TO INFINITY AND BEYOND:
A CRITIQUE OF THE AESTHETIC WHITE CUBE

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II. History of Museum Display and Precursors to the White Cube

We are all familiar with the "white cube." If you have ever been to an art museum, especially one displaying modern or contemporary art, chances are you will have experienced the phenomenon: plain white walls, polished wooden floors, evenly spaced artworks lit from above. The white cube has come to define the gallery space. Revered for its flexibility and neutrality, it concentrates the viewer's gaze on individual masterpieces while objectifying any characteristics that may interfere with such an aesthetic experience. However, this supposedly neutral approach is no less biased than previous concepts of display. It was born out of the social and artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and brought with it connotations of aesthetic transcendence and power.

The history of museum display is as varied and colorful as the artworks these institutions exhibit. The earliest displays of art were private collections in the hands of wealthy and often royal patrons. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw collections thriving throughout Europe in the form of the kunst- und wunderkammer. Translating from German as "chambers of art and wonder," these "curiosity cabinets" consisted of crowded displays of artworks as well as ethnographic and natural artifacts covering nearly every surface including walls and ceilings. The quantity and diversity of objects served to illustrate the wonders of the world in an almost encyclopedic manner. By creating a universal microcosm, the owner of such a curiosity cabinet was, in effect, asserting control over a small piece of the world.[19] Arranged symmetrically, curiosity cabinets also had a highly decorative appeal. The resulting effect was grand and visually captivating in a way that further reflected the superior social status and worldliness of

[19] Francesca Fiorani, "Review: *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunstkammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art, and Technology* by Horst Bredekamp," *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1990), 269.

their owners. A focus on the rare and exotic further helped to restrict collecting to those with the wealth and opportunity to obtain objects such as precious gems and minerals, unicorn horns (often in reality narwhal tusks), painted miniatures, and exotic coins. Additionally, they were often only accessible to the owners, their family, and personal guests of similarly high class. Even the Royal Kunstkammer in Kassel, a remarkably accessible curiosity cabinet, was open only to "scholars, princes, noblemen, and the educated upper middle class."[20]

By the 18th century, aristocratic collectors increasingly turned their attentions toward art in an attempt to distance themselves from curiosities and oddities now considered low culture. With the coming of the intellectual Enlightenment, such objects had lost their credibility in the new, scientifically based society. However, the display methods of the earlier centuries remained largely intact. Arrangements were still very decorative with dense, symmetrical hangings prevailing. Yet, this method of display was not without its erudite reasonings. Connoisseurship and the study of art were taking hold. Experts believed each school of art had specific proficiencies in artistic composition, drawing, color, and expression. Therefore, arranging groups of works in close proximity, either highlighting only one school or mixing multiple schools, could expose these distinguishing characteristics and talents. Known as a "comparative" hanging, this method allowed aesthetes and students of art to identify specific traits of particular artistic movements or even individual artists.[21]

In Europe, the first public museums of art grew out of these private aristocratic collections and were highly influenced by the Paris salons. Held in the Palais du Louvre beginning in 1725, the government-sponsored exhibitions highlighted the best new academic work to come out of the French academies. Although hung floor-to-ceiling, similar to private

[20] David Carrier, "The Display of Art: An Historical Perspective," *Leonardo* 20, no. 1 (1987), 83.
[21] Andrew McClellan, *The Art Museum from Boulée to Bilbao*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 118.

collections of the time, the salon had an active, bazaar-like atmosphere. Visitors from nearly all classes in French society were free to view and evaluate the artworks on display.[22]

The Musée du Louvre opened in 1793 after the French revolutionaries and the Assemblée Nationale claimed the royal collection and palace as possessions of the French public.[23] At this time, the museum still arranged its collections in a comparative manner. However, within a matter of months, the Louvre abandoned this aristocratic method in favor of a chronological system that favored art historical fact over connoisseurship and authenticity. Spurred by Carl Linnaeus's new taxonomic approach to scientific classification whereby biologists categorize organisms according to kingdom, class, order, genus, species, etc., art connoisseurs and collectors organized their works according to artists and national schools. The Louvre specifically divided its works into the Italian, Northern and French schools. At the same time, symmetrical, visually pleasing arrangements were still the norm.[24]

While museums still cluttered their spaces with art due to extreme overcrowding in their collections, a new approach allowed a great degree of space around each work.[25] As a result, wall color and coverings became more and more important as time went on. Many museum professionals believed colors should be chosen based on their ability to contrast with the specific works on display, while others called for a standard choice of wall color for all works. In an 1845 pamphlet advocating reform at London's National Gallery, Charles L. Eastlake argued that "a picture will be seen to advantage on a ground brighter than its darks and darker than its lights, and of so subdued a tint as may contrast well with its brighter colors."[26] In the early nineteenth

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[22] Carrier, 84.

