

RESHAPING THE PAST: ART MUSEUM'S POTENTIAL TO RESHAPE THE ART HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Reshaping the Past: Art Museum's potential to Reshape the Art History

Today, art history and its interpretation have changed with new museology applications. The potential to understand and perceive art history has changed over the years. Museums, owning large art collections, aim to spread and transmit knowledge in society, while reshaping the meaning of artworks as they maintain experienced-based exhibitions. Art museums also target to increase communication between artworks and visitors and develop programs specialized in their collections. Art museums also have the potential to drive the past into light with their temporary exhibitions and create new ways to understand art history within their exhibitions. Thus, being a new authority, museums add new meanings to the artworks, exhibition designs, classification of artworks, and spreading and transferring knowledge can change the interpretation of art history.

Keywords: Art History, Art Museums, History, New Museology.

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Introduction

Re-expressing, reshaping, or interpreting the history of art through museums gained importance especially in 1989 because of the changes in Peter Vergo's new museology approach. These have driven museums to make renovations.

The main reason was because of the potential improvements the new museum science could make in museums in every respect. Art museums have adopted new approaches to exhibiting, disseminating, and making sense of information, creating new values, and authorizing and starting to develop new styles in every field.

“It is museum actively engaged in education, attempt to resolve the dilemma about the entrepreneurial notion of museums as places of public diversion, the permanent questioning of museums' collecting as political, ideological or aesthetic acts and the idea of constructing history throughout arrangement, acquisition or disposal. (Kristovic, 2020: 128)

Considering all the aspects above, museums somehow need to question their potential for power in society. This kind of power questioning should include interpretation of the past and creating meaning again in the past.

In the 2000s museums are considered a social institution and their political duty has expanded. Museums have been supported to encourage social justice and deliver messages. The main aim of the museums, besides protecting and restoring, is to deliver information via artworks. (Erbay, 2009: 31)

Considering their power in delivering knowledge and reshaping the past, museums can become global institutions rather than local institutions. Creating knowledge and transferring it to society is an important aspect of increasing their knowledge. On the other hand, transferring and creating knowledge is always an issue of ethics in new museology. Their potential of transferring knowledge and reshaping the past and art history has given them huge responsibility. The question of how museums transfer the knowledge whether it is a right or wrong academic and art historians, museologist, Pierre Mayrand's speech in ICOM's general gathe-

ring in London dating back to 1983 is an important one as he mentioned new museology is not only about innovation, but also about frame of mind of museum workers and deep changes in the management. This approach come into prominence in new museology and helped museums to express themselves in society better. Maynard's approach is part of the museology approach aiming to grow and develop with society. This though made many museums an authority and gave them power. The authority in question also raised eyebrows while museums are trying to revalue the artworks they have with temporary exhibitions. For example, thinker Kwame Anthony Appiah's thoughts on the Declaration of the Importance and Value of the Universal Museum, along with his discussions of cosmopolitanism, argue museums tend to create two different meanings locally and universally with the objects they are exhibiting and a result of this, they create ethical problems in terms of creating knowledge and information. In this case, Kwame supports museums and said: “The artworks do not belong to a place or a particular time, art has a cosmopolite structure.”

However, if we are to look at the discussions of art museums, this kind of division also creates ethical problems. It raises the question of whether the meaning of artworks is interpreted in a right way. This also raises an important question about art museums if they can reshape the art history via their temporary exhibitions.

According to an article published at Artnews on May 20, 2022, 25 curators from all over the world can reshape the art history with the exhibitions they make, such as Cornelia Butler, Nicolas Bourriard, Thelma Golden, Rita Gonzalez, Hou Hanru, Mami Kataoka. All these curators have in common is they have worked for a museum or created an exhibition for the museum. On the other hand, names such as Nicolas Bourriard and Hou Hanru worked with municipalities for designing and opening and art museum. Bourriard, additionally left his job for Montpellier Contemporaine in 2021, raising eyebrows as he left his position. (Lairos, Bourriard, interview, 2021)

Art historians and museum professionals often think critically about museums' position in classif-

ying artworks, gathering, and spreading information in exhibitions, while shaping the art history. Art historian Donald Preziosi explains the situation as:

“Visiting a museum is like walking through history: we wander among the inheritance and legacy of works of art, not only a journey through time, but also a continuous development in terms of style, form, approach, style, discoveries. This extraordinary interactive machine (museum) that can recreate history and chronology with certain choreography is designed to be operated by its users and wants to involve them in everything.” (Preziosi, 2006: 50)

Museums share the information in chronological order, thus creating the knowledge within past and now can also recreate and reshape art history. Preziosi, defines this situation as ‘Rendering the visible eligible’. In this way, museums construct new definitions and meanings while exhibiting the artworks.

