

#Spectacular: Art in the Experience Age

by

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## ABSTRACT

In the 1960s, Minimal Art introduced a radical insistence on the bodily immediacy of the experience. Since then, artists have increasingly focused on the creation of immersive experiences, resulting in spectacular installations that fill museums, galleries, and public spaces. In this thesis, I argue that the artistic shift toward experience-based work stems from an overall revaluation of the experience as a central component of contemporary life in Western societies. Referencing sociological and economic theories, I investigate the evolving role of the art museum in the twenty-first century, as well as the introduction of new technologies that allow for unique sensorial encounters. Finally, I situate this development in both art historical and theoretical context, examining the relationship between critical distance and immersion and challenging the notion that art must become spectacle to compete with the demands of a capitalist culture.

## DEDICATION

In loving memory of my grandmother, Constance Ann Stoddard, from whom I inherited a love of books.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is summer of 2013 in New York, and hundreds of people form a line under the hot sun outside the Museum of Modern Art. Visitors have gathered to experience *Rain Room*, a software-driven interactive chamber that simulates an artificial rainstorm. The twist is that, thanks to a field of electronic sensors, the water miraculously parts for those beneath it, keeping participants dry by responding to their movement. Recycling hundreds of gallons of water per minute, *Rain Room* is the work of Random International, a London-based art house studio whose work encourages the active participation of people in their surrounding environments. In its three-month run at MoMA, *Rain Room* drew 74,200 people, and visitors spent an average of five to thirteen hours in line – all in order to experience staying dry in the rain.<sup>1</sup>

*Rain Room* embodies an artistic phenomenon that has been building momentum in the last few decades, as increasingly spectacular installations fill large museums, galleries, and public spaces. For further examples of immersive, experience-based work, one need only look to New York's most popular exhibitions in recent years. At David Zwirner Gallery in Chelsea, Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room - The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* (2013) invited visitors into a mirror-lined room hung with 75 colored LED bulbs that flickered and pulsed like stars in the night sky. On a typical day, about 2,500 people were propelled into Kusama's celestial world, waiting eight hours to experience it for a mere 45 seconds.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Gamerman, "Surrounding Yourself With Art," *Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 2013. [www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324809004578637911908326712](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324809004578637911908326712)

<sup>2</sup> William Grimes, "Lights, Mirrors, Instagram! #ArtSensation: Yayoi Kusama's 'Mirrored Room' at David Zwirner Gallery," *The New York Times Online*, December 1, 2013.

invited visitors to its rooftop garden to navigate the monumental, transparent and reflective structure of polyhedrons that made up Tomás Saraceno's *Cloud City*. Two years earlier on the same roof, the Starn Brothers' *Big Bambú* (2010) provided a 50-foot-high climbable jungle of bamboo and colored nylon. At the Guggenheim, James Turrell's *Aten Reign* (2013) drew 5,610 visitors a day to experience the hallucinatory play of light and color that radically transformed the museum's iconic rotunda and ocular skylight.<sup>3</sup>

In 1922, Hungarian Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy wrote, "Art crystallizes the emotions of an age; art is mirror and voice."<sup>4</sup> If art is a reflection of the society in which it was created, what, then, does this boom in experience-based work reveal about the emotions of this age? Why are so many museum-goers willing – and eager – to wait in line for hours under the scorching sun in exchange for a few minutes to dance in the rain without getting wet? What makes these immersive art environments so appealing, and what void is being filled by these experiences?

Clearly, we are living in the age of experience. As internet browsing, social media, sharing, collecting, and producing increasingly saturate every aspect of society, artists and viewers are approaching art in new ways. The current demand for experiential art, as I will argue, must be understood in the context of the recent economic, social, and cultural transformations of Western societies that have revalued the experience as a central aspect of contemporary society.

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[www.nytimes.com/2013/12/02/arts/design/yayoi-kusamas-mirrored-room-at-david-zwirner-gallery.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/02/arts/design/yayoi-kusamas-mirrored-room-at-david-zwirner-gallery.html?_r=0)

<sup>3</sup> Figure taken from Julia Halperin and Nilkanth Patel, "Visitor figures 2014: what do we want? Immersive installations by unfamiliar artists," *The Art Newspaper*, published online: April 2, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted by his wife, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, in *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, 1971. The quote originates in "MA," May, 1922. "MA" (meaning "Today") was a revolutionary Hungarian magazine, published between 1918 and 1925.

Immersive, experiential artwork is not new, although it has enjoyed a dramatic surge in popularity in recent years. Installation art was born in the 1960s, with close ties to Minimalism, but one could follow its lineage further back in time to the dream scenes of the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris, to Marcel Duchamp's full-gallery installation *Sixteen Miles of String* in 1942 in New York, to the immediate, first-hand experiences of Allan Kaprow's environments and happenings of the 1950s.

However, in the 1960s, Minimal Art fundamentally changed the relationship between the object and viewer. Artworks no longer held an inherent internal meaning, but rather formed part of an external space in which meaning was produced in relation to a given situation. In New York, Carl Andre's linear grid sculptures and Donald Judd's repeated geometric forms decentralized the art object, shifting meaning to the experience produced through the object's relation to the space and the viewer's body. Robert Morris, another key artistic figure in Minimal Art, said in 1971, "I want to provide a situation where people can become more aware of themselves and their own experience rather than more aware of some version of my experience."<sup>5</sup> Analogously, Earthwork artists – among them, Walter deMaria, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Nancy Holt – promoted the idea of the artwork as an environment to be inhabited, rather than simply looked at. In Southern California in the 1960s and 70s, another branch of Minimalism formed: the Light and Space movement. Artists such as James Turrell, Robert Irwin, Helen Pashgian, Doug Wheeler, and Bruce Nauman tested the limits of perception and phenomenological experience in a given space. Referring to works such as Nauman's

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Jon Bird, "Minding the Body: Robert Morris's 1971 Tate Gallery Retrospective," in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion, 1999), 97.



fluorescent light rooms and corridors and the sensorial involvement of the viewer, art historian Oskar Bätschman introduced the term “experience shaper,”<sup>6</sup> a notion that could easily be applied to many contemporary artworks. Likewise, French conceptual artist Daniel Buren called his works “exemplary experiences.”<sup>7</sup> By 1975, RoseLee Goldberg declared, “The gallery has ceased its conventional activity of showing objects and become “a place to experience experience.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, Minimal art, with its phenomenological model of experience,<sup>9</sup> paved the way for a definitive reconceptualization of both the notion of the object and its viewing subject. Since the 60s, installation art – originally a radical art form – has moved from the margins to the center of the art world.<sup>10</sup>

The question remains: if immersive, experience-based art has been in production since the 1960s, how can we account for its surge in popularity in the last two decades? The answer, it seems, is that artists like Yayoi Kusama and James Turrell – who have been working for decades with immersion and sensorial perception – are enjoying a renewed wave of interest by stimulating a very contemporary set of nerve endings. As I will argue, art’s increasingly experiential nature is the result of the influence of the “experience economy” on the art world, the exchange of ideas by artists and art audiences through the use of the internet and social media, and the introduction of new technologies that allow for innovative and unique sensorial encounters.

