

THE MODERN ART MUSEUM

It's a man's world

Mrs. Guggenheim said Barr had suggested she squint at it [Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*] in order to get the pattern without the subject. She said she had been squinting ever since [but] does not like [it].¹

Finally we come to the rituals of modern museums and modern wings.² Before we can enter any of these, however, something must be said about the history of modern art and artists.

The "history of modern art," as it is generally understood in our society, is a highly selective history. To be more exact, it is a cultural construct that is collectively produced and perpetuated by all those professionals who work in art schools, universities, museums, publishing houses, and any other place where modern art is taught, exhibited, or interpreted. The first thing that needs to be said here is that this world of art professionals is enormously fragmented and often fails to arrive at any simple or clear consensus about the history of modern art. Especially in the higher, more difficult reaches of critical and art-historical discourse – in university classrooms, academic conferences, and journal articles – conflicting concepts of the field openly dispute one another. Not only are there disagreements about where the boundaries of the field lie and what comprises its most important incidents; there are also competing ideas about what its basic intellectual tools should be and what fundamental questions it should be addressing.

Twenty-five or thirty years ago, this was not the case. It is, of course, still possible to speak of an established, or perhaps one should say, until recently established, art history with its own cluster of central truths. For, despite all the critical uproar, almost everywhere in the Anglo-American university world, a fair number of professors and lecturers still teach the familiar narratives of unfolding genius and formal development. These narratives continue to feature the usual Great Artists, and their work continues to be set against an historical background kept vague and far away enough so as not to interfere with the autonomy and universality of art, but near enough to supply occasional iconographic themes (when needed). Then again, however entrenched this art history still is in some institutions, in others it is

mercilessly assailed and undermined by the "new art history" – or rather the new art histories, since there are actually several (some are rather old), based variously in French post-structuralism, language and literary theories, the tradition of Marxist cultural analysis, and psychoanalytic theory.

Which leads me to this: despite their success in academia and high criticism, these new art histories have won very little ground in public art museums. That is, they have won very little ground that is visible. This resistance is not surprising. Like science and history museums, public art museums are mediating institutions, situated between academic and critical communities on one side, and, on the other, trustees, the museum-going public, and, on occasion, state officials, all of whom expect museums to confirm their own beliefs about art. Most art museums are caught in the middle. Their curatorial staffs may share many of the views of their academic colleagues; but, the government-supported and/or tax-free public institutions in which they work are under pressure to present forms of knowledge that have recognizable meaning and value for a broader community. They are expected to augment and reinforce the community's collective knowledge about itself and its place in the world, and to preserve the memory of its most important and generally accepted values and beliefs. Therefore, especially where permanent collections of art are concerned, museums tend to reaffirm familiar, widely held notions about art and art history. In all but a few public art museums today, that translates into conservative art-historical narratives.

For many decades, now, in both American and European art museums, the central narrative of twentieth-century art – let us call it the narrative of modernism³ – has been remarkably fixed. One of its first effective advocates was Alfred Barr, the founding curator of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), who adopted it (beginning in 1929) as his organizing narrative.⁴ Barr did not invent single-handedly what would become the MoMA's central art-historical narrative; but under his direction, the MoMA would develop it more than any other institution and promote it through a vigorous program of acquisitions, exhibitions, and publications. Eventually, the history of modern art as told in the MoMA would come to stand for the definitive story of "mainstream modernism."⁵ As the core narrative of the western world's premier collection of modern art for over half a century, it constituted the most authoritative history of modern art for generations of professional as well as non-professional people. To this day, modern museums (and modern wings in older museums) continue to retell its central gospel, as do almost all history of art textbooks. William Rubin, the MoMA's director of painting and sculpture for many years, remarked,

Modern art education during and just after World War II was, in the first instance, very much a question of this museum and its publications. . . . I find my own views about the collection and about the exhibiting of it are very much like Alfred's. That's partly because I was brought up on Alfred's museum and on the collection as he built it.⁶

As director, Rubin maintained Barr's basic narrative structure, but more rigidly and dogmatically than Barr – as critics complained.⁷ Thus, the writer and editor Thomas Hess:

The basic structure . . . seems to be that familiar formalist one which moves with a deathly sort of inevitability from the 1940s to the '60s, from Pollock to Morris Louis, the "style" purifying itself of "irrelevancies" like a snake shedding its skin. This is the current art-historical stereotype which gets repeated and repeated with all the inane self-confidence of a freshman art-survey demonstration of how Giotto tried to figure out perspective, but Piero della Francesca really got it right.⁸

As I complete this book, the MoMA has just unveiled a new installation, the work of the present curator Kirk Varnedoe. While it modifies slightly some of the strict linearity and compartmentalization of past installations, it leaves intact the basic outlines of the MoMA's traditional history of modern art. In what follows, I draw on the new as well as older MoMA installations, but also on other art museums, including (to name only a few), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, the Tate Gallery in London, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the modern wing of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and the Musée de l'Art Moderne in Paris.

As it is most often told in art museums, classrooms, and textbooks, the history of modern art unfolds as a succession of formally distinct styles (or, in more sophisticated accounts, as a series of art-historical moments that open up new formal possibilities). Usually it is Cézanne who takes the most significant first step toward modernism – in the MoMA's installation, this happens almost literally: Cézanne's *Walking Man* greets the visitor at the very threshold of the permanent collection, as he has in MoMA installations for the last two decades (Figure 5.1). Appropriately enough, considering his importance as the bringer of modern art, Cézanne's advent is dramatically foretold by a large bronze figure of *Saint John the Baptist* (Rodin's), who points to him from just outside the entrance. Following Cézanne and other post-Impressionists, Fauvism makes an appearance. But in the MoMA, as in many other museums, it is Cubism that most heralds the future. In the MoMA's version, it commands the narrow passage through which visitors make the first turn in the prescribed route (the layout of the galleries allows visitors few options). After Cubism, the history of modern art burgeons – practically all of the famous twentieth-century avant-garde movements from Futurism up to Surrealism will take from it their basic direction and structure. A non-Cubist, "Expressionist" subplot, in which Matisse is the central figure (announced by Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Fauvism), is also present but subordinated to the Cézanne-to-Cubism story.



Figure 5.1 Museum of Modern Art, New York: entrance to the permanent collection (photo: author).

Dada and Surrealism open the next major chapter in this history of art (I am still relying on the MoMA's program, but the same story is told almost everywhere in the West). They push modern art's earlier conquests of the subjective self to new depths and in new directions. Miró is usually the most important figure here, but Duchamp and Ernst also loom large. The next big moment after Surrealism comes in Post-World War II New York with the development of Abstract Expression. In the MoMA, European figures like Dubuffet, Masson, and Bacon are assimilated to it. Earlier American artists like Stuart Davis and Hopper, who can not be so easily fitted in, are hung in corners or alcoves out of the way of the "main stream"; likewise the Mexican artists Rivera and Orozco, who have often ended up out in the hall. Minimal and Pop Art follow Abstract Expressionism as its major after-shocks. Then, comes an assortment of works drawn from major market trends of the 1970s and 1980s.

MoMA's presentation of this history – at least through Abstract Expressionism, Minimal, and Pop – is extraordinary in both quality and quantity; few other museums can offer, as it does, so many chapel-like rooms exclusively

devoted to *the* major art-historical figures – Picasso, Matisse, Miró, Pollock. Even so, rival collections – in London, Los Angeles, Washington, New York, and other big cities – mount good replicas of the MoMA's orthodox plot (Figure 5.2). Of course, there are variations. In most places, special importance is attached to home-grown artists – Braque in the Centre Pompidou, Mondrian in Amsterdam, and so on. In MoMA's present installation, the simultaneity of developments of art-historical styles is more acknowledged than heretofore; for example, Kandinsky is introduced earlier, next to and no longer after, some of the later Cubists. The European avant-garde thus looks less like a strict succession of separate, nation-based styles, although the familiar art-historical style categories still structure the story.

