

Curating the Collection:

Editorial

Rachel Esner and Fieke Konijn

Over the course of 2017 the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam has worked on the re-installation of its collection, creating a semi-permanent and cross-disciplinary presentation of highlights in the lower level gallery and first floor of the museum's new wing. At the same time, the ground floor of the historical building will be re-dedicated to research-driven collection presentations under the title *Stedelijk Turns*. This move can be seen as part of a worldwide trend among museums – mainly of modern and contemporary art, but even institutions specializing in the art of the so-called Old Masters – to “dynamicize” the display of artworks perpetually in their care.

Although often perceived as rather static – and frequently criticized as such – one must keep in mind that throughout their history, museum installations have always been under reconsideration. Nonetheless, the critical discourses that began to shake up art history in the 1970s, as well as institutional critique from artists, have resulted in recent years in museums becoming the ever-sharper focus of cultural debate. Moreover, they have also gradually come under pressure from state and local governments to valorize their holdings through visitor numbers and inclusivity – a situation that seems particularly acute in the Netherlands. Simultaneously, influenced by information technology and visual culture, the public has become more and more interested in the links between different works of art, as well as their relation to current social and political issues. In order to meet these various demands, collection curators have been reconceiving their displays, seeking to create new understandings of (the history of) art.

It is our contention that the various cultures of curating that have developed outside the museum since the 1980s have also played a seminal role in this process, in particular the notion of ephemerality, the rise of the individuated (“star”)

curator, and the concept of narrativity. Collection presentations are now often treated like temporary exhibitions, not only in their lack of permanence but more crucially in their conception and format. Storytelling – always a prominent feature of exhibitions, biennials, and large-scale art events such as documenta – has become the guiding principle for many a collection display, while the authorial (and authoritative) voice of the *institution* has gradually been replaced by the more subjective speech acts of the (named) curator or curatorial team. The anonymous and canonical hang is slowly but surely being supplanted by a multi-perspectival, highly dynamic, and diverse vision of the history of art. The aim, moreover, is not simply to understand the artworks as individual objects with their own specific *art* history – as representatives of an artist's development, a particular "movement" or aesthetic – but also to see them as part of the museums' own history, and of a wider art historical debate. Everywhere we look we find abundant evidence of reflection on institutional contexts and practices, and a desire to explore the place of both single works and the collection as a whole within not only a highly specified institutional history, but also within art discourse in the wider sense.

These issues, which we see as forming the core of contemporary museological praxis in relation to collection presentation, have not arisen out of nowhere. As mentioned above, museum collections have always in some sense been in flux. An important – and relatively new – aspect that needs to be taken into consideration, however, is the enormous expansion of permanent collections that has taken place in recent decades. Moreover, since at least the 1980s the very nature of art has changed radically, with the emergence of a variety of new practices and media, as well as new uses of space and new forms of public address (e.g. installation art, relational aesthetics, performance art, digital art and so on). The history of modern art now comprises more than a century, and encompasses objects unheard of when many a museum of modern art was founded; this requires a thorough rethinking of interpretative concepts: is it still possible, for example, to stick to a meta-narrative?

The notion of using exhibitions to think about collections and the history of art of course has its own history as well. Compared to today, in the beginning of the twentieth century collections were still modest in size and even quite piecemeal; the narrative suggested in any particular collection presentation could therefore be no more than tentative. In this formative phase, museums sometimes relied heavily on private loans for the construction – or rather *a construction* – of the story of then-contemporary art. They also embraced the temporary exhibition as a tool for exploring new tendencies in art and for introducing artists into the canon. In their flexibility, museum collections and exhibitions testified together to the ideal that a museum should be a living organism, always open to future change. Under the direction of Willem Sandberg, the Stedelijk Museum was one of the most outspoken examples of this trend; creative as he was, Sandberg sought to develop a

diversity of formats for both exhibitions and the display of the permanent collection. Looking across the ocean, it was in fact only in 1951 that The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) decided to abandon Barr's famous torpedo model of collecting – which saw the development of art as constantly moving forward in time, leaving the old behind – in favor of a more fixed historical narrative. Thanks to its impressive acquisitions, MoMA's story quickly became the paradigmatic account of modern art, and its collection a standard against which every museum had to define its own position.

