

Luis Camnitzer  
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Having been educated in Latin America in the fifties, I was subject to two apparently contradictory premises. On the one hand, art was thought of as a weapon for social improvement. On the other, art was seen as the territory for individual freedom. Looking back at the past half century, it seems that my generation's main task was probably to bring together both premises in one continuum. One way of doing so was to follow the process of institutional critique that had started in the university reforms in Cordoba, Argentina in 1918. The other was to think in terms of the distribution of power and the ownership of order. This second perspective in particular made it possible for us to see art as the territory where one explores alternative systems of order that enable critical questioning of the status quo, thus offering a glimpse of this sought-after continuum. Unexpectedly, I became very aware of all this during the controversy around the threat to close Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum in January 2009.

Some questions immediately come to mind: What educational role does a university museum really play? What is the loss and what are its implications for the students if such a museum is closed? These questions were followed by potentially unappealing recognitions, such as the acknowledgement that if, for budget reasons, I had to choose between cutting a medical program or an art program, I would cut the latter. The thing is, I wouldn't cut art over medicine because I believe that art is less important. I would cut it because, given the way art is placed in the educational system, the choice posed here is one pertaining crafts rather than substance. As substance, artistic thinking is more important than medical thinking, since art may inform and contribute to the latter, while the opposite is less likely. However, as crafts go, a surgeon is more important for society than a painter is. So, for a real answer about the elimination of an art museum from a university one would have to qualify the question in terms of what kind of museum we are talking about, and actually also what kind of university.

University art museums have a rather murky role in that they are closer to independent art museums than to universities. In fact, they tend to equate real life with the museum environment, since, educationally speaking, they are its corresponding labs. Rarely is the university art museum used to enhance what is taught in other disciplines in the university. Most educational programs in art museums (whether affiliated with a university or not) are conceived as appendices to exhibitions and organized in the rarefied spheres of scholarship and blockbusting, mostly with the intention of assisting the latter. The entrance of the public

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Cildo Meireles, *Red Shift I: Impregnation (detail)*, 1967-1984, Collection Inhotim Centro de Arte Contemporânea, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

has a marked priority over their exit. Oddly enough, this commonplace problem for independent art museums carries on to university art museums. The educational component is defined by the way more curators are formed and by the refinement of the public's appreciation of art, not by a more complex analysis of the possible purposes of education.

At best, the function of a university art museum can be translated as forming better salespeople and better-informed customers, with a prime concern for the maintenance and development of its own collections, added to the forming of personnel for the collections of others.

As an example, we can consider the mission statement of a university art museum, as published on their website:

The Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University is an educational and cultural institution dedicated to collecting, preserving and exhibiting the finest of modern and contemporary art. The programs of the Rose adhere to the overall mission of the University, embracing its values of academic excellence, social justice, and freedom of expression.<sup>1</sup>

More important on the educational level, though without any elaboration, the statement ends with: "It promotes learning and understanding of the evolving meanings, ideas, and forms of visual art relevant to contemporary society."

For the first part, it is not clear why a university cannot coordinate with other museums to pursue this objective instead of spending money on redundancy. Secondly, if the museum's programs were that important, closing the museum would be equivalent to closing any other department that could be financed by the sale of the collection. Accordingly, the choice to deaccession artworks from the Rose would require a better justification than a financial crisis. As it is, university art museums seem to play a bigger role in public relations than they do in education, and the diversion of funds for this purpose can be compared to the allocation of resources to maintain football and basketball teams. After all, the prestige of both athletics departments and university art museums seems to elicit more donations than any academic performance.

Following the announcement on January 26, 2009, made by Jehuda Reinharz, President of Brandeis University, that the Rose would be closing, protests by students, faculty, and the arts community erupted. These mostly concerned the lack of consultation with the community and, given the quality of the

collection, the implications of dismantling such a collection of objects. Some complaints also addressed the impact the closing would have on specialized studies like art history. However, a few days later, in a February 5 letter of retraction to the Brandeis community (he confessed "I screwed up"), Reinharz made a potentially interesting point: "The Museum will remain open, but in accordance with the Board's vote, it will be more fully integrated into the University's central educational mission."<sup>2</sup>

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Vigil at the Rose Art Museum. Photo: christianrholland.

