

The Crisis in MOCA

The Culture Industry and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

1. A 'building boom' of cultural facilities occurred between 1998 and 2001 in the United States. The Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago, 'Set in Stone: Building America's New Generation of Arts Facilities, 1994-2008', 27 March 2013, accessed through: <http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/setinstone/finalreport/>, on 15 April 2013.

2. According to the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, accessed through: <http://lacountysarts.org>, on 15 April 2013.

3. Estimates of the value of the endowment at its high point vary from source to source. \$38 million is the

In a moment of crisis, Eli Broad, the founding chairman and life trustee of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, pledged \$30 million to keep the financially strapped museum afloat. His resulting leverage over the museum, and his goal to increase attendance by presenting exhibitions that appeal to a mass audience, raises questions about the social responsibility of the contemporary art museum today. Considering arguments made by cultural theorists in the period that marked the initial formation of an autonomous museum for contemporary art, Bartholomew questions whether MOCA has been led astray from its foundations as a museum by and for artists and into the realm of entertainment.

Angela Bartholomew

The Case of MOCA: A Sign of Things to Come?

The dilemma faced by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) is indicative of a financial crisis threatening contemporary arts institutions throughout the United States. With the market crash of 2008, and the subsequent economic decline, museums have seen their endowments wither. Considering the common-practice in museums of drawing operating funds from the interest of such endowments, a loss in investments means less reliable annual income. As such, museums must seek alternative funding sources to prevent depleting the principle endowment – the exhaustion of which could prove fatal to the institution's longterm financial stability. This challenge is twofold since alternative funding sources are likewise strapped: philanthropists are less keen on making donations in times of economic strife; corporations are less likely to donate or host events on museum premises; foundations find their own endowments

amount stated by Jeremy Strick in an interview with Lee Rosenbaum. See: Lee Rosenbaum, 'Jeremy Unmuzzled: Strick's Candid Account of the LA MOCA Saga', *CultureGrrl Arts Journal*, 5 March 2009, accessed through: <http://artsjournal.com/culture-grrl>, on 17 April 2013.

4. Suzanne Muchnic, Diane Haithman, 'MOCA's Jeremy Strick, the interview', *Los Angeles Times*, 25 December 2008, accessed through: <http://latimes-blogs.latimes.com/culture-monster>, on 15 April 2013.

5. Carol Vogel, 'Ex-Director of Los Angeles Museum Heads to Dallas', *The New York Times*, 29 January 2009, accessed through: <http://nytimes.com>, on 14 April 2013.

6. The funds for the Broad Contemporary Art wing at LACMA were funded through the Broad Art Foundation, which owns an art collection valued at more than \$2.4 billion. Broad Art Foundation website, accessed through: <http://broadartfoundation.org>, on 14 April 2013.

7. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles Press Release, 'MOCA Board of Trustees Votes to Accept Broad Foundation Challenge Grant', 23 December 2008, accessed through: <http://moca.org>, on 15 April 2013.

lacking; and governmental agencies at local and national levels are left with smaller cultural budgets from which to disseminate grants. Given the museum boom that took place in the years that preceded the economic decline, many museums – and arts institutions more generally – find themselves in a competitive situation for funding.¹ As a case in point, there are currently more than 2,800 arts organizations in the county of Los Angeles alone.²

Navigating through such conditions, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles found itself in a dire financial situation in 2008. Having reduced the museum's endowment to \$6 million from what had, at its height in 1999, reached nearly \$38 million, MOCA announced that it would require a large infusion of funds to remain independent and operational.³ Jeremy Strick, MOCA's then director, countered accusations of incompetence, explaining that MOCA's financial problems were part and parcel of a deeper systemic problem: 'MOCA had a chronic deficit. It had a financial model that didn't work... we raised a lot of money, more than many institutions in this city, but the kind of major endowment gifts that we needed eluded us.'⁴ With a small endowment relative to other organizations, and without government support like that received by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), MOCA was forced to rely to a large degree on contributed income, a strategy that comes with a degree of risk. In short, MOCA was perpetually and substantially underfunded, and the economic downturn served to compound these challenges, leading to Strick's resignation in December 2008.⁵

