History of Projects

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The Museum of Modern Art's Projects series is soon to be twenty-five years old. From its inception in the spring of 1971 until this October, when an installation conceived by Carrie Mae Weems opened the program's 1995–96 season in its usual gallery space just off the Garden Hall, Projects has presented 120 separate exhibitions. In all, these exhibitions have featured the work of more than 175 artists, including those participating in the several group shows organized as an extension of the normal series framework of one- or two-person shows, but not counting those in the forty-odd video programs presented under its auspices or the creators of the three artist's books published as a result of the Projects committee's efforts.

By any reckoning in the field of contemporary art, Projects boasts a distinguished record. Its history also represents a surprisingly long run for a program started on an almost ad hoc basis in the aftermath of the turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s. That period was one of great social tension and change, and the forces engendered fed both directly and indirectly into the experimental approach of a younger generation of artists then coming into its own. During those years, established art institutions were under intense external pressure to respond to political crisis in the country at large; at MoMA the various actions of the Art Workers Coalition were among the most significant examples of this pressure. Perhaps more important in the long run, Museum staff members committed to contemporary art were increasingly aware of how much outside events and aesthetic developments were outpacing the capacity of museums to respond while radically altering the terms on which such a response might be predicated. In short, new work demanded new exhibition formats.

The group that initiated the enterprise was formed of representatives from all the curatorial departments. Among the principals was Kynaston McShine, for many years the program's supervisor. His exhibition Information (1970) introduced Conceptual and Process art to MoMA audiences for the first time and was one of the models for the earliest of the Projects. Also active was Jennifer Licht, whose slightly earlier exhibition Spaces (1969–70) played the same role as Information with regard to installation art, as well as Bernice Rose, Cora Rosevear, Howardena Pindell, and Jane Necol. By 1974, Barbara London, then an assistant in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, began to take part as curatorial specialist in video art. Indeed, the video department she presently directs was born out of her efforts as a member of the Projects committee to establish video art as a basic component of the Museum's exhibition and collection activities.

Projects was the first showcase of its kind devoted to such rapidly mutating aesthetic strains—the similarly adventurous Matrix series at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, became the second in 1975. The MoMA series sought to engage with generally little known art and artists and present them to the public at large in a manner consonant with the pioneering spirit that had originally guided the museum to advocate and explain the seminal movements and figures of classic modernism.

That remains the raison d'étre of Projects. Though opportunities for young artists working in diverse media to exhibit vastly increased between the 1970s and the 1990s, the fact is that there are very few venues where what they produce can be properly understood in the context of the art history that informs their work either by influence or opposition. (And, it should be emphasized, these venues have in the last five years begun to decrease again as a result of a contracting gallery scene and abruptly diminishing subsidies to the arts.) Only where there are comprehensive collections of modern art—and for the period of the 1860s through the 1960s none equal the Modern's—can one see how the newest of new art, and sometimes the most irreverent or perplexing as well, re-

lates to such evolving traditions as Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, and Expressionism.

Two recent Projects exhibitions—both of them video-based works—demonstrated this cross-generational dialogue and examined unexpected correlations among what many think of as wholly incompatible mediums. In the first instance, Ann Hamilton's 1994 installation Seam belied the common assumptions that video is incapable of matching the visual and tactile qualities of painting and that it represents the photo-mechanical nemesis of the "old-fashioned" studio arts. An intimate environment consisting of mounds of soft, touchable, red fabric placed on long benches set in front of a wide glass rectangle the size of an "average" New York School canvas of the 1950s, the composite work centered on a slowly shifting image of the artist's greatly enlarged finger sensuously spreading a golden viscous liquid across the transparent screen. It was in effect an homage paid by immaterial light and motion to the opaque pigments and suspended gestures of Abstract Expressionist painting. By contrast, the video-installation of Paul McCarthy was a frontal satirical assault on the glorification of the Abstract Expressionist artist as a passionate hero of the imagination. Playing the lead in his rude send-up of that myth, McCarthy donned a curly blond wig, attacked his canvases with an oversize brush in a none-too-subtle burlesque of the "romance" of painting, talked nonsense to characters representing collectors and the press, and drooled the name "de Kooning." Simultaneously furious and funny, "Painter" was, in sum, a vulgar but wholly sincere argument with the old masters of American modernism, an argument that each generation since their heyday has made in its own way.

Both of these responses to art historical precedent, one inventive and respectful, the other infectiously disrespectful, were to be found within a short walking distance of the Museum's second-floor galleries given over to Abstract Expressionism. There museum-goers could experience firsthand some the great examples of the work to which these two installations referred. By thus traveling between the ground-floor Projects space and the collection

upstairs, they were able to enter into the free play of ideas between artists past and present, and between those secure in their status and others, generally at the beginning of their careers, who are willing to put their talent to the test in the most prestigious and public of places.

