Double-edged Experiences and Their Impact on the Twenty-First-Century Audience: The Ever-Evolving Museum

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Double-edged Experiences and Their Impact on the Twenty-First-Century Audience:

The Ever-Evolving Museum

by

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Abstract

The twenty-first-century museum is an ever-changing art institution adapting itself to engage a broader audience. The democratization of the museum becomes the priority to make art accessible to everyone. In the quest to find the perfect strategy, museums commit themselves to a constant transformation that seeks to create a unique “business model.” Along this process, institutions provide two-folded experiences to the public; first, the exhibition of art as a spectacular experience, and second, the staging of the museum as an entertaining entity. Today, museum attendance is not necessarily related to the quality of the show anymore. Welcome to the era of the spectacle.

Keywords audience; democracy; engagement; experience; future; institution; museum, spectacle; strategy
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Introduction

The culture of the spectacle constructs a passive audience overwhelmed with stimuli and convinced to be engaged with the artwork when, instead, they are involved in a masked disengagement. Twenty-first-century museums are inclined to stage exhibitions dressed as spectacles that affect the beholder’s responsiveness. These spectacles are, therefore, valued in terms of their impact upon the public and the attention drawn to the institution. Antithetical to democracy, they corrupt the museum’s educational mission.

The *mise en scène* of this exhibition’s modality overshadows the art displayed, prompting ignorance and propagating passivity within the audience. Philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) put forward in the early 1930s an explanation regarding the passive quality of spectatorship. He stated that an art experience was meaningless unless there was an active engagement with the artwork. Consumers of experiences had to react to the play staged and performed by the museum.

Current trends of passivity promotion in large institutions are altering artistic practices. As a result, new art installations tend to mesmerize the public, offering multiple immersive experiences to be sampled rather than lived. Nowadays, the museum visitor wanders from one room to another without taking the time to experience fully.¹ Under these circumstances, could a return of the Minimalism approach help the future development of institutions?

Culture tends to be ranked on the same level as entertainment, praising art as the ultimate leisure form; however, who bears the risk of classifying it under this category? We must not deceive ourselves in earnestly accrediting the truthfulness of this statement; instead, we should confront the situation as the problem it has become. First and foremost, in order to terminate this assumption about art, the concept of “audience” has to be re-examined. Centre Pompidou’s director, Bernard Blistène, stressed in an article published in the Spanish journal El País, the importance of a collection in constant renovation that goes hand in hand with the evolution of society. To think about today’s public as it was in the past is a mistake and for this reason, the parameters based on expired public traits, which come into play in formulating an exhibition, could lead to a cultural disaster.

Entertainment is perceived as the equalizer of communities; however, disregarding the fact that art brings unity, it does not have to be reduced to a leisure activity merely providing amusement and joy. The modern museum’s purpose emerged from the Enlightenment’s idea of democratizing the culture, making it available to educate the entire community rather than just the elite. Since its French revolutionary origins, it has been prone to pursue the cultivation of public taste through mass education, refining the audience’s aesthetic sensibilities. Unfortunately, the problem arises when art experience advocacy is no longer a priority, and the main institutional focus is pecuniary. Have museums of the twenty-first century lost the remaining faith in art democracy, luring visitors with attractive experiential exhibitions? Is “art democracy” a

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5 Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 149.
means to an end as opposed to being for the public’s benefit? Are they culturally falling behind?

What seems to matter in today’s institutions are attendance numbers over the public’s experience. Is there a desire to supersede the quality of the museum experience in preference for the quantity? Are contemporary museums focused on achieving the highest attending figures? Have museums forgotten about their visitors’ interests? If their priority shifts towards a mass appeal, are they jeopardizing the learning process? Underestimating the audience’s presence and learning aptitudes in favor of reaching a certain number of visits are now the prevailing tendency. To meet these attendance goals, museums devote themselves to the “show business,” where the mission relies on the “democracy of the spectacle,” with experiential exhibitions. This new situation leaves less room for the art displayed and affects the service delivered to the audience. Which make us question, is the art museum’s purpose still educational? Do the strategies taken within institutions pursue the benefit of individuals and society as a whole? Most experiential and environmental exhibitions claim to engage and foster audience participation. Nonetheless, where does experience truly stand on this equation?

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CHAPTER 1

TRANSFORMATION: THE ADVENT OF A PHENOMENON.

THE MODERN MUSEUM

Modern museums were erected over a humanist purpose, and from the outset, the development of society became a priority of theirs. After articulating their statement of intent, art institutions had to overcome obstacles in order to fulfill educative goals. To avoid being outdated, museums’ *raisons d’être* have to evolve in step with society.

The advent of the modern museum dated back to the late eighteenth-century and came into existence arguably with the opening of the Musée du Louvre in Paris. In 1793, the Louvre left behind its palatial youth and was imbued with a new meaning. In the late seventeenth-century, after the royal family abandoned the Parisian palace for Versailles, this building claimed for a new purpose. The French Revolution infused the new public museum with social aspirations that superseded its restricted past; notwithstanding, its origins were not rooted in the Reign of Terror. Turning the former palace into a public museum was an idea already brewing at the end of the Ancient Regime. Social circumstances changed the picture drastically, and the Louvre became the supporting platform that embraced the emerging bourgeois class. Burdened with the responsibility of making its extensive royal collections accessible, the institution accomplished to welcome and benefit the general public.

Museums were no longer seen as temples for the memory, treasuring their past and avoiding their present. They were not sanctuaries welcoming the elite for private art

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contemplation either. Before, holdings were purposelessly accumulated and nonsensically displayed. As author Paul Valéry underscored, art institutions resembled cemeteries that lacked any connection to the present, and were “resting places of incoherence.” Modern museums sought to be part of their present, and despite collecting their past, they aimed to provide answers to serve new social structures.

“Louvre” became the synonym for a democratized culture, the representation of national and civic pride that pursued to broaden its public access. At the heart of the democratic culture movement, it was the institution every major city wished to be by the end of the nineteenth-century. Museums in Europe were the first to follow suit; they were modeled after the Louvre, starting with the Museo del Prado in Madrid in 1819, the National Gallery in London in 1924, and the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg in 1852.

I. Paris: From Musée du Louvre to Centre Georges Pompidou

At the turn of the nineteenth-century, there was an attempt to democratize museums, followed by a gradual opening of princely galleries and their transformation into public museums. This transition raised questions of what the expectations of the new museum-goers were. Public exhibitions during the eighteenth-century were impelled by an increasing well-educated bourgeoisie willing to access culture, starting with the academies taking over the art scene, first held at the so-called Salons in Paris (1737) and then followed by the Royal Academy in London (1768).

Moving forward, over the last decades of the twentieth-century, questions shifted and gravitated around the issue of having meaningful public outreach and making the

art more accessible. Paris witnessed the evolution towards the democratization of the arts since times of despair and anger. Almost two centuries after the Revolution had overthrown the monarchy, and keeping the same revolutionary spirit, the French government conceived an experimental project in response to the political turbulences and riots affecting Paris in 1968. The situation of social discomfort called for a democratization of culture. President Pompidou’s proposal had the goal of providing the French people with a multicultural institution at the 4ème-arrondissement in Paris.

Centre Pompidou stepped onto a new path against the boundaries underpinning the existing museums. In conjunction with the postmodern trend of museums as social catalysts, the Pompidou’s core purpose was to look after a new kind of public. It halted the disengaged stance that art museums had adopted in the past. The unpleasant social realities demanded the rearrangement of priorities, which lead to a shift towards cultural commitment. At this point, the museum’s tranquility, built on a culture denial, was swept away from the equation. Pompidou’s compelling power had a tremendous impact on the rehabilitation of its neighboring community, the Marais district. Despite unreservedly earning the title of “symbol of a progressive society,” its impressive design by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano drew many non-conformist detractors. As a precedent of the “Bilbao Effect,” which we will bring into the discussion in chapter 3 of this thesis, the Pompidou laid the foundation of the museum of the twentieth-century as a “cultural trailblazer.”

II. The Democracy of the Spectacle

The battle to control museums is confronting cultural status against corporate ambition, which tips the scale to the present private funding model supporting “temples

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15 Ibid, 155.
16 Guasch and Zulaika, Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim, 14.
of leisure”. Almost every strategy seems justifiable in order to draw the highest number of attendees, and consequently, relegating art to the background. In times of austerity, public funding withdrawal is making European museums “cling” to donations and corporate sponsorships. This situation comes as no surprise to the United States, where institutions are privately funded by donors and patrons. Thus, it appears as if each member of the museum board has their right to change course protected with a funding-shield. However, turning the tide and affecting museum decision-making is hazardous and jeopardizes the future of the public museum. Despite receiving external financial support, private institutions are still for the public; they have to serve their audience’s benefit rather than display the taste of those behind the donations.