Amidst panicked accounts of the MOCA meltdown, suggestions to rent or sell off the collection, or merge the museum collection with that of another institution – chiefly LACMA – were proposed as potential solutions to the financial quandary. Offering the support of his foundation, Eli Broad, a founding trustee of the museum, returned to the board after a

fifteen-year hiatus with an offer to donate \$30 million (half to exhibitions and half to the endowment) to bail out the museum. A prominent philanthropist in Los Angeles, Broad is both a real estate developer and a major art collector. His \$50 million donation to LACMA in 2003 resulted in the founding of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA, a contemporary wing of sorts that bears his name and features part of his collection.⁶ What is further, Broad has broken ground on a new museum (called simply, The BROAD and sited across from MOCA), which will also feature part of his collection. In short, Broad wields a heavy hand over contemporary art institutions in Los Angeles. Still, in light of other alternatives, the offer proved appealing to the board. In a press release made by MOCA announcing the pledge and assuring a merge with LACMA would not take place, Broad stated, 'It is in the best interest of the city for MOCA to remain independent.'⁷

What followed the acceptance of Broad's MOCA bailout was no less controversial. In the search for a new museum director Broad emerged as the loudest champion for the candidacy of Jeffrey Deitch – a New York-based art dealer and the founder of Deitch Projects, from whom Broad had purchased a number of artworks, including those from Jeff Koons' *Celebration* series (conceived in 1994). The suggestion of Deitch to become MOCA's director was met mostly with bewilderment. Deitch, while undeniably successful and highly-regarded in the art world, received his advanced education not in the study of art, but at Harvard Business School. He lacked knowledge of how to run a nonprofit organization and was without any prior fundraising experience (aside from the raising of funds through the sale of art). Deitch's appointment is symbolic of a larger shift occurring throughout the art world; a sign of the increasingly hazy divide between the commercial world and that of the

8. Randy Kennedy, 'Museum's New Identity Causes More Fallout', *The New York Times*, 13 July 2012, accessed through: nytimes.com, on 14 April 2013.

9. Mike Boehm, 'MOCA: Eli Broad Discusses Ousting of Paul Schimmel', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July 2012, accessed through: articles.latimes.com, on 17 April 2013.

10. Tyler Green, a prominent art critic in Los Angeles called the firing not merely a loss for the museum, but an even larger setback for the 'critical, scholarly investigation of contemporary art.' Tyler Green, 'The real loser in "Deitch v. Schimmel" is us', *Modern Art Notes*, 29 June 2012, accessed through: <http://blogs.artinfo.com/modernartnotes>, on 17 April 2013.

11. Barbara Kruger, Catherine Opie, 'Board Resignation Email', reprinted 16 July 2012 in: *Blouin Artinfo*, accessed through: <http://blogs.artinfo.com/artintheair/2012/07/16/read-barbara-kruger-and-catherine-opies-l-a-moca-board-resignation-email/>, on 16 April 2013.

12. As explained by Ann Goldstein recalling her time spent working as the senior curator of MOCA (2001–2009). Ann Goldstein, 'Ann Goldstein Director, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam', in: *Art Forum: The Museum Revisited*, Summer 2010, p. 292.