Galleries devoted to post-World War II American art are especially predictable. Individual Abstract Expressionists such as Clyfford Still or Mark Rothko are often given galleries of their own, as in the Met, San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art, or the Tate Gallery in London (Figure 5.3). Although few museums have both space and collection enough for such individual artist chapels, almost every major museum in America and many abroad devote one or more galleries to the New York School collectively (Figure 1.5). Whether in New York, Los Angeles, or Houston, Texas, large-scale works by Pollock, Newman, Gottlieb, de Kooning, Klein, and the rest fill monumental galleries that read as climactic moments in the museum's modern-art narrative. Indeed, in the 1950s and 1960s, these artists produced large

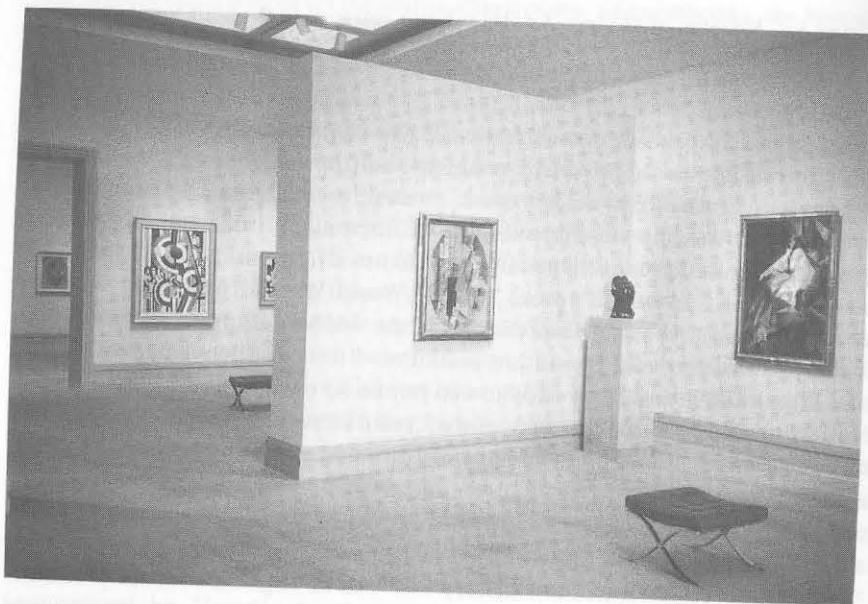


Figure 5.2 Modern art in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (photo: author).



Figure 5.3 A room of Rothko paintings in the Tate Gallery, London (photo: author).

quantities of their most characteristic, signature works precisely to feed a rapidly expanding, seemingly insatiable art-museum market.

My point is not that museum directors and curators lack the interest or imagination to do anything different (although that may be true), but rather that they are constrained to program their galleries within a cultural construct – one that is never fully of their making but for which they will be held responsible by their superiors in the museum, by the views of other art-world professionals and by the variously informed, often conservative publics they serve, publics whose expectations are barely touched by the new or revisionist art-historical thinking. Which brings me, once again, to the central idea of this book, that art museums are a species of ritual space.

It is not, I believe, farfetched to think of the situation of a museum curator as analogous to that of a medieval church official responsible for planning the iconographic program of a cathedral. As scholars have long observed, the images and themes that recur in the sculptural decorations of medieval cathedrals are almost always based on certain authoritative literary sources – Old and New Testament texts, Apocryphal books, narratives of saints, and the like. Moreover, the theological significance of these subjects (the story of Jonah, the Annunciation, the Last Judgment) was considerably elaborated by an interpretive discourse that determined even such details as the size and placement of individual iconographic elements in relation to each other and to the whole.⁹ So, too, in museums, an organizing art-historical narrative

draws authority from a system of beliefs that is codified by and elaborated in a surrounding discourse. We have already seen such coherence in the nineteenth-century public art museums studied in Chapter 2.

What, then, is the ritual scenario of a gallery of modern art? Let us start with the museum's central narrative, according to which modern art unfolds as a series of moments, each involving a new and unique artistic achievement and each growing out of (or negating) something before it. As constructed in both museums and art-historical texts, modern art history – that is, the modern art history that counts – moves always forward. Its progress, relentless and irreversible, is propelled by the efforts of artists who, individually or in teams, work through issues or overcome impassés posed by earlier modern artists. Picasso's Cubist works build upon and transcend the art of Cézanne. Pollock's "breakthrough" compositions transcend the resolutions of Cubism. The most celebrated artists are those who are thought to have left the field most changed from the way they found it, pushed it the farthest in a new direction and redefined most radically the terms of entry for future individuals.

Central to all of this history of individual achievement, then, is an idea of progress. But progress toward what? In the nineteenth century, progress in art was progress toward an ideal that, brilliantly realized in the past, could now measure the achievements of the present. In the twentieth century (that is, in most twentieth-century art history), progress in modern art, especially the art of the first two-thirds of the century, is gauged by the degree to which art achieved greater abstraction – the distance it travelled in emancipating itself from the imperative to represent convincingly or coherently a natural, presumably objective world. Modern art's most important figures rejected the commitment to illusionism that was for so long central to western painting and sculpture. The mandate of modern art is thus represented as a mandate to turn away from the objective world – to devalue its significance or deny its coherence – and concern oneself with some aspect of subjective experience, including the artist's struggle to renounce the exterior world. It is to this end that modern artists have thrown out, piece by piece, all the accumulated knowledge that constituted traditional artistic skills. And it is for this reason that, as the century wore on, they become progressively less interested in and able to create convincing illusions of space, volume, light, shadow, and the rest. These were replaced with newly invented visual languages and creative techniques (free association, color experiments, the use of chance, and so on) that enabled artists to evoke new universes of modern thought and feeling.

There is a little-remarked aspect of this history – or rather of the many histories of individual artists that make it up – and that is a recurrent narrative pattern that identifies artistic invention with *moral* achievement. According to this pattern, the more artists free themselves from representing recognizable objects in space, the more exemplary they become as moral beings and the more pious and *spiritually* meaningful their artistic efforts. The pursuit

of abstraction (or the distance achieved from traditional pictorial constructions) thus becomes the supreme sign of an artist's liberation from the mundane and commonplace. Given the symbolic import of abstraction, it is not surprising that the literature of art history has been obsessed with chronicling the formal development of abstract artists. Indeed, much of the most admired art-historical enquiry has consisted in meticulously sifting the slightest minutia of an artist's production in order to grasp the uniqueness and originality of his contribution to modern art's progress toward abstraction. Countless books, articles, and catalogues depict artists who renounce representation as heroes engaging in moral struggle, accepting pain or sacrifice rather than compromise their artistic credos. The disruption of space, the denial of volume, the overthrow of traditional compositional schemes, the discovery of painting as an autonomous surface, the emancipation of color, line or texture, the occasional transgressions and reaffirmations of the boundaries of art (as in the adaptation of junk or non-high art materials), and so on through the liberation of painting from frame and stretcher and thence from the wall itself – all of these formal advances translate into moments of moral as well as artistic ordeal.

To be sure, this conflation of the moral and the aesthetic is rarely an articulated theme in the critical literature. On the contrary, the dominant tradition, beginning with the work of Roger Fry and his contemporaries and continuing through the 1960s, expressly treats the two as mutually exclusive categories of judgment. Where the aesthetic reigns, the moral is presumably immobilized. In practice, however, the moral seems not so much vanquished as hidden inside the aesthetic, which, in the name of purity or some other artistic value, appropriates its function as an imperative. A text by the critic Michael Fried, written in 1965, offers a rare statement of this aesthetic-as-moral principle. Fried first insists that the artistic judgments that make a work significant as modern art take place outside the moral-practical realm. (In this, Fried is following Clement Greenberg, the art critic who articulated most fully and authoritatively the formalist dogma that dominated high-art criticism of the 1950s and 1960s.)¹⁰ Having thus evicted the moral from the realm of art, Fried proceeds to reimport it, arguing that the modern artist's pursuit of abstract form is *like* moral experience, that it *feels* moral and has "the denseness, structure and complexity of moral experience."¹¹ Fried's text is an excellent example of modern criticism as a kind of crypto-moral sermon and rightly earned him recognition as an important young critic, deeply committed to the cause of art.