Today, aesthetics and knowledge do not seem to translate as immediate income results anymore, and therefore, must be sacrificed to achieve profitability goals. In the essay “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” art historian Rosalind Krauss declares, adopting a pessimistic tone, that “the new museum would forgo history in the name of a kind of intensity of experience […] radically spatial.” Krauss was a skeptical supporter of Minimal art. She fluctuated between phases of endorsement and criticism during the 1960s and 1970s. Rosalind Krauss presciently argued in the 1990s how museums would seek institutional survival with the implementation of the expansionist “Krens (business-like) model”, which will be explained in the next chapters. Moreover, she thought how shows were mounted in a way in which the

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19 James Meyer, Minimalism (New York: Phaidon Press, 2010), 35.
exhibition space outweighed the content itself. According to her, this exhibition model had its roots in the articulation of Minimalism.\(^{21}\)

The democracy of the spectacle backs a theatrical architecture that stages and glorifies exhibitions. New architectural containers are prone to accommodate installations over single works of art that captivate and engulf a larger audience. Museums implementing this strategy tend to overwhelm the visitor with the scenography rather than engage them with the artworks. Exhibition curating becomes visually compelling and hence a “manipulation” of the beholder (consumer of a commercially-inclined platform) is facilitated.

Institutional mass control is not a novelty of the twenty-first century museum — this desire was born in the Victorian era, when museums were measured in socioeconomic terms. Its origins date back to the post-Second World War in Europe and, in the period between wars in the United States.\(^{22}\) By supporting the development of museums at the time, politicians had the belief that they could redefine all the classes under a shared sense of taste. Thus, altering and having power over them through culture.\(^{23}\)

The proliferation of temporary exhibitions has arisen to cope with the whims of the growing consumerism. From this perspective, visitors are seen as consumers of entertainment, and their “desires” have become “needs” used to face their consumer anxiety. Individuals are bombarded every day with information, and as a result, our attention spans get damaged. Whenever the stimulus-supply decreases, consumers demand more to reach their informational overdose cap. Our cravings are insatiable, and enough is no longer enough. This indicates how overstimulation has become a

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
\(^{22}\) Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 209.
\(^{23}\) Guasch and Zulaika, *Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim*, 162.
detriment to our society, and why it should not be fueled by art institutions. Are we at a point of no return? Our attention does not focus anymore on one specific activity, which promotes the failure of fostering a deeper thinking when a certain amount of information cannot be fully processed. Is that what contemporary museums aim? A model relying exclusively on multiple diversified exhibitions willing to touch every topic, could threaten our overall learning experience, and might drag our minds into the abyss.

III. Minimalism as a Phenomenon

Minimal sculpture was the cradle of installation art; the writings of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) shaped its reception.\(^\text{24}\) Controversial at its time, Merleau-Ponty became a faithful supporter of this art movement and his writings revolved around the non-traditional sculptures’ effect they had over the public. He believed in an unfolding encounter between people and their surroundings. The new aesthetic experience of the early 1960s was based upon his books *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Primacy of Perception*, translated from the French in 1962 and 1964, respectively.\(^\text{25}\) For this philosopher, our existence correlated to our perceptive engagement.\(^\text{26}\) Artists turned to his writings to help them express what they were aiming to offer to the viewer with their sculptures.

A starting point to comprehend Merleau-Ponty’s claims on phenomenology is the following extract from his book *The Phenomenology of Perception*.\(^\text{27}\) In phenomenology “the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be itself because it stands at the other end of our gaze or the terminus of a sensory


\(^{25}\) Bishop, *Installation Art*, 160.


exploration”. Both object (“the thing”) and subject (“the person perceiving it”) are a unity where the existence of the former relies on the perception of the latter. Once this is accepted as a true statement, Merleau-Ponty moves to the analysis of “perception”.

Again, it requires the presence and involvement of the subject to happen. However, he points out that it is not just an act of vision but the commitment of the entire body with each of the five senses. It is not a question of subjective experience, but a relationship between work, viewer, and context of viewing, therefore, a spatial experience. The relationship between “the self” and the world is co-dependent of a complete embodied, aesthetic engagement. What we perceived is affected by what we feel and where we are. The philosopher described how “I do not see (space) according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me”. Perception refers then as the whole process of involvement and commitment with what we have in front of us. A journey of immersion in the object inscribes our body in the world around us, beyond the present.

Attracted by the object, the subject becomes aware of the existing relationship between them and the voided space. Among the senses heightened during the circumnavigation of the sculpture, attention takes us back onto the perception process. As a result, to emphasize and capture the predilection artists had for empty locations in which the viewer’s experience became the content of the object, this branch movement of Minimalism, was coined after the phrase “Light and Space”.

Perceptual immediacy in the 1960s provides a non-biased encounter at a phenomenological level, where the idea is neonate, born in the present, and for the present. The first reaction is, therefore, an experience not affected by prior memories.

29 Bishop, Installation Art, 56.
This perception process raised some issues questioning the disconnected *presents*, a plurality of non-related moments. In response to this problem, artist Dan Graham (b. 1942) believed in a perceptual process viewed from three different moments: past, present, and future. Moreover, Graham emphasized the space of non-isolation in which the viewer could have a social embodied experience.\(^{31}\) However, Merleau-Ponty’s theory did not regard the individual as an isolated entity living in the present; instead, it was a psychological identity existing in the past, living in the present and transitioning into a future.\(^{32}\) As artist Robert Smithson highlighted, Minimal art attempted to create an object complete in itself, non-relational, to be experienced in complete isolation, and that made no reference to its surroundings.\(^{33}\) The presence of the artist’s hand thereby was erased when the object was placed on the floor.\(^{34}\) Indeed, Minimalists intended to give autonomy to the artworks and their presence within their framework.\(^{35}\) Donald Judd (1928-1994), for instance, agreed upon the idea of a disconnected work that did not belong to time nor space and had value in itself.\(^{36}\)

Simple forms and use of materials that are non-expressive nor symbolic characterize Minimal sculptures. According to Minimal artist Robert Morris (1931-2018), the size of the object mattered to the spectator’s interaction. Large-scale works attract the audience because they create a stage scale that magnifies the space and its relationship with the public. This environment engulfs the spectator into a displayed situation, where the viewer perceives the work from a “lived bodily perspective”\(^{37}\). Morris held dear that the awareness of oneself living in the given space was more

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31 Bishop, *Installation Art*, 73.
32 Ibid, 76.
present than ever. The spectator of this staged work installation apprehends the object from diverse perspectives and conditions, as it embeds the environment. Furthermore, the subject recognized their position within that specific location for a while. 38

IV. Installation Art

Art critic Michael Fried alleged in *Art and Objecthood* (1967) that Minimal art was more akin to theater than to sculpture due to the response to its surroundings. 39

Conqueror of its time, the practice of installation stood out among artistic disciplines. Its proximity to the public generates a disassociation from traditional art forms that do not require any collaboration. Installation art could be understood as a social platform prompting open-ended interactions with the public coming to the institution. This art practice was born in the 1960s, and ever since then, it has commonly be described as immersive and spectacular. Frequently misused after this decade, the term installation describes a myriad of related disciplines across the art media. 40 Now, it comprises disparate object arrangements, from paintings to light bulbs, displayed in any given space. Installation has, therefore, become a polysemic word fraught with meanings, encompassing concepts such as “interaction” or “ambient.” 41

A group of Minimalist artists proposed to review the relationship between three key components: the beholder, the object, and the surrounding space. Among them, Donald Judd focused on the relationship of overscale objects in non-traditional exhibition spaces. As he underscored in his writings, “the work is not disembodied spatially, socially, temporally, as in most museums.” The surrounding space had the

38 Bishop, *Installation Art*, 56.
39 Ibid, 53.
same impact as the thought put into the creation of the work.\textsuperscript{42} Author Julie Reiss underscored that the uniqueness of installation art was that it only had complete meaning with the presence of the viewer: “the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work […] without having the experience of being in the work, analysis of Installation art is difficult.”\textsuperscript{43} This art was created to be sensed by a viewer willing to bridge the gap between their own body and the work.

During the 1980s, Documenta, Skulptur, or Venice Biennale, played a significant role in increasing awareness of spectacular art installations. Prior to these art events, venues dedicated to Minimal art have already further consolidated the power of environmental installations. Nowadays, a biennial or triennial that does not embrace this kind of art is inconceivable.\textsuperscript{44} Nonetheless, it was not until after the show “Dislocations” curated by Robert Storr at MoMA (1992) that installation art was regarded as an artistic discipline.\textsuperscript{45} For our purposes, this thesis will only analyze the experiential side of installation art and our body response to its display.