Although the ways in which this integration would be realized are not explained and will probably not be elaborated, the statement seems to defy the image of a museum bent on collection and a university committed to disciplinary fragmentation. What could be defined as guidelines for a possible taxonomy of knowledge seems like an antiquated approach that explains, but does not justify, the subdivisions used for what is essentially an amorphous cultural flow. It better reflects the organization and distribution of power than that of knowledge, a problem whose origins may be historically embedded in the processes of institutionalization and the intentions that guide these subdivisions.

Back in 306 AD, Demetrius Phalereus approached Ptolemy I and suggested that two edifices should be constructed: a library and an institution to honor the muses. The library became the famous Library of Alexandria, dedicated to store all the written knowledge of the time. The institution to honor the muses, the *Mouseion*, was basically a university whose function was to displace Egyptian culture to make room for Greek culture.<sup>3</sup> After all, Ptolemy had been one of Alexander the Great's distinguished generals and was agreeable to the imperative to cement Greek imperialism: both

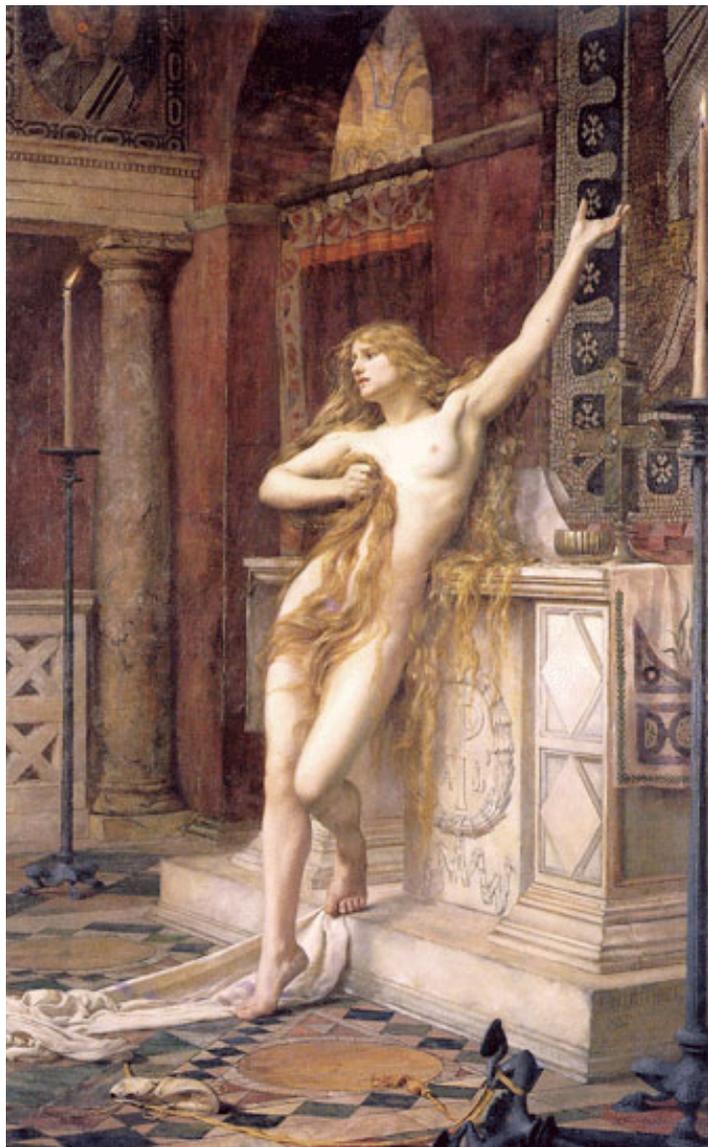
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Elaine Sturtevant painting a Frank Stella.

institutions were meant to collect, organize, and disseminate available information in a particular order of power and things. As such, the institutions were intended to set and stabilize this order and exclude or minimize any alternative order that might come up.