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<sup>6</sup> Oskar Bätschmann, *Ausstellungskünstler* (Cologne: DuMont, 1997), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Jérôme Sans, *Daniel Buren: Au sujet de...; Entretien avec Jérôme Sans* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 126.

<sup>8</sup> RoseLee Goldberg, “Space as Praxis,” *Studio International* 190, no. 977, September/ October 1975; 134.

<sup>9</sup> Conceptual art later replaced this with a semiotic model of experience. See Lucy Lippard’s *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*.

<sup>10</sup> See Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

## THE AESTHETICS OF EXPERIENCE

I do not see [space] according to its exterior envelope; I live in it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me...  
– Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, 1961

In this chapter, I will establish a working understanding of experiential art and delineate the various types of artworks that fall within this category. I will then contextualize this type of artwork in the broader cultural, social, and economic environment in which it has emerged.

In his influential 1967 essay, “Art and Objecthood,” Michael Fried makes the argument that Minimal Art, with its self-consciousness of viewing, is essentially a genre of theater. He wrote that Minimal Art “depends on the beholder, is incomplete without him, it has been waiting for him. And once he is in the room the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone.”<sup>11</sup> However, for many Minimal artists who subscribed to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of phenomenology, what Fried understood as “theatrical” was seen as proof of the embodiedness of the perceiving self.

In “The Experiential Turn,” art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann argues that “experiences” have become a kind of artistic medium in contemporary art. Von Hantelmann suggests the term “experiential” be used in place of the traditional “performative” in order to more appropriately describe the ongoing tendencies in contemporary art that prioritize an artwork’s effects on the viewer and the situation in which it takes place.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998: 140.

<sup>12</sup> Dorothea von Hantelmann, “The Experiential Turn,” In *On Performativity*, edited by Elizabeth Carpenter. Vol. 1 of *Living Collections Catalogue* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2014).

What qualities, then, might classify an artwork as experiential? Of course, every artwork is an experiential space. In 1934, John Dewey declared, “It is a mistake to think of art only as an object – a painting, a sculpture, a thing. Art is also an experience.”<sup>13</sup> Traditionally, art was meant to elicit from the viewer an experience of spiritual wonder. When we examine the brushstrokes of Monet’s *Waterlillies*, or the visionary sculpture of Brancusi, we are certainly involved in an aesthetic experience.

However, not all experiences are created equal. The large-scale, immersive environments of contemporary installation art require that you become a part of the artwork; in turn, your encounter with the work is essential to its completion. In other words, every artwork *produces* an experience – not every artwork *shapes* an experience. “Experience” is a historically contested term with various philosophical interpretations. Yet every theory of experience contains the fundamental inclusion of the human subject who does the “experiencing.” In *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*, Julie Reiss identifies this underlining characteristic of installations, stating “the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work.”<sup>14</sup> Ronald J. Onorato, in *Blurring the Boundaries: Installation Art 1969-1996*, observes, “The aesthetic power of installation art does not reside in a singular, commodified object but in an ability to become, rather than merely represent, the continuum of real experience by responding to specific situations.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 19.

<sup>14</sup> Julie Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ronald J. Onorato, *Blurring the Boundaries: Installation Art 1969-1996* (San Diego, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 1997), 11.

## **A Brief Note on Relational Aesthetics**

At this point, I would like to indicate a particular category of art that I have intentionally excluded from this discussion: that of relational aesthetics and socially-engaged art practice. Relational aesthetics, as originally noted by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s, is a term used to describe the tendency for artists to make work based on, or inspired by, human relations and their social context.<sup>16</sup> These artists seek to decentralize the role of the artist and “forge a collective, co-authoring, participatory social body.”<sup>17</sup> For artists such as Felix González-Torres, Rikrit Tirajana, Thomas Hirschorn, and Santiago Sierra, the activated viewer becomes a political subject. Participatory works urge you to act, write something down, have a drink, and engage with other people; viewers must participate in some way by providing an input in order to determine a particular outcome.

At first, one might be tempted to call this work experiential in the sense that it is interactive and social. But, in fact, artists working in relational aesthetics, participatory art, and socially-engaged practice are diametrically opposed to the passive consumption of spectacular, attention-grabbing art environments. Both immersive and participatory works require the viewer’s presence to complete the work. Yet there is a distinction: immersion is always participatory, but participation is not always immersive. In other words, an immersive environment requires the viewer’s participation to complete the work. However, an artwork that requires viewer participation does not need to necessarily immerse her bodily in a particular environment. For these reasons, the arena of art known

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<sup>16</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 1998), 21.

<sup>17</sup> From Clare Bishop’s lecture “Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?” from 2011 Creative Time forum.

as relational aesthetics and socially-engaged practice will not be included in this discussion on experiential art.

### **Categories of Installation Art**

In order to arrive at a clearer understanding of the type of contemporary “experiential” art discussed in the introduction, I will use as a guiding model Claire Bishop’s categorical descriptions in *Installation Art: A Critical History*. Bishop delineates different modalities of art that provide an immersive experience, each of which “presupposes an embodied viewer, whose sense of touch, sound, and smell are as heightened as their sense of vision.”<sup>18</sup> Bishop denotes the following categories:

1. The dream scene: work that plunges the viewer into a psychologically absorptive, dreamlike environment. This type of art includes the Surrealist installations mentioned in the introduction, and works that seek to evoke the feeling of a dream. For example, Russian artist Ilya Kabakov’s *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* (1985) resembles a film set or theatre stage, and includes minute details of a narration for viewers to unravel.
2. Heightened perception: These works emphasize the viewer’s bodily experience and are interested in a phenomenological model of the viewing subject. Bishop includes in this category Minimalist artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd, as well as the artists of the Light and Space movement, James Turrell, Robert Irwin, Maria Nordman, Bruce Nauman, and Doug Wheeler, who were influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *The Phenomenology of Perception* of 1945.

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<sup>18</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 21.

3. Mimetic engulfment: This category of work is diametrically opposed to the former category of minimalist sculpture and post-minimalist installation art. Rather than heightening our perception of our bodies and their relation to the room, this type of work obliterates it, forcing our dissolution and annihilating our sense of self. It encourages a diminished possibility of locating oneself in space, and you lose sense of the boundaries of your body. These installations often utilize mirrors and reflection to simulate a mimetic experience of fragmentation, and are exemplified in Yayoi Kusama's recurrent themes of self-obliteration and Lucas Samaras's *Mirrored Room* from 1966. It is important to note that Bishop also includes aural engulfment in this category, such as in the work of Janet Cardiff, as sound can be as immersive as darkness.

Claire Bishop's categorization of the varied types of installation art provides a helpful framework for how we might begin to understand experiential art as an artistic medium in and of itself.