V. Art Pilgrimage: Dia Art Foundation, Beacon

The magnificent scale of installation art dominates any given environment, although it does not respond to it as one might expect. Contrariwise, it responds directly to the people with which it shares the living space. Gravitating around staged artworks automatically heightens the way our body reacts to them. In installation settings, each artwork is housed and displayed as a living collective (Fig. 1). Only understood as a

\textsuperscript{43} Julie H. Reiss, \textit{From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art} (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001).
\textsuperscript{44} Bishop, \textit{Installation Art}, 37.
\textsuperscript{45} Oliveira and Petry, \textit{Installation Art}, 17.
unit, this entity codifies the spatial parameters, bringing about situations ready to be experienced.46

Dia Art Foundation was born as a nonprofit organization that provided space and private funds to commission site-specific and large-scale artworks.47 Collectors and institutions did not favor their scale nor nature due to a lack of space ready to equip and present their format. Neither did art dealers find these works profitable trade material because they were unmarketable.

Fig. 1, Rice+Lipka Architects, Dia Art Foundation, Beacon, New York, 2003. Robert Smithson, Glassed Mirror Squate (Cayuga Salt Mine Project), 1969

46 Bishop, Installation Art, 6.
In 1974, Dia’s first location in Chelsea could no longer sustain the size of these experimental projects (Fig. 2). The foundation had to wait over a decade to be able to equip these works in their newly acquired space, an abandoned Nabisco plant on the banks of the Hudson River. Its renovation took five years and translated into a $25 million grant from the New York governor George Pataki. In 2003, the new “satellite” opened its doors in Beacon under the direction of Michael Govan, who was the former deputy director at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In chapter three, we will explain how the “Bilbao Effect” became the inspiration for the opening of Dia’s upstate second location (Fig. 3). Conditioned by the then Guggenheim director Thomas Krens, Dia Beacon opened its doors in 2004, offering 292,000 square feet of gallery

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space dedicated exclusively to Minimalist and Conceptual Art. It supported financially a group of artists that were part of the founders’ collection, from Robert Irwin and Walter de Maria, to Robert Smithson, Donald Judd, or Dan Flavin. Judd was a staunch defender of judging art based on commercial considerations. The lack of artistic support demanded a robust funding system willing to embrace Minimal art, which endorsement inexorably involved sponsors and public subsidy. Although this pecuniary approach makes us hesitate about the economic effort supporting these projects, institutions could then focus again on art for art’s sake. \(^{49}\)

![Aerial View of Dia: Beacon with Hudson River Valley, New York. © Dia Art Foundation](image)

**Fig. 3**, Aerial View of Dia: Beacon with Hudson River Valley, New York. © Dia Art Foundation

A decade after its establishment by Heiner Friedrich and his wife Philipa Pellizzi, Dia Art Foundation underwent a financial crisis. Dia’s operating expenses derived

almost exclusively from the returns on Schlumberger Ltd., in-continuous-decline tumbling stocks. A series of upheavals followed their ambitious fundraising method.

Concomitantly, Judd started a private artistic project in collaboration with Dia. Once the institution had overcome all the ups and downs, the project deviated into a public viewing space. From the outset, the concept was built around the idea of embedding large-format works in Marfa’s surrounding landscape. Donald Judd’s works would live side by side with commissioned Dan Flavins and John Chamberlains.

According to the initial plan, the artist would receive a monthly salary from the foundation, and each of his works would remain in the space and could only be removed or sold under his consent. Regrettably, the Marfa foundation suffered the costs as it was sustained by Dia’s revenue stream. Among all the artists, Judd was cut off financially, which prompted him to threaten the foundation with the file of a lawsuit.

The first contract between Judd and the Dia Art Foundation dated back in 1978. Together, they were going to work in partnership to create and administrate his works in Marfa, reallocating the curatorial offices there. Dia was responsible for approving the cost estimation for the production of the works. Judd was in charge of making the artistic decisions, leaving the care and maintenance of the artworks to the foundation.

At the center of the legal dispute, the foundation was forced to put an end to the agreement with Judd in August 1986, and Marfa became a nonprofit organization disengaged from Dia. The nonprofit agreed upon enabling the completion of unfinished works to support its transitional costs into an independent organization in the course of the next five years. After this period, Dia handed the Marfa project to the Chinati Foundation (Fig. 4, 12).⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ Stockebrand, *Chinati: The Vision*, 34.
Both venues were intended to raise awareness for the supported artists and site-specific works. Dia did not only provide patronage to its artists, but the ideal conditions to make their works possible. Its purpose was to create something never done before, embracing the uniqueness of each work and challenging the conventional display of museums. Marfa, as Dia had done before, uncovered or, rather, brought to light the constraints most contemporary museums had when it came to fully experience the works on display. They both differ from traditional venues in the presentation of sculpture and the viewer’s location within the exhibition frame. Furthermore, these foundations heightened the sculpture’s autonomy as a self-sufficient object, a stand introduced in the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century. Despite the presence of the viewer, the work on display remained independent from its surroundings.

Experiences have their time and place, yet they remain transient with us. Even when we bury them, they are etched in our memories. Experiences are ephemeral, fleeting moments in time before passing away. Non-repeatable, these memories represent the uniqueness of an instant. Despite their blurriness, they will turn into our life partners, transitioning, and altering our hearts and minds. Memorable experiences will eventually be elusive. Nevertheless, experiences have to be lived and undergone from top to bottom to stick with us for a lifetime. Deep down, a lived experience will be in our minds forever, even if it is radically transformed every time we revisit it.\textsuperscript{54}

Our memory is always selective. Prior experiences underlie the formation of new tangible memories, predisposing visitors’ identity-related motivations and future engagement with their surroundings.\textsuperscript{55} “To engage” is to bind a promise or contract, to take part, to pledge oneself. Among its definitions, one stands out, “to come into battle.”\textsuperscript{56} While the former implies a commitment, the latter stresses how to face and confront what we have before our eyes. Who are we fighting with when it comes to engagement? The beholder attending an exhibition engages not in a regular confrontation but a reckless encounter. What is the dispute being fought here? Does it refer to a crisis that has to be overcome? Does this engagement have an end in itself, after all?

\textsuperscript{54} Mark Godfrey, \textit{Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life} (London: Tate, 2019), 155.
\textsuperscript{55} John H. Falk, \textit{Identity and the Museum Experience} (London: Routledge, 2009), 139.
In the past, museums were inclined towards an object-focus display, forgetting about social engagement. However, this attention has shifted over the past decade to reach a greater range of visitors through experiential shows.

Museums are one of the venues where the opportunity to “control” might be within reach. In this learning setting, visitors enhance the formation of their memories, embracing free-choice decisions. Paradoxically, visitors’ free-choice learning goes hand in hand with institutional control over them, as museum researcher Deborah Perry concluded in her doctoral studies. Among diverse defining variables of museum learning, she highlighted how the audience’s confidence had a major role in museum experiences.\(^{57}\)

One of the problems museums have to face when designing and delivering experiences is accepting that results are not always guaranteed. The backbone of audience-centered exhibitions is the stimulation of visitor involvement within an open and conversational platform. Their dialogue with each individual taking part in the show gains then paramount relevance.

I. Staging experiences

Museums are attempting to better shape and tackle experiential staging. In order to welcome a broader and diverse audience, institutions usually apply the IPOP Theory. This theory aims to understand the subjects’ unconscious preferences, and what draws the public to experience their surroundings.\(^{58}\)

Also known as the “experience preference theory,”\(^{59}\) it seeks to enhance audience outreach through classification into four categories. Accordingly, experiences fall under


the following dimensions: conceptual, aesthetic, emotional or narrative, and physical. When the visitors are moved by the beauty of the experience itself, objectifying it as a valuable thing, we have *object experiences*. In contrast, from a conceptual approach, *cognitive experiences* enrich our understanding. *Introspective experiences*, on the other hand, reflect on the meaning of our experiences and make us reconnect with old feelings and memories. The IPOP interpretation amplifies the sense of connectedness and appropriation to the new experience.  

Experiences can appeal directly to emotions and go beyond any knowledge. Accepted and stored in our memory as unites, experiences can be reassembled into a whole when we attempt to access them. They could be thought-provoking and affect the subject on an intimate and individual level.  

Museum experiences go beyond the visit itself, and could be tracked down. The visitors’ experienced encounter at the institution becomes the start of meaning-construction. The experience shapes the individual and influences their future museum visits from beginning to end. Before entering the museum, there is an *a priori* moment that starts the experience, and this instant has to be followed imperatively by a *post hoc* analysis of experience interpretation.

