

Published in: *What is Modern Art? (Group Show)*, 2 vols., ed. by Inke Arns / Walter Benjamin, Frankfurt am Main: Revolver – Archiv für aktuelle Kunst 2006, Vol. 2 ISBN 3-86588-298-6 (critical edition) [D/E]

MY DEAR, THIS IS NOT WHAT IT SEEMS TO BE

In recent years, the artworks shown to an international audience at the most important biennials (Sydney Biennial, Whitney Biennial, Venice Biennial) have included recreations of important artistic events of the past. We spoke about these projects with Walter Benjamin. For many years, he has had the opportunity to see and follow up on most of the projects we are talking about here.

Beti Zerovc: I'm wondering why people recreate events in this way at all and why they opt to stage this or that event in particular. But of course, I'm also wondering why I am speaking to "Walter Benjamin"?

Walter Benjamin: Obviously, the name I took for this conversation refers to the well-known early 20th century philosopher, but it also refers to the same Walter Benjamin who gave a lecture in Ljubljana in 1986 entitled "*Mondrian '63-'96*", a lecture that was about Mondrian's paintings dated between 1963-1996. It is the same Benjamin whose statement "Copies are memories" served as a motto for the *Americans 64* exhibit at the Arsenale in Venice this year. I not only had a chance to see most of the works and exhibits we are going to talk about, but also I learned a lot by trying to understand them, trying to explain them to myself. I assume we are talking about (authorless) projects like the *International Exhibition of Modern Art* (dated 2013), the *Salon de Fleurus* in New York (established 1992), the small scale Museum of Modern Art (dated 1936 and attributed to Alfred Barr, Jr.), the Museum of American Art that recently opened in Berlin, and finally the collection *Americans 64* of the Museum of American Art only just shown at the Arsenale. The theme of this last exhibit is American representation at the Venice Biennale 1964.

Beti Zerovc: Yes, these are the projects I meant. Why recreate exactly these projects?

Walter Benjamin: As you have already said, the themes of these works are clearly some events important for the art historical narrative. For example, Gertrude Stein's Salon in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York could be understood as an American interpretation of European modern art. It seems that it was Gertrude Stein's Salon where works of Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso were exhibited for the first time (1905). Alfred Barr, Jr. was only three years old back then. From today's perspective, Gertrude Stein appears as a proto-curator, while her Salon looks like a precursor of the Museum of Modern Art. Until recently, the MoMA's permanent exhibit started with Cézanne from whom the story splits into Fauvism (Matisse) on the one hand and Cubism (Picasso) on the other.

Conversely, the theme of the Museum of American Art in Berlin is all about the "invasion" of post-war Europe by American art. The Museum's collection is built around four travelling exhibitions shows curated by Dorothy Miller in the 1950s. It is about the European reception of American modernism and the gradual expansion of American art, which was in a way officially recognised by award of the Grand Prize to Rauschenberg at the Venice Biennale of 1964. I would say that *de facto* these events shaped the narrative of 20th century modern art. Especially Barr's

concept of the Museum of Modern Art, as conceived at the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Seemingly, it is still not entirely clear that here Alfred Barr was not acting as a chronologist, recording events as they unfolded before his eyes, but as someone who retroactively constructs (or invents) a narrative. It is this particular narrative of modern art that subsequently became dominant., Barr did not only manage to historicize the first three decades of 20th century art at this show, but later assembled and arranged MoMA's permanent exhibit according to this scheme as well, so that the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* served as the blueprint for the MoMA for many years to come.

Of course, all of this makes for an interesting story. But then again, it is no more than a story. An artwork that takes that story as its subject matter, however, is something completely different. It is a material (physical) reflection (interpretation) of that story. In fact, this work contains its own context, its own narrative, so that you don't need additional clues if you know modern Art History. You don't even need to know who the authors of these works are. It is questionable if the notion of the "author" is even applicable.