The newly constructed meanings can add new definitions to the artworks. Museums are both own and reshape information. While information is also used as a tool for communication, artworks in the museums become ‘things’ without time and place while building information. According to Preziosi, these so-called objects are destined to tell stories in notional and epistemological angles. So, things or objects, also known as artworks in the museums have different meanings when they gather to gather or create new exhibitions by combining and museums constantly handle knowledge and information. Preziosi also mentions:

“In museums, different artworks are presented side by side and when we look at the management of an art museum it seems like it is very simple, however, the effect on the visitor or spectator is quite deep.” (Preziosi, 1996: 168)

With this deep and complex effect, the knowledge and information are reshaped and rebuilt again as it is transferred to the visitor. Reshaping the art history depends on the information flow. Museums make the information readable and legible.

The official records on this subject can be found on ICOM’s (International Council of Museums) definitions of museology and museums. All the defi-

nitions delivered and published by ICOM include the potential of museums transferring and building information for society. While each new object and artwork is used to transfer and construct information, each artwork or object’s meaning differs in a semantic way. The artwork’s meanings differ as the visitor experiences them and they become vessels of information. In this context, Curators in museums have also been active in re-expressing and interpreting information by entering a new field of knowledge with their exhibitions.

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* book also emphasizes how it is possible to know the information is right and how these changes over the years.

“Museums have been active in shaping knowledge over (at least) the last 600 years. During the period of the Renaissance episteme, the classical age, and the modern age, a variety of both structures of knowledge and rules for the production of truth can be observed to have been in operation.” (Hooper Green 1992:108)

Hooper-Greenhill claims that only if museums put all the accumulated objects together, then it is possible all these things can derive a meaning from each other. That’s how Wunderkammer- cabinet of curiosities existed. Objects collected and displayed together can build information via their own internal communications.

In their book titled *Cultural Heritage in a Changing World*, Trilce Navarrete and John Mackenzie Owen mention museums’ role as:

The information they convey depends on the observer’s ‘reading’ of the object, based on acquired rules of interpretation and methods of reasoning. So, for instance, a painting may be ‘read’ differently by a painter (observing colour and brushstroke), an art historian (determining cultural and historical value) and a chemist (inspecting mineral composition). (Navarrete, Mackenzie 2016: 112)

As a result of this approach, we encounter how museums carry information and knowledge over the years. It is fact that the question if museums are delivering the right information or not also establishes new meta texts for artworks while opening new ways to render information.

The objects in the museum find new forms of meanings and values as they communicate with each other. This kind of 'finding a value' trigger inter-cultural dialogue and bring communication with the society to afore. Like so, museums activate redefining and transmitting the information.

Knowledge has its own past and the displaying of the past is essential in terms of acknowledging knowledge. (Gorman 2011: 155) Thus, museums activate transmission of the knowledge and spread among societies.

Museum as an Authority

Being able to transmit the knowledge makes museums steadfast authorities. As they become cultural authorities, museums become institutions that adorn national values. Their place in the society strengthens and museums consider giving a serious thought on their future plans.

"Most museums started their 2030 plans. Their fast change after the 2000s is expected to accelerate in the coming 30 years. Today's museums need to benefit from strategic planning to plan their future changes. The technological changes saw an acceleration in museum planning after the 2000s."(Erbay, 2013: 21)

Technological developments have also caused the selection of exhibitions in art museums and the new semantic expressions related to the exhibition to change. Most art museums preferred established artists who have proved their stance in art history while planning exhibitions. Museums are wanting to prove their authority in reshaping art history. In this way, their connection and communication with society strengthen and they underline the power of their roles in informing society.

"Museums' current situation and what they have become is a problem." Said David Chapin and Stephan Klein, in their article titled *The Epistemic Museum* and they carry this discussion further by asking who is controlling exhibitions and programs of museums. (Stam, 1993, 270)

It is possible to see many examples regarding questions of controlling. For example, in the protests that started in 2018, it was stated that the curator's

works and exhibitions of the Brooklyn Museum did not include enough different cultures, races and genders and that there was no such diversity in the programs of the museum. Museum critics, who see this situation as a kind of misuse or abuse of authority, have published articles stating that the Brooklyn Museum (although it is an encyclopedic museum) does not use its power correctly. In a much-cited article in the *New York Times*, it was stated that the Brooklyn Museum had hired a white curator for its African Arts department, and therefore could not communicate with the society (they even referred to it as their own) that he needed to communicate with and was disconnected from the society. (decolonizethisplace.com).

