INTRODUCTION

open the box

‘Every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.’

Walter Benjamin, ‘Thesis on the Philosophy of History’

Anyone who has ever wandered around a museum that retains a nineteenth-century display, with a dense accumulation of objects in ranks of vitrines, may wonder how it could possibly relate to the kind of clinical white space usually associated with the contemporary art museum. One notable example of the traditional approach is the Pitt Rivers in Oxford (founded in 1884), which combines its founder’s quest for completeness with a continuing aura of ‘curiosity’ and preserving – virtually unaltered – what is in effect a time-capsule, cocooned from the ever-changing world outside. The diversity of its essentially ‘non-art’ collection, which lacks the tendency of modern museums to over-interpret, inspires the imagination and tends to generate questions rather than give answers. Many feel that the particular nineteenth-century display aesthetic of such institutions which have escaped modernization approaches an art form in itself. In complete contrast, the modern art museum has created its own, purist display aesthetic, a highly self-conscious viewing space which proclaims the institutionalization of art. The resulting idealized neutrality of the white interior is thus offset by a need to re-establish the heterogeneous spirit of the traditional museum through art. What is most intriguing is the way in which the museum concept has developed into an expression of multiple commitments and roles, which have in turn become increasingly conflicting and ambiguous. Although the nineteenth-century encyclopaedic approach represents the very antithesis of methods of display in the modern art museum, the two types are in fact connected, not merely through the process of museological evolution but also because many contemporary artists have been inspired by the wider notion of the museum which such places embody – that is to say as an institution, an idea and a practice.

A natural starting-point for examining the relationship between artists and museums is the cabinet of curiosities or Wunderkammer, which existed in Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. This early ancestor of the museum possessed a special quality in tune with the creative imagination, a quest to explore the rational and the irrational and a capricious freedom of arrangement. It is this apparent lack of rational classification, with its bizarre sense of accumulation and juxtaposition, that makes the Wunderkammer concept aesthetically so appealing. But the unscientific form of these pre-Enlightenment collections eventually led to the dispersal of their contents and to the birth of the museum as we know it today. It is possible to identify two dominant tendencies, in which the artist confronts miraculous aspects of the Wunderkammer. One is as a collector, who uses assemblage through the arrangement and juxtaposition of diverse collected
ROBERT FILLIOU
THE FROZEN EXHIBITION
1972

This scaled-down retrospective in a cardboard bowler hat evolved from Filliou's earlier Galerie Légitime, 1962. As a challenge to the static nature of the conventional museum, the artist would wear a real hat around Paris and present its contents to strangers and to those he met in the street.
Wunderkammer of Ferrante Imperato, Naples

Wunderkammer was an expression of a particular individual's collecting interests. Rare, precious and strange objects were intended to arouse wonder in the mind of the viewer and to provide aesthetic pleasure. A delight in the anomalous was also in tune with the Mannerist taste of the late sixteenth century. The Wunderkammer was linked to the creative imagination and has parallels with the work of the Dadaists, Surrealists and some contemporary artists.

The Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

The diverse collections of the noted anthropologist General A.H.L.F. Pitt Rivers (1827–1900) form the basis of the museum, which has been greatly expanded since its foundation in 1884. They include ethnographical, prehistoric and natural history material. The museum's original closely packed style of display, with its selective taxonomies, remains unchanged and continues to provide artistic inspiration.

The collections were usually displayed in multi-compartmented cabinets and vitrines and arranged in such a way as to inspire wonder and stimulate creative thought. They included exotic natural objects that crossed the rational boundaries of animal, vegetable and mineral, such as fossils, coral formations and composite creatures, basilisks and mermen. Particularly desirable were anomalies or freaks of nature and optical wonders like special mirrors and lenses capable of distorting reality. It is possible to apply the 'Wunderkammer principle' to the invention of the miraculous in art. Many artists have shared this fascination with the subversion of natural
order, as illustrated in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and Giuseppe Arcimboldo which include fanciful composite creations derived from animal, vegetable and mineral sources. A thread of continuity extends into the twentieth century and it is possible to see similar mechanisms at work particularly in the case of the Dadaists and Surrealists, and of the Post-Modern avant-garde artists in the 1970s and 1980s. The Wunderkammer also embraced the notion that the world exists to be containable in one room or cabinet, a pre-programmable personal environment. A parallel process exists in the way some artists create and orchestrate their own aesthetic spaces, in isolation from the outside world. Kurt Schwitters used his own house in Hanover as a vehicle for his spatial experiments with his Merzbau (begun in 1919), which became a microcosm of his artistic practice. In his poetic assemblages, created from ephemera and small found objects, Joseph Cornell also constructed very personal microcosms in the form of narrative assemblages. The earlier versions in 1932

KURT SCHWITTERS
HANOVER MERZBAU: VIEW WITH BLUE WINDOW
1933

Throughout the 1920s and up to 1936, Schwitters obsessively transformed a number of rooms in his home into a unique spatial environment. The Merzbau functioned as a sort of container for a variety of objects having personal significance for the artist, a synthesis between Constructivist and Dada elements. Schwitters went on to develop various "caves" and "grottoes", some of which were left visible through glass fronts, while others became completely hidden. At its most developed stage the Merzbau contained 40 grottoes, variously dedicated either to people or to symbolic or topographical subjects.
were contained in bell-jars of the type used for the display of stuffed birds, but small glass-fronted containers — "shadow boxes" — became his most familiar mode of presentation during the 1940s and 1950s. The Surrealists made unusual accumulations of disparate objects. André Breton’s collection included a mandrake root in the shape of a person, embalmed animals, shells, ethnographic objects from Africa and Oceania, incised bones and stones and a mirror that multiplied the image. Surrealism practises on a wide scale the Wunderkammer principle, with its mixture or fusion of diverse elements and materials, because of its resistance to their separation by specialized classification in the real world. Many twentieth-century artists have followed a collecting principle, akin to the Wunderkammer, which embodied an element of free association where the mind could roam at will. The subject matter of such a collection might be both eclectic and personal, bound up with memory and imagination, accumulation rather than sheer calculated order and selection. The artist frequently has an attitude of mind similar to that of the bricoleur, motivated by an instinctive and mysterious love of things which have no known relationship to one another. This is the result of a Sammeltrieb or primal urge to collect, or as Walter Benjamin put it: "Animals (birds, ants), children, and old men as collectors." According to Benjamin, collecting is also a form of memory: "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories."

The artist's urge to accumulate objects in the studio is part of the age-old human impulse to gather and hoard. But artistic collecting is very different from that of the hobbyist or the "serious" collector and it has a distinct character which links it to the creative process. Historically, paintings have shown artists at work in their studios surrounded by diverse collected objects which they might depict as still-life studies to enhance the background of formal portraits. In the twentieth century artists may actually use the things they collect as an integral part of a work. With the early modernists, collage became an offshoot of artists’ collections where cut-out images, ephemera and even small found objects were applied directly to the canvas support. Max Ernst used printed illustrations. Kurt Schwitters used discarded tram tickets and Hannah Höch made assemblages from photographs. The increasing assimilation of the found object into a work of art of course owes much to Marcel Duchamp.

Through his principle of the 'Readymade' Duchamp was able to demonstrate in 1917 that something as ordinary as a standard urinal could be accorded the title Fountain and transformed at will into an art object. He claimed to have chosen mass-produced objects like the urinal, bottle-rack and snow shovel in moments of "aesthetic amnesia" and to have displayed them, alone and empty of aesthetic presumption, precisely to ridicule the "aura" of value and prestige that traditionally accrues to the art object.
Through his Readymades Duchamp had indirectly mocked the museum concept and challenged the uniqueness of genuine works of art - an idea that has continued to inspire succeeding generations of artists. The artistic tendency to gather together large quantities of society's cast-offs and the extension of the notion of the objet trouvé coincides with the vast post-World War II growth in consumer goods. In the early 1960s, flea-markets, rubbish tips and the streets provided endless supplies of working materials for artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow and Ed Kienholz, just as they had for the Surrealists in the 1930s.

