

**REMODELING AN AMERICAN CULTURAL INSTITUTION: A CRITIQUE OF THE  
DECOLONIZATION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

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By Taryn Curatti

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WE, THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE,

HAVE APPROVED THIS THESIS

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DECOLONIZATION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this thesis is assessing museums as representational cultural institutions and the ethical responsibility these institutions have in regard to accessibility and inclusivity of artifacts and information for the public. Accurate representation of cultural narratives and marginalized groups of artists within institutions has been severely lacking and needs to be addressed. Additionally, there has long been a lack of diverse representation within the infrastructure of cultural institutions in regard to gender and race in positions of power or authority. The specific institution that is evaluated in this thesis is the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Historically speaking, MoMA has been under fire in both public and scholarly critique for specific exhibitions and a clear lack of diverse artist representation and inclusivity since its creation. The Museum has recently undergone a renovation of its gallery spaces as well as a restructuring and rehang of their collection in an effort towards decolonization. After first discussing museum unrest on a larger scale, then closely evaluating specific instances of controversy in MoMA's recent past, I finally evaluate MoMA's attempts at decolonization and the attempted shift towards inclusivity and accessibility. My research addresses why museums need to change, while evaluating how MoMA has made attempts at this cultural shift and if these attempts are deemed successful.

Keywords: representation, inclusivity, accessibility, decolonization, institutional critique, museology, intersectionality, narrative

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Overview

Since the development of the first cabinet-of-curiosities and *kunstkammers* in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the act of collecting and displaying artifacts and art objects has existed as both a personal experience for groups and individuals, as well as the purpose of cultural institutions. Art museums, cultural-history museums and natural-history museums have different justifications for their activities and radically different conceptions of how to use and present their collections.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the type of institution, museums are expected to be neutral in the information they are presenting, as well as the means of the presented information. Unfortunately, it is very clear there is no neutrality, as seen with the great disparities of the corporate and financial infrastructure within institutions down to the lack of inclusivity and the misrepresentation of oppressed artists and cultures. Even in a world where these disparities wouldn't exist, pure neutrality in practice will always exist as a reflection of the curator, relevant financial contingencies, the historical time period, and so on, regardless of intention. Established art dealer and gallerist Ivan Karp writes about neutrality within exhibitions in "Culture and Representation," stating: "The mode of installation, the subtle messages communicated through design, arrangement, and assemblage, can either aid or impede our appreciation and understanding of the visual, cultural, social and political interest of the objects and stories exhibited in museums."<sup>2</sup> This is the *museum effect*, and it is that of elitist grandeur and power; it consists of ivory pillars and white walls, and is organized primarily by and consisting of white male curators and artists. Karp continues to explain how museums and their exhibitions are,

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<sup>1</sup> Ivan Karp, and Steven D. Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.



“morally neutral in principle, but in practice, always make moral statements; even the assertion that ‘art’ is exempt from moral, social, and political judgments implies ideas about what is and is not subject to certain forms of criticism.”<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, the assumed innate neutrality of museums and exhibitions is the very quality that enables them to become instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience.<sup>4</sup> The focus of this thesis and the driving force behind my research is assessing museums as representational cultural institutions, and the power and ethical responsibility these institutions have in regard to accessibility of artifacts and information for the public. In addition to best serving the public, accurate representation of cultural narratives and overall better representation and inclusivity of marginalized groups of people as artists and patrons is of high value and needs to be addressed when discussing the cultural position of museums.

Because the power of historical representation in American society is mostly delegated to universities, history sites and museums, these institutions exert a huge influence over the public’s perception of the past.<sup>5</sup> It is the basis of this power and how it has been applied in art museums that has inspired my research. Karp writes about this power in *How Museums Define Other Cultures*: “Two strategies are used when representing other cultures or their works of art. Exoticizing showcases the difference between the cultural group being displayed and the cultural group doing the viewing, while assimilating highlights the similarities. Whether we are describing a text or an exhibition, otherness is either made strange by exoticizing or made

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<sup>3</sup> Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Jessie L. Whitehead, “Theorizing Experience: Four Women Artists of Color,” *Studies in Art Education* 50, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 31.

familiar by assimilating.”<sup>6</sup> Further, he claims that in this process of exoticizing, “the differences of the other are portrayed as an absence of qualities the dominant, often colonizing, cultural groups possess.”<sup>7</sup> This concept directly addresses one of the core issues that still exists within art institutions, and is evidence of the need for decolonization. Other problematic issues within art museums lie in the internal structure of the institutions, as well as the type of artworks displayed, the artists that are represented and the accessibility of the surrounding communities that will be viewing the work. These ideologies of inclusivity and accessibility are not new concepts in the current social climate, but unfortunately, they are concepts that have not been critiqued enough and subsequently, nothing drastic has changed within the cultural community.

The terms *inclusivity* and *accessibility* correlate with one another and are interchangeable in my research process, as they both hold great value and are required to be present in museum policy if the desired cultural shift is to occur. The use of the term *accessibility* within my research refers to the ease of access for those with varying abilities to navigate the physical spaces of a museum, as well as an acceptance of both emerging artists and underrepresented artists of the past. Art should be available and accessible to the public, as they are the viewers or audience of focus. Secondly, it is also important that artists have accessibility through inclusivity in the process of displaying their work. Finally, art institutions need to be inclusive in regard to the race and gender of their employees. These conceptions of inclusivity and accessibility apply not only to racial and gender differences, but also to those with varying physical and mental ability, binary or non-binary identification and sexual orientation, as they should also be included and welcomed in the art world.

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<sup>6</sup> Ivan Karp, “How Museums Define Other Cultures,” *American Art* 5, no. 1/2 (Winter – Spring 1991), 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

## Purpose and Research Question

The importance of cultural institutions ethically obtaining, displaying and representing accurate experiences and reflections of all types of people in society should have been witnessed in their practice and policies from the beginning. As common sense as this notion seems, this concept has been lacking from cultural institutions around the world. Barbara Pollack describes this problem, arguing that “museums are no longer the ivory towers of culture, far removed from politics and controversy.”<sup>8</sup> Her own acceptance and use of the term “ivory towers” provides insight to the ingrained, institutional racism that needs to be abolished in order to enact change. She continues: “museums have increasingly come into the spotlight as sites of protest and places where equity, diversity and inclusion have become imperatives... [and are] now more than ever under pressure to change, both for practical and ethical reasons.”<sup>9</sup> Although the spotlight Pollack describes has been increasing, museums have long struggled with diversity and inclusion. A 2015 study of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) provided the fact that nearly 80% of its visitors were white.<sup>10</sup> In an effort to focus on diversifying their demographics, the MFA has been trying to change that statistic through outreach, programming and events, but a more recent incident shows evidence of the repercussions that can occur when marginalized people enter a predominantly white space. In the earlier months of 2019, a tragic and highly unfortunate example of crude injustice and racial prejudice occurred. A group of young students of color were harassed by two patrons of the MFA; various slurs and racist tropes were verbally fired at the students, causing enough distress for the students to report it and the institution to rightfully

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<sup>8</sup> Barbara Pollack, “Exhibiting Change,” *ARTnews* (Summer 2019), 56.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “Do Our Arts Institutions Have A Race Problem?,” WBUR, Radio Boston, May 23, 2019, <https://www.wbur.org/radioboston/2019/05/23/mfa-racial-incident>.

investigate the situation.<sup>11</sup> The MFA spent time and effort to address the situation by reviewing security tapes in real time. After assessing the situations and identifying the patrons, the MFA confronted them and served no-trespass, cease-and-desist letters, along with revoking their patronage privileges.<sup>12</sup> The Museum handled the situation appropriately, but because unwarranted acts of racism and injustice are still occurring in museums, the need for pressure to change still exists and is the reason why I have chosen to research this matter. We are living in a time of cultural shifts towards established inclusivity and greater accessibility for individuals from all walks of society – artists, and museum patrons alike – and as the foundation of cultural institutions is that of *culture*, their collections, exhibitions, and spatial environment should reflect this concept.

As more people are becoming aware of these societal shifts, the intentionality and application of exhibits at museums are not impervious to critique. While all cultural institutions are included in the discourse of ethics and purpose, my research focuses specifically on the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). More specifically, the Museum's 2019 renovation and attempted decolonization is evaluated. Since the beginning of its creation, MoMA has engendered debate and controversy; much of the early criticism concerned the nature and validity of modernism from a journalistic perspective, but artists and staff also contributed to the dialogue.<sup>13</sup> Three decades later, museums and other institutions were still under question by

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Garcia, "MFA Bans 2 Patrons After Students Of Color Say They Were Subjected To Racist Comments," *WBUR: The ARTery*, May 24, 2019, <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2019/05/24/boston-mfa-ban-davis-students>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Tobias, "Messing with MoMA: Critical Interventions at the Museum of Modern Art, 1939-Now," *Post: Notes on Modern & Contemporary Art Around the Globe*, May 26, 2016, [https://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/804-messing-with-moma-critical-interventions-at-the-museum-of-modern-art-1939-now](https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/804-messing-with-moma-critical-interventions-at-the-museum-of-modern-art-1939-now).

artists as political activism was thriving, but MoMA in particular became a “site of active debate on topics such as the artists’ role in the exhibition and the sale of his or her work, emerging and historical art movements, and overarching social issues such as the Vietnam War, racism, sexism and economic injustice.”<sup>14</sup> MoMA, among other museums, has long been perpetuating a myth of European-American culture as the best and only definition of culture. We have entered a crucial time in history; one that is dedicated to the reflection on past events and exhibits and is shifting the focus away from the established colonized culture, moving forward toward accurate representation of historical narratives. Glenn D. Lowry, MoMA’s director, has been highly prevalent in the press and discussing the Museum’s intentions with the newest renovation and collection reorganization. The Museum is expected to be “physically more comfortable, allow better traffic flow, offer free access to the ground floor and its new galleries, and add about 40,000 square feet for the permanent collection. But most important, the story of modernism as we know it – linear and dominated by European male geniuses – will be radically revised, expanded and rendered more inclusive.”<sup>15</sup> This radical revision is the main area of focus for my research and the foundation of my research question: has MoMA’s attempt at decolonization through the recent architectural reconstruction and collection reorganization been successful?

## Literature Review

Research and writings on museums and other cultural institutions abound in many regards and areas of study, from curatorial practices and the art of collecting to museum ethics and the politics of museum displays. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal offer historic insight to the

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<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Tobias, “Messing with MoMA: Critical Interventions at the Museum of Modern Art, 1939-Now,” *Post: Notes on Modern & Contemporary Art Around the Globe*, May 26, 2016, [https://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/804-messing-with-moma-critical-interventions-at-the-museum-of-modern-art-1939-now](https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/804-messing-with-moma-critical-interventions-at-the-museum-of-modern-art-1939-now).

<sup>15</sup> Roberta Smith, “Last Call: MoMA’s Closing, and Changing,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/06/arts/design/moma-closing-renovation.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>.

Western approach to collecting in *The Cultures of Collecting*: “The great canonical collections, with their temple-like architecture, their monumental catalogues and their donors’ names chiseled in stone, testify to the paradigm of Beauty as the exclusion of all ugliness, to the triumph of remembrance over oblivion, to the permanence of Being over Nothingness.”<sup>16</sup> These ideologies, as “absurdly and dementedly eternalist as they are, carry such weight as to seem incontrovertible, while the histories to which they give rise appear equally impervious to query.”<sup>17</sup> One of their ambitions in this book is to “challenge such self-assurance, and to ask whether collecting, as a cultural and behavioral phenomenon, can be adequately *understood* if one looks only at the official norms,” consisting of public art collections and museums.<sup>18</sup> The process of challenging these ideas has contributed to what society is witnessing as *museum unrest*. This unrest has long existed but perhaps has only recently been made more public as we enter a more discursive time of cultural awareness. Gary Edson questions if and how museum ethics contain the ability to serve the public in his edition of *Museum Ethics*:

Human beings exist not merely as individuals, but as members of a greater organism that assumes some level of control and responsibility for those within its boundaries. This organism may be called by many names: community, society, state, or nation. The word “nation” often implies a unique, self-contained entity normally based on political union. There is also an inference of linguistic and racial commonality. In reality, most nations are composed of several nationalities using numerous languages. ... Persons in an organized community entrust that entity with authority greater than that of the individual members. This collaborative organism may be called the museum community and to function it must have some form of underlying structure. Ideals and ethics are the base for that structure and the means for recognizing the highest common good.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John Elsner, and Roger Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4.

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

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Gary Edson, *Museum Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 36.

By reflecting on both individuals and groups in the realm of cultural institutions, Edson is directly questioning collective responsibility. Decision making and other daily practices within museums are discussed as a commingling of general ethical values and professionally oriented values.<sup>20</sup> Some of these commingled values are deemed ethical concepts that should be witnessed as common practice, and include a level of honesty, a consciousness of human dignity, a recognition of personal property, a sense of right and wrong, and an awareness of social order.<sup>21</sup> These ideologies and concepts of collecting are to then be transformed through the act of displaying. *Thinking About Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, contains essays that investigate exhibitions outside of the traditional gallery as well as innovative work in extending cultural debates within the museum. Sections of the publication include a focus on the history of the exhibition, forms of staging and spectacle, and questions of curatorship, spectatorship and narrative. As stated in the introduction, exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known.<sup>22</sup> This alludes to the idea that museums as cultural institutions have the power to make shifts in culture. In this case, the shift can occur through art and art museums, as “exhibitions are the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed.”<sup>23</sup> It is in this realm of deconstruction that I aim for my research to provide attention to, and insight toward, the traditional exchanges and conversations around art that reflects culture, and more importantly, art and exhibits that *don't* portray accurate representations and cultural narratives.

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<sup>20</sup> Gary Edson, *Museum Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 28.

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

<sup>22</sup> Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, *Thinking About Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996), 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

*Art and Globalization*, edited by James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim, addresses the question of globalism in art and offers the suggestion that instead of trying to globalize something, it is a matter of realizing and recognizing that art and its history are, in fact, already much more global than one might have been told by traditional narratives.<sup>24</sup> Adding to the conversation of art and globalization as commodity, curatorial activist Maura Reilly offers insight to part of the issue of otherness and representation within institutions. In *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, she proclaims rather than constructing a new and inclusive discourse for art in an age of globalization, most mainstream (non-activist) exhibitions are “only interested in including the postcolonial Others as long as they speak of their Otherness.”<sup>25</sup> This identification of “Otherness” Reilly speaks about should be an aspect of one’s identification, as opposed to the prime identifier. Unfortunately, the exhibitions she references are perpetuating “Otherness” as the paramount identification, further aiding in the erasure of dynamic identities. Additionally, non-Western artists have no choice but to follow this path of creative process in order to show work, as it is the [European-American] art world that selects, legitimates, promotes, and purchases the artworks to be exhibited, leading to what is described as “a burden of representation.”<sup>26</sup> Although this thesis is not relating directly to globalization of art, the concept of traditional narratives existing as the majority in art museums, including MoMA, can be applied to the areas of research found in this thesis.

Part of the *Museum Meanings* series, *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design: Purpose, Process, Perception*, edited by Suzanne MacLeod, Tricia Austin, Jonathan Hale and

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<sup>24</sup> James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim, ed., *Art and Globalization* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 74.

<sup>25</sup> Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2018), 104.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, offers insight into three areas of focus for future exhibition endeavors; Purpose, Process and Perception. Purpose contains discourse regarding social responsibility, cultural specificity and museum making, with articles focusing on ethical museum and gallery design to be employed as a force for good in a diverse cultural sector. The Process segment of this book addresses the need for deconstructing narratives within exhibitions, in addition to the importance of curating socially engaged artworks. The final segment, Perception, dives into the embodiment of exhibitions or artworks, the experience an exhibition can provide and the importance of making meaning of the narrative within a space. The initial chapter argues that museums have yet to effectively draw design into their strategies to reposition museums as socially purposeful institutions.<sup>27</sup> Macleod offers a new approach to this issue, arguing for an ethics of museum design and suggesting that museums need to wrest control of design from the political and economic drivers that often shape it; such an approach recognizes the ways in which the processes and built forms of museums are implicated in the unequal and divided social climate we are currently living in.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to referencing collection and curatorial practices, I evaluate how properly displaying appropriate contemporary art can help us move forward towards decolonization. Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel's *Themes of Contemporary Art* aid in the process of better analyzing modern works of art through theoretical application and analysis, as well as help to situate existing works of art within curatorial movements of the future. In a section dedicated to identity within art history, Robertson and McDaniel explain the need for artistic political

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<sup>27</sup> Suzanne MacLeod, Tricia Austin, Jonathan Hale and Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, ed., *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design: Purpose, Process, Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

activism, claiming in the past decade, there has been something of a stalling of this form of activism towards cultural institutions.<sup>29</sup> “Although survivors of the culture wars and occasional younger artists still court controversy, many more artists want to engage the public, rather than challenge social and political institutions and practices.”<sup>30</sup> Further: “A deep, implicit connection between art and human identity has existed throughout art history. How the world views you, how you view yourself, how you view others – these fundamental dimensions of human identity have influenced artists’ ideas, emotions and creative expressions.”<sup>31</sup> This is why accurate representation is so crucial. “Within the Western tradition, two genres with enduring histories, the portrait and the self-portrait, are directly linked to the artistic exploration of the theme of identity in art today. Rembrandt, Pablo Picasso, and Frida Kahlo are among those who invested significant energy in recording their own likeness. Indeed, popular myths that romanticize artists as a special category of people are fed by such representations.”<sup>32</sup> These romanticizing myths of specialty are part of the reason traditional art historical narratives are perpetuating colonial ideologies.

Focusing specifically on racial disparities within cultural institutions, and in art museums specifically, Bridget R. Cooks discusses the relationship of Black artists and representation in her book *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum*.<sup>33</sup> Cooks begins her book by introducing the history of Black artistry as “Negro” art in modern art museums, then

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<sup>29</sup> Jean Robertson, and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>33</sup> I have chosen to capitalize the term *Black* in relation to African American people of color throughout this thesis. Aside from my stylistic preference of this application, my intention behind capitalizing this term is to demonstrate my support for the reclamation of power to those that identify as such. Further, I have chosen to not capitalize the term *white* to further support my aforementioned statement of reclamation; as one of the main concepts of this thesis is to address the abuse of power held by white institutions, I do not feel it is necessary to capitalize the term *white* out of respect for those identifying as Black.

continues to further assess this relationship chronologically through time. Activism is addressed in the discussion of the 1969 exhibition *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as the historical importance of the 1976 exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Finally, returning to a more contemporary focus of representation, Cooks investigates the controversial art exhibition *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1994. In discussing the relationships that art museums have with diversity, Danielle Kwateng-Clark writes about the need to address colonialist-theft rather than solely focusing on diversity within the infrastructure. In her writing, she references MoMA specifically: “The very clear shift for inclusion in the [then] 89-year-old institution is a part of a growing conversation in the art world about representation and decolonization of traditionally white spaces. In recent years, the dialogue has come to include ownership over pop culture references, the return of stolen artifacts, and protesting of museums all over the globe.”<sup>34</sup> This statement was partially in response to the then upcoming renovation MoMA was anticipating. Leon Black, the Museum’s chairman, spoke with the *New York Times* and acknowledged MoMA’s relationship with the demographics of artists within their collection and gallery walls: “We don’t want to forget our roots in terms of having the greatest modernist collection but the Museum didn’t emphasize female artists, didn’t emphasize what minority artists were doing, and it was limited on geography. Those were always the exceptions, now they really should be part of the reality of the multicultural society we all live in.”<sup>35</sup> Although Black is addressing MoMA’s roots, as opposed

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<sup>34</sup> Danielle Kwateng-Clark, “Art Museums Need to Address Colonialist Theft – Not Diversity,” *Vice*, February 8, 2019, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/nexemx/moma-new-york-closing-inclusion](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/nexemx/moma-new-york-closing-inclusion).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

to making attempts at erasure of historical truths, the very roots he mentions are problematic in their nature. “Museums are colonial structures,” states Amin Husain, facilitator at Decolonize This Place, a grassroots activist collective.<sup>36</sup> This is not a recent realization, as Husain mentions in an interview: “We were at this moment, maybe in 2010, where across the world oppressed people are rising up, from Tunisia onward. During that moment, we saw renewed attention toward museums. People of color organized as arts and labor, and they were protesting in MoMA. People started looking at museums and art in the context of what is happening in Western civilization – that failed us – and [we’re] speaking up.”<sup>37</sup> This grassroots activism approach, among others, to defying the perpetuated colonialism found in museums is to be discussed at greater length in the following chapter.

Further relating specifically to MoMA, Griselda Pollock writes about the lack of women artists within the Museum’s galleries. *The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women*, published by the Museum itself, explains how historical events are always the effect of many determinations and relations rather than the product of individual initiatives: “It is, however, the very contradiction between the undoubtedly influential role of certain women in founding and shaping MoMA and the vision of modern art that the Museum disseminated – which radically *disappeared* the equally vital and visible role of women in *making* that modernist art, as artists – that we have to explore and reframe.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Danielle Kwateng-Clark, “Art Museums Need to Address Colonialist Theft – Not Diversity,” *Vice*, February 8, 2019, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/nexemx/moma-new-york-closing-inclusion](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/nexemx/moma-new-york-closing-inclusion).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Griselda Pollock, “The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women,” in *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 33.

Finally, it isn't merely scholars that are discussing this unrest and need for change; critics and fellow museum- and art-related persons are also commenting on the social issue of reshaping museums. The 2019 summer edition of *ARTNews* has focused entirely on "Reshaping the American Museum," with articles discussing repatriation, new ways to curate exhibits, protests at museums around the world and the relationship between art and empathy. Additionally, MoMA specifically has been under watch and actively discussed due to the recent building reconstruction and gallery rehangings. Accredited news sources, such as the *New York Times*, have written multiple articles detailing the process, proclaiming anticipations and evaluating the results post re-opening. Some sources refer to the renovation as merely a "makeover," reflecting on the fine attention to detail as seen with the newly abundant spread of natural light and the new stairwells "lined with wood panels that are micro-perforated," allowing sound to be absorbed.<sup>39</sup> Other commentaries were less complimentary of the renovation, citing issues that were clearly not addressed. I was provided the opportunity to evaluate the galleries at MoMA in person both prior to its closing over the summer as well as after the renovations were complete. The fourth chapter in this thesis elaborates on my findings in greater detail.

