Chapter VI on the inside

Contemporary art can be installed in existing museums in such a way as to give rise to an immediate dialogue with established collections, displays, architecture and public services. Instead of being set apart in special exhibition galleries, these so-called ‘interventions’ involve the interweaving or juxtaposing of artists’ work so that it merges or interferes in some way with the museum collection or site. Most significantly, artists are sometimes given the opportunity to undertake a temporary rearrangement of galleries and to provide a more personal commentary on permanent exhibits. Interventions have a tendency to address museological policies of acquisition, interpretation and display or other more provocative topical issues, thus challenging the traditional impartiality of the institutional context. Alternatively, a museum’s architecture or artifacts may add a unique spatial, conceptual or aesthetic dimension to the installation of an artist’s work, whether existing or specially made for the occasion. While interventions tend to occur more frequently in historical and modern art museums, some projects have been staged in essentially ‘non-art’ contexts which offer a challenge to interact with specialized collections such as archaeology, ethnography or natural history, and thus engage with a different audience.
ANDY GOLDSWORTHY
SANDWORK
Installation view, from the exhibition ‘Time
Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art’
British Museum, London
1994–95

Made from thirty tons of sand, compacted by
hand, Goldsworthy’s installation remained in the
museum gallery for only three days because it
restricted public access. However, the artist’s own
large-format photograph, with his preferred view-
point and lighting conditions, subsequently
became the ‘work’ which was shown in the gallery,
together with a video of its making. The ephemeral
nature of the installation itself served to echo the
idea of museum objects merely representing the
legacy of lost civilizations. The exhibition also
included some of Goldsworthy’s smaller works
(made from leaves, sand and pebbles) placed in the
ancient sarcophagi.
A significant tendency evident since the 1980s has been the increasing number of opportunities for artists to create within museums site-specific works that respond to both the location and the existing collections. Sometimes referred to as "museum intervention," such projects have frequently been occasioned by special initiatives on the part of institutions with historical and 'non-art' collections. These moves have evolved from the need to cast off the staid image of tradition in order to attract new audiences, while also reflecting an increasing climate of institutional self-criticism and observing political correctness. Interventions provide an opportunity for museums to reanimate sometimes tired-looking displays by adopting a fresher, contemporary approach. Artists are in turn offered an exciting challenge to show their work to a wider 'captive' audience who may be visiting a museum principally to view historical artifacts. In such a situation they are therefore inspired by the 'insider' possibilities of placing art in a non-art context. Mark Dion feels that for living artists the opportunity to collaborate with and show work in other types of museum as certain virtues over and above those fusing their work in a contemporary gallery: 'I think for artists in my general genre working with institutions is infinitely more exciting than working in a modernist white cube.'

The entrance hall provides an effective space for an exhibition since it offers an exhibition space with the potential to be visited by a museum's largest captive audience. This was demonstrated by Robert Kosuth's installation for the Brooklyn Museum's Grand Lobby, The Play of the Unmentionable (1990). The use of a social space (see p. 33), close to the outside world, provided a more immediate context for showing historical museum objects which would usually be found deeper within the building. His carefully chosen images which related to forms of censorship were juxtaposed with striking quotations stencilled directly on the wall. Museum visitors, many of whom were simply passing through the Grand Lobby while on their way to other galleries, were both intrigued and disturbed by the installation. In an interview at the time, Kosuth noted their response: 'Some people appear to be shocked that such things could ever appear in a museum. They tend to see a museum as an oasis away from the problems of the world; but my art has always tried to resist a position in which we're supposed to be passive consumers of culture – here it is, this is what it means. I refuse to do that. The viewers complete the work. They're the other half of the making of meaning.'
Artists who have been invited to create projects within museum collections often rearrange displays or introduce their own labels for exhibits as an accepted feature of their practice. In describing his exhibition *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors*, held at the Seattle Art Museum in 1993, Fred Wilson points out the importance of this essential dialogue set up by the fact of his work becoming an integral part of the existing display: 'I view museums as mixed metaphors and my installation [as] another way to mix them up. I was not given one particular space – rather I was given the whole museum as a site for my installation. My work was interspersed throughout and in juxtaposition with the museum’s permanent collections.' In this project he was concerned with challenging the notion that in museum terms the art of certain cultures is frequently viewed as dead rather than living. Among the elements he introduced were videos created by contemporary Native American artists which were shown in galleries displaying artifacts made by their forebears. His strategy of 'camouflaged' intervention proved both challenging and thought-provoking to visitors. Some might come across his installations unexpectedly, while others set out deliberately to find them, and there were inevitably those who missed them completely.