The modern artist, then, as a consequence of his moral-aesthetic struggle, renounces representation of the visible world in order to connect with an inspiring realm of purity and truth that lies beyond it (or, in a more liberal variant, in order to advance toward a utopian future). In Cubism, this realm is identified as the process of thought itself. Mondrian and Kandinsky, each in different ways, discover abstract, universal forces and make their works

visible analogues of them. Similarly, Delaunay discovers cosmic energy and powers his painting with it. Miró explores a limitless and potent psychic field, while the Abstract Expressionists travel to even less nameable reaches of the unknown. All of these artistic breakthroughs (and others – Futurism, Suprematism, the Blue Rider) are, at one and the same time, moments of spiritual transcendence and moral example.¹²

In the liminal space of the museum, the visitor is prompted to re-live these many, successive moments of heroic renunciation. Just as images of saints were, by example, supposed to trigger in the initiated a quest for spiritual transcendence, so in the museum, art objects focus and organize the viewer's attention, activating by their very form an inner spiritual or imaginative act. The museum setting, immaculately white and stripped of all distracting ornament, promotes this intense concentration. All depends, of course, on whether or not visitors have learned to use these works knowledgeably as ritual artifacts, whether or not they can identify with the artist's spiritual-formal struggles through the work, its surfaces, composition, symbols, and other manifestations of artistic choice. The art objects thus provide both the content and structure of the ritual performance. Through them, viewers enact a drama of enlightenment in which spiritual freedom is won by repeatedly overcoming and moving beyond the visible, material world. In the art museum, even reproductions of beer or soup cans achieve this meaning as do other works that depend heavily on non-art objects for their form or materials. What matters is their power to demonstrate the art-ness of art and to transcend the meaning of those other beer and soup cans that are *not* in the art museum. Artists may or may not intend such meanings for their work; I speak here not of their intentions, but of the uses their works serve in art-museum installations.

These heroic-artistic acts, however, are not given equal value by the history of art. In this, saints have had an advantage. They acted in a universe whose forces of good and evil were constant. Modern artists must live in and transcend an always changing world – a world that (in art-historical thinking) is coterminous with the history of art itself. In that world, the attainments of yesterday – what previously made the heavenly gates of critical acclaim open – become derivative today and not worth even the price of the paint. The challenge before the artist is not to repeat but to advance a spiritual history, to overcome its present obstacles and plot its future course – and, often, as a by-product, throw new light on the achievements of past artists. In the narrative, certain moments are more climactic than others, more fraught with difficulty and danger; or they require greater leaps into the future. Cézanne, Cubism, and Surrealism are such moments. So is American Abstract Expressionism. Indeed, its very scale, which so overwhelms its predecessors, demands monumental space. In almost any museum displaying it, the passage into galleries of Abstract Expressionism is a movement into something visibly and dramatically different from what came before. Here is the work

of bigger-than-life heroes, who, by their own lights, went beyond the limits of art itself. They made the final breakthrough into the realm of absolute spirit, manifested as absolute formal and non-representational purity. Their achievements continue to set standards of scale and ambition for aspirants to the gigantic spaces of modern museum galleries.

And yet, there is something odd about all this progress toward ever greater abstraction, all this reaching into ever more transcendent realms of mind and spirit, all this inventing of new ways to demonstrate the category of art. Consider again the MoMA's galleries. The place is thick with images and representations. And most of them are of women (Figures 5.4 and 5.5). These women, however, are almost never portraits of specific individuals. The largest number are simply female bodies, or parts of bodies, with no identity beyond their female anatomy – those ever-present “women” or “seated women” or “reclining nudes”; Matisse and Picasso alone fill literally acres of the world's gallery space with them. There are also quantities of tarts, prostitutes, artists' models, and low-life entertainers. These, too, are unspecified individually, identifiable only as occupants of the lower rungs of the social ladder. In short, the women of modern art, regardless of who their real-life models were, have little identity other than their sexuality and availability, and, often, their low social status.



Figure 5.4 Inside the Museum of Modern Art: images of women by Picasso (photo: author).



Figure 5.5 Inside the Museum of Modern Art: with Kirchner's streetwalkers (photo: author).

In these images, too, the MoMA's collection is outstanding. Because of the museum's history as an early champion of abstract and formalist values, the sheer *amount* of female imagery in the collection and its prominent place in the installation is staggering. Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Léger's *Grand Déjeuner*, the street walkers in Kirchner's *The Street* (in Figure 5.5), Duchamp's *Bride*, Severini's *Bal Tabarin* dancer, de Kooning's *Woman I*, and many other works are often monumental in scale and conspicuously placed – just as the critical and art-historical literature features them as seminal works. To be sure, modern artists often make “big” philosophical or artistic statements via the nude. If the MoMA exaggerates this tradition or states it with excessive zeal (and I'm not sure it does), it is nevertheless an exaggeration of something pervasive in modern art production and its supporting critical discourse. (Other museums are not very different.) In fact, the MoMA's most recent installation seems to assign these images slightly fewer front-and-center places than previous installations; but so many big, famous “key” works are difficult to downplay. In any case, unless and until the museum adopts an entirely different organizing program, such an exercise would hardly have a point.

Until the last two decades, art history has shown little interest in accounting for this intense preoccupation with sexually available female bodies. While it has never hesitated to extol the artistic prowess of their inventors, it has

not raised larger questions about their meaning in the context of the history of art. Why, then, are images of nudes and whores an accompaniment to modern art's heroic renunciation of representation; why are they accorded such prestige and authority; and how do they relate to the high moral import of modern art? To focus these questions, let us examine some female images in the ritual space of the art museum.

It may be the case that more women than men enter modern art museums, become members, buy gifts in the gift shops, eat in the restaurants, and ultimately pay the museums' operating costs. As a high-culture ritual, however, a museum of modern art, like a universal survey museum, is normally scripted for male subjects – even New York's MoMA, which was founded by women.¹³ Certainly, no public art museum admits to privileging anyone among its visitors. Nevertheless, not only is the museum's immediate space gendered, but so also is the larger universe implicit in its program. Both are a man's world. This job of gendering falls largely to the museum's many images of female bodies. Silently and surreptitiously, they specify the museum's ritual as a male spiritual quest, just as they mark the project of modern art in general as a male endeavor, built on male fears, fantasies, and aspirations. Seen in this light, the visitor's quest for the spiritual and his obsession with the female body – rather than appearing unrelated or contradictory – can be understood as parts of a larger, integrated whole. (Later, I shall try to relate that whole to the historically evolved world outside the museum.)

How often images of women in modern art speak of male fears! Many of the works I just named feature distorted or dangerous-looking creatures, potentially overpowering, devouring, or castrating. Indeed, the MoMA's collection is truly resplendent in monstrous, threatening females: Picasso's *Demoiselles* and *Seated Bather*, the latter a giant praying mantis (visible in Figure 5.4), the frozen, metallic odalisques in Léger's *Grand Déjeuner*, the several early female figures by Giacometti, Lipschitz's *Woman* and numerous Abstract Expressionist images, including Baziotes' *Dwarf* – a mean-looking creature with saw teeth and a prominent, visible uterus – to name only some. One could easily expand this category of monster to include works by Kirchner, Rouault, and others who depicted decadent, corrupt – and therefore *morally* monstrous – women.

What, then, can such images contribute to modern art's mission of progressive abstraction and purification? Each of these works testifies in its way to a pervasive fear of and ambivalence about woman. It is possible, too, that they arouse and objectify more widely felt anxieties about unknown and uncontrollable forces, including fears about the body – its life, its overpowering desires, the decay of its flesh and its death – that are often projected onto women and their presumably mysterious biology.¹⁴ However one reads their meaning, in the museum, it is they who give motive to the central moral of modern art.¹⁵ What I am suggesting is that modern art's quest for abstract,

transcendent realms of freedom is the top side of a deeply felt compulsion to flee “woman” and all that she is made to represent – the entire realm of spiritless matter and biological need. I noted above modernist art’s pronounced iconography of transcendence – its celebration of such “higher” realms as air, light, mind, spirit, and the cosmos. All of these exist above, beyond, and in opposition to a presumably female and material earth. Cubism, Futurism, The Blue Rider, De Stijl, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism – all seek out some non-material and autonomous energy in the self or the universe. (Léger’s ideal of a rational, mechanical order can also be understood as opposed to – and a defense against – an unruly feminine nature that needs control.) The themes of so much modern art, together with its renunciation of representation and its retreat from the material world – seem at least in part based on an impulse, frequently expressed in modern (as well as primitive) culture, to escape – not the mother in any literal sense, but a psychic image of woman and her earthly domain that seems rooted in infant or childish notions of the mother. Philip Slater noted an “unusual emphasis on mobility and flight as attributes of the hero who struggles against the menacing mother.”¹⁶ In museum rituals, recurrent images of monstrous and menacing women add urgency to such flights to “higher” realms. Hence also the presence of their obverse side, the powerless or vanquished woman. Whether man-killer or murder victim – whether Picasso’s deadly *Seated Bather* or Giacometti’s bronze *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (she is actually a murdered monster) – women literally punctuate and structure the ritual way. Confrontation with and escape from them gives the ritual its dynamic center. The women give meaning, motive, and content to the visitor’s ordeal and its spiritual resolution.¹⁷

