

In the New Museum. Experiencing “Carsten Höller: Experience.”

The New Museum appears very new indeed. Its clean, sleek exterior, strange shifted-box design, monochrome off-white color and lack of identifiable windows provide for a perfectly foreign and largely intriguing character in relation to its closest neighbors in lower Manhattan. The New Museum’s neighbors, for the most part, bear the characteristics one most associates with more traditional New York buildings: constructed of old stone, brick and concrete; volumetric arrangements that maximize square footage while minimizing real estate costs; and windows arranged in a grid like pattern so that each room in the building both receives a similar degree of natural light and provides a similar view of the external world. The rigid uniformity of these traditional, some might say old, style New York City buildings is what gives the New Museum the right to bear such a title. Despite the statement found in the museum pamphlet about the New Museum’s materials’ being in “keeping with the commercial character of Bowery,” and the “deliberate openness to the building,” the museum appears more as a closed off and intentionally alien element of Downtown Manhattan than a structure that fluidly integrates into its context. While its looks may alienate it from its peers, the New Museum’s unique design certainly has its benefits. The external appearance of the museum is eccentric and it drives the visitor in; it appeals to one’s sense of curiosity and desire to explore the unknown; it beckons in to discover the art concealed inside those strangely stacked volumes.

The New Museum was founded in 1977 by curator Marcia Tucker who had “neither personal resources nor a collection” but had plenty of “resourcefulness” and strong “passion for living culture” (from museum pamphlet) This passion still characterizes the museum today; it embraces the idea that the world and its many cultures are indeed alive and changing with the passing of time. It is this ideology that drives the museum to engage the experimental and the controversial contingent of the Art World. It was this ideology that ultimately brought Carsten Höller to the New Museum. Finally, it was this ideology that brought me to Carsten Höller through viewing his exhibit. Were it not for those beautifully stacked volumes of the New Museum, Höller and I may never have met.

Höller made me reexamine “what I know about myself” (from artist’s statement). Carsten Höller is a contemporary German artist, born in Brussels, Belgium, who is concerned with altering the way in which art is perceived. He works to redefine the experience art can provide by

placing the viewer in “influential environments” and forcing the viewer to rediscover his senses through altered ways of common perception.

Höller holds a doctorate in agricultural science, specializing in insect sensory perception. It was not until he was in his late twenties that he actually began practicing art. Höller’s artistic career and doctoral research overlap by some fourteen years. This perhaps can explain why Höller’s artistic methodologies are similar in many ways to laboratory experimentation. While visiting his exhibit, I felt more like a subject of scientific research than a passive viewer of art. The works of art become clandestine experiments, the results of which are the viewers’ experiences. The fusion of art and science in this exhibit was very much in line with the spirit of the New Museum. The mission of the New Museum is to “keep breaking new grounds,” promoting new ideas as well as stimulating “ongoing experimentation and questioning of what art can be in the twenty-first century.” Höller’s objective coincides with the mission of the New Museum in its relentless search for novel answers to the question of ‘what is art?’ Höller’s work answers this question by presenting art as a process of scientific discovery, with the viewer’s being simultaneously subject and researcher; data point and conclusion. Unlike a traditional view of an art piece as an expression of the artist’s creativity and imagination, Höller’s presentation of art as scientific discovery makes it experiential, thus allowing the viewer to be a participant in the very process of making art. Höller’s viewer becomes his arts’ co-creator. Höller approach is thusly one that shares the glory of his artistic achievement with the viewer. Indeed, the viewer can rightfully regard himself as an artist as well.

Each floor of the exhibition was meant to explore a different general theme within Höller’s work to provide a “carefully choreographed journey through the building and the artist’s oeuvre” (pamphlet). For example the fourth floor concentrated on the exploration of movement, while the second floor dealt with themes of utopian experiences in architectural space. While it is difficult to place where the slide going from the fourth floor gallery to the second floor gallery lies within the artist’s oeuvre, it certainly created an efficient and exhilarating alternative to the elevator and redefined the circulation of the museum. Perhaps this was just another way that Höller invited the viewer to circumvent the conventional, to experiment, and to experience the joy of discovering something new.

Even before entering the exhibit, the visitor gets a sense that his preconceptions of ‘what art is’ are soon to be challenged. To get into the exhibit, the visitor is required to sign a waiver that releases the museum of any liability for injury or bodily harm that may result from his interactions with the artwork. It felt unsettling and firmly reinforced my sense that I was stepping into

the unknown. In signing that waiver, not only was freeing the New Museum of legal responsibility, I was freeing myself from the responsibility to view, analyze and respect art by any traditional standard. Thus began my Höller experience.

