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March 20, 2018

Observational Study

For my observational study I felt it would be interesting to analyze two institutions which on the surface are quite similar, yet in actuality operate under a radically different set of principles, creating an altogether different museum-going experience. These institutions were the Rubin Museum in Chelsea and The Neue Galerie on the Upper East Side. Both are regionally-specific art museums. The Rubin Museum focuses on the art and culture of the Himalayan Region ranging from the ancient to the contemporary, whereas the Neue Galerie is dedicated specifically to German and Austrian art made in the 20th century. Attending these two museums side by side illuminated the myriad factors which inform the attitude and philosophy of a cultural institution. It was interesting to see how the personality of the museum manifested itself in the presentation of the materials. The museums presented two contrasting visions of what art is and how it should be engaged

I went to the Rubin Museum on a Sunday afternoon (around 1 pm). As a student, I was given free admission. I believe this is only the case for Sundays, given that the official student price was listed as \$10. Upon first entering the museum, I was greeted by a friendly woman at the reception desk. After presenting my student ID I was handed my ticket, a program brochure, and a sealed envelope. I opened the envelope out of curiosity; at the top of the page in big bold letters it read "Dear Visitor" and at the bottom, in smaller printed text, it read: "a previous visitor wrote this letter to help guide you through the museum". The body of the letter was a handwritten note, advising the visitor (in this case, me) to put aside all rational thoughts and to instead experience the museum on a visceral, sensory level. Right away the personality of the museum was established: it was not only welcoming and friendly but also playful and

interactive, inviting the attendees to experience the material as a vehicle for healing and self-reflection. This was confirmed upon entering the first floor of the museum. As part of a display called “A Moment for the Anxious and Hopeful”, participants were invited to write their deepest anxieties on a piece of paper and pin them to the wall. It was clear that this was meant to embody Buddhist ideas in an abstract way without acknowledging it directly. This was another call for attendees to view the art not just as objects but as expressions of spiritual ideas that can be applied to one’s own life. On the first floor there was a gift shop and a cafe entitled the “Café Serai” serving Himalayan cuisine. I noticed that the demographic was made up mainly of adults ages 30-60 and young children. I then realized that Sundays at the Rubin are in fact “Family Sundays”. Every Sunday from 1:00-4:00pm families are invited to participate in a series of family-friendly activities such as art making and a special “family exhibition tour”. I would assume that on another day there would have been perhaps more young people ages 15-30 and well as elderly people ages 65 and above. There did not seem to be one gender that was represented more so than another, yet the attendees were mostly white or of asian descent. The museum is made up of 6 floors, each containing a different exhibition. The security was minimal, with only 1 security guard per floor. The security guard would typically stand by the stairs rather than actively patrol the exhibition spaces, creating a relaxed atmosphere as well as an implied trust between the museum and its attendees. I asked one of the guards if pictures were allowed, and he said that it was fine except for in certain rooms. Optional audio-tours were available in addition to highly informative text descriptions next to each object.

The overarching concept of the museum seemed to be accurately summarized by the museum's motto, “The Future is Fluid”. I interpreted this statement as relating to Buddhist and Hindu ideas of cyclical time, as well as the museum’s desire to bring traditional art out a specific historical context and place it in the present. In a sense this could be seen as collapsing history. This idea is manifested in the juxtaposition of ancient paintings and sculptures with

contemporary art and media. In many of the exhibits a ancient work would be placed directly next to a projection, a monitor or a computer. In keeping with the museums interactive ethos, the top two floors featured both virtual reality experience and a series of iPads which the viewer could point in direction of a traditional Hindu or Buddhist painting and through recognition software, the painting would be virtually “de-coded” on the screen. For one moving image display, multiple headphones were attached to the wall for sound. This had the effect of creating a more immersive experience without completely isolating the viewers (multiple people would be listening to the same audio at one given time).

The mood of the museum as a whole was meditative, peaceful and inviting, in keeping with the ideas expressed in the artwork. I then headed uptown to the Neue Galerie and was exposed to a very different approach to a similar kind of museum. The Neue Galerie is located on West 87th street, adjacent to Central Park. The building itself is designed in a classic art nouveau style. Upon immediate entry I was greeted by two security guards who searched my bag before going through a metal detector. They informed me that there are no cellphones or cameras allowed in the gallery whatsoever. In the lobby, rather than having a traditional gift shop, there instead was a design shop and a bookstore (in two separate rooms). There was also a coat check where I was advised to leave my backpack. I was able to get in on a student discount, paying \$10 for admission. On the other side of the lobby there was also a cafe, which appeared to be relatively fine dining. From my observations, I noticed that the majority of the attendees were elderly (over 60) ,white and by appearances wealthy. This can be attributed to the content of the material as well as the location of the museum. I also heard various European languages spoken. The exhibit, entitled “Before The Fall” deals with German and Austrian art made during the first three years of the 1930’s, before the Nazis took power. It is safe to say that the effect of the environment was much more sobering than the Rubin Museum. The exhibition featured works by famous German artists including Gustav Klimt, Otto Dix and Karl

Volker. The rooms were divided up by themes including: The Individual, Society, Works on Paper, and Landscapes. There was at least security guard per each room, adding up to 3 or 4 per floor in total. I spoke to one to see if he was trained in any of the artworks and he said that we was not, and that there were experts downstairs who could answer questions. It was clear that unlike the Rubin Museum, the intention of the Neue Gallery to recreate the feeling of a specific place and moment in time. Therefore there was virtually no contemporary media included to supplement the work. The descriptions of the material was minimal, and in many cases just included the title, year and artist name. I believe there was a conscious decision to show and not tell, and allow the work itself to tell the story rather than providing a lot of additional context (that being said, there were audio tours provided). The architecture of the building contributed to the simulation of the time period. Attendees are invited to imagine that they are viewing the works in there original environments. I noticed that those who were attending in a couple or group would move fairly quickly around the exhibit, whereas those attending alone would take more time viewing each piece, which is fairly typical.

The ethos of the Neue Galerie is much more in keeping with a classical conception of art and high culture. The original integrity of the work is highly valued. The general feeling of the environments of both the Rubin Museum and the Neue Galerie seem to be appropriately suited to the subject matter of the work displayed. The Rubin Museum attempts to embody ideas of meditation, transcendence and healing. The Neue Galerie cultivates a more stern atmosphere, allowing attendees to contemplate the gravitas of the history. The narrow scope of the museum allows attendees to focus deeply on each individual work. I spent over 1 hour in each museum, I tried to observe both the people, the art and the environments to discern the overall personality of the institution. Through my observations I was able to perceive the nuances that make up the gestalt of the museum going experience and subtly inform the mindset of the attendees.