I am not suggesting that women are somehow more at home with their biology than are men, or that they might seek freedom from the realm of necessity less than men. I am speaking of constructs whose gendered identities have been culturally assigned. Anthropologist Murial Dimen has noted that myths like the *Odyssey* (of which modern versions abound) are directed toward men and function as “passages to adulthood [that] celebrate independence, singularity, and the discovery and creation of subjectivity.” In contrast, myths directed toward women are often about staying at home, waiting and being there for others.¹⁸ It seems to me that the ritual scenarios of modern art museums have precisely the structure of such male-oriented myths. The fact that women may enact ritual scenarios like the one in the MoMA does not alter the gender of the museum’s ritual subject or the nature of the universe in which he moves. It is another matter when it comes to the sex of the artists on display. Since the ritual’s exemplary heroes are generically male, the presence of more than a token number of women artists can threaten the ritual’s integrity. An occasional woman can be absorbed, but too many can dilute the urgency and dynamics of the ordeal, which depends on and exploits male-identified desires and fears. Accordingly, in

conservative, high-modernist galleries, where the ritual atmosphere is most intense (once again, the MoMA is the outstanding example), the number of women artists is kept well below the point where they might effectively de-gender the ritual’s masculinity.

Of course, images of men also occur in the museum’s program. But unlike those of women, the males are given personal, social, and cultural identities. Even when they represent an anonymous, generic male, they are active beings who creatively shape their world, ponder its meanings and transcend its mundane constraints. In the present MoMA, male figures actually monitor the movement of visitors along the ritual route: Rodin’s gesturing *Saint John the Baptist Preaching* (1878–89, Figure 5.1), and Giacometti’s *Man Pointing* (1947) show them the way. Elsewhere in the collection, men make music and art, work, build cities, conquer the air through flight, think, and compete in sports (as in works by Cézanne, Rodin, Picasso, Léger, La Fresnaye, and Boccioni). When male sexuality is broached, it is often presented as the experience of highly self-conscious, psychologically complex beings whose sexual feelings are leavened with poetic pain, poignant frustration, heroic fear, protective irony, or the drive to make art (I am thinking of many well-known works in the collection by Picasso, de Chirico, Duchamp, Balthus, Delvaux, and others).

Let us examine how two of art history’s most important female images masculinize museum space. The images I will discuss, both key objects in the MoMA, are Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* and de Kooning’s *Woman I*.

Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1906–7 (Figure 5.6) was conceived as an extraordinarily ambitious statement – it aspires to revelation – about the meaning of Woman. In it, all women belong to a universal category of being existing across time and place. Picasso used ancient and tribal art to reveal her universal mystery: Egyptian and Iberian sculpture on the left and African art on the right. The figure on the lower right looks as if it was directly inspired by some primitive or archaic Gorgon-like deity. Picasso would have known such figures from his visits to the ethnographic art collections in the Trocadero in Paris. A study for the work (Figure 5.7) closely follows the type’s symmetrical, self-displaying pose. Significantly, Picasso wanted her to be prominent – she is the nearest and largest of all the figures. At this stage, Picasso also planned to include a male figure on the left and, in the axial center of the composition, a sailor – an image of horniness incarnate. The self-displaying woman was to have faced him, her display of genitals turned away from the viewer.

In the finished work, the male presence has been removed from the image and relocated in the viewing space before it. What began as a depicted male-female confrontation thus turned into a confrontation between viewer and image. The relocation has pulled the lower right-hand figure completely



Figure 5.6 Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K. R. Version O)* (oil on canvas, 96 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 92 $\frac{1}{2}$ "), 1906-7, Museum of Modern Art, Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (photo: museum).

around so that her stare and her sexually inciting act – an explicit invitation to penile penetration and the mainstay of pornographic imagery – are now directed outward. Other figures also directly address the viewer as a male brothel patron. Indeed, everything in the work insists on a classic men-only situation. To say it more bluntly – but in language more in the spirit of the work – the image is designed to threaten, tease, invite, and play with the viewer's cock. Thus did Picasso monumentalize as the ultimate truth of art a phallic moment *par excellence*. As restructured, the work forcefully asserts to both men and women the privileged status of male viewers – the only acknowledged invitees to this most revelatory moment. In so doing, it consigns women to a place where they may watch but not enter the central arena of public high culture – at least not as visible, self-aware subjects. The



Figure 5.7 Picasso, *Study for "Les Femmes d'Alger"* (charcoal and pastel, 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 24 $\frac{5}{8}$ "), 1907. Basel, Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kupferstichkabinett (photo: Kunstsammlung).

alternative role – that of the whore – was and still is for most women untenable.¹⁹

Finally, the mystery that Picasso unveils about women is also an historical lesson. In the finished work, the women have become stylistically differentiated so that one looks not only at present-tense whores but also back down into the ancient and primitive past, with the art of "darkest Africa" and works representing the beginnings of western culture (Egyptian and Iberian idols) placed on a single spectrum. Thus does Picasso use art history to argue his thesis: that the awesome goddess, the terrible witch, and the lewd whore are all but facets of the same eternal creature, in turn threatening and seductive, imposing and self-abasing, dominating and powerless. In this context, the use of African art constitutes not an homage to "the primitive" but a means of framing woman as "other," one whose savage, animalistic inner self stands opposed to the civilized, reflective male's.

De Kooning's *Woman I* is the descendent of Picasso's *Demoiselles*. For many years, it hung at the threshold to the gallery containing the New York School's biggest "breakthroughs" into pure abstraction: Pollock's flings into artistic and psychic freedom, Rothko's sojourns in the luminous depths

of a universal self, Newman's heroic confrontations with the sublime, Still's lonely journeys into the back beyond of culture and consciousness, Reinhardt's solemn and sardonic negations of all that is not Art. And always seated at the doorway to these moments of ultimate freedom and purity, and literally helping to frame them was *Woman I* (Figure 5.8). So necessary was her presence just there, that when she had to go on loan, *Woman II* came out of storage to take her place. With good reason. De Kooning's *Women*, like Picasso's *Demoiselles*, are exceptionally potent ritual artifacts. They, too, masculinize museum space with great efficiency. (In the present installation, *Woman I* has been moved into the very center of the gallery in which the New York School's largest and most serene abstract works hang. Although her placement there is dramatic, it also disrupts the room's transcendent quietude.²⁰)

The woman figure had emerged gradually in de Kooning's work in the course of the 1940s. By 1951–2, it fully revealed itself in *Woman I* as a big, bad mama – vulgar, sexual, and dangerous (Figure 5.9). De Kooning imagines her facing us with iconic frontality, large, bulging eyes, an open, toothy mouth, and massive breasts. The suggestive pose is just a knee movement away from open-thighed display of the vagina, the self-exposing gesture of mainstream pornography. These features are not unique in the history of art.

