

Against Neutrality – Finding a Place in Museum Culture

IRA TATTELMAN
Washington, DC

ABSTRACT

This paper uses the museum to examine issues of architecture and identity. Often located within diverse, multi-cultured areas, museums (especially those that receive public funding) have been asked to represent the multiple and sometimes conflicting identities present within their surrounding communities. While many artists include race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality within their work, they rarely question the space of the museum, the social construction in which they are placed. They leave the economic and political framework of the art world unexposed.

Artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Robert Gober, Hans Haacke, Tadashi Kawamata, Louise Lawler, Thomas Struth, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Fred Wilson take on the museum as a space of reception and confinement. While their work makes the hierarchies of the museum visible, their display within the museum is an act of complicity. How do they criticize the very space on which they depend?

This paper looks at just two of the artists, Gober and Lawler, who challenge the neutrality of museum space. They use their unique perspectives as gay man and woman to question the physical environment with its symbols of power and authority. By inhabiting the museum, by locating themselves within its spaces, these artists spatialize the diverse and conflicting identities that museums contain, focusing on gender and sexual differences rather than commonality. Through their efforts, the artists begin a dialogue with the museum and viewer. They address an institutional culture that has historically been hostile to their gendered and sexualized communications.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of "hegemony" is particularly useful when we talk about how dominance works in our seemingly democratic society, for it reminds us that institutions controlled by powerful corporate and financial interests, bent on building and maintaining empires, assert their dominance through cultural persuasion. (Hills, 18)

Museums, which might be described as viewing mechanisms, construct galleries with bare white walls to focus the act of seeing. The objects on display are framed so that visual connections can be made without distraction or interruption. While the implication of most gallery design is that art can be read, studied and enjoyed in a seemingly pure environment, outside the context of a capitalist society, the institution and its public know better. Art is both object for contemplation and privileged commodity.

Contemporary artists realize that the space for viewing art is not neutral. The museum is an exclusive site of exhibition, a sequence of spatial forms that determine movement and social relations. The act of display, role of judgment and application of aesthetic standards influence art making and its reception. Art is tied to commerce and political positioning, and the architecture of its spaces reflect those charged relationships. As a result, artists working within the museum sometimes politically and socially question the space in which they create or exhibit, examining issues of separatism, gender choices and cultural preferences.

Hans Haacke looks at the institutional politics behind art exchange and exhibition. He questions museological devices and corporate financing to call attention to the ways in which individual artistic production is manipulated. A 1985 piece is entitled "The Business Behind Art knows that Art is Good Business." Daniel Buren exhibits uniform vertical stripe panels made on site. His repetitious work attempts to abolish "the code that has until now made art what it is, in its production and in its institutions." (Crimp, 103) Tadashi Kawamata used discarded wood to construct temporary attachments to buildings. He layers a new system onto an existing museum to question private and public spaces and the boundaries between them. By obstructing the original building and assimilating the work with that from which it emerges, he creates a new identity for the site, a redefinition through contrasts and oppositions. Thomas Struth photographs the museum to interrogate the politics of exhibition. The placement of a "masterpiece" has a specific marketing, aesthetic and chauvinistic objective. Felix Gonzalez-Torres works against the gaze of fine art consumption by promoting inter-

action. The viewer, invited to ingest candy, take printed posters, or pass through beaded curtains, is no longer the passive participant. Fred Wilson is interested in the relation between perception and context. The way an object is presented and the people to whom it is presented are the results of institutional values and exhibit techniques. Wilson juxtaposes "high" and "low" art or brings historical information to the aesthetic experience "in order to reveal the imperialist reality of how museums obtain or interpret the objects they display." (Sims, 3) He rearranges the museum to point out the fallacy of neutrality.

Louise Lawler and Robert Gober reinterpret the space that surrounds art by investigating the reciprocity between the building as conceptual frame and museum program as architectural intervention. They expose the relationships between architecture, institutional hierarchy, artistic practice and commercial participation and confront issues of choice, homogeneity, monumentality and order. They also raise issues of identity, sexuality and culture in their discussion of the space of the museum.