The exploration began in the glass gallery on the ground floor inside which stood a troop of human-sized mushrooms. Such an unobvious reference to psychedelic drug culture spoke directly to the “alternative” nature of the museum. Each mushroom was composed of the two halves of different mushroom types, one of which was flipped upside-down. Visitors were encouraged to wear ‘upside-down glasses,’ which distorted one’s perception by inverting vision. Wearing these glasses put me into an altered state of reality which, while exciting at first, soon became a dizzying experience. After taking a few steps I promptly found myself disoriented and helpless. Security guards in the gallery, used to dealing with seemingly dazed and confused visitors, enthusiastically advised the visitors, me included, to refrain from trying to walk between the mushrooms. While many seemed to find this gallery quite thrilling, I found the novelty of it wore off rather quickly. Fortunately for me, unlike with psychedelic mushrooms, all I had to do was take off my glasses to step back into reality.

The architecture of the museum embraced the exhibit. The synergy occurred not only on an ideological level but on a physical one as well. ‘The ‘Slide’ piece ran from the fourth to the third floor right through the floor plate. This literal fusion of the art piece and the building’s architecture signified the high level of collaboration between the museum and the artist for the sake of creating one powerful experience.

The interior attempted to create a “desire for structural transparency.” Structural steelwork was exposed, unadorned and unscreened. Beams and girders, metal deck, steel joints and connections were all completely visible. In this sense it was a totally utilitarian space, abandoning all avoidable interior design elements. I was reminded of my freshman year chemistry laboratory, drawing further the parallel I saw between Höller’s art work and scientific discovery.

The lighting of the galleries was evenly distributed. The shifted-box design of the building created slivers of light in the ceiling of each gallery. Thus sunlight was able to reach each even the ground floor of the museum. Halogen lights were installed in the ceiling where artwork required additional illumination. The fourth floor exhibit contained a slowly revolving ‘Mirror Carousel’ (2005) made out of highly reflective material. The lights of the carousel reflected all around the room at a rather lethargic pace, creating, in my mind, a very festive scene as though somebody had decided to record everything in slow motion. In contrast, the second floor gallery

was completely unlit except a bit of light emanating from the art piece 'Double Light Corner, 2011,' which was composed of a diagonal array of halogen lamps wrapped around the wall approximately 4 feet off the ground. The lights on the left and right side of the room flashed in an alternating fashion, disorienting the viewer. It had the effect of discretizing time. When I was on the dark side of the room, I had to wait for the lights to come back on before life began again. I found this experiment in non-continuous life to be very interesting and thought-provoking. However, much like my experience with the mushrooms, I decided not to dally for too long.

The same gallery featured a fish tank which the viewer could experience from underneath while lying on a bench with the head inserted into the special opening below. The flashing lights of the nearby artwork gave a very jolly appearance to the underwater world. The second floor gallery also featured a herd of neon colored animals resting on the smooth concrete floor. This piece called 'Animal Group, 2011' was composed of a Dolphin, Hippopotamus, Crocodile, Orangutan, Rhinoceros, Reindeer and Walrus. Their bright color and soft, matte texture contrasted with the grey, hard and glossy concrete floor. This juxtaposition of textures was, for me, one of the more memorable elements of the exhibit. Another component of the second floor was a series of small rooms where visitors could engage in various forms of self-experimentation. For example, one of the rooms had a desk where one could experience a "rabbit jumping on the skin." The rabbit was produced by slight electric current running through the viewer's body. In another room the viewer could place a vibrator to his arm and hold his nose to experience the 'elongation of the nose' or 'shortening of the nose,' depending on to which side of the arm the vibrations were applied. In total there were about six rooms with different experiments. Each room was painted black and held nothing within it except for the piece it featured. It felt cryptic.

Light played an interesting role in the overall architecture of the New Museum. Aside from the glass façade of the first floor, the only natural light sources inside the building were those areas created by its shifted-box design. Within each gallery, this unique method of illumination created a very pleasant and soft glow emanating from the edge of the ceiling. Because of the varying relationships between the elements of the building, a specific nuance was given to each gallery. Viewed from the exterior, the shifted-box design allowed light to radiate from the building at night making it seem as if the museum concealed some large mysterious glowing object. It was almost as if the building were beckoning one to come and discover what secrets lay within. For me, this glowing mystery revealed itself to be the 'Höller Experience.' The great surprise promised by the exterior turned out to be the 'Mirror Carousel' and the 'Double Light Corner.'