During this period Claes Oldenburg created a series of works that broke through the boundaries of performance, installation and display. His installations 'The Street' of 1960 and 'The Store' of 1961 were sites for exhibition, live art and the selling of work. In his notebook written during the year-long life of 'The Store', he wrote: 'I am for art that is political-critical-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.' In this installation Oldenburg used found and altered objects as display and as consumable art. The inventory for 'The Store' of December 1961 lists 107 items which he referred to as 'charged objects'; these were things which had been transformed, not only through the artist's intercession but also through actual change via their 'participation' in the installation and 'The Store'. Oldenburg's position was to shift later in the decade, when Pop art became a runaway success and much of the work made by the Pop artists, including that by Oldenburg himself, did indeed sit 'on its ass in museums'. A similar idea was explored by Daniel Spoerri, who created a grocery store stocked with all sorts of packages stamped 'Attention - work of Art'. Here each item was offered for sale at the same price as the genuine article when sold in a normal store. Of course, much of this work depends for its historical legitimacy on the foundations laid by Duchamp with his 'Readymades'.

Daniel Spoerri, along with Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely and Arman, was a member of the French movement Nouveau Réalisme, which was formed in 1960. In common with a number of prominent artists based in New York at the time, they used collections of discarded materials which were presented in the form of assemblages, tableaux, happenings and environments. Perhaps the most notorious example of mass-accumulation was Arman's exhibition 'Le Plein', where an art gallery was crammed from floor to ceiling with detritus.
EL SPOERI

Early in the 1960s, Spoori produced a series of pâtes (literally 'snare pictures'), trapping groupings of objects at a given moment, time. In each of these assemblages culinary deny, together with plates and dishes, with meal leftovers, were fixed down to which was then mounted on the wall display.

I. EL SPOERI

From the streets of Paris. This was a foil to Yves Klein's 'Le Vide', years earlier in the same gallery, of a completely empty interior hit. These artists wanted to themselves with tangible objects in the Abstract Expressionism that usually dominated the art scene, significant here is the mode of display adopted by both Arman and Spoori. They frequently presented arrangements of objects either in see-through containers or mounted on a hard support. Arman showed his 'Poubelles' (dustbins) consisting of clear acrylic containers full of discarded waste items. He also set multiples of any type of object, from door-handle to watch parts, into clear resin. The containers had the effect of framing the subject, drawing the observer's attention to recognize the strange beauty of cast-off materials, which thus become endowed with a whole new aesthetic structure. A similar principle is employed by Daniel Spoerri in his 'snare pictures', which consist of table-tops with objects and meal leftovers fixed to the surface and then displayed vertically on the wall.

PIER MANZONI

MERDA D'ARTISTA NO. 58
1961

Manzoni challenged many traditional notions of artistic value by designating what he chose to sign as a work of art, whether it be a person or a potentially worthless artifact derived from his own body. In 1959, Manzoni had proposed the idea of displaying living people as art and encapsulating human bodies in transparent plastic. In the same year he presented a series of 45 'pneumatic sculptures', inflated by means of his own breath. Two years later, he went on to produce 90 sealed cans containing his own faeces, the contents weighed 30 grams and each can was individually signed and numbered.
Timm Ulrichs
The First Living Work of Art
1961
Ulrichs' work was probably the earliest example of an artist using a vitrine to exhibit himself, based on the principle of 'art is life and life is art'. The performance was recorded in a photo work shown at the Berlener Kunstausstellung Berlin in 1966. A later version was staged at the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum, Hagen, Germany, in 1991.

The Auto-Icon of Jeremy Bentham (1745–1832)
University College, London

Bentham’s Auto-Icon or self-image — his clothed skeleton with lifelike wax head displayed in a vitrine in the college entrance lobby — has parallels with the more recent notion of displaying live models as works of art. The presentation of Bentham’s skeleton and mummified head (seen in the foreground) was in keeping with the wishes of this eccentric English philosopher and jurist. In 1974, Bentham’s Auto-Icon was featured in a film entitled Figures of Wax made by the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers.

perceived in a completely different way by the viewer, as compared with when it is viewed in its original context. The vitrine functions as a means of protection both from the elements and the spectator, who is thus physically separated from its contents. Almost like a peep-show it seduces, concentrating, looking, staring at the unattouchable and the unattainable. The vitrine shares with the shop window and commercial display case the power to catch the attention of the passer-by. The albums of photographs of shopfronts and window displays in Paris, taken in the 1920s by Eugène Atget, who influenced the Surrealists, explore the possibilities of the vitrine without the mediation of authority inherent in the museum display.

The use of the vitrine in science and medicine is linked to the need to keep a specimen in a still viewable, arrested state of being. The practice of preservation of museum exhibits by taxidermy, pickling, dehydration etc. illustrates the desire to suspend time and stabilize objects against decomposition. It also keeps the viewer at a comfortable, voyeuristic distance, so avoiding direct contact with something perhaps distasteful yet fascinating, such as an anatomical dissection. The vitrine’s associations with both science and the Church relate to its role as bodily container, and a number of artists have even exhibited living people or themselves in vitrines as part of a wider fascination with their exploration of the material self or the body. This idea has an intriguing precedent in the philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s Auto-Icon, and in recent years living people have been exhibited in vitrines as a form of performance art. Artists might also create works from intimate personal possessions, keepsakes or even body fluids which, like both reliquaries
and museum artifacts, serve as tangible evi- dence of their existence. Thus Piero
Manzoni’s works c. 1960 are effectively
erisonal relics which also relate to the
authentication and value of art.7

In some of the works of Christian Boltanski
and Joseph Beuys the vitrine has connec-
tions with both the melancholic funereal
quality of the church reliquary and the use
of the glass-sided incubator for premature
sabies. Beuys often used vitrines to contain
a diverse range of materials that have refer-
ces to his own life and include relics of
his ‘actions’ or performances. The vitrine
came to form part of the language with
which Beuys made his art works, providing
a ‘neutral’ protected space for elements that
otherwise might be seen as fugitive. This is,
if course, the raison d’être of the museum
showcase and, in this, Beuys’s position in
relation to the museum is made clear.

He used the elements available as a vehicle
of his ideas and so the museum and its
component parts came to be another set
of tools to be used in his argument. His
use of this language is shown most clearly
in the installation which he organized as
a permanent suite of galleries at the
Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt
in 1970. This is situated directly above
the museum’s old natural history displays,
a fact which appropriately echoes Beuys’s
own emphasis on the link between art
and science, past and future and the personal
and universal. In terms of its presentation
of curious objects in vitrines, the Beuys
Black is, in effect, a museum created by
the artist which stealthily usurps the con-
ventional museum to his own ends. It is
both a concentration of Beuys’s work and
his vision of his relationship with the world
using personally symbolic collected objects.

The activities taking place behind the
scenes in museums have been as important
as the modes of display in public areas.
There is the interesting contrast between
revealing and concealing, as illustrated
in the common museum process of choosing
to exhibit one object while keeping others
in reserve storage. The establishment of
systems of organization is as instinc-
tive to human nature as is the accumula-
tion and collecting, and artists frequently imitate
the institutional practice of creating
inventories and archives as part of a
working process. Joseph Cornell carefully
preserved all kinds of material that was
surplus but related in some way to his main
body of work, keeping it in shoe-boxes
and other improvised archive boxes. In
1946 he presented an exhibition called
‘Romantic Museum: Portraits of Women’;
which was derived from a body of his
works that he referred to as ‘dossiers’.8
These were unfinished works, housed
inside document boxes which were
intended to be added to and subtracted
from as part of his working research pro-
cess. The basement of the Cornell family
home served as the store room for these
dossiers and constructions, all carefully
filed into the relevant categories. He had
wanted his house to become a permanent
museum after his death, but although
the accumulated stores were kept together,
they were transported to Washington to become
an archive within the Smithsonian Institu-
tion. One of Cornell’s archive boxes which
recently came to light reveals that he
assisted Marcel Duchamp in making the
various elements of his portable museum,
the Boîte-en-valise.9

From 1974 Andy Warhol created ‘Time
Capsules’, obsessively packing and storing
ANNETTE MESSAGER
ALBUM COLLECTIONS
Installation at the Städtische Galerie im
Lenbachhaus, Munich
1973
Assembling collections in the form of scrapbooks,
Messager compiled a numbered sequence of 56
albums between about 1971 and 1974. Her first
collection was taken directly from the commem-
orative tradition of marriage albums, and she
substituted her own face and name for those of
the real brides. Subsequent albums chronicle
fictional events in her life, frequently using
illustrations from magazines. Her entire album
collections have been displayed as a form of
archive in vitrines at a number of contemporary
art venues.