## Methodology

Two different areas of theory are used in this critique of MoMA's attempt at decolonization. The first theoretical lens employs ideologies from Tony Bennett's museological studies, of which concepts of power are applicable. Bennett draws upon Foucauldian concepts of institutional articulations of power and knowledge relations, and states that museums should not be discounted from this grouping.<sup>40</sup> In *The Birth of the Museum* Bennett also discusses the

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<sup>39</sup> Sara Kugel, "NYC's Museum of Modern Art gets a makeover," *CBS News*, October 6, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/moma-new-york-city-museum-of-modern-art-gets-a-makeover/?fbclid=IwAR1ZRSQmB9J42o2WEBzPoNe03AG3XUeB9QHQMcf3HIEZk8U6r6X4qE47vM>.

<sup>40</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 59.

political-discursive space of museums, in which he provides a pair of contradictions that he aims to use as a dismantling of the museum space by establishing a new set of relations between the museum, its exhibits and the public, allowing it to function “more adequately as an instrument for the self-display of democratic and pluralistic societies.”<sup>41</sup> In addition to Bennett’s theories, more contemporary approaches to museum practice and policy are offered through the lens of institutional critique. Scholars and curators Aruna D’Souza and Maura Reilly are referenced frequently on this matter, as their professional efforts are aimed directly at museums and the multitude of errors and missteps that have occurred in the more recent years.

In the interest of moving forward in a progressive and proactive fashion, the second application of theory is demonstrated by referencing elements of intersectionality and critical race theory. It is important to contextualize aspects of decolonization within the field of intersectionality, as the two terms exist simultaneously and are directly correlated with one another. This correlation can be explained as described by scholar Patricia Hill Collins: “... intersectionality is a knowledge project of resistance that aims to bring about change.”<sup>42</sup> By drawing on Collins’ ideologies, as well as concepts developed by fellow contemporary scholars and theorists such as bell hooks, Carol Duncan, and Susan Cahan, aspects of intersectionality and critical race theory help to address and evaluate racial disparities from the past and present. Focusing on gender discrepancies within museums, Duncan has argued MoMA’s collection consists of recurrent images of sexualized female bodies, which in turn actively masculinizes the Museum as a social environment: “Silently and surreptitiously, [the female bodies] specify the

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<sup>41</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 102.

<sup>42</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 289.

Museum’s ritual of spiritual quest as a male quest, just as they mark the larger project of modern art as primarily a male endeavor.”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, Hill’s approach to intersectionality helps to draw connections to this gender disparity, while also incorporating hooks’ focus on Black representation and Cahan’s concepts of structural racism when looking to provide direction for the future of curatorial practice and museum exhibitions.

## Chapter Overviews

The second chapter of this thesis, titled “Museum Unrest: The Need for Change” begins by evaluating the historical background of the relationship between contemporary art institutions and the racial and gender disparities that have existed within their infrastructures. This section references data found in a demographic study completed by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that measured race and gender statistics of various employment positions within art museums over the span of four years. The following section addresses historical controversies surrounding exhibitions from art museums over the course of the last century, specifically referencing MoMA’s *Exhibition of Sculpture by William Edmondson* (1937), the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968* (1969), and the Whitney Museum of Art’s *Black Male: Representations of Black Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (1994). Additionally, more recent race-specific artworks that were displayed and exist as clear representations of cultural appropriation are then discussed, specifically Kelley Walker’s *Direct Drive* (2006) and Dana Schutz’s *Open Casket* (2016). The public reception and immediate critique of these works, as well as the subsequent institutional responses of these critiques are also evaluated. Finally, this chapter provides examples of public activism and protests (fig. 1-3) as a response to the need for change, through grassroots movements by activist

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<sup>43</sup> Carol Duncan, “The MoMA’s Hot Mamas,” *Art Journal* (Summer 1989): 172.

collectives like Decolonize This Place as well as individual artistic protests. Finally, the success of these movements offers insight to a new approach of displaying art by opposing the traditional art historical narratives that have long existed as partial cause for museum unrest and suggests shifting focus towards new art histories for better and more accurate representation of artists and cultures.

The third chapter, titled “Primitivism at MoMA” discusses the historical context of MoMA and includes commentary and critiques of past exhibitions. Created by three middle to upper class white women, MoMA has always considered itself as a contemporary institution, responding to respective contemporary narratives and events through the form of displaying art. Unfortunately, as genuine as the original conceptualization and aesthetic approach was, the Museum has fallen short multiple times since the opening of its doors. Specific areas of focus in this chapter are MoMA’s exhibitions *African Negro Art* (1935, fig. 4-5) and “*Primitivism*” in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984, fig. 6). The first exhibit featured objects from West and Central Africa, with little effort in organizing the artifacts in relation to their cultural significance, but rather by an obtuse grouping of similarly shaped objects and their value in relation to colonial modernisms.<sup>44</sup> Fifty years later, this same ignorant and offensive display was portrayed by reflecting on the concept of primitivism as an affinity to the modern genius that enabled artists like Picasso and Gauguin to take complete reign of modern art. Both of these exhibits are not appropriate representations of the contemporary approach to modern art they are so concerned with presenting. There have been multiple critiques of these exhibits over a variety of platforms due to the severity of the problematic nature of the exhibits. By addressing

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<sup>44</sup> Darby English, and Charlotte Barat, *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 19.



the controversy of those exhibits, the new attempts at decolonization can be situated within the framework of the conversation that museums collectively need to be having.

Finally, the fourth chapter “Modernizing MoMA: A Critique of Success” is dedicated to addressing MoMA’s primary efforts of decolonization based on the 2019 architectural renovation, in addition to the restructuring of their collection to better display and recontextualize specific works of art. Before undergoing the renovation process, MoMA published a collection of essays and plates entitled *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA* (fig. 7). This publication discusses the Museum’s controversial past, while providing visual and written information on Black artists found in their collection and is used as both a reference and a tool in my investigation into MoMA’s intentions towards inclusivity following the remodel. In addition to evaluating *Among Others*, two publications focused on their collection, *MoMA Highlights* and *MoMA NOW*, both of which are dedicated to featuring the works MoMA deems as their highlights, are analyzed. Following these evaluations, the focus of this chapter shifts to the renovation. The institution has publicly announced this renovative process as the beginning of a “new MoMA.” Lowry has stated: “The real value of this expansion is not more space, but space that allows us to rethink the experience of art in the Museum [and] together, we’ll explore the ideas that shape our culture and find inspiration in the art of our time.”<sup>45</sup> MoMA claims this complete renovation will strengthen the community by continuing and beginning new collaborations across the city, and essentially, the art community. Having returned from viewing the Museum in person post-re-opening, I analyze specific galleries that have been redesigned, such as *Artist’s Choice* (2019, fig. 9). I also discuss MoMA’s choice of the featured exhibits,

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<sup>45</sup> “A New MoMA,” Museum of Modern Art, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/about/new-moma>.

*Betye Saar: The Legends of Black Girl's Window* (2019, fig. 10-11) and *member:Pope.L (1978-2001)* (2019), as well as specific artworks, including Faith Ringgold's *American People Series #20: Die* (1967) and Louise Bourgeois' *Quarantania, I* (1947-53, reassembled by artist in 1981), that have been implemented in the newly reorganized gallery, *Around Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (2019, fig. 12-14). Finally, the common thread of MoMA's longstanding relationship with primitivism is brought to light and addressed in regard to the restructuring of their collection, assessing if the aforementioned changes have successfully demonstrated the Museum's efforts towards decolonization.

## Chapter Two: Museum Unrest: The Need for Change

This chapter begins by taking a perspective through the lens of institutional critique and situates MoMA's renovation within the realm of museum unrest by evaluating the historical background of the relationship between contemporary institutions and the racial and gender disparities that have long existed within their infrastructures. Subsequently, race-specific artworks displayed at other cultural institutions that exist as clear representations of appropriation are discussed, in addition to the public critique and institutional responses of these critiques. Alongside evaluating problematic artifacts displayed within institutions, I also provide examples of public activism and protests as a response to the need for change. The purpose of addressing museum unrest is equivalent to cultivating conversations about free speech, artistic freedom, censorship, racial justice and art's value.<sup>46</sup> By situating museum unrest from a historical perspective and within the current cultural climate, an effort towards a greater cultural shift can occur. We have entered a unique time in history, where awareness of modern civil rights movements are being brought to light and cultural criticism is becoming more widely discussed, and cultural institutions have an important role to play in this shift.

Addressing unrest is important as museums, even art museums, exist to serve a purpose of making and strengthening communities. But if the exhibitions open to the public are displaying flawed ideologies or showing acceptance of narrative misrepresentation, the community cannot be strengthened. According to Steven Lubar: "Communities define themselves in part by their 'objects of veneration,' the things that seem sacred, even an apple tree root, if it has a good story, and especially if it is preserved in a museum. Museums give

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<sup>46</sup> Aruna D'Souza, *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018), 12.

communities things to be proud of.”<sup>47</sup> Other types of museums, such as American and natural history museums, have always been comfortable with portraying a balance of both educational and economic useful work, ideological and practical educational outreach, and both applied research and pure scholarly endeavors.<sup>48</sup> Art museums, on the other hand, have existed as grounds for a deep-rooted debate about institutional purpose in the United States that came to a head just prior to the opening of MoMA’s doors in the early twentieth century.<sup>49</sup> The two points of debate were spearheaded by John Cotton Dana, founder of the Newark Museum, and Benjamin Ives Gilman, longtime secretary of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts (MFA); Dana chose to represent those who demanded museums be useful by meeting society’s needs, while Gilman argued for those that believe art is its own reward, and “that it is useful in its uselessness.”<sup>50</sup> Fellow colleague Theodore Low, the then-director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, supported Dana’s stance on the issue and argued for education being the only purpose for museums, because they strengthen “that thing which we like to call ‘the American Way of Life’.”<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, this “American Way of Life” is part of the problem, considering America’s foundation as a colonial establishment. However, while all of these arguments seemingly stem from good intentions of those involved, the best statement on this discussion comes from a critic of Low’s stance. Blanche Brown, a lecturer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, believed Low’s motives to be flawed based on the group of people that museums education was targeted towards, “the intellectual middle class”; she further argued that museums should

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<sup>47</sup> Steven Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 258.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

“learn that a public institution must not only build itself a house in a community, but must penetrate the lives, the ideas and ideals of the members of that community, so that the good things of cultural experience also may be democratically disseminated.”<sup>52</sup> Determining perspectives of museum leaders is crucial in evaluating intention. By understanding the demographics of chosen colleagues and desired audiences, it is easier to analyze why museums exhibit specific artifacts and artworks.

### **Employment Infrastructure Statistics**

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, along with the Association of Art Museum Directors and the American Alliance of Museums, partnered with Ithaka S+R in 2014 to undertake an effort to measure staff demographics of US art museums.<sup>53</sup> Ithaka S+R is a not-for-profit organization that provides research and strategic guidance to help the academic and cultural communities serve the public good and navigate economic, demographic and technological change.<sup>54</sup> The original report was released in 2015 and was used to determine findings of disparities between gender and race. Since the original report was released, the Mellon Foundation has invested in multiple initiatives to better help us understand the challenges museums face when working to diversify their staff, as well as how these statistics can help make museums more welcoming and accessible to people of color.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Steven Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 248.

<sup>53</sup> Mariët Westermann, Roger Schonfeld, and Liam Sweeney, “Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018,” The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, January 28, 2019, [https://mellon.org/media/filer\\_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf](https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf): 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

From the 2015 report, it was determined that the museum population was about ten percentage points more racially and ethnically homogenous than the US population, and that in the positions of curators, educators, conservators, and museum leadership there were further barriers to entry for people of color; people holding these positions were 84 percent white non-Hispanic, four percent African American, six percent Asian, three percent Hispanic, and three percent two or more races.<sup>56</sup> Further, based on current census projections, researchers established that by the year 2045 the US population will no longer have a white majority, as multiracial, Asian and Hispanic populations will continue to grow.<sup>57</sup> The report then reiterates the objective of this chapter: “While the US population is growing increasingly diverse, the positions that are most directly responsible for presenting, interpreting, and caring for art objects from all the world’s cultures over time are not yet reflecting that diversity.”<sup>58</sup> It is worth noting that which researchers described as a “bright spot in gender balance,” namely that women were found to make up a significant proportion of art museum staff. Unfortunately, there is still a higher proportion of male curators and museums leaders regarding other intellectual leadership positions.<sup>59</sup> This disproportion will ultimately be present in the subsequent study, with a disheartening and discouraging lack of change or progress when referencing racial disparities specifically. It is also worth noting that the report specifically mentions the reasoning for statistics being reported as binary, male and female options only, is due to the fact that 99 percent of contributors provided information in the form of binary demographics. Binary versus non-binary statistics are not included in my research, but I believe it deserves mentioning on the

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<sup>56</sup> Mariët Westermann, Roger Schonfeld, and Liam Sweeney, “Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018,” The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, January 28, 2019, [https://mellon.org/media/filer\\_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf](https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf): 2.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

basis that an area of interest for my research is inclusivity. Whether or not the numbers are significant should not matter in making the decision to report them; I hope that future records can provide proof of acceptance in the form of at least offering an “other” or non-binary option for employees to choose when collecting this information.

The second demographic survey was completed in 2018 and this iteration had a substantial number of institutions contribute comparatively. A total of 332 art museums participated, including 136 institutions that had also previously submitted their data in 2015, which yielded a collection of data for over 30,000 museum employees.<sup>60</sup> Once analyzed, this information sheds light on specific areas where gender and race disparities are occurring, ultimately acting as a part of the foundation for my research. Key findings from this report state that while museum leadership positions for women have grown five percent in the last four years, the management positions of curatorial roles are still around fifteen percentage points more male than non-management roles.<sup>61</sup> Further, although education and curatorial department museum staff have become more racially and ethnically diverse in the last four years, the conservation and museum leadership positions have not changed at all in regard to racial or ethnic diversity during this time.<sup>62</sup> Keeping gender and race/ethnicity as the two areas of focus, discrepancies vary but are still predominant in both areas. Not one area holds higher value over the other, as these discrepancies are highly prevalent for both areas universally within cultural institutions and further should not be compared. My intention with discussing these figures is to address the lack of representation for museum employees wherever it exists, in the hopes of

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<sup>60</sup> Mariët Westermann, Roger Schonfeld, and Liam Sweeney, “Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018,” The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, January 28, 2019, [https://mellon.org/media/filer\\_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf](https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf): 5

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

cultivating conversations about making progressive changes and bettering the environment in which the institutions serve their purpose.

The following statistics are from the 2018 report and should highlight areas within art museums that deserve attention and recognition for progression towards diversity and inclusivity. The overall demographic of female art museum employees grew minimally from 59 percent in 2015 to 61 percent in 2018; further, each department within the intellectual leadership positions increased, with the exception of the Education department by at least four percent.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, the Museum Leadership grouping, which includes executive positions, was significantly closer to an even split percentage and female representation still only reaches 62 percent in 2018, a mere five percent higher than the 57 percentile statistic from 2015.<sup>64</sup> As previously stated, it is not my agenda to proclaim one form of classification as having more value over the other; however, it must be stated that while the minuscule change established in gender discrepancies is discouraging, the ratio of statistics within the race and ethnicity study is vastly greater than the discrepancies in the gender groupings.

When evaluating race and ethnicity statistics, there was a four percent increase from 2015 to 2018; more importantly, however, that increase only raised the percentage of employees belonging to the people of color grouping to 28 percent.<sup>65</sup> A variation of these factors is further broken down into hiring statistics over the last four years. There is a larger increase of people of color being hired during this time, but this fact correlates with an overall increase of museum

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<sup>63</sup> Mariët Westermann, Roger Schonfeld, and Liam Sweeney, “Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018,” The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, January 28, 2019, [https://mellon.org/media/filer\\_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf](https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf): 8.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 9.



employees collectively. Of the 2,216 people hired in 2015, only 26 percent were people of color; this number did increase by a mere nine percent by 2018, but there was also 4,044 new hires that same year, which is a substantial increase of overall employees hired, further stifling the positive aspect of an increase in people of color being hired.<sup>66</sup> A deeper evaluation on these statistics includes the distribution of new hires amongst the non-white category; Black or African American hires were significantly higher than Asian and Hispanic hires, with very little Native or Indigenous hires between 2015 and 2018.<sup>67</sup>

And finally, there was an evaluation of the racial statistics within leadership positions. Perhaps not surprisingly, these disparities offer the greatest insight into the purpose of my research. While there was a five percent increase for people of color in these positions over the past four years, people of color only exist at a mere 20 percent of intellectual leadership positions from the 2018 statistics.<sup>68</sup> Even more staggering is the breakdown of specific positions within this category. The Education Department increased from 20 to 26 percent from 2015 to 2018, and that is the highest number of people of color amongst all four leadership departments; both of these percentages are notably about ten percent higher than the other three departments as well.<sup>69</sup> The Conservation Department and Museum Leadership sectors maintain the greatest disparities between white people and people of color. Positions within the Conservation realm only increased one percent over four years, maxing out at a mere eleven percent in 2018.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Mariët Westermann, Roger Schonfeld, and Liam Sweeney, “Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018,” The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, January 28, 2019, [https://mellon.org/media/filer\\_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf](https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf): 10.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Museum Leadership also reported the same one percent increase, and even that increase stops at twelve percent people of color, meaning the remaining 88 percent of Museum Leadership positions are held by white people.<sup>71</sup>

Growth through increase is positive change and is important to recognize, without a doubt. But it is also important to recognize the astounding continued discrepancies between positions of power being given to white people over people of color. The demographic survey concludes by stating this research “reveals more detail about the presence or absence of diversity in museums than was previously available, [and] while the overall gender composition remained static, a higher percentage of women now hold executive level positions than in 2015. [Unfortunately,] directorships remain majority male, and curatorial roles with management responsibilities are more likely to be staffed by men than those without management responsibilities.”<sup>72</sup> Further, the intention of completing this specific research can hopefully “inform strategy as leaders in the field work towards a more equitable and representative workforce.”<sup>73</sup> The final point of interest I would like to make in this segment is that during the research process for this survey, an advisory committee was established in order to help guide revisions and collection of information. Sixteen individuals were named in thanks for their contribution to this committee and the current director of MoMA, Glenn D. Lowry, was named as one of the committee members. I would have assumed that with its renowned status among cultural institutions, MoMA’s information would have been part of these statistics. I find it worth noting that Lowry made additional efforts towards establishing this information for the public,

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<sup>71</sup> Mariët Westermann, Roger Schonfeld, and Liam Sweeney, “Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018,” The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, January 28, 2019, [https://mellon.org/media/filer\\_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf](https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf): 11.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

and while the aforementioned disparities are immense, he has chosen to participate in the conversation, thus representing the Museum's interest in at least acknowledging this issue.

### **Historical Controversies: Exhibitions of Racial Misrepresentations**

Beyond underrepresentation within the employment infrastructure of museums, perhaps the more obvious lack of representation exists within the types of artifacts displayed in vitrines and the artists whose works are installed on the often-white walls of said institutions, in addition to the subjects of these works. The first area of focus in this portion of the chapter will be dedicated to offering a brief synopsis of infamous controversial exhibitions over the course of the last century, with a focus on more recent years. From that historical abridgment, I move on to discuss specific works that are notably three of the most recent works of art that were surrounded by controversy from the opening day of reception. All artworks offer specific aspects of appropriation and misrepresentation, lending insight to the method of institutional practice of selecting the works to be shown, the means of displaying the works, and the institutional response to public upset and unrest within the surrounding communities. By situating the three specific pieces to be discussed within the context of museum unrest, I offer further reiteration of the need for my research and the intent of my thesis. Misrepresentation is part of a greater, uncomfortable conversation that is built on the recursive history of lessons learned and forgotten when it comes to art, race and protest.<sup>74</sup> It is important to remember these shortcomings and further share the stories of the people associated with otherness that don't get told.

The induction of artworks by Black artists was first organized by two major American art museums, consisting of the *Exhibition of Sculpture by William Edmondson* (1937) at MoMA and

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<sup>74</sup> Aruna D'Souza, *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018), 12.

*Contemporary Negro Art* (1939) at the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA).<sup>75</sup> Bridget R. Cooks describes these two exhibitions as both addressing the role of the “Negro,” a term still used during the time of these exhibitions further establishing the lack of equality and acceptance of Black people, in the contemporary art world; the museums’ approaches to presenting this art offered contradictory functions.<sup>76</sup> She explains MoMA’s interpretation of Edmondson’s sculpture presented an opportunity to reconnect with America’s primitive soul, as opposed to BMA’s approach to Negro art as representation of “the development of a group of trained artists ready to take their place among the democratic ranks of contemporary American artists.”<sup>77</sup> This is one of the first, and most certainly not the last time that MoMA approaches artworks by artists that are not white or male and deems them inferior, or only of relevance based on a conservative art historical narrative that will be discussed shortly. The following chapter in Cooks’ *Exhibiting Blackness* addresses the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 1969 exhibit *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968*. This particular exhibit displayed Black culture not as a creative contributor to contemporary art, but rather as an ethnographic study.<sup>78</sup> Cooks establishes the curatorial decision to display African American people through “oversized photo-murals and to dismiss their input and artwork as unworthy of being in the museum,” causing the exhibit to become a site for “racial politics and debates about artistic quality and art versus culture in the United States.”<sup>79</sup> The Harlem art community met this decision with great and highly deserving critique, causing conflicts with the Met and the Harlem art community that Cooks categorizes as both political and aesthetic issues: “In spite of the directors’ intention to

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<sup>75</sup> Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 17.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

increase Black-white communication, what was most significant about *Harlem on My Mind* was not the exhibition itself, but the activism of the Black art communities in Harlem criticizing their omission. This community movement changed the discourse of Black art in mainstream American museum politics.”<sup>80</sup> The omission she is referring to involves the medium of artworks that were on display in this exhibit; the museum opted to only include photography, which at the time was not yet accepted by the art world to be a form of art, in addition to the images not accurately representing Harlem’s rich artistic community.<sup>81</sup>

Moving forward chronologically, the next widely discussed exhibition is the 1976 Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s (LACMA) *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. Making its way across the country to the Brooklyn Museum, this travelling exhibition received greater visibility and validation from the mainstream art world than any other group exhibition of work by Black artists, according to Cooks.<sup>82</sup> It is reported that this exhibition was referred to as “The Black Show” during its planning phases, and was a Black affirmation and political insertion into art history and race relations in Los Angeles at the time.<sup>83</sup> Critically, the concept was lost on existing art critics. For some, it was the first time they were faced with reviewing an art exhibition consisting solely of Black artists; one deplorable response to this show being a critic that complained because he believed the show contained “too much social history and therefore did not belong in a museum.”<sup>84</sup> The importance of the success of this particular show is the confrontational nature in which the exhibit forced a conversation about the claims of American art museums working towards acknowledging national diversity and racial conflict as an

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<sup>80</sup> Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 53-4.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

American reality and the demonstrative curatorial actions of continuing to maintain the hierarchy of white privilege on gallery walls.<sup>85</sup> Roughly ten years later, the infamous “*Primitivism*” show at MoMA was exhibited and is discussed in much greater detail in the following chapter of this thesis.