II. Individual and Social Experiences

The turn of the twentieth-century drew attention to the abandonment of the isolated spectator in favor of the public as a collective. To satisfy the process of introspection, the beholder had to share the space generated by the museum with other individuals. Through social interaction, visitors were allowed to reconnect with themselves. One

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64 Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 108.
could experience while in complete solitude, but it was co-dependent of the presence of a third to fully evolve. Although a shared space embraces the reunion of a diverse audience, it is doubtful that each visitor will experience in the same way.

The value given to individuality owes its importance to the early nineteenth-century German thought, when it was significantly emphasized. However, as psychologists Jerome Bruner and Bernie Kalmar had underscored, “the self” tends to project a double image of themselves as individuals, a privately subjective inner version and a publicly social outer version. At the end of the 1920s, there was a shift in art perception that advocated for a collective viewing experience. During this decade, European museums experimented with different modes of art viewing, which expanded to New York at the beginning of the 1930s. The director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, set a precedent with his prove-to-be influential exhibition model. Prior to his appointment, Barr had visited the Bauhaus workshop in Dessau on a research trip, where he absorbed the discursive techniques to display exhibitions. MoMA was presented to the world as “a laboratory” with an evolving character and sense of experimentation. It became a museum of reference due to its original disruptive approach to art staging. However, ninety years after its opening, could we still consider MoMA a leading pioneer? What remains of this artistic laboratory? Its recent $450 million renovation aims to make MoMA accessible to a broader audience. Commercial purposes prevail over the exhibition display, despite an effort to present artists’ inclusion (embracing roughly 28% of works done by women and 21% created by non-

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65 Ursprung, Studio Olafur, 446
66 Klonk, Spaces of Experience, 38–4.
67 Falk, Identity and the Museum, 71.
68 Klonk, Spaces of Experience, 135.
Western artists\textsuperscript{70}. Changes do not happen overnight, and the extension of the MoMA does not necessarily translate into an immediate ground-breaking \textit{museological} success.\textsuperscript{71}

Interactions can have a high impact on a visitor’s experience. We can perceive ourselves differently through others’ eyes as well as by sharing beliefs and values; wherefore, different people bring different meanings to what it might appear as a unique experience.\textsuperscript{72} To add to our personal and individualistic experience, the museum has to provide the means to facilitate a closer social engagement that promotes this interaction. All these measures combined make visitors grow as they engage both socially and individually with the work.\textsuperscript{73}

“To experience” involves a personal investment of your time and soul, a sense of ownership embracing first-hand exposure to a particular situation set in the “here and now.” It has to start with the awakening of your consciousness before it can be shared and discovered socially under similar circumstances.\textsuperscript{74} Much of the human behavior can be learned mimitically. Exploring an exhibition by yourself has, therefore, side effects, such as the lack of thought-fostering that can be achieved as a collective. Heartfelt experiences can be partaken and shared by a group of individuals that has undergone them together. The involvement with people dwelling the same social settings happens

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{72}]Falk, \textit{Identity and the Museum}, 99.
\item[\textsuperscript{73}]Falk, \textit{Identity and the Museum}, 99.
\item[\textsuperscript{74}]Hilde S. Hein, \textit{The Museum in Transition. A Philosophical Perspective} (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Books), 86.
\end{itemize}
to impact the value of their overall experience\textsuperscript{75}, interfering with the meaning it could have held by itself.\textsuperscript{76}

\section*{III. Identity-motivations}

There is an imaginary boundary that exists within the space where the experience takes place, and it separates the artwork from its surroundings. Once we erase this limit, the theatrical sphere of the work and the spectator are brought together. Part of ourselves, the audience, remains at the margin, not willing to collaborate with either the artwork nor the other visitors. People feel more inclined to participate in experiences that match identity-motivations. Nevertheless, the interests that took the visitor to the museum in the first place might vary slightly once the experience starts. Entering motivations tend to be modified by visitors to ensure that their expectations are met. There is an adjustment during the visit in which the public changes their initial beliefs to avoid “psychological inconsistency.” Virtually, when behaviors and perceptions differ from expectations, there is a cognitive dissonance that alters the visitor’s mental state.

Individuals bear their prior experiences and values into the exhibition, and these parameters determine which parts of the experience are worth of their focus of attention.\textsuperscript{77} In this cause-and-effect scenario, the visitor has initially thought about the outcome of their visit. Unconsciously, the beholder has played it in their head several times, using this image as a prediction of their future visit. If the experience does not turn out as expected, the visitor will be disappointed.\textsuperscript{78} On the other side, when prospective visitors engage with what they believe is an intrinsically rewarding art experience, and it happens to match their entering expectations, it turns out as a
success. Human beings are motivated by the attractiveness of the goal to be achieved. For this reason, expectations are an accurate measure to identify the satisfaction coming out from an experience.

The identity of “the self” is a malleable quality that can be influenced by the environment. It is in a stage of continuous development that evolves and reconstructs as needed. Individuals demand unconsciously this evolutive process where their identity emerges differently affected by their socio-cultural world. The “identity theory” believes in a connection between the individual’s perception of social environments and the subsequent performance in that situation. It states that identities motivate social behaviors. Individuals enact those actions that confirm the most salient identities they have. Once identity is understood as the motivation behind our behavior, actions and thoughts can be regulated and controlled more effectively. The term “self-regulation” in psychology implies the existence of a person with a goal-oriented mind. Psychologists believe that people are the originators of their thoughts, but surroundings are responsible for modifying our perception; wherefore self-regulation is altered by our context. Understanding that the audience acts out motivated by their perception becomes a must when staging meaningful experiences.

The display of an exhibition does not necessarily imply the acknowledge of public needs. However, as identity-related motivations are temporary, every repeated experience lived by an individual will never be the same. For this reason, institutions have to fit specific needs and provide ever-evolving trajectories accordingly. As a reaction to our surroundings, the identity matures, keeping and getting rid of past selves.

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79 Ibid, 151.
80 Ibid, 140.
After accruing diverse identities, “the self” becomes an aggregate of the past, present, and future; an expression of multiple identities.

Today’s institutions have to grasp the nature of targeting their audience based on their needs and expectations. Once these are identified, the next step is to outline a long-term plan with the approaches to be adopted considering the museum’s strengths and weaknesses. Adaptability is one of the features of “the self” when facing new situations and surroundings. In order to understand what draws the public’s attention, institutions have to acknowledge the ever-changing transformation of the visitor. Institutions should, therefore, include the notion of identity as a conceptual tool to gauge their exhibitions. If their goal is to connect with their public, museums should match institutional capacities with identity-needs. Aforementioned, we described the collection of identities that a person carries with them. The cumulation of compelling experiences that inhabit the individual translates into this plurality of identities.

Institutional missions are critical, and once they are settled, they have to be continuously revisited. There is no perfect visitor, but infinite ones. Assuming that there is only one becomes a detriment in terms of progress for the institution’s development. When the public addresses new situations in the form of experiences, their response is both unconscious and conscious, as a reflection of their concept of themselves. According to psychologist Bernd Simon, the concept of identity has to be applied as an analytical method to further understand the person visiting the institution. We accept that no single perfect visitor is walking through the museum’s

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doors. Hence, there should not be a unique logic model of staging experiences for the public.

Logic does not come into play as a determinant of a visitor’s behavior towards the artwork. Despite setting the first goals, the museological initial stages will transition along with the community’s interactions. The audience has to determine the outcome of the exhibition, and the institution has to embrace its unpredictability.87

IV. Participation as an Act of Passivity

At the core of every experiential art exhibition, critical thinking cannot be ignored. Participation is deemed to be a double-edged sword, especially when it comes to critical thinking. Deep inside the meaning of the term “participation”, we could find “coercion.” Leaving threats and pressures aside, to coerce implies persuasion into doing something against someone’s will or forcing someone to act in a certain way. Environmental art convinces the audience to be involved and engaged with the staged work, although this act is not always the result of any coercion or manipulation of the subject. Could this engagement be an act of free will? The visitor is put under a spell of seductiveness that induces them to participate, feeling either manipulated or freely engaged.

Expectations such as interaction, entertainment, or knowledge become enticements to the beholder. Consequently, museums convince the audience into taking part in the experience in order to get what is promised at the end. For this reason, the adjective “voluntary” has often been paired with the noun “participation.” If it were implicit in the term, it would be a tautology to use it. Participation does not always imply a lack of freedom; nevertheless, it does not represent a voluntary act in itself either. Therefore, as

a caution note in this thesis, collaboration, performance, engagement, and involvement will replace the concept of voluntary participation whenever possible.