[23] "History of the Louvre." *Site officiel du musée du Louvre*, accessed March 20, 2012, http://www.louvre.fr/en/history-louvre.

[24] McClellan, 120-123.

[25] Ibid, 122-125.

[26] Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 31.

century, a greenish gray color was favored for its neutrality, while later, a deep crimson was preferred for its visual contrast with the gold of most picture frames.[27]

Following the lead of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London's South Kensington district, museums forming in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century sought to educate and morally uplift a broad American public. By presenting objects of art and science as didactic specimens instead of princely treasures, these institutions hoped to refine commercial design and industrial manufacturing and civilize the working class.[28] In its original 1870 mission statement, even New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art underscored its dedication to "the application of arts to manufacture and practical life," and "furnishing popular instruction."[29] In 1870, Charles Perkins, a vocal proponent of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, whose very building was modeled after that of South Kensington, also stated that the proper function of a museum was not "making collections of objects of art," but "the education of a nation."[30]

One manifestation of this educational focus was the pervasiveness of casts and reproductions within the collections of American museums. As mentioned previously, the collection of rare and costly artifacts was not the focus of such institutions. Instead, many museums wished to impart lessons in idyllic beauty by exposing their patrons to the finest works of art, whether in the form of originals or reproductions. Therefore, visitors could view plaster casts of classical sculpture in almost any institution dedicated to the arts from the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy to Pittsburgh's Carnegie Institute. In fact, the Metropolitan Museum dedicated an

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[27] Ibid, 32.

[28] Michael Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts," in *A Grand Design: A History of the Victoria & Albert Museum*, ed. Malcom Baker, Anthony Burton, and Brenda Richardson (V&A Publications, 1999) http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1159_grand_design/essay-the-idealist-enterprise_new.html (accessed March 20, 2012).

[29] "Museum Mission Statement," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed March 20, 2012, http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/mission-statement.

[30] Conforti.

entire wing exclusively to the display of casts.[31] The ideal gallery, archaeologist and museum professional Edward Robinson explained, would be one in which "children could grow up familiar with the noblest productions of Greece and Italy, in which the laborer could pass some of his holiday hours, and in which the mechanic could find stimulus to make his own work beautiful as well as good."[32]

With the turn-of-the-century rise of wealthy robber barons, American art museums began to turn away from their educational mission and moved toward a new aestheticism based in rarity and transcendental beauty. When J.P. Morgan became president of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1904, the museum became more concerned with standards of authenticity and connoisseurship. Two years later, the museum had disbanded its cast department.[33] Rather than displaying reproductions that visitors could see in any city and that lacked any true artistic spirit, the staff and trustees of the Met believed that only original works of art could enrich the lives of the masses and propel the museum to new heights of status and reputation.

Two key figures in the museological shift toward aestheticism were Benjamin Ives Gilman and Matthew Prichard of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Like Morgan, Prichard too believed that, due to their lack of vitality and merit, casts did not belong in museums of art. In a letter to museum trustee Samuel Warren, he stated that each instance of their display should contain the disclaimer "THE ORIGINAL DOES NOT LOOK LIKE THIS."[34] Taking the sentiments of the movement further, the two men believed that education in its previous forms had no place within American museums. Instead, museums should promote "appreciative

[31] Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 46.
[32] Ibid, 47.
[33] Ibid, 49-51.
[34] Ibid, 52.

acquaintance with objects of beauty"[35] and "pleasure derived from a contemplation of the perfect."[36] Gilman himself saw artistic and pedagogic objectives as mutually exclusive, and, with the upper floors dedicated to exhibition and the basement set aside for study, the very structure of the Museum of Fine Art's new 1909 building on Boston's Fenway supported this belief and promoted the supremacy of the aesthetic.[37] Ultimately, this new aesthetic focus served to mirror developing American social ideals and encouraged the continued philanthropy of the rich. As the nation's economy boomed, the demand for status-enhancing luxury items increased greatly. In turn, emerging industrialists and financiers felt it was their duty to share their cultural wealth with the common man.

With the new aesthetic focus came new methods of display. As previously discussed, artworks were crowded into dimly lit, highly decorative rooms. In 1918, Gilman brought to light just how draining and ineffectual such spaces could be. "After a brief initial exertion," he wrote, the typical museum visitor "will resign himself to seeing practically everything and by passing glance."[38] Therefore, with Gilman's leadership, the Museum of Fine Arts spearheaded a new movement in the United States, fostering a more efficient, tranquil viewing experience.

