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Observational Study: The New Museum and the Frick Collection

This observational study considers two vastly different art museums located in New York City—the New Museum and the Frick Collections. Though both these institutions exhibit art, they display starkly different sensibilities regarding several notable elements of operation. This study looks specifically at three facets of these museums—atmosphere and design, patron demographics and behavior, and interactivity—in order to draw conclusions about the development of museums within the past century and the way museum patrons engage with art.

The Frick Collection predates the New Museum by roughly forty years. Established in 1977 and located in lower Manhattan, the New Museum was one of the few New York City spaces at the time dedicated solely to the exhibition of contemporary art. Its brief mission statement, “New Art, New Ideas,” is reflected throughout the space.¹ Though the New Museum does maintain a small collection, it prides itself on operating as a non-collecting institution, perhaps as a move of intentional resistance to the structure of traditional museums. Conversely, the Frick Collection exists as a relic of Gilded Age industrialist Henry Clay Frick’s personal home and art collection. Unsurprisingly, these two museums are vastly different, but these disparities manifest themselves in unexpected ways. Though one might be tempted to immediately classify the Frick as traditional with its neoclassicist paintings and ornate décor, this same decorative element works to rejecting the stark gallery construction of many other New York City museum spaces, including the New Museum.

¹ “Mission & Values.” *The New Museum*. <http://www.newmuseum.org/pages/view/values>

My unscientific observations at each of these institutions are the result of careful watching and notetaking as I attempted to replicate the normal flow of a museum patron within these spaces. I spent roughly 90 minutes in each museum, and observed every publicly accessible exhibition space. Both visits took place on Thursday afternoons, though the weather was not consistent between these days. These two museums are located in radically different Manhattan neighborhoods and this difference is reflected in the patronage and overall brand of each institution.

From the moment you enter the doors, the New Museum exudes a casual yet extremely fashionable aesthetic. The loud, high-ceilinged lobby includes a busy coffee shop and open-air museum store, in contrast to the Frick Collection's traditional enclosed lobby and regimented pathway through the museum. The current major exhibition at the New Museum, *Raymond Pettibon: A Pen of All Work* (on view through April 9, 2017), occupies the museum's main three floors, with smaller exhibitions to be seen on the fifth, basement, and main floors. Though I perhaps missed signs within the New Museum directing patrons, I was immediately confused as to the intended route for the Raymond Pettibon show, unsure whether the exhibit worked from the top-down or bottom-up, or if that intentionality was present at all. When compared with other aspects of the New Museum, this vague setup is unsurprising—the gallery walls, while painted white, are unfinished in some areas. The floors are poured concrete, and the ceilings echo as if unfinished; in short, the entire museum design aligns with the intended contemporary art—"new ideas"—aesthetic, one that rebuffs the idea of a pristine and sacred museum space.

Conversely, the Frick Collection displays its works within the former home of a 19th and 20th century New York City millionaire. The white walls and high ceilings of the New Museum are nowhere to be found; instead, every element of décor within the Frick's permanent collection

space is on view as art. These pieces, from credenzas to rugs to the more familiar works of art (paintings by Rembrandt, El Greco, and Bruegel, among others), are contextualized in their relationship to Frick himself, both implicitly through their design and explicitly through the ever-present audio guides utilized by nearly every visiting patron. The Frick Collection exists in a unique position—its art and history situate the institution firmly within the tradition of museums displaying widely-accepted high art, yet its rejection of the white-wall gallery aesthetic and holistic contextualization of Frick’s collection within his home and life are unexpected. Despite its focus on the undeniably impressive art, the permanent collection spaces within the Frick are as much history museum as art.