JOSEPH BEUYS
BEUYS BLOCK:
VIEW OF ROOM 3
Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt
1970
This, the largest group of Beuys’s vitrine sculptures,
is regarded as the most definitive example since
the works were installed personally by the artist. He
once suggested that his fascination with glass
began at birth when as a premature baby he was
placed in a glass-sided incubator. The vitrines serve
as displays of relics of Beuys’s life and contain a
diverse selection of objects used in his Actions of
the 1960s and early 1970s, brought together in
what he called a ‘constellation of ideas’.

all kinds of ordinary objects which he
accumulated from day to day. These
were standard-size cardboard cartons
which, when full, were labelled, sealed
and sent into storage in New Jersey.
They were filled with everything that
passed across Warhol’s desk, including
magazines, invitations, photographs,
unopened letters and, occasionally, clothes.
The ‘Time Capsules’ now form the core
of the archive housed at the Andy Warhol
Museum in Pittsburgh. Warhol used
the ‘Time Capsules’ as a kind of repository
for his own past; in his diary entry of
24 May 1984 the artist notes: ‘I opened
a Time Capsule and every time I do it’s
a mistake, because I drag it back and start
looking through it ....’.10 Warhol expressed
and extended this fascination for things hidden and stored when, in 1969, he was invited by the Rhode Island School of Design to curate an exhibition of work selected from the collection of its own Museum of Art in Providence. Called ‘Raid the Icebox’, the show was part of a series conceived by John and Dominique de Menil, who wanted to bring out into the open some of the unfamiliar and often unsuspected treasures molding in museum basements, inaccessible to the general public. Instead of selecting individual examples for display, Warhol chose to exhibit complete groups of related objects exactly as he had found them in the storeroom, for example by bringing all the chairs out of storage. When it came to the shoe collection, the Museum curator pointed out that this process would result in duplication of some pairs or in showing inferior examples of particular types of shoe, but Warhol insisted on including the complete collection. ‘There were exasperating moments when we felt that Andy Warhol was exhibiting “storage” rather than works of art, that a series of labels could mean as much to him as the paintings to which they refer. And perhaps they do, for in his vision, all things become part of the whole and we know what is being exhibited is Andy Warhol.’ This exhibition has become historically significant as having set a precedent for other museums to follow, by inviting artists to act as guest curators.

While the idea of the artist’s museum is essentially a tendency in twentieth-century art, it has some parallels with the extra-

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**Marcel Duchamp**

**Boîte-en-valise (Portable Museum)**

1941

The year after Duchamp produced the first edition of his Boîte-en-valise, he was photographed for Life magazine demonstrating the contents of the box housed inside its purpose-made suitcase. The flaps of the box can be opened to reveal a compilation of his works reproduced in photographs, prints and diminutive models, thus creating a portable, rearrangeable museum. The ‘Boîte’ also has functional associations with the Porte-Monnaie (Purse), a pigeon attaché case for use by casino gamblers.

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**Andy Warhol**

**Raid the Icebox I with Andy Warhol**

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, R.I.

1970

Rather than make a selection of his favourite or the ‘best’ pieces in the museum storeroom, Warhol chose to exhibit the complete collections of various types of object, regardless of provenance or condition. The items shown here include shoes and parasols. The exhibition was an early precursor of what has since become a more frequent tendency for museums to invite artists to curate shows.
ordinary personal museums created in England, over a hundred years earlier, by the architect Sir John Soane and in America by the painter Charles Willson Peale. In his London house Sir John Soane designed a special rotunda, crammed from floor to ceiling with three storeroys of sculptures and architectural fragments, at the centre of which he placed a bust of himself. On the other side of the Atlantic in Pennsylvania, Charles Willson Peale, the painter of Revolutionary heroes, created the first American Museum. This included vitrines containing his large collection of natural history specimens arranged in a hierarchical display which conformed to his knowledge of the Linnaean system. Artists are inevitably collectors of their own works in finished and preparatory form, which they might periodically reappraise and modify. By necessity their studios might even need to be organized in a way similar to museum storerooms. Perhaps the most immediate artist’s museum involves the presentation of an individual’s own work: thus Duchamp’s Boîte-en-valise is effectively a portable museum of his works in miniature enclosed in a custom-made suitcase. He decided to develop a retrospective of his existing art, which involved making miniature representations of paintings, graphics and Readymades to fit inside an attaché case. Between 1935 and 1940 he created a deluxe edition of twenty boxes, all in brown-leather carrying cases but with slight variations in design and content. During the 1950s and 1960s, he released an edition consisting of six different series in archive box form. Each box unfolds to reveal various works displayed on pull-out and standing frames. Since the content was rearrangeable, both the artist himself and the individual collector could assume the role of curator.

Duchamp’s artistic use of the anonymous-looking attaché case was appropriated by the Fluxus artists for housing their numerous Fluxkit editions. These were described as ‘miniature Fluxus museums’ by the movement’s founder, George Maciunas. Between 1975 and 1977, Maciunas assembled what was to be the last Fluxus anthology: the Fluxcabinet. This was a wooden cabinet with twenty drawers containing objects by fourteen Fluxus artists. For drawer 12 he contributed his Excreta Fluxorum, a taxonomic presentation of insect and mammalian faeces, arranged hierarchically according to their evolutionary order. Other participants created alternatives to the static museum, and Robert Filliou made what was, in effect, a museum in a hat (with the objects tucked into the band) which became The Frozen Exhibition (1972).

For his ‘Museum of Drawers’, Herbert Distel conceived the idea of creating an entire museum of modern art in a multi-drawer cabinet. He invited artists to contribute works in miniature scale mostly dating from the 1960s and 1970s. Each work was contained in one of the 500 compartments of a cotton-reel cabinet.

Sir John Soane’s Museum, London
The rotunda, looking east, with the bust of Sir John Soane in the middle

In 1833, Sir John Soane directed that his house in Lincoln’s Inn Fields should be bequeathed to the nation and preserved ‘as nearly as possible in the state in which it was left at the time of his death (which occurred four years later). Although Soane is noted mainly for major architectural projects such as the Bank of England, his house and museum have come to be widely regarded as being close to an art form.
in which each compartment represented a ‘room’ of the museum. In 1972, the ‘Museum of Drawers’ was included in the exhibition Documenta V in Kassel, an event which represented a watershed in the relationship between the institution of the museum and contemporary art. This exhibition attempted to show the strands in contemporary art, including land art, film as art and the artist’s museum which, along with Distel’s creation, included examples of works by Marcel Duchamp, Claes Oldenburg, Ben Vautier and Marcel Broodthaers. Though a relatively small proportion of a massive summary of current practice, this exhibition marked an acknowledgment of a significant tendency.

