

Bernice Ho
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Alternative Histories
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The Collection Galleries at the MoMA: A Comical Perspective

A globally renowned residence for iconic contemporary art, the Museum of Modern Art serves as the archetype for the white cube museum. With bare, minimal walls ranging from warm greys to soft whites, the institution establishes an ideological framework that structures the museum-goer's experience. The bare-bones structure of the white cube museum amplifies the artistic nature of these pieces, stripping away any notion of the object as artefact. Audiences are often left to their own devices with little to no contextual information regarding these works. While this framework certainly broadens the possibilities of interpretation and may even empower well-versed audiences to apply their learned expertise, it can also prove to be alienating and misleading for visitors who are less knowledgeable in this regard. Despite the white cube museum's intentions to decontextualize works, the popularization of contemporary art through outlets such as social media and educational materials renders it nearly impossible for viewers to enter the museum with a completely blank slate, with no preconceived notions or expectations whatsoever. Consequently, the Collection Galleries at the MoMA serves as an ideal exhibit to observe and examine audience interactions within the white cube framework. Featuring Western art from the 1880s to 1940s by some of the most revered artists at the time, the Collection Galleries highlights how the proliferation of art and replicas of art as a result of technology in the last century has affected how viewers interact with institutional display.

Using comics as a means of exploring this dynamic relationship, my project employs satire to examine and speculate possible scenarios that emerge from how museum-goers interact

with works in light of their own preconceptions, past encounters, current sociopolitical climate, and the imposed ritual script of the institution.¹ In order to garner more attention and maximize the exposure of these comics, they are to be printed on the backside of entry tickets. Following the format of MoMA's usual tickets, the front of the ticket will feature the title of the piece, or comic, in this case. The title will allude to the content of the comic, providing some context without using extensive descriptions. In addition, copies of the comics will be accessible in clear, wall-mounted cases near the artworks that each respective comic references, if applicable. This mode of display and distribution aims to provoke thought and critical dialogue in regards to how audiences choose to interact with the MoMA's museological framework and politics of display.

The series of five comics may be broadly divided into two categories of institutional critique. The first category specifically deals with the trademark lack of context within the white cube museum. The first comic, titled *Under Constructionism*, is based upon how objects, by virtue of being in a museum, begins to assume properties of art, and is classified as such.² The comic features an unwitting visitor, rationalizing an "under construction" sign with superfluous contemporary art jargon. While the example in this comic may seem far-fetched and rather unrealistic, it does not deviate far from the present philosophical tendency of deeming and accepting everything as art. The post-dada sensibility that even an appropriated urinal may be considered art and displayed in the most prestigious museums has certainly contributed to this sentiment. In addition, this comic highlights how the lack of context within a white cube

¹ For the definition of the ritual of museum viewership: Duncan, C. and Wallach, A. (1980), "THE UNIVERSAL SURVEY MUSEUM". *Art History*, 3: 448–469. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8365.1980.tb00089.x

² Barker, E. (1999). *Contemporary cultures of display*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press in association with the Open Univ.

museum compels audiences to assign their own meanings to art works, regardless of whether they are accurate to intention or even art at all.³

The second comic, titled *Who's Leroy Borton?* also deals with the lack of context within the MoMA's institutional framework. This comic in particular addresses the cryptic, somewhat mystical nature associated with modern art, as pieces from movements such as abstract expressionism become progressively more non-objective. This comic features a sculpture by David Smith titled *The History of Leroy Borton*.⁴ The accompanying label to this angular, futuristic sculpture is certainly minimal, providing no context as to who the artist or Leroy Borton was, or how the sculpture represents the said history of this character and their relationship. As such, the institution imposes the status of art upon this piece, urging audiences to analyze and appreciate the piece from a strictly formal and aesthetic standpoint. This mode of viewing works may ultimately prove to be alienating for audiences without formal training in the field of art. The comic also incorporates the use of smartphones as a possible equalizer in terms of how audiences experience art within the museum. In this scenario, the phone is depicted as an additional source of information, and alludes to another possible dimension of interpretation for viewers. Within the white cube museum, the smartphone serves as a placeholder for contextual labels or images. While the information provided on the device does not reflect the ritual script of the museum, it reflects the institution's problematic assumption that audiences are either already familiar with the works on display, or have the means to research it for themselves.