The final exhibition as a whole to be referenced is the 1994 exhibition *Black Male: Representations of Black Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, curated by Thelma Golden at the Whitney Museum of Art. Golden’s contribution to the *Whitney Biennial* the year before, which Cooks describes as the museum’s most diverse biennial at the time in terms of the race and gender disparities of the artists, seemed to be a source of inspiration.<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, the biennial show received reviews that appeared to demonstrate a lack of understanding or acceptance from the critical art world. Some reviews commented that the exhibition’s inclusiveness reduced the meaning of the artworks to “identity politics” without further exploring these issues.<sup>87</sup> These reviews didn’t stop Golden from curating *Black Male*, and she went on to develop an exhibition that explored the importance of how discussing gender, race, and sexuality informs representations of Black masculinity in the art world.<sup>88</sup> Rather than appreciate the exhibition and work towards accepting Golden’s curatorial efforts as worthy of existence without criticism or comparison, some cultural activists at the time noted the decision to omit Black women from the exhibition was upsetting; Devon W. Carbado specifically is quoted as stating: “Without a similar focus on Black women, Black men are perceived to be significantly more

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<sup>85</sup> Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 89.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

vulnerable and significantly more ‘endangered’ than Black women [thus becoming] the quintessential example of the effects of racial subordination.”<sup>89</sup>

The concept of racial subordination is a theme that American art museums have faced for over a century and are still coming face-to-face with in recent specific cases. The following three examples of appropriation, misrepresentation and museum unrest are all from within the past five years. Additionally, it is worth noting that I have chosen to intentionally not provide reference images of these artworks; I believe it is more important to discuss the problematic nature of the images in the context of the institutions than it is to provide visual reference, which I believe further perpetuates the acceptance that the institutions were hoping for upon first installing the works. The first artwork to be discussed is that of Kelley Walker’s 2016 *Direct Drive* exhibit. Walker, notably a white man, was featured in St. Louis’ Contemporary Art Museum and the exhibition was the largest comprehensive examination of the artist’s work to date.<sup>90</sup> The larger than life artworks involved series of images containing Black men enduring acts of police brutality, alongside images of Black women from objectifying magazine covers, both smeared with chocolate and toothpaste respectively. Although I cannot, and will not, claim one of these series as being more offensive than the other, it was Walker’s *Black Star Press (rotated 90 degrees)* that propelled the critical response from St. Louis natives into the PR storm that was reported and ultimately forced both Walker and the Museum’s director to publicly apologize. The images of police brutality, merely rotated as if slightly rotating a horrific image lessens the traumatizing experience for viewers, were silkscreened with melted white, milk, and dark

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<sup>89</sup> Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 115.

<sup>90</sup> Brian Boucher, “Artist’s Depiction of Police Brutality Sparks Boycott at St. Louis Museum,” *Artnet*, September 23, 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kelley-walker-st-louis-cam-boycott-667172>.

chocolate, further manipulating, masking and partially censoring the acts of police brutality, ultimately altering the power dynamics between the subjects in the images.<sup>91</sup> This was already a sensitive time for the citizens of the St. Louis area, as the show's opening was almost exactly two years after police shot and killed the unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown in the nearby town of Ferguson. Calling for removal of the works, several Black employees of the museum declared the artwork to be "untimely and insensitive" and that displaying this artwork "triggers a retraumatization of racial and regional pain... [positioning] the museum and its staff in implicit support and perpetuation of these societal ills."<sup>92</sup> Even after much public resistance and internal debate among those staffed at the museum, *Kelley Walker: Direct Drive* remained installed until its scheduled end date.

The second artifact to be discussed is Sam Durant's *Scaffold* (2017), which was installed only a few hours away in Minneapolis at the Walker Art Center. This particular piece was similarly life-size, adding to the negative effect of viewers that found it offensive based on its nature. The two-story structure was installed in the Sculpture Garden of Walker Art Center, and represented the gruesome setting of seven executions, including the hanging of 38 Dakota Indian men in Minnesota after the United States-Dakota war in 1862.<sup>93</sup> From an institutional perspective, a multitude of staff members were leaving the museum for both practical reasons and supposed issues with demanding hours and expectations from the Museum's executive director at the time, Olga Viso.<sup>94</sup> It was also noted by multiple people that this same director was not always open to criticism or warnings that could have prevented *Scaffold* from even being

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<sup>91</sup> Boucher, "Artist's Depiction of Police Brutality," *Artnet*.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Sheila M. Eldred, "Walker Art Center's Reckoning With 'Scaffold' Isn't Over Yet," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/arts/design/walker-art-center-scaffold.html>.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*



considered to be shown and then installed.<sup>95</sup> Protests of the installation ultimately forced the museum to delay the opening of the newly renovated Sculpture Garden, and both Viso and Durant issued public apologies; the steel from the installation was recycled and the wood was given to the Dakotas and will ultimately be buried under a plan reviewed by elders of the tribe.<sup>96</sup>

The final and perhaps most controversial artwork is the painting by white female artist Dana Schutz depicting the imagery of Emmett Till's brutally lynched body in his coffin. The 2016 piece titled *Open Casket* was featured in the 2017 *Whitney Biennial*. Described as "modest in scale, muted in color, and less overtly cartoonish than is typical for Schutz" by Aruna D'Souza, the showing of *Open Casket* is studied as a huge turning point in the conversation about art institutions, the type of artworks deemed worthy of display, and questions of censorship.<sup>97</sup> Essentially, D'Souza evaluated public response across social media and other communication platforms, and tracked the progression of collective conversation on why this particular piece had such an effect, and the subsequent value of this uprising. She states: "What started with questions around a single painting by a single artist in a single exhibition turned into a national public debate over the fundamental questions that bind culture and society: who art is for, socially speaking; what are the responsibilities of art institutions to their audience and artists' to theirs; who is granted the right to speak and paint freely; and what censorship is and who has the power to censor."<sup>98</sup> This evaluation is witnessed most heavily in the process of discussing this particular artwork. But these questions and conversations have and will continue to arise on a larger scale, and for good reason.

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<sup>95</sup> Sheila M. Eldred, "Walker Art Center's Reckoning With 'Scaffold' Isn't Over Yet," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/arts/design/walker-art-center-scaffold.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> D'Souza, *Whitewalling*, 16.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

## Taking the Power Back: Acts of Protest and Activism

The aforementioned pieces and exhibitions did not go unnoticed or get erased once viewed by groups of people within their respective communities. In a time of advanced technological abilities, mass communication efforts to reach broader communities across the world are much easier to accomplish. It is in part because of this advancement that the first act of progressive action to be discussed has been able to collect and organize followers and news coverage of their grassroots movement. New York-based groups MTL Collective and Decolonize This Place, founded by activist and adjunct professor Amin Husain and fellow artist Nitasha Dhillon, were formed as a response to collective socio-economic inequality, gentrification and colonialist penchants found within a multitude of cultural institutions and governmental practices around the world. Decolonize This Place, hereto after referred to as DTP, is the specific movement of focus in this section, but both collectives have made great efforts and have had huge impact within the world of protest.

The collective foundation of their movement efforts is based on defending Indigenous rights, Black liberation and Palestinian nationalism, and their acts of protest are often aimed and staged at various museums within New York City.<sup>99</sup> DTP was first organized as a call to action at the Brooklyn Museum's 2016 simultaneous exhibitions *This Place* and *AgitProp!; This Place* was a photography exhibition that stood to portray the Israel and Palestine conflict in a "neutral" light, and the *Agitprop!* exhibition was intended "to connect contemporary art devoted to social change with historic moments in creative activism," according to the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>100</sup> The DTP collective found this pairing of exhibits to be problematic, and wanted to take this

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<sup>99</sup> Decolonize This Place," *Decolonize This Place*, accessed March 19, 2019, <https://www.decolonizethisplace.org>.

<sup>100</sup> "Agitprop!," Brooklyn Museum, accessed January 13, 2020, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/agitprop>.

connection one step further by applying the concept of colonization existing in the Brooklyn area to that of Palestine, and placed gentrification in the context of “historical and ongoing mechanisms of displacement, dispossession, genocide and transfer of wealth upwards.”<sup>101</sup> This action included an unauthorized assembly, tour and re-labelling of artworks.<sup>102</sup>

Another large area of focus for this grassroots organization focuses on interrogating sources of funding and removing problematic trustees and those belonging to other authoritative positions within cultural institutions. Two years after their first protest at the Brooklyn Museum, DTP returned after it was announced in 2018 that a white female curator was hired to oversee the Museum’s African Art collection.<sup>103</sup> According to DTP’s website: “The public controversy revolved around the identity of the curator, and matters of diversity and inclusion in the staffing of the Museum”; further, “this framing of the situation served to distract from the deeper structural injustices at the Museum, including the colonial provenance of the Museum’s collection, and the ongoing presence of oligarchs on the board who are implicated in the displacement and dispossession of the communities at the Museum’s doorstep.”<sup>104</sup> DTP was quick to request solutions to this issue as well, by demanding the Museum form a “Decolonization Commission” whose primary purpose would be to help the institution address its “role in the histories of colonialism and white supremacy.”<sup>105</sup> This proposition warranted a response from the Museum; the director, Anne Pasternak, issued a statement agreeing that the

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<sup>101</sup> “Brooklyn Museum, We Await Your Response to the Call For Decolonization Commission,” *Decolonize This Place*, accessed January 13, 2020, <https://decolonizethisplace.org/bk-museum>.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Alex Greenberger, “‘Brooklyn Is Not for Sale’: Decolonize This Place Leads Protest at Brooklyn Museum,” *ARTnews*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/brooklyn-not-sale-decolonize-place-leads-protest-brooklyn-museum-10230/>.

Museum needs to take accountability for the issues DTP has been addressing, although she also noted these issues are deeply rooted in a number of American museums: “Please know that every day the Brooklyn Museum is working to advance these efforts and its longstanding and widely recognized commitment to equity in all its forms, including race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.”<sup>106</sup>

A few months after the assembly at the Brooklyn Museum, DTP took their protests to the Whitney Museum, focusing specifically on the vice chair of the Museum’s board, Warren B. Kanders. During November 2018, it was revealed in a *Hyperallergic* report that Kanders also has ownership of a company called Safariland, which is responsible for manufacturing tear gas canisters and other products that have been used against asylum seekers along the US-Mexico border.<sup>107</sup> Not only did outside protest from groups like DTP occur, but additionally 95 of the Whitney’s staff members signed an open letter that urged the Museum to consider asking for Kanders’ resignation.<sup>108</sup> This specific issue of concern lasted for months, and was ultimately brought to attention at a town hall meeting at Cooper Union in New York the following January. Banners reading “DECOLONIZE THIS MUSEUM” (fig. 1), amongst others specifically naming Kanders, were paraded around by fellow protesters. The intent of DTP’s action at this meeting was to reiterate that Kanders’ presence at the Whitney “relates not only to contemporary happenings along the US-Mexico border” but that it is perhaps more importantly “connected to histories of colonialism, sexism, racism and oppression.”<sup>109</sup> Additionally, founding member of DTP, Amin Husain is quoted as making reference to Kanders’ position at the Museum being

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<sup>106</sup> Greenberger, ““Brooklyn Is Not for Sale”” *ARTnews*.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

similar to that of other board members at museums around the world: “We know the Whitney is not an exception. We know it’s happening everywhere.”<sup>110</sup>

In addition to grassroots collectives like DTP, individual artists are also taking a stand against museums’ curatorial choices and accompanying means of displaying information. In 2018, Chicago-based artist Michelle Hartney created her own form of artistic protest by creating a series of placards and then installing them directly adjacent to existing placards at well-known art institutions, such as the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This series, titled *Separate the Art from the Artist*, was completed without asking permission from the museums and included the placards themselves, as well as photographs of herself installing them (fig. 2). Her intent with this series is to address the crucial information that is often withheld from infamous works of art. Specific examples in her project include addressing Picasso’s description of women existing as machines for suffering; Balthus, who was known to sexualize prepubescent girls; and Gauguin, a pedophile who had three child brides in Tahiti during his formative years.<sup>111</sup> Quoting Roxane Gay, one of her placards reads: “We can no longer worship at the altar of creative genius while ignoring the price all too often paid for that genius. In truth, we should have learned this lesson long ago, but we have a cultural fascination with creative and powerful men who are also ‘mercurial’ or ‘volatile,’ with men who behave badly.”<sup>112</sup> Interestingly, and in opposition of some protesters’ demands for specific works to be removed from exhibitions entirely, Hartney believes that controversial artworks should remain

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Nadja Sayej, “The art world tolerates abuse’ - the fight to change museum wall labels,” *The Guardian*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/nov/28/the-art-world-tolerates-abuse-the-fight-to-change-museum-wall-labels>.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

on display, with the caveat that education and presentation of truth can be a powerful moment that will show “how long the patriarchy has ruled over women.”<sup>113</sup>

Other museums are beginning to shed light on these efforts by revising existing labels within their own institutional walls. The Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts, as well as the MFA in Boston, have added wall labels that address artworks with images regarding slavery and pedophilic drawings, respectively.<sup>114</sup> The Worcester Art Museum has installed labels addressing specific portraits of figures with ties to slavery, claiming: “These paintings depict the sitters as they wish to be seen – their best selves – rather than simply recording appearance. Yet, a great deal of information is effaced in these works, including the sitters’ reliance on chattel slavery, often referred to as America’s ‘peculiar institution’. Many of the people represented here derived wealth and social status from this system of violence and oppression, which was legal in Massachusetts until 1783 and in regions of the United States until 1865.”<sup>115</sup>

The aforementioned controversy surrounding Schutz’s painting of Emmett Till also warranted an edited placard from the Whitney. As previously mentioned, the curators decided to keep the painting installed and opted to reference the controversy in the placard, stating: “This painting has been at the center of a heated debate around questions of cultural appropriation, the ethics of representation, the political efficacy of painting and the possibilities or limitations of empathy.”<sup>116</sup> One artist’s approach to the continued installment of this specific work is that of Parker Bright, a New York-based Black artist who has made part of his artistic mission to combat appropriation and misrepresentation. His initial action against Schutz’s painting involved

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<sup>113</sup> Sayej, “The art world tolerates abuse” *The Guardian*, November 28, 2018.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

wearing a shirt that read “Black Death Spectacle” while standing directly in front of the painting in the museum (fig. 3). Bright’s main issue with Schutz’s work, among many, involves the artistic technical representation of Till’s horrific experience and portrayal of his final imagery: “I told people they could go Google search Emmett Till’s open casket and see a more impactful image that doesn’t simplify or reduce or flatten Till’s body. I was more interested in having people confront a living, breathing Black body as opposed to one that didn’t really have a choice.”<sup>117</sup> Part of Bright’s response included recreating his own painting of the imagery displayed in fig. 3. By painting himself witnessing the appropriation, with the added perspective of his direct and contending written message, he is able to reclaim the context of this specific artwork. Scholar and ethics philosopher Lynne Tirrell explains this act of reclamation as one of two approaches to derogatory verbiage and imagery; the other approach being that of absolutism. “Both the Absolutist and the Reclaimer seek to break the power of oppressive category terms, but they have different strategies for doing so. ... The reclaimer wants to disarm the power of these terms and images by internal reorganization – by effecting semantic change – rather than by imposing external sanctions.”<sup>118</sup> Bright’s “Black Death Spectacle” shirt and subsequent painting of himself wearing said shirt is a direct example of this form of reclamation.

Bright’s efforts of artistic protest are also an exact approach to institutional critique; an approach that supports this form of critique from the perspective of a fellow artist-activist, Hans Haacke. Haacke is widely known for his contemporary approach to institutional critique in the form of identifying flaws in the social and political systems surrounding the art world, with a

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<sup>117</sup> Anya Jaremko-Greenwold, “Protesters Block, Demand a Removal of a Painting of Emmett Till at the Whitney Biennial,” *Hyperallergic*, March 22, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/367012/protesters-block-demand-removal-of-a-painting-of-emmett-till-at-the-whitney-biennial/>.

<sup>118</sup> Lynne Tirrell, “Aesthetic derogation: hate speech, pornography, and aesthetic contexts,” in *Aesthetics and ethics: Essays at the intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 286-8.

specific focus on financial aspects of institutions. Additionally, aforementioned fellow scholar and critic D'Souza reflects on writings about Haacke's artistic activism, reiterating one of the crucial insights of Haacke's work: precisely that there is no "outside" to the art world; artists cannot exist in an antagonistic relationship to the institutions of art because artists are an integral variable to the institutions of art.<sup>119</sup> D'Souza continues by stating: "Art does not exist as a social concept outside its institutionalization. And so it follows that even protesting a museum exhibition is still a form of participation since the gesture takes meaning from its relation to the art world."<sup>120</sup> She further references Haacke's protests in relation to his work still being shown in museums whose boards were overseen by "dubious trustees" that openly receive funding from controversial conglomerates such as BP or Philip Morris.<sup>121</sup> However, that is part of the point of Haacke's work: "Haacke has advocated protest as a means of changing the conditions of the field in which he operates. His approach reflects not so much a politics of refusal as an insistence on radical transparency, a position that is strengthened when established from within the museum."<sup>122</sup> This same approach is that of Bright; his reclamation of Black experience and continued efforts of creating artworks depicting the protesting of appropriative works is from the omnipresent inside of the art world.

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<sup>119</sup> Aruna D'Souza, "What Can We Learn From Institutional Critique?," *Art in America*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/hans-haacke-new-museum-retrospective-institutional-critique-63666/>.

<sup>120</sup> Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 413.

<sup>121</sup> Aruna D'Souza, "What Can We Learn From Institutional Critique?," *Art in America*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/hans-haacke-new-museum-retrospective-institutional-critique-63666/>.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*



### **Shifting Intentionality: The Fight for New Art Histories**

The need to address unrest and decolonization via protest and grassroots activism is due to the underlying issues with institutions still hailing specific artists as genius, without presenting accurate background information on their artistic endeavors being praised at the expense and appropriation of Others. These same artists and this same conservative art historical narrative, rather than a new art historical narrative, are still prevalent in MoMA's galleries, as well as many other renowned art institutes across the world. Esteemed feminist scholar Carol Duncan establishes the first approach to disparities within museums by addressing the history of modern art and artists. In her *Civilizing Rituals* chapter dedicated to the various aspects of modern art museums, aptly titled "The Modern Art Museum: It's a man's world," Duncan sheds light on this historical narrative as it is generally understood within our societal standards, claiming it to be a highly selective history.<sup>123</sup> Further, the shaping of this narrative extends beyond those in charge of the space within the white walls of museums, for "it is a cultural construct that is collectively produced and perpetuated by all those professionals who work in art schools, universities, museums, publishing houses, and any other place where modern art is taught, exhibited, or interpreted."<sup>124</sup> Debatably, the institutions that exist outside of museums all have different intentionalities and purposes so it is understandable that perspectives and approaches can vary. Yet outside of these differences, perhaps it is the responsibility of museums as beacons of knowledge and their power to educate that should establish their position as representative leaders of accurate narratives and historical truths. Unfortunately, as Duncan asserts, it is of utmost importance to address the fact that the world of art professionals is enormously

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<sup>123</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 102.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

fragmented and often fails to arrive at any simple or clear consensus about the history of modern art.<sup>125</sup> Within the last thirty or forty years, small efforts of change have occurred through the creation, accreditation and application of various theories attempting to establish a “new art history.”<sup>126</sup> Although this institutional critical uproar has continued to grow and stem from larger groups of activists, the continuation of teaching familiar narratives of unfolding genius and formal development still reigns supreme in the daily practices of Anglo-American academic realms.<sup>127</sup> These familiar narratives continue to feature the usual Great Artists, whose work maintains their relevancy within a vaguely-kept historical background that is “far away enough so as not to interfere with the autonomy and universality of art, but near enough to supply occasional iconographic themes (when needed).”<sup>128</sup> This continued reiteration of the importance of these Great Artists establishes the purported challenge for establishing a new art history; subsequently, the same challenge also exists for the cultural institutions that are responsible for adapting and displaying this new approach.

The pressure on art museums to exist as leaders of this mission is not lost during their curatorial efforts, but there are also outside variables that add to this navigation of narratives. According to Duncan, it is not surprising that new art histories have gained little visible ground within public art museums, as they are mediating institutions situated between academic and critical communities on one side and simultaneously facing trustees, the museum-going public, and even sometimes state officials on the other side, all of whom expect museums to confirm their own respective beliefs about art.<sup>129</sup> Duncan describes this situational placement of public

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<sup>125</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 102.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

art museums as “caught in the middle; ... curatorial staffs may share many views of their academic colleagues, but the government-supported and/or tax-free public institutions in which they work are under pressure to present forms of knowledge that have recognizable meaning and value for a broader community. They are expected to augment and reinforce the community’s collective knowledge about itself and its place in the world, and to preserve the memory of its most important and generally accepted values and beliefs.”<sup>130</sup> In our colonized society, these accepted values and beliefs translate into the conservative art historical narratives we are so desperately trying to reevaluate, reclaim and ultimately reshape. “This is not to maintain that Eurocentric art is not worthy of dissemination in the culture at large; but rather to point out that there is much other ethnic art that is already out in the surrounding society and has an even greater claim to be brought into existing art institutions and appreciated on its own terms. The idea that formalist art should hold a preeminent place in the absolute scale of values, and so appropriate preeminent space in our ethnically and socioeconomically variegated cultural scheme, is another ideological fiction, generated by existing art institutions, that is difficult to justify objectively.”<sup>131</sup> Further, regarding the ethical practice of art history, the importance of calling out the ironic historical inaccuracies of white supremacists’ dangerous, ideological misappropriations of the Middle Ages is not, however, an end goal in itself. These incidents have been a call to action for historians of antiquity and the Middle Ages, making clear that we need to reshape our view of the past, in order to reshape the public’s view.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 103.

<sup>131</sup> Adrian Piper, “Power Relations Within Existing Art Institutions,” in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 272.

<sup>132</sup> Karen Overbey, “Towards the Ethical Practice of Art History,” Material Collective, August 31, 2018, <http://thematerialcollective.org/towards-the-ethical-practice-of-art-history/>.