It provided the opportunity for Oldenburg to show his ‘Mouse Museum’, a collection of found and fabricated material which he had built up and displayed in his studios during the mid-1960s. The 385 miniature consumer objects and toys which were retrieved from Oldenburg’s studio were displayed in linear form in a continuous vitrine, and the plan of this building within a building takes its shape from a distinctive cartoon mouse. Although this shape may be unreadable from the ground, the museum structure is used as a logo and thus

HERBERT DISTEL
MUSEUM OF DRAWERS
1970–77

Distel invited artists to contribute a miniature work of art to the museum he was both creating and curating. This was housed in a former cotton-reef cabinet with a total of 500 compartments intwenty drawers set on a base made by Ed Kienholz. The artists represented included many well-known names, such as Picasso, but some of them have since sunk into relative obscurity.

DETAIL OF DRAWER NO. 8
integrated with the collection, so becoming, in effect, another exhibit. There is no hierarchy to the display of found, bought or modified objects and maquettes, and they are all preserved just as if they were still in use as the artist’s ‘notebook’ of forms. The installation, though by no means portable, refers back inevitably to the Boîte-en-valise. It was subsequently shown in its final form in Chicago in 1977 and then in Cologne and Otterlo in 1979. After Documenta V a second element was added to the ensemble: the Ray Gun Wing. Again the form of the structure is dictated by its contents and here the objects are selected for their similarity in form to that of a pistol. The Ray Gun Wing adds an ironic comment on the scholarly approach to museum making and to the expansion of museum buildings. Neither the objects on display in the ‘Mouse Museum’ nor the Ray Gun Wing are ‘new’ work made for exhibition; instead these installations are more properly seen as yet another view of Oldenburg’s output.

‘Fiction enables us to grasp reality and at the same time that which is veiled by reality’, wrote Marcel Broodthaers, who in 1968 first developed his critical concept for the Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles (‘Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles’). Using the device of the heraldic eagle to symbolize the authority of the museum and the tendency for it to be divided into various departments, he went on to make a series of twelve sections, in each of which he acted as its director, curator, designer and publicist. This earliest section of the museum was a kind of installation –
CLAES OLDENBURG
MOUSE MUSEUM
Installation detail
1965–77

The artist’s notebooks of 1965–66 contain plans to found a ‘museum of popular objects’. The museum is housed within a series of display cases made from wood, corrugated aluminium and Perspex. This microcosm of objects, a few of which are shown here, is intended to reflect not only Oldenburg’s working process, but also his perception of stereotypes in American society. Although somewhat diverse in their classification, the groups of objects exhibited are unified through their form, colour, texture and proportion.

which he staged at his own house in Brussels—consisting of empty packing crates, postcards of French nineteenth-century paintings fixed to the wall, a slide projection of prints by Grandville, and even a turtle living in his garden. On the opening and closing days of the nineteenth-century section, exactly one year apart, an empty transport container was parked outside the building, suggesting the recent arrival/imminent removal of the collection on display. On the night of the closure invited guests were taken by coach to Antwerp to attend the opening there of the seventeenth-century section of the Musée. This new stage repeated the style of the first section, but contained a different set of reproductions, all but one being works by Rubens. These events marked the beginning of a continuous, itinerant project and along the way the Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Figurines covered various subjects: literature, folklore, cinema, finance, publicity and modern art.

Brodthaers also created a more informed and ephemeral section of the museum on the beach at Le Coq in 1970, assisted by Herman Daled. Both men donned canvas hats daubed with the word ‘Museum’ and drew a national museum plan in the sand. This was a form of archaeological invention and, when the dig was complete, bilingual (French and Flemish) signs were erected saying ‘Touching the objects is absolutely forbidden’. A year later, at the Cologne Art Fair, he presented the Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Figurines, Section Financière, which was an announcement of the bankruptcy of this fictional museum. The museum was put up for sale and, in order to publicize the idea, he intended to offer for sale an unlimited edition gold ingot stamped with an eagle motif.

In 1972 Brodthaers was invited by the director of the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf to make what was to be the most extensive manifestation of the museum: ‘La Section des Figures’ (‘Figures Section’) — The Eagle from the Olignecan to the Present, comprised
over 300 objects in a wide variety of media, all representing eagles, borrowed from various museum and private collections. They were displayed in vitrines, each with an engraved plastic label declaring in French, German or English: 'This is not a work of art'. The installation looked like a 'normal' museum exhibition, but at the point of the visitor’s encounter with each object, the arbitrarily placed eagle and its label revealed the subversive quality of the display. Like most thematic exhibitions, it was didactic in content, although there was no explanation of development or origin. Formal links between objects, though established by the choice of the subject 'eagle', were not elaborated. This was an exhibition which existed in its own dialectical sphere, calling into question the museum processes of selection and ordering as applied to the presentation of contemporary art.

Language is an essential factor in all of Broodthaers' work, which is not surprising given his background as a poet, and he maintained that 'the language of forms must be united with that of words'. He recognized the significance of the relationship between the museum label and the object it describes and his work conveys an urge to free the written word from this traditional subordinate role. In the Düsseldorf exhibition he made particular play on the gulf that exists between word and image and the fact that the museum seeks to deny this reality in its attempt at a unification of word and object. A label which reads 'This is not a work of art!' refers to the object, to the ensemble of label and object, to the exhibition and, in the manner of the joke enacted by children, to the label itself.

There is, of course, also an in-built homage to René Magritte's labelled depiction of a pipe: 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe.' Magritte labelled objects in such a way that they were not described; his labels address the viewer, rather than describe the object, in terms such as 'here is ...' or 'this is ...'. Broodthaers draws attention to the complexity of the relationship between...
object and label in three dimensions. As Duchamp’s ‘Readymades’ made clear, the function of an art museum, as of the artist working within its discursive authority, is to declare, in regard to each of the objects housed there: ‘This is a work of art.’ Broodthaers’ labels reverse this proposition through the application of Magritte’s formula, and his museum thus becomes the location of the ‘non-artwork’. In the Düsseldorf exhibition catalogue, he specifies that in fact the meaning of these labels is to be construed as ‘Public, how blind you are’, and that they ‘illustrate an idea of Marcel Duchamp and of René Magritte’.16

In the same year, the final manifestation of his Musée d’Art Moderne was shown in Kassel in two parts at Documenta V. The ‘Section Publicité’ was installed on the ground floor of the Neue Galerie; this included catalogues and photographs from previous sections and a few vestigial, empty frames containing references to non-existent figures. In the upper gallery, the ‘Section d’Art Moderne’ (‘Modern Art Section’) now comprised only a series of signs and labels, with lettering and directional arrows applied to the walls, pointing the way to non-existent cloakrooms and offices. On the window, and visible from outside, was painted ‘Museum/Musée’, and on the inside ‘Fig. 0’. On the floor, in the centre of the gallery, the words ‘private property’ (in German, English and French) appeared in gold on a black-painted square protected by stanchions. Halfway through the installation’s life, Broodthaers replaced these words with ‘to Write, to Paint, to Copy, to Represent, to Speak, to Form, to Dream, to Exchange, to Make, to Inform, to Be Able To’ (in French). He also amended the lettering on the walls to read ‘Museum of Ancient Art, Department of Eagles, 20th-century Gallery’ (in French).

Daniel Spoerri’s fictional museum, the ‘Musée Sentimental’, like that of Broodthaers, had no permanent collection or home and was staged in four different permutations and locations between 1977 and 1989.17 Inspired by a museum of the same name he had discovered in Barcelona in the mid-1960s, Spoerri suggested that his idea of the ‘Musée Sentimental’ had most in common with the Wunderkammer. In Spoerri’s museum the traditional categories and hierarchies were abolished and history, memory, science and myth are reunited. The exhibitions’ significance lay not in their presentation, which conformed to a conservative museological style, but in the curator/artist’s choice of objects, the criterion for which was their importance relative to their urban contexts; and while the objects did not constitute the most important historical or artistic artifacts from the various cities, their selection represented an attempt to compile an inventory of what was significant. ‘Key words’ were matched up to exhibits and the display was then arranged alphabetically using these words as the basic point of departure. The correspondences and relationships thus built up resemble
the interconnecting networks of the city. Like so much of significance, these items displayed aspects of the everyday or have a particular resonance by association.