Instead of embracing the busy galleries of the past, Gilman and his followers took their cues from contemporary interior design and commercial displays. The number of works on display was greatly reduced, highlighting only the best works of aesthetic genius, and hung at eye level in well-lit, dull-colored rooms to save visitors from eyestrain and the physical exertion of crouching, bending, etc. The walls of the Museum of Fine Arts itself were a creamy shade of

[35] Benjamin Ives Gilman, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1918), 87.
[36] Wallach, 52.
[37] Gilman, xii-92.
[38] Ibid, 252.

grey.[39] In 1917, the Metropolitan Museum of Art went even further, hosting a session of the annual American Association of Museums conference in which Frederick Hoffman, a window dresser at New York's Altman's department store spoke on new commercial display methods that could be incorporated into the art museum setting. In 1927, the Met again untied with the commercial world, this time collaborating with Macy's in a series of shows under the banner *Art-in-Trade*. Featuring arrangements of interior décor, a recognized designer organized each exhibition. One such designer, responsible for a show at Macy's that year, was set designer Lee Simonson who had long believed that museums should follow the lead of theatrical and commercial design.[40] In a 1914 article, originally published in the art and political magazine *The New Republic*, Simonson described museums as rooms "crammed with paintings until they become a kaleidoscope" and cases "crowded with objects until the mere process of attention becomes an agony of effort." Like Gilman and his followers, Simonson too thought museums must drastically alter their display methods. "Only ruthless elimination can produce design. . . . A museum must become not a permanent exhibition, but a permanent exposition, arranged as our expositions are, and pervaded by the same holiday spirit."[41]

Gilman further believed that ideal gallery spaces were small, intimate rooms, in which museum visitors could view works of art comfortably, as if they were in their own homes. Therefore, he argued that individual rooms should be open, with little distracting adornment and situated off a central walkway. In this way, galleries would not become "thoroughfares"[42] and visitors could enjoy an intimate viewing experience without the distractions of passersby or unnecessary ornamentation. Finally, he concluded that museums must distribute sufficient

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[39] Ibid, 252-428.

[40] McClellan, 205-206.

[41] Lee Simonson, "The Land of Sunday Afternoon," in *The New Republic Book: Selections from the First Hundred Issues* (New York: Republic Publishing Company, 1916), 312.

[42] Gilman, 399.

seating among the space to allow visitors to enjoy the gallery at their leisure while still staving off fatigue.[43] In many ways, museums began to resemble the feminine sphere of the home rather than a public space. Like a home, they become more comfortable, inviting, and intimate.

By the time of the aesthetic movement in the United States, many German museums had already embraced new systems of design and decor. In his 1853 essay "Thoughts on the New Building to be Erected for the National Gallery of England, and on the Arrangement, Preservation, and Enlargement of the Collection," Gustav Waagen, the director of the Berlin Museum, had advised the staff of London's new National Gallery to be more selective when choosing artworks for display and to hang them farther apart.[44] In fact, as part of the planning process for the new Fenway building, representatives from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts visited the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin, now renamed the Bode Museum after Wilhelm von Bode, its first curator.[45]

When German museums of art first used white walls, it was not radical, but simply continued evidence of the influence of contemporary interior design. When exhibiting modern works, museum professionals often chose white for its ability to contrast with and emphasize the artists' use of bright color. As Gustav Pauli, director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle, asserted, "The stronger the colors of the paintings, the more decided may be the brightness of the background. Our Expressionists . . . bear black well – or white."[46] When Nationalgalerie director Ludwig Justi, acquired the Kronprinzenpalais to show contemporary works, he unabashedly utilized the latest trends in interior decor. However, when renovating the top floor in 1929, he stripped the walls of several rooms of adornment and completely painted them white

[43] Ibid, 252-428.
[44] McClellan, 124-125.
[45] Conforti.
[46] Klonk, 96.

as a nod to the burgeoning Bauhaus style architecture and design. Yet, even here, the rooms retained their intimate feel through a largely symmetrical arrangement and the works' relatively low hanging with bottoms aligned.[47]