LOUISE LAWLER ON THE MOVE

Contextualist art intervene[s] in its spatial context critically making the social relations of that space visible. (Deutsche, 117)

While women are invited into the museum to view the art on display, women who produce art have rarely (until recently) been included in the exhibits. Without access to the power of the museum, women were more likely to comment on it. Isabella Stewart Gardner and Peggy Guggenheim acquired their own collections and oversaw the spaces in which they were to be seen. Others ignored the "high" arts and concentrated on textiles and ceramics instead.

Louise Lawler provides one example of how a woman defines her role, her interests and cultural aspirations within the museum complex. While she travels along side the system, she never adopts a fixed position within it. Lawler as a woman posits that she cannot own or inhabit space in the art world. Instead, she appropriates the space, borrowing it for her exclusive use, while resisting placement and also, resisting naming.

Lawler negotiates her path by concentrating on the importance of adjacencies. She realizes that the area around the art object can determine, shape and influence an aesthetic response. By examining art contexts and documenting art displays, Lawler reveals the business of art and the construction of reception.

Lawler moves the frame in order to find the multiple authors who are already present. In the periphery of the object people are coming to see, Lawler discovers the curator, the publications director, the public information writer, the exhibition designer, the museum architect, the financial sponsors and on from there. Her images encompass all of these voices. Following her detective work, we investigate the way muse-

ums and galleries represent themselves through these authors. We begin to understand the institutional framing, the not always obvious material and social contexts of art circulation.

In the MOMA brochure from 1987 entitled *Enough*, Lawler writes: "I am showing what they are showing: painting, sculpture, pictures, glasses and words on painted walls furnishing the same material experience; my work is to exchange the positions of exposition and voyeurism. You are standing in your own shoes."

Her exhibits confront the spectator with the institution. Her photos, arrangements of artwork by other artists and manufacture of promotional items such as brochures, matchbooks, stationary or invitations that travel freely outside the confines of the room, make the "passive" museum seem very active. She also addresses the physical frame of the museum; an architectural construction provides a strong presence against which art is viewed. The spectator is obliged to act in collusion with the institution that displays the art.

In her photograph of the Whitney Museum branch at the Phillip Morris building, *Caldor, Franzen, Oldenburg*, the window found at the center of the photograph acts as a boundary between the private corporate office and the public atrium space. Lawler addresses the connection between display, accessibility, viewing conditions and economic power.

At Artists Space in 1978, Lawler hung two 1000-watt lights over a painting, one directed at the viewer, the other through the space. The lights over-illuminated the gallery making it difficult to see the painting. At night, the lights had a different effect. The space of the gallery (expressed by the shape of the windows) was silhouetted against the building across the street (with its Citibank branch). Through projection, the gallery was allowed to travel, to slip outside the confines of its construction. She annexed or assumed the neighboring building, addressing the issue of real estate speculation the art world brought to Soho and lower Manhattan.

At Metro Pictures in 1985, Lawler had a show entitled, *Now that we have your attention. What are we going to say?* She presented slides that were visible through the street level windows only after dark when the gallery was closed. The images in this exhibit, many were photos of art copies of classical sculpture stuck away in storage, could not be bought or touched. Even the clarity of its image was impaired by the reflectivity of the window glass; the shiny surface showed the gallery space, the projected image and the viewer as well. If architecture shelters its contents, Lawler focuses on the by-products of that process: control of and access to space.

Lawler looks at and challenges how a site is designed and occupied. One could argue that in the modern art business, art tries to have no specific site, suggesting the erasure of site. Artwork easily travels from studio to gallery to dwelling to museum; the sites of art display allow the artwork to become momentarily static. However, those sites and the vagaries of placement play a significant role in reception.

In her work for MOMA, *Untitled 1950 -51*, Lawler directs our view toward a bench and painting within the museum and

a bench and photograph as part of her own installation. The position, movement and sight lines of the viewer is defined by the institution and the architect as an agent of the institution.

In her installation *Standing Before You, Rather Behind You, to Tell You of something I know Nothing About*, Lawler photographs the space of the LA MOCA as she found it. In the second shot, she re-photographs the space with her intervention in place, a photograph taken from a slightly different position in the gallery.