One approach to embracing new art histories involves the precarious concept of deaccessioning artworks. The Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) has established guidelines specifically addressing the act of deaccessioning artifacts, and subsequent circumstances that allow for this process. For example, art can be deaccessioned if it is “determined to be false or fraudulent.”<sup>133</sup> This has rarely been the basis of recent deaccessioning, however. One of the more recent causes for museums to deaccession work has been based on financial dispositions. Roughly six years ago, the Delaware Art Museum received grave criticism by the AAMD for selling a small handful of paintings from its collection in an attempt to gain more funding for a desired building renovation and to replenish its endowment.<sup>134</sup> This specific motivation for deaccessioning goes against one of the main guidelines established by the AAMD: “The proceeds from the sale or funds from the deaccession can only be used to buy other works of art. The principle for us is that works of art shouldn’t be considered liquid assets to be converted into cash; they’re records of human creativity that are held in the public trust.”<sup>135</sup> A similar instance was found to be under discussion at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). Upon declaring bankruptcy in 2013, the city was required to disclose all of its assets, and it was determined the city’s most valuable asset was the art collection at the DIA. Ultimately, no work was deaccessioned as Michigan’s attorney general claimed, “the art cannot be sold because it’s a public trust.”<sup>136</sup>

The process of deaccessioning can also occur regardless of dire financial circumstances. Some museums have taken steps towards a greater acceptance of artists belonging to

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<sup>133</sup> Elizabeth Blair, “As Museums Try To Make Ends Meet, ‘Deaccession’ Is The Art World’s Dirty Word,” NPR, August 11, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/08/11/339532879/as-museums-try-to-make-ends-meet-deaccession-is-the-art-worlds-dirty-word>.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

underrepresented and marginalized groups in the form of deaccessioning larger, more monetarily valuable works. Most recently known for this radical act of diversifying their collection is the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA). In 2018, the museum was in the process of selling off seven works from its collection, including pieces by Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and other “20<sup>th</sup> century titans,” otherwise identifiable as white male artists.<sup>137</sup> The sum of these sales was expected to exceed twelve million dollars, and was intended “to fund future acquisitions of cutting-edge contemporary art, specifically by women and artists of color.”<sup>138</sup> This move was described as “absolutely transformative” by the museum’s director, Christopher Bedford: “[the] collection has woefully underrepresented non-white artists, and African American artists in particular. [This move] comes at a historically significant moment, in that the most important artists working today, in my view, are Black Americans.”<sup>139</sup>

This last example of deaccessioning is one extreme approach to the issue of traditional art historical narratives, and it is seemingly too radical of an approach for MoMA to take. Considering the fact that two of their largest renovations within the last few decades have been massive multimillion-dollar projects, they don’t appear to be in dire need of financial support. This leaves the idea of deaccessioning to be dedicated to obtaining newer works by most likely lesser-known artists. This is highly unlikely to happen as MoMA is known for displays of “modern genius,” therefore it wouldn’t be in their best interest to make such drastic changes. However, part of the power held by cultural institutions is the tiered, hierarchal gallery structure. Artists are highly aware of this structuring, and the effect it has on the process of accessioning

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<sup>137</sup> Julia Halperin, “‘It Is an Unusual and Radical Act’: Why the Baltimore Museum Is Selling Blue-Chip Art to Buy Works by Underrepresented Artists,” *Artnet*, April 30, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/market/baltimore-museum-deaccession-1274996>.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

new works. As the ultimate decider in the accessioning process, the institutions themselves are solely responsible for making the desired change in this process; no one else has this power.

### **MoMA's Art History: Fixed or Moving Forward?**

The importance of this effort toward new art histories is specifically relevant to MoMA based on the very foundation of the Museum's existence: modernism. Duncan refers to the central narrative of twentieth-century art as "the narrative of modernism" and further proclaims this narrative to be "remarkably fixed."<sup>140</sup> This fixed status of modernism is evident throughout the Museum's history of exhibitions, curatorial efforts, and publications since its inception. The Museum was created in 1929 by three middle to upper class white women; Lillie P. Bliss, Mary Quinn Sullivan, and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.<sup>141</sup> It was established as one of the first art institutions in the United States to be solely dedicated to the exhibition of modern art and has always considered itself as a contemporary institution, responding to respective contemporary narratives and events through the form of displaying art. As aspirational and enthusiastic as its founders were at the time, they were essentially starting an institution from scratch, in a realm of new and critical approaches to art history. Complete freedom could be perceived as an advantage, and seemingly allowed the founding director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., to shape the operations and intentions of the Museum accordingly. Barr, in regard to the Museum entering uncharted territory, is quoted as conceiving the collection to be "a torpedo moving through time, its nose the ever advancing present, its tail the ever receding past of 50 to 100 years ago."<sup>142</sup> MoMA has undoubtedly maintained its emphatic passage through time, and much like the

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<sup>140</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 103.

<sup>141</sup> MoMA through Time: Three Women Have a Vision," Museum of Modern Art, accessed May 15, 2019, [https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma\\_through\\_time/1920/three-women-have-a-vision/](https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma_through_time/1920/three-women-have-a-vision/).

<sup>142</sup> Museum of Modern Art, "MoMA through Time: Starting (a Collection) from Scratch," accessed May 15, 2019, [https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma\\_through\\_time/1920/starting-a-collection-from-scratch/](https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma_through_time/1920/starting-a-collection-from-scratch/).

“torpedo” it was intended to be, has endured grave consequences of heavy critique after multiple dispositions and controversial exhibitions. Even within its first decades of existence, the very nature of a “modern art” museum faced public criticism, much of which stemmed from journalist-as-art-critic perspectives and concerned the nature and validity of modernism.<sup>143</sup> Barr continued to address stigmatic inquisitions of modern art by producing a series of five exhibitions, beginning with *Cubism and Abstract Art*, among other exhibits dedicated to the “Masters of Modern Art.”<sup>144</sup> It is within this championship quote that the focus of this chapter is situated; while the ebb and flow of a newly developed institution will likely encounter sociopolitical fumbles, repeated oversight of accurate representations and disregard for otherness has perpetuated MoMA’s relationship with Eurocentrism and the continued objectification of women.

One of the most infamous works by an acknowledged “master” of modern art is Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O.J.)* (1911). This work in particular makes a recurring appearance throughout my research. MoMA acquired this work in 1939 and has continued to recontextualize the controversy surrounding this piece by regularly relocating it after various renovations and reorganizations of the Museum’s collection, in addition to frequently making reference to the work as one of the Museum’s greatest acquisitions. It has regularly been placed adjacent to other modern works, as well as existing as the focal point of the room it was last installed in prior to the 2019 renovation. There will be more discussion on the context of this particular piece later in my thesis. My intention with the current reference to this piece is regarding the lack of

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<sup>143</sup> Jennifer Tobias, “Messing with MoMA: Critical Interventions at the Museum of Modern Art, 1939-Now,” *Post: Notes on Modern & Contemporary Art Around the Globe*, May 26, 2016, [https://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/804-messing-with-moma-critical-interventions-at-the-museum-of-modern-art-1939-now](https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/804-messing-with-moma-critical-interventions-at-the-museum-of-modern-art-1939-now).

<sup>144</sup> “MoMA through Time,” Museum of Modern Art, accessed May 15, 2019, [https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma\\_through\\_time/](https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma_through_time/).

representation of female artists, in addition to representation of artists with non-white ethnicities, that are regularly shown at MoMA. In the defense of female artists deserving their own MoMA retrospectives, an article published in 2015 addresses the lack of women artists in the collection and on the walls. After detailing the then-upcoming roster of shows consisting of primarily white male artists, the Museum is referred to as “NYC’s palace [a problematic term in itself] of modern art [that] will be ogling over male artists, and a lot of them. Of course, this isn’t a new trend; it’s hard to ignore the numbers, stats that consistently tell us that women artists are underrepresented in major museums and galleries.”<sup>145</sup> Further, the power plays described as “‘circumstances’ [that] don’t seem to be changing fast enough” calls for the author to ask the main question on this issue: “where are all the women artists of color?”<sup>146</sup>

Additionally, the position of women within the Museum can be found in the art, rather than read on the accompanying didactic; for so long, women have been the classic or ideal subject of portraiture and other artistic settings to portray, but without proper identity. Rather, they are often only represented by their anatomy, in addition to being characterized as “tarts, prostitutes, artists’ models, and low-life entertainers.”<sup>147</sup> Duncan addresses this discrepancy in MoMA’s collection, stating representations of female artists remain merely non-existent, while the number of representations of female anatomy and caricature is staggering.<sup>148</sup> Rather than displaying artworks by female artists that represent the female figure and narrative, the notion of

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<sup>145</sup> Katherine Brooks, “11 Women Artists Who Should Have Their Own MoMA Retrospectives,” *HuffPost*, August 11, 2015, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/11-women-artists-who-should-have-their-own-moma-retrospectives-now\\_n\\_55b23c1de4b0a13f9d1826e1](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/11-women-artists-who-should-have-their-own-moma-retrospectives-now_n_55b23c1de4b0a13f9d1826e1).

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 111.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.



the male gaze reigns supreme and perpetuates the idea that these so-called Great Artists of modern art were and are, in fact, only men.

Like many museums, if not most, MoMA claims to be universal, objective and neutral. However, in all actuality, this is not the case. Based on the nature of modern art, the Museum is wedded to the methodology of formalism. The Grand Narrative, or traditional art histories as previously described, is tied to abstraction and the practice of displaying artwork that is removed from direct social issues. Focusing solely on aspects of formalism can be perceived as a sort of strategy for avoiding controversy. The combination of these issues, along with the various actions MoMA has taken during past renovations, alludes to a struggle of identity within the Museum itself; it is being forced to recognize its issue with identity in postmodernity. How can a museum of modern art exist without controversy or acknowledgement of certain issues? Those that benefit from Eurocentric ideologies are the very same audience members that are statistically decreasing, and demographics are hugely determinate of an institution's social standing. In order to maintain desired statistics, and perhaps more importantly relevancy, all demographics need to be served. Without serving the entire public, museums – including MoMA – will cease to exist, regardless of endowments.

### Chapter Three: Primitivism at MoMA

This chapter brings concepts from chapter two into the context of MoMA's historical shortcomings, specifically analyzing the "*Primitivism*" in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984). One of the research questions addressed in this chapter reflects the 1984 exhibit and the racially charged sociopolitical connotations associated with the application of the exhibit, the Museum and the art world as a whole: what does MoMA's authorization of the "*Primitivism*" exhibit indicate about Blackness in the art world, and subsequently, racial otherness in contemporary cultural institutions?

The first portrayal of primitivism at MoMA arose almost exactly forty years prior to "*Primitivism*" in the 1935 exhibition *African Negro Art* (fig. 4). The organization of the artifacts on display (fig. 5) are clear examples of foreshadowing of the misappropriation to be witnessed in "*Primitivism*." Beginning with the title including the word "Negro" it is clear the exhibition was a direct reflection of what was considered socially acceptable at the time, yet the use of such a word was still a form of racism and misrepresentation. It was in the context of this series of "primitive art" exhibitions that the Museum, for the first time, dedicated a show to the work of Black hands. Unfortunately, the Museum opted to focus not on "Afro-American art but ... a selection of so-called primitive work produced by the Negroes of Western Africa."<sup>149</sup> The massive exhibition was directed by James Johnson Sweeney and presented more than 600 objects consisting of mostly sculptures and masks, augmented by textiles and implements, principally drawn from West and Central Africa. While the *New York Times* raved about the show's installation thanks to the "principle of surrounding each object with all the space it needs," contemporary retrospect sheds light on the accurate basis for the arrangement of the

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<sup>149</sup> English and Barat, *Among Others*, 15.

artifacts. Fig. 5 demonstrates this lack of attention or cultural acknowledgment to the actual meanings behind certain artifacts based on the visual organization of similarly shaped objects, as opposed to recognizing their historical and cultural context. The exhibition has been described as “a clear attempt to do with these African objects something fundamentally unrelated to them. It excised and repositioned the shapes and forms in African artifacts that moderns had used to promote (visually) their own ideology of directly expressed bare feeling. Aside from one room (the Cameroon room) objects were arranged irrespective of chronological or geographical considerations.”<sup>150</sup>

Until *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* (1972) and “*Primitivism*” the Museum’s strongest representation of non-Western traditions was René d’Harnoncourt’s exhibition, titled *Timeless Aspects of Modern* (1948). This show ran from 1948-49 and advanced d’Harnoncourt’s notions that modernism was not an isolated historical phenomenon by juxtaposing Western modern art with objects from other eras and cultures. Unfortunately, the same misstep of using spatial organization of artifacts was applied, only this time, the exhibition used proximity to assert the theoretical fact of “close relationship.”<sup>151</sup> No didactics were used, causing the viewer to encounter pairings or grouping of artworks as “an invitation to undertake their own exploration.’ The idea was to demonstrate affinities and analogies, meant to be a reminder that such ‘modern’ means of expression as exaggeration, distortion and abstraction have been used by artists since the very beginning of civilization.”<sup>152</sup> This exhibition is also problematic in its lack of accurate representation from a critical race theory (CRT) perspective. Aja Y. Martinez

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<sup>150</sup> English and Barat, *Among Others*, 19.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

explains another premise of CRT resides in its commitment to the centrality of experiential knowledge as detailed through narrative.<sup>153</sup> Without didactics that provide accurate information on the artifacts, there is no experiential knowledge provided to the viewer. The narrative is lost, leaving the objects open to interpretation, as opposed to a better understanding and gaining an appreciation, as they have been used referentially. This didact-less impoverished approach acts as erasure of cultural narratives and experiences, existing as another form of misrepresentation at others' cultures and on behalf of MoMA.

### **The Exhibit: A Brief Account**

*"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* was established and directed by curator William Rubin, in collaboration with Kirk Varnedoe, art historian and eventual chief curator of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA. The exhibit opened on September 27, 1984 and remained on view through January 15, 1985. It then travelled to the Detroit Institute of Arts where it was displayed from February 27 to May 19, 1985, and then to the Dallas Museum of Art from June 23 through September 1 of the same year. The exhibition included approximately one hundred and fifty modern European and American works and more than two hundred tribal objects from Africa, Oceania, and North America.<sup>154</sup> Regarding the title of the exhibition, the use of quotations around the word "primitivism" was an indicator of the curators' intention to scrutinize the appellation, and the exhibition was conceived in terms consistent with MoMA's tradition of presenting, with a modernist framework, how "tribal" objects had been interpreted not by those who made and used them but by (largely European) foreigners.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Aja Y. Martinez, "Critical Race Theory: Its Origins, History, and Importance to the Discourses and Rhetorics of Race," *Frame* 27, no. 2 (November 2014): 20.

<sup>154</sup> Hilton Kramer, "The 'Primitivism' conundrum," *The New Criterion* 3, no. 4 (December 1984): 1, <https://newcriterion.com/issues/1984/12/the-primitivism-conundrum>.

<sup>155</sup> English and Barat, *Among Others*, 75.

According to Rubin, however, the exhibition established “special emphasis ... on those artists and movements – Gauguin, Picasso, Brancusi, Modigliani, Klee, the Expressionists and Surrealists – most deeply involved with tribal art.”<sup>156</sup> Works by these renowned artists, such as Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* were juxtaposed alongside masks and sculptures from the personal collections of Western modernists (fig. 6). In congruence with the exhibition, Rubin also composed a comprehensive collection of essays in two volumes, published by MoMA. A press release, to be discussed in greater detail later in this paper, described the collection of essays as a “beautifully illustrated, intellectually provocative volume examining the crucial influence of the tribal arts of Africa, Oceania and North America on modern painters and sculptors.”<sup>157</sup> Discrepancies between the intent of the curators, the application of the exhibition and the perception of the public have remained consistently present since its creation, and will be of further analyzed shortly.

From the surface level of the exhibition’s background thus far, it might appear that the organization or conceptualization of “*Primitivism*” was rushed, or not properly prepared. This is not the case, however. Rubin wrote to a fellow curator in 1970 about the idea. “It would be interesting to have, as the Art Workers Coalition originally suggested, an exhibition on the relationship of African and other ethnic and indigenous arts to the tradition of modern painting and sculpture. This would make a fascinating exhibition, even though that contribution is, I believe, less marked than some people believe, and could also provide the basis for a most useful

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<sup>156</sup> “Press Release: New Exhibition Opening September 27 at Museum of Modern Art Examines ‘*Primitivism*’ in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art,” Museum of Modern Art, accessed November 11, 2019, [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_327377.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_327377.pdf).

<sup>157</sup> “Press Release: Major Publication Accompanies ‘*Primitivism*’ Exhibition,” Museum of Modern Art, accessed November 11, 2019, [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/6087/releases/MOMA\\_1984\\_0023\\_23.pdf](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6087/releases/MOMA_1984_0023_23.pdf).

publication.”<sup>158</sup> Fourteen years later the idea came to fruition with the actual exhibition, albeit displaying a distorted mirror to the artists’ demand, similarly to so many art museums’ responses to cultural activism in the late 1960s and early ‘70s.<sup>159</sup>

Perhaps fourteen years seemed like enough time to properly and appropriately develop the exhibit. Unfortunately, the exhibition was not well received from multiple perspectives, and was in fact highly criticized across the board of art critics and journalists alike. The most notable review was the scathing *Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief* written by art critic Thomas McEvelley. McEvelley begins the *Artforum* review by questioning MoMA’s intention to bring primitivism to light “now – and with such intense promotion and overwhelming mass of information.”<sup>160</sup> He then directly calls attention to Rubin’s intentions, both for his role in the exhibition as well as the interpreted relationship Rubin has with MoMA: “One suspects that for Rubin the Museum of Modern Art has something of the appeal of church and country. It is a temple to be promoted and defended with a passionate devotion – the temple of formalist Modernism.”<sup>161</sup> The eight page review dives deep into an analysis and intense critique of Rubin’s work, the “*Primitivism*” exhibition and the relationship the Museum has with maintaining Western ideals while falsely presenting a confrontational perspective of the Third World. McEvelley’s essay caused a rift with Rubin, as can be expected given the length of time for the project’s development and high regard for contribution to the institutional conversation of modernism at the time. Rubin and Varnedoe responded in a letter to the editor of *Artforum*, which was subsequently published, and a public dispute ensued. In an article praising McEvelley posthumously, contemporary art critic Jerry

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<sup>158</sup> Susan E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 171.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Thomas McEvelley, “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: ‘Primitivism’ in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984,” *ARTFORUM* (November 1984): 55.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

Saltz reminisces on the gravity of the power-house argument: “McEvelley’s role as spokesperson was elevated to general in the war on cultural imperialism when, to everyone’s surprise, the show’s curators answered back.... For a few issues the art world watched and read a war of words take place.”<sup>162</sup> But the gravity of the critique spans beyond the opinion of three white men in positions of power arguing their own opinions. And although over thirty years have passed since the exhibition, the issue of accurate representation of cultures, or lack thereof, is still being discussed. Susan Cahan, art historian and educator, writes about the problematic nature of the exhibit from a more contemporary standpoint, stating:

Rather than acknowledge modern European artists indebtedness to African and other indigenous arts or explore cross-cultural influences, the exhibition followed a well-trodden path; “art” was defined as the creation of white European and European American artists. People of color were ignored both as makers of the ceremonial and functional objects on display and as modern artists in their own right. The show perpetuated the exclusion of Black subjectivity from modernity.<sup>163</sup>

Cahan’s book *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* reflects on other high-profile and wildly contested exhibitions that attempted to integrate African American culture and art into museums. Her evaluation of specifically Black art and Black artists’ relationships with art museums is one of many that continues to draw attention to the racial disparities in cultural institutions; further, her contribution reiterates that the intention and application of the “*Primitivism*” exhibition, although having concluded more than a quarter century ago, is still a crucial example of how, and more importantly how not, to address misrepresentation of other cultures.

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<sup>162</sup> Jerry Saltz, “Saltz on Critic Thomas McEvelley, 1939-2013,” *Vulture*, March 3, 2013, <https://www.vulture.com/2013/03/thomas-mcevelley-1939-2013.html>.

<sup>163</sup> Cahan, *Mounting Frustration*, 171.

### ***“Primitivism”* vs Primitivism**

It is important to first present this analysis by focusing on the linguistic application of the word *primitivism*, as found in the title of the exhibition and concurrent catalogue. It is important to assess this term as it is not only the main theme of the exhibition, but more importantly it is the root cause of the exhibition’s critique to those that recognized the innate appropriation and subsequent misrepresentation of tribal cultures. Further, the soon-to-be established depiction of primitivism is determined to be a common concept of problematic nature for MoMA; this notion will be discussed in greater depth later in this thesis. Denotatively, “primitive” can take two variations: as an adjective and as a noun. The general definition of “primitive” as an adjective makes reference to being the first or earliest of the kind in question, or in existence, especially in an early age of the world. Further, “primitivism” then refers to primitive practices or procedures. However, “primitive” as a noun, especially in the fine art world, is constituted as an artist of a preliterate culture, a naïve or unschooled artist, or an artist belonging to the early stage in the development of a style.<sup>164</sup> Contradictorily, specifically relating to art and philosophy, “primitivism” exists as a recurrent theory or belief that the qualities of primitive or chronologically early cultures are superior to those of contemporary civilization.<sup>165</sup> Without a singular, widely accepted and agreed upon use of the word, it is clear to see how a sort of misunderstanding can take place when using the word in a specific manner. But the problem with *“Primitivism”* lies not in the use of the word; rather, the problem lies in the implication of what is considered primitive and its relationship with the modern art world.