### **The Art of Immersion**

One descriptive term that is often applied to certain types of experiential art is that it is "immersive": that is, all-enveloping, engrossing, a space in which one loses himself completely. The term refers to works that not only require the active involvement of the viewer, but that also somehow overwhelm the senses. Immersion is a spatial experience, enveloping the spectator in a discrete and often panoramic zone. It is a subjective state of altered consciousness, a sense of being that occurs when the boundary between fact and fiction is blurred.

A particular set of social and cultural factors are driving the increased demand for immersive artworks. Frank Rose, the author of *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories*, argues that in the last twenty years, fundamental technological changes have led to a new, immersive kind of art. The internet is transforming aesthetics into an increasingly interactive experience. Rose writes:

Video games and the nature of the web have trained people not to want to sit still and look, whether it's in a proscenium-arch theater or a traditional art museum. There's a huge appetite for something more immersive and sensory, in which you can take a somewhat active role. You experience it with all your senses, and it's all around you.<sup>19</sup>

Rose continues:

Not long ago, we were spectators, passive consumers of mass media. Now, on YouTube and blogs and Facebook and Twitter, we are media. And we approach television shows, movies, even advertising as invitations to participate—as experiences to immerse ourselves in at will. What we're witnessing is the emergence of a new form of narrative that's native to the Internet. Told through many media at once in a nonlinear fashion, these new narratives encourage us not merely to watch but to participate, often engaging us in the same way that games do. This is "deep media": stories that are not just entertaining but immersive, that take you deeper than an hour-long TV drama or a two-hour movie or a 30-second spot will permit.<sup>20</sup>

Our desire to lose ourselves in an engrossing universe has sent artists further and further towards installations resembling Star Trek's fictional simulated reality facility the holodeck, which Rose defines as "the definitive if as yet unattainable immersive entertainment experience."<sup>21</sup> Rose's *Art of Immersion* is, in a way, a continuation of Walter Benjamin's landmark 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the

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<sup>19</sup> Frank Rose, *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in which Benjamin argued that new methods of technical reproduction – namely, photography and film – had democratized art, freeing it from ritual worship. Works once viewed only by those with privilege became available to all. Benjamin's assertion that "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character"<sup>22</sup> seems especially prophetic today, as the internet and social media have effectively leveled the once-stratified world of the arts.

Another indicator of immersion as a societal trend comes from a recent survey of American and British adults conducted in November 2013 by JWT Intelligence, an influential marketing and communications brand that focuses on identifying shifts in the global zeitgeist. In their "10 Trends for 2014 and Beyond," trend #1 was "immersive experiences."<sup>23</sup> The firm credited this development to various factors, including improved technology such as the much-anticipated Oculus Rift headset, a 110-degree field of virtual reality. Most tellingly, however, the company attributed the desire for immersion to certain deeper societal shifts. The JWT study revealed social trends that indicate a preference for:

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin, 2008), 34.

<sup>23</sup> This report is the result of quantitative, qualitative and desk research conducted by JWTIntelligence throughout the year. For this report, JWTIntelligence conducted quantitative surveys using SONAR™, JWT's proprietary online tool, from Nov. 5–8, 2013, surveying 1,003 adults aged 18-plus (500 Americans and 503 Britons). The report includes input from nearly 70 JWT planners and researchers across more than two dozen markets, and interviews with experts and influencers across sectors including technology, health and wellness, media and academia. More at: <http://www.jwtintelligence.com/shop/10-trends-2014/#ixzz3WYouPVly>.



- Experiences over things: When asked if they preferred experiences or things, visitors overwhelmingly chose experiences, reflecting a powerful, deep-rooted shift. The report also notes that as experiences supersede things, they must have a deeper impact in order to stir an audience.
- Experiences that are shareable: The study reveals that people prefer experiences that are easily shareable on social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest. The consensus indicated that if we can't share what we're doing, we might almost as well not be doing it.
- Delivery from distraction: Distractions and exhaustion are common in a world that emphasizes multitasking. This, in turn, fuels a craving for experiences so all-consuming they block out everything else - especially physical experiences.
- A generational shift: The study found that “the younger you are, the more likely to feel distracted, to want an out from the always-on world, to respond to entertainment and advertising that goes beyond the ordinary, and to crave sensory experience. More than Gen X-ers and far more than their Boomer parents, Millennials want—and expect—to be active participants, not passive consumers. From video games to social media, they've been trained to be involved. Boomers, on the other hand, are the group for whom the term ‘couch potato’ was invented back in the '80s.”<sup>24</sup>

These findings coincide with the reality that we are living in an overall age of experience that does not merely apply to the realm of aesthetics. Arguably, the current

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

demand for immersive art derives from a cultural predilection for, and perhaps even addiction to, experiences.

### **The Experience Society**

The concept of examining “experience” is relatively new, and was primarily introduced by two works. The first came more than two decades ago in 1992, when German sociologist Gerhard Schulze argued that we are part of an “experience society.”<sup>25</sup> In his book, Schulze analyzed patterns of cultural behavior in different social strata of Nurnberg. His findings revealed that people’s motives and attitudes had changed since the post-war period, driven by the profound economic transformation of Western societies in the late twentieth century.

Schulze attributes this fundamental change to the transition of societies from those of lack to those of affluence. That which historically was an upper-class phenomenon — the cultivation of, and preoccupation with, an aesthetics of existence — is now a mass phenomenon. With increased amounts of income and leisure, more people can engage with practices of the self and seek pleasure in experiential stimulation. Thus, Schulze views the “experience society” as a reflection of a vast movement of democratization.

It is important to mention that the focus on experience that Schulze observed in 1992 has skyrocketed in the decades since. Although his original diagnosis still holds weight, the author himself updated his analysis in a 2009 lecture. He now differentiates between what he calls the “early” and “late” experience societies. Schulze explains:

“In early experience society, instrumental thinking conquered the new pattern. Rationality of experience was born: a collection of common strategies to maximize and perfect experiences. A rapidly expanded market of experience trained and stabilized this rationality of experience. In a collective learning process, consumers

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<sup>25</sup> Gerhard Schulze, *The Experience Society (Die Erlebnisgesellschaft)* (Frankfurt, Germany: 1992).

and suppliers established four simple techniques of psychophysical stimulation: accumulation, variation, escalation, and coding opportunities of experience. ... In late experience society, however, these techniques have largely lost their potency, like addictive drugs. People are still dedicated to the pursuit of happiness. They still define the sense of life in psychophysical terms. The good life is still conceived as one of intense, fascinating experiences. But there are increasing tones of criticism, boredom, disgust, and hostility.<sup>26</sup>

In reviewing the experiential phenomenon today, Schulze assumes a more critical tone of the supposedly narcissistic and individualistic focus on experiences. Pointing to a kind of dead end of the subject's turning to the self, Schulze compares today's citizens of the experience society with drug addicts who are increasingly unimpressed and unfazed by the experiences around them.