Spoeiti's museum was first presented in 1977 in Paris at the Centre Georges Pompidou, where he also created a museum shop called the 'aberrant boutique' within the frame of an enormous welded metal sculpture by Jean Tinguely. The shop offered for sale all manner of objects donated by artists at Spoeiti's request; they included old tools, brushes, palettes and unfinished works, and all proceeds were used to benefit Amnesty International. The 'Musée Sentimental' itself was installed in a long dark corridor with different configurations of vitrines inset into the walls. Most of the objects on display related to French culture, and included relics like Vincent van Gogh's furniture, René Magritte's bowler hat, toy horses owned by Marcel Duchamp and Ingres' violin. The second 'Musée Sentimental' was designed on a much larger scale in the Kunstverein in Cologne in 1979. Since he had been invited to teach at the art school there, Spoeiti involved his students in the project. They divided the museum into 120 sections, each containing several objects. These included items as diverse as a piece of lead from the roof of the cathedral damaged during World War II, a football used in an important league fixture and a pair of muddy boots found after the city's carnival weekend.

Beyond appropriating and applying museological principles to their work, artists have in practical terms become increasingly interested in exploring the museum's wider institutional framework. This phenomenon needs to be examined against the historical background rooted in the avant-garde and in the prevailing social and political climate of the 1960s. Since the beginning of the twentieth century some artists have continued to question, deny or proclaim the ideas and values of art within museum culture. Each new movement and manifesto declared its opposition to the multiplying effect of the museum, which was seen as an outmoded institution to be swept away along with orthodoxy of the academy and the salons. The history of Modernism is strewn with the ruins of the museum, yet ironically while avant-garde artists criticized museums for collecting 'dead' art, their work has been continually acquired and displayed by them. Modernism emerged amid a complex political climate of continual reinvention, since its most significant feature has been rejection of the past and complete confidence in the process of change and belief in the supremacy of the new and novel. This trend naturally led artists to challenge the cozy illusion of the museum's cultural immortality and, as Marinetti proclaimed, 'We want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong Futurists!'18

The museum, with its custodial view of history, was seen as either irrelevant or destructive. The Suprematist painter Kasimir Malevich proclaimed that the art of the past should be burned to make way for the art of the present. In his short essay 'On the Museum', he challenged the role of the museum in acquiring the art and artifacts of the past: 'contemporary life-needs nothing other than what belongs to it.'19 The Russian Constructivists, who had started as Futurists, did not concern themselves explicitly with the abolition of the museum. Their main priority was to bypass the institutions of the imperial state and of wealth and to move their operations straight to the street. Museums and galleries were for them laboratories in which experiments could be carried out and there was also a belief that the artist should have an active role in their management. Alexander Rodchenko, in his 'Declaration on the Museum Management' (1919), maintained that 'artists, as the only people with a grasp of the problems of contemporary art and as the creators of artistic values, are the only ones capable of directing the acquisition of modern works of art and of establishing how a country should be educated in artistic matters'.20 El Lissitzky applied his Constructivist principles to the organization of space with his Proun (Projects for the affirmation of the new in art). These were seen as a hybrid between painting and architecture and took a number of forms, including exhibitions of large-scale photographic environments. He developed a theory for museum display which he was able to put into practice in two 'Demonstration Rooms', one in Dresden in 1926, the other in Hanover in 1928. These explored the possibility of creating a space which he believed was most suitable for presenting modern art – a space where the specifically designed surroundings were further controlled by colour and lighting. This was a museum environment which was in direct opposition to the still predominant belief in the 'neutral' space of the museum object.
he avant-garde artists in Paris during the
me period also resented the museum’s
ditional conservatism. The work of
arc Duchamp expressed both the
adaists’ and Surrealists’ disregard of
stitutional authority. By adding a
oustache and beard to a reproduction
the Mona Lisa, in his provocative work
H, O, O, Q, of 1919, he was also contest-
g the reverence usually accorded to this
ost celebrated museum masterpiece in
Louvre. The Dadaists made their
ost controversial statement against the
ishment in 1920 at the First
ernational Dada Fair in Berlin. This
ployed an authoritative style of display
the juxtaposition of text and image.
tyle which was to be echoed by the Nazi
time’s counterattack on avant-garde art
the ‘Degenerate Art’ exhibition held in
ich in 1937. The Surrealists were to
take their own definitive exhibition state-
ent with the International Exposition
urrealism held in Paris in 1938 and the
rst Papers of Surrealism in New York
42. Although he himself was neither
ajor exhibitor nor even a completely
mitted Surrealist, Marcel Duchamp
rly orchestrated both these shows.
his ideas on the manipulation of space
icipate aspects of later museum inten-
tions. For the Paris exhibition he
ated a special ambience with the aid
200 oil-sacks suspended from
ceilings and over the paintings. Rather than
allenge museums directly, the Surrealists
 suggested that they imprisoned the fertile
imagination. As André Breton stated in
urrealism and Painting in 1927: ‘Now
 confess that I have passed like a madman
 through the slippery halls of museums ...’
Passing by all those religious compositions,
all those rustic allegories, I irresistibly lost
the sense of my own role. Outside, the
street prepared a thousand more real
enchantsments for me ...’.
he first
urrealist challenge was that of looking
at reality in very different terms, a battle
continually fought against the banality of
the everyday. The Surrealists wanted to
disintegrate the unconscious workings of
the mind and share with the early creators
of the Wunderkammer a desire to construct
a specific, personal order and anarchic
juxtaposition of collected elements,
therby resisting the kind of separation
imposed by the museum through special-
ized classification.

A line of continuity exists between the
questioning of the museum’s autonomous
role undertaken by the early avant-garde
movements and the activities of those
artists who began to create work around
a critique of the institutions of art in the
1960s. As Hal Foster wrote: ‘First artists
like Flavin, Andre, Judd and Morris in
the early 1960s, and then artists like
Broodthaers, Buren, Asher and Hanneke
in the late 1960s, develop the critique
of the conventions of the traditional
mediums, as performed by Dada,
Constructivism, and other historical
avant-gardes, into an investigation of
the institution of art, its perceptual and
cognitive, structural and discursive para-
eters.’ By the late 1960s, worldwide
student unrest, anti-Vietnam War
demonstrations and civil rights and peace
movements gave rise to the questioning
of many long-established values and
the concept of institutional authority,
which included museum administrations.
In France there were the activities of
the Situationists led by Guy Debord
and influential new ideas expressed in the
works of theorists like Roland Barthes,
Michel Foucault and, slightly later, Jean
Baudrillard. Their writings stimulated a
critical examination of existing cultural
institutions and recognized art as being
interwoven with a system of socio-
economic exchange.

In 1967 Daniel Buren and other artists
made a demonstration at the Salon de
la Jeune Peinture, Musee National d’Art
Moderne, Paris, where each artist exhibited
a painting in the form of a simple motif,
as a ‘signature’ of their objection against
the institution, and distributed a text on
a flier. During the following year Buren
continued to paint the ‘same’ painting
of vertical, alternating coloured and white
stripes and posted 200 of these panels on
hoardings around Paris, an action which
suggested the idea that displays of art no
longer needed to be restricted to the
confines of the museum. Meanwhile,
parallel protests to the celebrated Paris
student demonstrations of 1968 included
the temporary occupation of the Palais
des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, in which
Marcel Broodthaers took part and also
acted as a negotiator. Among the objec-
tives of the demonstrators was the need
to draw attention to the lack of provision for contemporary art exhibition spaces in Brussels, and such debates undoubtedly helped to stimulate Broodthaers' use of the museum as a focus for a wider critique of the art establishment. In common with a number of other artists at the time, he had become disillusioned with the legacy of Pop art since, while it had blurred the boundaries between mass culture and high culture, it had sold out to the very commercialism that it was seeking to ridicule. As a result art was in danger of losing its 'true' value, becoming a mere commodity or decoration, accumulated in museums without offering critical reflection. Artists therefore began to challenge the idea of art as an avant-garde invention, and there was a new awareness that despite Marcel Duchamp's earlier claim, via his creation of the Readymade, that it is the artist who accords an object its status as a work of art, in reality power still rests with the framing institution.