There is also a pre-history to the current notion that museums should at times give up their authorial voice and draw on those from outside the institution to question or reinterpret the collection from a more subjective perspective. At the same time MoMA was solidifying its authority, in Europe initiatives were being taken to counteract this process through alternative readings of collections of both modern and pre-modern art. Perhaps not coincidentally, such “acts of resistance” have often taken place in smaller museums, institutions in less advantageous pecuniary circumstances and therefore with neither the means nor the desire to create comprehensive, “universal” narratives. The role of gadfly was early taken up by the Netherlands' own Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, where in the 1970s several artists and art historians were asked by then-director Jean Leering to express their personal views of the collection by way of exhibitions. On a more ambitious scale, between 1988 and 1997 Rotterdam's Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen invited various guest curators to work with the whole span of the collection, which covers the late Middle Ages to the present, and to choose objects from all its departments for display according to their own concepts. This resulted in exhibitions that commented on the collection from the perspective of the guests' own discipline, which ran the gamut from artist to philosopher to movie director. More recently, both museums have resumed these practices, albeit with a decidedly different approach. In 2006 the Van Abbe Museum embarked on a series of rehangs of its collection. These successive presentations were conceived as multifaceted discourses, divided into several complementary temporary exhibitions that together formed chapters within an overarching theme. In a search for new contexts, the Van Abbe Museum addressed its own history as well as the *raison d'être* of museums of modern art in general. In 2007 Boijmans began reviving its own collection-display tradition. Their presentations are meant to stand for several years and follow a chronological order, drawing on the diversity and the historical breadth of its collection. The most recent of these were curated by art historians Peter Hecht and Carel Blotkamp, respectively. One could add numerous international examples to this list. What distinguishes these initiatives from the flexibility we find earlier in the century is that they were explicitly announced as personal interpretations designed to provoke a fresh look at the collection.

Turning to external factors that have led to the current re-conception of collections and collection presentation, the

politics of city branding have certainly played an important role. In recent years, museums and their holdings have become an instrument in gentrification, as well as an integral part of spectacle culture, the entertainment industry and tourism. This has led institutions to extend their physical plant with new wings, or in some cases to build new buildings entirely. While there is much to be criticized in this practice, these expansions have also presented curators with new opportunities. Although mainly designed to make room for the swelling collection and to provide new facilities for the public, they also offer the chance to renew one's identity and to opt for a change of perspective. In the case of the Musée d'Orsay, a building project even led to revolutionary interpretation of an entire period, as the museum boldly embraced the whole of nineteenth-century art production, up to and including its previously most neglected (and reviled) aspects. In 1986 it opened with an alternative narrative that sought in essence to respond to the most recent art-historical insights. Although the presentation of the nineteenth-century avant-garde in relation to tendencies considered retrograde (Salon painting, the academic tradition) was criticized in some quarters, the museum has consistently maintained this original vision, albeit with some modification. As for museums of modern art, the trend was set by Tate Modern, which, when moving to its new building in 2000, shook the museum world with the groundbreaking and much-debated installation of its permanent collection according to theme rather than chronology. Shortly thereafter and as a result of its own building plans, the Museum of Modern Art in New York attempted something similar: in a series of exhibitions it began to investigate a possible future non-chronological presentation of its holdings – although the idea was eventually abandoned. Having a building at its disposal that was designed for flexibility, but which had undergone several transformations since its opening in 1977, Centre Pompidou followed in Tate's footsteps and between 2005 and 2015 began to update the installation of its permanent collection on a regular basis. Each of these projects was titled and announced as if they were temporary exhibitions. With *Elles*, which took place between 2009-11, and more recently with *Modernités plurielles* (2013-2015), the museum took the bold step of attempting to rewrite the history of twentieth-century Modernism from a feminist perspective and as a global phenomenon, respectively. It is interesting to note, however, that as of 2015 it has returned to a more traditional chronological presentation.

Limiting ourselves to a comparison between the practices of the Centre Pompidou and Tate Modern, there appear to be several outspoken differences as well as some similarities in the positions these two museums have taken with regard to the display of their permanent collections. Both museums take 1960 as a turning point, although the thematic approach enables Tate to more thoroughly intertwine with, and relate to, earlier periods of time. The museums' opposing views centre on two fundamental concepts, which moreover also need to be addressed by other museums: chronology and geography. When appointed director of Centre Pompidou in 2015, Bernard Blistène almost

immediately returned to a chronological and movement-based presentation – beginning with French Fauvism – convinced as he apparently is that the complexity of modern art requires well-defined frameworks to enhance readability for the public. To add depth to the visitors' understanding, small galleries – the so-called *salles dossiers* – take a historiographical approach, shedding light on the producers of art history such as critics, art historians, and collectors. Although Blistène acknowledges the necessity of a global point of view, the result of the Pompidou's present installation is decidedly French-colored.

By contrast – and as stated by its new director of collections, Frances Morris – Tate Modern resists strict chronology, choosing instead for a broad geographical spread in order to highlight transnational connections. Moreover, thanks to the recent Switch House extension, the museum now seems to offer a more challenging view of art after 1960 – stretching from Minimalism to highly topical participatory art – which contrasts markedly with the rather disorganized presentation of this period at Centre Pompidou. In addition, by having its labels signed by the curators, Tate's narrative is decidedly more transparent. We should also not forget that the collections of these two museums differ fundamentally in their scope and history. Centre Pompidou harbors a truly interdisciplinary wealth of objects, and thanks to acquisitions from avant-garde artists living in Paris or their estates is able to show a more or less complete overview of twentieth-century production. Tate Modern, on the other hand, inherited a decidedly spotty collection, but has turned this apparent deficit into an advantage by more recently focusing its acquisitions largely on contemporary non-Western art and artists. In this case, the themes chosen for the displays steered the purchases, rather than the other way around. It reminds us – if such a reminder is necessary – that there is no one generic museum of modern art; each institution needs to be seen in the context of its history and geographical situation.