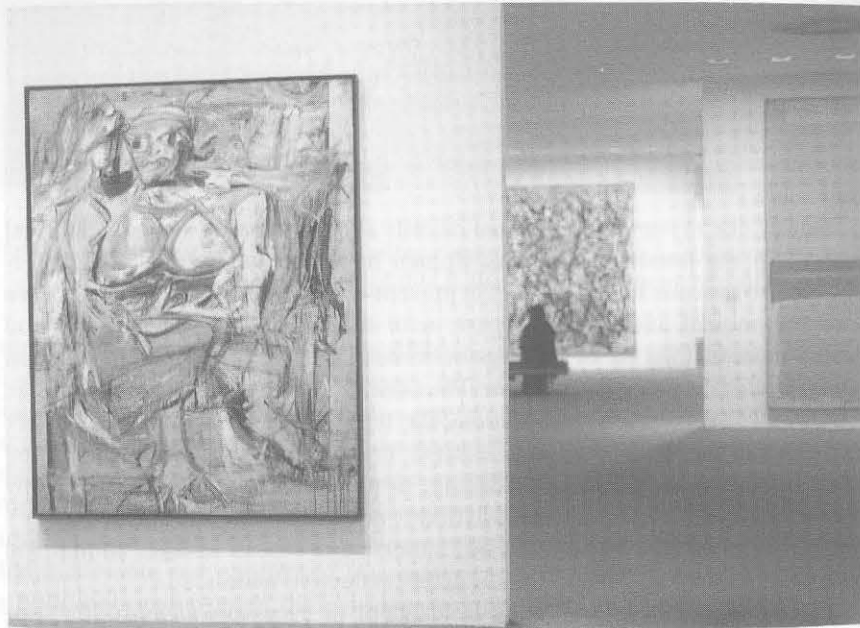


Figure 5.8 Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, 1952, as installed in the Museum of Modern Art in 1988 (photo: author).



Figure 5.9 De Kooning, *Woman I* (oil on canvas, 76" × 58") 1952, New York, the Museum of Modern Art (photo: museum).

They appear in ancient and primitive contexts as well as modern pornography and graffiti. Together, they constitute a well-known figure type.²¹ The Gorgon of ancient Greek art (Figure 5.10) is an instance of that type and bears a striking resemblance to de Kooning's *Woman I*. Like *Woman I*, she both suggests and avoids the explicit act of sexual self-display; at other times, she



Figure 5.10 Gorgon, clay relief, 6th century BC. Syracuse, National Museum (photo: courtesy of the Photographic Archives of the Superintendent of Cultural and Environmental Affairs of Syracuse).

spreads her thighs wide open (Figure 5.11). Often flanked by animals, she appears in many cultures, archaic and tribal, and is sometimes identified as a fertility or mother goddess.²²

As a type, with or without animals, the configuration clearly carries complex and probably contradictory symbolic possibilities. Specified as the Gorgon witch, the image emphasizes the terrible and demonic aspects of the mother goddess – her lust for blood and her deadly gaze. Especially today, when the myths and rituals that may have once suggested other meanings have been lost – and when modern psychoanalytic ideas are likely to color any interpretation – the figure appears intended to conjure up infantile feelings of powerlessness before the mother and the dread of castration: in

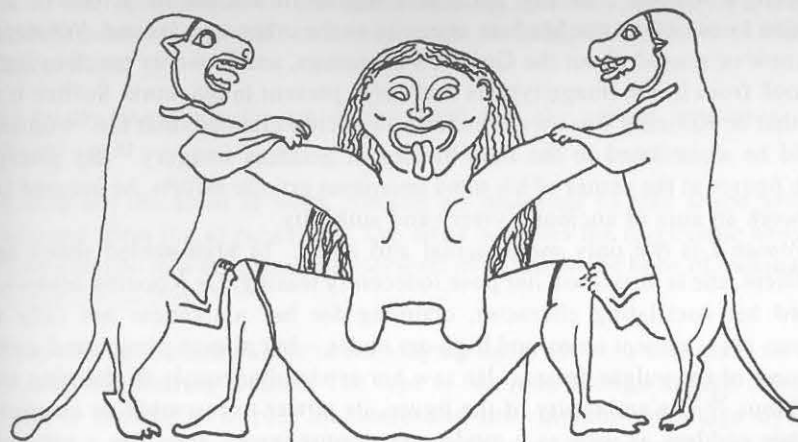


Figure 5.11 Etruscan Gorgon (drawing after a 6th-century BC bronze carriage-front). Museum Antiker Kleinkunst, Munich.

the open jaw can be read the *vagina dentata* – the idea of a dangerous, devouring vagina, too horrible to depict, and hence transposed to the toothy mouth. Feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability before mature women are common (if not always salient) phenomena in male psychic development. Myths like the story of Perseus and visual images like the Gorgon can play a role in mediating that development by extending and recreating on the cultural plane its core psychic experience and accompanying defenses.²³ Publicly objectified and communally shared in imagery, myth, and ritual, these individual fears and desires may achieve the status of authoritative truth. In this sense, the presence of Gorgons on Greek temples – important houses of cult worship – is paralleled by *Woman I*'s presence in a high-cultural house of the modern world.

The head of de Kooning's *Woman I* is so like the archaic Gorgon that the reference could well be intentional, especially since the artist and his friends put great store in ancient myths and primitive images and likened themselves to archaic and tribal shamans. The critic Thomas Hess evokes these ideas in an essay about de Kooning's "women." According to Hess, de Kooning painting a "woman" was an artistic ordeal comparable to Perseus slaying the Gorgon, for to accomplish his end, de Kooning had to grasp an elusive, dangerous truth "by the throat" without looking at it directly.

And truth can be touched only by complications, ambiguities and paradox, so, like the hero who looked for Medusa in the mirroring shield, he must study her flat, reflected image every inch of the way.²⁴

But then again, the image type is so ubiquitous, we needn't try to assign de

Kooning's *Woman I* to any particular source in ancient or primitive art. *Woman I* can call up the Medusa as easily as the other way around. Whatever he knew or sensed about the Gorgon's meanings, and however much or little he took from it, the image type is decidedly present in his work. Suffice it to say that de Kooning was aware, indeed, explicitly claimed, that his "women" could be assimilated to the long history of goddess imagery.²⁵ By placing such figures at the center of his most ambitious artistic efforts, he secured for his work an aura of ancient mystery and authority.

Woman I is not only monumental and iconic. In high-heeled shoes and brassiere, she is also lewd, her pose indecently teasing. De Kooning acknowledged her oscillating character, claiming for her a likeness not only to serious art – ancient icons and high-art nudes – but also to pinups and girlie pictures of the vulgar present. He saw her as simultaneously frightening and ludicrous.²⁶ The ambiguity of the figure, its power to resemble an awesome mother goddess as well as a modern burlesque queen, provides a superbly designed cultural, psychological, and artistic artifact with which to enact the mythic ordeal of the modern artist-hero – the hero whose spiritual adventures become the stuff of ritual in the public space of the museum. It is the *Woman*, powerful and threatening, who must be confronted and transcended on the way to enlightenment (or, in the present MoMA, in the very midst of it). At the same time, her vulgarity, her "girlie" side – de Kooning called it her "silliness" – renders her harmless (and contemptible) and denies the terror and dread of her Medusa features. The ambiguity of the image thus gives the artist (and the viewer who has learned to identify with him) both the experience of danger and a feeling of overcoming (or perhaps simply denying) it. Meanwhile, the suggestion of pornographic self-display – it will be more explicit in his later works – specifically addresses itself to the male viewer. With it, de Kooning exercises his patriarchal privilege of celebrating male sexual fantasy as public high culture.

Thomas Hess understood exactly the way in which de Kooning's "women" enabled one to both experience the dangerous realm of woman-matter-nature and symbolically escape it into male-culture-enlightenment. The following passage is a kind of brief user's manual for any of de Kooning's "women" (and his other, more abstract paintings as well, since they, too, usually began as female figures). It also articulates the core of the ritual ordeal I have been describing. Hess begins with characterizing de Kooning's materials. They are clearly female, engulfing, and slimy, and must be controlled by the skilled, instrument-wielding hands of a male:

There are the materials themselves, fluid, viscous, wet or moist, slippery, fleshy and organic in feel; spreading, thickening or thinning under the artist's hands. Could they be compared to the primal ooze, the soft underlying mud, from which all life has sprung? To nature?

Now comes the artist, brandishing his phallus-tool, to pierce, cut, and penetrate the female flesh:

And the instruments of the artist are, by contrast, sharp, like the needlepoint of a pencil; or slicing, like the whiplash motion of the long brush.