There is a good chance that these works are not going to be seen as art at all. The fact that they are shown within an art context today does not imply that they could only be seen as works of art. This is why it is important that, for the time being, both the Museum of American Art in Berlin and Salon de Fleurus in New York are located in private spaces. They attempt to gain modest visibility without seeking total incorporation into the art world, meaning that their reading does not only take place with the context of art.

Beti Zerovc: But do they really want to resist incorporation into the art world? What I mean is that they don't seem to be trying very hard; they were included in the last two Venice Biennales, and were also present at the Whitney Biennial and the Sidney Biennial some years ago, etc.

Walter Benjamin: They are definitely shown in the art context, but what other venues are there today for such works/ideas? As I said, the fact they are shown in the art context doesn't mean that they are works of art. A group of visitors at the Arsenale talking in front of the Museum of American Art exhibit used the word *Meta-Kunst* [German in the original]. This might be an appropriate term. If Art History as a narrative becomes the internal subject matter of a work (becoming its inner narrative), if it is contained within that work, then this immediately opens a possibility for a position "outside" of Art History. This would, in fact, be a meta-position in relation to Art History.

Beti Zerovc: I don't have a problem with the fact that these works could also be seen as something else one day. That could be true. But for now the situation is that these works are, in fact, accepted by the art system; they are understood, written about, exhibited, and have a price as artworks and not as something else.

Walter Benjamin: Yes, of course. They are definitely perceived as more or less interesting works of art. But there could be another explanation. When, for example, Copernicus wrote his treatise on the movements of celestial bodies, it was not a scientific but a theological paper because back then there was no science, no scientific infrastructure, no scientific language. Basically, there was only one dominant platform (ideology) with a developed physical and conceptual infrastructure, namely Christianity. It took several centuries to fully develop another position (platform), which we call science today.

Today, similarly, Art History is the dominant narrative, and there is no other platform or infrastructure from which you could “read” these works in any other way. This is the limitation of the time we live in. It is why I think these works are only seen as art today. Not because they are inherently art works. The very fact that those visitors could see it as *Meta-Kunst*, shows that even today some people do not see it as *Kunst*.

It may well be that Art is a concept that only has a meaning within Art History. It has no meaning or might have a different meaning outside of Art History. The way, let’s say that the notion of God has a different meaning for a believer and a non-believer. Take for example the notion of “African art.” It was just recently (in the last hundred years) incorporated in the art historical narrative, almost as an appendix, along with several other non-western traditions. This could be understood as some kind of “positive colonialism,” where the “other” is treated “equally but on our own terms.” Here, Art History has appropriated the production of (“ritual”) object (masks, sculptures) from Africa and given it the name of art. But within those societies where these objects were produced, they had and perhaps still have another meaning and purpose that has nothing to do with concept of art, which is a Western invention. I think these objects are works of art only in the art books and art Museums, but they are also something else when they are used as “decoration” or in “rituals” within the societies that produce them.

However, we should be aware that history didn't only colonise the "others". First of all, it colonised the past of the very society within which it was conceived and articulated. It is why there is a similarity between “African art” and “Christian art.” Within Art History, objects (paintings, sculptures, frescos, icons, etc.) that were produced as illustrations or reflections of the Christian narrative are named as art, while within the Christian universe these are sacred, religious objects, objects of worship. A Christian painting is primarily a religious object. When you apply the term art to it, you have already moved to another discourse, another narrative. If you have a painting representing Madonna and Child in a church and you’re a believer, you will immediately know what you’re looking at. Both Madonna and that Child are real characters for you, since these are the main characters in your story, the Christian story. If we now establish another story like Art History, materialised in the form of a Museum, and we move this painting to the Museum, then “Madonna” and “Child” are no longer this new story’s leading characters. Now Rafael the artist and his painting “Madonna and Child” are now important as (unique and original) protagonists. This is how you actually change the meaning of the same object by changing the narrative in which it plays a role. A painting that is a religious object in the Christian story becomes an object of art in Art History. Rafael, who doesn’t exist in the Christian story at all, appears as an important character in Art History. We see how the same painting means one thing for those who believe in the Christian story and something else for those who believe in Art History. Within the Christian universe, there is only one narrative that is both inside and outside of the painting. This painting is practically submerged in its own narrative and there is only one possible reading of it within that universe. But when we see the same painting exhibited in the Museum, we face two parallel narratives. One is its theme, its internal (Christian) story and another is its external story, namely Art History and its meta-narrative. If the church is a materialised “position” then the Museum is a materialised "meta-position" in relation to it. There is another point that is also important. Not all objects that are called works of art today have the same nature. We should distinguish between at least two main groups. One group includes objects manufactured *before* the Museum and Art History were established. Though these objects were produced beforehand, they were retroactively selected to illustrate this new narrative and “promoted” to the status of artworks in the process, regardless of their previous meaning and function. Another group consists of objects produced *after* the Museum and Art History were established. Perhaps those objects conceived inside the “field” of Art History and