Yet, it was the Bauhaus and the artists themselves that were more revolutionary than the German museum professionals they initially influenced. Established in 1919 by architect Walter Gropius, the Staatliches Bauhaus was a revolutionary school of visual arts that combined fine and applied arts such as painting, sculpture, photography, film, stage design, architecture, industrial design, and the graphic arts. Located in Weimar until 1925, the school's founding staff included American-German painter Lyonel Feininger, Swiss Expressionist painter Johannes Itten, and German sculptor Gerhard Marcks. Its purpose, Gropius stated in his 1919 manifesto, was to create "a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions which raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist." However, highly influenced by Vkhutemas and the Constructivists in Russia, the Bauhaus soon began to turn from craftsmanship towards a new focus on industry and commercial production and the Bauhaus style became extremely influential in Modern architecture and design.[48]

Bauhaus architects and designers did not follow the homelike, intimate methods prescribed in the United States. Although, like Gilman, they were interested in increased functionality, they instead focused on exteriority, breaking away from cozy spaces like that of the MFA. In his 1930 article "Weiss, alles Weiss," critic J. E. Hammann theorized:

> One no longer wishes to be closed off from the exterior world, from nature, in a sentimental romantic dimness. Rather, one seeks [the exterior world] through the use of all means, and not just through the given options of big windows, house or roof gardens, verandas and so on, but also through the breadth created with the illusion of white paint. The human being of today wants freedom, air, and light;

[47] Ibid, 96-135.

[48] Rainer K. Wick, "Bauhaus" In *Grove Art online, Oxford Art Online*, accessed March 20, 2012, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T006947.

IV. LIMITATIONS OF THE WHITE CUBE

Not everyone embraced the aesthetic "white cube." While some praised Barr and the Museum of Modern Art for their innovative spirit, others had been criticizing MoMA's exhibition techniques since *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Meyer Schapiro questioned Barr's method of removing art from its historical and social contexts. In "Nature of Abstract Art," Schapiro stated that "there is no 'pure art,' . . . all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience, and non aesthetic concerns."[101] He argued that no one could truly understand the history of art without some knowledge of its background. "The movement of abstract art is too comprehensive and long-prepared, too closely related to similar movements in literature and philosophy, which have quite other technical conditions, and finally, are too varied according to time and place, to be considered a self-contained development issuing by a kind of internal logic directly from aesthetic problems."[102]

In 1936, Henry McBride declared that *Cubism and Abstract Art* was geared toward those with advanced knowledge and did not make an effort to appeal to the general public. He claimed that the exhibition methods used, effectively alienated uninformed visitors, stating that the museum's officials "smite the public in the eye on the very door-step, so to speak, of the show."[103] He believed that the public needed more than just statistics and dates. Instead, a gradual introduction to the subject of abstract art and guidance from concept to concept would

[101] Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978), 196.

[102] Ibid, 202.

[103] Henry McBride, "Exhibition of Abstract Art at the Museum of Modern Art," in *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticisms of Henry McBride*, ed. Daniel Cotton Rich (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 334.

build more interest and understanding. "Though abstract art is here in plenty," he stated, "'abstract beauty' is not placarded in a way to win new converts."[104]

As the white cube began to gain a larger following, its elitist tendencies became more defined. The authoritative history of art presented within the gallery space supported traditional power relationships, portraying the curators as the ultimate purveyors of knowledge and visitors as lowly consumer peons. The museums are geared more toward those with at least some advanced knowledge of the type of art displayed. Like Barr with his Harvard lecture, museum staff members may overlook the fact that many visitors have not yet developed the same knowledge base as they have. Even when aware of their audience and its skill level, curators often decide that providing context interferes with the visitor's ability to think for him or herself. Yet, such methods are clearly ineffective and may actually alienate uninformed visitors. "I was a little disappointed," one participant of *Insights*, a series of visitor focus groups published by the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1991, stated after visiting the Philadelphia Museum of Art for the first time. "There was really no background information on a lot of the items, how they were made, why they were used, what they symbolized . . . It was just sort of all there."[105]

Similarly, the white cube artificially elevates the status of the artworks themselves. As the Getty's report points out, museum staff now strive to convey works of art primarily as "significant and original" rather than grounding them in the human realm from which they sprung.[106] In order to do this, works of art are isolated from one another, widely spaced and spot-lit from above. The empty white walls of the gallery make the artworks appear transcendent and timeless, as if they were sacred objects in sacrosanct temples. The curators further detach art

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[104] Ibid, 334.

[105] *Insights: Museums, Visitors, Attitudes, Expectations: A Focus Group Experiment* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1991), 22.

[106] Ibid, 9.

from the everyday world by limiting background information to simple facts such as artist, title, date, and media. They, like Barr, treat art as if it was self-contained, emerging whole and untouched from the ether.