And finally, the symbolic act of the mind that the viewer witnesses and re-lives:

Could not the artist at work, forcing his materials to take shape and become form [be a] paradigm? The artist becomes the tragicomic hero who must go to war against the elements of nature in the hope of making contact with them.²⁷

De Kooning is hardly alone in embodying the artist-hero who takes on the fearsome and alluring woman. The type is common enough in high culture. To cite a striking example: an interesting drawing/photomontage by the California artist Robert Heinecken, *Invitation to Metamorphosis* (Figure 5.12), similarly explores the ambiguities of a Gorgon-girlie image. Here the effect of ambiguity is achieved by the use of masks and by combining and superimposing separate negatives. Heinecken's version of the self-displaying woman is a composite consisting of a conventional pornographic nude and a Hollywood movie-type monster. As a well-equipped Gorgon, her attributes include an open, toothy mouth, carnivorous animal jaws, huge bulging eyes, large breasts, exposed female genitals, and one nasty-looking claw. Her body is simultaneously naked and draped, enticing and repulsive, and the second head, to the left of the Gorgon head – the one with the seductive smile – also wears a mask. Like the de Kooning, Heinecken's *Invitation* sets up a psychologically unstable atmosphere fraught with deception, allure, danger, and wit. The image's various components continually disappear into and reappear out of each other. Behaving something like de Kooning's layered paint surfaces, they invite ever-shifting, multiple readings. In both works, what is covered becomes exposed, what is opaque becomes transparent, and what is revealed conceals something else. Both works fuse the terrible killer-witch with the willing and exhibitionist whore. Both fear and seek danger in desire, and both kid the danger.

In all of these works, a confrontation is staged between a Perseus-like artist-hero and a lewd, uncivil, and uncontrollable female. And in every case, the danger is forced back behind the divide of art. Like Picasso in the *Demoiselles*, de Kooning summons support from the most ancient artistic cultures. But he also draws on modern pornography. Indeed, it is de Kooning's achievement to have opened museum culture to the potential powers of pornography. By way of exploring how the pornographic element works in the museum context, let us look first at how it works outside the museum.

A few years ago, an advertisement for *Penthouse* magazine appeared on New York City bus shelters – the one in my photograph is located on 57th Street (Figure 5.13). New York City bus shelters are often decorated with



Figure 5.12 Robert Heinecken, *Invitation to Metamorphosis* (emulsion on canvas and pastel chalk, 42" × 42"), 1975 (photo: artist).

near-naked women and sometimes men advertising everything from underwear to real estate. But this was an ad for pornographic images as such, that is, images designed not to sell perfume or bathing suits, but to stimulate erotic desire, primarily in men. Given its provocative intent, the image generates very different and – I think for almost everyone – more charged meanings than the ads for underwear. At least one passer-by had already recorded in red spray-paint a terse, but coherent response: "For Pigs."

Having a camera with me, I decided to take a shot of it. But as I set about focusing, I began to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious. As I realized only later, I was experiencing some prohibition in my own conditioning, activated not simply by the nature of the ad, but by the act of photographing such an ad in public. Even though the anonymous inscription had made it socially



Figure 5.13 Bus shelter on 57th Street, New York City, 1988, with advertisement for *Penthouse* magazine (photo: author).

safer to photograph – it placed it in a conscious and critical discourse about gender – to photograph it was still to appropriate openly a kind of image that middle-class morality says I'm not supposed to look at or have. But before I could sort that out, a group of boys jumped into the frame. Plainly, they intended to intervene. Did I know what I was doing?, one asked me with an air I can only call stern, while another admonished me that I was photographing a *Penthouse* ad – as if I would not knowingly do such a thing.

Apparently, the same culture that had conditioned me to feel uneasy about what I was doing also made *them* uneasy about it. Boys this age know very well what's in *Penthouse*. Knowing what's in *Penthouse* is knowing something meant for men to know; therefore, knowing *Penthouse* is a way of knowing oneself to be a man, or at least a man-to-be, at precisely an age when one needs all the help one can get. I think these boys were trying to protect the capacity of the ad to empower them as men by preventing me from appropriating an image of it. For them, as for many men, the chief (if not the only) value of pornography is this power to confirm gender identity and, with that, gender superiority. Pornography affirms their manliness to themselves and to others and proclaims the greater social power of men.²⁸ Like some ancient and primitive objects forbidden to the female gaze, the ability of pornography to give its users a feeling of superior male status depends on its being owned or controlled by men and forbidden to, shunned by, or hidden

from women. In other words, in certain situations a female gaze can *pollute* pornography.²⁹ These boys, already imprinted with the rudimentary gender codes of the culture, knew an infringement when they saw one. (Perhaps they suspected me of defacing the ad.) Their harassment of me constituted an attempt at gender policing, something adult men routinely do to women on city streets.

Not so long ago, such magazines were sold only in sleazy porn shops. Today ads for them can decorate mid-town thoroughfares. Of course, the ad as well as the magazine cover, cannot itself be pornography and still be legal (in practice, that tends to mean it can't show genitals), but to work as advertising, it must *suggest* pornography. For different reasons, works of art like de Kooning's *Woman I* or Heineken's *Invitation* also refer to without actually being pornography – they depend upon the viewer “getting” the reference without being mistakable for pornography. Given those requirements, it is not surprising that these artists' visual strategies have parallels in the ad (Figure 5.14). Indeed, *Woman I* shares a number of features with it. Both present frontal, iconic, monumental figures that fill and even overflow their picture surfaces, dwarfing viewers and focusing attention on head, breasts, and torso. Both figures appear powerful and powerless at the same time, with massive bodies made to rest on weakly rendered, tentatively placed legs, while arms are cropped, undersized or feeble.³⁰ And with both, the viewer is positioned to see it all should the thighs open. And of course, on *Penthouse* pages, thighs do little else but open. However, de Kooning's hot mama has a very different purpose and cultural status from a *Penthouse* “pet.”

De Kooning's *Woman I* conveys much more complex and emotionally ambivalent meanings. The work acknowledges more openly the fear of and flight from as well as a quest for the woman. Moreover de Kooning's *Woman I* is always upstaged by the artist's self-display as an artist. The manifest purpose of a *Penthouse* photo is, presumably, to arouse desire. If the de Kooning awakens desire in relation to the female body it does so in order to deflate or conquer its power of attraction and escape its danger. The viewer is invited to relive a struggle in which the realm of art provides escape from the female's degraded allure. As mediated by art criticism, de Kooning's work speaks ultimately not of male fear but of the triumph of art and a self-creating spirit. In the critical and art-historical literature, the “women” themselves are treated as catalysts or structural supports for the work's more significant meanings: the artist's heroic self-searching, his existentialist courage, his pursuit of new pictorial structures or some other artistic or transcendent end – in short, the mythic stuff of art-museum ritual.³¹

I wish to be especially clear at this point that I have no quarrel either with the production or the public display of these or other works like them. My concern rather is with the ritual scenarios of art museums and the way they do and do not address women and other visitors. If I am protesting anything