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<sup>164</sup> Robert Atkins, *ArtSpeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1945 to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2013), 564-5.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*



McEvelley speaks on the Museum's use of the word in his review of the exhibition, and the problematic nature of the curators' intentions:

In the context of Modern art, "primitivism" is a specific technical term: the word, placed in quotation marks in the show's title, designates Modern work that alludes to tribal objects or in some way incorporates or expresses their influence. Primitivism, in other words, is a quality of some Modern artworks, not a quality of primitive works themselves. "Primitive," in turn, designates the actual tribal objects, and can also be used of any work sharing the intentionality proper to those objects, which is not that of art but of shamanic vocation and its attendant psychology. Some contemporary primitivist work may also be called primitive; yet the works selected by Varnedoe are conspicuously nonprimitive primitivism. The works of Smithson and Hesse, for example, may involve allusion to primitive information, but they express a consciousness highly attuned to each move of Western civilization. Rubin and Varnedoe make it clear that they are concerned not with the primitive but with the primitivist—which is to say they ask only half the question.<sup>166</sup>

Additionally, Rubin and Varnedoe not only twist the meaning of "primitivism" to fit their agenda, but they also purposefully disregard other modern artists that apply the appropriate contextualized variation of the word in their works. McEvelley states: "There are in fact contemporary artists whose intentionality's involve falling away from Western civilization and literally forgetting its values. These are the primitive primitivists; they are edited out of the show and the book altogether."<sup>167</sup> This contorted application of "primitivism" can be interpreted through a concept developed by Tony Bennett. Bennett, a museological theorist, addresses this type of application as a contradiction based on the "principle of representational adequacy consisting in the disparity between the museum's universalist aspirations embodied in the claim that the order of things and peoples it shaped into being was generally representative of

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<sup>166</sup> McEvelley, "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief," 55-6.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

humanity; yet the general fact exists that any particular museum display can always be held to be partial, selective and inadequate in relation to this objective.”<sup>168</sup> Art critic Hilton Kramer addresses this apparent selectiveness in MoMA’s approach to the exhibition in an essay for *The New Criterion*; when discussing the gallery layout of the “History” section, he describes the viewer’s perspective as being “offered a miserly selection of objects shunted into a mean, corridorlike space that has the effect of belittling, if not actually obliterating, the entire subject.”<sup>169</sup> It is in this convolution of Western ideals and primitive principles that Kramer situates his perspective of MoMA’s use of primitivism. From an art historical background, Kramer references Donald E. Gordon’s notions from an essay on German Expressionism, that interestingly also happened to be included in the second volume of the “*Primitivism*” catalogue. According to Gordon, “primitivism affected Expressionism in two ways: both as life idea and as art idea.”<sup>170</sup> This affectedness is actually considered appropriation, as the so-called “life idea” involved enacting in “supposed instinctual freedom of tribal life” such as “[going] native during summer vacations, living in the nude and practicing a sexual camaraderie that paraphrased – so they thought – the supposed instinctual freedom of tribal life.”<sup>171</sup> Additionally, Kramer adds that “despite their profound debt to primitive art and a primitivist ideology, the Expressionists remained firmly attached to one of the most deeply entrenched traditions of Western thought—the romantic tradition that invoked the purity and vitality of nature as an alternative to the moribund forms of inherited culture. It was part of the paradox of their situation that it was, however, by way of culture that they came to their appreciation of the primitivist ideal.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 102-3.

<sup>169</sup> Kramer, “The ‘Primitivism’ conundrum,” <https://newcriterion.com/issues/1984/12/the-primitivism-conundrum>.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, it is complete misappropriation to adapt and reshape an ideal to better fit a narrative that doesn't match the intent of the original ideal.

### **In the Press: Response to Public and Art-Professional Critique**

The criticisms from both Kramer and McEvilley caused a clear rift with Rubin, and assumedly Varnedoe as he was also under fire for his contribution to the approach of the exhibition. Before further addressing the critics' opinion and the public rebuttal by Rubin of the critiques, it is important to note Rubin's confidence in the inspiration and application of the exhibition. Prior to the opening of the "*Primitivism*" exhibit, Rubin spoke of his inspiration in an interview with *Vogue*, stating: "Whereas I felt very strongly about the generation of Pollock and Rothko, and about the color-field painters, and Minimalist, and certain Pop artists, ... I haven't had as much passion for what has happened since conceptual art, [and] have been perfectly willing to focus my attention on the historical shows."<sup>173</sup> This statement came at a time when the Museum powers' regard for contemporary art was limited and cautious, having just been under fire for presenting a show earlier in the year, *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, that claimed to be "as inclusive as possible," yet only featured three Black artists and fourteen female artists within a group of 165 artists from 17 countries.<sup>174</sup> While the statistics of this show aren't necessarily representative or equal to the disparities in the "*Primitivism*" exhibition, the misrepresentation of multiple cultures is prevalent in both shows.

Although the problematic nature of the exhibition from a linguistic sense practically speaks for itself, an earlier facet of misrepresentation can be found in the various press releases for both the exhibition, and the two-volume catalogue that accompanied "*Primitivism*" at its

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<sup>173</sup> English and Barat, *Among Others*, 75.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

release. The original press release introduces the new exhibition and describes the inspiration for the show, and the use of the term *primitivism*, “as a Western response to tribal cultures as revealed in the work and thought of modern artists, recognizing the importance of this issue in modern art history – and the relative lack of serious research devoted to it – [MoMA] presents a groundbreaking exhibition that underscores parallelisms that exist between the two arts.”<sup>175</sup> The subsequent press release focuses on the two-volume catalogue that accompanied the opening of the exhibition. The catalogue is described as “a beautifully illustrated, intellectually provocative volume examining the crucial influence of the tribal arts of Africa, Oceania and North America on modern painters and sculptors. It is also the first book ever to illustrate and discuss tribal works collected by seminal modernists such as Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Nolde, and Ernst. The publication has been possible by grants from Philip Morris Incorporated, chief sponsor of the exhibition, and from The Eugene McDermott Foundation.”<sup>176</sup> It is an interesting note that within the first paragraph, immediately following the praised artists, those with financial contributions are mentioned. Additionally, combining aspects of both press releases, I have to note it is unclear as to what point these “parallelisms” become the “underlying affinities and the illumination of the problems of influence and rapport,” as mentioned in the publication press release.<sup>177</sup>

Another alarming set of sentences from the same publication-related press release is this: “The roots of modernist ‘primitivism’ can be followed back to the ‘discovery’ of tribal sculptures and masks by vanguard artists in the first decades of this century. Heretofore viewed merely as

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<sup>175</sup> Museum of Modern Art, “Press Release: New Exhibition Opening September 27 at Museum of Modern Art Examines “*Primitivism*” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art,” August 1984, [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_327377.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_327377.pdf).

<sup>176</sup> Museum of Modern Art, “Press Release: Major Publication Accompanies ‘*Primitivism*’ Exhibition,” August 1984, [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/6087/releases/MOMA\\_1984\\_0023\\_23.pdf](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6087/releases/MOMA_1984_0023_23.pdf).

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

curiosities, the objects had suddenly become aesthetically relevant due to changes in the nature of modern art itself, and it wasn't long before reference to tribal objects became evident in the work of modern painters and sculptors. Many of the key works associated with pioneering modernists – Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and *Guitar*, Brancusi's *Madame L.R.*, Klee's *Mask of Fear*, Nolde's *Masks*, Ernst's *Bird-Head*, among others – contain such references.”<sup>178</sup>

In her writings on CRT, Martinez addresses this shift in relevance, stating: “contemporary racial inequality is reproduced through color blind racist practices that are subtle, structural, and apparently non-racial...”<sup>179</sup> This is the exact application of the “*Primitivism*” exhibition. By so graciously displaying tribal works and even claiming them as influence to genius as the exhibition is striving to do, the context of the misrepresentation slips through the cracks.

As previously stated, these obvious issues certainly did not go unnoticed by art critics at the time. Upon witnessing the exhibition, McEvelley argues a valid perspective that directly reflects the problematic nature of the essence of the show: “The fact that the primitive ‘looks like’ the Modern is interpreted as validating the Modern by showing that its values are universal, while at the same time projecting it (and with it MoMA) into the future as a permanent canon. ... The primitive, in other words, is to be censored out for the sake of Western civilization. The museum has evidently taken up a subject that it lacks the stomach to present in its raw realness or its real rawness.”<sup>180</sup> Additionally in his review, McEvelley call to question Rubin's intentions as curator, specifically in regard to what he deems worthy based on past experiences of praising and showing other artists:

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<sup>178</sup> Museum of Modern Art, “Press Release: Major Publication Accompanies ‘*Primitivism*’ Exhibition,” August 1984, [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/6087/releases/MOMA\\_1984\\_0023\\_23.pdf](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6087/releases/MOMA_1984_0023_23.pdf).

<sup>179</sup> Martinez, “Critical Race Theory,” 14.

<sup>180</sup> McEvelley, “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief,” 56.

Rubin's great shows of Cézanne, in 1977, and Picasso, in 1980, were loving and brilliant paeans to a Modernism that was like a transcendent Platonic ideal, self-validating, and in turn validating and invalidating other things. But like a lover who becomes overbearing or possessive, Rubin's love has a darker side. Consider what he did to Giorgio de Chirico: a major retrospective of the artist's work, in 1982, included virtually no works made after 1917—though the artist lived and worked for another half century. Only through 1917, in his earliest years as an artist, did de Chirico practice what Rubin regards as worth looking at. This was a case of the curator's will absolutely overriding the will of the artist and the found nature of the oeuvre.<sup>181</sup>

Further, "Rubin's love of Modernism is based on the fact that it at last took Western art beyond mere illustration. When he says that the tribal artisans are not illustrating by conceptualizing, he evidently feels he is praising them for their modernity. In doing so, however, he altogether undercuts their reality system. By denying that tribal canons of representation actually represent anything, he is in effect denying that their view of the world is real. By doing them the favor of making them into Modern artists, Rubin cuts reality from under their feet."<sup>182</sup> Concepts from both Bennett's museum theory and Martinez's writings on CRT are applicable to McEvelley's interpretation of MoMA's tribal representation. Bennett draws upon Foucauldian assertions of institutional articulations of power and knowledge relations, and states that museums should not be discounted from this grouping.<sup>183</sup> This power is directly applied to the misappropriation of the tribal works in "*Primitivism*." Bennett states that "the past, as it is materially embodied in museums and heritage sites, is inescapably a product of the present which organizes it."<sup>184</sup> This can also be evaluated from the perspective of applying CRT. Considerably, the most important premise of CRT is the "challenge of calling into question a

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<sup>181</sup> McEvelley, "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief," 55.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>183</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 59.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

dominant ideology, [and] that racialized ideological paradigms act as camouflage for the self-interest, power and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society.”<sup>185</sup> The self-interest Martinez speaks of is a direct reflection of the authorization by MoMA and specifically the director of the “*Primitivism*” exhibition, Rubin. Martinez’s reference is based on Derrick Bell’s conceptualization of interest convergence theory; his concept holds that “white elites will tolerate or encourage [and in the case of “*Primitivism*” promote and benefit from] racial advances for [people of color] only when such advances also promote white self-interest.”<sup>186</sup> As previously stated, Varnedoe’s efforts were not immune to critique either. “A quick way into the problems of the exhibition is in fact through Varnedoe’s “Contemporary Explorations” section. The question of what is really contemporary is the least of the possible points of contention here, but the inclusion of great artists long dead, like Robert Smithson and Eva Hesse, does suggest inadequate sensitivity to the fact that artmaking is going on right now. One cannot help noting that none of the types of work that have emerged into the light during the last eight years or so is represented.”<sup>187</sup> Not only does “*Primitivism*” misappropriate tribal cultural representation, it also diminishes other forms and artists of Modern art by only including work from, at that time, over almost ten years old; this seems like a contradictory act of a museum that prides itself on its attention and dedication to Modern art. This same pride is witnessed in the two subsequent responses to the editor of *Artforum* from Rubin himself, in regard specifically to McEvelley’s review. It was widely known among journalists, and others within the art community, that Rubin was keen on gaining accolades over admitting mistakes.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Martinez, “Critical Race Theory,” 20-1.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>187</sup> McEvelley, “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief,” 55.

<sup>188</sup> I was unsuccessful at obtaining full versions of both letters-to-the-editor for *Artforum*, as a subscription is required. Multiple news sources from the same time provide commentary on Rubin’s general business demeanor.

### A Case Study of Righteousness: The Ziibiwing Center

It is entirely plausible for museums to present and represent art from different cultures without appropriating or distorting accurate narratives from those cultures. Even amidst our colonized nation and the rest of Western society, museums are still able to help reclaim narratives of marginalized and oppressed peoples. Amy Lonetree writes about The Ziibiwing Center, located in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, and their dedication to the “truth telling” of the Anishinaabe peoples while existing as a cultural institution. In her book *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* she discusses the complexities involved with relationships between museums and the telling of stories from centuries of unresolved trauma of Native peoples. The fourth chapter of *Decolonizing Museums* focuses specifically on “The Ziibiwing Center of Anishinaabe Culture and Lifeways: Decolonization, Truth Telling, and Addressing Historical Unresolved Grief,” and how the Center helps to “indigenize museum practice[s].”<sup>189</sup> The Anishinaabe are the indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes, and the Ziibiwing Center proudly displays the history, philosophy and culture of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe. Further, the Ziibiwing Center “actively engages the theoretical concepts of historical trauma and historical unresolved grief to begin the healing process for Native people,” and is designed around assisting the community in healing “age-old wounds.”<sup>190</sup> These efforts, according to Lonetree, “exemplif[y the Center’s] subjectivity both as a cultural center and as a site for community empowerment and decolonization.”<sup>191</sup> Lonetree discusses the museum’s efforts towards decolonization by analyzing two interpretative strategies in museum exhibitions. First, she references the framing of the entire exhibition “within the context of the

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<sup>189</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 122.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*



tribe's oral tradition, its representation of history reflects more closely an Indigenous understanding of history, as opposed to a postmodern sense of history. Second, its ability to speak the hard truths of colonization in its exhibitions addresses the legacies of historical unresolved grief."<sup>192</sup> Even something as small as identifying as a "community center," rather than being referred to as an "institution," shows steps towards decolonization. Rather than whitewashing or sugarcoating the past experiences of such a large group of people, the Ziibiwing Center brings to light the accuracy of events and the experienced narratives that were part of or effected by said events: "At the Ziibiwing Center, we acknowledge this history and work with our community to move in positive directions to heal the age-old wounds. The issues may seem ... complicated, but we believe that by providing entry points for our people to gain access to our true history, culture, and language, we can, so to speak, turn back time."<sup>193</sup> There is even a gallery entitled "Effects of Colonization," which is situated alongside another gallery aptly named "Blood Memory," referencing the understanding of heritage and the experiential connection of ancestry.

Compared to the approach taken by MoMA in the "*Primitivism*" exhibition, the Ziibiwing Center opposes the "rigid adherence to the specifics of U.S.-Indian relations; the historical material is there, but it is presented in a tribally based framework for understanding history that illustrates the themes of the prophecies."<sup>194</sup> From a museological standpoint, the Center is organized around these prophecies. By organizing the museum as such, these efforts reflect a critical race methodology. This methodology challenges white privilege, rejects notions

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 132.

of “neutral” research or “objective” research, and exposes research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color.<sup>195</sup> The Ziibiwing Center rejects the colonial narrative of indigenous peoples, and makes a the conscious effort to aptly portray accurate narratives in a way that moves viewers. Additionally, the museum offers a unique perspective on early twentieth-century material culture. Lonetree writes about having seen “many museums present these types of objects in a way that challenges age-old ‘art versus ethnographic’ categories or that demonstrates cultural continuance by placing contemporary objects nearby.”<sup>196</sup> These presentations are exemplified in the misrepresentations found in “*Primitivism*.”

It is important to clarify the contextual framework of “*Primitivism*” in relation to the Ziibiwing Center. The Center exists solely dedicated to the narratives of the Anishinaabe peoples, whereas “*Primitivism*” was offered as an artistic and curatorial perspective towards ideologies of primitivism. The takeaway point from this comparison lies in addressing the value and relevance of the artifacts and information being displayed; “*Primitivism*” was a direct misrepresentation and appropriation of various cultures, while the Ziibiwing Center honorably reflects the authentic and accurate experiences of the peoples it is representing.

### **Looking Forward**

The nature of how and what museums are choosing to exhibit has shifted over the last few decades, and this is perhaps due to continued public awareness and response. We should not stop questioning intentions of cultural institutions, nor should we ignore misrepresentation when witnessed. Misrepresentation exists as a cultural barrier, and Bennett comments on this barrier as partial cause for varying museum attendance. He states the disparities in museum participation

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<sup>195</sup> Martinez, “Critical Race Theory,” 24.

<sup>196</sup> Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 143.

exist because there is a clear feeling “that the museum constitutes a cultural space that is not meant for them – and, as we have seen, not without reason.”<sup>197</sup> It is crucial for their continued success for museums to be aware of any potential messages that could be construed, or misconstrued, from the manner of their exhibitions. This concept is applied in a statement by leading museum professional Kathleen McLean: “Exhibitions are central to a museum’s identity, as they ‘are the soul of a museum experience for the millions of people who visit them, as well as for many of the people who create them.’”<sup>198</sup> This chapter focused on an identity that many people obviously disagreed with, and played a role in the Museum’s inspiration for aspiring towards “a new MoMA.”

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<sup>197</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 104.

<sup>198</sup> Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 130.

## Chapter Four: Modernizing MoMA: A Critique of Success

There has been discussion and critique of MoMA and its perpetual changes since its doors first opened. Given the previous historical background of the Museum in earlier chapters, the 2019 expansion was highly buzzed about in all forms of media platforms. After analyzing the importance of museum unrest and delineating the Museum's own history with unrest through evaluating the "*Primitivism*" exhibition, this chapter brings the conversation to the present and evaluates the most recent renovation and rehanging of the Museum's collection. Ultimately, MoMA's efforts towards decolonization, inclusivity and accessibility are analyzed in this chapter and I offer my evaluation on whether these attempts were successful in delivering the intended shift towards "a new MoMA."

### ***Among Others: Addressing Blackness at MoMA***

Perhaps one step in the ethically accurate direction of addressing their relationship with Black artists for the Museum was the 2019 release of *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA* (fig. 7). Written by Darby English, the Carl Darling Buck Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago, and Charlotte Barat, Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA, the book includes two essays that track moments in which, over a succession of historical contexts and power relations, MoMA approached or encountered racial Blackness. Additionally, the remaining section of the book is dedicated to over 200 plates of work by Black artists from their collection. It is clear that until very recently, most Black artists, their work, and representations of Blackness in the modern art world, although abundantly prevalent, were nevertheless "blocked from consciousness" at MoMA.<sup>199</sup> Darby and Barat are not shy or intimidated to address this fact, as they state within the first page of their essay, titled "Blackness

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<sup>199</sup> English and Barat, *Among Others*, 15.

at MoMA: A Legacy of Deficit”: “MoMA’s historical relationship with Black artist and Black audiences is an uneven one, alternating between moments of pioneering initiative and episodes of neglect, and worse.”<sup>200</sup> Immediately following the introduction, the essay details the historic nature of MoMA’s relationship with the concept of primitivism. This publication was used not only as a resource for this thesis, but also as an area of critique for existing as a reflection and revelation about the Museum’s own history with people of color and its relationship with simultaneously perpetuating oppression and elitism within the art world. Creating and publishing this work was a step in the right direction; by addressing past issues of all magnitudes relating to Blackness and Black artists, MoMA is able to recognize their missteps and acknowledge their participation in social injustice. Hopefully, by making this acknowledgement, moving forward towards inclusivity and decolonization will be an easier process. Taking responsibility for past errors can help lead the institution forward in a way that dictates how, or how not, to represent artists and the public.

English and Barat shed light on their intentions before the essay even begins. In the Acknowledgments, they detail the beginning of their research efforts roughly six years ago. During the hours spent researching the collection, extraordinary works that have long laid dormant were discovered, leading to the finding of “countless as-yet-untold stories linking MoMA – to varying degrees, according to the moment of the issue or the individual at hand – with Black audiences, Black artists, and related questions of race and representation.”<sup>201</sup> According to the editors, during this same time of deep archival research, the Museum was actively seeking and acquiring major works by Black artists at a remarkable pace.<sup>202</sup> It is these

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

two areas of research that ultimately solidified English and Barat's idea to partake in this global conversation of institutional critique, and to further address the complexity of these aspects from MoMA's historical events, all in an effort to spark the conversation on a greater, more accessible scale for the Museum's audience.<sup>203</sup>

The first of two essays, titled "Blackness at MoMA: A Legacy of Deficit" begins by straightforwardly calling attention to the Museum's relationship with Black artists. The editors deem it important to address the full historiography of the Museum, rather than to simply focus on the generalized history of the institution, as that would make for a much shorter essay. This importance is reiterated by a statement found within the first paragraph; rather than cultivating a broadened view of MoMA's historical narrative, English and Barat state: "There are things MoMA has bought or shown in order not to understand them at all, and a nontrivial number of [these artifacts] have Blackness in common."<sup>204</sup> By addressing this fact, the authors are employing a correlation to the concept described by Bennett as *representational effects*. Bennett discusses various approaches to the act of reading the past; by questioning how narratives between past and present are represented, he establishes unavoidable consequences for curatorial practices that do not address or accurately portray the past "as it really was."<sup>205</sup> Based on the fundamental properties of museum policies focusing their eventual aim and outcome to be "a regulated set of encounters between visitors (with different cultural backgrounds and orientations) and textually organized museum displays, it is appropriate that policy should be guided by an awareness of the factors which influence and regulate the nature of the meanings

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>205</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 131.

transacted in those encounters.”<sup>206</sup> Failing to properly “read the past” as such, it is clear where the disconnect with the public, especially misrepresented groups, stems from.

### **Beyond Gallery Walls: *MoMA Highlights* and *MoMA NOW***

From both of my visits to MoMA, I purchased their self-published *MoMA Highlights* and *MoMA NOW* books. The version of *MoMA Highlights* in my possession was last edited in 2014, before the most recent version, *MoMA NOW*, was edited and released in 2019. *MoMA NOW* follows the more standard coffee table style of book with larger dimensions and a thicker, overall greater appearance. I studied both versions in an effort to configure gender and racial demographics in order to establish what the Museum deemed “highlight” worthy and to investigate if anything had changed over the past five years. In both versions, Lowry describes how the collection has been procured and developed over time, in addition to the curatorial roles in this process as well as the exhibition process: “Since the development of the Museum’s collection has occurred over time, each generation’s choices are woven into the collection’s fabric so that a continuous thread of ideas and interests emerges. The result reflects the unfolding pattern of the Museum’s history in a collection that is nuanced, inflected, and altered by the tastes and ideas of individual directors and curators, and by the responses those tastes and ideas engender in their successors as holes are filled in the collection and areas of overemphasis are modified.”<sup>207</sup> This statement directly applies to the ability and subsequent responsibility the Museum has in addressing the issues of discussion within this thesis. While the introductions in both are written by Lowry, there are minimal variations between the two segments. *MoMA*

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>207</sup> Museum of Modern Art, *MoMA Highlights: 350 Works from The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 10-1.