In the USA the development of 'land art' presented a direct challenge to containing art in the museum. Robert Smithson, who created his famous Spiral Jetty (1970) in the Great Salt Lake in Utah, took a critical stance against museums in his writings. He reinvented place as a kind of post-industrial spectacle and attempted to shift the emphasis of art away from the institutions of the gallery and museum. In his 1987 article 'Some Void Thoughts on Museums' he wrote: "... Museums are tombs, and it looks like everything is turning into a museum. Art settles into stupendous inertia. Silence supplies the dominant chord. Bright colors conceal the abyss that holds the museum together. Every solid is a bit of clogged air or space. Things flatten and fade. The museum spreads its surfaces everywhere, and becomes an untitled collection of generalizations that immobilize the eye." In a pencil drawing of 1969 he proposed an alternative museum – The Museum of the Void – which was 'devoted to different kinds of emptiness'. Minimalism and Conceptual Art also presented a challenge to institutional conventions in what was described as 'The dematerialization of the
The growing acceptance of Conceptual and Installation Art was to provide the ideal climate to allow artists to critique the museum, both from the outside and from within, through site-specific interventions from the mid-1980s onwards.

The museum as the institution of art has of course changed almost beyond recognition since the time of the historical avant-garde, and the particular tendency for its critique by artists in the USA is linked with that country’s role as the power base for the contemporary art market and the modern art museum. The twentieth century saw a rapid increase in museums of modern and contemporary art and, compared to the older-established art museums of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they are a fairly recent and growing phenomenon. Since the 1960s there has been a boom in museum building without precedent since the nineteenth century, while what were previously ‘alternative’ venues devoted to contemporary art have since become part of the mainstream. By 1999 half of the 1,240 art museums in the USA were less than 25 years old and many of them are devoted purely to modern and contemporary art. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, founded in 1929, is regarded as the archetypal museum of its kind which became a model for others. Contrary to popular belief, it was not the first museum intended to display only contemporary art, since as early as 1815 the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris was organized to show only the work of living artists. Nevertheless, when MoMA was founded, it was the first to be exclusively concerned with Modern art and it houses one of the most comprehensive collections. It was able to shape modernism into an ideology and its strategy was conceived on business lines in terms of ‘Production’ and ‘Distribution’. Alfred Barr, MoMA’s first Director, made this clear in an early confidential report to the trustees: ‘Basically, the Museum “produces” art knowledge, criticism, scholarship, understanding, taste…. Once a product is made, the next job is distribution. An exhibition in the galleries is distribution. Circulation of exhibition catalogues, memberships, publicity, radio, are all distribution.’

Museums are naturally careful to play down such parallels with industry or any commercial affiliations, but some artists have become interested in examining the growing corporate involvement in the arts, both through direct collecting and through museum sponsorship. Hans Haacke has investigated the museum’s complex interconnection with commerce and politics, as well as with the personalities who serve in the governing bodies of institutions. In his seminal writing on Museums he claimed: ‘Every museum is perforce a political institution, no matter whether it is privately run or maintained and supervised by governmental agencies’. In 1970, as part of an exhibition at MoMA, entitled ‘Information’, he installed ballot-boxes for audience participation. Visitors were invited to vote in favour of or against the re-election of Nelson Rockefeller as Republican governor of New York in the light of the Nixon administration’s Indochina (Vietnam) policy. Rockefeller had previously held posts as both president and chairman of MoMA’s board of trustees, while members of the Rockefeller family had been instrumental in the original founding of the museum. A total of 37,129 visitors voted, and Haacke was thus able to link their views to external political issues that were indirectly connected to the museum’s own administrative affairs. In a number of his projects, Haacke has carefully investigated a particular painting’s provenance, tracing its unbroken line of ownership since it left the artist’s studio. He adopts the procedure of an art historian but, instead of using his research to add to a painting’s pedigree, he exposes the work’s hidden financial and political background. This approach tends to present these works of art as mere symbols of corporate investment and institutional authority. His controversial Manet – PROJECT ‘74 was excluded from an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum and its Director referred to Haacke’s work as an ‘alien substance that had entered the art museum organism’.

Daniel Buren first expressed his theory about the ‘frame’ the museum imposes on art in his ‘Function of the Museum’ written in 1970: ‘The aesthetic role of the Museum is thus enhanced since it becomes a single viewpoint (cultural and visual) from which
works can be considered, an enclosure where art is born and buried, crushed by the very frame which presents and constitutes it. Buren asserted that the artist rather than the institution creates the frame, and he developed this concept further by actually deconstructing the museum space in a number of 'in-situ', site-specific works in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During the same period Michael Asher also created a number of subtle installations, all located within museum exhibition spaces, which critically contemplate the institutional framing of art and disrupt the museum’s linear scheme of history. His best-known work of this nature was in the context of the Art Institute of Chicago’s 73rd American Exhibition in 1979, when he removed the bronze replica of the life-size statue of George Washington by Houdon from its permanent site outside the main entrance and had it transferred to an internal museum gallery. Through this simple act of displacement he was able to draw attention to the different aspects of the museum’s presentation of the sculpture. He showed how our aesthetic appreciation of the work changed according to its physical context, when transferred from its familiar public decorative and commemorative role to an essentially art-historical situation. Once removed from its original site as a permanent feature of the museum façade, the statue now had to be viewed as part of an eighteenth-century collection. A historical interior thus became part of the present time-frame, since Asher effectively created his own installation by using the other eighteenth-century works as part of the contemporary art exhibition in which he had been invited to participate.

Through being invited to create site-specific works for exhibitions in museums, artists have thus been able to intervene simultaneously in the day-to-day function and activities of institutions. In a perform-

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**HANS HAACKE**
**MOMA POLL**
1970
As part of the group exhibition entitled ‘Information’ at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Haacke installed two transparent acrylic ballot-boxes. The museum visitor was invited to vote for or against the U.S. government’s policy for involvement in the Vietnam War and the results were recorded by a photoelectrically triggered counting device. More specifically the work related to the impending election for the governorship of New York state, in which the incumbent, Nelson Rockefeller, was a candidate, since both he and his family had historic and ongoing links with MoMA.
ANCE WORK called *Service Area*, Vito Acconci forwarded his mail to a display case situated in the exhibition 'Information' at MoMA in 1970. By this action both the museum and the postal service were used by the artist, and the confines of the exhibition space were deconstructed or extended to include Acconci's daily journey from home to the museum to collect his mail. His loft studio was thereby temporarily relocated to the museum.

The growth in museological studies has also been a significant catalyst in the museums’ investigation of their social and cultural function. By the early 1990s a number of art museums were staging exhibitions in which artists were invited to create work that would interact with the permanent collections or be instrumental in examining aspects of the
museum’s institutional role. The Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (1991), and ‘The End(s) of the Museum’ at the Fundacio Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona (1995), were among a number of significant exhibitions involving internationally known artists whose work addressed specific museum themes. Many artists have found a particular affinity with natural history, archaeology and ethnography collections, especially those with displays that have escaped refurbishment. They have continued to use the medium of photography and gone beyond documenting the museum collection to reveal the peculiarities of its space and visitor dialogue. In the mid-1980s, a number of artists, such as Fred Wilson, Louise Lawler and Mark Dion, have been concerned with exploring the social and political agendas concealed behind the museum’s supposedly neutral façade. They have gone on to use the museum as a critical vantage point for reviewing questions of wealth, privilege, gender and cultural prejudices. Most significantly, artists have been given the opportunity to work directly with these ‘non-art’ collections, a phenomenon that is linked to the museum’s growing tendency to self-evaluation in the wake of an increasing emphasis on considerations of political correctness.

