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Exhibiting History in a Period of Presentism,
Or should we still be collecting archives?

As we have often discussed at ICAM, the situation of the founding moment of ICAM in 1979 and the situation today at nearly the mid-point of the second decade of the new millennium seem radically different. In 1979 no one could imagine the role that digital technologies would play in historical research and archiving or even in the very nature of what is collectable. The question is thus raised how does an institution heavily invested in its collections respond to a world in which collecting and the past seem to face waning interest, or do they?

We have often addressed the issue of the challenges of the digital and its preservation, but have shied away a bit from the perception of many that the audiences for historical subject has been in a free fall which has perhaps reached a tipping point. This is in some ways a problem specific to our own age of on-line 24/7 presentism, and an issue that has been around ever since museums sought to articulate the relationship between the historical and the contemporary, given that the contemporary is always changing. What is contemporary today will be historical in not such a near future. Currently on display in Frankfurt is a historical exhibition of the incredible collecting activity of Heinrich Klotz in the contemporary architecture of the 1970s and 1980s, along with a publication of his diary in which he imagined himself as the Vasari of the present, a kind of historical awareness of the present that it seems to me is quite the opposite of the culture of presentism that is a challenge to our work in collecting museums today when audiences regularly text in front of displays, at best instagraming a photograph of a work in the museum, or a selfie with a work, at worst simply unable to attain anything like the notion of Kantian aesthetic experience while awaiting a response to an SMS about a meeting point or anything outside the visual frame of the gallery.

Klotz was by no means the first curator to wonder about the relationship between vacuuming up the present and storing the past. As early as 1929, when the young art historian Alfred Barr, Jr. was asked to imagine a Museum of Modern Art by the founding trio of women collectors, the problem of how to develop a historical narrative and yet remain cutting edge and open to contemporary developments was posed. Barr proposed a museum that might be as radical in its acquisition policy as its de-acquisition policy, a policy rapidly abandoned so that today MoMA is in dire need of further storage space.

ICAM was founded in 1979, one year before the first dedicated architectural biennale was held in Venice, famously under the title “The Presence of the Past.” Even if Paolo Portoghesi’s Strada Novissima was produced by film set designers from
Rome’s Cine-Città – and thus were meant to vanish as rapidly as they appeared – that Biennale did signal an era in which the history of architecture was thought to be of enormous relevance to contemporary culture, no matter what one thought of post-modernism as it was being practiced. Where do things stay today when it would seem that despite all predictions of the radical decline in interest in history the current Venice architectural biennale, curated by Rem Koolhaas, is – in reaction to a decade of star architects -- under the banner of history again with the assignment to the national pavilions to excavate aspects of their history since the out-set of the Frist World War in 1914 to consider the theme of “Absorbing Modernity.”? “Previous Biennales,” Koolhaas explains, “have looked at architecture as a whole – trying to project the “full” picture, including context and politics. Here, we present micronarratives revealed by focusing systematically on the scale of the detail or the fragment. We uncover not a single. We uncover not a single, unified, history of architecture, but the multiple histories, origins, contaminations, similarities, and differences of those very ancient elements and how they evolved into their current iterations through technological advances, regulatory requirements, and new digital regimes.” Despite the fact that this is precisely what architectural history, influenced by such historians as Carlo Ginsburg and Robert Darnton have been doing for over 20 years, the critical reception is of a new research paradigm.

When I was trained as an art historian in the 1970s and early 1980s the notion was widely prevalent that the contemporary scene could only with difficulty be brought within the purview of art history; that it was nearly impossible to think historically about the present, to discern meaningful patterns among empirical observations. While that prejudice was gradually eroded, it still remains difficult to diagnose contemporary events as part of larger patterns without recourse to the quantitative methods of the social sciences. In the sense that there has been a rapid erosion of an interest in history from students in universities and audiences in museums, I can turn only to the most superficial evidence; a wider study would in fact be very worthwhile. It has certainly been my experience as both educator and curator that there has been a huge shift from a notion that there could not be an art history of the present still prevalent around 1980, to the feeling that only what is inflected towards illuminating the present is of interest.