*NOW*'s introduction varies slightly by Lowry openly admitting: "What we used to call the canon – the great masterpieces of modern art that MoMA has assembled to embody *the* narrative of the art of the twentieth century and beyond – has not disappeared from the galleries."<sup>208</sup> He also calls attention to the problematic nature of this narrative, and how MoMA is addressing it curatorially. Old favorites such as *The Starry Night* and *Campbell's Soup Cans* now coexist with a more diverse cohort that is also part of the Museum's story; these works "now neighbor compelling artworks formerly often overlooked, whether those by women or African Americans, by practitioners in Asia, Africa, Latin America, or the Middle East, by the self-taught or the (literally) provincial, or, finally, by those who trafficked in the aesthetics of a 'minor' ism or joined the 'wrong' movement of their day."<sup>209</sup> These published collections do not represent what is currently on view, but what MoMA considers important, relevant or note-worthy from their collection. In *MoMA Highlights*, there are 359 plates total, with 64 plates featuring work by female artists and only 40 plates by artists of color. This equates to roughly eighteen percent female representation and a disheartening eleven percent representation of artists of color, with some overlap between the two categories. Although it is not a great improvement, the statistics do increase slightly in the latest publication, *MoMA NOW*. In addition to adding 25 new plates, and increasing the size of the book, thus increasing the viewable quality of the plates, there was also an increase in both disparate categories by twice the original amounts. There are now 122 plates by female artists and 100 plates by artists of color; this increase provides almost 32 percent of the publication to be dedicated to female artists and 26 percent to be dedicated to artists of color.

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<sup>208</sup> Museum of Modern Art, *MoMA NOW* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 15.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.



These numbers are a shift in the right direction towards inclusivity and a focus on diversity, but they do not offer the equality to the best degree; both categories of otherness were statistically doubled, but they still don't equal half or more than the featured white male artists. There have been positive shifts within the chosen artworks to be highlighted, however. *MoMA NOW* has added Gilbert Baker's *Rainbow Flag* acquisition, as well as gender non-conformant artists Marcel Moore and Claude Cahun. Additionally, the 2014 version of highlights includes four works by Picasso, whereas *MoMA NOW* decreased to only three works. While this thesis is focused as a critique of the Museum, these small steps can't go unnoticed or addressed. Perhaps releasing updated diverse highlights allows artists to shine even if they aren't on display within the galleries. Speaking on accessibility, these publications also allow viewers to enjoy the artwork outside of the Museum walls, as it can be brought home with the viewer.

### **Marketing Proclamations and Collective Intentions: "A New MoMA"**

This most recent renovation came at a new era of technological advancements and marketability that was able to reach a broad audience through the form of various social media, amongst the standard daily news coverages of a pillar in the art community. From the beginning of this renovation, the marketing verbiage across all platforms claimed this effort to be the beginning of "A New MoMA." This title was found in every email, social media post, and advertisement established surrounding the renovation to notify the public. The term "new" has obvious connotations but shifting the entire essence of an institution through yet another expensive architectural restructuring is a loaded term and, seemingly, a daunting feat. In social media advertisements, Lowry is quoted on the intentions of the reconstruction: "A new generation of curators is discovering the richness of what is in our collection, and there is great work being made around the world that we need to pay attention to... The collection galleries

will be experiments in cross-pollination, with painting, sculpture, photography and design sharing the same turf.”<sup>210</sup> This comment speaks directly to a new structure of fresh curatorial perspective, in addition to the so-called cross-pollination of mediums. This same equity amongst artists is still yet to be determined. An additional approach to this recontextualization via cross-pollination is the new partnership formed with The Studio Museum in Harlem. MoMA has partnered with The Studio Museum as they undergo their own reconstruction, providing exhibition opportunities that will allow MoMA “to expand [their] knowledge about a range of artists [they] may only be vaguely familiar with.”<sup>211</sup> The director and chief curator of The Studio Museum, Thelma Golden, speaks on this partnership as “a new paradigm for collaboration that looks at the different ways institutions can come together.”<sup>212</sup> Her first curatorial efforts in the process will be exhibited under the title *Studio Museum at MoMA* and will feature Kenyan-born artist Michael Armitage.<sup>213</sup> In addition to the focus on an artist belonging to an underrepresented group of people, the exhibition is expected to be presented in one of the new ground-floor, street-level galleries that is free to the public.

Part of the press efforts towards marketing the “new MoMA” included a collection of articles in the Museum’s online magazine titled *Picturing MoMA* and featured the commission of two female artists spanning generations, Sara Cwynar and Rosalind Fox Solomon. Solomon has created medium-format photo portraits from her travels around the world for the past 50 years, some of which were featured in MoMA’s 2010-11 exhibition *Pictures by Women: A History of Modern Photography*, whereas Cwynar’s approach to photography varies slightly from the

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<sup>210</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “MoMA to Close, Then Open Doors to More Expansive View of Art,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/05/arts/design/moma-museum-renovation.html>.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

traditional approach by building composite photographs and videos of found objects.<sup>214</sup> Cwynar and Solomon were commissioned to capture the renovation from the perspective of the renovation being historically monumental for the institution, with the intention of two varying artists' abilities to portray this moment through their own unique creative processes. The series of articles begins with an interview of the two artists, followed by two articles focusing on the artists' individual work respectively.

In the beginning of the joint interview, Cwynar addresses her approach to this project by referencing her inspiration: "I started to think about the history of MoMA and how it teaches us what we think our history is, or who we think we are, through canonical art objects like the *Water Lilies* and *Les Femmes d'Alger* that we've seen over and over again. I wanted to think about what those objects say about Western history and ideas about a public-shared history through art objects."<sup>215</sup> Cwynar's finished work offers a contemporary approach to this process by collecting, digitizing and superimposing images from the Museum's collection, then producing a six-part short video series, titled *Modern Art in Your Life*. The series documents her perspective on specific museum objects and contextualizing these objects within her forward-thinking auditory narration. During these videos, she questions modality: "Do objects instruct needs and structure them in a new way? ... the museum is a site of excess, closed upon itself, concentrated on its own name but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations."<sup>216</sup> In a statement on her work, she references her inspiration to John Berger's video series *Ways of Seeing*, which critiqued the power dynamics of imagery: "[My] videos

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<sup>214</sup> Sara Cwynar, and Rosalind Fox Solomon, "Picturing MoMA," *MoMA: Magazine*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/99>.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Sara Cwynar, "Picturing MoMA: Sara Cwynar," *MoMA: Magazine*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/102>.

connect the power of art history and advertising to new issues around social media, contemporary feminism and the #MeToo movement, technology and the intensified life of images, and news media and truth in the current moment. I wanted to think about the meaning and position of all of MoMA's beautiful things in our time of image saturation and overwhelming choice."<sup>217</sup> Although her creative approach to the Museum's changes is not directly stemming from an completely institutional critical perspective, her dialogue sheds light on the effects and relationships that museums and contemporary art can have on their audiences.

Solomon's work focused on a slightly different area of the Museum; stating her interests exist in the psychology of people and their own realities, she chose to photograph museum employees "who are unseen, or [working] behind the scenes."<sup>218</sup> She describes her fascination with the employees that make everything happen within the Museum: "My intention is to photograph their diversity and to acknowledge those who are responsible for the expansion – the guardians of art who provide security for the masterpieces that the public is privileged to view; the conservators who preserve the Picassos, Chagalls, and Rodins and manage to keep them in their original condition; ... some of the curators who conceive and create exhibitions; and the patrons, who help to make possible what has been envisioned."<sup>219</sup> Immediately following her brief introduction and inspiration for her work, the article published nine of Solomon's photographs from this project, with the accompanying captions stating the workers' names and positions within the institution. The diversity she focused intently on is only minimally observed in the images; there are about seventeen subjects between all nine photographs, and only six of

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<sup>217</sup> Sara Cwynar, "Picturing MoMA: Sara Cwynar," *MoMA: Magazine*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/102>.

<sup>218</sup> Sara Cwynar and Rosalind Fox Solomon, "Picturing MoMA," *MoMA: Magazine*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/99>.

<sup>219</sup> Rosalind Fox Solomon, "Picturing MoMA: Rosalind Fox Solomon," *MoMA: Magazine*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/116>.

these subjects are people of color. Further, the roles these individuals have within the Museum directly reflect the statistics that were previously discussed. While the positions are leadership roles, they still remain within the confines of less intellectual leadership positions as described in the aforementioned survey: Security Supervisor, Director of Information Technology, Paint Shop Foreman and The Crown Creativity Lab team.<sup>220</sup> Additionally, it is necessary to critique Solomon's approach to this series. Within her statement on her work, the conservative art historical narrative is perpetuated by naming Picasso as the primary example of concern for the conservators. That is not to say that conservation efforts should not be equally applied to controversial artist's works any less than others; rather, the final phrase of her statement directly reflects this ingrained conservative narrative by discussing museum patrons' worth in relation to the purpose of curatorial efforts. Her statement implies the Museum exists to *serve* the curators and "what has been envisioned" and is merely *supported* by the public who exist to "help to make possible" the curatorial vision.<sup>221</sup> Bennett's theories on the political rationality of museums addresses how this way of thinking has been established and perpetuated throughout society. Deriving aspects from Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's essay *The Museum in the Disciplinary Society*, Bennett references her idea that the function of public museums inevitably surpassed the two original contradictory functions: "that of the elite temple of the arts, and that of a utilitarian instrument for democratic education," and was then "shaped into an instrument of the disciplinary society."<sup>222</sup> It is through this third functionality of discipline that demonstrates the split or undecided purpose of determining just who the museum's functions are designed to serve. Bennett states: "Through the institution of a division between the producers and

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 89.

consumers of knowledge – a division which assumed an architectural form in the relations between the hidden spaces of the museum, where knowledge was produced and organized..., and its public spaces, where knowledge was offered for passive consumption – the museum became a site where bodies, constantly under surveillance, were to be rendered docile.”<sup>223</sup> This described complacency is reiterated in Solomon’s statement; she seems to be standing on the side of society that still adheres to the understanding that museums exist as institutional white pillars of culture, and further reflecting the views of those that benefit most from the institution: those that have been hailed and remain at the elite positions of power.

Finally, speaking theoretically on MoMA’s intentions, employing the perspectives of these two photography-based artists appears as a nod to the Museum’s ability to appeal to a variety of age groups. Additionally, this same notion also provides a feminist approach by having the voices of two female artists present. Notably however, these two artists are white; this fact reinforces the findings in the aforementioned survey of museum staff. These artists are not staff at MoMA, but they were commissioned, and speaking to the demographic of authoritative positions, they fit into the statistics provided from the survey that addresses the lack of diversity within museum infrastructures on a racial scale.

### **Building and Gallery Restructuring**

Regarding the concept of accessibility, there are two aspects of construction that were added to the Museum in order to be more accessible to the public. The first is an exterior awning (fig. 8) described as an “entrance canopy” that was added to the 53<sup>rd</sup> Street entrance to the building.<sup>224</sup> The broad yet sleek design, part of the construction partnership with architecture

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Alexandra Peers, “Unwrapping the New MoMA’s Great Pros and Cons,” *Architectural Digest*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/moma-expansion-redesign>.

firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro, offers both insight to the modern nature of the institution as well as physical coverage from the exterior position of patrons and passersby alike. The canopy acts as a transitional space for museum goers, whether they are waiting in line for Free Friday Night access to the Museum or are in the swift and exciting process of walking into the building from the streets of New York. There is something welcoming about an awning or canopy: the structure acts as a shield or protective force from external happenings, while also drawing viewers' gazes to the entrance doors, almost beckoning people off the chaotic city streets and into the curated, bewildering art world the Museum is intending to offer.

The second aspect of focus on accessibility in the reconstruction was the process of adding a gallery to the Museum that could be viewed from the streets and further accessed without purchasing a ticket to the main areas of the building. The concept behind adding this space is based on accessibility to art by better connecting the Museum to the city and its people.<sup>225</sup> Overall, the building construction added over 40,000 square feet of new and updated gallery spaces throughout the entire institution.<sup>226</sup> Other facets of the reconstruction include areas of the original main lobby being extended, in addition to raising the ceiling to a two-story clearance of that same area, altering the space for a more open and inviting experience for those entering the building. New elevators and a new staircase provide additional access to the expanded exhibition space, allowing for circulation and connectivity between floors to be improved. Overall, the exhibition space increased by 30 percent.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> "The Expanded and Reimagined Museum of Modern Art Opened on October 21, 2019," Museum of Modern Art, MoMA: Press Office, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://press.moma.org/news/museum-renovation-and-expansion-project/>.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

Part of this focus on accessibility is apparent in the technical restructuring of the galleries. From my experience at the Museum after the reopening, in comparison to my first visit pre-closure and reconstruction, I noticed the flow of energy and overall dynamic of the gallery spaces was much more natural and coherent from a design perspective. This is a welcome change, as the previous renovation and reconfiguration in 2004 “resulted in congestion and overcrowding.”<sup>228</sup> By assigning each gallery a specific floor-related number and title, visitors can better situate themselves within the space in relation to specific themes and artworks. Some themes include *Machines, Mannequins, and Monsters*, which focuses on artistic works developed within the early decades of the twentieth century that address fears about the body’s vulnerability and malleability registered across visual mediums; *Abstraction and Utopia*, which contains works of nonrepresentational art with the intention of this artform to free viewers from the material realm while connecting to radical politics and imagining a more perfect future; and *Planes of Color*, consisting of works by Rothko and Newman, whose pieces were in part a response to unthinkable atrocities, such as the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, and employed the artistic practice of using color as an essential expressive tool.<sup>229</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned published print versions of the Museum’s self-titled highlights, their website offers a link to virtual updates on ongoing collection highlights, specifically focused on a new concept of a formal “Spring Review.”<sup>230</sup> The press release for this reveal provides insight to design and layout of the new gallery organization and the epistemology

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<sup>228</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “MoMA’s Makeover Rethinks the Presentation of Art,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/arts/design/moma-redesign-art-expansion.html>.

<sup>229</sup> “404: Planes of Color,” Museum of Modern Art, MoMA: Collection 1940s-1970s, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/galleries/5118>.

<sup>230</sup> “Press Release: MoMA’s Spring Reveal to Open With Changes to 20 Galleries on the Museum’s Collection Floors This May,” Museum of Modern Art, February 11, 2020, [https://press.moma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MoMA\\_SpringReveal\\_May2020.pdf](https://press.moma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MoMA_SpringReveal_May2020.pdf).



of the pieces that were installed. According to the press release: “The new MoMA opened with a reimagined approach to its presentation of modern and contemporary art, including a commitment to rotate one-third of its collection galleries every six months. This new collection model highlights the creative affinities and frictions produced by displaying painting, sculpture, architecture, design, photography, media, performance, film, and works on paper together.”<sup>231</sup>

The floors are now organized chronologically beginning with the second level displaying art from the 1970s to present day, the third level focusing on interactive and performance spaces, the fourth floor housing the collection’s work from the 1940s through the 1970s, and the fifth floor focusing on works dating back to the 1880s.

Within the dynamic of floor distribution, each floor of the of the newly constructed David Geffen Wing features coherently segmented galleries: “The majority of MoMA’s approximately sixty collection galleries now feature works from two or more of the Museum’s curatorial departments, proceeding along a broadly chronological spine throughout the fifth-, fourth-, and second floors. A selection of medium-specific galleries within each circuit delves into art and ideas that only MoMA’s extraordinary collection can present.”<sup>232</sup> Every subsegment gallery on each floor begins with the respective floor number, followed by a standard numerical organization of the galleries within each floor. These numbers are not only added to the maps available for visitors but are also applied to the wall spaces standing between each gallery and other walkthrough areas. Compared to the organization of space between galleries pre-construction, having these newly added gallery numbers around every corner makes the whole museum much easier to navigate. Whether the visitor is looking for a specific work of art, or

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<sup>231</sup> “Press Release: MoMA’s Spring Reveal to Open With Changes to 20 Galleries on the Museum’s Collection Floors This May,” Museum of Modern Art, February 11, 2020, [https://press.moma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MoMA\\_SpringReveal\\_May2020.pdf](https://press.moma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MoMA_SpringReveal_May2020.pdf).

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

simply needs to determine their location in relation to the space as a whole, the addition of the individual gallery numbers and respective arrows offers an ease of navigation throughout the museum experience. This ease allows for a greater sense of general accessibility, in addition to a more natural flow of progression when walking through the various galleries.

The Museum has established a new rotation schedule as well, as detailed in the Spring Reveal Press Release.<sup>233</sup> By regularly rearranging works, the Museum will hopefully be able to enable new contextualization and perspectives towards the included artworks, in the hopes of offering new art historical narratives along the process. The Museum has shown efforts of continuing accessibility through offering virtual tours of gallery spaces and of course, as it has been for years, the collection is available to be viewed online at no cost to viewers. During the original plans for the Spring Reveal “and subsequent rotations, each floor of galleries will offer a deeper experience of art through all mediums and by artists from more diverse geographies and backgrounds than ever before. Conceived and installed by cross-departmental teams of curators at all levels of seniority, the Spring Reveal delivers on the promise to constantly renew the presentation and explores the relationships among works of art displayed in continually changing contexts.”<sup>234</sup> The Museum addresses this promise of diversity by “recognizing that there is no single or complete history of modern and contemporary art, [and it] will continue to systematically rotate and reinstall one-third of these collection galleries every six months. By

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<sup>233</sup> This Spring Reveal was announced in the beginning of February 2020 and was intended to open in May 2020. Unfortunately, due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic closures, the status of the actual reorganization has been put on hold, determinate upon the unknown date of MoMA reopening to the public.

<sup>234</sup> “Press Release: MoMA’s Spring Reveal to Open With Changes to 20 Galleries on the Museum’s Collection Floors This May,” Museum of Modern Art, February 11, 2020, [https://press.moma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MoMA\\_SpringReveal\\_May2020.pdf](https://press.moma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MoMA_SpringReveal_May2020.pdf).

2021, MoMA will have re-choreographed each of its galleries across the fifth, fourth, and second floors—and will constantly renew the presentation.”<sup>235</sup>

One of MoMA’s relatively new approaches to contextualizing specific pieces is a newly expanded gallery space titled *Artist’s Choice* gallery (fig. 9). The *Artist’s Choice* series began in 1989 with artist Scott Burton. Burton was “invited to select, juxtapose, and comment on” works from the Museum’s collection.<sup>236</sup> The chief curator of Painting and Sculpture at that time was Kirk Varnedoe. Varnedoe addresses the importance of offering such a series and gallery space by noting: “We have to recognize that a crucial part of the modern tradition is the creative response of artists to the works of their peers and predecessors.”<sup>237</sup> The timing of Varnedoe’s thoughts on this new gallery concept reflects a slightly different perspective than that of his response to the “*Primitivism*” exhibition from only five years prior. The predecessors he is referencing are the very same canonical geniuses he had praised in the approach to the concept behind the “*Primitivism*” exhibition; only this time, he is seemingly aware of the importance of other artistic perspectives and creative approaches to the reception of traditional art historical narratives. The phrase “modern tradition” is also an interesting point of focus in his statement. I am curious how this modern tradition he is referencing is related to his previous definitions and curatorial practices of modern tradition; I wonder if the overall negative response and critique of “*Primitivism*” acted as a catalyst for the shift in his acceptance of other artistic perspectives,

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<sup>235</sup> “Press Release: MoMA’s Spring Reveal to Open With Changes to 20 Galleries on the Museum’s Collection Floors This May,” Museum of Modern Art, February 11, 2020, [https://press.moma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MoMA\\_SpringReveal\\_May2020.pdf](https://press.moma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MoMA_SpringReveal_May2020.pdf).

<sup>236</sup> “Artist’s Choice,” Museum of Modern Art, accessed March 13, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/groups/19>.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

further allowing these voices to not only be heard but expressed in the dedicated space of their own gallery within the Museum.

The effective ingenuity of the *Artist's Choice* space, although technically limited to one gallery and only work from within the collection, offers a fresh perspective on the so-called modern tradition that a modern art museum would provide. Part of the Museum's reorganization process debate sheds light on the expected chronological display of artworks, contextualizing and grouping artists by periods, their creative environments and inspirations that led them to creating the works deemed worthy of belonging to the collection. The *Artist's Choice* gallery provides an ahistorical approach, thus recontextualizing the selected works within that space. Upon the reopening, the selected artist chosen to implement the curation of this space was painter Amy Sillman. Sillman titled her exhibition *The Shape of Shape*, based on her interest in the relationships we've formed with shape in both art and life itself. She describes that although shape is everywhere, it isn't often discussed as a "hot topic" in art, the same way concepts of color or systems have been addressed so crucially in the past: "I wonder if, in fact, shape got left behind when modern art turned to systems, series, grids, and all things calculable in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Was shape too personal, too subjective, to be considered rigorously modern; or is it just too indefinite, too big, to systematize?"<sup>238</sup> As seen in fig. 9, the works Sillman chose to implement each offer an approach to the concept of shape that dominates over other, more expected, themes of modern art.

An interesting aspect of the *Artist's Choice* series is the fact that the artworks are not displayed in a traditional manner, as the majority of the Museum's galleries employ. Pieces are

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<sup>238</sup> "Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman," Museum of Modern Art, accessed March 13, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5175>.

staggered and layered on the walls and ground-level pedestals within the space. Additionally, there are no labels associated with the artworks to be found. This concept allows the images and works to be viewed without the context of the artists statements, time periods, or other historical data that would typically offer a background for understanding. Giving the viewers free reign to observe and draw conclusions or interpretations from their own perspective allows for the works to be experienced the way Sillman intended. This recontextualization is established as an innovative curatorial approach from a transhistorical perspective. For the sake of clarification, I am taking the stance that the terms *ahistorical* and *transhistorical* can act interchangeably on this matter. While *ahistorical* references a lack of historical perspective compared to the transcendence of a transhistorical narrative, they are both offering the same effect to the viewers of Sillman's curated space. Without providing wall labels to identify information relating the works to concrete places in time, the viewer is able to perceive the works open-mindedly and receive the visual information in the art from a neutral perspective, allowing the art to speak for itself. This approach varies from the previous didact-less exhibits in a crucial way. The artworks featured in "*Primitivism*" specifically related the "primitive" works to those of "modern genius," whereas Sillman is portraying a theme of form or aesthetic from her perspective, established from pieces within the Museum's collection.<sup>239</sup>

### **Featuring Blackness: Highlighting Betye Saar and Pope.L**

The main exhibition gallery space, situated on the second floor is gallery 2 South, located just off of the Atrium space that is one of the first areas visitors move to once entering the Museum. This space, named The Paul J. Sachs Galleries, stands alone in relation to the other

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<sup>239</sup> Comparisons to d'Harnoncourt's *Timeless Aspects of Modern Art* can be drawn here, as both exhibits focus on a neutral concept of varying modern artworks, rather than cultural artifacts.

galleries on this floor, and acts as a focal point for viewers to experience a gallery dedicated to one specific artist. For the re-opening, curators have chosen Betye Saar's works for an exhibition titled *Betye Saar: The Legends of Black Girl's Window*. Saar's primarily print-based works focus on her perspective as a woman of color, with the exhibition title alluding to her autobiographical assemblage *Black Girl's Window* (1969, fig. 10). Reflecting themes of family, history, and mysticism, the exhibition of her works explores the relation between her experimental print practice and the new artistic language debuted in this famous piece, along with the recent acquisition of 42 rare, early works on paper.<sup>240</sup> This exhibition is the first time Saar's work as a printmaker has been so largely featured at the Museum. The majority of her prints reflect her experience as a person of color growing up in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The use of windowpanes in some of her works provides a conceptual approach to her experience with segregation and racism. Another work, *Black Crows in the White Section Only* (1972), frames various racist advertisements from that time period in each pane. By the repetition of images between the panes, these negative stereotypes are reiterated. The frame represents perspective, lending insight to the Black experience of that time. Unfortunately, these racist ideologies are not yet extinct, and should never be forgotten even in potential future times of equality, so the importance of displaying these kinds of works helps to transcend time the same way institutional racism has transcended time up to this point in history.