What made Lawler's photograph particularly effective – so carefully hidden in plain view – is how it passed invisibly into the crowd. It also suggests . . . how a specific piece, rather than her 'project' in total, addresses its physical location within the space and time of a given installation. (Fehlau, 62)

In pointing to the role of other authors, Lawler hides her own authorship. When asked to pose for the cover of *Artscribe*, Lawler submitted a photograph of Meryl Streep with the headline, "Recognition maybe, may not be useful." Coming to popularity at the same time as Cindy Sherman, an artist who inserts herself into her work with a multiplicity of looks and guises to prove the performativity of appearance and action, Lawler takes an opposite tact to the same effect. She seems to be saying that if she is recognized, she will become objectified by the system. Like Streep and Sherman, Lawler loses herself in her role so that no identifiable personality comes through. She carefully maintains her anonymity, choosing not to locate her body in her work.

As recent analyses of the "enunciative apparatus" of visual representation confirm, the representational systems of the West admit only one vision — that of the constitutive male subject — or, rather, they posit the subject of representation as absolutely center, unitary, masculine. The postmodernist work attempts to upset the reassuring stability of that mastering position. (Owens, 58)

Like many of the postmodernists Craig Owens discusses, Lawler appropriates from others. In a collaborative work by Lawler and Sherrie Levine entitled *A Picture Is No Substitute For Anything*, the two reinterpret the work of Mondrian. Sherrie Levine, in order to deny authorship and the invisibility of women in the art world, took on the "identity" of this male master by re-painting the artwork, not to the size and color of the original but to the size and color as represented in art history textbooks. Lawler, in order to ask those same questions, photographed the space the original work occupied; she focused on the frame and the museum label rather than on the work itself.

This shift in practice entails a shift in position: the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacle. (Foster, 100)

Lawler is the floating author. In 1980, the following invitation was sent: "Lawler invites you to attend *Swan Lake* performed by the New York City Ballet at the New York State Theater, Lincoln Center, Thursday, January 22, 1981, 8 pm. Tickets to be purchased at the box office." Her invitation to the ballet takes over the space of theater as her own. She claims the aesthetics of a traditional cultural event while reiterating its commodity status.

Through her work, Lawler points to the power of presentation and the network of structures, spaces and contexts that give art and gender relations meaning. She repositions the viewer and creates a narrative that anyone can enter. She subverts the museum by showing others people's work; while she creates her own work, she shows nothing of herself. She also expresses the authority of the museum by presenting its spaces. She reiterates the importance of placement and position in a space she has no power to control.

ROBERT GOBER CONTESTS, OBLITERATES AND STRATEGICALLY INTERVENES

Lawler's work, *Helms Amendment* (963) addressed the Senate's vote on a 1987 appropriations bill. The amendment to the bill prohibited using government funds "to provide AIDS education, information, or prevention materials and activities that promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual activities." There were only six senators who voted no or who abstained.

Another Helms amendment to an appropriations bill, this one for the NEA/NEH in 1989, also gained notice in the art world. It stated that "none of the funds authorized . . . may be used to promote, disseminate or produce materials which . . . may be considered obscene, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the sexual exploitation of children . . ." (*Congressional Record - House*, H6407).

Homosexual activities are often described as dangerous and are still against the law in some states. Homo-eroticism is considered suspect and was, for a long time, kept out of the museum. While erotic images of women are widely accepted since female nudity is considered the "correct" object of the male gaze (the possibility of a lesbian viewer is usually ignored), one rarely finds an erotic image of men. Few exhibits ever focus on alternatives to male heterosexuality; traditional museum culture would never ask one man to stare at the genitals of another.

Robert Gober, an openly gay artist, expresses the rights of sexual minorities to represent themselves. When talking about the relation between his work and AIDS, he has said, "How could I not be affected by it? I'm a gay man, and I was living in the middle of the epidemic." (Madoff, Section 2, 1) In order to define himself and the culture in which he participates, Gober acts as his own curator, arranging his work and limiting the influence of outside interpreters. He builds his own walls and fixes his own boundaries in order to affirm his independence against the immense power of the museum.