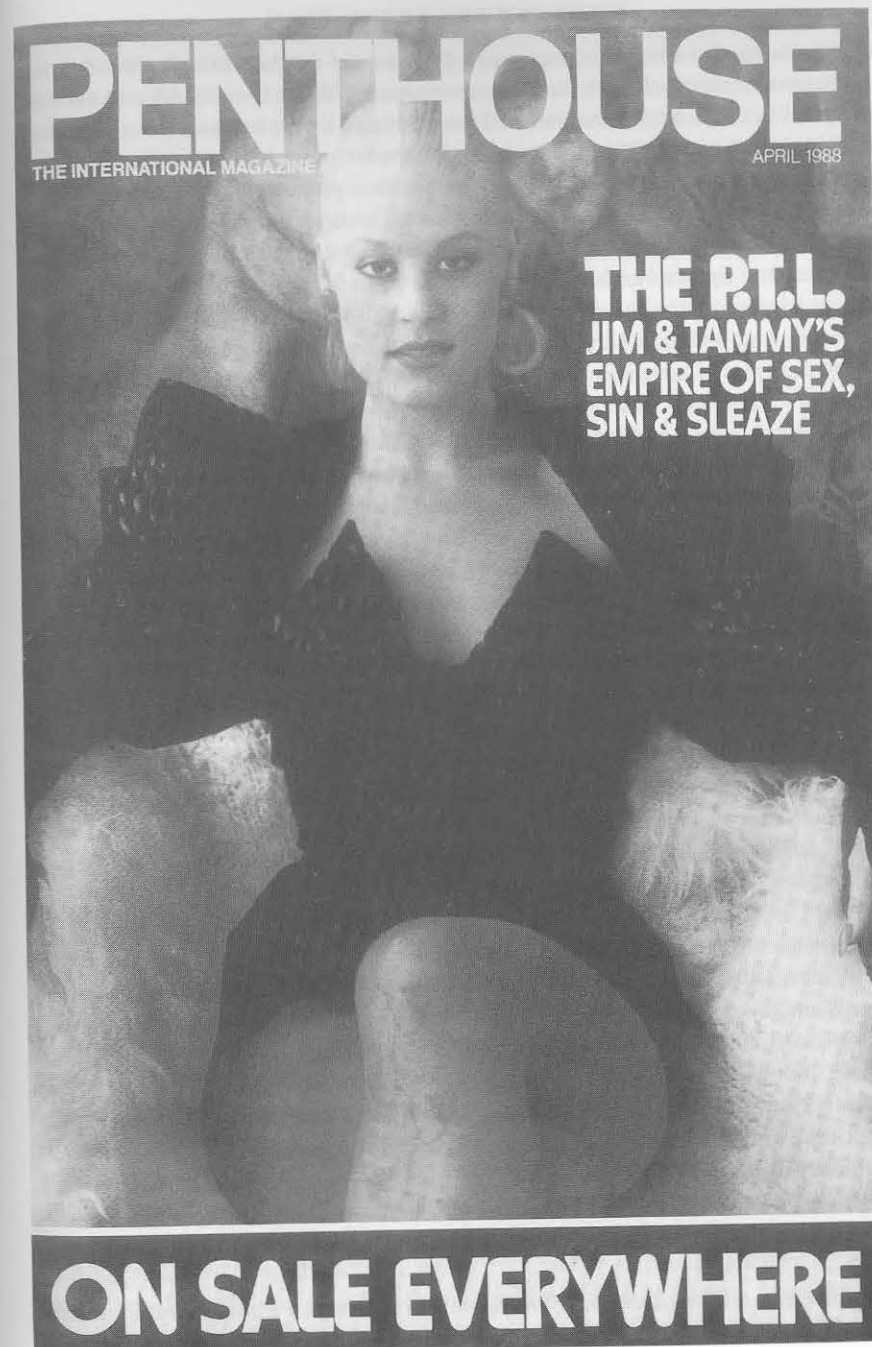


Figure 5.14 Advertisement for *Penthouse*, April, 1988, using a photograph by Bob Guccione. Courtesy of *Penthouse* magazine.

in museums, it is not the presence of *Woman I* or the *Demoiselles* but the exclusion of so much *else* from museum space. What I would like to see is a truly revisionist museum, with different, more complex and possibly even multiple scenarios that could build on a broader range of human experience – sexual, racial, and cultural – than the present pathetically narrow program that structures most modern art museums today. Indeed, such a program might well promote a deeper understanding even of the museum's modernist old masters by recognizing their flights and fears as historically specific responses to a changing world.³² A more open museum culture could illuminate rather than perpetuate the profound and on-going crisis of masculinity that marks so much museum art.

I have been arguing, from the example of the MoMA and other collections, that the history of modern art is a built structure that privileges men in ways that are both obvious and subtle. Certainly more women artists could be integrated into museum programs even as things now stand – figures like Joan Mitchell, Louise Nevelson, Agnes Martin, or Eva Hesse have already been fitted into the story of progressive abstraction without disrupting it. But the problem involves more than numbers and is not merely a question of adding women to the familiar narrative. What has kept women artists out of art history is not merely biased curators (who, in any case, are not more biased than anyone else). It is no small thing for women artists to face an overwhelmingly authoritative tradition that has made it highly problematic for them to occupy public art space *as women*. For many, the entire art world – its art schools, critics, dealers, and especially its summit museum spaces – has seemed organized to maintain a universe precisely structured to negate the very existence of all but white males (and a few token “exceptions”).

And yet, for the last twenty-five years or so, as repercussions of the civil rights and women's movements – and, more recently, the lesbian and gay movement – have reached the art world, museum space has begun to open up. Women artists are often still confined to marginal spaces or temporary exhibitions, but it is no longer possible to ignore their presence in the art world. While older artists such as Marisol, Louise Bourgeois, and Alice Neel have become more visible, younger artists such as Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Kiki Smith – to name only a few, have begun to de-masculinize the museum and rescript its ritual, bringing with them new concerns and, often, a critical outlook that can not easily be assimilated to the museum's normal ritual ordeal.

The modern art museum's program not only assumes a male ritual subject; like the nineteenth-century museum, it constructs a larger universe and places that subject within it. Let us again consider the citizen-visitor of the nineteenth-century public art museum and the ideal world in which he moves. A rational, enlightened male, his universe is made up of two complementary

spheres: the public and the private, the community and the family. Between them, he realizes his potential in every significant way: biologically, morally, politically, and culturally. The ritual of the public art museum affirms the structure of this world and gives particular substance to the citizen's public self, defining it in relation to a politically constituted community with shared values and a common historical past. It also celebrates and idealizes (from a male perspective) the pleasures and beauty of domestic and private experience. Within this structure, freedom (as opposed to leisure) is something exercised largely (if not entirely) in the civic realm and is contingent on the realization of the state and the political autonomy of the individual.³³

In the course of the twentieth century, this bourgeois ideal of a social-moral universe has steadily lost its power to convince, even in the most official of public spaces. Although traces of it survive, the old dichotomy of public and private has become obscured and overlaid by a new configuration that has reworked some of its central elements. The private sphere of home and family has especially assumed new significance. Once opposed to a public sphere, it is now positioned antithetically to the world of work. And freedom, which in the nineteenth century still presupposed a public arena, has moved almost totally to the private sphere. The opposition between freedom and necessity is still there, but it has been redefined. Whereas once home and work comprised the realm of necessity (where laws of nature prevail and biological and material needs are met), in the modern world, the home, or more broadly, *privacy*, has become the realm of freedom, now understood as the chief site of leisure. Its opposite is the workplace, where one does not as one pleases, but as one must.

Nowhere is this universe more insistently evoked or graphically represented than in advertising.³⁴ In newspapers and magazines, on television and billboards, indoors and out, even in the sky, advertising fills every possible space, threatening to collapse all space – public and private, urban and rural – into one homogenous commercial zone. Advertising gives us the universe – and ourselves – as transformed by the profit-seeking gaze of capital. Aside from the specific products it promotes, the persistent, underlying message of advertising is the ideal of consumerism itself, the promise that individual happiness is best sought in the consumption of mass-produced goods and services. According to the imagery of ads, the most common site of this happiness and freedom is the private space of the home, where, presumably, one is empowered to shape one's life (often by altering one's body). But other times and places – vacation time, travel, the lunch break – are equally targeted. Indeed, as advertising depicts it, society (in so far as one can know it) is no more than the sum total of individual buyers in search of beauty, comfort, and status through the consumption of commodities, and freedom is no more than the right to prefer one brand over another. As a TV ad once put it,

Soon America will have a *real* choice: the new taste of Coke or the original taste of Coca-Cola classic.

In such a world, where each seeks only personal gratification through consumption, it is barely possible to speak meaningfully of such ideas as the public or the common good, let alone of the possibility of collective action.³⁵ Advertising, "the official art of modern capitalist society," as Raymond Williams called it,³⁶ helps naturalize this world by representing and celebrating individual powerlessness as true individual freedom.

There is, I think, a remarkable fit between the world as constructed by advertising and the world as constructed in modern art museums. Like advertising, modern art museums (as distinct from modern *art*) rarely if at all acknowledge a moral-political self. Moreover, their programs aggressively devalue the objective world as a stage for significant or gratifying human effort. Even when "political" art is exhibited, the framing ambience of the museum insists on its meaning as "art," often with such emphasis that other meanings fade. To be sure, certain artists – Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, Leon Golub, or Adrian Piper, to name only a few – have developed ways of disrupting the museum's de-politicizing ambience (if only momentarily) and more or less force from viewers political and moral attention – but their work is more often seen in temporary exhibitions than in permanent collections. Surrounded by ample amounts of (usually) white museum space, and set within the museum's carefully ordered program, most work is made to play its part within the whole, even though, in another program it might appear differently. What modern museum culture excels at is the construction of a ritual self that finds meaning and identity not in relation to history, community, or questions of morality but by renouncing such concerns and seeking after something or some place beyond – inner reaches of the irrational or mystical mind, fantasies of the primitive, or some other, "natural," ahistorical realm that can be entered only individually. The microcosm of the art museum, like that of advertising, best accommodates an isolated self.