the Museum are the only *real* works of art. They were produced exclusively to *be* works of art, to be included in the Museum and in Art History. Somehow this group of works coincides with what we call modern art in a broader sense (indicating roughly the last two centuries).

Also, we should distinguish those works of 20th century modern art produced before the 1936 exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art," which became a blueprint for the MoMA display, from those works produced afterwards under MoMA's influence. Modern art before 1936 was made and interpreted within the context of a 19th century narrative based on "national schools." Many of the same works and movements were included in Alfred Barr's narrative of "international movements" narrative. This inevitably changed their interpretation. Thus, the production and interpretation of modern (abstract) art after World War Two, which took place under the influence of the MoMA, appeared to be the continuation of its (i.e. Barr's) narrative.

Today, we should start thinking about how to define a position (platform) that represents a meta-position in relation to Art History and thus a meta-meta-position in relation to the Christian narrative. In other words, the question is how to move beyond Art History, how to establish another platform from which we could see Art History from the outside. The point is not to forget Art History and its Museums but rather to place them into a new context.

This is why those works that have Art History as their subject might help us establish in establishing this meta-position. Based on copies, these authorless works contain the narrative of Art History as something "buried" within the work itself, together with the notions of the artist and artwork as unique entities. We can see that the subject matter or internal narrative of such works *is* Art History. But it is still unclear what the meta-narrative for this work could be.

Basically, it has yet to be established. On this meta-level, it will, of course, still be possible to use notions like art, artist, Work of Art, Art History, but they'll have quite a different meaning, and will probably not be that important. In other words, they will not be the meta-position's formative notions.

So, the fact that these works are shown within the art context and that they came out of the art context does not mean that this is the only way they can be read. Furthermore, I do not think that this is the proper way to read them. I am more and more convinced that they are, in fact, not works of art.

Beti Zerovc: So, in an exhibition like the last Venice Biennale, everything around the exhibit "*Americans 64*" was art and...

Walter Benjamin: Absolutely. On the other hand, out of everything shown at the Arsenale, I think only the exhibit *Americans 64* was not a Work of Art. That also explains why the notion of an artist (author) was not necessary. It does not belong to that story. I don't know whether the visitors are going to see it as an artwork or not, but the fact that it is shown within the art context doesn't necessarily mean that it is artwork at all. It is in a way the opposite situation of one established by Duchamp's ready-made still dominant today: "anything shown within the art context is a Work of Art." Here we have something that is shown in the art context, and that is even *about* art, but most probably is not a Work of Art.

Beti Zerovc: But claiming a special status for these works just doesn't seem to be enough, especially if everything else concerning them is done "by the book". Also, precisely this stubborn claim of a special position somehow seems typical of the existing narrative of Art History. You

know, one of the fundamental sociological rules says, don't just pay attention to what people say about what they do, but first check what they do in reality.

But since you were present when these projects were prepared and exhibited, you must have had plenty of chances to observe both the people who participated in them and the visitors who looked at them. So, based on your observations, what do these projects "do" to these people? Do they become suspicious and critical or they enjoy them as nostalgic "theme parks"? Which hints did you receive to confirm either assumption?

