

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Gauging the Possibilities of Impermanence at the New MoMA

MoMA's recent expansion embodies the tension between the ways in which cultural spaces can offer visitors comfortable narratives and on the other, how they can suggest the potential for radical inclusiveness by iteration, reinvention, and reinstallation.

[Laura Raicovich](#) January 9, 2020



Installation view of “Around Les Femmes d'Alger” (Gallery 503), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art (all images courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, unless otherwise stated; photo by Heidi Bohnenkamp)

While institutionally affiliated resources, such as endowments and museum collections, are embedded with notions of permanence, neither functions in such a solid or immobile form. Beyond the raiding of endowments in times of financial distress that might enable an organization to survive, this impermanence, less dramatically, is reflected in the healthy and regular pruning of museum collections to focus specific holdings or make room for other works (note controversial, to potentially game-changing, and mundane versions of this phenomenon). Permanent collection installations within museum galleries are also malleable, and made fresh

periodically by, for example, setting new works against old gems of the collection or installing works along thematic (as opposed to chronological) lines. This is relevant because, while the objects themselves (mostly) remain the same over time, the world changes around them, producing multiple meanings and alternate interpretations perhaps previously invisible. Novel configurations might allow the public to appreciate these works in a new light.

Recently, New York's Museum of Modern Art reopened after a major expansion initiative that included 40,000 square feet of additional gallery space and a major reinstallation of the collection over three floors of the storied institution. Much has been written about the expansion, ranging from whether the additional square footage will actually relieve overcrowding, to whether the reinstallation has actually shifted underlying modernist narratives or achieved a multicultural transformation, to whether the \$450M price tag is a bargain or not for a museum expansion these days. Rather than re-tread these paths, here I offer a reflection on how, on the one hand, the new MoMA embodies the tension between the ways in which cultural spaces can be zones of comfort via the familiarity of their collections, and on the other, how it suggests the potential for radical inclusiveness by iteration, reinvention, and reinstallation.



Installation view of Claude Monet's "Water Lilies" (Gallery 515), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art (photo by Kurt Heumiller)

For many who grew up near or in New York City, or who have traveled to the Big Apple, a visit to MoMA's staggeringly rich collection nudged its way into the imagination of what New York is, how it functions, and its place in the evolution of art and ideas. As a kid, on my family's annual(ish) winter holidays visits to Manhattan from Long Island, we visited museums. Sometimes we went to MoMA and I remember the zigzagging escalators that brought us to the galleries, and the green helicopter hanging precariously to announce the design objects. My favorite place in the museum was the almond-shaped room that held Monet's "Water Lilies." The black banquette provided a place to sit at a distance from the expansive painting. It was a place I could think and look, a meditative space where I felt tucked into a fold of art inside the museum. I have no idea if my memories of that particular installation are accurate but that hardly matters. Rather, what is important is that I went back to see that work over time, and while it didn't change (at least to my eyes), I did.

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Installation view of 19th Century Innovators (gallery 501), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art (photo by Jonathan Muzikar)

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This is why MoMA's reinstallation of its permanent collection is significant, and why it still has a way to travel. Recently, I've been reading Ariella Azoulay's latest book, *Potential Histories, Unlearning Imperialism*, and one particularly urgent idea discussed at length, regarding unlearning, seems to be budding in MoMA's reinstallation. Azoulay speaks about the technologies of imperialism as those that operate via categorization and the constant reinforcement of a linear progression of time, limiting the ways anyone or anything may be perceived beyond its defined frameworks. Resisting these categories as well as the pressure of the forward progress of modernism, Azoulay suggests, can be a mode of unlearning imperialism, and the museum is as apt a location as any to attempt this work.