Saar offers audio tour descriptions of select works when walking through the gallery, as well as accompanying the same works in their digital reproductions on the Museum's website. When describing her creative process for developing the images in her prints for *Black Girl's*

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<sup>240</sup> "Betye Saar: The Legends of *Black Girl's Window*," Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 31, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5060>.

*Window* and the idea of combining windowpane elements, she explains the flow of thought by reflecting on her inner fascination with astrology combined with realistic experiences from throughout her life. The top row of panes containing celestial symbols represents her interest in the sky and, based on the natural occurrence of their location above us, it is clear why they are placed at the utmost top panes. The second row begins with an image of a couple dancing, meant to represent her mother and father. In the audio description, she explains the horrific experience of her father passing away: “He had an infection and the hospital in Pasadena was segregated, and he had to drive to a county hospital which was the only kind of medical care black people had. The next picture is of death; which is the way I interpret his passing; ... he had such a rude way of dying.”<sup>241</sup> Looking back to these memories brought up the ingrained issues Saar experienced with racism and segregation. Moving onto the third row of images, she reflects back to the dualistic nature of life and her placement within the world. The lion with a sun in her mouth represents her astrological sun sign, a Leo. The following pane holds a daguerreotype of a woman, meant to symbolize her unknown ancestry on her mother’s side, as her mother was white but her father was Native American and black.<sup>242</sup> The farthest right image in this row displays a large, eagle-like bird, with a banner proclaiming the word “love,” perhaps symbolizing the love she feels towards her family and her placement within that structure. The final and largest pane at the bottom houses her own silhouette, with her hands pressed against the pane, symbolically staring back at the viewer. She states: “On the hands are the different symbols and signs of astrology; one hand is for what my life will be, and the other hand is what my life really

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<sup>241</sup> Betye Saar. *The Man from Phrenology*. 1965.” Museum of Modern Art, Audio Recording of Artist for Gallery Tour, accessed October 31, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/302/3888>.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

was. It's about life and about death."<sup>243</sup> It is clear that Saar's works represent her experiences throughout her life as a woman and person of color who grew up during times of civil unrest and cultural movements towards change.

While astrological themes resonate throughout many of her pieces shown in this exhibit, other themes reflecting racism and oppression are just as prevalent. One key theme of Saar's installed collection is the phrenological silhouette, as seen in *The Man from Phrenology* (1965, fig. 11). The use of phrenological imagery is especially important considering the historical background of how Black people were established as the other. bell hooks writes about the politics of Black bodies always receiving attention within the framework of white supremacy, in the form of racist and sexist iconography being deployed to perpetuate ideologies of innate biological inferiority.<sup>244</sup> Saar does not ignore these historical references, but rather reclaims them through her creative process. In addition to making the reference of injustice, she offers a positive approach to the use of the image: "Certain parts of your skull reveal aspects of your personality. What you think about, what you dream about."<sup>245</sup> Her reclamation does not erase the original intent or usage of this particular image; she acknowledges its negative position in culture, then adds her own perspective, offering a more positive shift towards accurate representation.

In addition to Saar's large exhibition, another exhibition focused on African American artist Pope.L was displayed. This exhibition, titled *member: Pope.L, 1978-2001*, offered a new

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<sup>243</sup> "Betye Saar. *The Man from Phrenology*. 1965." Museum of Modern Art, Audio Recording of Artist for Gallery Tour, accessed October 31, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/302/3888>.

<sup>244</sup> bell hooks, "Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: The Whitney Museum of Art, 1994), 127.

<sup>245</sup> "Betye Saar. *The Man from Phrenology*. 1965." Museum of Modern Art, Audio Recording of Artist for Gallery Tour, accessed October 31, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/302/3888>.



approach to an artist that focused his creative work on nontraditional mediums. The exhibition was interactive and eclectic, while still shedding light on the social, racial and economic issues at hand. MoMA's description of the exhibition describes Pope.L's work as "resisting easy categorization; his career encompasses theatrical performances, street actions, language, painting, video, drawing, installation, and sculpture."<sup>246</sup> The Museum's employment of this exhibition reflects their supposed interest in representing artists of color, as well as artists that practice in mediums outside of traditional art historical practices. The use of the term *member* in the exhibition title is a nod to the provocative terms and stakes of members for an artist who constantly strives "to reinvent what's beneath us, to remind us where we all come from," making material out of categories of race, gender, and citizenships that are intimately entwined.<sup>247</sup> The concept of being a "member" denotes inclusiveness. Pope.L's work was often addressing the "fraught connection between prosperity and what he calls 'have-not-ness'," according to MoMA.<sup>248</sup> While the Museum is obviously paying homage to the artist in both the exhibition title and the artwork displayed, I am forced to question the intentionality behind the decision to employ this term as such. In "Race, The Writing of History, and Culture Wars," Maghan Keita explains the importance of addressing this history from an intersectional approach. She claims by locating and centering ourselves, a forced recontextualization of the present space will allow for new interpretations that are "predicated on other dynamics that have always been consonant with race, dynamics like class and gender."<sup>249</sup> Taking this concept even further, this type of

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<sup>246</sup> "member: Pope.L, 1978-2001," Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 31, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5059>.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Maghan Keita, "Race, the Writing of History, and Culture Wars," *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 2 (November 2002): 168.

intersectional approach offers a window into thinking about the significance of ideas and social action in fostering social change, according to Patricia Hill Collins.<sup>250</sup> She states, “... neither change itself nor intersectionality’s connections to such change is preordained; [and] the only thing that is certain about human existence is that it will change, but not necessarily in the evolutionary, linear fashion of Western notions of progress.”<sup>251</sup> It is this shift in progress that efforts of decolonization can hopefully be found. This specific exhibit alludes to the Museum’s acknowledgement of this concept; how, or if, they continue this approach will be the signifier of their decolonizing efforts.

### ***Around Les Demoiselles d’Avignon: A Shrine***

The final area of focus on the reorganization of the collection and galleries involves the fifth-floor gallery titled *Around Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*. This gallery space, as can be inferred from the title alone, situates Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* within the space amongst other works spanning decades and mediums of Picasso’s creative endeavors. The works featured in this space follow the chronological progression of Picasso’s artistic development, and include pieces such as *Boy Leading a Horse* (1905-06), *Two Nudes* (1906), *Head of a Sleeping Woman (Study for Nude with Drapery)* (1907), *Fruit Dish* (1908-09), and “*Ma Jolie*” (1911-12) to name a few. The point of study within this shine-like space is the placement of two contemporary works by female artists: Faith Ringgold’s *American People Series #20: Die* (1967, fig. 12) and Louise Bourgeois’ *Quarantania, I* (1947-53, fig. 13). In addition to these two works being situated and contextualized among Picasso’s works, they are positioned opposite one another in the gallery space (fig. 14). The curatorial intention can be speculated to have dispersed

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<sup>250</sup> Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, 286.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

the two pieces evenly amongst Picasso's works, but as seen in fig. 14, they can also be perceived as adversarial to one another.

The purpose of including Ringgold and Bourgeois' pieces in relation to the other works in the space is not lost on the viewer. Visually, the two pieces clearly represent different artistic approaches compared to Picasso's work. Ringgold's *American People Series #20: Die* is a clear representation of her perspective and reinterpretation of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), depicting the tragedies of war and the potential of human nature towards violence and aggression. As opposed to the violence found in *Guernica*, Ringgold documents the violence she witnessed as an African American artist living during the racial transgressions happening in the United States during the 1960s. Ringgold opted to make clear representations of violence in the subjects' jarring movements within the piece, amongst the undeniable blood spattering between them. Even the clothing on the subjects has signification; men wearing suits and sharply dressed women act as representation of a professional class that is being held accountable for their actions in the chaotic scene.<sup>252</sup> Bourgeois' *Quarantania* offers a softer approach to the female figure, in both shape and coloring of the subjects. The structural piece, similarly to *Les Demoiselles*, consists of five female figures and is said to represent manifestations of the artist's homesickness she experienced after moving to New York from Paris in 1938, the year she began making the sculptures.<sup>253</sup> Unlike *Les Demoiselles*, however, the female figures do not directly meet the viewer's gaze with their own, as each of the four surrounding figures face the central figure. This offers a feeling of conversation between the subjects, as opposed to the jolting glare experienced

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<sup>252</sup> "Faith Ringgold, *American People Series #20: Die*, 1967," Museum of Modern Art, MoMA: Art and artists, accessed November 11, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/199915>.

<sup>253</sup> "Louise Bourgeois, *Quarantania, I*, 1947-53; reassembled by the artist 1981," Museum of Modern Art, MoMA: Art and artists, accessed November 11, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81955>.

when viewing *Les Demoiselles*. Bourgeois' piece better applies what MoMA's intentions were with this specific gallery, but the curatorial decision to include *Quarantania* remains problematic given the idea behind situating Bourgeois' work in relation to Picasso's work.

*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* has been the common artifact throughout the years of both praise and critique for the Museum. It was obviously a canonical acquisition, as it has been cited as the origination of the Cubism movement; therefore, it is no surprise that this work has remained installed since it was acquired and continuously in the reopening. Compared to its location pre-dating the renovation, where the work was installed on a focal wall in a room with less than ten other works, the piece is now situated amongst other "noteworthy" pieces by the artist. It still stands alone on the focal wall and is most likely the first artwork the viewer sees upon entering the gallery, but within the shared space of the other pieces in the room with an overall collective visual aspect of fitting into the space with only slightly less attention drawn to it. Regarding the continued attention to infamous works like *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Carol Duncan writes about this organizational approach in *Civilizing Rituals*: "MoMA's [then] most recent installation seems to assign these images slightly fewer front-and-center places than previous installations; but so many big, famous 'key' works are difficult to downplay. In any case, unless and until the museum adopts an entirely different organizing program, such an exercise would hardly have a point."<sup>254</sup> Duncan's approach dates back nearly thirty years, yet sheds light on issues MoMA is still facing, as clearly displayed by the choice of the shrine-like gallery dedicated to the multitude of Picasso's work over the years, with *Les Demoiselles* acting as the focal point.

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<sup>254</sup> Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 112.

The nature of *Les Femmes d'Alger* has long been discussed and critiqued as problematic for multiple reasons. From the perspective of artistic technique, the work has been described as “less suited for public display than for the studio,” and it appears as though Picasso “left the work in a disjunctive state, such that historians debated for some time whether it was actually finished.”<sup>255</sup> Speaking to the subjects in the painting, although they all appear to be light-skinned, “critics often differentiate the two with African-looking masks as distinctly ugly, bestial, and dirty or contagion-ridden – that is, with all the scathing stereotypes that have so long dogged dark-skinned peoples.”<sup>256</sup> Supporting this negative approach to women, and particularly women of color, the Museum’s own William Rubin is quoted as referring to “the monstrously distorted heads of the two *whores* on the right,” contrasting them with “the comparatively gracious ‘Iberian’ *courtesans* in the center.”<sup>257</sup> The subtext to this thought is the relation of the more European-looking figures to the two figures in African-esque masks is a narrative of regression: “of normality regressing into deviancy, of well-being degenerating into disease, and of contained eroticism lapsing into raw animality.”<sup>258</sup> Regression goes against the very foundation of modernism, which is based on present reflection and is forward-facing. Additionally, this idea of regression can also be found in *American People Series* but from a different perspective. Ringgold’s work comments on the regression of society, whereas Picasso’s regression is specific to, and quite obviously against, women. Further on this regressive path, the Cubist approach to the female form has also been described as follows: “The radical treatment of the traditional idealized nude female announces the end of the old world of art with a new, staggering violence.

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<sup>255</sup> Anna C. Chave, “New Encounters with *Les Femmes d'Alger*,” in *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, edited by Kymberly N. Pinder (New York: Routledge, 2002), 265.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> Patricia Leighton, “The White Peril and *L’Art nègre*,” in *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, ed. Kymberly N. Pinder (New York: Routledge, 2002), 272.

The violence comes not only from the savage treatment of the distorted faces and forms of the two ‘African’ figures, and from the transformation of usually passive nudes in tamed attitudes into aggressively challenging mock-temptresses, but also from the very illusion to the dark continent unavoidably carried with them.”<sup>259</sup> In an article in *The Guardian*, Lowry addressed part of the curatorial decision to place *American People Series* in the adjacent position to *Les Demoiselles*: “Ringgold’s painting, which is violent, introduces issues around race but it also talks about the impact of colonization and decolonization. It reframes Picasso differently; it doesn’t diminish Picasso, it simply means that there’s another conversation you can have around Picasso.”<sup>260</sup> The conversation Lowry mentions about colonization, and decolonization specifically, is counterintuitive. Picasso was known for appropriative works and misrepresenting entire cultures, so it is entirely implausible to allow Ringgold’s work to act as a catalyst for conversation, and acts of, decolonization when her work is contextualized *amongst* Picasso’s, perhaps most offensive, work. This unfair juxtaposition of Ringgold’s work reflects MoMA’s lack of understanding of the importance of representation. hooks explains: “Representation is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonization of the mind. Without a doubt, if all Black children were daily growing up in environments where they learned the importance of art and saw artists that were Black, our collective Black experience of art would be transformed. However, we know that, in the segregated world of African-American history, for years Black folks created and displayed their art in segregated Black communities, and this effort was not enough to make an intervention that

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<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>260</sup> Miranda Bryant, “New York’s MoMA unveils \$450m expansion and ‘remix’ of collection,” *The Guardian*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/oct/10/moma-expansion-museum-new-york>.

revolutionized our collective experience of art.”<sup>261</sup> Therefore, if the representation of artists of color that *is* present is that of a singular piece in a room dedicated to the artwork of a deceased white male, the representation becomes even further diminished, misconstrued and misrepresented.

Due to these issues, this specific gallery exists as problematic and contradictory to the purpose of the Museum focusing on displaying more diverse works by women and people of color. hooks explains this phenomenon in relation to white supremacy: “From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination.”<sup>262</sup> *Les Demoiselles* has travelled through many exhibitions at the Museum since its acquisition, being recontextualized to fit the respective intentions of each exhibition. If it has such ability to be recontextualized, the Museum has fallen short, if not failed completely, by the current position of the piece and the grandeur of showing it in the context of its own gallery.

### **Mixed Reviews**

In the Winter 2020 edition of ARTnews, heavy focus was set on discussing MoMA’s renovation. Unsurprisingly, two of the three featured articles offer primarily positive accolades for the reorganization and rehanging of the collection. Perhaps the anticipation of the promise of greater change than the previous flop of a renovation in 2004 was enough to enact a more lenient critique, or even evaluation as opposed to critique, of the space. Olga Viso comments on the support in her article “Experimental Well-Being” stating: “While quality remains paramount,

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<sup>261</sup> bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press: 1995), 3.

<sup>262</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 2.

how it is defined remains open to shifting interpretation that can change with time. And it is a mind-set cognizant of such change that marks the reshaping of MoMA as the first real attempt by a major museum to imagine an authentic and potentially lasting structural shift.”<sup>263</sup> In further support of the chronological uncoupling’s found in the revamped gallery spaces, Latin American scholar Edward J. Sullivan offers praise of “pleasures and possibilities for learning more” in his piece “Global Action.”<sup>264</sup> Sullivan voices his appreciation for the shift in focus on Latinx artists in the new MoMA’s application of displaying the Cisneros Collection. The stronger, least-impressed critique can be found in curator Maura Reilly’s “Misfired Canon.” Reilly describes the unfortunate juxtaposition of Ringgold’s work and *Les Demoiselles* as “tokenism” in addition to drawing attention to the *Florine Stettheimer and Company* gallery, claiming the random grouping of female artists that have relatively zero connection to one another is “perhaps the best example of problematic curating.”<sup>265</sup> The ultimate takeaway from her critique of the renovation reverts back to the similar concepts I have also discussed within this chapter, regarding Ringgold’s placement in *Around Les Demoiselles*:

In what seems like an effort to address the sins and errors of the past, MoMA is attempting an integrative approach, inserting artists back into the mainstream canon within which they had either been marginalized or made invisible. MoMA’s principle aim here, it seems, is to revise the canon, to rewrite it—in short, to expand it to include what it had hitherto refused, forgotten, or hidden: women, for instance, and minority cultures. While revisionism is an important curatorial strategy, it also assumes the white, masculinist, Western canon as its “center” and accepts its hierarchy as a natural given. The Ringgold intervention is an excellent example. The problem is that with a revisionist strategy there is still a binary opposition in place. In other words, we must be wary of revisionism that becomes a kind of homage. Revising the canon to address the neglect of women and/or

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<sup>263</sup> Olga Viso, “Experimental Well-Being,” *ARTnews* (Winter 2020): 121.

<sup>264</sup> Edward J. Sullivan, “Global Action,” *ARTnews* (Winter 2020): 114.

<sup>265</sup> Maura Reilly, “Misfired Canon,” *ARTnews* (Winter 2020): 112.



minority artists is fundamentally an impossible project because such revision does not grapple with the terms that created that neglect in the first place.<sup>266</sup>

Reilly's approach to the issue with *Around Les Demoiselles* points to the continuing issues with MoMA's decolonization efforts. The concept behind presenting Ringgold and Bourgeois' work next to works of Picasso has poor intentions with even worse follow-through. *Les Demoiselles* is still being highlighted as the focal point of the space, therefore perpetuating the same traditional art historical narrative that maintains Picasso's position of power as one of genius, and ultimately supporting the colonized ideologies that this renovation was intending to diverge from.

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<sup>266</sup> Maura Reilly, "Misfired Canon," *ARTnews* (Winter 2020): 113.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

Museums as cultural institutions have the power and responsibility to contribute to the corrections of social injustices. By addressing this responsibility, and specifically focusing on MoMA's role in this process, I have contributed to the conversation of equal and accurate representation within museums. Drawing upon Viso's stance on art and museums' responsibility:

Art can illuminate the fissures in society and in return offer opportunities for healing. But should artists be the only ones to bear the brunt of this responsibility? If museums want to continue to have a place, they must stop seeing activists as antagonists. They must position themselves as learning communities, not impenetrable centers of self-validating authority.<sup>267</sup>

My research has shed light on the current issues within art museums, and further provided valid support for the type of changes that need to occur. A multitude of misrepresentations and acts of failure on the behalf of institutions, curators and artists have been demonstrated. MoMA's most recent renovation has been a step in the right direction. But a single step is not enough to make the changes that need to occur. In the contemporary writings of David Fleming's *Museums for Social Justice: Managing organizational change* the thought of a museum being active in seeking to fulfill a social justice agenda remains a radical one; this is despite the very real progress that has been made in recent years in terms of the museum profession's growing acceptance of fundamental principles relating to their role society.<sup>268</sup> Fleming makes mention of this agenda belonging to management within the museums: "What we have to embed is a corporate commitment to a particular set of roles; roles that are different from those that museums played for most of the twentieth century. This demands the

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<sup>267</sup> Olga Viso, "Decolonizing the Art Museum: The Next Wave," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/opinion/decolonizing-art-museums.html>.

<sup>268</sup> David Fleming, "Museums for Social Justice: Managing organizational change," in *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, ed. Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale (England: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 72.

engagement of all parts of the organization, most urgently and critically at leadership and governance levels, where the new commitment can be achieved fairly rapidly, even if it takes longer to persuade everyone else to sign up.”<sup>269</sup> As the director of MoMA, Lowry has made obvious statements towards an interest in this movement of change, acceptance and inclusiveness. In addition to the necessity of leadership positions contributing to this movement, museum missions, values and vision, all of which are important elements of a museum’s make up, play a critical role where change is being introduced.<sup>270</sup> Aspects of the renovation have further supported these statements, as seen with the increase in the diversity of race and gender amongst artists whose work is displayed. But while the collection reflects greater diversity, it still needs much improvement. Upon the re-opening of MoMA, of the 1,443 works on display, only 336 are by women artists, accounting for only a mere 23 percent.<sup>271</sup> Beyond this detrimental percentage is that of works credited to artists of color. The significance of this significant lack of representation is directly related to the patrons of color that would be viewing the artwork. Without representation, the Black experience stays oppressed; hooks writes: “Socialized within white supremacist educational systems and by a racist mass media, many Black people are convinced that our lives are not complex, and are therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection.”<sup>272</sup> Beyond this concept, the responsibility to correct this injustice lies in the hands of the oppressors, not those that are continuously oppressed.

The concept of regularly rotating and recontextualizing works seems promising, but the issue still remains to be proven in the form of future exhibition endeavors. Maura Reilly offers

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<sup>269</sup> David Fleming, “Museums for Social Justice: Managing organizational change,” in *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, ed. Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale (England: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 72-3.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>271</sup> Maura Reilly, “Misfired Canon,” *ARTnews* (Winter 2020): 111.

