

Fuli Wang
Professor Kletchka
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A Discussion and Comparison on Non-collecting Museums

“The museum universe in the United States includes both collecting and non-collecting institutions” (American Alliance of Museums). The name “Non-collecting institutions” means museums who do not seek to have a permanent collection but run most of the other functions as regular museums do, such as organize exhibition, provide education program and maintain archives.

Although the majority of the museums in America have their own permanent collection, there are some abnormal cases that museums do not intend to have one. Most of these non-collecting museums are specialized in contemporary art. Reasons for museums to identify themselves as non-collecting institutions are various. One of the major arguments is that contemporary art, giving its contemporariness, has yet withstood the test of time, thus not qualified to be permanently collected by museums (La Rosa, 18). Museums also save money and effort from not having to acquire, store and conserve a permanent collection, so they can utilize these resources on featuring less popular artists, providing better education programs and other services. Besides these, there are many other reasons. It could be the concern of storage space, finance, social commissions or local situations that makes a museum to choose the path of being a non-collecting institution.

Museum professional networks guided by organizations like the AAM seem to view non-collecting institutions as experimental and yet fully believe in its future. The majority of the public is not aware of the existent of non-collecting institutions and the differences between them and collecting institutions thus do not expect a different experience or demand distinguished services.

In this paper, I will analyze the motives, advantages, disadvantages and audience experiences of non-collecting art museums while using New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York as a major example.

HISTORY OF NON-COLLECTING INSTITUTIONS

According the Marti Mayo, the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago is considered the first non-collecting institution established in the United States. Following with the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (ICA Boston) and the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati (CAC) join the practice in 1936 and 1939. The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston was founded in 1948 as a non-collecting institution. In the 1960s, the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania (ICA Philadelphia) and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (MCA Chicago) (which later transformed to a collecting institution) also join the group of non-collecting institutions (25).

Later on, the New Museum of Contemporary Art opened in 1977 by Marcia Tucker after she left her position as a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art from 1967 to 1976. "Tucker observed that that new works by living artists was not easily assimilated into the conventional exhibition and collection structure of the traditional art museum." (New Museum

of contemporary Art, Official Website) Therefore, the New Museum positioned itself as “an exhibition, information, and documentation center for contemporary art made within a period of approximately ten years prior to the present (New Museum of contemporary Art, Official Website).

All these non-collecting institutions emphasize on providing the fast changing dynamic contemporary art scene a more open museum environment and flexible exhibition conditions; and at the same time dedicate their effort on educational programming, community outreach, archive upgrading, special commissioning allowing a more comprehensive interaction between the museum and the public (Hewitt).

These museums carry on the non-collecting principle throughout these years, however, they have altered many of the details in their practice as a result of the ever-changing contemporary art world and the relation among artists, institutions and viewers.

EXIBITIONS

From February 12th, 2014 to Aril 13th, 2014, the New Museum put on a solo show, The Neighbors, by Poland artist, Paweł Althamer. As it is the artist’s first museum exhibition in America, the museum does achieve its goal to “present the work of living artists who did not yet have wide public exposure or critical acceptance to a broader public” (New Museum of Contemporary Art). However, it is mine and my friend’s opinion from our visit to the museum that it lacks of diversity because the majority of this building’s exhibition space is occupied by Althamer’s works and little of others.

The show spread among three out of seven floors of the building showing a series of figurative sculptures on two of the floors (Fig 1.) and an interactive project on another floor (Fig. 2). Except for a few video and installation pieces grabbing minor attentions were shown at the corners the room, the entire second and third floor were occupied by this army of sculptures. The overwhelmingly large group of monochrome human-size sculptures under a fairly dim light creates a feeling of sublime. The sculptures stand loosely on the floor with no particular order nor walls or ropes separating them. Visitors can walk around among them and get very close which form an intimate relation between the art and the audiences.

The entire fourth floor gallery was turned into a graffiti room where visitors are invited to paint anything they would like on any surface of the room with material provided by the museum. This part of the exhibition is highly interactive and fun. It attracts a lot of audiences while many of them come to the museum for the first time because they heard about this project. This project has also brought the museum a lot of social media coverage as visitors take photos and tweet about it.

The instructiveness of this project also satisfies the museum's intention of providing audiences with engaging experience with the arts and creating the sense of community. However, the dramatic differences between the sculpture series and the graffiti project make the audiences hard to connect the two experiences together as a whole. There are not so many descriptions of the works except for an introduction about the series near the entrance of each floor. The description of the fourth floor project was even hard to see because it was partly covered by visitors' doodles.

Featuring only one or a few artists' works in a medium size museum is rare or almost impossible in normal collecting museums where there are spaces dedicated for showing their permanent collections. On one hand, the flexibility and availability of space allow non-collecting museums to create an environment in which audiences can fully experience the works without being distracted by see too many things at the same time. On the other hand, it risks the museums on possibly making the audiences bored and having no alternative options if they do not like the temporary exhibitions.