Over the course of multiple visits, I started to find my way around MoMA's new permanent collection galleries, getting a sense of the flow and ideas at work in the process. It will take many more visits to unearth the unanticipated narratives that might emerge over time, however, even during these hours, there were moments when I delved more deeply into the spaces in which I found myself, captivated by the sheer gorgeousness of what appeared before me. Yet, there were

others when I could not work out why objects were arranged the way they were. Mostly, the experience is one that builds on the depth and range of the collection, particularly by remixing materials, breaking down departmental divisions, and seeking both classical and unexpected entry-points to beloved objects, with hints of the energies of the forthcoming generation of MoMA curators and what they might have in store.



Installation view of the gallery “At the Border of Art and Life” (Gallery 410), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art, New York (photo by Robert Gerhardt)

When I spoke with MoMA’s Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, Ann Temkin, and asked her about the collective curatorial approach to the reinstallation of the collection, she responded:

What was on our minds was that we, as curators, have to be of our times just as artists, to be great artists, have to be of their time. It felt to all of us that this type

of [canonical] presentation had passed, and that perhaps for the moment, we have different desires. First, it is a desire to share with the public the thousands of works of art that are in [the Museum's] storage, and this dovetails with a second desire to say that there is no longer one canonical narrative that sets out a limited number of 'best works.' Rather we had to add time to the additional space to allow an infinite number of perspectives.

This second desire has, of course, been a focus of other cultural organizations and museums (and likely some number of MoMA's staff) for decades, and it is both important and necessary that MoMA be explicit about the earnestness of this work today, particularly as it simultaneously upends and upholds some of the key categories and approaches that have defined it as an institution. While the first organizing principle of the reinstallation concerns three broad time periods which maintain the ever-progressing forward march of art history, it becomes its most interesting when tangents and glitches appear. Each of the major time spans — 1880s-1940, 1940s-1970, and 1970s-present — occupies one of three floors. These chronological chunks serve as a backbone, and it is in the moments when they are not treated as gospel that great stuff happens (more of this please!). Two of my favorite instances are the gallery entitled "At the Border of Art and Life" on the fourth floor, and Amy Sillman's selections from the collection on the fifth (technically its own exhibition within an exhibition, as part of the museum's long-running Artist's Choice series). "At the Border of Art and Life" brings a carnival of works into a small-scale gallery, which is painted orange-red with works hung salon style. The space is packed with Fluxus works from Japan to Latin America, and features works by Fluxus's leading man, George Macuinias, alongside Yoko Ono's instructional works from the early 1960s, Rirkrit Tiravanija's "Untitled (apron and Thai pork sausage)" (1993) and Pope.L's "Mal Content" (1992), all of which connect the poetics (and flailings) of daily life, often centering the quotidian as a vehicle for meaning-making as well as political expression.



Installation view of *Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape*, on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York from October 21, 2019, through April 12, 2020. © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art. (photo by Heidi Bohnenkamp)

In Sillman's *The Shape of Shape*, her selections from MoMA's collection relay a great deal about her own work as a painter, as well as an interest in shape (as opposed to line and color) which might be interpreted as another tangent to modernism's 20/20 vision of itself. Sillman has chosen over 70 sculptures, objects, photographs, and paintings that are installed on bleacher-like steps that ring the rectangular gallery on three sides. Through its density, the exhibition makes space for odd overlaps and surprising coincidences of form and content across decades; the lovely formal relationship between a Louise Nevelson relief and Senga Nengudi's performance photo, for example, or Ulrike Muller's conversation with an Edward Munch lithograph. Michelle Kuo, Curator of Painting and Sculpture, who worked with Sillman remarked to *Hyperallergic*:

One of the biggest surprises, for me, was how much geometry appears in the show. Our focus was on art that rejects rigid or overarching systems — for example the grid — and yet in the end you see works that get really close to the grid, to rectilinearity, to geometric structure. But they never succumb completely; they're never just straight lines or pure squares. These are strange, off-kilter geometries. They're shapes that lie somewhere between the geometric and organic — between order and chaos, between mathematical precision and the

messiness of bodies. The abstract forms by Jennie C. Jones and Sandu Darie, for example, remind me of the logarithmic curves in Hilma af Klint's painting in a nearby gallery. Amy discovered these odd shapes throughout the collection, in art from very different places and times.