Charles William Mitchell, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, 1885. Oil on canvas.

However, fate had it that at some point this ownership of order and the criteria that guided it did not agree with other established or aspiring orders. As a consequence, both institutions were destroyed several times. In one of the many instances, seven hundred years later, the archbishop of the region accused the Library's co-director Hypatia of witchery. Shortly after, her body was meticulously dismembered and its remains burnt in front of a public satisfied with God's justice rather than that of the Greeks.

The discrepancies about the ownership of order led to bombings and arsons of similar institutions during wars, or totalitarian

vandalism during political upheaval, or, more recently, simple budget cuts. Generally speaking, however, the situation of libraries and museums has improved over time. Also, the university function has separated from the museum function and taken off on its own. Nevertheless, some traits of the original intentions for both the Alexandrian library and museum continue to this day; namely, collectionism and exhibitionism. These features also became present in the private sphere as fetishism and ostentation.

The museum is still defined as a repository of works, one that, according to its consensual quality, gives cultural standing to whoever owns it. Those that don't own collections become envious, which explains why, upon their independence in the nineteenth century, former colonies in Latin America quickly created their own museums. Since the major powers had museums, every former colony felt that in order to be a dignified country they had to have them as well. Interestingly enough, due to economic constraints, these first museums were interdisciplinary and not specialized. The same exhibition hall would show national symbols, botanical and zoological specimens, stones with geological or archeological interest, and examples of local art enriched by international pieces imported by rich travelers with a philanthropic inclination. From an educational point of view, these museums were much more efficient than what we have today. They stimulated curiosity and nourished imagination. They were not competitive institutions that affirmed their importance by saying, "we have the Mona Lisa and you don't." And yet, they functioned so as to generate cultural gatekeepers and to assert standards of order. This was more important than the impossible task of closing the gap with the metropolitan centers. It is not a coincidence that in order to see masterpieces today, one still has to take a trip to a cultural center. Even when some of those works travel, they do so to places that can pay millions for insurance and where there are spaces with impeccable climate and security controls. These conditions tend to exist, redundantly, in other cultural centers.

Museum collections therefore automatically divide the public into those who have access and those who don't – a fact that can sometimes deteriorate into chauvinism. A few years ago, Philippe de Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, complained about some countries' demands to return pieces they considered stolen and rightfully belonging in their national collections. On occasion of the suits leveled by Italy against the Getty Museum, de Montebello told the *New York Times*: "I am puzzled by the zeal with which the United States

rushes to embrace foreign laws that can ultimately deprive its own citizens of important objects useful to the education and delectation of its own citizens.”<sup>4</sup>

Still, one cannot entirely condemn the museums’ collection drive. One can, however, criticize how they do it by pointing out the difference between having and showing. This becomes particularly clear when museums live off handouts. The Guggenheim provided a classic example in 1987, when it celebrated its fiftieth birthday with a cycle of exhibitions. The Latin American section included thirty-seven works and upon seeing them, one would assume Argentina to be the most important art country in Latin America (eleven artists out of twenty-seven in the exhibition), followed by Chile and Venezuela (three artists each), Colombia and Mexico (two) and the remaining countries with one artist each. Among the latter was Cuba, represented by one Wifredo Lam piece, and Uruguay with one by Torres García. Furthermore, one discovered that the crucial period for Latin American art was in the mid-sixties (sixteen of the works were dated between 1963 and 1967). According to the collection, the most important Latin American artist (the only artist with the maximum of three pieces) was Venezuelan