Gober's installations physically separate his work from the context in which they sit in order to control the site of his intervention. His cribs and jail bars set into the gallery walls remind the viewer of their own isolation and alienation. The relation between inside and outside, container and contained, is especially important for an artist vying for attention in New York City. It is also important for someone outside the heteronormative conventions of mainstream culture. Two men usually cannot safely hold hands on the sidewalk, dance together at a prom or kiss after a ride on a Ferris Wheel.

The familiarity of the ordinary objects Gober remakes in his work, the door, sink, bed, chair, playpen, arm chair, tissue box and stick of butter, are undermined by the way they are installed, the institutions in which they are placed, and Gober's manual attention to their manufacture. Gober rebuilds these domestic objects in order to question the trappings of his upbringing. He reinterprets them; separated from their not always safe dwellings, the viewer is asked to provide their own metaphors and explanations.

In remaking a site for his installations, Gober often uses simple 2 x 4 stud construction. He creates a place which includes new walls and ceiling to remove it from the place in which the work functions. At the same time, the work derives significance and status from the new context in which it is placed.

Robert Gober's use of the room as a structuring motif for his presentation of sculpture goes back to 1978 and his small-scale replicas of nineteenth-century New England vernacular houses. . . . In this context, the room emerges as a metaphorical structure linking the domestic or private with the political or social. . . . A potent expressivity was attached to the interior division and to the important division of inside and outside, underscoring the dimensions of exclusion, sexual difference, intimacy, and privacy that these divisions suggest. (Sussman, 66)

By organizing his own space, Gober articulates and controls the space that he occupies. He creates his own room in the museum's room and often, places himself in it. His wedding gown, naked body parts or drag photos printed in newspaper ads all utilize or remember the body of the artist. His genital wallpaper, another sign of inhabitation, has simplistic black drawings of the male and female genitalia repeated from floor to ceiling. Whereas Lawler tries to remove herself from a room, Gober is very much present.

His sculpture, which reconstructs and transforms recognizable objects, also connotes the experience of bodies which are not present to represent themselves. As body parts emerge from the walls, we imagine what other body parts are trying to get out. The walls are clearly inhabited but we cannot see what goes on inside. (In his installation at the Dia Art Foundation (DIA) where water runs freely in his once dry sinks, we have to imagine the pumps which control the water flow; we cannot see them.)

His series of doors which bend and collapse from 1988 are

particularly suggestive. When they appear out of their frame, we wonder whether these doors are still functional. What did they keep out and what did they hide inside? Now that they are open, what discoveries are made and what new paths are possible?

Gober addresses the identity of the object and user through these shifts of context. When we see his newspaper bundles, tied as if ready to be thrown out, we know that by their placement in the museum there is something for us to see in them. We begin to look more closely, carefully scanning the headlines and photos. The items in the margins move to the center.

By inserting his own environment into an existing environment, Gober has created a stage which maintains its portability. While he recognizes the impermanence of his actions (although he spends a lot of time chemically treating his objects so that they are less likely to deteriorate), Gober manipulates the environment and focuses our vision so that we see only what he wants us to see. What we find are private, social, political and aesthetic meanings within the artwork and the institution.

One of the fundamental insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis, . . . is the notion that any identity is founded relationally, constituted in reference to an exterior or outside that defines the subject's own interior boundaries and corporeal surfaces. (Fuss, 2)

For an ICA exhibit, the gallery space he built within the museum is designed for its utility and efficiency. From the museum space, we see the container, appearing not fully public as if something inside might be dangerous, needing to be secluded. The primacy of the installed room with its clear demarcation of "finished" inside and "uncovered" outside seems to question issues of secrecy and concealment. Yet, with the "closet" opened, with the door removed and placed against the far wall, we are invited to investigate what is inside. Here, Gober curates the work of three artists and his own, providing a space of interaction for the disparate works.