While the unexpected adjacencies of these works are thrilling for art historians and curators, there is also plenty of space for non-art expert publics to have some fun too.



Shigeru Onishi, "Untitled" (c. 1955), Gelatin silver print

On the fourth floor, another gallery devoted to the "Abstract Lens" offers an animation of international experimentation in still and moving photographic images from the 1940s through 70s. Photographic work from Brazil, Japan, Europe, and the US is augmented by experiments in moving image, including Marie Manken's 1961 "Arabesque for Keith Anger" and Robert Breer's 1956 "RECreation." Both films are tantalizing works in and of themselves, and through their placement they exchange formal and contextual ideas with two-dimensional works by Gerraldo de Barros, Man Ray, Gaspar Gasparian, Shigeru Onishi, Robert Frank,

and Arthur Siegel. Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator in the Department of Photography, told me via email:

A great impetus for the presentation of the collection galleries at MoMA has been our pan-institutional research initiative called C-MAP (Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives in a global world). For the past ten years we have accrued amplified knowledge within the museum on cultural areas

outside the Western hemisphere ... through our continued dialogue with scholars, artists, curators and theorists from various countries across Africa, Asia, Eastern and Central Europe, and Latin America. These exchanges have informed our rethinking of the histories of modern and contemporary art outside of established canons. In the presentation of the collection we tried to pay careful attention to context, different temporalities, and specific geopolitical and artistic contexts... Abstract Lens [considers] how artists in the aftermath of WWII embraced the idea of trans-national abstraction.

Indeed, in this and other instances of photographic works on view in the reinstallation, the efforts made to be inclusive of, and draw parallels or distinctions between works being made in similar time frames from around the globe, are clear.



Installation view of the gallery "Joan Jonas's Mirage" (Gallery 418), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art, New York (photo by Robert Gerhardt)



Conceived by David Tudor, realized by Composers Inside Electronics, Inc. (John Driscoll, Phil Edelstein, and Matt Rogalsky), “Rainforest V (variation 1)” (1973/2015), twenty objects, sound, dimensions variable, © 2019 David Tudor and Composers Inside Electronics Inc, installation view, October 21, 2019–January 5, 2020, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (image © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art, photo by Heidi Bohnenkamp)

Periodic solo artist presentations also punctuate the steady pace of the chronological spine, offering greater depth, or spotlighting works of significant scale that are not often on view. I love, for example, the gallery devoted to Joan Jonas’s work, specifically for the ways it draws connections between various phases of her artistic production, the seemingly endless ways she interweaves drawing, film, poetry, performance, and text, and how experiencing all of this work together generates deeper readings of her work. The galleries devoted to David Tudor and Composers Inside Electronics’s sound sculpture and Sheela Gowda’s environmental installation are two other terrific examples.

Another highlight was the gallery just outside of the start of the 1940-1970 section of the collection, titled “New Monuments.” It shows off an assembly of sculptural works engaged in



Barbara Chase-Riboud, "The Albino" (1972) (reinstalled in 1994 by the artist as All That Rises Must Converge/Black), bronze with black patina, wool and other fibers

both formal and conceptual conversations. Melvin Edwards's muscular metal assemblages from his Lynch Fragment series (1960s–ongoing) (of which there are four) are installed on the east wall, and "The Albino" (1972) by Barbara Chase-Riboud is installed on the west wall, punctuated by a view of the Sculpture Garden. On the floor are parts of Lynda Benglis's lead, tin, bronze, and aluminum works, "Modern Art" (1970-1974), as well as Jackie Windsor's "Chunk Piece" (1970), and a Louise Bourgeois bronze, "The Quartered One" (1964–1965) hangs from the ceiling, like an overgrown wasp's nest. Soft and hard textures, black, white, grey, oozing, and pouring, hard edges and bundles, are the physical forms that hold narratives of tumult, addressing, among other topics, histories of

violence against Black people in the United States, the horrors of the Vietnam War, and the rise of feminism.