In MoMA, a very slight reveal separates the floor from the walls, suggesting that the walls and ceiling are a series of planes that hang weightlessly in space. Such a reading implies a conceptual lack of gravity and therefore takes the gallery away from the physical world. The floor of the New Museum is also separated from the wall by a reveal. But unlike in MoMA, where the wall steps away from the floor, appearing to hang over it, in the New Museum the floor steps a fraction of an inch away from the wall — it implies that gravity is present. This difference can be explained by the description given by O’Doherty in *The Gallery as a Gesture*. The gallery gradually becomes “infiltrated with conciseness. Its walls become ground, its floor a pedestal, its corners vortices, its ceiling a frozen sky.” The galleries of the New Museum are not abstract assembly of floating planes – they have weight and gather consciousness. The ceiling becomes the sky captured behind the opaque glass on the setback areas. The floor that steps from the wall reads as a pedestal due to the reveal detail. “No longer confined to a zone around the artwork, and impregnated now with the memory of art, the new space pushed gently against its confining box” (322, O’Doherty). The entire space of the gallery becomes infiltrated with art, not only the space around the work. Space acts as art of an experience devised for measuring the time between other experiences. Space itself is meant to inspire. Space itself translates into the experience of art.

#### Metropolitan Museum of Art . Ancient Greece.

During the 1870s the purpose of the art museum was seen as an educational tool devised for cultivation of taste in the working class. The masterpieces of the great civilizations (primarily sculpture) as well as the examples of European painting were the central means of mass culturalization. Therefore the centrality of these galleries in plan is explained by their primary function in the cultural role of the museum at the time.

Some of the rooms of the Greek galleries have dark marble floors while others have plain concrete; some walls are actually made of stone, while others just appear to have the stone texture applied to concrete. Such a gamut of color and choice of materials enhances the reading of the antique marble sculptures, making them appear visually at home. Subtle in their color and delicate in their form, the figures of ancient Greeks demand an interior that would not compete with their majesty nor disgrace them with an overly postmodern atmosphere. The Metropolitan’s gallery houses sculptures of antiquity well. The space of the gallery is divided by columns that are exact copies of antique originals. The gallery is softly and evenly lit. The architecture integrates too well with the world of antiquity, making it difficult to decipher where the exhibit

stops and its architectural 'frame' begins. Only the protective glass occasionally reminds us what the actual exhibit items are.

My favorite architectural moment of the exhibit was the very long, lofty, vaulted space with a series of rectangular windows in the ceiling that flooded the entire room with light — the Great Hall. It exhibited sculptures mounted on cubic marble stands. Its ceiling was intricately patterned with octagonal and diamond coffering. The Great Hall terminated with a no less great top third section and the base of an enormous Ionic column. The size of the column appeared shocking. If one was to reconstruct the missing sections, the entire exhibited column would have exceeded the regular surrounding columns that held the ceiling of the Great Hall by about three times, harkening back to the grandeur of the Ancient Greek temple.

The balance and homogeneity between the gallery and the exhibit allowed one to be fully immersed in the ancient culture of Greece. I stepped into a gallery and emerged in antiquity that day.

Sep 16 2011

#### Nassau County Museum of Art:

##### Lois and David Lerner Gallery: Francisco Goya's "Los Caprichos"

The museum consists of formal garden that houses thirty nine sculptures of different styles authored by various artists, and a main building that presents wide array of paintings, prints and etchings. The main building of the Nassau Museum of Art is a three-story Georgian mansion typical of Gold Coast architecture of the late 19th century. It is named in honor of the art collectors and philanthropists Arnold and Joan Saltsman. Most of the Museum property originally belonged to William Cullen Bryant — the poet, lawyer, political activist, preservationist and patron of the arts who settled in Roslyn in 1843. Bryant's home played the role of intellectual center in the middle to late 19th century. In 1900 Lloyd Stephens Bryce, the attorney, politician and man of literature (he also served as the Minister to Netherlands and Luxemburg) purchased the "Upland Farm" from Bryant, commissioning the architect Ogden Codman to design the Bryce House — the mansion that currently houses the museum in its entirety. In 1919 Henry Clay Frick, co-founder of the US Steel Corporation purchased the House as a gift for his son Frances Frick — the vertebrate paleontologist and devoted naturalist — and hired British architect Sir Charles Carrick Allom to redesign the façade and the interior of the House. Frick used his newly acquired mansion for his natural science collections that he meticulously catalogued,

classified and preserved in its walls. In addition, due to his interest in botany and zoology, Frick built a monkey house, aviary and a bear pit on what is now the museum premises. In 1989 after being administered by the Nassau Office of Cultural Development the estate was turned into a non-profit private educational institution and public museum. It is currently governed and funded by the private board of trustees that include prominent Long Island businessmen and civic leaders.