Although the 1970s and 1980s saw an expansion of the teaching of architectural history at the graduate level in universities with the opening of a series of Ph.D. programs in English–language universities from the Americas to the South Pacific. In the United States, where traditionally architectural history had been a sub-specialty within departments of art history, the net result was an explosion of studies of the history of modernism and the recent past and a concomitant decline in the architectural history of earlier periods. Even the study of the 19th century which had flourished in the 1970s and early 1980s jointly fueled by the rise of historic preservation in urban centers rich in 19th century building stock and by the critique of modernism’s subordination of all study of earlier periods to genetic narratives – think of Pevsner’s Pioneers of the Modern Movement for instance or Sigfried Giedion’s Space, Time and Architecture – has gone into severe retraction in the last fifteen
years. If the 1980s were marked by a spike in Ph.D. programs in architectural history, the last few years has been characterized by the explosion of masters programs in curatorship. And here then the recent evolution of architectural studies focused on professional outlets in museums and galleries is of direct interest to the evolution in museums and architectural collections, for clearly the curricula and the expectations of these programs are meant to align with the interests of the architectural institutions gathered here. There are programs notably at Goldsmith's College of Art in London, the University of Reading, the University of Zurich, the Graduate School of Architecture at Columbia, and most recently the newly established “Curatorial Project,” in the Department of Architecture and Urban Design at UCLA. To quote from the Columbia web site, “The Masters of Science in Critical, Curatorial, and Conceptual Practices in Architecture is designed to offer advanced training in the fields of architectural criticism, publishing, curating, exhibiting, writing, and research through a two-year, full-time course of intensive academic study and independent research.” All of these programs have an exclusive focus on the contemporary, with a smattering of history of the modern movement in the 20th century. Nowhere on the web sites are any courses in history before 1920 or in historical method to be found. Curatorship is decidedly an activity about selecting, and organizing aspects of contemporary practice, one too in which increasingly the artists and the curators are both seen as creative voices, indeed as many have pointed out one in which often he curator seems to overshadow the very artists they are putting on display. Gone is the notion that a curator is someone who has training in the history of art and architecture and in the care and conservation of objects, which as Anthony Vidler pointed out back in the 1980s was the origin of the neologism conservateur, French for Keeper, during the years of the French Revolution when so many objects became detached from a context of origin in search of safe keeping in the relatively young concept of the public collection or museum. Are we at the other end of that great historical period which saw the rise of the museum of architectural artifacts, notably with Lenoir’s museum of fragments and Cassas’s museum of representations? Or are we in a period in which history as the framework in which artifacts were curated has yielded to other frames, other concerns, other future traditions?

How does all this align with the situation of architecture institutions with collections today, particularly at a time when statistics indicate than in general exhibitions of contemporary art – usually for hard core audiences a generation ago – are today overwhelmingly more popular and visited than all but a few displays of older art. In the United States there are two diverging trends that have been noted in recent years. While in general museums and historic sites have been steadily losing visitors, museums of modern and contemporary art in major cities with large tourist bases have reached states of almost intolerable crowding. In August of this year New Yorker critic Peter Schjeldahl writes “At what point does a widely shared yen for aesthetic engagement alter the character of that engagement? We’ve reached that point on many days at the Museum of Modern Art, where the crowds experience mainly crowdedness, and the Picassos and Pollacks take on the glazed miens of traumatized warriors …”
How to strike a healthy balance between the obvious relevance of much contemporary architectural practice, and the archiving and interpreting work on a larger historical spectrum of collecting institutions is not a problem unique to the field of architecture, or even of art and art history. A decade ago, in assuming the presidency of the American Historical Association, distinguished historian of the French Revolution Lynn Hunt offered her reflections on the challenges facing curricula and research profiles in University history departments under the title “Against presentism”. “Who isn't, you say?, she began, noting, “Hardly any "ism" these days has much of a scholarly following. Yet presentism besets us in two different ways: (1) the tendency to interpret the past in presentist terms; and (2) the shift of general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past. Although the first propensity was implicit in Western historical writing from its beginnings, it took a more problematic turn when the notion of "the modern" began to take root in the 17th century. Over time, modernity became the standard of judgment against which most of the past, even the Western past, could be found wanting. The second trend, the shift of interest toward the contemporary period, clearly has a connection to the invention of modernity, but it did not follow as much in lockstep as might be expected. As late as the end of the 19th century, and in some places even after that, students in history expected to study mainly ancient history and to find therein exemplars for politics in the present. Ten or fifteen years ago, survey courses routinely stopped at World War II. French historians still refer to history in the 16th–18th centuries as histoire moderne; for them "contemporary history" began in 1789, and until recently, it stopped about the time of World War I, the rest of the 20th century being consigned to the province of journalism rather than historical scholarship. I believe that the 20th century should be part of historical scholarship and teaching, of course, but it should not crowd out everything else.”

