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The Culture of Archives, Museums, and Libraries

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## **Observational Study: NYPL's Roosevelt Island Library and The Met Breuer**

### **Background & Methodology**

This observational study considers New York Public Library's Roosevelt Island Library (Roosevelt Island Library, henceforth) and the Met Breuer, two vastly different institutions located in New York City. Despite both sites function as public institutions, they exhibit different characteristics. This study focuses on the architecture and atmosphere, visitor demographics, exhibition arrangement, and their interactions to analyze how the institutions exert their missions in different ways of engagement with the visitors.

The history behind two institutions are drastically different. The Met Breuer, opened in 2016, is one of the three divisions of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts and the only one that primarily focuses on modern and contemporary arts. Various sources point out that running the Met Breuer has proved to be such a financial burden that the building will be vacated in July 2020.<sup>1</sup> In comparison, Roosevelt Island Library has a long history serving the local community. It was run solely by volunteers for twenty years under the name of Roosevelt Island Community Library before becoming the 85<sup>th</sup> branch of New York Public Library in 1998. A new building has been built and the library is expected to move to the new site to better serve the community.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Farago, The Sublime Farewell of Gerhard Richter, Master of Doubt, March 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/arts/design/gerhard-richter-review-met-breuer.html>

<sup>2</sup> About the Roosevelt Island Library, <https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/roosevelt-island>

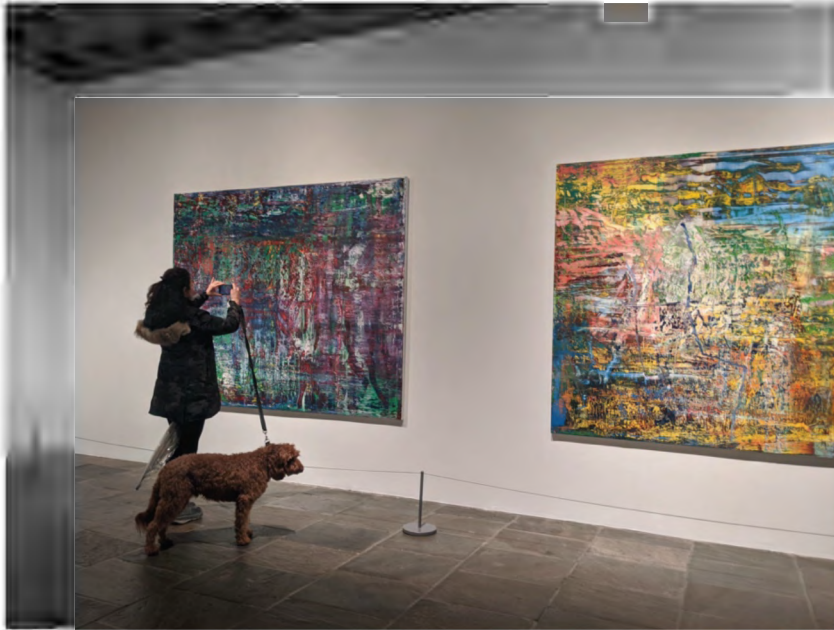
To conduct the observation, I visited every public area of the two institutions and used a notebook to write down the space arrangement and audience demography. Due to the limited opening hour and the availability of my schedule, I have not been successful at arranging the visits on the same weekday. My visits to the Met Breuer and Roosevelt Island Library are from 4.30 pm to 7 pm on Friday and Tuesday respectively.

### **Space**

Even on a Friday night, the Met Breuer was quieter, less crowded, and more spacious than the Roosevelt Island Library. With no more than 200 artworks in display in the five-stories architecture, the museum allows the visitors to walk around freely and move back and forth in front of each painting or sculpture. The five-floor modernist architecture in Madison Avenue was originally designed for The Whitney Museum of American which inhabits the building for more than forty years. It has high ceilings and vertical windows, providing a non-obtrusive view of large-scale artwork. The only busy area of the museum is Flora Bar, a high-end restaurant located on the ground floor. The Roosevelt Island Library is a small room crammed with bookshelves, tables, posters, computers, and printers. There were about two librarians and thirty visitors. Every corner of the library is filled with papers and signs about activities at the library.

