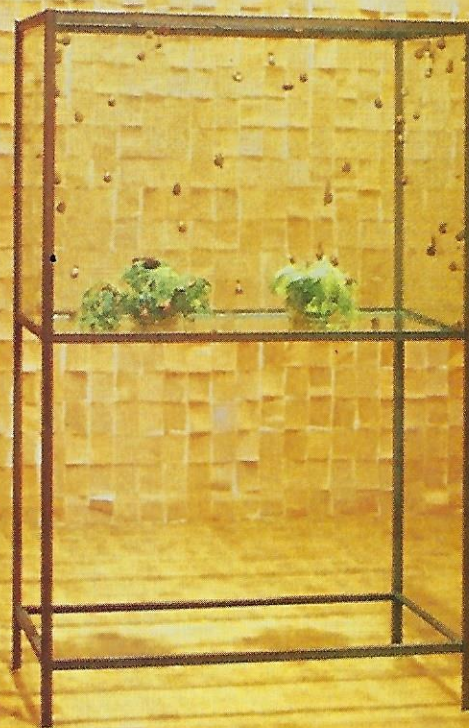


Since the New Museum of Contemporary Art opened in New York in 1978, founding director Marcia Tucker has nurtured a novel vision: a forum for the very newest in contemporary art, unfettered by the demands of the art-historical canon, the art market, and the hierarchy of power that has traditionally governed museums. In the wake of the widely discussed and debated Decade Show, Tucker reflects optimistically on the future of the collaborative enterprise, and professes an uncensored devotion to the broadest possible spectrum of late twentieth-century art.

BRAVE NEW MUSEUM

By Roslyn Bernstein





Roslyn Bernstein *I have read a great deal about your original concept for the New Museum, which was a non-hierarchical, radically democratic organization that is very responsive to artists and devoted to the contemporary arts. Has it lived up to your original concept?*

Marcia Tucker We certainly had to make some changes as the staff grew. When we began, everyone got the same pay and there was really no structure, but then there were only four of us, so everything was a lot easier. As the staff grew to around twenty people, a lot of discussion of the original concept—and a lot of changes—took place. There were many people who felt that a non-hierarchical structure was not possible, that what they called “clear lines of authority and responsibility” were needed. So we played around with that for a while. We established department heads. We organized a council composed of department heads and one elected member of the staff at large to make some of the internal policy decisions. And my sense at the time was that this was not working.

R.B. *When was this?*

M.T. A few years after we moved to 583 Broadway in the summer of 1983. I was increasingly unhappy with the way things were going, so at the museum’s tenth anniversary, we asked a management team to come in to take a look at us from the outside. In the end, they suggested that we in fact return to the original concept, and the most important thing that they did was to help us organize a structure for a collaborative method that would be suitable for a staff of thirty people. At that point, we had a really substantial change. Those who felt that they had been here a long time, and who were not certain what the organization would become, left, as did a few people who didn’t really think that they could work under a completely collaborative system. New people were brought in by hiring teams composed of all kinds of representatives from the museum. Now, after two years, I would say that we have found that collaboration is in fact not only possible, but extremely enjoyable. We are very close to being an entirely collaborative and completely transparent organization.

R.B. *When you say entirely collaborative, do you mean all of the decision-making and curatorial responsibility?*

M.T. Well, we do have job descriptions; not everyone is a curator. But once the curatorial team decides on a good program and on exhibitions that would fit into that program, those decisions are presented to the entire staff, which then spends a great deal of time discussing their viability. Adjustments are made depending on the staff’s responses. All of our programs are organized by whatever group has the required skills, and then that group refers to the larger body for approval. We have a similar arrangement for the budget.

R.B. *Over the years, what were your greatest problems? As you grew, was it staff, organization, philosophy?*

M.T. The obstacles always seem to be practical rather than intellectual or ideological or aesthetic, because I really believe that any good enterprise is predicated on mistakes—that’s what makes it interesting. I think that it is impossible to have a museum or organization that does really unconventional and original programming but is run with a corporate structure; I think that the inside and the outside need to match.

R.B. *How do you see that?*

M.T. Well, exhibitions will be seen in many different ways over the years, but if we can put into place a model—a structural model, a management model—that shows how an institution can run in a totally democratic and collaborative way, if our structure can become paradigmatic, then I would say we’ve accomplished something really important. Another challenging problem has been to raise money, because one thing I can’t and won’t do is misrepresent the museum or tell people what I think they want to hear.