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painter Jacobo Borges. Twenty-four pieces of the thirty-seven were donations, thirteen of which came from Latin American funds.<sup>5</sup>

Exhibitionism, generally mentioned as a curatorial activity, is what puts a collection in order. Collecting does not imply order – it only refers to acquisition and storage. Sometimes one category of things excludes another, but collecting is about possession and not order. Once one puts the things in order, the question of who owns the stuff becomes secondary. Even authorship may become irrelevant. What matters is that there is a clear idea behind the order, since to underline some things also means to hide others. If I show art from the US, I am excluding non-US art, so that there can be no question about the essence of US art. The curator places the collection in the context of a discourse.

It is in the construction and use of this discourse that the distinction between curator and artist become blurry. The discourse or thesis of the curator may contradict the discourse of the artist, because the curator extrapolates from the presentation of artworks in a way that is not necessarily determined by the artists’ original intentions. Accordingly, the exhibition becomes a meta-creation that uses specific creations by



Louise Lawler, *Untitled (Martin and Mike)*, 1992. Cibachrome, crystal, and felt paperweight. Courtesy the Artist and Metro Pictures.

artists to serve the curator's purpose.

Regardless of the agreement or conflict with the artist, since the exhibitionist order is explicitly created for a public, a series of responsibilities come into play. One of these is for the order to be interesting for the public it addresses. Some years ago, the Reina Sofia in Madrid presented an exhibition in which works were grouped according to color. One room had only white pieces, another room red ones, and there was even a golden one. I have to presume that the public targeted was formed by interior decorators. I only happened to see this exhibition because I visited the museum in order to see something else, but the nonsensical impact was strong enough to make me forget my reason for going to the Reina Sofia that day. There were many interesting pieces that enabled me to re-arrange the show for my own purposes, and this personal reorganization has made me think of three general problems:

1. The order of the exhibition has to be interesting for the particular public it addresses. If it is not, the public may declare it stupid or banal, as in my case. To be fair, there was a catalog where the curator (who had some international stature) probably wrote an intelligent essay making a case for that arrangement. But if this were the case it would mean that the public was divided into those who buy the catalog and those who don't.

2. The order has to be adjusted to the expectations of the public it addresses, as well as the public that normally visits the space. The Reina Sofia, I believe, mostly draws people interested in art and less so people interested in interior design. This is what allows me to declare the exhibition as lacking interest. However, I would have judged it differently had the show been part of a commercial fair dedicated to furniture.

3. The curatorial order has to reveal something that wasn't evident before that order was proposed. In other words, the show has to be instructive and the curator must be an educator.

Order may be private or public. A friend of mine owns an enormous collection of classical music. His CDs fill the walls of a whole big room, floor to ceiling. What is interesting here is that they are chronologically organized by the composer's date of birth. The order is eccentric because, to his wife's despair, the owner and recipient of that order is just one person.

Then there is what we can call a public order. Here, there is a distance between the owner and the recipient. The word "order" acquires its double meaning of organization and directives for behavior. In this double interpretation, the owner of the order is the power structure. The order is codified in laws,

decrees, and protocols, or is simply expressed through abuse of power.

It is here that art becomes a fundamental activity because it is one of the important tools in creating alternative orders. Using what is essentially a private order, the artist challenges the established and public order by proposing others. When the artist is good, his or her systems are unexpected and revealing. They subvert and expand existing knowledge, at least for the brief instant that passes between creation and the assimilation of the contribution.

The museum curator is somewhat trapped between the artist's private order and the public order. On one hand, the curator represents an institution, and institutions are part of the structure that determines public order, or are at least suspiciously close to that power. Therefore, the freedom of the curator to present alternative orders is somewhat limited. As an artist, one could make offensively pornographic art. As a curator, it is more difficult to organize an exhibition of that work. Nevertheless, one of the tendencies of curatorship is to find an order that is alternative enough to enable a personal recognition that transcends institutional praise. This is what leads to the proliferation of diva-curators.