V. **Olafur Eliasson, “Spectacular Artist”**

Museums should strive for connectedness with visitors through new approaches and techniques. Artist Olafur Eliasson orchestrates experiential artworks that aim to make the visitors’ five senses stagger. Upon the viewing of his work, he exhorts his audience to discover the unknown and take the risk of getting lost along the way. In our hyper-regulated society, we are used to be guided and told what to do and think. Taking for granted that there will always be parameters to follow as a guidance, the public has to remember to start thinking on their own and be willing to sharpen their critical thinking.  

Eliasson brings to life works of art in dialogue with the space and the viewer. Each work is completed when the beholder engages in an experience-contract with the artwork. Once they are one, there is an exchange of truths and beliefs, of doubts and shared questions between subject and object.

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Fig. 5, Olafur Eliasson, Audience engaged with *The Weather Project*, 2003. Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, and scaffolding 26.7 m x 22.3 m x 155.4 m Installation in Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London. © Studio OE

Fig. 6, Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003. Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, and scaffolding 26.7 m x 22.3 m x 155.4 m Installation in Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London © Studio OE
Eliasson refers to his works as unpredictable, a feature of experiential art. When work and beholder accept the engagement, there is a sequence of arguments going back and forth. His work has often been qualified as democratic. Does it mean that it accessible to everyone? Is it approachable and easy to understand or to be experienced?

Olafur Eliasson stages situations that are prone to instigate interaction and involvement on the visitor’s behalf.\textsuperscript{90} In 2003, \textit{The Unilever Series} annual commission invited Eliasson to the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern. The resulting commission, \textit{The Weather Project}, put Eliasson on the map and meant a transformative moment for the museum’s history.\textsuperscript{91} The work consisted of a semicircular screen mounted at the end of the hall, hanging 7.70 meters away from the wall. Suspended from the ceiling, aluminum frames combined with mirror foil, reflected the space and doubled the volume of the venue. These materials created the illusion of the sun when in touch with the flat side of the semicircular screen. Visitors walking in could see their reflection and immerse themselves in the space amazed by their surroundings.\textsuperscript{92} To include all the elements together, a mist was emitted into the Hall, unifying the atmosphere of the environment.\textsuperscript{93} The installation was accessible, an invitation for everyone committing to engage temporarily with the spectacle.\textsuperscript{94} As an open space, the work benefited from the immersion of the public, adding meaning to the artwork. Tate Modern agreed at that time to open itself to the audience, embracing co-production as a crucial stage of the process for understanding the work.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{90} Ursprung, \textit{Studio Olafur}, 114.
\textsuperscript{91} Godfrey, \textit{Olafur Eliasson}, 6.
\textsuperscript{92} Ursprung, \textit{Studio Olafur}, 120.
\textsuperscript{94} Jackie Wullschlager, “How Tate Modern transformed the way we see art,” May 26, 2016, \textit{Financial Times}, https://www.ft.com/content/8e961a2e-2192-11e6-9d4d-c11776a5124d.
\textsuperscript{95} Ursprung, \textit{Studio Olafur}, 287.
The topic of the weather has been in the back of his mind all his life. He sees the weather as a social organizer, which encompassed shared environments. Our behavior and actions are reactions to the element of the weather. It influences and alters the way people experience his works, acting as co-creators. Again, the concept of weather implies unpredictability, and its role affects our understanding of time and space.96

Eliasson’s installations are imbued of the Californian Light and Space late 1960s inspiration. Accordingly, his work is indebted to the paradox of this movement, where immediacy is balanced out with mediation. His works represent a form of institutional critique, regarding their display in the space and how they address to the public.97

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97 Bishop, *Installation Art*, 77.

Fig. 7, Olafur Eliasson, *Your blind passenger*, 2019, 45-metre tunnel of dense fog. Exhibition Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life, Tate Modern, London.
Visitors’ performance is at the heart of Eliasson’s works. Unfortunately, he does not find this performativity applied in institutional practices. From July 2019 through January 2020, Eliasson’s work inhabits, once again, Tate Modern spaces. The retrospective *Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life* traces the history of commitment and involvement fostered with his art (Fig. 7). One of the many features that make Tate Modern unique is that its space takes the public a step further engagement. This institution not only invites to get involved with the works exhibited but to surrender to them. Tate Modern, in collaboration with Guggenheim Bilbao, embraces Eliasson’s willingness to heighten the awareness of “the self”, bringing the attention back to the audience.

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99 Wullschlager, “How Tate Modern.”
I. Institutional Critique

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Conceptual art brought about an analytical tool to oversee institutions. Referred to as “institutional critique,” this artistic practice emphasized the existing connection between a method (the critique) and its case of study (the institution). The following decade witnessed a current of thinking that crumbled the institution’s framework. As an element of the institutional puzzle, the forgotten artist became the new target of criticism. Today, both streams of thinking represent a consolidated and unified critique rooted in art institutions. It was not until the decade of the 1990s that the old institutional monopoly began to fraction. However, before falling apart, the competition to gain an ever-growing audience became real. Critical writings and political activism dressed up methods and strategies to draw new audiences. Mainly conducted by artists, this activism was directed against the ideological and social functions represented by art institutions. As a result, they underwent a process of constant self-questioning with the aim of transforming into critical institutions. The proposed changes led to the formation of the early 2000s trend, New Institutionalism. A term coined in the field of sociology, this process studied the interaction between society and institutions. It matched the sense of community and engagement embraced by mostly public-funded organizations. Instead

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103 Von Bismarck and Schafaff, *Cultures of the Curatorial*, 362.
of praising the society of the spectacle, art institutions were willing to explore progressive approaches where the exhibition venue was a unit in constant change.104 Encouraged by the lack of consistent funding, museums have to find strategies to stand out from the crowd and remain relevant to their audience.105

“Interpretation is an approach to presenting the heritage which seeks to engage and involve the audience with the 'real thing', to encourage participation and, through that, to assist visitors to develop the skills to explore for themselves and so enhance their own understanding.”106

Never regarded as an act of isolation from its environment, interpretation goes hand in hand with the journey of self-discovery in the social context of the entire visit.107 It involves inclusiveness and cooperation, but it does also require active participation on the audience’s behalf. We must acknowledge that an engaging educational process is essential to enhance the audience’s self-exploration. Nonetheless, institutions have to assist the public in acquiring and developing the required skills to get to know themselves. Today, it is upon the viewer’s decision to commit to the learning agreement set by the museum.

II. Staging Guggenheim Bilbao as a Spectacle: The “Bilbao Effect”

Over the last couple of decades, the public domain faced a period of mixed uncertainties and clarities. Unexpected and unwelcomed changes challenged the rise of new institutions worldwide. Modern architectures ceased to be mere dwelling spaces hosting exhibition sites and cultural heritage narratives. The overall globalized

104 Ibid, 367.
105 McClellan, The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao, 173.
106 Black, The Engaging Museum, 185.
107 Black, The Engaging Museum, 189.
“museification” was a transformative process willing to homogenize the mass culture. Hence, these architectural masterpieces became cultural instruments reinventing museums' discourses and altering urban landscapes.

The twenty-first century gave birth to a paradigmatic, and, arguably, unprecedented museum model aiming at becoming the “first global museum.”\(^{108}\) It had the signature of Thomas Krens, the then director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum back in 1988. Krens arrival to the New York location concurred with times of crisis. Guggenheim was facing a fall down in attendance, a considerable portion of its collection was confined in storage, and as a result, its finance was on the verge of collapsing. It lacked identity and failed to succeed in building an institutional character. The situation was screaming for help, and Krens came for its rescue. His winning formula was the idea of an international network of satellite institutions co-dependent of the Solomon R. Guggenheim.\(^{109}\) Bilbao was outside the art mainstream and had the chance to be culturally regenerated instead of remaining at the margins of culture.\(^{110}\) Merging a spectacular building signed by an acclaimed architect with the Guggenheim brand would be sufficient to take over Bilbao and raise it as a cultural destination – increasing the overall profitability of this corporate-business like art institution.\(^{111}\)

Krens’ formula spanned an international chain of flagships operating under the “Guggenheim Consortium.” Behind this master plan, the sustaining idea was to give responses to socio-political and economic problems of a regional area. Under this

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\(^{110}\) Guasch and Zulaika, *Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim*, 188.

strategy, museums became the metonymy of their cities, promoting the worthiness and possibilities of a city around an art collection.