Walter Benjamin: I assume that people involved in these projects take on roles such as "doorman", "technical assistant," "volunteer," etc. because unlike an "artist" or a "curator," these are non-creative roles. Also, as I said before, the notion of the "artist" belongs to the art historical narrative itself, while the "curator" and the "art historian" are "story tellers" (narrators) of a kind. Art historians usually tell the story through texts, while "curators" tell it through exhibition. (Alfred Barr, for example, was both).

As for the visitors, different people react differently. It is like reading a text that has different layers of reading. For some visitors, these projects are probably "nostalgic theme parks," and this reading is absolutely legitimate. Some people just go through these exhibits with thinking what they're looking at, as if walking through a familiar landscape, since most of these images are well-known icons. But then, some get confused when they realise what they're looking at is not what they see. Once when I was standing near the entrance of the "Armory Show" exhibit in Venice (2003), I noticed an elderly gentleman with his wife both standing at the entrance looking at the entire show in front of them. Then at one point he turned to his wife and said: "My dear, this is not what it seems to be." And I said to myself: Exactly, all this is not what it seems to be.

Beti Zerovc: So, you think the people who make these projects want the visitors to get confused? Does this irritation already provide a means of reaching another level, a meta-level?

Walter Benjamin: Confusion is sometimes the first step towards learning or re-learning. In the Museum in Berlin, for example, you have two rooms. In one room there are the paintings of the pages of the catalogue of four American exhibitions that were exported to Europe in the 1950s. In the same room is also a Museum of Modern Art, 2x2 m in size. Many think it's a kind of a model but it is in fact the real Museum of Modern Art, in a way more so than one in New York. Another room looks like a living room from the 1950s with large paintings/copies of Kline, Rothko, Pollock, Gottlieb, and Newman. Those who know something about Art History and these particular exhibitions will recognise that these paintings are all from the catalogue of *The New American Painting*. This was the landmark exhibition of abstract expressionism that took place in 1958 in many European cities. Here, they're decorating the living room walls. When you enter the room, you find yourself in a very familiar environment. Jazz music playing from the gramophone helps people to relax. But at some point, the visitors start to understand that what they're looking at is not Kline, or Gottlieb, or Motherwell. But what is it? I don't know. I have no answer to what these paintings mean. If you start to analyse them as paintings you're definitely wrong. But still, these are real, physical paintings. And this confusion, how to say, gives you goose bumps. If painting looks like a Kline, with heavy black brush strokes on white canvas, like abstract painting par excellence, what is that painting in fact? What is the copy of Klein? Is that an abstract painting? It's not and it is. So, suddenly, from the territory of certainty you enter the territory of uncertainty, and a familiar landscape is not familiar any more.

The notion of the modern is somehow associated with the notion of frontier.

'Modern' means looking outward. It is about pushing the boundaries, turning unknown into known in the process. You have something you call "known" as a place where you feel good and safe. And then, you have "unknown" as some kind of dark and dangerous place on the other side of the border. The entire era of modernism could be understood as a process of pushing the boundaries and broadening the territory of brightness by turning this "unknown" into the "known." These are for example the new laws of science, new discoveries, numerous expeditions across the globe, through the jungles of Africa, to the North Pole, to the top of the Mount Everest, diving with Cousteau into the deepest waters of the ocean, flying to the Moon, Mars ... Expeditions into the human body and mind...etc. Practically no stone was left unturned. Now, we are dealing with works that actually pursue the opposite approach. They turn the "known" into the "unknown." There are no more boundaries, and danger is no longer beyond some distant frontier. The very place where you stand and feel safe begins to look a bit strange; we recognise it but it is not the same. Then the ground beneath us starts to shake, and all that scares us. I think I can feel the entire world today becoming this "known-unknown" place. "Unknown" and "dangerous" is now our "backyard" not some distant "jungle;" it is right "here" and not "over there" anymore.

Beti Zerovc: But is it really so frightening? I would say the process of turning the known into the unknown has been an accepted art procedure for decades. Surrealism regularly used devices that turned something that looked familiar into something different or unknown. What is more puzzling to me is, where do (or will) those projects belong if they don't belong to art? Since you explained your view on the past so precisely, I'm sure you must have some plans for the future? Some idea what this new narrative, this new position/realm will be?