Wilson's interventions have also addressed sensitive racial issues. In *Mining the Museum*, held at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992, he created installations and rearranged the existing displays to illustrate concealed histories of slavery and racism in the state's colonial past. By making ironic juxtapositions of objects like a pair of slave shackles and examples of fine silverware (see p. 30), he demonstrated that such exhibits do in fact have a potential historical connection. Wilson's ability to grasp the essential character of an existing museum display, and to go with it rather than work against it, enabled him to get his message across with a surprising degree of subtlety and effectiveness. He was thus able to illustrate the way in which many unpleasant aspects of social history had been conveniently overlooked by the institution. His extensive research into the Museum's reserve collection and archives led to the discovery of many significant artifacts that had been considered either too unimportant or too confrontational to be exhibited. Often what museums put on view says a lot about the museum, but what they do not display says even more. I called the installation
“Mining the Museum” because it could mean mining as in a gold mine – digging up something rich with meaning – or mining as in land mine – exploding myths and perceptions – or it could mean making it mine.” Wilson’s groundbreaking exhibition was a collaborative project between the host museum and the museum for contemporary art in Baltimore, and it occupied the entire third floor, extending through a linked sequence of eight rooms.

The hidden histories of African-Americans are also alluded to in Rendi Green’s installation, Ageus (1981–92), at the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. This was a site-specific work created within the museum’s permanent collection as part of its ‘Insights’ exhibition programme.

Green’s work frequently challenges aspects of ethnic identities within cultural conventions, and Ageus was an examination of how the Worcester Museum’s sense of heritage had been formed. “My idea is to make some reference to existing objects in the museum. I’m considering how museums establish a national identity through acquisitions.”

Artists’ interventions do not necessarily involve changing permanent museum displays, and in practice existing gallery arrangements may well become an important feature of an installation. As the British Museum in 1994, Andy
Goldsworthy incorporated the ancient sculpture on display and the imposing architecture into Sandwork. He was one of twelve artists invited to create a response to the Museum’s Egyptian collection for the exhibition ‘Time Machine’, in which contemporary works in various media – painting, sculpture and video – were intermingled with the historical artifacts. The modern works needed to be carefully and sensitively sited to avoid giving offence to the British Museum’s regular visitors and, since the installation was staged in a principal gallery which also served as a through route leading to other departmental collections, it could be seen by potentially millions of visitors. Contemporary art interventions can be equally effective when seen in the more homely interiors of former private houses. Such sites and collections frequently reflect the character of the former occupants and can offer a more intimate context for a dialogue between them and a living artist. The Freud Museum in London has provided an evocative venue for contemporary artists to create site-specific installations in response to the aura surrounding one of the major thinkers of the twentieth century. These projects inevitably involve curatorial criteria in terms of matching appropriate artists with the inherent qualities of a particular museum site.

There are also occasions when artists have decided to make their own unauthorized interventions, either in response to the museum’s autonomy or as a result of having had their proposals or work rejected. One of the most brazen examples of an artist’s use of ‘guerrilla tactics’ was Jeffrey Vallance’s unofficial exhibition of paintings on electric wall-sockets at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1998. Artists have also used the galleries of major public museums to stage unofficial, ad hoc performances in which the collection itself or other property of an institution are incorporated in some way into their actions. In 1976, Dove Bradshaw affixed her own label to a glass-encased fire-hose

