

Annie Schweikert
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Observational Study: MoMA PS1 and the Met Breuer

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Metropolitan Museum (the Met) are two of the largest and most famous museums in New York City. Success at their flagship locations has led both museums in the last twenty years to expand their footprint. The Met opened the Met Breuer in 2016 within the Marcel Breuer-designed museum formerly occupied by the Whitney Museum of American Art.ⁱ In 2000, MoMA formally became affiliates with a contemporary art gallery, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center (founded 1971), and mounts joint exhibits in the gallery's existing facility in Long Island City, Queens.ⁱⁱ For each museum, the new building and gallery space serves not just as spillover space, but as a chance to mount highly contemporary art exhibitions. Though both institutions expanded in an attempt to address weak points in their contemporary art collections—the Met's modern art collection is its well-known weak point,ⁱⁱⁱ while MoMA's own permanent collections favor earlier modern art in the “20th-century canon” it helped create^{iv}—the Met Breuer is a direct extension of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and exhibits works from its collection, while MoMA PS1 is not a collecting institution like MoMA, but a gallery-like exhibition space.^v ^{vi} MoMA PS1 represents an attempt by MoMA to “[devote] its energy and resources to displaying the most experimental art in the world,” as its “About” webpage declares.^{vii} This mission statement is quite different from the Met Breuer's comparatively passive goal of “enabling visitors to engage with the art of the 20th and 21st centuries through the global breadth and historical reach of The Met's unparalleled collection and resources.”^{viii} MoMA PS1, then, is a space of energy and experimentation; the Met Breuer is a

gallery of the Met housed in a different building. I found that a comparison between the two museums, though outwardly rather similar contemporary outposts of major museums, highlighted this functional gap.

In order to carry out my comparison, I visited each museum on a holiday or weekend around midday. By doing so, I included in my observations those who work typical office hours. I also avoided rainy days, so as not to dampen turnout artificially. In each museum, I stationed myself in the first room of the major temporary exhibition(s)—at the Met Breuer, retrospectives of painters Anselm Kiefer and Leon Golub, and at MoMA PS1, one of Carolee Schneeman—and lingered for at least 20 minutes to make my observations while posing as a patron. I took out my phone to time patrons as they read labels and stood with artwork, and I walked through the rest of the museums to compare the spaces and note any other art on display.

Audiences in both spaces were contemplative and systematic, their behavior influenced by the choices of the museum itself. Each exhibition's first room had a "centerpiece" artwork that immediately commanded attention. At the Met Breuer, these were monumental paintings hung directly across from the only entrance to each exhibit, while MoMA PS1 had mounted three large screens spanning across the corner of the room, on which index cards from a Schneeman project were projected three at a time. Confronted with such obvious loci of attention, most visitors began by contemplating these works before moving systematically through the rest of the room. Labels were plentiful and verbose, particularly at the Met Breuer, and visitors in each institution almost always read the text, sometimes before even looking at the work itself. Most spent an average of 30 to 120 seconds with one piece of art and its label, though the time spent with each object tended to decrease as the visitor lingered. Both museums

had visitors who strode through the galleries without looking, but the indisputable “experience” in these rooms was clearly reflective and art-focused.

Though the generic aesthetic experience in these museums was largely the same, the audience at MoMA PS1 was more diverse and significantly younger than the audience at the Met Breuer. With the caveat that the following demographics were inferred, the audience at the Met Breuer was about 80% older than 50, 95% white, and approximately 100% affluent; within the galleries at MoMA PS1, only 25% were older than 50, 75% were white, and approximately 100% affluent. In the café at MoMA PS1—which is free to enter—the percentage of white people dipped again, to approximately 66%. The café at the Met Breuer was empty upon my arrival, and remained so as I left. Small children and babies in strollers were a near-constant, though low-volume, presence in both the MoMA PS1 café and the galleries, even in exhibits with “explicit content” warnings at the entrance.

Behavior was also different in each museum. Attendees at MoMA PS1 were far chattier than those at the Met Breuer; they often arrived as pairs of friends or as couples, and, in a couple of cases, recognized other attendees and stopped to catch up. The café was in turn far busier than the galleries, and housed several communal tables bustling with patrons. Attendees at MoMA PS1 often discussed unrelated topics even as they stopped to read labels; attendees at the Met Breuer also spoke to each other, but largely about the paintings.

