

## Collecting the New: A Historical Introduction

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The collecting and preserving of objects has traditionally been marked as a—if not the—central function of the museum, but discussion of museums and contemporary art has focused almost entirely on issues of display and exhibition.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising, as exhibitions are the public face of the museum, being the primary attraction for visitors and the central object of attention in the press and in the academy. But the collecting of contemporary art by museums raises a wide range of issues, from challenges to the traditional conception of the art museum to practical questions relating to the changing character of contemporary art itself. The purpose of this volume is to investigate these concerns, and to do so from the standpoint of those who deal with them in the course of active museum work. To set the stage, it will be useful to look at some of the critical moments in the history of, and conceptual tensions occasioned by, museum collecting of contemporary art.

Gertrude Stein reportedly observed that something could either be modern or it could be a museum, but it could not be both.<sup>2</sup> Stein's remark points to a dilemma central to the museum's engagement with contemporary art: since the eighteenth century the traditional view of the art museum has been that it is an institution intended to preserve and display works that have withstood the test of time. Given the fallibility of aesthetic judgment, this has seemed the most reliable way to identify artistic quality.<sup>3</sup> Thus the validation that artists and contemporary collectors seek from the display of their works in museums is based on the association of the museum with the time-tested masterpiece, a normative connection grounded in a convergence of historical opinion that seems to rule out the new.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, curators make qualitative judgments all of the time—about new works as well as about old—but such assessment implicitly is done in the subjunctive mode. To designate artworks as museum-worthy is to mark them as objects that would deserve a particular place in what Philip Fisher has called “the future’s past.”<sup>5</sup> This past is that of art history, whether viewed as a linear narrative or, in tune with recent directions of inquiry, as a more variegated story. Contemporary works valorized by entering museum collections—and, to a lesser extent, by being exhibited in museums—are in a sense projected into the future, identified as playing a role in an anticipated history. This same kind of projection also connects with the art market for contemporary works, for putting a price on a recent work of art in part is to place a bet on how important this work will be in the art historical future.<sup>6</sup> These two aspects of anticipating the art historical future are closely related, and in fact they are two sides of the same coin. A familiar example is the influence of Clement Greenberg during the 1950s and ’60s, when his critical writing and art world activity guided contemporary acquisitions by both American museums and private collectors. During this period Greenberg’s view of artistic progress yielded expectations of future art historical significance, which in turn determined judgments of both museum-worthiness and market value.<sup>7</sup>

The connection between art history and the art museum makes the collecting of contemporary works just as much a matter of guesswork as are dealers’ prices, and equally problematic. In addition to general skepticism concerning aesthetic judgment of the new, the pedagogical function of the museum—established in the eighteenth century alongside its moral purpose of developing taste through exposure to exemplary artworks—required that works brought into an institutional collection be located within a fixed art historical narrative. It is this narrative that was to be taught to visitors, making the museum, as Christian Mechel wrote in his 1781 catalog for the Habsburg imperial collection that he had installed in the Belvedere in Vienna, “a visible history of art.”<sup>8</sup> Especially in the modern period, when artists pushed the boundary of what counts as a work of art—certainly one source of Stein’s difficulty in conjoining “museum” and “modern”—problems of historical anticipation were pronounced. And with recent resistance to the modernist story of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century art, as well as the proliferation of alternative narratives and artistic practices, the very enterprise of constructing definitive accounts that situate new acquisitions in terms of historical place and importance has been called into question. So throughout the history of the museum, arguments have been available to steer the institution away from the art of its time.