While the centering of the narratives outlined above feels fresh and important; an opportunity to create a parallel focus on the ideas and commitments of the artists whose work is on view was lost in the gallery devoted to Harlem, which instead feels like an incomplete acknowledgement of the historic lack of connection between the museum and upper Manhattan (its recent partnership with the Studio Museum in Harlem notwithstanding). While unforgettable for its display of the historic and moving portion of Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series" that is in MoMA's collection (the other half is owned by the Phillips Collection in DC), the remainder of the gallery, titled "In and Around Harlem," seems a catch-all for Black artists making great paintings around 1940, including Romare Bearden and William H. Johnson, alongside a suite of works by photographer Helen Leavitt, whose practice encompassed the streets of all of New

York City, and a post script of portraits by Alice Neel of East Harlem residents (the latter two artists of which are white). This intersection of works misses the cohesion of the “New Monuments” installation and doesn’t manage to successfully weave together the subjects, politics, and materials of the works on view.



Installation view of “In and Around Harlem” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (photo by Dessane Lopez Cassell for Hyperallergic)

While much ink has been spilled over the decision to hang Faith Ringgold’s “American People Series #20: Die” (1967) adjacent to Pablo Picasso’s famed “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)” (1911-12), I wonder whether we might take Azoulay at her word and reimagine the installation. Given the surrounding of Ringgold’s work with numerous Picassos, as well as a Louise Nevelson totem, the insertion of this monumental artwork reads as defensive, particularly in the context of the Museum and its long-standing attachment to linear histories. The timelines so important to both

modernism's and imperialism's narratives might make it challenging to imagine Picasso's canvas as adjacent to Faith Ringgold's rather than the other way around, simply because the former "came first" and has been exhaustively touted as a masterwork, but this could be a more worthwhile experiment. I wonder whether centering Ringgold might have been a more thought-provoking choice. What could have been learned from reversing the relationship and moving "Demoiselles" to the 1940s to 1970 section of the reinstallation, and putting it in relationship to Ringgold in the latter artist's own time, space, and peers? If the goal of the reinstallation, at least in part, is to reorient some of the patriarchal and predominantly white narratives at the museum, then this could have offered a particularly interesting opportunity.



Installation view of Bill Traylor's work in "Masters of Popular Painting" (Gallery 521) at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (photo by Laura Raicovich for Hyperallergic)

Along a parallel thread, the installation of “Masters of Popular Painting” in a fifth floor gallery sits uncomfortably, given the efforts to integrate styles and media throughout, and the stated desire in the wall text to honor Alfred Barr’s advocacy of so-called “outsider” art in the context of art history. Would some of these works, like Pearl Blauvelt’s or Bill Traylor’s exquisite works, not have been more provocatively installed in relation to ones by Florine Stettheimer or Jacob Lawrence? The work in the adjacent gallery, “Picturing America,” for example pairs photos by Walker Evans, Gordon Parks, Lisette Model, and Edward Weston with dozens of photos taken anonymously in photo booths during the same period. The latter contribution adds an important element of self-representation amidst the story-telling contributed by some of the most well-known and respected photographers of the era.



Installation view (detail) of “Picturing America” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (photo by Laura Raicovich for Hyperallergic)

As Azoulay offers, the collapsing of categories (like the divisions between experimental film and photography or sculpture and painting, or “outsider” art and every “other” kind) is an intentionally anti-imperialist move because it attempts to add complexity, via other layers and stories, to dominant ideas that exclude what doesn’t “fit.” I look forward to further iterations of MoMA’s promised cycle of reinstallations of the collection, and only hope that the inclination towards undoing exclusions and interrupting time-honored narratives continues apace, creating greater opportunity for highlighting shadowed corners and ideas outside of the dominant narratives of the past, as well as yielding new exhibition-making strategies that might evolve in parallel. As Octavia Butler has written, “There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns”; if cultural spaces are to exist in a broad cultural imaginary, they must embrace those new suns and let them shine.