R.B. *Have you replaced senior curator Bill Olander?*

M.T. Yes we have, although Bill was really irreplaceable. His death was quite a blow to the museum. We now have a full curatorial staff. We’ve hired France Morin as senior curator, and Gary Sangster and Laura Trippi as curators. France Morin was at the 49th Parallel; Gary Sangster was

Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clark, *Palimpsest*, 1989. Installation from *Strange Attractors: Signs of Chaos*, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 14 September–26 November 1989.

the director of Art Space in Sydney; Laura Trippi worked at P.S. 122 and has a background in intellectual history and literary theory.

R.B. How will the three curators divide up their responsibilities?

M.T. It's up to them. I don't like to separate photography, video, or performance from other kinds of things, and I think the ways in which the three divide their duties will depend very much on what their particular needs and interests are at the moment.

R.B. As I understand it, you have no permanent collection, only a core or semi-permanent one.

M.T. Yes, a semi-permanent collection.

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If we've held something for ten years, then we dispose of it.

R.B. How do you dispose of pieces? Are they sold off?

M.T. Sometimes. There are many ways to deaccession. Sometimes an artist is interested in trading an older work for a more recent one. We have made donations of works that don't have much monetary value, and we will organize a small collection to go to a hospital or a children's shelter.

R.B. How big is your present semi-permanent collection?

M.T. About three hundred pieces.

R.B. When you buy, what is your sense of what you're acquiring? What are you looking for in terms of complementing what you're doing here?

M.T. We usually try to buy from every exhibition that we do, so that's the first

priority. Or we buy work by artists who have shown here and who represent some quintessential aspect of the culture as we perceive it.

R.B. I've noticed that many of the members of your Board of Trustees are collectors. I'm curious about the role of the board at the New Museum.

M.T. They have the same role that you would find in any other museum. They set overall policy for the museum. They raise money and offer financial and business guidance. They make sure that the museum is appropriately managed. They also deal with questions of expansion, of endowment, of how to proportion our funds to maximize what we have in terms of the museum's goals and mandates.

R.B. Historically, over the years, have there been moments when their policy has been at odds with some of yours?

M.T. Absolutely not. Unless the board and I share the same vision and understand the role of the museum, and unless they help to publicize that role, the New Museum can't exist. The overall direction of the museum is in the hands of the trustees. Trustees usually join a museum because they believe in what the museum does and not because they want to change the museum into something else.

R.B. Your shows are always controversial as well as interesting. It'll probably make you happy that, as I walk the streets of SoHo, I still hear people talking about last fall's *Strange Attractors: Signs of Chaos*, December's *Eat Me/Drink Me/Love Me* installation by Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe, and February's *Interim* installation by Mary Kelly. And, of course, everyone has something to say now about *The Decade Show*. How do you respond to critics who say, "The group shows are a mess," or, "I don't understand where the museum is heading"?

M.T. This is part of the condition of contemporary art: you respond to what's actually happening in the art community rather than trying to fit certain kinds of things that appear into some very rigid structure. There is a really important point to be made here: we don't believe that art can be separated from cultural conditions, from the social and political world. Art exists and always has existed as a part of the human condition, and to try to separate

the two—to put art back into an ivory tower—seems to me to be a particularly archaic concept at this moment. None of these shows you mentioned constitute a different direction for the museum. Mary Kelly is concerned with theoretical feminist issues. We also felt that this was a huge body of work never before seen in the United States. Similarly with the Fleming & Lapointe collaboration. They are dealing with other feminist issues—with sexuality, with poetry, with Rossetti. Our trustees were delighted—they bought lots of pieces from the show. Still, when people say, "What are they doing?," we know that we are headed in the right direction.

R.B. So you think that some of the criticism represents an adherence to the older notion of a separate sense of art?

M.T. Leo Steinberg once said that what you criticize about a great work of art turns out, more often than not, to be the very thing it's about. The museum welcomes criticism. Part of what we hope to do is engage people on a level that will invite intelligent criticism. Often the criticism is quite accurate, so there's no particular need to be defensive about it. Self-criticism and criticism from the outside are really important to the ways in which we choose to grow.

R.B. When you first arrived here on Broadway, you were alone. The area's character has certainly changed. The East Village galleries are here, and we've got a new name for it: *LowBro*. Has that had any effect on you and the avant-garde institution?