The chosen city claimed for a facelift and clung to positivity. A model flourishing from the ashes of the crisis that had weakened the community after Franco’s dictatorship seemed to be the winning option.\textsuperscript{112} Bilbao was caught up in the process of deterioration and found itself unable to stay afloat. Notwithstanding their lack of motivation, a solution came to its rescue in 1997. Across the ocean, New York’s headquarter was recovering from its crisis. Prior to this situation, Solomon R. Guggenheim had undergone a renovation that affected the operating revenue.\textsuperscript{113}

Times demanded an innovative strategy, which came to life in the form of an urban catalyst museum.\textsuperscript{114} Bilbao bears the consequences of the “Guggenheimization,” also known as “Krensification” in the postindustrial era of decline. Krens’ plan revolved around questions of growth coming from a city on the wane as it was. Paired with Frank Gehry’s design, the new museum put Bilbao on the map as an active cultural player.\textsuperscript{115} The opening of this institution brought forth hope, restored the city’s poor infrastructure, and contributed to its economic revitalization. It positioned the institution as an American hegemony over its counterparts’ museums,\textsuperscript{116} which were working on the forthcoming European Union.\textsuperscript{117} Consequently, this project broke the ground to significant changes in the art world.

Far from the need to mount a blockbuster, the Guggenheim Bilbao was a spectacle in itself. If we go back to the beginning of the 1970s, we can find how museum salvations depended on famed blockbusters. Despite their cost, its popularity justified

\textsuperscript{112} Guasch and Zulaika, \textit{Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim}, 75.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, 76.
\textsuperscript{114} Guasch and Zulaika, \textit{Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim}, 15.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid, 17.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid, 9.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, 76.
corporation endorsement, in an exchange of financial support for a good advertisement for the funding company.\textsuperscript{118}

Despite the brightness brought by this initiative to a decaying Basque Country, it was unfortunately condemned and labeled as cultural colonialism. Under these terms, detractors saw the Guggenheim’s new branch as a cloning of the institution rather than as a distinctive model. Deemed as a mere spectacle for the popular masses, the museum gained support gradually expanding the “Bilbao effect” among other cities willing to experience a phenomenon like this. Regardless of the critics it carried, the Guggenheim Bilbao became a phenomenon in the art world to look at in perpetuity. It outperformed all expectations, and during its first year, over 1.3 million visitors generated $219 million.\textsuperscript{119} It went beyond the cultural sphere, and as such, experienced the theory of the three cultural epochs; a period of chaos and disagreements was followed by its equilibrium and consequent acceptance and integration within the community.\textsuperscript{120} We must look back to our past and inquire about the problems and solutions it offered us. After a thorough examination in retrospective, we can pursue to attain the desired future.

The notion of the modern museum became intertwined with a phase of economic prosperity in the 1990s, where institutions seeking to expand their influence globally. Superseded by the “building boom,” museums’ roles were morphing into multi-purpose venues where almost everything can be accommodated. Coupling with a renowned name meant success and met the revitalization goal.\textsuperscript{121} The idea of a globalized cultural institution was not far from any corporate practice. Krens’ purpose concerned growth

\[\textsuperscript{118} \text{McClellan, The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao, 212.}\]
\[\textsuperscript{119} \text{McClellan, The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao, 53.}\]
\[\textsuperscript{120} \text{Guasch and Zulaika, Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim, 74.}\]
and expansion, of conquering and turning into gold anything he was a part of in order to stabilize its finances. Despite setting high expectations, most of his projects came to a sudden end. The SoHo branch never brought the expected attendance figures. Instead, it turned to be a financial drain holding back Guggenheim’s salvation and taking it closer to its final meltdown.\textsuperscript{122} The trigger for a severe crash was caused by the Guggenheim’s previous director, who left with a financial burden hard to overcome. Decades of tilting from the budget crisis to close-to-uncontrollable recessions made the institution dependent on corporate sponsorships. Its operations required a continuous flow of cash injections, and expansion was seen as a promising solution for increasing profitability.\textsuperscript{123} The plan was to secure a third-party, the Spanish government, to endorse the museum’s expansion while increasing the revenue to pay for its accumulated deficits. Nevertheless, spreading abroad an emulated satellite location was not only going to bring profits back, it was going to generate additional financial needs. Based on corporate reasoning, expanding the number of flagships would result in the decrease of “the resulting unit cost” – variable costs will depend on the volume of units produced. The larger the level of output generated, the lower the cost per unit. This governing principle has the drawback of not becoming true when dealing with art institutions instead of mass-produced goods. The fact that there was not just one Guggenheim, but several willing-to-be multiples did not reduce the overall variable costs. In turn, the opening of new branches increased the estimated costs. A museum of the proportion of the Guggenheim Bilbao did not lower but increased the already high operating costs. In the long-run, administrative expenditures will cancel out any attained figures. In 1999, the budget for this project was estimated to be almost $230 million. Although it brought an unpredictable number of attendees, close to 20 million

\textsuperscript{122} Schubert, \textit{The Curator’s Egg}, 117-118.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid, 119.
visitors\textsuperscript{124}, it was clear that running a museum could not be compared or measured in corporate terms.\textsuperscript{125} The global museum idea came as a tour de force under the statement that Bilbao needed its rescuer. Thomas Krens came as “the hero of the twenty-first century” with the ambitious project of retooling the city into an international cultural hub.

Behind the direction of this museum was Frank O. Gehry (b. 1929). This architect devised the creation of a venue ready to exhibit the art of our time. As Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) had done before, the Guggenheim factory promoted a museum in which architecture sugarcoated the impact of the collection shown (Fig. 8)\textsuperscript{126}. It turned out to be a large scale backdrop with a two-fold purpose, firstly for its functionality in promoting conserving, displaying and teaching art, and secondly, providing an experience through an aesthetic pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{127} Initially conceived for another project in Los Angeles, the Walt Disney Concert Hall (Fig. 9), it was later going to be tested on a second never-realized building for Mass MoCA. Unfortunately, financial problems and the attacks of 9/11 put the project on a halt, as happened with all cultural initiatives.\textsuperscript{128} In the end, the gargantuan architecture found its home in the Basque region, in the shape of an overwhelming wraparound shell housing a three-story floor plan. Its challenging architectural inventiveness was used as a tourist-driven strategy, drawing new audiences and regenerating both city and museum finances. In times of internationalization, their concept morphed with their new architecture.\textsuperscript{129} The newly-branded extension modified its surroundings with their external design, but its collection did not resonate with their location. Unfortunately, the benefits that came along with new architectural envelopes

\textsuperscript{124} Pes, “Can a New V&A Design,” \textit{Artnet}.
\textsuperscript{125} Schubert, \textit{The Curator's Egg}, 119.
\textsuperscript{126} Hein, \textit{The Museum in Transition}, 84.
\textsuperscript{127} Guasch and Zulaika, \textit{Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim}, 81.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 196.
\textsuperscript{129} Pes, “Can a New V&A Design,” \textit{Artnet}. 39
were overshadowed by their internal distribution. Interiors were not being challenged (Fig. 8), and neither were their audiences. The long-lasting white cube model predominated in museums that were built upon superficiality.130

Fig. 8, Frank O. Gehry and Associates, *Guggenheim Bilbao*, Bilbao, 1997. © Guggenheim Bilbao

Gehry’s building stood on empathy as a source of inspiration, revolving around the idea of interpreting Bilbao’s urban infrastructure. As such, the structure conveyed the power the industrial city had back in the nineteenth-century and became a symbol of a

130 Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 164.
Setting aside the reasons behind Krens’ intervention in Bilbao’s city planning and cultural reawakening, it is an undeniable fact that he weathered the storm.

The Guggenheim Effect gifted us with three vital lessons. Museums are part of their context, and this relationship is bi-directional. Therefore, these institutions not only count on their context to exist and evolve, but their context depends on them. Secondly, art has to be spread across the nations and be accessible to a broader audience. For this reason, new spaces have to be provided to welcome more public. A third lesson can be inferred from the results this museum brought to Bilbao; amid the cultural value, it became a motor of economic development that gave a twist to the city.¹³²

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright had previously embodied a modern relationship between art and its audience through the expressiveness of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Along these lines, Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao entailed presenting itself as the model of the civic public museum, breaking the ground in the guise of a modernist monumentality.

¹³² Guasch and Zulaika, Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim, 85.
CHAPTER 4

STRATEGY:
THE INSTITUTION OF THE FUTURE

After World War II, museums demanded new forces of innovation and change. They underwent a drastic shift in strategy with the blooming of architectural expansion. Artworks were staged within a new framework that challenged rather than naturalized the encounter between subject and object. Instead of treasuring their holdings as uncontested artworks, institutions called into question the connection between the beholder and the object.