This situation brings with it questions such as whether museums can exhibit the artists they want or the objects they want whenever they want.

Inevitably, this situation is based on issues such as the exhibiting art, the difference, or the sameness of the selected artists. This situation also refers to the reshaping of art history through the artists exhibited in museums. It gains importance how and why a museum has become an authority, especially museums of art, such as the Guggenheim Museum, MoMA, Tate Modern.

"Museums must reconcile with the pluralistic nature of the past. As one of the main areas where people access history, museums must remove cultural barriers so that activities can be accessed by all." (Lawley 1992:38, Ross, Lichfield 2004: 85)

Aiming to reach visitors with different exhibitions and presentation techniques, art museums have begun to shape the history of art by using different techniques.

On the other hand, museums can shape art history and begin to rewrite art history with new exhibition and presentation techniques by revealing artists whose names have been hidden in the past and whose names have not been enlightened in the halls of art history in their exhibitions. This situation could help them both to become authorities and easily turn the innovations in the art world to their advantage.

Exhibition examples: Guggenheim Museums, MoMA and Tate Modern

Although the concept of an encyclopedic museum is generally a definition befitting 18th-century museum, this term is still used for museums that have large and historical collections. Guggenheim Museum, one of such encyclopedic museums, has hosted many different exhibitions in the last 10 years, while managing the museum like a company, shaping art history with museums opened in different countries (such as Spain, Abu Dhabi). The museum is constantly reshaping art history with exhibitions highlighting some artists or mixed collections, is a striking example.

Using different exhibition and presentation techniques, the Guggenheim Museum brings together both group and individual exhibitions of artists who have had a place in the history of art. In this field, it tries to express artists who have an important place in art history with more experience-based exhibition and presentation techniques, knowing that exhibitions should be both audience-oriented and appealing to individuals from all segments of society. As a result of the effective use of the experience-based approach in different museums in different ways, the museum increases its impact on society. On the other hand, this approach has become important in terms of sustainability in museum planning. Audience-oriented activities/works should be increased to ensure the sustainability of museums, which are effective in the development of the region/city they are located. (Erbay, 2006: 171)

By making decisions, such museums shape and reconstruct the field of knowledge: they use specific methods for selecting objects, placing them in specific contexts, classifying and labelling them, and in doing so for research and publication. (Navarette, Owen, 2016:286)

For example, Kandinsky, Picasso, and Pollock have been the most frequently seen names in the Guggenheim group exhibitions in the last ten years. According to some museologists, this is not a coincidence and progresses within the method.

The sales of auction houses, such as Christies or Sothebys, that develop and grow together with

the constantly exhibited artists, also have a great impact on this issue. Peter Vergo, on the subject of new museology, said that museums focus too much on the past in their programs and practices and they forget the human side of museology, which includes meaning and purpose. If we look at the exhibitions held at the Guggenheim Museum, we see that the museum practices are in place and the focus on the past is very high. The reason for this is both the museum's effort to show its own collection and the desire to develop new discourses in terms of art history.

When we look at the Guggenheim Museum's exhibitions (all Guggenheim Museums on different continents) in the last 10 years, we come across striking examples. We can see that the most preferred artists in these exhibitions are Picasso and Kandinsky. Between 2010 and 2022, Picasso was exhibited 5 times in single and group exhibitions, and Kandinsky was exhibited 4 times in single and mixed exhibitions. In the same years, the Jackson Pollock exhibition took place 4 times. These artists were followed by Brancusi with 3 exhibitions, David Hockney and Jean Michel Basquiat with 2 exhibitions.

We can say that one of the most basic problems we can see in these exhibitions is the problem of sexism, which is talked about in the world of museology, especially in art museums and the history of art. For 12 years, only 23 of the solo artist exhibitions exhibited by the institution are women. Apart from this, 106 artist exhibitions were held in the museum individually and in pairs (such as Kandinsky- Picasso and Pollock Kandinsky). In this case, it is seen that the Guggenheim Museum is stuck on certain periods in the selection of artists, and on the same way of expressing the history of art, always through the same artists.