The second major work that introduced the term "experience" was an article published in 1999 by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, titled *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage*. Pine and Gilmore situate the experience economy as the next economy following the agrarian economy, the industrial economy, and the most recent service economy. Insisting that goods and services are no longer enough, they predict a new economic era in which all businesses must orchestrate memorable events for their customers.<sup>27</sup> Drawing examples from Las Vegas to Walt Disney, Pine and Gilmore argue that memory itself becomes the product — the "experience," and encourage businesses to begin charging for the value of the "transformation" that an experience offers. "Those business that relegate themselves to the diminishing world of goods and services will be rendered irrelevant," declared Pine

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<sup>26</sup> Gerhard Schulze, "Searching Ground: Patterns of Self-Transcendence in Late Experience Society," keynote lecture at the Fourth Nordic Conference on Cultural Policy Research, Jyväskylä, Finland, August 19–22, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 13.

and Gilmore. “To avoid this fate, you must learn to stage a rich, compelling experience.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, *The Experience Economy* follows *The Experience Society* as cementing evidence of the arrival of the economic and societal shift into the experience age.

In this chapter, I have outlined various categories of experiential art and their focus on immersion, as well as situated them within their broader economic and social context. In the next section, I will turn to an examination on the various ways in which museums and institutions have responded and adapted to the experience age.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 25.

## THE ACTIVATED MUSEUM

Not surprisingly, museums are attuned to the experiential shift in art. In a 2010 speech he gave in Australia regarding the current trends and future challenges and directions of museums in the twenty-first century, Glenn D. Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, declared that museums had to make a “shift away from passive experiences to interactive or participatory experiences, from art that is hanging on the wall to art that invites people to become part of it.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, he added, art museums had to shed the idea of being a repository and become social spaces. Chrissie Iles, a curator at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, contextualized this shift in the role of the museum, stating that at moments of profound change in society, it satisfies people's desire "to come together in a space and experience something in real time collectively."<sup>30</sup>

How exactly are museums adapting to the experiential shift in contemporary art and within the general culture? Firstly, they are providing larger and larger exhibition spaces to house spectacular installations. Secondly, they are revitalizing and reinventing their visitor engagement initiatives. Finally, museums are utilizing various strategies to attract new audiences in the internet age. All of these methods serve as ways to effectively “activate” the museum space, responding to the overall cultural desire for a unique and immersive experience.

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<sup>29</sup> Glenn Lowry's speech was the keynote address for *Museums of the 21st Century*, a panel discussion that was held at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne in 2010.

<sup>30</sup> As quoted by Ellen Gamerman in “Surrounding Yourself With Art,” *Wall Street Journal Online*, August 1, 2013. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324809004578637911908326712>.

## Making Room for Installations

In the 1960s, Minimal Art's reconsideration of the relationship between the art object, the viewer, and his or her surrounding environment prompted curators and museums to reconsider the boundaries of their exhibition spaces. Thomas Krens, the former director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, was a key figure in recognizing this revolution in spatial concepts and museum presentation designs. In November of 1985, Krens had a revelation while driving on the Autobahn past numerous large factories outside of Cologne. Having just encountered art dealers exhibiting the work of Markus Lüpertz, a German sculptor, in an old factory building, he suddenly remembered the huge abandoned factories in his hometown neighborhood of North Adams.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) was conceived.<sup>32</sup> In a radical revision of the nature of the museum, Krens determined that it was no longer the role of the museum to be encyclopedic – that is, to tell a particular story of the history of art – but rather, to be synchronic. The synchronic museum would forgo history “in the name of a kind of intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spatial.” He affirmed that museums should present a small selection of artists to collect and show in depth within the full amount of space it might take to experience the cumulative impact of a given

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<sup>31</sup> Tom Krens made this remark to Rosalind Krauss during an interview that took place on May 7, 1990, and is quoted in Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” *October*, Vol. 54. Autumn, 1990, 7.

<sup>32</sup> MASS MoCA (The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art) transformed the 750,000 square feet of factory space formerly occupied by Sprague Technologies Inc. into a museum complex that consists of gargantuan exhibition galleries, a hotel and retail shops. See Deborah Weisgall, “A Megamuseum in a Mill Town, The Guggenheim in Massachusetts?” *New York Times Magazine* (3 March 1989).

artist's oeuvre. The model of this, he attributes to Minimalism, which, according to Krens, "has reshaped the way we, as late twentieth-century viewers, look at art: the demands we now put on it; our need to experience it along with its interaction with the space in which it exists; our need to have a cumulative, serial crescendo towards the intensity of this experience; our need to have more and at a larger scale."<sup>33</sup>

Conventional museum architecture was unable to provide the kind of experience that Minimal objects required. The sculptures of Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, and Carl Andre prompted institutions to establish new spatial concepts and design paradigms that took their cue from warehouses and factories. As art theorist Rosalind Krauss noted in 1990, remarking on an exhibition of Minimal Art at the Musée d'Arte Moderne de la Ville de Paris, "Compared to the scale of the Minimalist objects, the earlier paintings and sculptures look impossibly tiny and inconsequential, like postcards, and the galleries take on a fussy, crowded, culturally irrelevant look, like so many curio shops."<sup>34</sup>

Since then, museums have opened up their exhibition spaces considerably in order to accommodate monumental installations. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, an institution whose neo-classical architecture is mostly immutable, recently began utilizing their Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden to feature commissioned, site-specific works of contemporary installation art. In 2012, the Metropolitan featured Argentine artist Tomás Saraceno's *Cloud City* on its outdoor roof garden, a 28-foot-high aggregate of 16 interconnected 12- and 14-sided polyhedrons the size of small rooms made of polished steel and clear plexiglass. The reflective or see-through surfaces

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<sup>33</sup> As quoted to Krauss in "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," *October*, Vol. 54. Autumn, 1990, 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

complicated the experience of the structure, which viewers navigated by climbing through it. Similarly, the Starn Brothers' *Big Bambú* (2010) provided a 50-foot-high climbable jungle of bamboo and colored nylon. In 2014, the Metropolitan installed *Hedge Two-Way Mirror Walkabout* by Dan Graham, another artist who has been building perception-bending sculptural environments of mirrored glass and metal since the 1970s. This "pavilion," as the artist calls his structures, features curves of steel and two-way mirrored glass between ivy hedges and is both transparent and reflective, creating a visually immersive and constantly changing environment for visitors.<sup>35</sup>

Similar to the Metropolitan's Roof Garden commission series, the Tate Modern in London has its own monumental exhibition space in the Turbine Hall, which at five stories tall and with 3,400 square meters of floor space once housed electricity generators. In 2000, the Tate began to display site-specific, specially-commissioned works by contemporary artists between October and March of each year in the Turbine Hall. This series, called the Unilever Series after its corporate sponsor, regularly features spectacular experiential installations.<sup>36</sup> Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003-04) featured an enormous artificial sun simulated by a circular disc made up of hundreds of monochromatic lamps radiating yellow light. Humidifiers misted the air with a solution of sugar and water amidst the massive orange light as visitors gazed up at their reflections in the ceiling's huge mirror. During its six month run, the exhibition

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<sup>35</sup> "The Roof Garden Commission," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Online*. <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2014/dan-graham>.