It is in this sense that art museums dedicated to twentieth-century art most accord with advertising. Certainly museum art and advertising share many features (most notably, an obsession with female bodies), and the two often appropriate each other's themes and forms. But it is not in their iconography or form that they reach their most significant agreement. In fact, museum art keeps a marked distance from advertising. Even when it appropriates advertising imagery, as in the work of Andy Warhol or Robert Rauschenberg, the museum or art-gallery context (not to mention differences in scale and media) surrounds it with tacit quotation marks. So, too, the strategies of later work that contests high art's boundary-lines only to reaffirm them. It is, rather, on the deeper level of ideology that the culture of consumerism and museum culture come together to form a single world: both accommodate only isolated individuals for whom life's greatest values and pleasures exist in a private or subjective realm seemingly outside of the politically organized world.³⁷

Abstract Expressionism pushed this outlook to an unprecedented extreme in art-world culture and has, in a sense, kept it there ever since. That is, the

standards it set – of scale, intensity, and inwardness – still determine much modern art, and by extension, the liminal ambience of permanent museum collections. According to its artists and supporters, authentic art *had* to renounce politics (along with all other aspects of the external world). As the critic Harold Rosenberg declared in a 1952 essay, the Abstract Expressionist artist was not trying to change the world, but rather "he wanted his canvas to be a world." The new art "was a movement to leave behind the self that wished to choose his future."³⁸ Likewise, Barnett Newman (to cite only one more of many statements of this kind) advocated getting rid of historical memory:

We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of western European painting. . . . The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation . . . that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.³⁹

However, as critics and art historians have long argued, such attitudes, for all their rejection of historical memory, fairly reek of the times. We enter here the era of post-World War II America, an era when the imperatives of the Cold War and the dogma of aesthetic autonomy would coalesce in the liberal policies of American cultural institutions.⁴⁰ We should also bear in mind that, however important the politics of the period, Abstract Expressionism conquered the museum and art-critical world just as the advertising industry, propelled by expanding post-World War II markets, experienced a period of phenomenal expansion.⁴¹ Undoubtedly, the artists, along with the social world they moved in, saw their work as the polar opposite of everything advertisements stood for: their voyages of the spirit took one away from, not down into, the trough of materialism. And yet, in their invitations to other- and inner-worldly experience, and in their ardent rejection of community, history, and – what goes with the latter – the autonomous and rational self that was the legacy of the enlightenment, their work has definite parallels in advertising. The "admen" of the 1950s worked hard to implant in Americans a new kind of self, one with greater consumer needs and less ability to defer gratification than earlier models. To that end, as Steven Fox has shown, bolder, more visually compelling images (with fewer words to read) were introduced, and motivational researchers were employed to discover the inner mechanisms of the consumerist psyche.

Instead of treating consumers as rational beings who knew what they wanted and why they wanted it, motivation research delved into subconscious, nonrational levels of motivation to suggest – beforehand – where ads should be aimed.⁴²

The museum's ritual program and mass advertising imply each other. Together, they construct a new individualist self, one which exists at the center of a boundless, a-social universe that is both spiritual and material. In

the cult of high art, this self strives for spiritual, implicitly male, purity by transcending the limited and finite material world. In the thrall of advertising, it seeks the (often erotic) pleasures of the material world, which is also without limit and, one might add, infinitely buyable. Each sphere lurks in the other as an implication, a cause, an enticement, and a negation. In the nineteenth century, educated opinion hoped that there would not be a conflict between museum beauty and the culture of commodities; it tried to bring the two together in a new type of museum – the Victoria and Albert was the prototype – invented for that purpose. In the twentieth century, the two cultures coexist as in a love-hate relationship. Advertising and all it stands for contributes to the formation of a spirit-starved self that is driven to escape a world increasingly suffocated by the needs of corporate power and increasingly choked by its products. In the museum's liminal space, the modern soul can know itself as above, outside of, and even against the values that shape its existence.

CONCLUSION

I have argued, among other things, that art museums are elements in a larger social and cultural world. Whatever their potential to enlighten and illuminate, they work within politically and socially structured limits. Should we conclude, then, that the art museum's freedom can be only an illusion that ultimately reconciles us to our own powerlessness? Given the ideological power and prestige of art museums, it is not realistic to think that museum rituals – especially the most prestigious and authoritative ones – can be moved very far from their present functions. But that does not mean that the symbolic uses of museum spaces – let alone other kinds of art spaces – are static or without value, even as they now exist, or that they are impenetrable to new ideas. Even the Museum of Modern Art occasionally addresses us (albeit, usually on a temporary basis) as inhabitants of a wider – and historically more specific – world.¹ Institutions elsewhere have taken bolder steps. In Chicago's Art Institute, the conventional narrative of modern art has been completely opened up to new content. There the present installation of twentieth-century art allows modern artists to appear as a highly diverse collection of men and women who have given form to a wide range of concerns. The work of African-American and women artists is much in evidence, and separate galleries look freshly at specific themes – the varieties of love or of political life in the modern world. Indeed, the installation creates a new context for understanding even the more familiar work of the vanguard, whose concerns now appear to touch a much broader spectrum of experience. Clearly, old assumptions about the primacy of western civilization and white male subjecthood are no longer taken for granted, among either museum professionals or their educated audiences.

Exhibitions in art museums do not of themselves change the world. Nor should they have to. But, as a form of public space, they constitute an arena in which a community may test, examine, and imaginatively live both older truths and possibilities for new ones. It is often said that without a sense of the past, we cannot envisage a future. The reverse is also true: without a vision of the future, we cannot construct and access a usable past. Art museums are at the center of this process in which past and future intersect. Above all,

they are spaces in which communities can work out the values that identify them as communities. Whatever their limitations, however large or small, and however peripheral they often seem, art museum space is space worth fighting for.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 *The Museum Age*, trans. J. van Nuis Cahill, New York, Universe Books, 1967.
- 2 See, for examples, the numerous writings of J. Paul Getty (listed in the Bibliography), or Thomas Hoving's "The Chase, The Capture," in Hoving (ed.), *The Chase, The Capture: Collecting at the Metropolitan*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975, pp. 1-106.
- 3 The two best and most comprehensive histories of museums are still those of Germain Bazin, op. cit.; and Niels von Holst, *Creators, Collectors, and Connoisseurs*, trans. B. Battershaw, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967.
- 4 As Benedict Anderson has argued, nation-states have often adopted similar forms, similar institutional strategies, and similar cultural expressions (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991).
- 5 See James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 215-51.
- 6 For overviews of this debate, see Terry Zeller, "The Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Art Museum Education in America," in N. B. and S. Mayer, (eds.), *Museum Education: History, Theory, and Practice*, Reston, Va: National Art Education Association, 1989, pp. 10-89; Michael S. Shapiro, "The Public and the Museum," in M. S. Shapiro and L. W. Kemp (eds.), *Museums: A Reference Guide*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1990, pp. 231-61; and Edith A. Tonelli, "The Art Museum," in *ibid.*, pp. 31-58. All of these articles contain excellent bibliographies.
- 7 The greatest master of anti-aesthetic, anti-ritual, pro-educational polemic was John Cotton Dana, creator of the unconventional Newark Museum of Art in Newark, New Jersey. His writings include *The Gloom of the Museum* and *The New Museum*, both published in 1917 by Elm Tree Press in Woodstock, Vermont. For another, later, and also brilliant, anti-ritual outpouring, see César Graña, "The Private Lives of Public Museums," *Trans-Action*, 1967, vol. 4, no. 5, pp. 20-5.
- 8 I should especially like to mention the work of Alma S. Wittlin, whose book, *The Museum: Its History and Its Tasks in Education* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), is an impressive piece of museum history as well as a highly reasoned argument for museum reform.
- 9 Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *L'Amour de l'art: Les Musées d'art européens et leur public*, Paris, Editions de minuit, 1969, p. 165 and throughout. Bourdieu continued to argue the social meanings of aesthetic judgement, contending that