While there are disadvantages to the Projects room's location off the Garden Hall and on the way to the restaurant, there is also an undeniable plus in exhibiting such intentionally debatable work in one of the most heavily trafficked areas of the Museum. It would certainly be safer—especially now that vanguard art has become an easy target for ideologues of all stripes—if perplexing and sometimes provocative works such as Hamilton's and McCarthy's were consigned to the remoter corners of the building so that viewers intent only on their favorite Monets, Matisses, or Picassos could reach their goal undisturbed. But modernism has always vexed its audience. Matisse, after all, was once labeled a "wild beast," and Picasso's often violent or erotic imagery shocks even today. This institution is largely responsible for having educated the general population to see merit and meaning in the formal dislocations and unconventional imagery of these precursors. It is only right, then, that the Museum should not only gamble on fresh ideas but trust in the average spectator's ability to deal with surprises and perhaps discomforts emanating from the serious efforts of the current avant-garde.

On occasion, Projects shows have cropped up in unlikely spots as well, and this too is an expression of the experimental spirit in which the program was founded. Indeed, the second exhibition in the series, Pier 18, consisted of photo-documentation of temporary works that twenty-seven artists created on an abandoned pier on the Hudson River in the winter of 1971. More recently, in 1992, Felix Gonzalez-Torres dispersed his Projects exhibition throughout the city by displaying a mural-scale photograph of an unoccupied bed showing the impress of two bodies on twenty-four billboards situated in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens. And in 1993, Gabriel Orozco's show included the installation of objects and images in the Garden Hall, the Garden, and across Fifty-fourth Street, where each day

he placed fresh oranges in the windows of private apartments, forming bright irregular patterns that were plainly visible from the Museum.

Thus the flexible, sometimes migratory format of the Projects series (which included book publishing in the early 1980s, when the program lost its space altogether during the expansion of the Museum) is an expression of its experimental nature. That spirit has also guided the committee in the creation of two full-scale installations organized to participate on the Museum's behalf with the Day Without Art, the annual commemoration of the impact of AIDS on the arts community. The first, in 1991, consisted of a haunting sound piece by Robert Farber that echoed through a room filled with framed but unused canvas, paper, and photographic materials representing the works that will never be made due to the premature deaths of so many artists. The second in 1993, was an accumulation of hundreds of pieces of paper on which museum personnel, artists, and visitors listed the people they knew who had died from or were living with AIDS.

From the outset, the Projects series was seen not only as a forum for new artists but also as a workshop for younger curators. For the curators it is a chance to test their insights and skills with the full backing of the Museum; for the Museum it is an opportunity to benefit from the knowledge and taste of rising generations. Under the direction of the committee's chairmen, which over the years have included Mr. McShine, Riva Castleman, Linda Shearer, and presently the author, these junior staff members review proposals independently submitted by artists as well as presenting their own candidates. Given that it is possible, at a maximum, to do only six or seven Projects a year, the sheer quantity of options under consideration is daunting. Every year dozens upon dozens of alternatives are reviewed. Although only a handful of the many worthy suggestions can be acted upon, every effort is made to vary the type of work shown and to encourage risk-taking propositions.

Frequently the Projects group receives requests from other institutions interested in borrowing its exhibi-

tions. Sometimes, as in the case of the Argentine painter Guillermo Kuitca's show, this has been done. More often, what was first shown at the Modern becomes the model for other institutions. Thus several versions of the MoMA resentation of Art Spiegelman's source materials and working drawings for Maus, his precedent-setting "comic" book about the Holocaust, were created at other venues, and a widely distributed CD-ROM devoted to the making of Maus was also based on that 1992 installation. On occasion, meanwhile, works shown in or created for Projects exhibitions enter the Museum's collection; these have included, for example, sculptures by Alice Aycock and Kiki Smith, paintings by Moira Dryer and Jess, and installations or site-specific works by Ann Hamilton and Karin Sander.

As central as it has been to the role of contemporary art at MoMA over the past twenty-five years, Projects, like all efforts now devoted to experimental work, faces an uncertain future. Yet Projects has never been more important or more integral to the Museum's overall program. The very precariousness of the situation presently faced by emerging artists and their creations underscores this fact. That such art truly matters to a broad and varied audience can be measured by the degree to which it has become the subject of regular, often heated debate. In many respects, opinion in this country is as divided now as it was during the difficult years when the series began. Work that taps into those febrile thoughts and emotions or challenges viewers to reexamine their basic assumptions about art's nature or role may at first upset or confound the public. The proof that such reactions are an essential part of a process of aesthetic diversification and growth can, however, be clearly seen in the many ways in which, over the last quarter-century, the speculative ideas advanced by the Projects artists and curators have substantially altered perceptions about what art is or might be. Indeed, the worst of times produces some of the best art, and the cumulative effect of the innovations made in good times and bad over the last two and a half decades argues forcefully for continued attention to and support of unproven but equally undeniable new talent. That was the Projects mandate

from the beginning. It still is. And if the exhibitions of the last year or so are any indication, we may look ahead with more excitement than worry. For as always, we can count on artists to show the way out of the mess and discord in which we find ourselves—or at least to make something vigorous and vivid from it.

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