On January 12th, 2018, the Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris organized a roundtable to explore succeeding models for tomorrow’s museum. Hans Ulrich Obrist was the moderator of this symposium, with some of the most prestigious directors of modern and contemporary art museums in the world. Maria Balshaw (Director of Tate Modern London), Bernard Blistène (Director of the Centre Pompidou in Paris), Glenn D. Lowry, (Director of the MoMA in New York) and Manuel Borja-Villel (Director of Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid) were amongst the guest speakers invited to the debate “What Will Be Tomorrow’s Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art?” This debate confronted the problems that museums of contemporary art are currently facing and examined prospective alternatives to be adopted for the expansion of the collections, space uses and museum profitability. Blistène started the debate by criticizing museums' lack of personality due to the standardization of a thought-to-be "winning model." As it has been discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis, Bilbao started a cloning trend that erased the peculiarities of each museum location.
Present-day institutions should start focusing on which strategies might facilitate an engaged interaction and inviting environment for their audience. Art museums willing to accomplish public impact through a community-centered approach must match their audience’s values with their alternative exhibition models. The thirst for refreshing shows comes together with the thought of the economic profits they may bring at the end. If there are no amendments that translate into concrete programs and engaging shows, then we are doing something wrong. From our present, we cannot predict which museological model will succeed in the forthcoming century. Our current perspective prevents us thus from achieving a climate of certainty for the future of institutions, despite the trial-and-error institutional experiments we try to implement. Problems have to be identified first in order to reach a solution. After internal constraints and challenges have been identified, museums have to come with a solid strategic plan that highlights the foreseeable involvement of the audience.

Museums must strive for a self-evaluation of their mission and compel to address internal inadequacies and problems of an immediate nature if they aim to develop long-lasting relationships with their public. The trend of focusing on operational economic impact rather than providing meaningful services to the audience will eventually corrupt the overall experience.

The staging of experiences is inclined to guide people’s thoughts and emotions as a collective. Despite the control of the museum over the public, the outcome of their experience is unpredictable. The visitor’s experience is out of the museum reach;

133 Oliveira and Petry, Installation Art, 106.
137 Falk and Dierking, The Museum Experience, 296.
138 Decker, Engagement and Access, 2.
139 Falk and Dierking, The Museum Experience, 299.
however, providing the space for experiences to develop must be under the museums’ scope of action.\textsuperscript{140} Museums of the twenty-first century have vowed to embrace art experiences over artworks.\textsuperscript{141} Back in the 1960s onwards, phenomenology helped displace from museums’ mission statement the urge to focus exclusively on art preservation. It stressed their responsibility for shaping and affecting people’s values and experiences instead.\textsuperscript{142} Thereupon, art on display should no longer be the main priority. The emphasis has shifted towards the construction and process of interaction between the subject and the object.

Binding ourselves with estimations might be the only possibility when foretelling is not an option. Motivated by recent declines in attendance and mounting operating costs, museums awoke to find themselves in a sudden need to recast their exhibitions to engulf a broader audience. Unfortunately, these motivations were rooted in their pursuit to increase revenue and were in conflict with the institutional goal of social inclusion.\textsuperscript{143} Predictions about the shape of the museums dominate today’s institutional agenda. Museums focus on being accessible to a broader public by reinforcing the feeling of belonging.\textsuperscript{144} In this long-term process, institutions explore alternative strategies to enhance social inclusivity and deliver results that match visitors’ expectations. Reliance on exhibition revenue could jeopardize the engagement and commitment of the audience, becoming a second priority. If attendance numbers prevail over people’s art experience, how could the museum’s mission of fostering understanding and their goal

\textsuperscript{140} Hein, \textit{The Museum in Transition}, 86.
\textsuperscript{141} Malraux, \textit{The Museum Without Walls}, 87.
\textsuperscript{142} Hein, \textit{The Museum in Transition}, 67.
\textsuperscript{143} Guasch and Zulaika, \textit{Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim}, 184.
to educate the public could still matter? The obstacles to democratize art venues may be coming from within the institution.\textsuperscript{145}

Museums should desist catering to an extended audience spectrum by means of displaying all forms of art for all types of visitors. In order to provide a better cultural service, institutions should focus on the particular rather than aiming to tackle the universal. An attempt of diversification could undermine the quality of the service provided rather than foster it.\textsuperscript{146} The emphasis should underscore the need for a plurality of institutions, each representing a diverse \textit{museological} model that targets specific visitor expectations and serves different purposes.

How can institutions ensure long-term audience commitment? If this concern is in the limelight, are current museum strategies keeping the sponsorship flow going while drawing loyal attendees? Museums are platforms for individual and social debate, where reflection becomes the fuel for progress. To move forward, institutions have to step out of their comfort zone, and articulate cultural value. Regrettably, defining the future only from present thinking could result in taking a step backward. When austere measures prevail, museums resort to their holdings, experimenting with innovative narratives to display art. In this situation, historical approaches are challenged, and the importance of a chronological abandonment in museum discourses is addressed. Arranging art by themes that match and please a diversified public becomes, therefore, one of the winning formulas. Museums experiment with a range of discursive techniques in order to find which are the ones that conform and suit a majority. Yet, they lack a stable institutional preferred position to look after their audience’s education.\textsuperscript{147} The ultimate aim of museums should be to push the beholders to the brink

\textsuperscript{145} Guasch and Zulaika, \textit{Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim}, 187-189.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid, 191.
\textsuperscript{147} Bishop, \textit{Radical Museology}, 24-27.
of their comfort zones; this position would enable the viewers to find themselves again after transitioning the learning process. Through engagement with the artwork, the subject would be physically, psychologically, and socially free to enter a relational state with the object.\textsuperscript{148} Museums should let the individuals construct this one-on-one experience while joining them along their path.\textsuperscript{149}

Museum strategies seek to enforce a dialogue between subject and object, encouraged by an insatiable appetite for novelty approaches. Amongst the countless twenty-first-century curatorial methods defined, there is one prevailing: combining artworks unexpectedly to re-examine their overall plethora of meanings from an alternative viewpoint.\textsuperscript{150} Present-day museums ahistorical discourses are criticized for erasing the artists’ original intentions,\textsuperscript{151} despite the motivations endorsing these narratives. Where do we museums find a balance when coping with disruptive strategies? Labeled as a “curatorial playground,”\textsuperscript{152} Tate Modern had the mission to challenge the conventional and repetitive discourses of contemporary art collections. As a revolutionary reaction to Bilbao Guggenheim, it redrew the distribution of its holdings, rejecting the standardized chronological display of artworks by schools and avoiding a single narrative.\textsuperscript{153} Artists from diverse nations and stylistic periods were hanging next to each other, creating a sense of unity and extending the curatorial narrative in unexpected directions. Tate acted against the authoritative script of what a museum of contemporary art should look like and offered the audience the opportunity to design their intuitive gallery path. In so doing, it conveyed alternative ways of seeing

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\textsuperscript{148} Ibid, 40-41.
\textsuperscript{150} Schubert, \textit{The Curator’s Egg}, 135.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid, 135.
\textsuperscript{153} Klonk, \textit{Spaces of Experience}, 197-200.
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art. It set itself apart from canonical collections with a conservative vision of modern and contemporary art that was reluctant to change in the short-term.  

I. Commercialism. Fighting Back Museum Commodification

Modern museums have contributed since their princely collection origins to mold public taste. Decades later, during the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, high culture and the sphere of retail intertwined unwittingly. Department stores gained a dominant position as taste-makers. These commercial environments had in turn been influenced by the notoriety of theme parks, for their nature as profit-driven enterprises. Subsequently, some museum strategies drew inspiration from these mass-produced engines to promote retail-like experiences with a hint of consumerism. In this context, institutions found themselves surpassed by the recognition given to this source of entertainment (Fig. 11). The Museum of Modern Art in New York was one of the first to embody the perfect artistic and commercial duo. Since the audience was envisaged as educated consumers, the museum had to be adapted to its clientele. Each visitor was and is offered a commodified object, a product rather than an artistic experience. As a critic of museum commodification, Manuel Borja-Villel, director of the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, underlined in the roundtable organized at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris last year, the importance of gaining knowledge upon leaving the museum.