Such reluctance, however, generally has existed alongside a fervent desire to embrace the new. The museum as exemplar of civic pride and national heritage

was established in eighteenth-century France and promulgated by the French. Initiated by the transformation of the Louvre in Paris into a museum and its opening as a public institution in 1793 after the Revolution, the conception of the public museum spread throughout Europe.<sup>9</sup> With the nation's artistic patrimony expanded through the confiscation of works from the aristocracy and the Church—and by Napoleon's looting of the Continent's artistic treasures—museums were created in other French cities, and a number of important European museums were established in the early years of the nineteenth century in territories occupied by Napoleonic forces. Although their primary displays were of works of the past, a rising sense of national identity often resulted in the exhibition of local artists, such as the room of contemporary paintings by Goya and other Spaniards that led toward the central gallery at the opening of the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid.<sup>10</sup> Such nationalism influenced the creation in the latter half of the nineteenth century of many public institutions dedicated to the display of contemporary art, from London's Gallery of British Art to Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery, and here the precedent also was French.<sup>11</sup>

In Paris in 1818, with the Louvre reserved for the masterpieces of the past, a place was made for contemporary French art when the Palais du Luxembourg was converted into a public museum, the Musée des Artistes Vivants (Museum of Living Artists).<sup>12</sup> (The name would be adapted by A.E. Gallatin when he established one of the first modern art museums in the United States at New York University in 1927, the Gallery of Living Art.)<sup>13</sup> With works by important French artists passing from the Luxembourg to the Louvre within five to ten years after the artists' deaths, room was freed in the Luxembourg for new art, and an institutional structure was created for an ongoing state commitment to the collecting and display of contemporary work. This commitment soon was expressed by large-scale state purchase of paintings at the annual Salons, works bought for the Luxembourg and, increasingly, for the expanding system of provincial museums. But it is important to note that these state purchases were primarily of academic art, and that "the new painting" would largely be excluded.<sup>14</sup> Only in 1896 did a significant number of important Impressionist works enter the Luxembourg, after a compromise was reached allowing the museum to accept a portion of Gustave Caillebotte's controversial bequest of his collection to the nation.<sup>15</sup>

The predominantly academic character of the French state collection during the nineteenth century raises an important question: What exactly do we mean by contemporary art? It might seem most natural to identify as "contemporary" those artworks created by living—or recently deceased—artists, but this is not how the term currently is employed. There is an additional filter, a presumption that "contemporary art"—the subset of present artistic production

that finds its way into significant galleries and museums—is more adventurous, more “cutting edge” than work made by traditional artists. Of course this distinction presupposes the historical break between the academic and the avant-garde—a break that first occurred in the nineteenth century in France. But the institutional identification of the contemporary with the up-to-date originated not in France but in Germany. For it was in Germany that such works were first brought into public collections in significant numbers and that museums first committed themselves to what we would call contemporary art.

A 1912 guidebook for Berlin’s National Gallery stated that its “principal task . . . was to be for the art of the present what historical art museums are for the art of the past,” but the collecting of modern art by German museums did not come easily.<sup>16</sup> With acquisition committees governed by establishment artists, it took radical purchases made by progressive museum directors to change the course of German museum collecting. Ironically, the greatest opposition came from artist organizations, pressed by competition from increasing numbers of artists and threatened both economically and aesthetically by the new French painting.<sup>17</sup> The exemplary figure here is Hugo von Tschudi, who was appointed director of the National Gallery in 1896. Tschudi was an expert on Italian and Flemish painting and senior assistant to the conservative Wilhelm Bode, head of the Prussian museums, but soon after his appointment he had a kind of conversion experience while looking at Impressionist paintings in Paris. Bode believed that museums should hold only work that represented time-tested aesthetic values, but Tschudi came to identify the role of a museum of contemporary art as facilitating the development of modernity.<sup>18</sup> Relying on funds provided by wealthy patrons, he was able to purchase progressive French and German art without the use of state money or the approval of the official acquisitions committee. His purchases and his reorganization of the galleries, especially his support of modern French art, brought him into conflict with both Wilhelm II and local artist organizations, and in 1909 Tschudi left Berlin to become director of the Munich art museums. In Munich he brought the same modern program—and controversy—to the Neue Pinakothek, which had been created in 1846 by the Bavarian king Ludwig I as Germany’s first museum dedicated to the work of living artists.