**DOVE BRADSHAW**

**PERFORMANCE**

Postcard edition of 1,000
1976

This work evolved from a label Bradshaw had composed and placed secretly next to a fire-hose in a principal gallery of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1976. Having photographed the ‘exhibit’, she went on to produce her own postcard, copies of which she placed unofficially in the Museum shop. These sold well, and eventually the Museum acquired Bradshaw’s original photograph, which was reproduced as the authorized version of the postcard.
Chapter VI

Ann Hamilton / Kathryn Clark

Installation at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
1991

The installation involved placing translucent wax panels inscribed with the names of extinct animals and plants over the gallery windows. It used the visual interplay between the inside and outside of the museum building to express the irony of mankind's urge to collect and preserve inert natural specimens within an institution while at the same time participating in the destruction of the living world beyond its walls.

In the Grand Gallery of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, her label identified the materials of the object, 'brass, paint, canvas', and herself as the artist. Although this was removed shortly afterwards, she persisted in replacing it and took a photograph of the firehose from which she produced a postcard edition. Bradshaw then went on to stock the postcard racks at the museum shop surreptitiously, and as a result her unofficial cards sold very well. As an ironic twist to this remarkable story, the Museum eventually acquired her original photograph from a collector and had it reproduced as the subject of its own 'official' postcard.

Andrea Fraser's authorised performance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk involved her masquerading as an official guide who offered tours of the museum. This was a work which infiltrated the museum's public services and incorporated both its site and its audience. Artists have also created their own tours of museum collections using the medium of the audio guide as a more intimate form of private engagement with the visitor. This might involve the artist's own interpretations of specific objects which serve to stimulate the visitor's imagination within the museum space. Rather than seek to interpret objects on display in the manner of conventional museum audio guides, Jamie Cardell has created a number of 'audio walks' for museums which can totally change the visitor's mental perception of the gallery surroundings by mixing words, music and sound effects in a fantasy tour.

For their collaborative installation called View at the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington (1991), the conscious merging of the museum's architecture into their installation was central to Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clark's working strategy: "The challenge of the Hirshhorn 'Works' project was to place work in or with a site that didn't isolate it but let it interact with the museum. Cultivate or mitigate our discussions about the site was a desire to create something that was emotional, as a contrast to our perception of the coldness of the building."

The Hirshhorn's circular form (suggestive of containment) and its close proximity to the Smithsonian Institution inspired the artists to examine the museum principle of collection and classification in the pursuit of knowledge. Taking advantage of the vast expanse of gallery windows, they covered the glass with several hundred translucent wax panels.
each embossed with the name of an extinct species of animal or plant. This had the effect of bathing the interior of the sculpture gallery with amber light. In their joint statement Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clark wrote: 'Those aspects of culture that are designed as valuable for collection are often at odds with what is actually valuable in daily life … If collecting is about the removal of objects to a hermetic context, then art that exists in the seams can introduce and remind us of all that cannot be preserved.'

Site-specific intervention in art museums can also be used to alter the context and framing by using constructions and deconstructions of existing exhibition spaces. This process was adopted by Michael Asher in two separate projects that he created for Chicago museums in 1979. At the Museum of Contemporary Art, he made an installation that consisted of eighteen aluminium plates which he had removed from the cladding of the museum façade. He had them hung like paintings on an interior gallery wall that was visible from the street through the glazed frontage. Although ironically made out of elements of the fabric of the Museum building, Asher’s installation was acquired to become part of the permanent collection. Using terms like ‘situational aesthetics’, Asher has described his work as ‘ … the subtraction of materials from the site of both production and reception …’. Artists have also made site-specific works that both interact with and incorporate the museum both as an architectural and institutional entity. In Une Enveloppe Peut en Cacher une Autre (One Container May Hide Another) at the Musée Rath, Geneva (1989), Daniel Buren covered part of the façade and sides of the building with his characteristic striped ‘paintings’. He was thus reversing the traditional situation of the edifice acting as the container for the artwork, so challenging and extending the physical confines of the institutional framework. Buren’s installation functioned simultaneously as the shell and core, and – perhaps most significantly – contested the notion of the museum as the final resting place of the art object.