My visit to the Nassau County Museum was concentrated on the Goya exhibit that featured etchings and the burnished aquatints from the series "Los Caprichos." The exhibit took place at the Lois and David Lerner Gallery in two relatively spacious adjacent rooms located on the first floor directly to the left of the entrance. The aura of the gallery rooms suited the essence of the exhibit. Dim, evenly distributed light that avoided direct influence on the works created a gloomy contemplative atmosphere. The exhibit was presented in two rows one above the other. The original prints that measured from five to ten inches on each side were located at eye level allowing the viewer to take a closer look and appreciate the level of detail and delicacy of the line work. Prints were secluded in austere and simple white frames with about ten inches of white mate board around the image. Such presentation provided an ample amount of white space around the works, contrasting with the intensity of the line work and graphic nature of the depicted scenes. The second row which was presented directly above the originals featured magnified details. Magnified prints were framed similarly to the originals; the single discrepancy was the slightly pinker tone in the grey of their frames. The individual dates of the prints were not specified but the approximate date of the series was marked as 1815.

The walls of the gallery were fully covered with grayish-white panels that exposed a neoclassical cornice. The panels superimposed on the actual walls gave the gallery an unplanned postmodern feel. However, the parquet floor, the heavily decorated gilded ceiling and the marble chimney at the entrance reminded of its true character. The middle of the room was occupied by the tables that presented more original etchings framed in the same manner and accompanied by descriptions. The overall austerity of the presentation allowed the viewer to concentrate on the moral lessons depicted in Goya's images.

In the series "Los Caprichos" Goya raised the issues of intellectual passivity and moral degeneration through rather graphically portrayed scenes of lust, prostitution, drunkenness, abuse, greed, immoderate pursuit of physical pleasure and other human follies. The plates reflected Goya's contemplations on themes raised by the two literary works that were in fashion at that time. Under each plate the viewer could find the citations from these texts as well as the

interpretive comment by the curator, messages were quite shocking. "Out hunting for teeth," was signed under the portrayal of a woman who tried to pull teeth out of a dead hanging man. The teeth were golden. Goya captures her gesture of trying to turn her face while covering her nose with a handkerchief, suggesting that he was hanging there for a long time. The darkness of the line work of the etchings and the intensity of their meaning tamed by the neutrality of the framing and contradicted by the gaudiness of the hidden neoclassical walls of the gallery accentuated the shocking character of the exhibit.

Sep 18 2011

### MoMA: de Kooning. Retrospective.

I went to MoMA on a dark rainy day. I stepped inside. Clean lofty space, very bright, not so much from the intensity of the light but from the overwhelming even whiteness of everything from floor to ceiling, created a contrast with the raininess and mud that still penetrated the transparency of the façade. Buying the ticket helped me to forget the rainy, busy world of New York and get ready to submerge myself in the weatherless world of art. The long convoluted passage between the entrance and the beginning of the exhibit was meant to be an architectural device for putting aside the worldly worries before approaching art with a mind unburdened of all mundanity. This passage stood out as a pilgrimage, as a lengthy journey to something much desired. The varying height of the lobby ceilings made it seem as though the space itself was dilating towards the coming experience. The art called to be discovered, and its call intensified with the progress of the procession.

I decided to respond to the call of the de Kooning Retrospective exhibit. The exhibit took place on the sixth floor of the museum. Next to the exhibit, the visitor could find a secret little gift shop where special exhibit merchandise was sold. The secret shop required a ticket and made one feel extremely special about being able to come in.

The exhibit was quite comprehensive. The exhibited works that captured the artist's development over nearly seventy years were presented in chronological order, beginning with early academic paintings produced in Holland and concluding with final abstract works that the artist painted in United States during 1980s despite his waning health. The works were brought together from various public and private collections, making the exhibit very successful in capturing the wide array of techniques, materials and styles the artist employed over the course of his oeuvre. Such presentation allowed the viewer to see a clear progression of de Kooning's work and captured the evolution of his ideology.