13. In this Op-Ed letter to the press, Broad explains, '[MOCA] needed a director who could create exhibitions that would dramatically increase attendance and membership and make MOCA a populist rather than an insular institution.' Eli Broad, 'MOCA's past and future', *Los Angeles Times*, 8 July 2012,

museum. Deitch was tasked with bringing MOCA into 'a new era' with a mission to generate larger audiences through programming more in line with what board members view as changing perceptions about art and the ideal museum visit.⁸

Indeed, a new era had begun at MOCA, and it was accompanied by a mass exodus. Much of the curatorial staff left their positions, including senior curator Philipp Kaiser, who took over as director of the Ludwig Museum in Cologne. Then, outraging critics, artists, and museum supporters alike, the board and directorship at MOCA prompted Paul Schimmel, the museum's highly respected chief curator of twenty-two years, with a 'forced resignation'.⁹ Eliminating Schimmel, the last prominent voice from the former MOCA regime, was seen as a capstone moment in the museum's embrace of populist, blockbuster exhibitions. Schimmel's departure proved to be the last straw for the artists on MOCA's board, and the program's growing lack of scholarly engagement with artists and curators quickly became a major focus of critics.¹⁰ In a move as much protest as resignation, all four artists, John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, Barbara Kruger, and Catherine Opie, resigned in letters that were leaked to the press. Expressing their deep dissatisfaction with the dominant leadership of MOCA, Opie and Kruger explained the reason for their decision in a shared letter to the trustees: 'we wonder if our position [is] just symbolic and that our ability to be heard and to suggest and make change has become a kind of inconvenience to the instrumental workings of the board.'¹¹

Artists had been a vital part of MOCA's board since the museum's initial founding in 1979 when Robert Irwin, Alexis Smith, Sam Francis, and Vija

Celmins, among others, served on the institution's Artists' Advisory Council.¹² The flight of artists signaled a complete loss in faith in the direction of the museum. Further, it served as a warning to the public against the loss of a diversification of voices on the MOCA board. Broad's response, with his own letter to the press, did little to quell these accusations, describing his vision for the museum as one focused on making it a stable enterprise committed to high attendance numbers and increased popularity. 'In today's economic environment,' Broad explained, 'museums must be fiscally prudent and creative in presenting cost-effective, visually stimulating exhibitions that attract a broad audience.'¹³ The assertion made by Broad is that the elitism of the art program is what was fundamentally wrong with MOCA, and a business-like approach to creating a higher demand for the programming will, in turn, solve the museum's financial woes.

The expectation of museums like MOCA to function as informed and representative repositories, as sites for the presentation of scholarly, frequently changing, and well-attended exhibitions, and, simultaneously, as business enterprises that must forefront the income generating dimension of their activities in order to fund all other ventures, is not only incredibly daunting, it is perhaps impossible. Museums throughout the United States continue to struggle to meet these growing expectations on smaller allotments. But the impending danger is not that MOCA will bar its doors, or that its collection will disappear on the free market. Rather, MOCA will cease to exist as it was envisioned by the founding Artist's Advisory Council in 1979: as an institution that insists upon presenting art with the audacity to rebuke the very system which it depends upon for its own survival – a museum envisioned through the eyes of artists, not through the eyes of a businessman. That institution is

accessed through: <http://articles.latimes.com>, on 14 April 2013.

14. Georges Henri Rivière, Harald Szeemann, et al. 'Problems of the Museum of Contemporary Art in the West', *Museum*, Vol. XXIV, NO. I, Paris: UNESCO, 1972, p. 6.

15. Arendt draws a comparison between the use of art for educational purposes and the use of art to cover a hole in the wall, labelling them both as cases when 'the art object has been used for ulterior purposes', and further explaining that 'these usages, legitimate or not, do not constitute the proper intercourse with art.' Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis in Culture: Its Political and Its Social Significance', in: *Between Past and Future*, New York: The Viking Press, 1961, p. 203.

fading, and it may soon be gone for good. Without adequate support from diverse funding sources, institutions like MOCA risk losing their independence, and with it a connection to their initial mission.

