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Report of the Curatorial Council Committee on Exhibitions

Members of the Committee

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William Agee, Painting and Sculpture
 Virginia Allen, Painting and Sculpture
 Annette Allwardt, International Program
 Peter Bunnell, Photography
 Mildred Constantine, Office of the Director
 Inez Garson, International Study Center
 Ludwig Glaeser, Architecture and Design
 Linda Gordon, Public Information
 Alicia Legg, Painting and Sculpture
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The Exhibition Committee examined several aspects of exhibitions: the overall principles, coordination and financing of the Museum's exhibition program, 53rd Street, the International Program, and the National Program. A number of recommendations or suggestions in this report have appeared in past Museum studies and reports of other Curatorial Council Committees, but this Committee felt the necessity to restate and reemphasize them in the hope of seeing them implemented. We also recognize that certain of our general recommendations are already part of the policy of some departments but felt it would be better to keep the report a general one. In exploring the International and National exhibition programs the Committee is adding suggestions to some of the new policies that now seem to be in effect.

From the Museum's inception, its exhibition program has been distinguished and unparalleled in the presentation of twentieth century art. It has presented new ideas, emphasized scholarship, and facilitated the public's comprehension of the modern visual arts. In a larger sense, it has also generated world-wide enthusiasm for the arts of our time. If the Museum is to continue to maintain its position, it must reexamine its exhibition policy periodically.

The Committee feels that the exhibition program is often haphazard. There is the general feeling of not knowing who is making the exhibition policy. Given the nature of modern art, the exhibition program should maintain a certain flexibility, and the current structure leaves little room for modifications.

We also felt that too often exhibitions are scheduled without even the knowledge of the curators of the departments concerned; that the knowledge and expertise of the curators was not being used to its full potential; that often many good ideas were shelved or dismissed which might have been more sympathetically received if circulated more widely among the curatorial staff.

The modern movement is not based on the work of a handful of people. The Committee feels strongly that box-office potential should not be the primary determining factor in planning the exhibition program of a highly professional institution with a commitment to scholarship as well as to ideas and visual criticism. The exhibition program should ideally be a balance between old and new, large and small, one-man and group, "styles", "movements", shows based on complicated esthetics, the unpopular, and the interdisciplinary. The presentation of a balanced exhibition program devoted to the highest standards, to ideas that may not as yet be popular, and to scholarship should continue to be the Museum's goal. The program has to be an imaginative, bold, experimental, and thoughtful one. We must accept the fact that to accomplish this, we must operate independently of ratings and reviews.

As one step toward balancing the exhibition program, this Committee recommends that the curatorial staff undertake an analysis of the historical and contemporary omissions which might form the basis of a modified program for the next few years. The Museum cannot lose faith in the art of our time because it challenges many presuppositions. In order to maintain our prestige nationally and internationally we must continue to show the new and untested.

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Increasingly, commercial galleries cannot fulfill this function and also the Museum's public is a different and larger one. It was felt that the Museum should investigate the possibility of extending itself beyond the physical facilities of 53rd Street -- for example, a sculpture exhibition in a city park and some members of the Committee felt that a large continuous and flexible space should be considered -- perhaps in another part of town, for example, somewhere below Houston Street, even the "Wall Street" area.

One of the most important recommendations of the Exhibitions Committee was that an exhibition planning group be formed. We urge that a standing committee with curatorial participation and representation be instituted where exhibition or project proposals can be reviewed and discussed. Its function should also be to assist on a regular and continuous basis the Director of Exhibitions on both short range changes and long range concepts. It should be a forum or "clearing house" for exhibition proposals coming from the staff at large. By providing more open discussion, it is hoped that a better balanced and coordinated program would evolve. This planning committee could also act as coordinators between the Museum and its National and International programs. It was also felt that this "clearing house" would assist in the assignment of space and that the importance of an exhibition should determine the space allotted to it. This would be preferable to the more arbitrary way in which space has always been assigned in the past.

This planning group would in no way assume the Executive Committee's responsibilities toward the exhibition program, but the exhibition program is only one of their responsibilities which we feel means that they cannot give it as thoughtful consideration as it continually needs.

The Committee would like to recommend that if the existing Staff Executive Committees' weekly meetings are continued, that one meeting per month be devoted exclusively to exhibitions and that whenever a specific exhibition is being discussed that the director of that exhibition be present. The general impression was that second-hand reports often distorted a curator's intention and that the person most directly concerned was excluded from some basic decisions and discussions.

Given the specific problems of modern art, it is suggested that curators be given the opportunity to do research that would enable an exhibition, either through loans and/or the collections, to be produced at short notice if another project has to be postponed or abandoned.