She concludes very tellingly, “Presentism, at its worst, encourages a kind of moral complacency and self-congratulation. Interpreting the past in terms of present concerns usually leads us to find ourselves morally superior; the Greeks had slavery, even David Hume was a racist, and European women endorsed imperial ventures. Our forebears constantly fail to measure up to our present-day standards.” And she finds hope in the popular appeal of historical topics, notably in television series, theme parks, etc. (although she doesn’t quite go far it is worth noting), and notes that “despite the great upsurge of interest in 20th-century and even post–World War II topics, students still take courses in ancient and medieval history. Whether motivated by escapism, nostalgia, a wish to study "elite" subjects, or just a desire for something "different," they readily throw themselves into another era. In this, they reflect the interests of the general public, which often resents the scholarly insistence on revealing all the foibles of past men and women. They don't always want history to teach them the inadequacies of people in the past or even to reassure them about their own identities in the present. It’s the difference of the past that renders it a proper subject for epic, romance, or tragedy-genres preferred by many …”

So how do we as museum professionals charged with collections respond to the challenges not only of presentism, but of the raging culture industry of contemporary
production? And along with it the phenomenon of proliferating bienales, the number of which has escalated over the past decades, all dedicated to celebrating contemporary practice and to some extent the locales in which they take place. Few have the conditions to exhibit documents – indeed one of the few pavilions this year at Venice to mount a historical show, star curator Hans Ulrich Obrist’s installation of Lucien Burckhardt and Cedric Price in the Swiss Pavilion (did you know that Price was Swiss?) used facsimiles, perhaps a welcome relief from miles and miles of digital scans and Xeroxes in most pavilions. Indeed one could perhaps take some cues from the success of this pavilion with its team of graduate students seeking to define a new interactive mode between up-dated museum docents and facsimiles of archival material, reminding us that in fact stimulating an interest in historical material has more to do with approach than with the foregone conclusion that the past has nothing to offer. Watching the Swiss pavilion in action I did vacillate between thinking "here is something to be learned and extended as a technique" to, if filmed this could make a great Monty Python skit, to a very common reaction I have in the projects of the new curatorial programs emerging everywhere were art and architecture are mere props in the sometimes desperate quest for novel "curatorship" – a new part of speech derived from the transfer of curator from noun to verb in the past decade. Watching the graduate students in action in the Swiss Pavilion made one wonder to what extent the much heralded innovation of this – like so much that goes on in today's curatorial programs – didn’t have a marvelous innocence of earnest people blissfully reinventing the wheel with a total lack of self-awareness. After all I spent many years a child in the 1970s handling fascimiles of art works in the wonderful education wing of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

One thing that the current Venice biennale has made clear is that there is an entire infrastructure in place to stage exhibitions on the architecture of the 20th century, particularly when it is cast as historical material relevant to the present. Ph.D. programs, journals, societies such as Docomomo, symposia, have mobilized a full range of resources and enthusiasms for the history of the recent past on a horizon of nearly 100 years. I am eager to hear what Guido Beltramini has to say about working with material that is some five hundred years old. I will only say in closing that despite all my expression here of anxiety over presentism, that the historical exhibitions we staged during my seven years as Chief Curator at MoMA were incredibly well received and attended. Part of course has to do with the captive audience at MoMA – from those who flock to any exhibition of contemporary art to those who would consider any visit to New York incomplete without seeing the masterpieces of the collections of painting and sculpture. If "Labrouste: Structure Brought to Light" which I organized, I should say curated, with Corinne Belier and Marc Le Coeur was in fact much better attended at MoMA than at the Cité de l'Architecture, where arguably people have a more immediate connection to the name of a 19th century architect primarily known for two libraries, it was because in Paris to visit the Cite expresses an intention to see an exhibition on architecture and to buy a ticket separate from entry to the permanent collection with its spectacular models and spectacular views of western Paris and the Eiffel Tower, whereas in New York, as a the Centre Pompidou, a single entrance ticket admits visitors to the permanent collection and to
the special exhibitions. The enormous popularity of that show was, of course as gratifying as it was unexpected. In 1975 the display of drawings from the 19th century pedagogical exercises of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts at the Museum of Modern Art was deeply controversial and even jokingly protested by guests at the opening wearing buttons distributed at the door by two architecture critics “Bring Back the Bauhaus”. But in 2013 in New York the Labrouste show as not only celebrated as a exquisite expose of an architectural intelligence manifest through drawing, but also found to have a timely resonance with the raging controversy over the New York Public Library’s proposal to strip its late 19th century metallic stacks from its Beaux-Arts building on 42nd Street.

I bring this to the fore to suggest that one can find visitors and interesting reception for debate for shows of historical material off the pilgrimage circuits of the biennale bonanza, even if preferably not too far from the masterpieces that are trophies of modern cultural pilgrimage for non-specialist audiences. And more to open, rather than to close the debate on history in the present, since I believe all good shows are meant to open a subject to renewed discussion rather than to seal debate with definitive conclusiveness. In closing I show you one of my talisman images for teaching, writing, and curating, the neon piece by Italian artist, Maurizio Nannucci here installed in Schinkel’s Altes Museum in Berlin, “All Art has been once contemporary.”