The space and the exhibit were in synergy. The characteristic features of de Kooning's work, the boldness of mark, rapid change and vividness of color, and rather large size of the paintings were modestly framed by the modern interior of the gallery. The lofty ceilings allowed the works to breathe. The white walls and lightly colored parquet of the floor did not compete with the colors in the paintings. The space of the gallery acted passively giving the undoubtedly leading role to the works.

The space interacted especially well with the paintings of the late period. Abstract and bold in their essence, the forms on the canvases demanded an architecture that would not contradict the autonomy of their being. The architecture of the gallery fulfilled this demand. It allowed art to exist alone and majestic in its own space. This space was in MoMA but at the same time somewhere far, far away from the city of New York. It existed somewhere in a metaphysical realm that even allowed one to forget about gravity. The reveal that created discontinuity between the walls, the floor, and the ceiling of the gallery gave the illusion of floating planes that happen to come together to create a room where paintings also happened to be. The movable partitions separated from the ceiling and the floor by the reveal read as passerby plans that carried the paintings with similar floating conditions depicted on them. Nearby the transparent planes of glass with metal rims acted as railings for the escalators. Nothing called gravity to mind. The frames of the paintings were minimal and simple: thin, black, white or gilded. Their function was merely to delineate the artwork, but in no way to present the paintings as venerable objects. The paintings appeared as documents of thought, as mental constructs rather than fetishized objects of artistic value. The entire architecture of the gallery appeared purely conceptual and promised to disintegrate with the ease of a daydream.

Sep 24 2011

### Whitney: Real Surreal

Visiting the Whitney always appears very festive. Perhaps it has to do with the way crossing the moat on the way in alludes to visiting a castle. The festive feelings however are usually disrupted by ambiguous and peculiar architectural forms. It seems that the architecture of the Whitney tries to compete with art. Its formal language goes beyond the program, it does not intend to frame the art, nor does it try to integrate into the surrounding urban fabric. It is especially puzzling to see architecture programmed to house sculpture (amongst other art forms) exhibiting purely sculptural qualities of its own and of its own accord.

However I found two moments in the architecture of the museum worked brilliantly. The first is the aforementioned portal in that crosses the moat and the stair landings inside. The facade is comprised of a series of large, two story windows. The windows cover ground level and basement, spanning from the bottom of the moat to the second floor. Entrance occurs through the concrete bridge that crosses the moat, penetrating the glass portion of the façade on the ground level. It inserts the visitor right in the middle of the glassed aperture. Identically textured concrete in front and beyond the glass of the façade create total fluidity between exterior and interior. The glass of the façade appears as pure demarcation allowing the visitor to decide where the museum begins. The continuity of the architectural language suggests that the entry into the museum occurred somewhere along the bridge while crossing the “moat,” but one never knows for sure when. Moving inside one discovers the claustrophobically low ceilings over the stair landings that recall a reading nook. The spotlights over the seats located on the landings allude to the lights shining on to the works of art on the gallery walls that portray the seated visitors as a sculpture in a spotlight. The coziness of the low ceilings over the landings creates a counterbalance to the spacious loft galleries that come next.

The six stories of the museum have four different types of floor finish and a few different ways of articulating the ceiling plane. Some of the levels of the museum have a very elegant polished stone floor that echoes the material used for the exterior, lobby and elevator core. Other levels have laminated wood tile or parquet floors, while others have a plane grey floor finish. The choice of stone as the floor material can arguably be justified by the intention of placing steel sculpture. However the majority of other material choices seem purely arbitrary. The discord in the materials throughout the museum fosters discontinuity of spatial experience that ultimately undermines the focus that ought to be placed on the art in the museum building. I would suggest experimenting with diversifying the atmosphere of the interiors via play in architectural articulation not so much via randomness of materials or rapid difference in color as by ...

My visit was concentrated on the exhibit “Real Surreal,” featuring Francis Criss, Edward Hopper, Walter Murch, Philip Guston, John Wilde and many others. The exhibit took up the entire second floor: the main room, two smaller rooms adjacent to the main room and the projection space. The smaller rooms of the exhibit had irregular geometric boundaries and colorfully painted walls. In the center there were some additional planes that formed irregular trapezoid shapes in plan and were extruded all the way to the ceiling. The main room had grey wall panels that occasionally revealed coarse stone plinth disrupting the otherwise textureless articulation. The colors of the interiors seemed to be extremely bright and diverse. The partitions that