Tschudi’s efforts to transform German museums would be emulated by others, such as his successor at the National Gallery, Carl Justi, and Gustav Pauli, whose 1910 purchase of a painting by Vincent van Gogh at the Bremen Kunsthalle provoked Carl Vinnen’s vehemently nationalistic *Ein Protest deutscher Künstler*.<sup>19</sup> Outside the state museums, Karl Ernst Osthaus’s privately financed Folkwang Museum in Hagen opened in 1902, designed by the Belgian painter and architect-designer Henry van de Velde, who encouraged Osthaus to purchase

the modern art for which the museum was best known.<sup>20</sup> By the 1920s museum directors throughout Germany were acquiring the art of the international avant-garde, including works by members of Die Brücke, the Blaue Reiter, the Neue Sachlichkeit, and others. Ironically, the extent of these purchases would become clear only in the late 1930s, after the Nazi confiscation from museums of about sixteen thousand works, a small portion of which were shown at the 1937 Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich.<sup>21</sup>

In the late 1920s, the German museum with the greatest reputation abroad for its support of modern art was the Landesmuseum in Hanover. This was less because of the quality of its contemporary collection—though that was high—than it was due to the gallery in which it was displayed, the *Abstraktes Kabinett* (Abstract Cabinet) designed and realized by El Lissitzky in 1927–28. The Abstract Cabinet was the culmination of a series of “atmosphere rooms,” in which the director, Alexander Dorner, had reinstalled the collection in galleries meant—through wall color and decorative appointments—to immerse the viewer in the spirit of each art historical period.<sup>22</sup> The design of the Abstract Cabinet was intended not only to present the spirit of modern art, however, for in its interactivity and flexibility it embodied Dorner’s notion of a museum appropriate for the modern age. (Like Tschudi, Dorner wanted the museum to be more than a mausoleum of past artistic achievement, believing that it should play an active role in preparing the public for modern life.) Visited by progressive critics and museum people from around the world, including the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Alfred Barr, Jr., Hanover’s Landesmuseum represented the European museum’s most advanced engagement with the contemporary. (Soon significant attention was also directed to Lodz, Poland, after the outstanding modern section of its Museum of Art opened in 1931.)<sup>23</sup>

Like their European progenitors, American museums collected works by living artists, although they generally confined acquisitions to the traditional and the indisputably acceptable. But the civic spirit that was so much a part of their founding led to plans such as one proposed in 1833 for the creation of a museum in Detroit, which called for collecting one or two examples of the work of “every American painter, living or dead, who has attained to a certain standard of fame,” plus “original works by the great modern European painters, to be chosen on the same principle” and copies of Old Masters.<sup>24</sup> By the 1920s the city’s art museum actually did move into the modern and contemporary, under the leadership of German scholar William Valentiner, who acquired German Expressionist works soon after his 1924 appointment as director of the Detroit Institute of Arts and later commissioned Diego Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* murals for the museum.<sup>25</sup> For many years there would be no national museum

charged with collecting the work of living American artists, until the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York opened in 1931 as an institution meant to perpetuate the commitment of its founder, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, to the country's advanced artists.

Throughout the United States, museum funds were allocated to purchase the work of living Americans, most notably donations given for that purpose by George A. Hearn to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. But some time after the donor's death in 1913, the museum's Law Committee interpreted the gift's terms so that "living American artists" was taken to mean living in the year that the relevant fund was established. Thus the Met was free to use the Hearn funds to purchase older American art of recognized historical importance—such as that of John Singer Sargent—rather than restrict acquisitions to the work of contemporary artists. Because of the museum's lack of interest in contemporary American work, the Hearn funds were used little and their accumulating income largely went unspent. Well into the 1930s, American artists would protest this withholding of acquisition funds meant for them.<sup>26</sup> It was in part to obtain use of the Hearn funds that the Museum of Modern Art—despite its European focus—began talking with the Metropolitan Museum about establishing a relationship like that between the Luxembourg and the Louvre. But more to the point for MoMA was the question of what would be the most appropriate sort of collection for a museum of modern art.

