

Editorial

01/03

On November 7, 1929, the Museum of Modern Art “opened in a five-room rented space with an ‘historical’ exhibition of (European) Post-Impressionist art, titled ‘The First Loan Exhibition: Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat, Van Gogh.’”¹ MoMA’s founding director, Alfred Barr, had the idea that modern works that passed a test called “Torpedo in Time” would, after some fifty years, be considered historical and transfer to the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.² At the time, Gertrude Stein also famously quipped that the very idea of a museum of the modern was an oxymoron. In short, MoMA was more of a *kunsthalle* than what we usually mean by a “museum.” This October, the building on West 53rd Street in Manhattan was reopened with half a billion dollars of expansion and renovation on the outside, and an enlarged and reframed collection on the inside. It’s been noted that the white, male-dominated canon that has persisted in the museum’s eighty-year history has been finally studded conspicuously with certain works by those old masters’ contemporaries of color and women. It has also been noted, to the chagrin of certain art historians, that the wall texts explaining the works have been crafted in a way that suggests a dancing away from placing pieces of art within authoritative movements, rather offering looser, descriptive terms to tell of their place and time. Instead of the Harlem Renaissance, for example, we read “In and Around Harlem.”

Art institutions, like any small or megalithic enterprise shot through with capital, are inherently political beasts. But the larger of these often try to gloss and shade away certain political lineages or leanings. So, though institutions may develop public strategies offering a new history of modern art that represents the diversity of its protagonists, the vague results are instead an obfuscation of political movements and hidden narratives that would otherwise offer power back to those overlooked and displaced. They continue to be buried deep in the still vast, unseen collection, or, more likely, never collected or touched by the institution in the first place. For example, there is no room in MoMA’s now 708,000 square feet for the major contributions to art made by practitioners of socialist realism. Nor for that matter do we see works even tenuously connected to that tradition – there is no section titled “In and Around Socialism.”

In the lead essay of this issue of *e-flux journal*, titled “The Cold War between the Medium and the Message: Western Modernism vs. Socialist Realism,” Boris Groys reveals modern art’s mutating role within various factions of the Cold War, which, as we can see today, continues. Well before World War II, Groys

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demonstrates, Soviet thought decried Western modern art as fascist, and Western criticism denounced Soviet art – socialist realism – as also fascist. How far have we moved from this paradox – this cultural war within a war – a century later? Groys reminds us that in the West, Clement Greenberg declared that avant-garde art was only accessible to those linked to the golden umbilical cord of wealth, while he dismissed socialist realism as just another brand of kitsch – advertising, propaganda. Groys follows the Cold Art Wars from World War II, through the divided blocs of Germany, up to the 1970s and beyond, ending up with a present return to message over medium.

Soo Hwan Kim looks closely at three figures from two different eras, alongside an examination of the contemporary renewed interest in the factographic movement. Kim first recounts the story of Walter Benjamin's conjuring of Sergei Tretyakov in his 1934 lecture "The Artist as Producer." The two had certain fundamental ideals in common, namely a staunch belief in the right of artists and intellectuals to exist. After establishing this intellectual and artistic commonality, Kim jumps forward to today and examines the deep influence of Tretyakov on the video and written work of Hito Steyerl, noting the appearance of Tretyakov's essay "Biography of an Object" in Steyerl's *In Free Fall*. Kim also links Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" to Steyerl's "In Defense of the Poor Image."

Meanwhile, Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber, in contemplating the relationship between the art world and industrialism, pick apart the lingering specter of the individual "genius" in contemporary art narratives. Even though institutional nods to artists from groups that have been historically left out of this classification may appear to signal a return to a collective focus, Dubrovsky and Graeber insist that a preoccupation with individual artists' particular identities and biographies still boils down to a continuation of vertical Romanticism. The two writers look at the larger constellation of mega-exhibitions, pointing out the absurdity in each of these trying to be its own historic event. These "historic events," they contend, aim to expand notions of contemporary art, leaving the whole field a constellation of rules and meta-rules. In another text in this issue, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay considers the power of the strike not only as a protest against subjugation, but as "an opportunity to care for a shared world." In a moving consideration of what it means to strike, Azoulay focuses on two types of cultural workers who might amplify these activities: historians and museum workers.

Following their discussion of Victor Klemperer's study of Nazi linguistics in our last issue, Metahaven steps back and considers the logical seriousness in the development of children's language. If an adult says they will "die" if they cannot get something they want, or complains of a waiting period taking "forever," a child may take this literally and correct the adult for their absurd exaggeration. Metahaven traces the concept of *bessmyslitsa* ("meaninglessness") in Russian poetry for children (and open-minded adults). They examine a style of poems called "turnarounds" or "topsy-turvies" (*perevortyshti*), finding in them an absurdism that, paradoxically, manages to seek or tell more truth than more straightforward collections of words.

Returning to the notion of naming and renaming artistic movements, the texts by T. J. Demos and Dena Yago in this issue reflect on the world-shifting importance of what something is or isn't labelled. Demos calls for moving away from the neoliberal-laced language of "climate emergency" to an intersectional, movement-based "emergence." He points out that "the Bolsonaros, Dutertes, Netanyahus, and Trumps are happy to declare emergency" – as long as it's one they created themselves. Demos also notes that "the green nonprofit industrial complex," with its focus on emergency, frames climatic disaster in the same boiled-down terms as the finance and insurance industries. He ultimately concludes that we have to overcome emergency politics and decolonize our future.

Dena Yago zooms in on Los Angeles, simultaneously tracking the city's sidewalk usage – or lack thereof – and the current rise of destination selfie murals. Yago finds historical moments to background these street scenes, ranging from Brecht's 1941 depiction of cars "lighter than their own shadows," to the 1974 staging of a dinner on a traffic island by the art collective Asco, in the same neighborhood where, a few years prior, police violently confronted a peaceful Chicano-led protest against the Vietnam War. Yago relays a still-searing anecdote from the 1970s when a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) told Asco that their work was not suitable for the museum because Chicanos made crafts, not art. But Asco had the last word on the walls of that institution, for a short while. The battles in the city for wall space and street space continue apace, with gentrifying blue-chip galleries selectively whitewashing existing murals, while a city initiative literally whitewashes the blacktop to cool down the streets, deflecting the sun's rays onto those using the adjacent sidewalks, who tend to be working-class people of color in the car-centric

city of LA.

Also in this issue, we are pleased to present another excerpt from Franco “Bifo” Berardi and Massimiliano Geraci’s *Killing Swarm*, a near-future fiction that finds swarms of young people, their emotions influenced by a special pill, ecstatically doing away with members of the baby-boomer generation that won’t die. We learn more about the origins and swirling conspiracy theories around these occurrences, and delve deeper into the lives of the young characters, whose isolation and depression cocoons them even when they find themselves bound together. One of the young women in the story collects her existential screams in a bag, stores them on her device, then literally dumps them out to make room for more each day. “The spoken word,” one of the characters says, or thinks, “becomes essential when life stops happening to you.”

– Editors

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Walter Benjamin, “The Making of Americans,” *e-flux journal* no. 48 (October 2013) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/48/60039/the-making-of-americans/>.

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Cited in Porter McCray, “American Tutti-Frutti,” *e-flux journal* no. 60 (December 2014). See https://images.e-flux-systems.com/2014_12_Picture-5WEB.jpg, 2000.