Finally, the white cube erects a psychological barrier between the artworks and their viewers. Since people live in the real world, they could contaminate the art. Museum staff wants visitors to perceive their institutions as an escape from the mundane. One staff member participating in *Insights* stated that he or she wanted the museum to be "a special place, apart from the everyday world."[107] In this way, visitors too, are encouraged to leave their lives, the world, and any preconceived notions behind. In his 1976 book, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, artist and author Brian O'Doherty explains, "presence before a work of art, then, means that we absent ourselves in favor of the Eye and Spectator, who report to us what we might have seen had we been there."[108]

Even the artworks in museums of modern and contemporary art support the new elitism. While most viewers could at least superficially understand the meanings and intentions behind most academic and historical works of art, modern art speaks a different language and is often unintelligible without prior knowledge. In order to understand modern art, one must first have the access and leisure time needed to become familiar with it. While the middle and upper classes have had ready admittance, the working class and impoverished often have limited resources and daily pressures that restrict their access to modern art. In "Nature of Abstract Art," Meyer Schapiro explains that Barr and his followers saw naturalistic representation as "a passive mirroring of things" and "essentially non-artistic." Abstract artists, on the other hand, stripped their art of representation, meaning, and other "unavoidable impurities," leaving only the

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[107] Ibid, 9.

[108] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 55.

untainted, aesthetic "essence."[109] Barr himself further commented on the inferiority of the easily understood. As Sybil Gorgon Kantor points out in her book *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum Modern Art*, Barr often used the term "pretty" to discredit works of art that were too readily understandable. However, Barr believed that "difficult" works required more contemplation and "by their poetry [had] the power to lift us up out of humdrum ruts."[110]

Overall, the art museum now acted as the protector of our most noble societal values. It consumed art and presented it in a way that elevated it above life and shrouded it in an aura of mystery and transcendence. Brian O'Doherty summarizes this best.

> For many of us, the gallery space still gives off negative vibrations when we wander in. Esthetics are turned into a kind of social elitism – the gallery space is *exclusive*. Isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewelry, or silver: esthetics are turned into commerce – the gallery space is *expensive*. What it contains is, without initiation, well-nigh incomprehensible - art is *difficult*. . . . here we have a social, financial, and intellectual snobbery which models (and at its worst parodies) our system of limited production, our modes of assigning value, our social habits at large. Never was a space designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle-classes so efficiently codified.[111]

This elitism also translated into a new passivity never before seen in the museum setting. Non-initiated visitors feel intimidated and inadequate due to their lack of understanding and the museum's authoritative atmosphere. O'Doherty equates the discomfort felt by such visitors with the unpleasantly heightened self-consciousness of trespass. "Because trespass makes one partly visible to oneself, it plays down body language, encourages a convention of silence, and tends to substitute the Eye for the Spectator."[112] The Getty's *Insights* brought these feelings to the

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[109] Schapiro, 195.

[110] Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 249.

[111] O'Doherty, 76.

[112] Ibid, 49.

forefront, pointing out that visitors do not feel like they can be themselves. They feel they must be on their best behavior, making as little noise as possible or even dressing up. "It's going to be so quiet," one participant stated of Cleveland Museum of Art, "that you will feel conspicuous if you cough or anything."[113] Again, O'Doherty summarizes this perfectly: "from this room, burps and farts are exiled."[114] Even those regular museum visitors who do feel comfortable within the gallery setting restrain themselves in deference to the space and artworks on display there. In *Making Museums Matter*, Stephen Weil explains that whether a work of art is sensual, shocking, lavish, or amusing, the typical viewer nearly always responds with quiet deference. "Well bred visitors," he writes, "rarely display any horror, lust, envy, or open amusement at the things they see in art museums."[115] Furthermore, those individuals that would be more likely to openly react to a work of art may avoid attending museums precisely because they find them to be too stultifying and passive. Another participant of *Insights* explained, "if you weren't walking, you'd probably sleep through the entire trip."[116]

However, it was not until the 1980s that an exhibition came along that was so poorly received that it prompted people to reconsider the aesthetic focus of the "white cube" format. Organized by William Rubin, director of the museum's painting and sculpture department, in conjunction with New York University professor Kirk Varnedoe, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* opened at the Museum of Modern Art on September 19, 1984. The exhibition consisted of 150 modern and contemporary works as well as over 200 African, Oceanic, and North American tribal artifacts.[117] Focusing on the shared formal

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[113] *Insights*, 10.
[114] O'Doherty, 85.
[115] Stephen E. Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 185.
[116] *Insights*, 11.
[117] "New Exhibition Opening September 27 at Museum of Modern Art Examines 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art," *The Museum of Modern Art*, accessed March 20, 2012, http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/6081/releases/MOMA_1984_0017_17.pdf?2010.