For a museum dedicated to modern art, there is no tension of the sort that we have noted between the traditional conception of the museum and the collecting of contemporary art. However, there is the problem of how current the holdings of such a museum should be. The founders of the Museum of Modern Art initially conceived of a collection from which older works would be deaccessioned to make room for newer ones—since for them, as for others at the time, modern art meant contemporary art<sup>27</sup>—and in 1931 they entered into negotiations with the Metropolitan Museum of Art to create a system to implement the process. The metaphor chosen by Alfred Barr, Jr., in 1933 to describe the MoMA collection in this respect was that of a torpedo moving in time, passing through art history to capture the new and jettison the old within something like a hundred-year time frame. Barr's eventual view was that the museum should not hold works for more than fifty or sixty years after they were created, and the 1947 agreement between the two institutions seemed to anticipate that every work in the MoMA collection some day would move to the Met. Not surprisingly, the Modern's trustees began to look for a way out of this agreement in 1951. Worries about future gifts and holding onto their patrons, and concerns about losing their most valuable assets—their Cézannes, van Goghs, and Picassos—led in 1953 to an official repudiation of the notion of transferring

MoMA's collection piece by piece to other institutions and to a commitment "to have permanently on public view masterpieces of the modern movement, beginning with the latter half of the nineteenth century."<sup>28</sup> With this development, MoMA lost the uniqueness of its collection concept and in this regard joined the ranks of traditional institutions, albeit with a commitment to a special area of collecting.

As modern art—viewed as works of periodized art history—increased in price and notoriety, and as the market for contemporary art began to boom in the postwar period, it became clear that collecting and holding onto such artworks was important for museums. So while some institutions that focused on contemporary art—such as the short-lived Harvard Society for Contemporary Art in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1928–34), and Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art (established in 1936)—were dedicated solely to mounting exhibitions, collecting institutions embraced the established model of holding and preserving artworks in perpetuity. An important exception was the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, founded in 1977 by former Whitney Museum curator Marcia Tucker.<sup>29</sup>

Taking the commitment to contemporaneity to rule out permanency, the New Museum created the "Semi-Permanent Collection." According to its 1978 collecting policy, the New Museum would seek to acquire at least one work from each of its major exhibitions, and each of these pieces was to be retained for at least ten years and no more than twenty. Works that entered the collection outside the exhibition program, whether purchased or donated, must have been created within the previous ten years and would be deaccessioned within ten years of acquisition.<sup>30</sup> (While the New Museum thus outdid Barr's fifty-to-sixty year horizon, it embraced the view expressed in 1933 by the MoMA board president A. Conger Goodyear that his museum should hold no works more than twenty years old. This was echoed in a speech given that year to the American Association of Museums by the president of the Metropolitan's board, William Sloane Coffin—with whom Goodyear was negotiating the collection transfer agreement—in which he stated that "ten or twenty years should be the limit of modernity.")<sup>31</sup> But as the ethos of contemporary art changed from the radicalism that motivated Tucker in the late 1970s—that era of institutional critique and the dematerialization of the artwork—and as the New Museum attained institutional maturity, this policy became increasingly problematic. The institution currently is reassessing its collecting practices, and the future of the Semi-Permanent Collection is uncertain.

This brief discussion of the museum's engagement with contemporary art has marked two points of conceptual tension. First, collecting contemporary art conflicts with the traditional notion of the art museum as an institution that

preserves works that have withstood the test of time, placing them within an art historical narrative in which new works can have no definitive place. Second, with the creation of museums devoted to “modern” and “contemporary” art, the focus on the new was found to conflict with the traditional museum goal of preserving its holdings in perpetuity. Each of these concerns has been used to argue against bringing contemporary artworks into permanent collections.