In the context of the Stedelijk Museum's ambitious project of reinstalling its significant permanent collection during 2017, it is the aim of this volume of *Stedelijk Studies* to explore not only the physical manifestation of these developments, but also to look at their wider implications. What is the meaning of the collection in the present, and what means are museum curators employing to reactivate their collections, and to bring them to the attention of a diverse public?

We kick off the issue with a roundtable discussion with Stedelijk Museum director Beatrix Ruf and her curatorial team around the museum's plans for the new display. This open-hearted and stimulating interchange was organized around three themes: the conceptual process that led up to the new installation plan and its outcomes regarding questions of narrative, chronology and mediation; the plan itself and the choices that have been made regarding possible clusters of works and themes, as well as the actual works to be displayed; and, finally, the position of the

Stedelijk Museum in the contemporary debates surrounding the canon, curatorial strategies, the relationship between fine art and visual culture, and the influence of non-museological display formats on museum practice. Many of the issues we have addressed in this editorial statement were discussed: the role of curatorial voice; the function of narrative; the influence of institutional and collecting history; the question of architectural flexibility and how spaces can determine display choices, among others.

Our call for papers led to a wide variety of submissions and making a final selection was not easy. The essays we have chosen represent a wide diversity of approaches and ideas, ranging from the historical to the contemporary and from the highly material to the digital. The relationship of collection display to memory formation – whether the memory be institutional, national or with global implications – is the subject of the essays by Michela Deiana, Sabrina Moura, Raymond Rohne and Nadine Siegert. Here it becomes apparent that a collection and how it is presented can be both a critical tool (Deiana, Moura, Siegert) and an ideological instrument (Moura, Rohne), as well as the ways in which examining an institution's past can lead to new insights into both the institution itself and its objects (Moura, Siegert).

How collection display can reframe viewers' perceptions is the topic of the contributions by Johanne Lamoreux, Mélanie Boucher and Marie Fraser, and Ann-Sophie Lehmann and Judith Spijksma. For Lamoreux and her co-authors, the single-artwork display format is certainly a means of revitalizing the collection through reflection on institutional history, but more importantly it is an agent in redirecting and deepening the viewing experience. Taking two recent re-installations as their starting point (at Tate Modern and the Netherlands' Fries Museum, respectively), Lehmann and Spijksma discuss the problematics of displaying collections that encompass diverse artifacts. One of the aims of these installations seems to be to break the traditional boundaries between genres and media, to flatten hierarchies and to thereby bring the viewer to a more comprehensive vision of art objects as primarily *material* objects. Such displays are often touted as a more democratic way of addressing the public, an hypothesis the authors aim to interrogate.

Collection display can be more than a means of elevating, educating or entertaining the public; it can also be a deliberate political act. This is an issue addressed by Moura, Rohne and Daniel Berndt (see below), but even more explicitly in the essay by Michael Neumeister. He examines an important re-hang of the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2015 and suggests that the political standpoint of the works themselves, their position in the galleries, and the overall *parcours* appear to advocate may not be helped by such forms of explicit curatorial activism.

Moving into the realm of the (politicized) digital, Daniel Berndt looks at the curatorial practices of the artists involved in the Arab Image Foundation. Examining the display formats chosen for exhibitions around this (digitized) collection, he highlights the implications of the shift from analogue to digital photographic techniques for the collection in general, situating it within evolving conceptions of archival and collecting practices and linking it to the objectives of the AIF in a broader sense. While the figure of the “artist-curator” is central to the AIF and the stories it seeks to tell, Manique Hendricks suggests that in the not-too-distant future the curator may become superfluous, her role taken over by the algorithm. A piece of code might be able to curate and display collections without inherent human bias with regard to race, nationality, or gender, and to neutralize many of the other criteria by which works of art are generally categorized within a collection, such as media, history and temporality. This process of “making contemporary”, of destabilizing “the historical temporal certainties of the art museum”, was of course initiated by Tate Modern in 2000, and it is with an examination of the future of the Tate’s collection display that Victoria Walsh and Andrew Dewdney close out this volume. For them, the notion of “the contemporary” is an epistemological and market-driven fiction that is losing both validity and currency in this moment of flux, characterized by the total mobility of people, objects and data. How this new situation will influence the displays of modern and contemporary art of/in the future thus remains to be seen.

We would like to thank the authors for their contributions and the Stedelijk Museum for the opportunity to edit a volume of *Stedelijk Studies*. It has provided us with ample food for thought on a topic that remains at the heart of our interest in museums, their history and their future.

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