The Culture Industry

While the blurring of boundaries between the museum and the market has intensified as the economic woes of late capitalism spur governments to cut funding, the discussion around what should, and should not, be the focus and function of the art museum is not limited to the current economic impasse. The role of the contemporary art institution, and the art it houses, has continued to shift since the first emergence of an autonomous museum for the presentation and collection of contemporary art. Museums first began to situate themselves in the service of artistic production in the 1960s. The vast diversity of artworks being produced at the time forced museums to be receptive to new forms of art while increasing commercialism of the art market, and a social impulse to challenge institutional authority felt throughout the Western world, led those working in museums to reconsider the functional role of the institution. Profound methodological and structural problems have since arisen from the ontological positioning of museums of contemporary art, dedicated as they are to the collection, preservation, and presentation of art that challenges precisely the art system in which it operates. Poignantly, the 1972 UNESCO Report on the 'Problems of the Museum of Contemporary Art in the West' (the formation of which Pontus Hultén, the first director of MOCA from 1980 – 1982, took part) explains, 'This inner contradiction in the role of the museum – that it is the epitome of the system, but at the same time relatively

free to criticize it – is important for the museum of today and for its immediate future. To put it bluntly, the ideal museum would be the one that was closed by the authorities.'¹⁴

Through the 1970s, as artists had more say over how their works were displayed in the museum, they grew critical of the presentation strategies used, and the motivations behind them. Central to these artists, those often associated with institutional critique, was revealing the power structures behind aesthetic and political choices in the museum. It was late in this movement that MOCA was born. Yet today, a decade into the twentyfirst century, the institutional culture at MOCA, and that of museums generally, has shifted away from this aim to achieve transparency and share the conceptions it presents to a field that extends beyond the museum's walls. While interactive and social media, and exhibitions that emphasize a general pulling-back of the proverbial curtain to reveal the inner-workings of exhibition design, may appear to invite the spectator to see how the institution functions, contemporary art museums like MOCA use such trendy methods in a carefully orchestrated attempt to bolster popularity. Museums, therefore, are using the art they feature, and the history of the institutions themselves, to sell an entertaining product, not to engender a critical reflection of the contemporary world.

In her essay 'The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance' (1961), Hannah Arendt makes a polarizing argument against the utilization and functionalization of art.¹⁵ Arendt, like Walter Benjamin, was preoccupied with the repercussions of art's reproduction. Yet Arendt's concern was not with reproduction as such. Instead, she warns against the modification of cultural objects for facilitated digestion, against the destruction of art for the production of entertainment. Art, she contends, should be

16. Ibid.

17. Reed Johnson, 'MOCA Director Jeffrey Deitch posts message, seeking to reassure', *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July 2012, accessed through: <http://articles.latimes.com>, on 14 April 2013.

18. Frank Van der Schoor, 'The Van Abbemuseum: 1964-1973: The Ideas', in: Carel Blotkamp (ed.), *Museums in Motion?*, 's-Gravenhage, Netherlands: Govt. Pub. Office, 1979.

19. Irit Rogoff, 'Turning', *e-flux*, #0 11/2008, accessed through: <http://e-flux.com>, on 15 December 2012.

20. Rivière and Szeemann *op.cit.* (note 14).

preserved from the life processes of society. Describing entertainment as a biological necessity in line with eating and breathing, Arendt calls not for the eradication of entertainment but for the preservation of art. If left at the hands of those who produce mass media, art will be consumed and exhausted, in service of mass society's insatiable need for new and novel entertainment.¹⁶ While the definition of art has, in the decades following Arendt's essay, been contested and challenged by countless new media forms and a blurring of high and low culture, her warning against the dangers of altering art to make it more palatable for mass society directly resonates with current debates about the accessibility of MOCA's programming. Jeffrey Deitch's stance that 'contemporary art is the most exciting new cultural platform, connecting with fashion, music, design, film, performance, and community development' has resulted in a number of easy-to-swallow exhibitions to increase MOCA's audience, including an upcoming exhibition on how disco culture has influenced visual and performance arts.¹⁷