formed two additional closed volumes were colored bright violet and red while the smaller rooms were painted a saturated blue. Presented works included drawings, paintings, prints, photography, etchings and others. Pieces were framed in a wide variety of ways and styles: gilded, silver, black, colored, austere, flamboyant, thick, barely visible, etc. The overly colorful, irregular, pseudo-surreal way of framing the exhibit seemed distracting. The framing approach, diversity of medium in presented art works and the colorfulness of the interior caused the exhibit to give a rather cacophonous impression. No strict chronological order in presentation was followed. Some of the works depicted the surreal scenes in realistic character while others just captured reality in abstract or appeared surreal due to manipulation of reality via means of photography. Figurative and abstract works were presented side by side. The unifying characteristics of the exhibit were exclusively theoretical: the somewhat altered depiction of reality, the American origin and the twenties to forties dating. Visually the exhibit had no continuity. The somewhat random trapezoid aperture that acted as a window added to the overwhelming sense of randomness.

A relatively small room with installations on the sixth floor, on the other hand, did a better job of presenting surreal work. It was not a part of the exhibit. The room was about 30 feet on each side and had softly colored walls and a small projector in the corner by the ceiling. Video was projected directly onto the floor; it showed shadows of various objects 'falling up' in space (against the gravity) and disintegrating during the fall. Shadows of people were falling down in accordance with the gravity at the same time. The meaning of this installation was inconclusive but presented itself for thorough contemplation due to the absence of architectural distractions such as excessive color or distracting materiality. I would prefer to see the second floor exhibit presented in this way.

Oct 08 2011

Brooklyn Museum: 'Youth and Beauty' and  
Situ Transformation of the Great Hall

I was overtaken by the grandeur of the temple's front façade. The pediment held by the six large ionic columns and the relief sculptures located between the entablature and the cornice increased the magnificence of the building. On the entablature the visitor could find the names of major thinkers such as Socrates, Confucius, Sophocles and others. This detail defined the museum as a temple of knowledge – a treasury of human intellectual endeavor. Also

from the exterior one could see the presence of the dome that promised a central rotunda inside the museum; it added to the anticipation of grand space.

I was surprised to find out that the current version of the museum measures only one fourth of its original proposal. The museum is very large. The appearance of the Brooklyn Museum immediately resonated and possibly competes with the Metropolitan. Even though the façade of Metropolitan has different order, both museums share the type of classical vocabulary that relates them directly to their forefathers of antiquity — the Greek temples. I discovered that originally the museum had a grand staircase quite similar to that of the Metropolitan but twice as large. It was demolished due to its being ‘an obstruction in the way of the visitor there to see the art’ and substituted with a set of mundane narrow doors that give a prison-like quality to the entrance. In reality, I would venture to guess, it was demolished due to unspoken rivalry.

Consequently, after disappointing the public with those shabby doors the entrance of the museum was redesigned again in a modern way, so to speak, a look very different from the rest of the museum, I must say. Now the entrance to the museum is transparent. The glass walls and ceiling create a smooth moment of transition from the outside to the inside of the building. The slanted glass walls of the entrance façade create a great space for waiting but do not go well with the rest of classical vocabulary from the aesthetic stand point. The reflecting pool located right outside the glass exterior works wonderfully with the group of Rodin’s sculptures. Tense, dark, and dramatic bronze postures are circumscribed by grey granite, concrete, glass and water beckoning the visitor to immerse himself in contemplation.

I concentrated my visit on the exhibit ‘Youth and Beauty’ and the installation ‘reOrder’ by the Situ studio. The exhibit took place on the fifth floor of the museum. The exhibit occurred in two large galleries and ended with a small room with photographs and one other painting. It started from a room that featured a few oil paintings representative of twentieth century American painting. The walls of this room were painted turquoise. It was quite a radical choice of color and did not match the paintings very well. The large rooms were subdivided by panels of various height, some of them were connected and created corners. The variation in panel height and corners seemed rather excessive because it was not facilitated by any change in the size of the paintings. The corners caused the panels to be read as parts of other rooms that were somehow present inside the gallery, disturbing and confusing the flow of space. These rooms were oddly painted in different shades of grey, light turquoise and white in a striped manner. Some of the walls had ‘decorative’ lines freely painted on them, making the color choice even more eccentric. The third and final small room exhibited photographs that signified a definitive

shift in the methods used for photography. The photographs in the third room marked the moment of the photographers' embrace of the mechanical properties of the camera. The walls of this room were grey and silvered with very shiny finish. I think it was the curators' worst choice throughout the entire exhibit. The shininess of the walls took all the accent away from the works. The wall behind the works visually came forward due to its brightness, and consequently the photographs themselves were virtually lost in space. The exhibited photographs were of historical value and it was disappointing to see them presented in such poor manner.