Of course the time is long gone when museums debated the appropriateness of collecting contemporary art, a point hotly argued in the late 1920s in America’s premier training ground for museum curators and directors, Paul Sach’s “Museum Course” at Harvard.<sup>32</sup> The rising visibility of contemporary art in the media and the status accorded its acquisition—spurred in the late 1980s by publicity surrounding auction prices and more recently by the interpenetration of art, entertainment, and fashion<sup>33</sup>—have brought contemporary art into the center of museum activity. What would require justification today would be for a general museum not to collect contemporary art, and departments of contemporary art and curatorships in this area, along with graduate training programs, have proliferated.

With these developments have come a new set of concerns for museums, grounded in a variety of historical changes. Institutional structures created at an earlier time to meet different needs are being called into question by new artistic media and by the use of the term *contemporary* to designate a particular kind of artwork. Alternative conceptions of the artwork and new technologies have created special problems of preservation and conservation. Broader social and political changes have generated new artistic categories and have broken down established national and ethnic divisions, all of which have affected how collections are built and their contents organized. Dealing with these and related collection issues is part of the challenge of current museum work, calling for practical decisions both on the level of institutional policy and with regard to particular objects. The essays in this book are written by people who contend with these matters on a daily basis, and who have given them a great deal of thought.

The essays in *Collecting the New* can be seen to fall into four groups. The first set approaches museum collecting of contemporary art in terms of general issues, each discussed with regard to a particular museum. Howard N. Fox, using the example of Los Angeles County Museum of Art, addresses the notion of forming a definitive collection in a time of diverse artistic practices and the breakdown of established art historical narratives. Robert Storr discusses the acquisition process itself, focusing on the practices of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. And Jeffrey Weiss of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., looks at issues surrounding the acquisition of contemporary art for a museum

such as his own, which collects Western art since the Renaissance, versus the collecting activity of a museum of contemporary art. The second part of the book deals with contemporary art in particular media, focusing on kinds of work that present specific problems for museum collecting. Here Christophe Cherix discusses drawings and prints, Chrissie Iles and Henriette Huldich, film and video, and Steve Dietz, digital media. The third set of essays focuses on regional- and ethnic-specific collecting. In this section, Vishakha Desai addresses contemporary Asian art; Pamela McClusky, contemporary art from Africa; Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, contemporary art of Latin America; and Lowery Stokes Sims, contemporary art by African-Americans as collected by the Studio Museum in Harlem. In the book's final essay Glenn Wharton discusses conservation problems presented by contemporary works of art, special preservation concerns for museum collections, and how institutions are addressing these challenges.

This book represents just one way of organizing an overview of this broad field—alternative categories of discussion might well have been chosen, and other topics selected under these headings. In fact, new forms of cultural production and new ways of thinking about them, as well as changes connected with globalization and ethnic hybridization, call into question two of the book's central divisions. With many artists no longer confining themselves to a limited range of media, and as national and ethnic distinctions become increasingly porous, medium-, nation-, and ethnic-specific collecting all become problematic. But during periods of historical change, problematic categories still must be discussed in older terms, at the same time as their validity is questioned and new terminology and practices are formulated. Museums now find themselves at such a historical juncture, and the essays in *Collecting the New* are occasioned by the need to engage the issues that come with this territory.

## NOTES

1. See, for instance, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Emma Barker, ed., *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999). Discussion of the role of the contemporary curator also has focused entirely on exhibitions, as in Carin Kuoni, ed., *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum of Contemporary Art* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2001); Paula Marincola, ed., *Curating Now: Imaginative Practice/Public Responsibility* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, 2001); and Carolee Thea, *Foci: Interviews with Ten International Curators* (New York: Apex Art, 2001).

2. Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 287. Stein's view still is not a dead one, for in 1999 we find Ernst Gombrich remarking, "I think that a museum of modern art is a contradiction in terms. Museums