

Site Unseen

Following two decades during which the postmodern ethos has largely dominated the ways in which art is created and experienced, it has become all but impossible to experience the museum as a neutral container that displays its contents without influencing or being affected by them. Far from serving as empty places that possess no qualities of their own until art is experienced within them, museums have been transformed into public sites in which certain societal values are reinforced, often without any explicit acknowledgment of what those values are, or how they came to be embodied by the institution.

Since much of the broadly skeptical inclination of post-modernity has been constructed upon a revisionist approach to art history as its firmament, this revised set of conditions applies as much to historically based institutions as to their more modern counterparts. The tendency, begun with Andy Warhol and continuing through such current exemplars as Chuck Close, Hans Haacke, Joseph Kosuth and Fred Wilson, to unearth and reframe a museum's permanent collection according to revised or disputed values, stems in large degree from the present-day belief that museums are themselves hotly contested sites of meaning:

Movement in Art, the installation created by Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan for Moderna Museet Projekt in summer 2000, fits gently into this loosely defined tradition. Trained in visual arts and medicine, respectively, the Argentine artist couple has focused during the past several years on a brand of "temporary architecture" that is unusual in its seeming reluctance to draw attention to itself. Although most of their installations function in tandem with existing structures, they do so in a way that encourages viewers to question whether or not they exist separately from the environment in which they are encountered. A case in point is their 1999 installation, *Offside*, for the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, which focused on a fairly narrow stairwell leading from the mezzanine to the second floor gallery. Intrigued by the sharp vertical sweep of the surrounding walls, and the way in which the stairwell's design seems to hurry visitors to the next stage of their visit, Zinny and Maidagan attached a graceful armature of narrow wooden slats to the inner wall. This extension jutted less than a meter into the actual passageway but extended upward nearly to the ceiling. Covering the armature with semi-translucent sheeting, the work created a visual echo of the surrounding internal space, narrowing it further but also amplifying the passage of light through the small porthole at the base of the steps. Although the work was intended to go unnoticed by a significant proportion of museum visitors, it nevertheless succeeded in drawing critical attention to a functional space whose inherent beauty had gone unexploited.

For their Stockholm project, Zinny and Maidagan chose to intervene within the museum's infrastructure in a number of unobtrusive but telling ways. Their first act consisted of an attempt to amplify the museum's identity as a "found" space by drawing attention to the questionable status of the artistic original in the way this problem was first postulated by Marcel Duchamp. Singling out the pivotal work known as *The Large Glass*, they first approached the museum's staff with a plan to present a 1961 copy of the work within the Old Vicarage, an annex space that has recently become identified as a project space for younger artists. This *Large Glass*, which had been produced by the eminent Duchamp scholar Ulf Linde, was not available for their project, so they

⁸ settled instead for Duchamp's *Boîte en valise*, which contains a miniature, but arguably "original" (since it was made under the artist's supervision) version of *The Large Glass*, within the museum's main exhibition spaces. In this invitation to museum viewers to contemplate the shifting definitions of original and copy, as well as the interwoven narratives of dates, scale and authorship, Zinny and Maidagan also call into question their own role as producers, since this portion of their intervention could just as easily be pointed to as an example of Duchamp's work, or Linde's, rather than theirs. An additional point of contention within this action became the very definition of contemporary art, since the Old Vicarage was now designated as a place where works from art history were by definition excluded.

Two other interventions within the Moderna Museet's main galleries gave Zinny and Maidagan's meditation on the slippage between found and created a more purely institutional spin. One aspect of the museum's new building by the architect Rafael Moneo that caught their attention was a system of metal security grids that slid over the museum's windows at night. While this grating did not detract from the viewer's ability to take in the picturesque views of the city harbor, it did succeed in reinforcing the symbolic status of the collection as something that needed to be protected. For Zinny and Maidagan, this binary pair of institutional gestures – museum open/grating invisible, museum closed/grating visible – formed a kind of text of its own, one in which certain deeper meanings could be extracted. With the security grating closed during public hours, an essence of the museum as a display in itself becomes communicated to the public. Because institutional structures tend to resemble one another in their bureaucratic priorities, one inescapable result of this intervention is that spectator both outside and inside the Moderna Museet were viscerally reminded of the parallels with military and penal structures, which erect similar security systems in order to keep what's inside the walls from escaping. Finally, the suggestion that the museum is also a machine, one which draws attention to itself only when its apparatuses are not functioning properly, introduces an element of doubt or skepticism as to the hidden priorities of one of a society's most enlightened institutions.

Only the third part of Zinny and Maidagan's intervention in the Moderna Museet can be properly defined as involving built structures. Within three of the museum's main galleries, they installed temporary architectural extensions that served to round out a few of the architecture's sharply defined corners, while creating cupboard-like escape zones that visitors were permitted to open, try and enter, and shut behind them. Ideally, each of these corner getaways enable a single person to temporarily leave the public setting of the museum behind, and enter a space that is entirely private and contemplative. These zones of individual containment, while appearing to contradict some of the museum's functions as a socially defined gathering place, also duplicated, on a single, interactive basis, other functions which the museum is expected to carry out as well. On the one hand, our tendency to think of the art museum as a temporary retreat from the tribulations of the outside world was merely accentuated by these corner adaptations, as was the related principle that the museum's spaces represent quiet, meditative areas. At one level, Zinny and Maidagan's third intervention can be understood both as an effort to restore to the museum setting some of the characteristics that are most appealing in the institution's self-definition, and as a slight rebuke to the same institution for not having adequately reinforced some of those same properties. Thus, the 'movement' indicated in the title for their project refers in part to the movement away from the museum's public spaces, where one might feel that he or she is as much a part of the display

as the art objects, to a space where one can neither see nor be seen by the public who are also sharing the space.

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One critical reflection on this undertaking stems from the increasingly mediated nature of our daily work environments, which do not invite direct social interaction to nearly the degree that they did even a generation ago. Seen in this light, the increasing popularity of art museums in the digital era can be understood as a reinvestment in the social dimension of public space, in which our temporary occupation of these spaces enables us both to encounter our fellow beings, and to place an intermediate subject between us and them. We are all there to experience the art, but also to experience each other experiencing the art, and in this way to reinforce the parameters of social interaction in a way that suits our increasingly self-imposed isolation from one another. Rather than relegate this knowledge to the background of our museum experience, Zinny and Maidagan's Moderna Museet Projekt pushes this awareness to the foreground, forcing us to reconsider the parallel functions of the museum from the perspective of direct experience. Were one to choose, on a visit to the Moderna Museet during the period of their intervention, to focus exclusively on their alterations within the environment and overlook the rest of the museum's presence, the masterpieces of the collection would fade into a shadowy nether-existence while the reality of the museum as a laboratory of social engineering principles would be startlingly transparent. Like Duchamp, Zinny and Maidagan are interested in reflecting on the art system as a reality in itself, independent of the other values that the objects displayed within its boundaries are expected to embody. They are not asserting that one layer of interpretation is more important than the other, merely that by unlocking certain codes by which the museum functions as a social institution, we come to understand that the meanings of the objects it contains are more conditioned than we may have ever imagined on certain characteristics which remain just outside the limits of our vision.

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