Fig. 2. "Paweł Althamer, The Neighbors," 2014. Exhibition view of 2nd and 3rd floor: New Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: Benoit Pailley



Fig. 2. "Paweł Althamer, The Neighbors," 2014. Exhibition view of 4th floor: New Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo: Benoit Pailley

EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND COLLABORATION

The New Museum website lists about 10 education and community engagement programs. Compared to education programs in traditional museums, these New Museums' education programs require more of the audiences' participation. For example, in traditional museums, a big part of their education program is lectures and talks, however, in the New Museum; The New Museum Seminar is the equivalence to Gallery Talk. The description page of the Seminar invites anyone to apply to be a participant by sending in CV, letter of interests and work samples. The Seminar is also a semester long project includes activities like peer led reading sessions and guest speaker session invited by participants. There is also The G:Class program for high school students to explore and learn through contemporary art projects globally. There is also a list of external organizations as collaborators with the New Museum. Most of these collaborations reach out to local communities and online communities such as the NEW INK and Rihzome project. Some of them are start-up experimental projects that seem very interesting, yet, have a large impact.

The other non-collecting museums also have a diverse education programs. For example, the MOCA Detroit as well has project overseas in other countries and regions. The MOCA Cleveland emphasizes their education programs by filling the homepage of their website with a roll with images about their education and community involvement events, instead of current exhibition posters which museums usually place in this section.

From these examples, it is convincing that non-collecting are paying a good amount of attention on developing their education program. However, lots of them are recently developed including some that have not actually started, such as the New Museum Seminar

which is still in the process of recruiting participant for its debut seminar; therefore, their effects have not been tested.

ARCHIVES

Miriam La Rosa in her paper indicates that, archiving, with regard to contemporary art, is vital, because museums (both collecting or non-collecting institutions) do not acquire a lot of them in their permanent collects, especially a good number of them are intangible and non-collectable objects; they rather archive that information to keep the artworks alive (39).

In the Press Q&A release on New Museum's website, the museum answers to the question of "Does the New Museum have a permanent collection?" with an emphasis on their digital archive as a substitute of a permanent collection. The digital archive contains "approximately 8,000 written and visual records, as well as a searchable database of over 4,000 artists, curators, and organizations" (New Museum of Art).

Other non-collecting museums mentioned in this paper do not have an archive or one that include a decent amount of material. In general, larger museums usually have an archive data base, but only in these recent years that they become much more organized and easier to use because of the development of the internet technology.

I believe that achieving and making it available digitally for the public is important and will be beneficial not only for the public to access the informational and learn but are also necessary to keep document of contemporary art.

FINANCING AND MANAGEMENT

Non-collecting institutions although save money on not having to buy, transport, store and manage art works, they still have to spend a large amount on borrowing works. Organizing a show takes great effort on research and curating, and communications; borrowing them could be very expensive. Traveling shows require less efforts and time on in-house research and organization, however, loan fee for high quality shows are expensive. It is also not easy to find a perfect match between a travelling show and an institution with the considerations of physical space, schedule, subject matter, etc.

Just as I was complaining about when the New Museum put on only Paweł Althamer's solo show and other two very small shows earlier in this paper, I found out that, currently, the museum have seven shows on view. I would assume that they are smaller shows with either lower budget or time consumption to prepare. Any museum has limited resource and time to investing in initiating and coordinating new works. It is hard to balance the museums' capability and please audiences with temporary collections. Perhaps showing and reorganizing an institute's own permanent collection would be easier to guarantee the quality and autonomous decision on the show.

Although not having permanent collection, the New Museum has a so called semi-permanent collection for works from the past 33 years. Works in this collection are meant to be sold within 10 years. Some call this process as Deassociassioning. This process could cost a set of budget and human labor to do so, however, the benefit is not recognized by most of the audiences or even museum professionals.

CONCLUSION

My research and analysis of the operation of non-collecting institutions include that the practice of non-collecting institutions is a unique and inspiring invention of a group of museums, mostly for contemporary art. I believe that having no permanent collection it is a valuable way to for contemporary art museums; however, there are lots of challenges in terms of management, financing, preparation.

A museums' ultimate goal is to better serve the public's interest, therefore, I would use the public's interests as a measure if I have to address my judgment on whether a certain museum should practice as a non-collecting institution. I think the non-collecting museums I examined especially the New Museum has done a fine job on it and shown great responsibility and commitment to improve.

But as non-collecting institutions are still the minority in the museum world, the public tend to not realizing the differences between non-collecting and regular museums, thus, even a museum has done tremendous, audiences could come to disappointment.

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