M.T. It hasn't changed the response to what we do—it's still quite controversial. I just think that the more audiences you have, the better. Many more people come in now because they are in the area looking at art. One of the only things I regret is that, when we first started, we had much more of a mixed audience, because the area had a strong Hispanic community. We did a lot of bilingual labels and so forth. I hope, of course, that some of that is still here. I would hate to see our audience become homogeneous.

R.B. How do you see yourself developing the multicultural dimension? What do you see as your potential to do this?

M.T. From the start, the museum has shown all kinds of work, for instance

collaborative groups like the Tauer Boriqua from the Museo del Barrio and En Foco, a collaborative photography organization. We hope that we never do a unicultural show, and I think the way to do that is to be informed. That was the point of *The Decade Show*—we wanted to examine the eighties through the issue of identity, all kinds of identity: cultural identity, political identity, spiritual identity, sexual identity, gender identity, psychological identity. There are always problems, because art history itself—and all the educational processes from which museum people are drawn—is profoundly ethnocentric, and people from the mainstream culture can only go so far toward understanding other cultures. You have to change the complexion of the museum itself first.

R.B. Over the years, people have said at various times that you've become less pluralistic, or that you've become associated with a specific political position, even a leftist ideology. How do you respond to that?

M.T. This always makes me laugh, because in the early years everybody said, "Oh, you guys only show bad painting." Then for a while they said, "You only show conceptual work." Then for a while they said, "Oh, aren't you just a museum of sculpture?" And now suddenly we're a political museum. This too shall pass. But, once again, I have to say that I believe that art cannot exist separate from social, political, and cultural concerns. I think that those who would like to put art in an ivory tower are working from an assumption about the world that is, to me, very unrealistic.

R.B. What upcoming shows are you working on?

M.T. We have been trying to make sure that we stay international. We are also very concerned about providing real scholarship in multiracial and multicultural areas. Instead of putting out lush colored catalogues with brief introductions, we tend to put out really substantive material. We try to question museum practice itself—doing exhibitions that almost undermine the idea of the museum or make the museum transparent, unsettling the museum's authority in order to put control back into the hands of the public. That is, when you enter a museum,

you are usually confronted with the museum's idea of what is appropriate or good: you are given one way to look at things. We have been trying for years now to figure out how to present a number of options, so that the viewer could get in touch with his or her own ideas, knowing that there was no particular right way.

R.B. So, specifically, that means what?

M.T. We have years coming up in which we will be dealing with many issues. At one end of the spectrum, the current exhibition, *From Receiver to Remote Control: The Television Set*, looks at the historical influence of the actual t.v. set, as opposed to programming. Next March, *Digesting the West* is concerned with the ways in



Marina Abramovic & Ulay, *Nightsea Crossing*, 1986. Performed at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, as part of *Choices: Making An Art of Everyday Life*, 1 February–30 March 1986.

which African art has permeated Western culture. In May, *Sign Language*, curated by Gary Sangster, will focus on how abstract ideas are translated. We are also planning two theme years. From September 1991 to August 1992, our theme will be *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It is still in formation, but there will be four or five exhibitions, including *The Poetics of Death*, curated by France Morin, and the first museum exhibition in the United States of the work of Belgian artist Marie-Joe Lafontaine, which I will curate. Our second theme year, *Towards a New World*, will run from September 1992 through August 1993. It's inspired by the anniversary of Columbus' voyage in 1492, and the opening of the European market in 1992. Tentative shows include *The Gaia Hypothesis*, a show on colonialism, a show on trade routes that will be on view simultaneously in the

United States and Japan, linked by video, and *Inspirations*, which I will do with guest curator Eunice Lipton. It will focus on the way in which a gender- and race-conscious reading of history alters the way we read it.

R.B. Has the art world caught up with you? I mean, in the sense of alternative spaces? Are any other museums or spaces willing to take the risks you do?

M.T. Some institutions are completely in tune with these issues, others really are in opposition, and still others gradually work their way through them. But you have both situations, and I think there are also many alternative spaces that have become far more traditional. I really can't speak for

other museums, because they have different ways of organizing things, different mandates, different publics, different ideas. I think we can all coexist quite nicely. However, I do think that artistic freedom is not what it used to be. The principle on which this country's pride in the arts has been predicated is being eroded.

R.B. Do you want to do more shows that address the issue of censorship?

M.T. I think we will continue to do just what we do, because all of our programs, in and of themselves, are somehow caught up in that issue. I think that if the Helms Amendment had been the basis for our judgments, then this museum wouldn't have come to exist in the first place.

Roslyn Bernstein is a contributing editor of Contemporanea.