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156 Klonk, Spaces of Experience, 148.
Fig. 11, Phillip Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1939. Room with Vincent Van Gogh *Starry Night*, 1889. Oil on canvas. © Joshua Bright of *The New York Times*

Fig. 12, Donald Judd, *100 Untitled Works in Mill Aluminum*, 1982-1986, at the Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas. © Chinati Foundation
MoMA’s business interests played a crucial role in the architectural design of its building, where art walls compete to take up space from the museum shops. Under these circumstances, immersed in an expanding consumer-led society, museums felt the obligation of integrating part of the entertainment spectacle to their strategies. Museums had to fight against this potent entertaining force dominating society, before leaving art fall into oblivion. Faced with the impossibility of this task, art institutions decided to bring the entertainment in and become a spectacle in themselves. After the starting experimentation phase of previous decades, entertainment-institutions consolidated in the burgeoning art market. Followed by a period of economic flourishing, museums’ steadiness was affected by financial challenges during the 1960s and 1970s. Endowments and donations were no longer substantial to meet the rising operating costs, and shrinking government subsidies did not cover the budget shortfalls that state-run museums were facing. Refurbishments and building expansions were justifiable for the sake of an appealing makeover, beautifying exteriors to draw new audiences. Despite the superficial and aesthetic measures, bigger spaces demanded higher costs associated, which hampered the fundraising system. To increase profitability, institutions had to rely on crowd-pleasing exhibitions that attracted visitors to spend money on the museum facilities. Europe recently started to experience cutbacks in government funding and grant support, leading its museums through the same path of American institutions. Despite receiving public funding, European museums felt the pressure of raising more money and getting corporate sponsorship. Tate Modern, for

159 Klonk, *Spaces of Experience*, 206.
instance, succeeded in adopting global branding techniques that incited the development of a private patronage network willing to contribute financially to the institution.\footnote{Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa, and Victoria Walsh, Post-critical Museology: Theory and Practical in the Art Museum (London: Routledge, 2013), 210.}

When it comes to financial support, constituents may feel to have the right to interfere in museum decision-making and coerce in curatorial approaches. These days, museums have to put in extra effort to maintain a constant flow of individual donations and remain true to their cause.\footnote{Falk, Identity and the Museum, 244.} Sponsors could threaten to withdraw donations if they dislike an exhibition. Referred to as “coercive funding,” institutions have to be more aware than ever of corporate censorship.\footnote{Guasch and Zulaika, Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim, 226.} Will a profit-driven institution erode the educational mission of museums? Are not all institutions profit-driven organizations?\footnote{Nestor Garcia Canclini, Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 5.}

Through consumption, the capitalist system fosters the creative process of identity formation.\footnote{McClellan, The Art Museum from Boulée to Bilbao, 71.} From an amalgam of commercial opportunities, the consumer has the chance to exercise their freedom of choice to select the desired option and shape their identity. Notwithstanding, the issue at hand is what is understood as “art consumption” in today’s economy.

Identifying, revisiting, and placing priorities within the hierarchical structure is a need art institutions have yet to fulfill. Over the past two hundred years, institutions were prone to increase their involvement in museum design to satisfy their eagerness to grow their audience.\footnote{To this respect, during the early decades of the twentieth-century, concurring with the context of progressive museology, conflicting opinions emerged between museum professionals. On the one hand, there was a wave that supported an architecture hinging, to a significant extent, around their shops and cafés.}
In the context of institutional critique, anthropologist Margaret Mead emphasized the importance of museum investment in these amenities to maintain attendance levels.\textsuperscript{168} This viewpoint endorses “the annihilation of the museum,” promoting a consumption that increases visit numbers. On the other hand, there were museum detractors that criticized the prioritization of consumption over the educational purpose embedded in art institutions.\textsuperscript{169} Prior to Mead’s statement, John Dewey had championed a form of social capitalism less inclined to the fostering of consumerism in art museums.\textsuperscript{170} In his book \textit{Art as Experience}, Dewey embraced an “emancipatory” understanding of art rooted in a democratic society.\textsuperscript{171} Initially, museums’ massive architecture attempted to accommodate both museological tendencies, commercial and non-commercial, in order to provide the expected experience the audience was claiming. When times of declining revenue streams were paired with increasing operating costs, museums tended to search for profitable solutions. Under these circumstances, financial pressures tilt the scale in favor of financial bailout measures, which overall cheapened the museum experience.\textsuperscript{172} From a profit-driven point of view, the available space has to find the equilibrium between an intimate gallery setting to showcase art and the museum’s recreational areas.

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\textsuperscript{168} Guasch and Zulaika, \textit{Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim}, 183.
\textsuperscript{170} Klonk, \textit{Spaces of Experience}, 156.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 162.
\textsuperscript{172} Guasch and Zulaika, \textit{Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim}, 93.
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Conclusions

The perfect forward-coming art institution does not exist; it never will. Centre George Pompidou, Guggenheim Bilbao, Dia Beacon, MoMA, and Tate Modern had a crucial role in articulating the development of museums in the twenty-first century. Centre Georges Pompidou was born in the face of political adversities. It became the epitome of the democratic culture, which found itself halfway through between what was considered a high art museum and a mass culture institution. The new Guggenheim in Bilbao aspired to connect with its community, helped by the combination of its architectural features and its competing ideology. Despite undergoing a financial crisis, Dia: Beacon refused to become a business-driven museum. It set a precedent as a pilgrimage art destination for the as opposed to the path that MoMA took in the last decades. Tate Modern was a huge advocate of adopting alternative viewing experiences, embracing the freedom of choice amongst its audience. As it had happened with Dia Beacon’s building, Tate shunned to be part of the “Bilbao Guggenheim” architectural movement and proposed minimal building intervention.

The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed the triumph of a consumer-oriented philosophy implemented in art institutions. At the beginning of the new millennium, museum leaders in the United States pinpointed the pressing need for a clear delimitation between art and entertainment. Boundaries had to be set to distinguish which concepts identified with which goal.

These institutions contributed to setting the tone for alternative solutions to challenging the museum from the inside out and the outside in. Their models

\[174\] Ibid, 198.
\[175\] Ibid, 195-196.
highlighted their successes and failures, in an attempt to answer the questions of what to do and what to avoid doing for the benefit of the museum of the future. As evolving social platforms, museums hold themselves accountable for providing a service to their community. Although institutions claim authority over the presentation of experiences, their control is usually out of museums’ intention. Nonetheless, the outcome of staged experiences will have an impact on whether or not the visitor will return and encourage the visit to others.

Since experiences carry away an inherent subjectivity, overseeing the audience’s reception becomes unpredictable. For this reason, museums have to find a way to deliver on the promise of communicating their message most effectively. Before moving forward, institutions will have to be clear and question themselves for their reasons behind audience expansion. Are they willing to broaden their public for commercial purposes or to encourage critical thinking through art exhibitions?

Building audiences requires the willingness to understand the public’s interests. A starting point for exponential attendance growth relies on cultivating relationships with the audience. Art institutions are blinded by the novelty of addressing to a non-lasting audience. Instead, they should be getting in front of the beholder that would be the right fit. Museums should be more selective when attracting new audiences and find that prospective visitors that will come for the first time, be involved with the museum and the exhibitions held, and commit to return for the pleasure of learning. It is imperative to start making connections with each visitor entering the museum. The overall quality of their visit would be significantly enhanced if museums invested time in becoming better listeners. Museums’ strategies will have to be continuously revisited to satisfy visitors’ changing identity-related needs and expectations. Institutions are responsible

for making the right choice to benefit their public, from the installation of an environmental artwork to the experience provided as a cultural institution.

The future of museums lies, but not lives, in the past. With accumulated initiatives based on trial and error, institutions have the opportunity to learn and adapt themselves to the changing times. By taking the chance to make these experiences matter, museums will retain audiences.

Their commitment to producing cultural value and foster critical thinking among a broader audience has to move away from a mass education approach. Otherwise, this will lead to the belittlement of thought as opposed to the enhancement of the audience’s learning experience.

Behind the argument of museum expansions, the desire to accommodate the growing audience stands out as the preferred response. However, we must ask ourselves, is there a limit for institutional growth? Moreover, if that is the case, where should we put an end? Do museums speak in the name of the “one percent” of the audience? Or on the contrary, do they benefit the remaining “ninety-nine percent”? Unfortunately, the situation demands the presence of that visitor that is not willing to learn, but that contributes economically for no art-related reasons. Notwithstanding the help provided with the ticket purchased, the presence of the remaining “ninety-nine percent” hampers the quality of the experience the interested visitor is expecting to have upon their visit.

In the twenty-first century, achieving real audience engagement is more challenging than ever. Institutions should be more concerned about grabbing the

audience’s attention and gaining the knowledge to hold it throughout the visitor’s experience (and beyond the walls).¹⁷⁸

They cannot bear the risk of sacrificing the education quality while they get lost in the process of adhering or generating an occasional public that will visit the museum only once. Instead of engaging their audience through art, museums are focusing on implementing the entertainment strategy to increase their number of attendees.

The democratization of museums demands the transformation of art into a spectacle, which raises the question, should art be for everyone?

¹⁷⁸ Black, The Engaging Museum, 199.
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