On the other hand, experiencing the Situ's transformation of the Great Hall was truly a festive . The objective of the installation was to redefine the existing experience of the Great Hall. Interestingly it was the last work permitted to take place in the Great Hall before its actual reconstruction. In the exhibit the space was redefined by altering the silhouettes of the columns. Columns were dressed in folded fabric that went all the way from the capital to the base where it was held by that looked like a flower pot. The bulging parts of the pot were located at different heights on each new column, its contour providing either a bar-stand or a seating piece. Columns glowed from within with subtly tinted light located underneath the drapery. Meticulously and uniformly folded drapery radically redefined the contours of the columns via a ring element located underneath the fabric on various heights. The ring was tilted and draped over the column, visually giving each column somewhat female-looking 'hips.' Each column had its unique ring tilt, size and configuration which provided for a unique silhouette in each case. Crowds of columns appeared to be chatting with one another, captured in their newly defined postures.

The ceiling of the Great Hall had small square translucent apertures located within the coffering. Squares permitted subtle light that in reality was sunlight traveling through the central rotunda of the floor above and through the translucent floor panels into the Great Hall beneath. This subtle light interplayed with the gentle glow of the columns, creating a nuanced, festive atmosphere suited for celebrations, which are in fact what the Great Hall normally houses.

The installation seemed very elegant. Its success came from strict confinement to a limited vocabulary, well developed through research and study of fabrics and classical orders and of course the originality and playfulness of the idea. Completely idiosyncratic and extremely figurative forms gave life, character and personality to the otherwise static structural elements. Motionless columns seemed to turn into characters moving in space, swinging their giant pleated dresses and flirting with one another from time to time.

Nov 19 2011

## Neue Galerie: German and Austrian art

I barely noticed the small sign on one of the buildings west of Central Park that read 'Neue Galerie.' The modest facade of the museum and its total integration into the city block concealed a truly exquisite interior. The gallery had an intimate quality. It preserved a sense of rooms in a private mansion decorated by a collection that the owner decided to share with the guests. The feeling of privacy and intimacy was reinforced by the princely fashion of the presentation. Beautiful translucent glass ceilings and a curving staircase composed of white polished stone and black wrought iron railings reminded me slightly of Victor Horta's architecture, particularly his Hotel Tassel in Brussels. The interior of the gallery was executed in Art Nouveau fashion. It appeared that the space of the gallery was once actually a privately owned residence due to the definitive house-like arrangement of rooms. The gallery had three stories and a basement. The first (ground) level housed the lobby, book shops and a small café as well as the ticket booth and coat check. The basement held the theatre. Exhibits were located on the second and third floors.

Galleries were articulated with a sense of privacy and allowed intimacy in interaction with the art. Most of the walls of the lobby as well as the second floor were covered with beautifully designed dark wood lacquered panels, the ceilings had a deep viridian frieze with gilded details traveling around the perimeter of the room. The spaces were elaborated with numerous exquisitely designed and very well crafted elements that promised to enter in serious competition with any art to be presented.

The central room on the second floor had a curious method of presentation of the paintings. Klimt's painting "Adele" held dominance over the room – it stared from the East wall of the room flanked by two George Minne's sculptures on their tall black stands. The tension and nervousness captured in the sculpted postures resonated with the tension and anxiety of Adele's hands. The gilded fabric draping Adele, even though painted, echoed perfectly in the gilded frieze. Paintings were hung by a coarse rope from the horizontal rod installed near the ceiling. The coarseness of the rope stood out quite starkly from the rest of the presentation. The rope felt like a contemporary element that trespassed into the otherwise historical room. It could have been a good solution to hanging works on the historical wall without anchoring them in, but it produced a powerful visual dissonance and deflected one's attention. I must admit the rope did add an intriguing twist to the otherwise very formal arrangement.

I found it rather amusing to see Cézanne's painting above the original pieces of medieval armory. The colorfulness and playfulness of Cezanne's works, not to diminish its genius, seemed humorous in juxtaposition to the beautifully crafted pieces of war armor. The celebration of color and sheer joy of Cezanne seemed a bit naive and too playful juxtaposed with the mesmerizingly crafted piece of armor that had probably been used in acts of war. I learned the definitive lesson that Cezanne and objects of war should never be presented in a single gallery.