<sup>272</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 2.

insight to this notion: “For too long, equality and diversity considerations have been relegated to the margins of the business of museums and galleries with many institutions interpreting their responsibilities in this area as being limited to one area of activity (for example, collections or staffing) or restricted to specific equality issues (such as race, gender or disability) with a corresponding disregard for the interconnections or tensions between them. Ignoring the changed nature of our society and the multifaceted and shifting nature of people’s identities, they have often been limited (or at worst, insensitive or inappropriate) in their response to diversity and equality issues.”<sup>273</sup>

### **Museum of Modern Primitivism**

Regarding MoMA’s specific area of failing to address core issues of inequality has a common thread of the continued enabling and perpetuation of primitivism. The Museum is a powerhouse of modernity, yet the traditional art historical narratives that continue to marginalize and oppress are still proudly on display within the gallery walls. Specifically, and most importantly in relation to my research, the choice of the gallery *Around Les Demoiselles* is a continuation of support for subverted and obvious primitivism, thus making the desired decolonization to be rendered as unsuccessful and problematic. Patricia Leighton describes the negative effect of maintaining *Les Demoiselles* canonical stature: “Picasso’s primitivism subverts aesthetic canons of beauty and order in the name of ‘authenticity,’ as a way of contravening the rational, liberal, ‘enlightened’ political order in which they are implicated. The deliberate ugliness of a painting like [*Les*] *Demoiselles* is meant to assert the persistence, within a self-

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<sup>273</sup> Eithne Nightingale, and Chandan Mahal, “The Heart of the Matter: Integrating equality and diversity into the policy and practice of museums and galleries,” in *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, ed. Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale (England: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 13.

congratulatory ‘modern’ culture, of the ugly realities that a complacent modernity would prefer to elide.”<sup>274</sup> Regarding this thought, *American People Series* is also ugly, but from the perspective of an accurate representation of society as opposed to Picasso’s patriarchal approach through “anarchy” of the female body and feminine power.

The Museum’s relationship with the concept of primitivism began when the doors first opened. We witnessed this with the demonstrated decision process and application of the African Negro Art exhibit in 1935, and the subsequent mishandling and misrepresentation of the William Edmonson exhibition as the first “modern primitive” to be featured at the Museum. A continued lack of diverse representation, and gender and racial disparities, within the internal employment infrastructure as well as the artists and artworks installed in the galleries, carried through to the infamous “*Primitivism*” show. This exhibition shed bright light on the failure of a modern museum having the ability to properly represent modern culture in its actual time of existence at the end of the twentieth century. Since this time, attempts have obviously been made and the institution has addressed various areas of error, in addition to acknowledgment and praise where it was deserved. But these commentaries and acts are not enough. Beyond the obvious changes in curatorial practice, the issues I have discussed are still resonating beneath the surface of grand attempt; *Around Les Demoiselles* and the lack of deserved relevance for Ringgold and Bourgeois is the perfect example of this. The retelling of the narrative, whether pertaining to or containing art by people of color, or even accurate representations, is still told through the lens of the institution, which in this case, and in most, is still controlled by the white majority. It is not to

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<sup>274</sup> Leighton, “The White Peril and *L’Art nègre*,” 250.

say that the act of display does not warrant a step in the right direction, but the power of the step is still at the oppressor's hand.

### **Modern Modernisms: MoMA Moving Forward**

MoMA was established from the foundation of what is modern and has continued to strive to abide by the laws of the modern. Griselda Pollock offers insight to the crucial differences of varying modernisms that pertain to a modern art museum: "A museum of modern art negotiates three interconnecting terms. 'Modernization' refers to the radical transformation of economic, social, and political processes through industrialization and urbanization; 'modernity' refers to the cultural consciousness emerging in this epochal change that reshaped the world; and 'modernism' is the cultural negotiation and critical representation of this new consciousness."<sup>275</sup> According to Pollock: "Modernist consciousness was fundamentally engaged with the changing social roles, economic activity, public visibility, and cultural articulation of women in urban society at the levels of both lived processes and cultural representation; so how can we account for the counterintuitive fact that despite every form of evidence to the contrary, and despite everything that made the *modernization of gender* roles fundamental to modernity itself, the imminent vision of modern art created by the most influential American museum systematically failed to register the intensely visible artistic participation of women in making modernism modern?"<sup>276</sup> We are forced to question if MoMA's completion of this renovation is based on what is actually modern, or simply their own elitist notions of modern art. Throughout the entirety of its existence, MoMA has only portrayed the Western ideologies of modernism. The Museum's strongest advocate for non-Western traditions was Rene d'Harnoncourt, director from 1949 to

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<sup>275</sup> Griselda Pollock, "The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 36.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

1968 and the cofounder, with Nelson Rockefeller, of the Museum of Primitive Art, across the street from MoMA, 1957. D'Harnoncourt's 1948-1949 exhibition *Timeless Aspects of Modern Art* advanced his thesis that modernism was not an isolated historical phenomenon by juxtaposing Western modern art with objects from other eras and cultures."<sup>277</sup> The only other approach to addressing non-Western traditional art historical narratives is found in the overarching negative response to "*Primitivism*," when it made a moderately radical gesture of inclusion in 1988, by exhibiting *Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Print Art*.<sup>278</sup> Described as "easily the most 'political' exhibition to appear at the Museum since *The Artist as Adversary* (1971), the exhibition included a whole section called 'Race and Culture' and [included] enough Black and other minority artists to be described by critic Allen Schwartzman as 'the most integrated show ever staged at a major museum.'"<sup>279</sup> Statistically, this is represented by the total of 108 individual artists, of which eleven were Black, sixteen were Hispanic, three were Native American and seven were Asian American, with female artists pertaining to almost half of these numbers.<sup>280</sup> Schwartzman's statement begins with the bravado of great success, but the factual numbers and societal importance of the disparities provide a different perspective; one of disappointment and failure, on behalf of the institution and the art world in its entirety.

Addressing this need for change from the institutions, and evaluating the current attempts by said groups, is only the beginning. As described by English and Barat:

MoMA isn't yet entitled to congratulate itself. Mind what we do,  
not what we say; maybe view the inevitable difficulties ahead as

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<sup>277</sup> English and Barat, *Among Others*, 21.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

invitations to continue examining the definitions of museological and cultural practice at the Museum of Modern Art. That way, further theses will have to follow. The most powerful will be faithful equally to what MoMA is and what it is capable of becoming. We who are alive can say the least of anyone about the future of MoMA. But we can envision it and work toward what the mind's eye sees- a MoMA future in which the black artist is not a special occasion or subject, but just one artist among others.<sup>281</sup>

It is especially crucial in times of socioeconomic unrest to reflect on flaws within institutional systems and structures that we as a society have been blindly relying upon without questioning the associated power dynamics of said infrastructures and relational consequences to culture and society.

Acknowledging the changes that have occurred over time, Lowry has stated: “In the last 20 years we’ve made a very big push to ensure that representation of women, of African Americans and of course artists from elsewhere in the world was even more robust than before.”<sup>282</sup> The museum has also tried to make itself more approachable to people outside of the art world by avoiding art-specific terminology in their signs.<sup>283</sup> Standing by his institution, Lowry believes the renovation has offered the diversity we are seeking, stating works by women have increased fivefold since the early 2000s; unfortunately, 59 percent of artists across their collection are still male, with only 28 percent belonging to female artists and thirteen percent are people who are not gender-specific or are not single entities but groups, collectives and companies, in addition to obtaining more works outside North America and Europe.<sup>284</sup> Further, it is clear he believes the Museum has achieved the shift towards inclusivity, and is in part due to

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>282</sup> Miranda Bryant, “New York’s MoMA unveils \$450m expansion and ‘remix’ of collection,” *The Guardian*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/oct/10/moma-expansion-museum-new-york>.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.



the newfound connection of past and present, specifically in regard to the non-Picasso works in *Around Les Demoiselles*. “Introducing Ringgold’s painting, which is violent, introduces issues around race but it also talks about the impact of colonization and decolonization. It reframes Picasso differently. It doesn’t diminish Picasso; it simply means that there’s another conversation you can have around Picasso.” Unfortunately, cultivating a conversation about the impact of decolonization does not offer much more than an exchange of words.

### **Decolonization vs Deaccession: Final Thoughts**

Criticizing the politics or practices of certain “genius” artists does not discredit their artistic ability. Creative, innovative and projected emotive intentions aside, the process of establishing them as the canonical leaders negates the entirety of the truth that inspired and allowed their creative processes in the first place. By better informing the public through providing accurate narratives, or perhaps by deaccessioning entirely, we can make room for not only new, different and exciting art, but for more culturally significant artists that have never had a chance for the same accolades and affirmations as the previous leaders of the traditional art historical time period. As previously discussed in chapter two, the BMA’s director Christopher Bedford speaks to the importance of deaccessioning in order to obtain works by emerging artists of color: “I don’t think it’s reasonable or appropriate for a museum like the BMA to speak to a city that is 64 percent Black unless we reflect our constituents.”<sup>285</sup> This idea of making room for new work by letting go of long-held pieces was swiftly supported by those on the board of the BMA, with one member stating: “It’s 2018. Visions change. Just because you looked at things one way years ago doesn’t mean you look at them the same way now.”<sup>286</sup> As previously stated,

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<sup>285</sup> Julia Halperin, “‘It Is an Unusual and Radical Act’: Why the Baltimore Museum Is Selling Blue-Chip Art to Buy Works by Underrepresented Artists,” *Artnet*, April 30, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/market/baltimore-museum-deaccession-1274996>.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

to deaccession is not meant to diminish the legitimacy of the artists whose works would be sold. Rather than rotating the same artworks portraying the Grand Narrative, let us highlight the new and show the dispute with the old; the reason for change, the oppressed narratives and marginalized experiences that accurately reflect the experiences held by those currently visiting the Museum.

Architecturally, the remodel was a success. Speaking on matters of curatorial practice, improvements have been made; but it is not enough, and only time will tell if a real change is occurring. The Museum's continued display of *Les Demoiselles* in particular reiterates their stance on such masterpieces: that regardless of the multitude of renovations and reorganizing efforts we've seen over time, their focus lies solely on simply rearranging works as opposed to a willingness to attempt recontextualization, rather than embracing new perspectives and potentially selling work to make room for other works that might offer new approaches to visual information and the surrounding conversations to be had.

In addressing the historical denotation of decolonization, Robin W. Winks proposed a first, gradualist form of decolonization that assumed the appropriate means by which progress toward the top rung on the ladder was best measured lay in the political sphere: "One result of this assumption is that those who held to the doctrine of preparation saw decolonization first in political terms and only then in economic, social, or intellectual ones – that is, to one-half of an idealist conception of culture. That there was a catch to the process was clear enough: society would be taken as evidence that the process had been carried out too quickly, justifying slowing or stopping the process entirely."<sup>287</sup> It is important to consider the date of this statement was

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<sup>287</sup> Robin W. Winks, "On Decolonization and Informal Empire," *The American Historical Review* 81, no. 3 (June 1976): 540-1.

1976. Since this decade, mistakes have been made and addressed, with demonstrated intentions to acknowledge these errors and suggestions for future endeavors in order for change to occur. This is witnessed in the self-publication of *Among Others*; while the results of the renovation aren't as radical or extreme as desired, a shift in conversation at the very least is occurring. The public alongside museum employees are becoming aware of the societal rejection of traditional art historical narratives.

The desired change is possible. It has been described earlier in this thesis when evaluating the Ziibiwing Center's approach to decolonization and accurate representation. It can also be witnessed in the efforts of Decolonize This Place, and other activist groups including artists like Parker Bright and Michelle Hartney. There are even smaller groups within cultural institutions that are fighting for institutional steps towards change, such as the Museum as Site for Social Action (MASS Action). Created by three female Minneapolis Institute of Art museum employees, MASS Action "seeks to empower museum professionals through deeper conversations about equality and inclusion and ultimately a shift in the institutional structure itself."<sup>288</sup> A larger institution has also made a step forward in addressing the various discrepancies within the realm of cultural institutions. In 2019, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) announced an alternative museum definition within the establishment and respective community of institutions. ICOM is known to provide a common framework for museums, a forum for professional discussions, and a platform for questioning and celebrating heritage and collections in museums and cultural institutions.<sup>289</sup> By an institution of this stature

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<sup>288</sup> Alicia Eler, "Minneapolis team is changing museums from the inside out," *Star Tribune*, September 16, 2019, <http://www.startribune.com/changing-museums-from-the-inside-out/559569512/>.

<sup>289</sup> "ICOM announces the alternative museum definition that will be subject to a vote," ICOM News, International Council of Museums, July 25, 2019, <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>.

seeking an understanding within the museum community, ICOM affirms that providing a shared definition of the museum serves as the backbone for ICOM as a global organization.<sup>290</sup> The definition is as follows:

Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artifacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.<sup>291</sup>

Studying and embracing this definition is crucial for existing museums, including MoMA, if any sort of change is to occur. While the establishment of museums as colonial structures is undeniable and still prevalent, there have been small steps made in recent years by newer institutions, such as the New Museum – also located in New York – that have strived for inclusivity of lesser known artists and greater application of accurate representations of culture and peoples. Positioned between a traditional museum and an alternative space, the New Museum’s stated mission was to be a catalyst for a broad dialogue between artists and the public by establishing “an exhibition, information, and documentation center for contemporary art made within a period of approximately ten years prior to the present.”<sup>292</sup> The Museum presented the work of living artists who did not yet have wide public exposure or critical acceptance to a broader public, therefore focusing on inclusivity and accessibility of new art historical narratives

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<sup>290</sup> “ICOM announces the alternative museum definition that will be subject to a vote,” ICOM News, International Council of Museums, July 25, 2019, <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> “History,” *New Museum*, accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.newmuseum.org/history>.

through modern representation.<sup>293</sup> Additionally, it is worth noting Marcia Tucker, the creator of the New Museum, was previously a museum professional at the Whitney, which as an institution has come across exhibitions and displays of controversial, misrepresentative art, as previously discussed. Between the work of curators and museum professionals such as Thelma Golden and Marcia Tucker, the small success stemming from, and simultaneously being found at, institutions is a testament to their abilities and power as cultural institutions, leaving me to believe that a positive cultural shift of inclusivity, accessibility, and decolonization of museums in the future is entirely possible.

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

## Illustrations

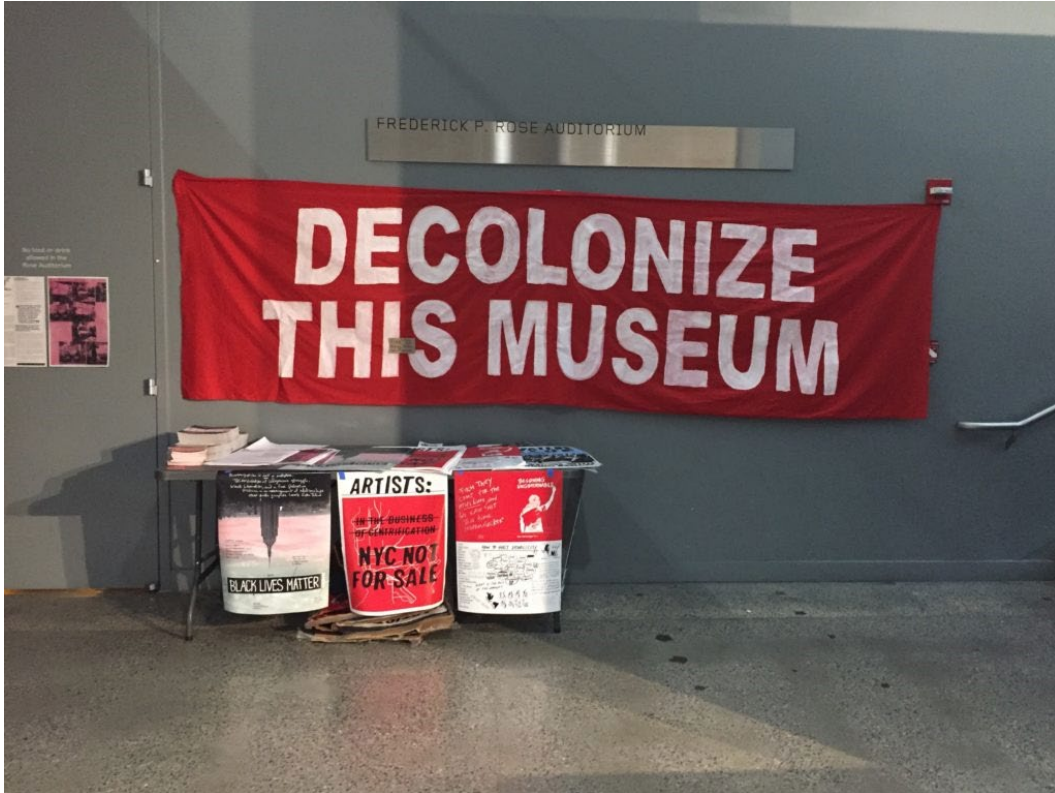


Fig. 1. Banners at a town hall held at Cooper Union, New York, on January 26, 2019. Copyright by Alex Greenberger, reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Fig. 2. Photograph of Michelle Hartney at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018. Copyright by Nate Brav-McCabe, reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Fig. 3. Photograph of protest by artist and activist Parker Bright, standing in front of Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016), at the Whitney Museum of Art, 2017. Photograph by Scott W. H. Young, via Twitter, reproduced under fair use. From Artsy. [Unpacking the Whitney's "Black Death Spectacle."](#)





Fig. 4. Announcement for the *African Negro Art* exhibition and publication, 1935. Photograph and permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Archives. [“African Negro Art” announcement.](#)



Fig. 5. Installation view of the exhibition *African Negro Art*, 1935. Photograph by Soichi Sunami, permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Archives. [“African Negro Art” installation view](#).



Fig. 6. Installation view of the exhibition *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 1984. Photograph by Katherine Keller, permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Archives. [“Primitivism” installation view](#).

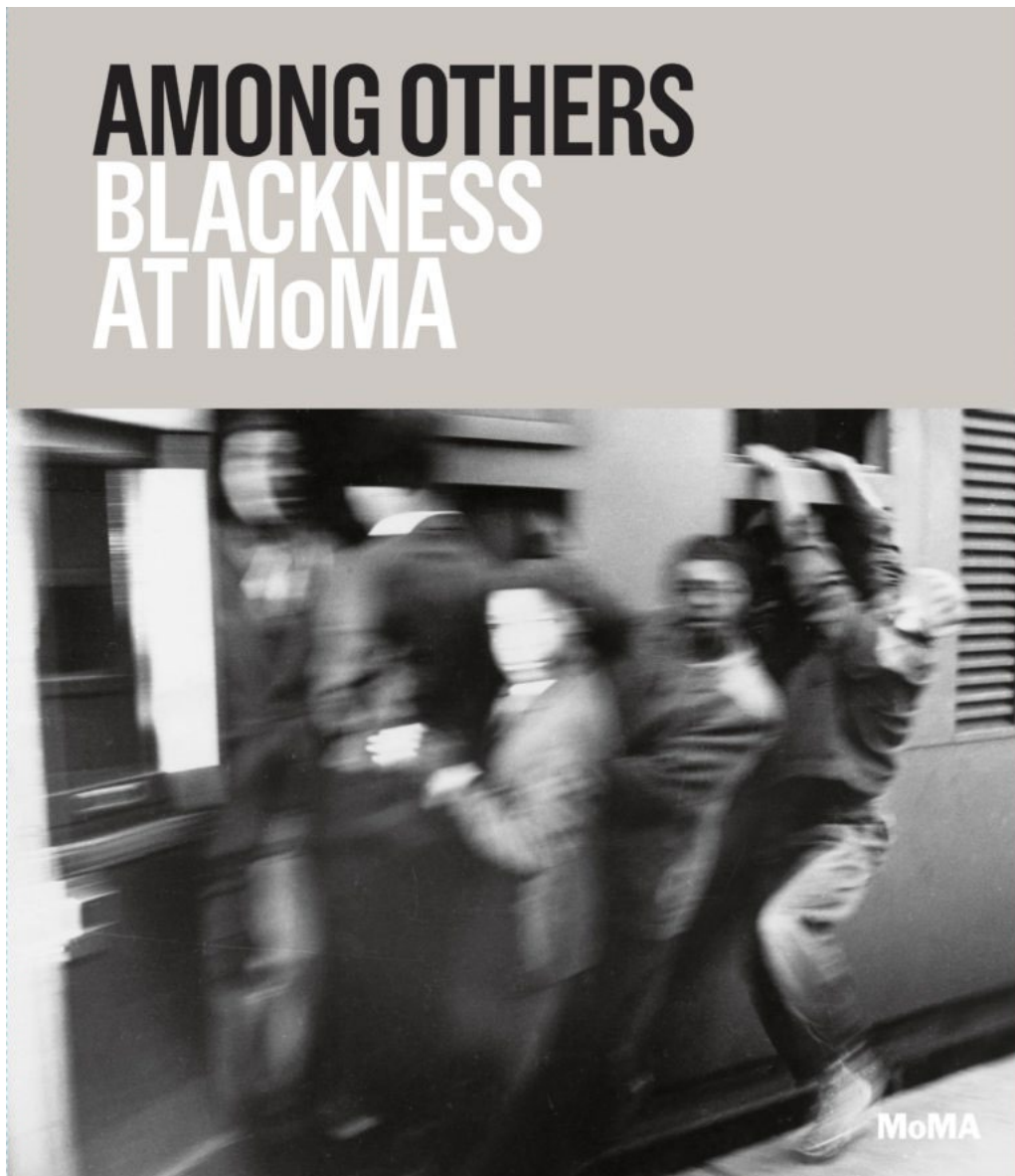


Fig. 7. Image of publication *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA*, 2019. Photograph and permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art. [“Among Others: Blackness at MoMA” press release](#).



Fig. 8. Exterior view of the Museum of Modern Art, 53rd Street Entrance Canopy, designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro in collaboration with Gensler, 2019. Photograph by Iwan Baan, permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art. [53rd Street Entrance Canopy](#).



Fig. 9. Installation view of the exhibition *Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman – The Shape of Shape*, 2019. Photograph by Heidi Bohnenkamp, permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art. [“Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman.”](#)



Fig. 10. Betye Saar, *Black Girl's Window*, 1969. Photograph and permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art. [Betye Saar, "Black Girl's Window."](#)



Fig. 11. Betye Saar, *Phrenology Man Digs Sol y Luna*, 1966. Photograph and permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art. [Betye Saar, “Phrenology Man Digs Sol y Luna.”](#)





Fig. 12. Installation view of the gallery *Around Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the exhibition *Collection 1880s-1940s*, 2019. Photograph by Heidi Bohnenkamp, permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art. [“Around ‘Les Demoiselles d'Avignon.’”](#)



Fig. 13. Installation view of the gallery *Around Les Femmes d'Alger* in the exhibition *Collection 1880s-1940s*, 2019. Photograph by Jonathan Muzikar, permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art. [“Around ‘Les Femmes d'Alger.’”](#)



Fig. 13. Installation view of the gallery *Around Les Femmes d'Alger* in the exhibition *Collection 1880s-1940s*, 2019. Photograph by Jonathan Muzikar, permission to reproduce courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art. [“Around ‘Les Femmes d'Alger.’”](#)

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