³Barker, E. (1999). "*Contemporary cultures of display*".

⁴ Smith, D. (n.d.). David Smith. "History of LeRoy Borton". February 17, 1956 | MoMA. Retrieved December 20, 2017, from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81048>. While the website does include contextual information, the physical label at the museum does not indicate the information shown on the website.

The second overarching category pertains to the effects of the democratization of art. Consequent of the development of photography as a means of replicating and documenting art, as well as the proliferation of the internet and other educational materials, works that were once confined within museum walls are now accessible globally with unparalleled efficiency. The exponential growth of social media as a platform to share encounters within the museum has shaped the manner in which audiences interact with works and the institution itself. The third comic in this overall series is titled *Do it for the Instagram*, and exaggerates the popular museum activity of mimicking gestures in paintings or sculptures for photographs, presumably to post on social media. Featuring a group of visitors re-enacting *The Dance* by Matisse, this comic reflects upon the presence of social media as a device that mediates and dictates how visitors consume art. Paintings and sculptures are no longer static objects- through selfies and hashtags, they become subjects, props on social media feeds, images that viewers curate to cultivate their reputations on public platforms.

Titled *I Want to Van Go(gh) and Buy One*, the fourth comic addresses how the democratization of art has transformed original paintings such as Van Gogh's *Starry Night* into a visual icon. While a sense of preciousness is most certainly conferred upon the original, highly fetishized version of *Starry Night*, the countless items of merchandise and replicas of the piece have served to devalue it in a commercial sense. The fact that a revered painting can be worn as something as commonplace as socks strips the piece of its sacredness and singularity. This comic satirizes and points out how the sale of *Starry Night* as merchandise is not unlike the sale of Disney merchandise within the theme park. Democratization of Van Gogh's piece has been so

widespread that the image itself has trickled into the spheres of consumerism, effectively subverting the institutional value assigned to it.

Titled *The Art of Being a Patriot*, the fifth and final comic examines the effectiveness of the MoMA's own recent intervention of introducing works created by artists affected by the Muslim ban.⁵ Centered around the gallery space holding Marcos Grigorian's *Untitled* (1963) and Jasper Johns' *Flag* (1945-55), this comic highlights the underlying sociopolitical implications in the physical placement and display of these works. Displayed adjacent from Jasper Johns' renown *Flag*, Grigorian's piece receives comparatively much less attention than Johns' work, which has cultivated a sort of celebrity following over the past decades. Accompanied with a descriptive label documenting the MoMA's intervention in light of the Muslim ban, there is a sense of painful irony projected by this configuration of display. The fact that a piece created by an Iranian artist who is barred from entering the United States is in such close proximity to an all-American symbol in the form of Johns' flag is indeed quite provocative and unsettling. This configuration emphasizes the inherent political nature of museum display, and demonstrates that museums are in a position where they must be responsive to current events to maintain relevance. This comic underscores an instance where the democratization and widespread fame of Johns' work overshadows and undermines the institution's efforts at creating constructive dialogue regarding the present political state.⁶

⁵ Farago, J. (2017, February 03). "MoMA Takes a Stand: Art From Banned Countries Comes Center Stage". Retrieved December 06, 2017, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/arts/design/Moma-president-trump-travel-ban-art.html>

⁶ For purposes of institutional intervention refer to Robins, C. (2013). "*Curious lessons in the Museum: the pedagogic potential of artists interventions*". Farham: Ashgate.

Ultimately, this project aims to raise awareness or emphasize the nuances and reactions of audiences in a white cube museum setting. By satirizing and exaggerating the tendencies of visitors, these comics create alternative, imagined scenarios that are just shy of reality in order to generate dialogue that speaks to audiences of different backgrounds. As “low” art culture, the use of comics in this particular project aims to subtly subvert the exclusive “high” art culture that the institution projects with its notable lack of context. As such, these comics acknowledge the museum as an ideologically active space and aims to question the manner in which visitors are choosing to navigate and interact with the museum.