Contemporary art museums have long been at the forefront of a polarizing debate about the role of the museum, which on one hand calls for the embrace of a mass audience, and on the other would preserve it as a sanctuary for aesthetic contemplation. During Jean Leering's canonical tenure as the director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven (from 1964 – 1973) both approaches to museum education were explored. While in the 1960s, Leering's primary aim was to attract an audience through an account of avant-garde production and 'indirectly on social relationships', the failure of this approach to attract a large and broad audience led in the 1970s to an increased focus on museum production that was concerned with 'increasing the educative and cultural function.'¹⁸ Reaching a mass audience took precedence, a course that has continued since. Yet appealing to a mass audience is not

necessarily a problematic development provided that accessible exhibitions do not entail the altering and oversimplifying of complex ideas: what Irit Rogoff calls 'critique lite'.¹⁹ The problem lies in the inability to differentiate between creating an environment where visitors have access to the concepts embodied through works of art, and dumbing down content under the guise of accessibility. When the audience to expense cost ratio is the primary concern, such nuanced distinctions tend to fall by the wayside.

As is fast becoming the case with many industries in the United States, at MOCA divergent and diverse voices have grown silent – or have come under pressure to resign. Pushing for a less insular, more populist museum, Broad's voice is the most domineering among institutional funders in Los Angeles. His objective to popularize MOCA's exhibition program has been taken to surprising and potentially dangerous lengths; for there is a direct connection between the voice of one man having too much weight within an organization, and the watering down of what has, since at least the 1970s been described as the democratic discourse of contemporary art. As wealth continues to increase in concentration among the wealthiest Americans, and state-funding continues to decrease, museums of contemporary art risk losing a democratic diversification of leadership – and perhaps also of artworks they feature – along with a scholarly and rigorous approach to exhibition-making. MOCA would appear to be realizing what was expressed as a major concern of museum professionals like Harald Szeemann in 1972, who wrote, 'One of the main problems of museums today is to succeed in avoiding the influence of an authoritative museum culture, determined solely by one man. The need to replace the one-man system by a team is obvious everywhere.'²⁰

21. Arendt, *op. cit.*
(note 15), p. 204.

22. These civic expectations are well encapsulated in the words of Luis A. Ubiñas, President of the Ford Foundation. In a speech laying out 2011 program funding strategies he stated, 'The arts are inherently valuable. And they're also part of what's going to get us out of this economic problem we're in.' Robin Pogrebin, 'Consortium Views Arts and Engines of Recovery', *The New York Times*, 14 September 2011, accessed through: <http://nytimes.com>, on 18 April 2013.

Conclusion

In a characterization that would seem to foretell the future of the contemporary art market, Arendt describes the 'cultural philistine', who, seeking loftier social status, exchanges cultural objects for monetary value – an act that results in those objects '[losing] the faculty which is originally peculiar to all cultural things, the faculty of arresting our attention and moving us.'²¹ More than fifty-years after Arendt's provocative essay, art retains a status that prevents it from being regarded as a profane object of use value, but it is not exempt from serving a function. Contemporary art is expected to act, to speak, to spur realizations, to inspire, to incite social and political change. Art is even accused of having the ability to shape economic conditions, and its institutions are expected to do the same.²² Excessive functional expectations require that a museum must act in a socially and economically viable way if it is to receive funding from state and private sources, and the prevalence of this narrowing perception of art in contemporary society is, arguably, the stimulus behind Broad's business-like approach to MOCA. It would be unrealistic to assert that museums should be immune to funding cuts as a result of some undefinable status as harbingers of art, but ensuring that contemporary art museums are properly funded by diverse sources must be a priority if the crisis plaguing MOCA is not to become a crisis of contemporary art museums throughout the United States.

Personalia

Angela Bartholomew is a research master student in the Visual Art, Media, and Architecture Program at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. She works as the Curatorial and Collections Research Intern at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and is developing her thesis entitled 'Physical Closure and Virtual Visibility: Alternative Exhibitions and Digital Initiatives at the Stedelijk Museum (2004 – 2011)'.