Due to a combination of their differing Manhattan locations as well as exhibited art, these two institutions draw vastly dissimilar crowds. Though one observational visit to each is hardly conclusive, an overwhelming majority of the Frick Collection patrons observed were middle-aged and older, usually in groups of two. These patrons were predominantly white, with many speaking languages other than English. The Frick’s visitors all appeared well-versed in expected museum-going behaviors—speaking in low tones, using audio guides without assistance, and keeping a safe distance away from the art on display. The free audio guides supplied by the museum support this observation--the information provided (narrated mostly by men and women with various European accents) assumed a baseline knowledge of the art and artists in question to contextualize the pieces on display. Though Randi Korn is referring specifically to modern art when she writes, “That is, the power and authority that are sometimes associated with museums may contribute to participants’ feelings of inadequacy when they look at and do not understand modern art,” her point remains salient in thinking about the both institutions.² From this

² Randi Korn, “Perceptions and Attitudes about Modern Art.” *Current Trends in Audience*

viewpoint, the Frick and the New Museum are two sides of the same coin—each imparting some level of intimidation on their patrons; for the New Museum it is the barrier to entry for understanding and appreciating contemporary art, and for the Frick Collection it is the assumed familiarity with prominent figures and pieces in European art history.

The patrons of the New Museum exhibited different behaviors from those attending the Frick. These visitors were mostly young, ranging from teenagers to those in their mid-30s, and were particularly fashionable. Similarly to the Frick, these patrons visited the New Museum primarily in groups of two. Unlike those older patrons, however, those visiting the New Museum did not appear as inclined toward traditionally-accepted museum behavior, and interacted with the art differently--taking photographs (prohibited in all but one room of the Frick), conversing and laughing loudly, using the museum as a space to visit with friends or spend time with a date, with less attention paid to the specifics of the art and shorter times viewing each piece. This method of museum-going is reflective of the New Museum's entire aesthetic--their exhibits push the boundaries of what is "museum-worthy," and their patrons act accordingly.

These museums take different approaches to interactivity, yet both museums utilize interactivity in ways that fit their missions and clientele. The security personnel at the Frick Collection were overtly facilitating an interactive nature. Numerous friendly security guards spoke to me without prompting, suggesting I use an audio guide, supplying an anecdote about the museum, and even offering me a chair while I take notes. Conversely, the New Museum's guards remained distant. In a choice seen with increasing frequency in museums today, the New Museum utilizes tablets, enabling patrons to view scanned pages of Raymond Pettibon's zines

rather seeing than a zine opened to a single page. The Frick Collection has a similar artifact on display in its current major exhibition, *Turner's Modern and Ancient Ports: Passages through Time*. One of Turner's sketchbooks lays encased in the low-lit room without electronic aid, where an iPad would undoubtedly appear out of place. The fifth floor of the New Museum includes a resource center, that contains a punching bag and gloves, a wall of academic texts on the subjects of resistance, feminism, and inequality, as well as a turntable with options from John Lennon to Bikini Kill. According to their website, this space serves as a

A hybrid exhibition, study, and pedagogical space adjacent to the main gallery—offers a variety of modes for understanding and utilizing energies of the burdened body, taking cues from reading rooms, gyms, listening stations, and spaces of respite. A punching bag, installed in the space for visitors' use, speaks to the ways in which bodies process shock, psychic and physical trauma, grief, and rage in the face of political extremism.³

Patrons were interacting with the space as intended, and as a result engaging with museum objects in a truly non-traditional fashion.

In the ongoing discussion of cultural institutions balancing their history with the drive to take risks and move forward, both museums achieve this equilibrium. The Frick's second temporary exhibition, *Porcelain, No Simple Matter: Arlene Shechet and the Arnhold Collection*, is an excellent example. By blending contemporary porcelain with 18th century pieces, the exhibition not only draws unexpected connections within this single medium of porcelain, but perhaps (even slightly) extends the museum's reach. As this observational study demonstrates, the New Museum, too, continues to push boundaries in a way that reinforces their brief but effective mission.

³ “A.K. Burns: Shabby But Thriving.” *The New Museum*
<http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/a-k-burns>.