Naturally, any ideal program is expensive, but the Committee also feels very strongly that sources of support have to be found for the Museum's programs -- 53rd Street, National, and International, so that the Museum can continue being adventurous, exciting, and even more important -- modern.

It is unfortunate that the Museum is about to undertake a new building program when both exhibitions and collections are inadequately endowed or financed. The Committee felt that considering the rising costs of exhibition preparation, the development program should take into account the importance of a proper funding of exhibitions and collections.

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We hope that more corporate and private support on a national basis will be forthcoming, but feel that City, State, and Federal support may now be essential, particularly for specific "educational projects". The Committee suggests that this be very carefully considered. A curator's responsibilities, already extremely time-consuming, should not have to routinely include fund-raising.

53RD STREET PROGRAM

A number of recommendations of the Committee have been repeatedly urged but many are still not in effect.

We think that the activities of the exhibition program cannot be reduced substantially but the duration of exhibitions should be longer than it has been in the recent past, and when needed more time should be allowed for installation. In terms of the scheduling of exhibitions, the Committee would like to recommend that there be more coordination and cooperation between departments, and with other museums in the city. Quite often exhibitions could supplement or contrast each other. (This would perhaps come about more effectively with the exhibition planning group that we urge).

We also felt that in the scheduling more attempts should be made to take into account the vacations of colleges and universities and other similar factors which directly affect our attendance. We also ask that the production of installations be more successfully coordinated so that successive exhibitions might be able to share some of the same walls.

One of the earliest recommendations of the Exhibitions Committee - that meetings be scheduled so that directors of exhibitions may summarize their plans and answer questions raised by members of the support departments well in advance of the opening of an exhibition - has already been put into effect and seems to be a very useful procedure.

Each exhibition worth doing is also worth documenting and it was felt that a small, inexpensive catalogue or illustrated checklist should be available from the opening day. This could then be followed by a larger book since it is getting more and more difficult for a curator to produce an exhibition, a book, and still continue to fulfill his other museum duties. We would also like to see more posters produced for general publicity as well as for a possible source of income.

The majority of the Committee is opposed to "orientation" galleries, it is not only a waste of valuable museum space, but it also means that the attention span of the viewer would be diminished before the actual experience of the exhibition or the collection. However, we did feel that there was a need for several docents.

The whole need of a real education department must be more fully explored. Orientation can take place outside the building, in classrooms etc. There is a need for slides, film strips, videotapes, and portfolios which would service students of all ages and the community. For example a short film both for the cinema and television "Masterpieces at the Modern" could be of great educational value both for here and abroad.

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Inexpensive books on the Collection are lacking, a general guide to the Museum's Collection would also seem to be essential and a priority. This certainly is not an original observation.

We ask that the Far West and Northwest galleries and possibly the old loading platform be remodeled to provide a more attractive exhibition space, and feel that this should be given priority regardless of the general Building Program. We acknowledge that these changes would probably be expensive but for example, if the garden wing goes out of commission for any expansion it would be useful to have an enlarged Western complex. At this point, it is an increasingly impractical space despite the remarkable ingenuity of the curators to make it seem to be a proper exhibition gallery.

We regret that the Building Committee of the Curatorial Council has not been formed. We hope that it will be instituted and that before the final building plans are produced a number of curators and other members of the curatorial council will be consulted. We fear that many very straightforward and practical necessities may get ignored and forgotten.

Because the Museum guards are quite often the only staff members whom the public meets, every effort should be made to make them less impersonal and more courteous. They should be well informed about the temporary exhibitions and the collections on view. This Committee would like to suggest that the curators give small, informal tours of the collection to the guards periodically, and naturally to any other interested staff members. It was also unanimously agreed that it would be very valuable if the director of an exhibition gave a brief talk or tour of his show to the guards, staff of Public Information and other interested staff members before the opening of an exhibition.

Given modern methods of security it was felt that perhaps the huge number of guards could be decreased. A non-uniformed corps in the galleries is one suggestion to supplement those at exits and entrances and a general supervisory force. This certainly has to be more carefully examined.

We would like the staff to think of the feasibility of having the Museum open to the public daily from 2:00 to 9:00 p.m. with the exception of Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. We believe that the Museum would then be available to a larger number of people and it is probable that the attendance would increase. Special groups could be scheduled for before 2:00 p.m.

There was a general feeling that the current hours of the film department's excellent program is impossible and inconvenient for most of the public and that one day's showing of a film was inadequate. We would like to see the Film Department's program made more available. It was pointed out that often even the interested staff of the Museum are unable to get to a 5:30 p.m. showing, far less to one at 2:00 p.m.

INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM

In examining the International Program of the Museum it was felt that the importance of the Museum's international role cannot be underestimated. Our collection and program cannot be compromised or overshadowed by more parochial interests and pressures. Our importance to more than New York must be continually emphasized.

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The Museum has a specific obligation to introduce the work of other countries to the United States and to introduce American art abroad without prejudice and without condescension. There can only be one standard. With the decline or poor quality of representations at international exhibitions such as biennials, it is becoming more important to provide excellent exhibitions abroad.

The needs of smaller cities and institutions are becoming more urgent and hopefully some of the exhibitions travelling could be smaller and still produce the same impact and excitement.

We also addressed ourselves to the value question of whether the Museum should have any major responsibility to Europe while the needs of Latin America, Africa and Australasia are greater. This, we hope, will be carefully discussed. Should a one-man show be sent to London and Amsterdam rather than Caracas and Buenos Aires? We do know the importance some artists place on European showings, but can we afford to subsidize this? Should we abdicate from the organization of such a tour?

It was suggested that there be more guest curators from other countries, who, with the Museum's assistance, would organize some of the exhibitions for their respective areas. The Committee, felt that a conference, for example, of the directors of museums and curators of Latin American countries involved in contemporary art would be very beneficial in formulating our Latin American Program, and that it would be very helpful to have common problems discussed with some of this Museum's staff and perhaps with others from similar institutions.

Artists should be encouraged to travel more. For example, often it is much less expensive, given the nature of recent work, to send an artist to create an exhibition in another country. His presence there cannot be underestimated and his accessibility would be of great value, particularly to students. We should also be more able to invite artists to this country. This exchange is also recommended for museum personnel, registrars, librarians, publicity staff, curators etc.

The Committee also hopes that many of the recent technological innovations would allow for a more imaginative presentation of work abroad particularly in those countries where risks are greater due to lack of experience in handling fragile works, climate, politics and not to mention the inability to pay much for shows. Exhibitions without such risks have to be created. Exhibitions on film rather than photo panels, for example, would have a very wide circulation. It was also felt that supplementary material to accompany shows would be very beneficial, for example, a small anthology of criticism could be compiled in Spanish to accompany an exhibition of recent American art. It would be very valuable. Naturally lectures or taped talks could also be provided more frequently.

We would also like to stress the urgent need for information in other countries and that perhaps the Museum should consider more publications in other languages, Spanish and French, among others, and even a bulletin with extracts and photographs from our catalogues and exhibitions would allow a larger number of people to participate and be informed of this Museum's activities. Some of these publications could be coupled with foreign membership proposals.

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NATIONAL PROGRAM

The Committee strongly urges that the domestic program be revised. All of the curators have found it very valuable. In addition to the sharing of larger exhibitions we would like to see more modest shows prepared for smaller towns, colleges and universities. Again, occasional travel for the purposes of assessing the needs of such institutions should be undertaken. Subscribers should feel that they have been consulted and that it is a co-operative undertaking.

Many university gallery directors and directors of smaller museums have asked for fewer shows of higher quality. They would like to see small historical exhibitions as well as shows that emphasize unfamiliar material.

We ask that stricter rules for institutions taking exhibitions be formulated and, where possible, a bit more control over installation, so that there is less possibility of misunderstanding the purpose of an exhibition and less of a possibility of damage to the work.

The travelling exhibitions also provide excellent training for young curators and even the Museum's interns could be invited to end their research by preparing an exhibition.

The importance of this program cannot be overemphasized.

CONCLUSION

We feel that this is a "preliminary report. The whole role of Museums and implicitly that of exhibitions is changing. With the continual and rapidly changing nature of art, the whole philosophy of exhibitions has to be studied in greater depth and detail. A very extensive survey of all of the implications of exhibitions is needed.

The Museum of Modern Art cannot forget the necessity for it to be the intellectual leader of the modern art world. It cannot adopt a posture of conservatism. The Museum's existence must be justified through providing the maximum direct experience of art without any compromises. It cannot fear either the unpopular or the possibility of making mistakes. The Museum exists to celebrate and to be in favor of one's own time.

The Museum must be a place where things happen imaginatively and seriously. It cannot forget that without artists there are no exhibitions or collections. Artists are our foremost constituency; they must have our attention and compassion. If we fail in this we become just bank vault guards.

The original idea and ideals of the Museum cannot be dismissed - to help people enjoy and study the arts of their time - in no way can this be compromised. We are a public service and one that has to be humane and artful.

April 28, 1970