### **Visitors**

The visitors of Roosevelt Island Library are more diverse than those of the Met Breuer. In terms of ethnicity, half of the library visitors are African Americans, a quarter are Latinas and the rest of them are Caucasians and Asians. Though teens and small children were a large portion, the rest of the readers cover every age group. However, at the Met Breuer, half of the visitors have Caucasian appearances. The rest of them are Asians and African Americans. Most people are in their 30s or 40s.



*Visitors Taking Pictures of Gerhard Richter's painting at the Met Breuer*

Roosevelt Island Library attracts more return visitors than the Met Breuer, which is a manifestation of the different nature of the two institutions. The library is a part of the everyday life of Islander, s community hub that teens will meet together

after class and children would be safe to play at. While for the

Met Breuer, most people I observed are first time visitors. They ask the guards to directions, comment on the architecture and wonder around.

### **Display and Interaction**

Comparing the methods two institutions use to present their collection, the Met Breuer focuses on using artworks to waive narratives and expecting the visitors to follow their arrangement, while Roosevelt Island Library allows the visitors to explore on their own. One of the main exhibitions currently in display at the Met Breuer is “Gerhard Richter: Painting After All”, perhaps the last show of the acclaimed German artist. Each room focuses on a theme, which is illustrated with some texts accompanying each group of artworks. Most visitors choose to follow the established viewing order (following the sign “the exhibition starts from here”) instead of going directly for a certain artwork. In the Roosevelt Island library, the collections are

presented mostly in standard library arrangements. Although there are several sections of the bookshelves dedicated to special community needs, most visitors are able to go for the item they want by tacit knowledge.

The way visitors interact with the staff at the two institutions share some similarities. Both the museum workers and librarians wouldn't interfere with the visitors' activities unless they are asked or certain behaviors are considered unacceptable. However, the librarians at

Roosevelt Island Library undertook many tasks that are often divided into different jobs in museums. They curate library display, help the reader to borrow books, and offer technical assistance.

Perhaps as a result of the difference illustrated above,

people at Roosevelt Island Library engaged in a great

variety of activities unrelated to reading, while the visitors at the Met Breuer mostly focus their activities on the exhibition. In the library, I observed small children playing at the playground area of the libraries, teens talking loudly to each other and running through the shelves, people in their 30s working on the laptops or reading magazines, elders asking the librarian to apply for a library card. While in the Met Breuer, people would look at the artworks, discussing the artist,



*Roosevelt Island Historical Archive at NYPL's  
Roosevelt Island Library*

taking photos of the exhibitors, searching relating information on the phone, purchasing copies at the museum shop.

The technical device of Roosevelt Island Library is arranged freely while the Met Breuer only gives support upon request. The library has three computers and one printer that can be used for anyone who walks in. However, some moving image works in the Met Breuer allow the visitors to plug in headphones to hear the audio better, but the visitors need to run down to the first floor to borrow them. The counterintuitive design reveals the museum's hesitation in providing free services to the public.

Roosevelt Island Library is also more community-oriented than the Met Breuer. The library holds several shelves of books in Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, as well as a section of fiction and textbooks specially arranged by Young Adult Librarian. Apart from books, there are also sections dedicated to Roosevelt Island Historical Archive, audiobooks, tax forms, children playing. However, there are hardly any efforts in considering the history of the neighborhood in the service or curation of the Met Breuer.

## **Conclusion**

In a word, the two institutions are the results of their different missions. Roosevelt Island Library pays close attention to the need of the island community by positioning itself as a center of knowledge, assistance, and safety, which wins the support of the Islanders in return. While the Met Breuer may be successful in attracting the attention of the modern art lovers, it fails to engage with them in the long-term.