In his installation at the DIA, Gober remakes the third floor with new walls, ceilings and doors. By blocking the windows, he takes out any literal reference points in the city; instead, he condenses the city into his work. Dark, unadorned spaces surround the room with wrapped newspapers in the corners. Inside the room are bright lights, painted trees, running water, prison bars, bags of rat poison and more papers. The museum space is transformed by his simulation and distortion.

At LA MOCA's Geffen Contemporary, the room he creates for *Untitled 1997* is a simple container which has been enhanced by suggestive spaces beyond. Centered on the back wall is a wooden staircase cut into the wall. It is covered with flowing water. Two custom fabricated suitcases are windows into subterranean pools of water. A cast concrete Virgin Mary has a culvert pipe through her middle. It sits on top of another cast-bronze sewer grate peering into the water pool. Each item is positioned to lead us to another space that is seen but not entered. The floor of the museum is not solid; there is an

underworld, another realm on which it sits. Gober's installation has an authority that individual isolated pieces do not; while claiming his own space, he also references an enigmatic, open-ended space beyond.

Gober conceives of exhibition space "not as a neutral container but as a space where a choreographed ensemble of objects" interact. (Sussman, 70) The museum is no longer a receptacle of what once was. Ideas cannot be emptied out of his work by the museum space around them. Instead, they are given an authenticity by their presentation as part of a spatial whole and by their representation of the artistic self. Gober creates an idealistic position, an imagined imitation of the real.

For us (gay and lesbians) performance is an everyday issue, whether in terms of passing as straight, signaling gayness in coming out, worrying which of these turns to do, unsure what any of that has to do with what one "is." (Dyer, 188)

Gay men sometimes feel like they lead a double life. Gober has discussed the way he monitors himself, staying in the closet when meeting with museum guards who he fears might be homophobic while playing with gender inversions in his displayed work. These acts examine the multiplicity of identity. He adjusts his identity when crafting his art.

Gober's installations, which are invited into the museum, block out the museum by turning the walls into Gober's walls, personalized and sexualized. He overlays recognizable objects and symbols with his personal narrative. His role as a "famous openly gay artist" and the subjects he chooses, quietly subvert the assimilative nature of the museum. He disrupts the frame of the museum in order to frame a new identity in the making.

CONCLUSION

The museum, with its gift shops, record auction sales and purchases, highly profiled buildings, corporate parties, and blockbuster exhibits, has grown increasingly popular. The institution, however, is under question. Unsure how to respond to the needs of the larger public, the changing nature of public space, and the confines of cultural funding, and unclear what its attitudes are toward social responsibility and cultural diversity, the museum searches through possibilities for acceptable solutions.

Architectural programs explicitly and implicitly support gender and sexual norms. They also help establish art, taste and style. The museum, by interpreting and representing culture, bolsters the culture's myths and proclivities. Museums are driven to collect, classify and own their subjects; the architectural order they require can silence. The formalism imposed on art drives out its social context.

Evident in the museum's architecturally-oriented program, these preferences and inclinations are subject to reshaping. The artists who I have mentioned are commissioned by

the museum to the reveal their surroundings, to say what they want about themselves and the museum. They insert layers onto the preexisting sites to comment on the museum, to point out the hierarchies of the space and the power distinctions present in positioning. By rearranging spaces or intervening in the collections, artists question who is allowed into the museum and how they are represented.

By consciously adjusting the way we see and inhabit space, Lawler and Gober among other artists, offer a cultural critique of institutions that divide and diminish original voices. Women and sexual minorities, whose marginalization by art institutions can become a point of departure, have created an alternative practice. By insinuating their work into a space already occupied by others, they find ways to change the context, to make visible what truly lies within the frame.

The institutions that surround us do not necessarily fit who we are. Yet we can use these spaces as a vehicle for self-definition and allegorical description. We can create settings which defy what is expected of us and strengthen the values and meanings we wish to represent. By infiltrating institutional contexts, we can draw attention to the structures, boundaries and conditions of presentation, representation, distribution, interpretation, circulation and consumption. We can ask the user to become an active reader of signs rather than passive follower. By repositioning authority, we can use quiet disruption to expose and communicate.

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