This need for museums to review their conventional presentation and interpretation methods and to develop fresh initiatives has led to active collaborations where practising artists have been invited to curate exhibitions and advise on matters of display. A number of ground-breaking exhibitions have resulted, such as Joseph Kosuth’s ‘The Play of the Unmentionable’ at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (1991) and Fred Wilson’s ‘Mining the Museum’, held at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore (1992). In these exhibitions the artist acted both as guest curator and as creator of a site-specific installation. This approach is a two-way process in which museums offer contemporary artists challenging alternative venues and contexts to the ‘white-cube’ environment, while artists provide museums with a means of reanimating
their collections and attracting new audiences. The involvement of major public museums with living artists has evolved naturally from a tradition of the artist-in-residence, and artists might be commissioned to create a work inspired by a specific painting or invited to select and comment on their favourite works in a particular collection. Artists might be specially commissioned to make large works which become part of museums' rapidly growing collections, but are subject to the limitations of their storage facilities. Contemporary art forms, such as video, performance, site-specific installation and digital media have joined with photography to challenge the very mission of the museum as collector and preserver of the unique and tangible.

Duchamp has already theoretically out-maneuvered the traditional concept of the museum, since to accept unquestioningly one of his Readymades as a work of art...
JOSEPH KOSUTH
THE PLAY OF
THE UNMENTIONABLE

Kosuth’s installation for the Grand Lobby comprised his selection and display of works from the Brooklyn Museum’s collection. This was based largely around the theme of censorship as illustrated by works from various cultures throughout history. His large and prominent wall texts included many provocative quotations from well-known philosophers, writers and other historical figures, including Adolf Hitler.

is to enjoy the very irony of its preservation by an institution, and his concept of the Box-en-valise also represents a challenge to the confinement of art within the walls of the museum. Although the rigid and autonomous nature of the museum was criticized by both the early avant-garde movements and their successors, by the 1990s many artists recognized the more positive evolutionary role that some museums can play when their curators are more receptive to new ideas. Criticized for having a rigid structure and for being out of touch with the real world, traditional museums can, by adopting an enlightened approach, become more of a laboratory for experimentation. Using its institutional power, the museum forms the ultimate arena for artistic discourse with the recognition that art is a dynamic force, continually in a state of flux.
The principles followed by museums for ordering their collections, in terms of both exhibition and storage, have had a strong aesthetic and conceptual influence on contemporary art practice; this may be either direct or subliminal. In using systems of classification, display, archiving and storage, artists have been able to apply museological methods to both the production and the presentation of their work. They are inspired not only by these practical methods but also by their broader institutional context, since the fact of being exhibited in a museum confers on objects an aura of importance and authenticity, endowing whatever is presented with a sense of significance. There has been an increasing tendency to employ typical museum display devices such as vitrines, archive boxes, specimen jars, descriptive labels, drawer cabinets and even packing crates used for the shipping and storage of works of art. Some artists have been specially attracted to the use of the display case or vitrine, and this has become a familiar mode of presentation in contemporary art, coinciding with a shift towards working more with mixed media and with the ever-present need to protect delicate materials.
Cigarettes have been a recurring theme in Hirst's work, and in this taxonomic display he exploited the infinite variety of forms resulting from stubbing them out. The stark severity of the design of the vitrines, coupled with Hirst's use of metaphorical and often playful, ironic titles, conveys an acute sense of the here and now which transports the display cases beyond basic museological associations.
Essentially a giant container for exhibits, the museum can offer a more aesthetically pleasing presentation merely by isolating an object from its original context and reframing it for more considered viewing. In *Unsettled Objects* (1968–69), Lothar Baumgarten has commented on the significance of this re-presentation of artifacts: "The display of powerful objects in vitrines and the desire to make use of their energy for a didactic exhibition displaces them and makes them enigmatic." Baumgarten’s work was presented in the form of a slide projection showing eighty images of the closely packed display of exhibits in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. All museums, through their chosen mode of display, using the traditional devices of plinth, vitrine and label, have the potential to transform almost anything they exhibit into a work of art. Every museum display and exhibition involves some form of visual construction with which artists have found an affinity, as has been acknowledged by Mark Dion: ‘... I love museums, I think the design of museum exhibitions is an art form in and of itself, on par with novels, paintings, sculptures and films.’ The vitrine is the primary museum display device which, from the standpoint of artists, suggests a number of significant practical, formal and conceptual possibilities. The most remarkable feature of the vitrine is its ability to transport its carefully ordered and labelled contents beyond the triviality and ephemerality of the everyday. At the outset the vitrine is intended to protect its contents both from dust and damage and from theft. It therefore provides artists with a convenient means of presenting works in less conventional, less durable media, and in this respect it is related to the box frame used for displaying assemblages and collages. However, the vitrine proper is usually much larger and can have a more assertive, ‘sculptural’ presence within an exhibition gallery. The act of placing an object in a vitrine immediately focuses attention on it and suggests that it might also be both precious and vulnerable. The vitrine reinforces the notion of the unique, unattainable and unattainable and, perhaps significantly, has its roots in the medieval church reliquary. It therefore enhances the inherent visual power of an object to catch a viewer’s attention and to stimulate contemplation.

The effect of placing something in a vitrine is to ‘museumize’ it: the glass creates not just a physical barrier but establishes an ‘official distance’ between object and viewer. By rendering untouchable the contained object or work of art, the more important and precious it becomes; it thus shares with the shop window and commercial display case the power to seduce the passer-by. In his presentation of pristine, brand-new
products. Jeff Koons' series *The New* (1980–86) employs this commercial device of making the most banal objects appear special. Thus Koons' domestic vacuum cleaners cease to be everyday items once they are displayed inside an acrylic box. Although the vitrine is essentially a frame, it also provides a carefully controlled and articulated environment. Its appropriation by contemporary artists coincides with their growing preference for delicate materials or potentially confrontational mixed media, the results of which need protective containment. While Joseph Cornell's 'shadow boxes' have an affinity with the more 'poetic', hand-crafted nature of nineteenth-century museum displays, the type of vitrine favoured by many contemporary artists tends to be rather industrial in appearance, often conveying the impression of being intentionally neutral, even clinical.

The practice of preserving specimens in liquids, as employed by natural history and anatomical museums, offers an unusual visual dimension which has appealed to some contemporary artists. On a conceptual level, such displays present life-forms in a suspended, inanimate state, as if 'frozen' in time. In *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding* (1991), Damien Hirst exhibited around forty fish of various species, separately suspended in formaldehyde and encased in Perspex. Neatly arranged on shelves in a vitrine, they all faced in the same direction as if swimming in a shoal. Similarly, he has also used glass-fronted cabinets to display ordered arrangements of objects and specimens such as medicines, shells and cigarette-ends. The formal groups of objects have the authoritative look of a museum display in which each is presented as a document of 'truth', but rather than having interpretative labels the objects provoke thought through their ironical and metaphorical titles. While some of Hirst’s vitrine works contain preserved and dissected animals and thus have obvious parallels with displays in anatomical museums, they lose such 'dusty' associations, thanks to their pristine presentation in the white space typical of the contemporary art gallery. In works like *Self* (1991) and *Eternal Spring* (1998), both of which employ refrigerated vitrines, Marc Quinn also evokes the atmosphere of a laboratory, while the design of his 'scientific' vitrines, with their LED displays and immaculate plinths made of stainless steel, suggest integral sculptural forms.