<sup>36</sup> "The Unilever Series," *The Tate Modern Online*. <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibitionseries/unilever-series>.



attracted two million people, many of whom were repeat visitors.<sup>37</sup> The Unilever Series has also featured Chinese artists Ai Wei Wei's *Sunflower Seeds* (2010-11), for which he filled the gallery with thousands of porcelain sunflower seed sculptures, and Belgian artist Carsten Höller's *Test Site* (2006-07), a series of metal slides that visitors could use to traverse between floors in the galleries. The Unilever Series was planned to last through five years, but its popularity led to it being renewed twice. So far, almost 30 million people have visited the exhibitions of the Unilever Series.<sup>38</sup>

Many other institutions have opened large spaces for immersive experiences. In 2010, the Society for Arts and Technology in Montreal opened a new addition to their building called the Sensorium. A dome-like structure, the Sensorium is a transdisciplinary center that focuses entirely on the immersive qualities of various art forms, becoming the "first permanent immersive theater devoted to artistic creation and visualization activities."<sup>39</sup> It is important to note, finally, that this trend does not exist solely within the walls of institutions; increasingly, public artworks are providing immersive experiences for their audiences on a massive scale. Leo Villareal's monumental outdoor installations, such as *Buckyball* (2012) and *The Bay Lights* (2013), used innovative light technology that triggered in the viewer an innate neurological compulsion to recognize patterns. Olafur Eliasson's 2008 project *New York City Waterfalls* featured four man-made waterfalls placed around New York's East River and

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<sup>37</sup> Cynthia Zarin, "Seeing Things: The Art of Olafur Eliasson," *The New Yorker*, November 13, 2006. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/11/13/seeing-things-2>.

<sup>38</sup> "The Unilever Series," *Tate Modern Online*. <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/press-releases/tino-sehgal>.

<sup>39</sup> Dylan Schenker, "The Sensorium: A New Center for Immersive Art Opens," *The Creators Project*, December 21, 2010. <http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/the-sensorium-a-new-center-for-immersive-art-opens>.

became the most expensive public arts project since Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 2005 Central Park installation *The Gates*. Though varied in execution, these experiential works share a defining characteristic: a staggering scale that effectively dwarfs the viewer and transforms his or her environment.

### **New Models for Visitor Engagement**

In 2009, Tom Fleming described the realities of the general shift taking place in the cultural infrastructure of the twenty-first century:

We are witnessing a complete renovation of our cultural infrastructure. Those 'bricks and mortar' culture houses, citadels of experience, towers of inspiration, that for so long have stood steadfast as symbols of cultural continuity and comfort, while the streets around them have whizzed and clattered to multiple disruptive transformation, are being turned inside out... this wholesale renovation is born out of an urgent requirement to change or die, and it is just beginning.<sup>40</sup>

Art museums are adjusting to the overall cultural shift toward marketing an experience by establishing an entirely new model for engaging audiences. Increasingly, museums are creating new departments and curators of visitor engagement whose duties often fall somewhere between curatorial and education. Among other institutions, the New Museum in New York, the Williams College Museum of Art in Massachusetts, the Berkeley Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles all have curators or directors of "engagement" whose positions did not exist five years ago.<sup>41</sup> These new departments share a focus on public participation. Katie McGowan, the curator of education and public engagement at the

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<sup>40</sup> Tom Fleming, "Embracing the Desire Lines – Opening Up Cultural Infrastructure," *Creative Consultancy*, May 2009. [https://www.watershed.co.uk/sites/default/files/publications/2011-08-23/Embracing\\_the\\_Desire\\_Lines.pdf](https://www.watershed.co.uk/sites/default/files/publications/2011-08-23/Embracing_the_Desire_Lines.pdf).

<sup>41</sup>Jori Finkel, "You're Sure of a Big Surprise: A New Breed of Curators at US Museums Has the Job of Playing with Visitors' Expectations," *The Art Newspaper*. Issue 255, March 2014, 1. <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Youre-sure-of-a-big-surprise/31998>.

Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, said that at its core, “the fact that these positions are cropping up indicates that museums are looking for more programming where visitors use their brains. It’s about interactivity.”<sup>42</sup> Allison Agsten, the curator of public engagement at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, agreed: “We are all more interested in dialogue than monologue.”<sup>43</sup> These visitor engagement departments typically value non-object based work that has socially-engaged leanings and place primary focus on their relationships with artists and artists’ relationships with visitors.

Some museums have gone so far as to organize public programming that directly addresses the evolving nature of audience interaction and engagement. During its exhibition of *Rain Room*, the Museum of Modern Art held a salon-type public discussion called “Immersion and Participation.” The goal was to dissect “the interplay of immersion, interaction, participation, technology, and innovative communication, especially as they pertain to museums.”<sup>44</sup> The panel of speakers, which included Frank Rose, author of *The Art of Immersion*, explained how both artistic practice and the experience of engaging with art are, inherently, deeply connected to the concept of immersion. Museum galleries, they suggested, could similarly be conceived as immersive experiences. Although the term “immersion” is highlighted in this public forum, a discussion of interaction eventually takes center stage. The salon’s website states:

Participation—exchange, interactivity, commitment—has become the Holy Grail for most museums and for many designers, architects, and artists. The concept is not new, but recent technological innovations have enabled experiments with enhanced storytelling techniques, and have also introduced

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>“Salon 5: Immersion and Participation” took place on June 11, 2013, at MoMA in New York City. For more, see: <http://momarnd.moma.org/salons/immersion-and-participation/>.

a demand for more complex, involving, and multi-sensorial experiences on the part of the audience.<sup>45</sup>

In his book *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century*, Graham Black, Professor of Museum Management and Interpretation at Nottingham Trent University, argues that museums must make major changes if they are to remain relevant to twenty-first century audiences. Black identifies several societal challenges facing museums, including the impact of new technology and a demographic and general change. He argues for the importance of reaching younger generations, stating “Museums are currently hemorrhaging traditional audiences while not replacing them with new ones.”<sup>46</sup> Black stresses that museums must convert their audiences to regular users, rather than one-off visitors.

### **Museums in the Age of the “Selfie”**

Until very recently, museums have generally discouraged the use of photography in their galleries, for reasons that range from copyright infringement laws to limiting light exposure for sensitive art objects. However, social media and smartphones have so infiltrated every aspect of consumer culture that museums have begun to gradually loosen their photography policies. In 2011, the Metropolitan Museum of Art took down their signs imploring visitors to stow their cellphones.<sup>47</sup> The National Gallery in London followed suit in 2014 and is now even encouraging visitors to share their photos on social media. In the Filipino capital of Manila, the world’s first “selfie” museum was recently

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Graham Black, *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 15.