In the museum, group exhibitions include Paris and the Avant-garde, Italian futurism, American Abstract Expressionism (4 times in 12 years), and post-war art, exhibitions. On the other hand, we see that these exhibitions are held twice, art exhibitions in Latin America (4 times) and the Middle East and African art exhibitions. In addition, Guggenheim gave special space to artists such as Susan Hefuna, Gülsün Karamustafa and Kader Attia

on its website and promoted these artists, but this number was not enough. This issue brings us to what extent and how correctly museums use their authority. Because it is known that the exhibitions held in museums, especially art museums, play a major role in using the authority correctly and reaching society. It is a fact that the Guggenheim Museum generally repeats itself about the artists it exhibits, but over the past 10 years, the museum has also featured temporary exhibitions that are more experience-based and involve the visitor. In this way, more effective new museology practices can be seen, placing space-oriented works at the entrance of the museum, exhibition programs specially prepared in the museum, and experience-oriented practices used for exhibitions are some of them.

“Authority and authenticity maintain the social contract between the museum and the visitor as long as the agreed reality between the society and the museum exists with the trust in the exhibitions held.” (Stam 1993: 268)

The importance of temporary exhibitions in art museums is increasing every year because temporary exhibitions are among the most important tools among the applications in new museology. On the other hand, the difference between male and female artists in exhibitions held in art museums in recent years is related to temporary exhibitions and creating collections.

Museum of Modern Art and MoMA are among the museums that work very hard on this subject. While the Guggenheim Museum usually deals with male artists in post-war art MoMA's 2017 exhibition Women artists and post-war abstract art made a splash. In this exhibition, feminist art, which found its own voice in the 1960s, featured women as abstract artists after 1945. All the works of the exhibition were collected from MoMA's own collection, and therefore, it was an important exhibition for new museology approaches in terms of collection and temporary exhibition applications.

The Tate Modern in London, on the other hand, seems to have more balanced exhibitions in 12 years than the Guggenheim Museum. Tate Modern held 79 solo artist exhibitions in 12 years. A total of 29 of these exhibitions belong to women artists. Tate

Modern has a more active program than the Guggenheim Museum and has strategies in different areas in this context. For its solo exhibitions, Tate Modern organizes ‘Curator Talks’, promotional events, and curator and artist meetings for members until 6 months ago. While Tate Modern organizes a very effective and inclusive program for solo exhibitions, it also includes events to show films about artists and promote their previous works. We can say that the museum, which uses this strategy effectively in the temporary exhibition area, works very actively. It is also a striking example of how the museum works for promoting exhibitions.

It seems that both the Guggenheim Museum and the Tate Modern delve deeper into art history and feature artists who are little known or underrated. For example, in 2021, the Guggenheim Museum exhibited the works of Kandinsky and Etel Adnan together gathering a special exhibition and program, and in 2018, the museum hosted Hilma Af Klint's major solo exhibition by promoting her as the first abstract painter before Kandinsky. On the other hand, Tate Modern's brought artists such as Dora Maar and Dorothea Tanning back to the stage in 2018 and 2019. This might be considered an intervention in art history. Such trends are new museology practices used in the context of reshaping and redefining art history.

It should be noted that the curators mentioned at the beginning of the article also serve as chief curators in museums. Museums' reshaping the history of art, bringing old masters back to the agenda, presenting old masters with contemporary artists (such as the Michelangelo and Bill Viola exhibition organized by the Royal Academy of Arts in 2018) and their desire to bring the forgotten names to light and intervene in the history of art. These practices and approaches can be evaluated as the new museology practices, as museums have the chance to expand effective areas of use.

While art museums become authorities with their innovations, the exhibited works and artists find new meanings and expressions over time.

Conclusion

In this study discusses museums' potential to re-express the history of art and their significance in reshaping the art history. While, the article emphasizes the potential of art museums to shape art history, it also talks about whether it is possible to rewrite and express art history in art museums. The article also reviews whether art museums can re-express art history in different ways through new museology practices.

The article looks at new museology practices in terms of reinterpreting information in art museums, disseminating information, exhibiting works, with an experience-based approach in museums. The article argues the museums' potentials through practices and exhibitions of Guggenheim Museums, MoMA and Tate Modern, while looking at these museums' temporary exhibitions within a decade, revealing the frequency of solo artist exhibitions and programs while looking at the importance of these exhibitions in the art history.

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