These demographic and behavioral differences, though small compared to the diversity of New York City as a whole, reflect each institution’s location and their role within the neighborhood. MoMA PS1 is set within an industrial, though rapidly gentrifying, neighborhood whose housing prices (lower than the Upper East Side) attract young people and families. A recent kerfuffle over entrance fees may have depressed turnout at the Met Breuer, which (like the

Met) remains pay-what-you-wish for residents of New York State, though it has recently come under criticism for imposing a mandatory \$25 admissions fee on out-of-state visitors.^{ix} MoMA PS1, like many galleries, is free for all New York City residents; its busy and relaxed café in particular appears to have benefited from the total lack of barrier to entry, and seems to serve as a community gathering spot.^x The broader demographic spectrum of patrons at MoMA PS1 and its café—particularly the comparative youth of the crowd—feel drawn largely from the demographics of the area, while the Met Breuer’s older group of attendees may also represent the surrounding neighborhood.

The difference in audience may also have come from the difference in the long-term exhibits at MoMA PS1 and exhibition history of the Met Breuer. While neither museum mounts permanent exhibitions—MoMA PS1 by definition, following the tradition of the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, and the Met Breuer because the Met has only an eight-year lease on the building^{xi}—the two sites draw their exhibitions from remarkably different sources. As an extension of the Met, the Met Breuer’s exhibitions draw on the other collections of the Met; thus, contemporary exhibitions are often mixed with older paintings and, while providing a fascinating look through art history, cannot hope to be as up-to-date and cutting-edge as the work by young, diverse artists displayed throughout MoMA PS1.

This difference in content was reflected in the range of interactions with art at MoMA PS1, which was far wider than that at the Met Breuer. While visitors to both museums averaged a meaningful but short contemplative interaction with the art on display, this response represented almost every single attendee at the Met Breuer, but only an average at MoMA PS1. Some attendees at MoMA PS1 spent less than ten seconds with each work as they chased children, wheeled strollers, or chatted with their friends (reflecting the institution’s function as

community space); others lingered with a single piece of art for up to ten minutes (reflecting the institution's function as provocative gallery space). This disparity is at least partly due to the presence of time-based media art at MoMA PS1, which was entirely absent from the Met Breuer. MoMA PS1 displays runtimes for each time-based work, and often sets aside entire rooms with seating to display these works; one room, running a digital projection program, even had movie theater-style folding seats. This experience of time-based media communicates expectations on length and attention—it will be long enough to want to sit, and important enough to stay—and also provides an immersive experience that makes a viewer less self-conscious and likely to linger. Much of the art at MoMA PS1 was immersive in such a way, from a sky room by James Turrell to Maria Lassnig's projected *New York Films*, and a survey of recent exhibitions indicates that the Met Breuer's exhibits, though acclaimed, never reach quite such a level of contemporaneity.

In sum, MoMA's use of MoMA PS1 to mount highly contemporary exhibits in a changing outer-borough neighborhood creates an engaging community space, while the Met's use of the Met Breuer to stage its existing (though widening) collections results in a straight-laced experience much like that at the flagship museum. It remains to be seen whether the Met Breuer will evolve over its eight-year lease and as the Met continues to strengthen its modern art collection.

ⁱ "History of the Museum," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/history#breuer>, accessed 11 March 2018.

ⁱⁱ "About: Profile," *MoMA PS1*, <http://www.momaps1.org/about/>, accessed 11 March 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robin Pogrebin, "Met Plans a Gut Renovation of Its Modern Wing," *The New York Times*, 19 May 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/20/arts/design/in-mets-future-a-redesigned-modern-art-wing.html>, accessed 12 March 2018.

^{iv} Carol Vogel, "A Museum Merger: The Modern Meets the Ultramodern," *The New York Times*, 2 Feb. 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/02/arts/a-museum-merger-the-modern-meets-the-ultramodern.html>, accessed 12 March 2018.

v “History of the Museum,” The Met.

vi “About: Profile,” MoMA PS1.

vii Ibid.

viii “History of the Museum,” The Met.

ix “The Met Breuer,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/visit/met-breuer>, accessed 11 March 2018.

x “Locations, hours, and admission,” *MoMA*, <https://www.moma.org/visit/>, accessed 11 March 2018.

xi Elisa Lipsky-Karas. “The Met Goes Modern: The Met Breuer Opens With ‘Unfinished’ Artworks,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 Feb. 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-met-goes-modern-the-met-breuer-opens-with-unfinished-artworks-1454341902>, accessed 12 March 2018.