<sup>47</sup> Steve Lohr, “Museums Morph Digitally,” *The New York Times*. October 23, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/arts/artsspecial/the-met-and-other-museums-adapt-to-the-digital-age.html>

launched called Art in Island, where the point is not to look at art, but to pose for photographs with it.<sup>48</sup> Many curators recognize that, through embracing digital technology, museums are playing a major role in helping people to explore and better understand the emerging internet culture. As Paola Antonelli, senior curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, remarked, “We live not in the digital, not in the physical, but in the kind of minestrone that our mind makes of the two.”<sup>49</sup>

The encouragement of smartphones at major museums has had certain undeniable positive effects on the art world. In a recent Pew Institute survey, 81% of museums and galleries believed the internet and social media play a crucial role in supporting the arts.<sup>50</sup> When asked to recount any major impacts that social media has had on their work, a consensus emerged that social media helps organizations clarify what they do and better describe how audiences can engage with their mission-driven work. It also helps organizations communicate with various audiences, while making it possible for patrons to engage with each other, and for messages to spread virally. The respondents further described a multitude of positive outcomes from their social media use, such as higher attendance at events, more ticket sales, increased public awareness of the organization, and an ability to support fundraising efforts.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Laura C. Mallonee, “An Art Museum Designed for Taking Selfies,” *Hyperallergic*, March 16, 2015. <http://hyperallergic.com/191194/an-art-museum-designed-for-taking-selfies/>

<sup>49</sup> Lohr, “Museums Morph...”

<sup>50</sup>Kristin Thomson, Kristen Purcell and Lee Rainie, “Arts Organizations and Digital Technologies,” *Pew Research Center*, January 4, 2013. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/01/04/arts-organizations-and-digital-technologies/>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Social sharing's impact does not only create buzz for museums and individual artists. In “How Instagram is Keeping Art Alive,” Aaron Flack notes that this phenomenon serves as a way to etch ephemeral art installations into digital history in a way that is both permanent and accessible. Furthermore, Flack posits, they “liberate art from eras past; selfies with Rembrandts and Van Goghs lend currency and vitality to works of art that, before internet-enabled devices with cameras, were confined to the museums and art history books.”<sup>52</sup>

Although the recent opening up of museum spaces to cell phone photography has allowed for greater audience interaction and a renewed interest in museums, there are caveats and drawbacks to this development. Some worry that taking selfies with art is less about what you see and how it makes you feel and more of a cheap tourist keepsake. Peter Bazalgette, the chairman of the Arts Council England, recently proposed that art galleries and museums institute a one-hour ban on selfies every day so as not to ruin other visitors’ experiences. Furthermore, museums remain cautious about visitor safety and that of the art objects by banning the use of “selfie sticks.” But even without the sticks, selfies have proven dangerous; last year, an Italian student made headlines when he smashed a 19th-century statue at Milan's Academy of Fine Arts of Brera while trying to photograph himself sitting on the figure’s lap.<sup>53</sup> Another unexpected consequence to the “art selfie” phenomenon came in reaction to Kara Walker's colossal sugar-coated sculpture at Brooklyn's Domino Sugar Refinery, titled *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*

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<sup>52</sup> Aaron Flack, “How Instagram is Keeping Art Alive,” *Arts Mic*, January 6, 2014.

<http://www.mic.com/articles/78175/how-instagram-is-keeping-art-alive>

<sup>53</sup> Sarah Cascone, “Italian Student Smashes Sculpture While Taking Selfie,” *ArtNet*, March 19, 2014.

<https://news.artnet.com/in-brief/italian-student-smashes-sculpture-while-taking-selfie-6343>

(2014). Meant as a commentary on the sugar cane trade and a critique of the perceptions of black women throughout history, the work spawned tasteless Instagram photos from people sexually objectifying the sculpture's body.<sup>54</sup> Still, this reaction served to further underline the necessity of works such as *Sugar Baby* that challenge common perceptions of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

### **High Culture Goes Hands-On**

In August of 2013, the *New York Times* published an article by Judith Dobrynski titled "High Culture Goes Hands-On," in which the author examines the growing trend towards museum exhibitions, galleries, and art spaces that prioritize experiences, interaction, and participation over traditional art environments.<sup>55</sup> Citing examples such as Martin Creed's balloon-filled rooms, Carsten Höller's museum slides, and Marina Abramović's performative sit-in at MoMA, Dobrynski attributes this phenomenon to the museum's adaptation to the current cultural climate. She writes:

The quest for an experience has taken over giant portions of our lives. Everywhere, we are assaulted by endless opportunities and activities. We text and get texts wherever we are, even behind the wheel. We constantly post what we're doing and where we are, letting friends know how active we are. We take part in ever more extreme sports. We work not on our own, but in teams and in social spaces, bullpens for offices, coffee shops for self-employed free agents. And when we go on vacation, we spend our time shopping, eating and seeking adventure. Even in Europe's old cities of culture, some people might stop in at the Louvre or the Uffizi, but often just to snap a few pictures on their cellphones to prove they were there.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Cait Munro, "Kara Walker's Sugar Sphinx Spawns Offensive Instagram Photos," *ArtNet*, May 30, 2014. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kara-walkers-sugar-sphinx-spawns-offensive-instagram-photos-29989>

<sup>55</sup> Judith Dobrynski, "High Culture Goes Hands-On," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/11/opinion/sunday/high-culture-goes-hands-on.html>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Dobrzynski points out that museums are seeking new ways to reposition themselves within a broader creative economy – among them, a renewed interest in visitor engagement, interactivity, and social networking. However, she cautions against this shift, claiming that when so many people go to a museum for an experience, the nature of art museums as a place of solace and inspiration — a key part of their identity, she posits — is at risk. She laments:

In ages past, art museums didn't need activating. They were treasure houses, filled with masterpieces meant to outlast the moment of their making, to speak to the universal. Visiting one might be social — you went with friends — but fairly passive. People went to see beauty, find inspiration, experience uplift, sometimes in a spiritual sort of way.<sup>57</sup>

Dobrzynski's opinion piece spurred an impassioned debate online after landing on the *New York Times*'s "most-emailed" list. Some readers and museum-goers wrote letters in agreement with Dobrzynski's position, professing to also eschew "fun-house exhibitions" and treasuring the role of museums as places of quiet contemplation and appreciation. An art history teacher from Brooklyn wrote in and maligned museum curators for taking the easy way out by pandering to the public looking for an experience. Gretchen Andrews, an American artist living in London, agreed and added her take: "While art is the gift of others' experiences, experience as a product fails to add to human language. This is why the highly manufactured genre of 'experience art' inevitably lets us down."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Gretchen Andrew, "Experience is Not Art," *Gretchen Andrew Art*, <http://underscoreg.com/art-review/experience-is-not-art>



However, many more writers called Dobrzynski's opinion "out of touch with what makes contemporary art great."<sup>59</sup> In a particularly notable article, Dennis Kois, the director of the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, writes, "Dobrzynski's piece is just the latest in a long line of anachronistic screeds that have appeared for as long as there have been art museums, and maybe for as long as there has been art, bemoaning the current state of affairs."<sup>60</sup> Kois points out that at key moments of progress and change in the history of art and museums, there have been wistful cries that what is on display should not qualify as art. Looking back in time, this phenomenon is certainly observable in the "radical" introduction of video art, photography, abstraction, the ready-made, impressionism – the list goes on.