The curator's choices are: (1) to represent his or her institution for its prestige and glory, (2) to represent his or her own prestige and glory, and (3) to represent the artists included in an exhibition and to act as a spokesperson for them. The three possibilities do not exclude each other; they generally appear intertwined, though in different doses. In the first version, the curator is mostly a bureaucrat, in the second a meta-artist where artists are used as pawns on a board where the game is being played. It is here that curatorship and making art intersect.

Inasmuch as the curator is the author of the "game" (or thesis) that is being presented, and it is an interesting contribution, it may be seen as a cultural contribution and not as an exploitation of the artist. There are also reverse cases (one could call them artists' revenge), such as during the 1980s when Group Material organized thematic exhibitions, featuring the works of colleagues, as larger works of art.

The third possibility, of the curator as a spokesperson and mediator, is probably the most important, culturally speaking. The good spokesperson integrates the other two functions, but stands firmly on a platform given by the artists' intentions rather than on that of the curator, and helps the public to access that platform. The institutional connections are kept, but as a mediator it is the artist's and the public's interests that are being defended. The curator's creative energy is maintained, but used to

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articulate and promote the work of the artist. Unfortunately, it often happens that artists lack clarity in what they are doing and the curator may help to clarify ideas. The artist tends to work individually, while the curator knows the general context of what other artists are producing in similar discourses. Thus, the curator may draw convincing connections and act as a megaphone. It is a didactic function that requires scruples and consultation with the artists.

In their increasingly specialized task of collecting and indexing, as in libraries, and collecting and exhibiting, as in museums, the original integrated notions of the Alexandria Mouseion got lost. The Mouseion's main task was one of transculturation, the substitution of local culture for a new colonizing one. Once that is not needed anymore, the main task of educational institutions becomes enculturation. To this effect, both libraries and museums became deposits of references. Universities became the places for learning that use those references and, for practicality and prestige, they sometimes house those same references. From that point of view, the closing of a university museum is probably something regrettable, but not a thing of much educational consequence, since the problems lie much deeper.

Many years ago, on my way to give a lecture on art education in a university in Bogotá, I saw the word *educastration* in graffiti on a wall. It captured the soul of the state of affairs and gave me lots of fuel for my lecture. Twenty-five years later, the same university invited me again to talk about the same subject. On the way this second time, I glimpsed another word sprayed on a wall. It was *educreation*. It once again fueled my lecture, not with optimism, but with the awe inspired by the extreme and accurate synthesis of complex ideas. It seems quite obvious that if the guidelines were to be *educreation* and the arts were used accordingly, there would be some invulnerability to budget cuts. At least the feeling of dispensing with the luxury of decoration would be gone.

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See <http://www.brandeis.edu/rose/aboutus/mission.html>. The full statement is: "The Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University is an educational and cultural institution dedicated to collecting, preserving and exhibiting the finest of modern and contemporary art. The programs of the Rose adhere to the overall mission of the University, embracing its values of academic excellence, social justice, and freedom of expression. An active participant in the academic, cultural, and social life of Brandeis, the Rose seeks to stimulate public awareness and disseminate knowledge of modern and contemporary art to enrich educational, cultural, and artistic communities regionally, nationally, and internationally. The Rose affirms the principle that knowledge of the past informs an understanding of the present and provides the critical foundation for shaping the future. It promotes learning and understanding of the evolving meanings, ideas, and forms of visual art relevant to contemporary society."

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See <http://www.savetheroseart.org/presidentletter.php>.

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Fernando Báez, *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books* (New York: Atlas & Co., 2008), 44–45.

4

Randy Kennedy and Hugh Eakins, "Met Chief, Unbowed, Defends Museum's Role," *New York Times*, February 28, 2006. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/28/arts/28mont.html>

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Luis Camnitzer, "La colección latinoamericana del Museo Guggenheim," *Arte en Colombia* 37 (September 1988): 31–32

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