Walter Benjamin: You are right about the Surrealists, but only regarding the internal narratives of their work that have more to do with psychology than art. I think they didn't do much to address the very nature of the Work of Art and to try to move out of the art historical narrative. They were still producing works of art for the history of art. The overarching narrative was left unchallenged, if not rhetorically, then as a consequence of their work.

Let me try to answer your question regarding these projects and why I think they do not belong to art. If, let's say, "apples" belong to "agriculture," the "painting of apples" doesn't belong to "agriculture." It belongs to something else, some other place than what we today call Art and Art History. And what is in fact Art History? It is just a story whose main characters are unique (original) entities: Artists and Artworks. If you have an Artwork, then by definition it belongs to Art History. Hence, a work whose subject matter is Art History itself could hardly belong to Art History. It most probably belongs to some other narrative that has not yet been established, that is in a meta-position in relation to Art History. Today we could only speculate about what this meta-position is and what it will look like. It will be definitely "outside" of the historical narrative, but it will also incorporate this narrative as one of its building blocks. It probably is not going to be linear (chronological), but will have a web-like structure instead, consisting not of one but several narratives that exist simultaneously, even with some interchanging artefacts, characters and notions. Thus it will not be based on the notions of the uniqueness of individual identity and the originality of its artefacts. The same icons could simultaneously play different roles in different narratives.

Also we, whoever "we" may be, could play different roles, simultaneously becoming characters in a number of different narratives.

Beti Zerovc: Many artworks, especially in the last decades, look backwards to works and events from the past. So, we could say that many works are about art, that they have art as their subject.

Walter Benjamin: I agree. Those were works about other art works (appropriation art, copies, quotations, etc). Here, it's not only the artwork that is depicted as subject matter, it is also the art narrative.

Beti Zerovc: But art narrative is not something that is completely separate from works of art.

Walter Benjamin: Actually, it is the art narrative that gives meaning to any object (“artefact”) it incorporates, supplying it with the legitimacy of a Work of Art. In fact, it is the narrative that is important, more than artefacts. It’s like branding. Art History itself is a brand. It is also a way of branding products (art works). And exactly this is the subject matter of all these works that we’re talking about, the Salon, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum of American Art. For example, look at the Salon. It is dark and dusty Victorian apartment whose walls are covered with sepia paintings. In the Salon you could see, let’s say, a copy of Picasso’s “Woman with a Fan”. Then you have a Gertrude Stein buying that painting and putting it among other paintings on the wall of her Paris salon. There you have Gertrude Stein looking at Picasso, looking at the woman. Then you have this place in New York called Salon de Fleurus that is looking at Gertrude Stein looking at Picasso looking at the woman. It doesn't look at Picasso directly. It looks at Picasso through the eyes of Gertrude Stein.

Beti Zerovc: No matter how much you claim that these works are trying to belong to some new logic, I can also see that they fit into the present art system and its needs. The art market and the contemporary field of visual art as a whole have a very strong need for the nobilitation of their practices and especially of the exhibition. For, let's say, almost 200 years, they have been trying to lump together art and exhibition, even though these are not at all the same thing. They don't have the same features, they don't have the same aims, nothing. By presenting those glorious moments of our history as enjoyable environments, their maker may be helping to nobilitate this practise of the exhibition more than opening people’s eyes to the structure and the construction of the past events it thematizes. You can’t really predict perception in contemporary art. Besides, these projects are done in such a way that they also provide a convenient romantic illusion of beautiful curatorial work, maybe of some really dedicated curatorial amateur. They are done in a kind of “low profile” manner, but very precisely and obviously with much care, by an anonymous author who doesn’t work with originals but makes all the work by himself, playing all kinds of roles from real life as in a game etc. I can easily see why they are so appealing to curators.