When a group of objects is exhibited together in a vitrine, a kind of visual construction or statement is involved, suggesting that they have some formal or cultural relationship one with another. This principle has inspired artists to imitate museological classification, arrangement and labelling according to type. The immediate appeal of this form of display is that the result conveys the impression of careful evaluation and deduction. Artists have created works that involve the arrangement of objects in regimented displays as if following a scientific ordering process like 'Taxonomy', the universal system of classification originally applied to natural history specimens. Ann Hamilton's installation *Between Taxonomy and Communion* (1990), at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, included systematic groupings of thousands of human and animal teeth laid out on a flat surface. Arranged in meticulous rows, they had the appearance of a vast museological display.
This display of some 16,000 human and animal teeth, presented in taxonomical style is concerned with the idea that the life-force can still be present in inanimate dead objects. Removed from their bodily context, these teeth acquire an almost precious quality and significance, like museological exhibits. The beautifully polished specimens presented on a vast steel table covered with iron oxide seem to invite the spectator to touch them. However, visitors are discouraged from doing this for fear of staining their fingers with the red liquid resulting from water dripping onto the table and from there onto the floor; the blood-like liquid evoked a sense of ritual.
The growing tendency manifested in much contemporary art to address the materialistic culture of the present has led to work that involves the classification and display of consumer cast-offs. Karsten Bott’s installation One of Each (1993) at the Offenes Kulturhaus, Linz, consisted of an extensive collection of mass-produced utilitarian objects of varied material, colour and form, divided into various groups. Even the most obsolete, broken and trivial everyday items are meticulously ordered in rows. The assemblage, which could be viewed in its entirety from a boardwalk platform, is no doubt inspired by either the modern phenomenon of the car-boot sale or the flea-market where diverse objects are presented for sale laid out either on tables or on the ground. Bott’s installations are selections from a massive ongoing collection of similar material; thus his ‘Archive of Contemporary History’ is carefully
inventoried and stored as if belonging to an institution. Mark Dion's artistic practice often follows a sequence of gathering, sorting, classification and display. Some of his works have involved a kind of archaeological process which leads to the material culture of the present being exhibited alongside that of the past.

In 1997, for his site-specific installation *Raiding Neptune’s Vault* seen in the Nordic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Dion displayed a fascinating collection of artifacts retrieved by him from the silt of a local canal. Two years later, in a more extensive project for the Tate Gallery, London, *Tate Thames Dig*, he and a team of helpers gathered material from the foreshore of the River Thames. The resulting collection, which revealed an ongoing history of the city, included items as diverse as ancient potsherds and contemporary plastic telephone cards; it was eventually exhibited at the Tate Gallery in a traditional museum-style vitrine.
Reserve collections often hold a greater fascination for artists than do the exhibition galleries of museums. On this point Dion observed that “The museum needs to be turned inside out – the back rooms put on exhibition and the displays put into storage.” The extraordinary visual potential of museum reserve collections was realized by Andy Warhol as early as 1970 with his exhibition ‘Raid the Icebox’ at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design. While the exhibition galleries represent the public face of a museum, its storerooms and basements remain its concealed, private zones; in most major museums the relative proportion of exhibited material compared to the reserve is staggeringly small. This discrepancy has become even more apparent due to a more minimalist display aesthetic, the need to accommodate more extensive interpretative object labels and the ongoing acquisition of contemporary works, often of larger dimensions. The artist’s interest has therefore extended to museum storage facilities, akin to vast warehouses, in which major works of art sit on industrial racking covered by polythene dust sheets or remain encased in anonymous packing crates.

In 1968, Marcel Broodthaers displayed empty crates, formerly used to transport paintings, in the first version of his Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXe Siècle. The boom in international art shipping linked with the regular practice of inter-museum loans for large-scale exhibitions has led to the packing case becoming a familiar sight in museum back rooms. However, the humble crate has emerged from storage to take centre stage in exhibition galleries and a number of artists have transformed it into a sculptural form. Richard Artschwager and Martin Kippenberger have both made sculptures imitating the type of crate used in fine art shipping: with their heavy-duty construction with fronts and corners reinforced to resist rough handling, they command an authoritative presence when seen in the gallery space. They also make a Duchampian gesture, teasing the viewer with the idea that there are sculptures
within them, still waiting to be unpacked. Ironically, in order to protect its soft pine surfaces, each crate sculpture in turn has its own packing case, fabricated from the same materials and to similar specifications.

The institutional practice of making archives and inventories has inspired artists to create their own. Archiving evokes the idea of important, official records which, even if hidden from view or forgotten, may be preserved for posterity. Christian Boltanski’s series of works called *Archives* consist of row upon row of metal or cardboard archive boxes stacked one on top of another. They can also include hundreds of photographic portraits, haunting, anonymous, dimly lit images suspended on wire-mesh grills in a manner suggestive of museum reserve storage areas. The solemn style of presentation and lighting seems to conjure up associations with religious icons, where the repeated pattern of the images themselves is suggestive of ritual. By 1972, Boltanski had already begun to compile his photographic archive using found photos, amateur snapshots borrowed from various friends, portraits acquired from schools and clubs, as well as crime story images culled from newspapers. In another work, *Children’s Museum Storage Area* (1989), he has incorporated shelving systems suggestive of the museum’s reserve.
store; these are crammed full of used clothing, with its inevitable reminders of Jewish victims of the Holocaust. His work is often concerned with collections of other peoples’ memories, once lost and forgotten but now reunited with their original context in the museum space. Boltanski has described his artistic practice as being concerned with ‘telling stories known to all’ and presenting a ‘universal history’ of memories.

The inventory or itemized list has also served as the basis for a major series of Boltanski’s works. In January 1973, he sent handwritten proposals to 62 museum curators specializing in art, history and ethnology, asking that each of them should buy, borrow or otherwise acquire the complete belongings of a single deceased individual, objects ‘which after his or her death gave witness to that person’s existence.’ He further requested that each group of objects be exhibited together in a museum gallery. Five of the institutions approached by him agreed to participate in the project, and in most cases the personal effects consisted mainly of household furniture, domestic appliances and ephemera. In these catalogues of individuals’ property no attempt is made to point out the particular personality or character of the former owners. The objects might therefore be seen as material evidence of social trends. In this respect, the museological framing – with its methodical documented detail – makes ordinary objects appear extraordinary, like a collection of ethnographic artifacts. These ‘Inventory’ works seem to proclaim the idea that absolutely anything may be considered worthy of being collected and exhibited and furthermore that any diverse material is, in its particular context, as culturally relevant as so-called ‘high art’ designated as such by museums in accordance with their established hierarchical systems.

CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI
Installation at the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh 1991

As part of his contribution to the exhibition, Boltanski created a fictional archive of the Carnegie International dating back to its inception in 1893. Within the narrow installation space the overpowering effect of racks filled with labelled cardboard boxes served to convey to the spectator a sense of historical transience. Boltanski’s works frequently play on the contrast between the fallibility of human memory and official institutional archives which convey a stark, objective record of the past.
WALTERCIO CALDAS
VENETIAN SERIES
1997

The illusion of panes of glass in a display case is suggested in a series of sculptures made by Caldas for the Brazilian Pavilion of the XLVII Venice Biennale. These works investigate the act of looking, exploring the intermediate state between what the object on display and what surrounds it. They also reveal the precarious nature of the perceived surface and the ambiguous space between transparency and physical reality. Perspex tags attached to the vessel shapes bear the names of famous artists as a means of conveying the continuity of art history.
REINHARD MUCHA
TREYSA
1993

Mucha's work often relates to museum shelves and vitrines, exploring them as sculptural forms. He plays with the irony of the empty showcase and the interior shelf which exhibits only itself - a container without content. The protective pane of glass draws the viewer to peer at the empty space within, while providing a simultaneous reflection of exterior surroundings. Commenting on the fundamental act of looking, the vitrine allows reflection in a contemplative sense. Entirely covered with grey felt, the interior of the showcase suggests warmth, insulation and absorption, thus creating a repository for memory. The title of the work is taken from the name of a small town in Hesse (south-west of Kassel), one of a number of German place names consisting of six letters which Mucha has used as titles for a series of works.

YUJI TAKEDKA
FLOATING PEDESTAL
1992

Takeda explores the form of display devices by presenting his specially created plinths, pedestals and bases as sculptures in their own right. His first series was begun in 1984, and an entire exhibition of these works was shown first in Belgium at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent, in 1989 and then in Germany as public outdoor sculpture at Documenta IX, Kassel, in 1992.