My favorite room of the exhibit was a small room on the second floor that presented the drawings by Klimt (South wall), Schiele (East wall), Kokoshka (North wall) and Kubin (West wall). This room, just as most of the other rooms, was organized in the princely collection manner: countless works were presented next to one another, crowding and virtually covering every inch of the wall. Due to the delicacy of the medium, the room was very dimly lit by small lamps installed on the ceiling. Subtle light bathed the walls with a yellowish tint that created an atmosphere of secrecy. It was bright enough to allow one to barely decipher the images, forcing the viewer to walk up very close to discover the details of the drawings. **The center of the room was occupied with a bench for seating.** Each wall was presented in a very different manner that seemed to suit each specific artist. For instance Schiele's pieces were hung in eight evenly distributed columns and four rows, which suited perfectly the virtually identical format of his work and the study-like character of his drawings. Klimt's drawings were arranged in irregular rows which suited him best due to their difference in size and seeming lack of conceptual continuity. Kokoshka shared the wall with Klimt. The works of both artists did share the same powerful line work and were similar in their subject matter and were therefore compatible on the same wall. Klimt's drawings were hard to see at all due to the lightness of his lines and the dimness of light. The most outstanding was the presentation of Kubin's charcoal and watercolor drawings. Very small, just a few inches on each side, the works were surrounded in an ample amount of mate board, up to a foot on each side, and secluded into a very thin frame. The works were literally drowned by the white margin surrounding them. This approach to the presentation tacitly valorized Kubin's talent and somehow made his work reign over the entire gallery.

Sitting on the bench in the center of this gallery one could easily deduce that the four walls of the room offered the viewer the four dissimilar worlds of these artists. The works complemented each other due to their similar motives and medium, but at the same time very different personalities and very diverse aspirations stared back from each wall. The tortured Schiele, the loving Klimt, the curious Kokoshka, the thoughtful Kubin, all shared elements of German ex-

pressionism, but each proposed its own universe. This simultaneous presentation gave a deep and clear view of German expressionism.

The third floor differed from the rest of the museum. Galleries, even though still very far from the 'white cube,' appeared much more modern than all the rest. The third floor was subdivided into four spaces connected by a corridor. There was virtually no ornament on the third floor. The corridor was full of visitors, despite its narrowness, presenting art works on all of its walls. Here the princely style reached its culmination – the corridor was absolutely covered with works of different artists, sizes, mediums and genres, leaving no inch unused. On the side the viewer could find a map of the wall that carried titles, dates and artists' names. It looked overwhelming and intimidating and due to the amount of work presented, it discouraged me from trying to find the authors. Each of the rooms was colored in its own distinguishing color: deep turquoise, dark yellow and beige and bluish gray. The last room was just canvas textured. Each room had its own very definitive quality. My favorite room on this floor was the smallest room with no windows. It had canvas covered walls and typical dim lighting. This room presented the drawings of Degas, Cezanne, van Gogh and Seurat. The beige-brown paper of the drawings blended almost perfectly with the beige canvas of the wall allowing the lines in the drawings to be the only thing that stood out. The size of the room left no choice but to be intrusively close to the works. The pieces themselves also were positioned very closely to one another. This room had a sense of complete immersion into the world of drawing.

Lastly I want to comment on my personal encounter with Picasso's "Woman with a Raven." It was exhibited on the third floor, in the room furthest away from the entrance. It shared the East wall with Broncuse, Matisse and Kandinski. "Woman with a Raven" was hung on a wall completely overwhelmed with various works but mostly drawings done in grayish tone with intricate line work. On this wall only the "Woman with a Raven" by Picasso and the study for "The Dancers" by Matisse contained color. They both celebrated large vivid areas of bright blue. These two works were placed far apart from one another making the eye move quickly from one bright blue to another, invigorating the works on the wall in between. The wall came 'alive' from this rapid interplay. This particular wall with Picasso's and Matisse's bright blues was opposed by the wall with Kandinsky's pieces that contained a similar blue but in smaller quantity, initiating a blue trio where Picasso undoubtedly had a leading role. Also the blue in the "Woman with a Raven" resonated with deep bright bluish turquoise walls of the hall near the stairs. Suddenly Picasso's blue resonated in my mind with all the other moments where I saw this blue throughout the exhibit, re-orchestrating it and re-tuning it to resonate with the trio I discovered in the last

room on the third floor. I saw the reproductions of the “Women with a Raven” but no reproduction was remotely just in capturing the richness of the actual color used by Picasso. This blue was stunning and hard to forget. It had or has subconscious influence over color choice in my own work. And certainly, my memory of Neue Galerie is now painted Picasso’s blue.

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