Walter Benjamin: Well, I don't know about the psychological make up of the people involved, but in spite of their anonymity, the projects they are involved in neither humble nor modest. On the contrary, judging by the scope of their themes and by their positioning in relation to the art context, these are clearly very ambitious works. But I think that is not matter of choice at all. I have no idea why they are so appealing to curators. Personally, I do not think that this is so obvious, but even if it is true, it could be because the curators are the subject matter of these works. We're talking about Gertrude Stein, Katherine Dreier/Marcel Duchamp, Alfred Barr, Dorothy Miller, Alan Solomon, etc. Not only the authors whose reflections are shown in these

projects, but also the curators who put these authors and their works together, are the central theme. It seems that the importance of the curator's position in organising and exhibiting art became more and more apparent as the 20th century progressed. First this role was associated with art institutions. In the Museums these were people like Barr and Dorothy Miller and in the galleries people like Peggy Guggenheim, Betty Parsons, and Sidney Janis, who were art dealers at the same time. Perhaps it is interesting to mention that Dorothy Miller was named *editor* rather than *curator* of her series of exhibitions entitled "Americans". In a way, the curatorial role in the Museum could be understood as non-commercial (only to show, to create a spectacle, but not to sell - *exposition*) while in the galleries it was commercial (to display merchandise for sale - *exhibition*). The so-called "independent curator" is a more recent development, but we might see Marcel Duchamp as his distant precursor. Clearly, the concept of an independent curator as a single and long-term position or career that is fully conscious of its potential and power is basically associated with the European art scene, where someone like the late Harald Szeemann helped to shape it the way it is defined today.

One of the artists who became aware of this development was Daniel Buren. Regarding the Szeemann's curatorial work Documenta 5 (1972), he correctly noticed that "increasingly the object of an exhibition is no longer the exhibition of works of art but the exhibition of the exhibition as a Work of Art". It is clear that the position of the curator is a meta-position in relation to the artist. As such, it could be quite uncomfortable for the artist's sense of "independence and freedom." We could say that the notions of "independent curator" and "independent artist" are two sides of the same coin. I expect that both will gradually diminish as the importance of the entire art scene together with Museums, galleries, exhibitions, art works, Art History, etc. either fades away or completely changes its meaning.

Beti Zerovc: But for now, the fact is that curators are interested in nobilitating the medium of the exhibition by any means possible. Can't we see the Salon of Gertrude Stein as something that contributes to romantic, noble ideas about the exhibition, since the majority of the public presumably doesn't take it as a critical tool, but as an enchanting, nostalgic experience about the past, where you feel really well and special?

Walter Benjamin: Sure and I'm glad. Things like the music from *West Side Story* that was used at the *Americans 64* exhibit are there to make people feel nice. The thing is that the real change is not going to happen through shock and scandal any more. It is going to take place unnoticed, getting under your skin while you are even not aware of it. Shock belongs to modernism. This is why, for example, "shock and awe" art from Britain is in my opinion anachronistic and totally uninteresting today. The real change is going to be subtly, almost unnoticed, and with some feeling of pleasure. But it's going to be a real, radical, and fundamental change.

Beti Zerovc: So, you think that these projects will make this change.

Walter Benjamin: Absolutely. They *are* making the change. I believe this is where the change is taking place today. Gradually, it will become clear that Art History and Art itself are exhausted concepts. They're going to be abandoned, or perhaps will become little more than entertainment for some people who continue to believe in history, the way the religion is an entertainment for some people today.

Beti Zerovc: But that's how it is now already. Art is just an entertainment for some people.

Walter Benjamin: Sure. This is why Art as such is not relevant for me any more.

Beti Zerovc: So, wouldn't it be more fun and make more sense to leave the art context altogether now?

Walter Benjamin: You see, you have to have a place from where you start learning things. Sometimes, a certain narrative already gives you a platform from which you can start and from where you can make the "next move." Why abandon it then completely? When Art History was being established, it didn't forget the Christian narrative. It just recontextualised it. And these Meta-Art works are not forgetting the narrative or Art History. They might be one way of recontextualising it. So, what we have is recontextualisation rather than a deconstruction of the historical narrative. While deconstructing is in some way closer to "forgetting," recontextualising might come closer to "remembering". Copies are memories.