFORMED

In 1796, French painter Hubert Robert made two paintings of the Louvre, one depicting the Grande Galerie as he
Robert had an interest in the public view of the edifice in ruins aimed to proposed to redesign it, the other showing it in ruins. As its first official curator, Robert had an interest in the public view of the edifice in ruins aimed to convey upon it a certain grandeur associated with classical ruins. Since Robert’s time, a number of artists have envisioned the museum in an altered, manipulated, transformed, or even ruined state, each with a particular objective.

A project by Christo of 1968 proposed a radical, temporary transformation of the entire Museum of Modern Art: the wrapping of the building in 70,000 square feet of heavy-gauge canvas tarpaulin bound with thousands of feet of nylon rope, the enveloping of its sculpture garden in a vast skin of translucent polyethylene, and the construction of a twenty-foot-high steel barricade on 53 Street using 441 stacked oil barrels. Although Christo created numerous architectural renderings, drawings, and scale models to back his proposal, the project was never realized. Richard Hamilton’s series of fiberglass reliefs of 1965–66, based on Frank Lloyd Wright’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum completed only a few years earlier, was, according to the artist, “an attempt to mirror the whole activity of architecture in the confines of a four-foot-square panel.” Hamilton’s precious Guggenheims, in gold, shiny black and white, or multi-colors, are suspended ambiguously, and perhaps ironically, between the museum as artwork and the artwork as museum.

Dennis Oppenheim and Robert Smithson have produced earthworks that physically challenge or defy the limitations of an institutional building. In Gallery Transplant (1969), Oppenheim traced the floor plan of a gallery from the Cornell University art museum in snow at a bird sanctuary nearby. Although intended to be an ephemeral gesture, the piece left behind collectible traces in the form of photographs and a map, which are exhibited in The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect. Smithson, too, adapted his outdoor art practices to the gallery by placing natural elements inside it. By creating these “non-sites” he provoked a certain dislocation of the museum’s conceptual premise.

A particularly fatalistic and ironic vision of the museum is Edward Ruscha’s painting The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire (1965–68). Perhaps a response to this unpopular and unfriendly building designed in 1964 by William Pereira, the painting also speaks to an uproarious period in which artists felt increasingly alienated from cultural institutions. A decade later, Komar and Melamid created a series of paintings titled Scenes from the Future showing prominent buildings, such as John F. Kennedy Airport, the Guggenheim Museum, and The Museum of Modern Art, in ruins. Seemingly indebted to Hubert Robert, these ominous images combine a charged contemporary subject with a style reminiscent of eighteenth-century landscape painting.

Since the late 1960s, Daniel Buren has written extensively about issues pertinent to museum installation and display and has made a number of interventions that radically transformed museums. In this exhibition, Buren appropriates a section of MoMA’s permanent collection, complete with its labels, gallery inscriptions, and lighting system, and transports it to The Museum as Muse. In its place, he installs his signature vertical stripes, leaving blank those areas where the paintings were positioned. Such works in situ “reinforce the fact that, as banal and convenient as people want us to believe [the museum walls] are, they embody everything possible and are never neutral.”

The word museum stems from the Greek museum meaning house of the muses, the nine goddesses of creative inspiration. Yet as this exhibition reveals, during the twentieth century the museum has expanded its function as simply a home or repository for art to become a locus for artistic inspiration and activity.

Kristen Erickson, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture

The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect was organized by Kynaston McShine, Senior Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture.

COVER ABOVE: Marcel Duchamp, Boîte-en-valise (de ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rrose Sélavy). 1935–41. Leather valise containing miniature replicas, photographs, and color reproductions of works by Duchamp, and one “original”; Large Glass, collotype on celluloid (69 items) 7 ½ x 9 ½" (19 x 23.5 cm); overall 16 x 15 x 4" (40.6 x 38.1 x 10.2 cm); IX/XX from Deluxe Edition. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, James Thraililik Soby Fund, ©1999 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

COVER BELOW: Charles Thurston Thompson, Venetian Mirror, ca. 1700, from the Collection of John Webb, 1853. Albume print from wet-collodion-on-glass negative. 7 ½ x 8 ¾" (19.1 x 21.3 cm). Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: V&A Picture Library