The problem with Dobrzynski's argument, insists Kois, is that it hinges on the assumption that museums are "monotheistic temples of one kind of art"<sup>61</sup> (and, I would add, one kind of experience, by extension.) Dobrzynski's assertion that participatory and interactive art is crowding out, or even replacing, the traditional experience of quiet contemplation that she associates with meaningful museum experience ignores the reality that both kinds of art can comfortably co-exist. Dobrzynski's other mistake, posits Kois, is that she seems unaware of the shifting sands of time, technology, and human experience. Kois explains, "Right now, our developing culture is technologically obsessed, a bit self-absorbed, fascinated with spectacle, and particularly – for better or

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<sup>59</sup> Dennis Kois, "Song of Experience," *Slate*, August 13, 2013.

[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2013/08/in\\_defense\\_of\\_big\\_bambu\\_the\\_artist\\_is\\_present\\_and\\_joyful\\_experience\\_in\\_the.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2013/08/in_defense_of_big_bambu_the_artist_is_present_and_joyful_experience_in_the.html)

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

worse – experience-oriented.”<sup>62</sup> I would add to Kois’s rebuttal of Dobrzynski’s thesis that it is not the museum approach that has stirred the impetus of change, but the art itself.

While museums are responding to the reactions they see from audiences who turn out in vast numbers to enjoy experiential works, they are also simply accommodating new works by contemporary artists who have clearly decided (since the 1960s, as I have noted) to make the viewer’s embodied experience an essential component of the work’s meaning.

### **In Solitude, Where We Are Least Alone**

Finally, last year, I curated an exhibition from the Arizona State University Art Museum’s permanent collection as an exploration of the current cultural examination of the role of museums as sites for either quiet contemplation or active participation. Titled *In Solitude, Where We Are Least Alone*, the exhibition posed a challenge to (and provided a sanctuary for) visitors to disconnect from the interminable hyper-connectedness of the digital age and tune in to a moment of stillness among a collection of artworks selected to inspire self-reflection.

The artists included in the exhibition walked the line between the pain of isolation and the pleasure of seclusion. Ranging from the early twentieth-century to the present and working in various styles, they shared an underlying introspective and existential sensibility. Artists Tamarra Kaida, Mark Klett, Robert Farber, and Marcelo Brodsky looked to nature for quiet meditation, while Aimée García Marrero and Claudia Bernardi explored existential themes through the human body itself. Other artists, like Esteban Vicente and Matsumi Kanemitsu, offered an abstract refuge of color, form and space to

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

stimulate meditation. The enthusiastic response to the exhibition from students and members of the general community indicated a wide-ranging public desire for a space that allows and encourages one to “un-plug” from the digital world. Along with this thesis, *In Solitude* served as a further investigation into the contemporary cultural push-and-pull between a desire for a social, activated experience and an inwardly contemplative one.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how museums are adapting to the experience age through opening up their exhibition spaces, revitalizing visitor engagement departments, and encouraging participation through social media and other web platforms. I have also described the general debate surrounding the evolving role of the museum in the twenty-first century. In the following chapter, I will consider experiential art within its theoretical context.

## ART OR SPECTACLE?

“To make a big splash in the global pond of spectacle culture today, you have to have a big rock to drop.”<sup>63</sup> - Hal Foster

At this point, I have discussed the fact that experiential work is immensely popular with art audiences, embraced by institutions, and reflective of a general societal reevaluation of the experience as a central focus of contemporary life. However, other than examining Dobryznski’s critique of the evolving role of the museum in the twenty-first century, I have so far refrained from providing a qualitative analysis of this artistic shift. In this chapter, I will examine experiential installations in the context of art theory and weigh their apparent value and shortcomings as they are perceived by several major figures within contemporary art criticism. Finally, I will compare the exhibition *Experience* by Carsten Höller at the New Museum (2011-12) with the recent retrospective of Icelandic artist Björk at the Museum of Modern Art (2015), both of which have been widely criticized for being all spectacle and no art.

### **The Society of the Spectacle**

In Guy Debord's 1967 *The Society of the Spectacle*, a treatise on the modern human condition, he wrote, "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all life presents as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation."<sup>64</sup> What, exactly, did he mean by “spectacle,” and how has lived experience become mediated? In essence, Debord defines

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<sup>63</sup> Hal Foster, “Polemics, Postmodernism, Immersion, Militarized Space,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, 2004: 327.

<sup>64</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, London: Notting Hill Editions, 2013

spectacle as the glaring superficiality of mass media and its oversaturation of images. Furthermore, he indicates that within the spectacle society, relations between commodities have replaced relations between people, and that images, in particular, have supplanted genuine human interaction. "The spectacle is not a collection of images," Debord explains, "rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."<sup>65</sup>

How can contemporary experiential art avoid the dismissive label of "spectacle"? Some critics, notably Rosalind Krauss and others associated with the art theoretical magazine *October*, have lamented that art's experiential shift signals its final capitulation to the spectacle society. According to Krauss, in her influential 1990 article "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalism," spectacle indicates "the absence of historical positioning and a capitulation to pure presentness."<sup>66</sup> In other words, it indicates a lack of historical contextualization. In her essay, Krauss applies this critique to Minimal Art, writing that instead of "reconciling" the individual with his or her own experiences, Minimal Art ultimately serves to underscore what she calls the "utterly fragmented, postmodern subject of contemporary mass culture," which "no longer finds the terrain for experience within a historical trajectory."<sup>67</sup> In other words, it nurtures an individual subjugated to spectacle.

However, Minimal Art's phenomenological orientation toward experience brought with it a new approach to the physicality of the body but also a kind of utopian gesture: the modern viewer, alienated in everyday life from his or her own bodily

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," *October*, 54 (Autumn 1990): 4.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

experiences, is realigned with them through his or her spatial relationship with the art object. “This,” Krauss says, “is because the Minimalist subject is in this very displacement returned to its body, re-grounded in a kind of richer, denser subsoil of experience than the paper-thin layer of an autonomous visuality that had been the goal of optical painting.”<sup>68</sup>

### ***Experience at the New Museum***

Carsten Höller’s *Experience* (first presented, in part, at the Tate London as *Test Site* in 2006-2007) was installed at the New Museum in the winter of 2011-12 as the artist’s first New York survey exhibition. Born in 1961 in Brussels, Höller began his career as a scientist, obtaining a Ph.D. in entomology with a specialization in insect communication. His work in the scientific realm consistently informs his artistic practice, which is often reminiscent of research experiments, designed to explore the limits of human sensorial perception through carefully controlled interactive experiences while experimenting with social and institutional norms.

Visitors to *Experience* at the New Museum were asked to sign a waiver upon entering the exhibition warning of potential side-effects, including falls, bumps, bruises, sprains, friction burns, fractures, head and neck injuries, dizziness and claustrophobic reactions. Museum employees armed visitors with helmets and elbow pads before they entered aluminum tubes that snaked through the gallery. Slides are Höller’s signature installations, and the 102-foot-chute at the New Museum was the only one he had created that cut *through* a building’s interior. Noted Höller, “The slide is a non-surprising

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

environment, completely predictable. Yet when you put yourself in it, you have to let go, losing control. You have no means of mastering the situation.”<sup>69</sup>

The New Museum exhibition also featured a 2-foot-deep "Psycho Tank" that fit six people, sitting off the ground in a tent-like structure to afford privacy. Visitors were handed bathrobes, slippers and towels before disrobing or donning their own bathing suits to enter the sensory deprivation tank, filled with water made dense with magnesium sulfate and designed to blur the boundaries of consciousness. The gallery also featured a mirrored carousel, and the entire exhibition could be experienced through provided upside-down goggles. Speaking on the work, Höller declared, "I'm proposing to look at the world, at what other experiences you can have, how you can experience your whole outside environment outside your body.”<sup>70</sup>

The response to *Experience* was immediate and passionate. No one disputed the fact that it made great business sense for the museum; rather, *Experience* was criticized for being all spectacle, as members of the art world questioned if it was museum-worthy or mere entertainment. However, Höller’s work cannot justly qualify as “spectacle” under Krauss’s definition, as it is, in fact, properly contextualized. As Dorothea von Hantelmanm noted in “The Experiential Turn”:

When Höller installs giant slides in the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, the object—although clearly one with a sculptural quality—functions like a tool for producing an experience of oneself (or of a different side of oneself). The actual aesthetic effect of the work lies in its capacity to trigger this experimental self-relation. Viewing the slides, we communicate not with the sensitivity or the specific subjectivity of the artist—as we might do when contemplating other artworks, for

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<sup>69</sup> As quoted in Karen Rosenberg, “Where Visitors Take the Plunge, or Plunges,” *New York Times*, October 27, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/arts/design/carsten-holler-experience-at-the-new-museum-review.html>.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

example, drawings—but with ourselves and others who enter into the same experience.<sup>71</sup>

Artists such as Höller propose a notion of meaning that is bound to a lived, felt, and situated dimension of experience. They reunite a modern subject who is alienated from his or her own bodily encounter with the physical world; thus, the artwork is historicized.

### **MoMA and the Björk Debacle**

Clear problems arise when an exhibition or artwork is not historically contextualized. The fierce critical backlash to the 2015 mid-career retrospective of Icelandic pop musician Björk, curated by Klaus Biesenbach, the current Director of MoMA PS1 in Queens and Chief Curator at Large at The Museum of Modern Art, proves what can happen when a museum relies too much on the spectacle of celebrity rather than the quality and depth of an exhibition's content.<sup>72</sup>

In the lobby, the museum installed various instruments featured on the artist's albums, including a gameleste, pipe organ, gravity harp, and Tesla coil. A cinema room screens the artist's music videos on a continuous loop. The crux of the exhibition is "Soundlines," a walking audio tour of Björk's career accompanied by ephemera such as hand-written lyrics and costumes, including the robots from the "All Is Full of Love" music video and her famous Swan Dress.

In response to the Björk retrospective, Jerry Saltz of *New York Magazine* called MoMA "a box-office-driven carnival" that has "gravitated to spectacle almost for its own

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<sup>71</sup>Dorothea von Hantelmann, "The Experiential Turn," in *On Performativity*, edited by Elizabeth Carpenter. Vol. 1 of *Living Collections Catalogue* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2014), 5.

<sup>72</sup> See Kriston Capps, "'Björk' at MoMA Is a Beautiful, Ill-Conceived Disaster," *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/03/bjork-at-moma/387370/>.



sake,” refusing to properly place the art and the artist in her own time “in an erudite, historically contextualizing way.”<sup>73</sup> Roberta Smith, writing for the *New York Times*, called the exhibition “a scant, cramped overview” that “indicates little of the research, documentation or context setting that such projects usually entail.”<sup>74</sup> The exhibition failed to establish any conceptual framework. Even the exhibition’s flagrant product placement for Volkswagen would have been permissible if MoMA’s curators had properly contextualized the artist’s oeuvre. Without any historical basis, what the museum called an immersive music, film and sound experience would be more accurately described as a music video and audio tour.

In order for experiences to avoid the label of spectacle and to be charged with meaning, significance, and content, they must be linked to their own historical setting. If we understand the turn toward the production and shaping of experiences today as a response to the present state of Western societies, then the subject is situated within a particular framework, establishing a notion of aesthetic experience that is intimately connected to the social and cultural contexts of art. Therefore, if we follow Debord’s and Krauss’s definition, art which is sufficiently historicized cannot be seen as just “spectacle.”

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<sup>73</sup> Jerry Saltz, “MoMA’s Björk Disaster,” *New York Magazine*, March 5, 2015. <http://www.vulture.com/2015/03/momas-bjork-disaster.html>

<sup>74</sup> Roberta Smith, “Björk, a One-of-a-Kind Artist, Proves Elusive at MoMA,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/arts/design/review-bjork-unfurled-in-many-guises-at-moma.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/arts/design/review-bjork-unfurled-in-many-guises-at-moma.html?_r=1).

## CONCLUSION

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, the increasing concern for the creation and shaping of experiences has marked a major shift in contemporary art, one that can be traced to artistic movements of the 1960s – most prominently, Minimalism – that sought to decentralize the inherent meaning of the art object. Once a marginal practice, art that provides an embodied experience is now at the epicenter of institutional activity.

Written nearly a century ago, Piet Mondrian’s 1917 statement holds true: “If art is to be a living reality for modern man, it has to be a pure expression of the new consciousness of the age.”<sup>75</sup> Great art mirrors and wittily subverts a particular moment within the wider culture. The internet age is still in its inchoate stages - we have yet to understand the implications it will hold for the future of art. Regardless, for better or for worse, this particular moment in time is a reflection of the age, a time characterized by falling attention spans, over-saturation of images, and a particular lack of bodily awareness. Immersive, experiential art directly addresses, and attempts to fill, the void left by those needs that are unfulfilled in the life of the twenty-first century viewer. This is a critical issue for art museums hoping to attract an audience and has required the museum to evolve its stance on various issues, from visitor engagement to in-gallery photography policies.

If we understand the artistic turn toward the production and shaping of experiences today as an adjustment to the current state of Western societies, experiential art is certainly an expression of the consciousness of the age. Thus, the subject of this

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<sup>75</sup> Piet Mondrian, “The New Plastic in Painting,” 1917, reprinted and translated in Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, *The New Art - the New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (New York: Da Capo, 1993).

experience is historically situated and contextualized, allowing for a notion of aesthetic experience that is intimately bound to the social and cultural moment – and, most importantly, one that cannot and should not be dismissed as spectacle.

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