

Invisible Culture, Issue 11
Curator & Context
Introduction

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A person discerns meaning, significance, or value from every aesthetic encounter, as each art object is presented to the world laden with ideas. Yet the contexts of experiencing art, by working within or against authorial intention, affect one's impressions of it, perhaps producing incomplete or imperfect interpretations. Contexts can be personal, physical, architectural, natural, artificial, and textual. They range from the subjective perspective of the viewer and her physical stature in a space, to the structural and architectural dynamics of the viewing site, the flow of its galleries, color of walls, tactility of floors, and quality of light from the sky. Other contextual factors might include the placement of the object, its relationship to adjacent objects, and the atmospheric properties that emerge from the overall installation of an exhibition, such as communal responses from visitors, or the mood of the space given the functions of the environment and the actions of its users. Contexts can also be textual, particularly in the museum or in institutionalized exhibition spaces, with didactic panels, audio guides, brochures and handouts, educational programming, lectures, and catalogues. While many of these contexts are preexisting, accidental, or consequential, many others are purposely constructed by those who are not the artist, such as curators, writers, and architects.

The practice of curating and the presence of contexts reveal many realms of possibility in the making of meaning from art objects. As a rhetoric of framing, contextualization affects the object's identity, but it does not necessarily subsume it.¹ In

fact, the multiplicity of interpretation gives art its far-reaching resonance and enables the object to retain its identity in the face of infinite and always-present contexts:

The horizon, then, is what guarantees the identity of the object throughout the exploration; it is the correlative of the impending power my gaze retains over the objects which it has just surveyed, and which it already has over the fresh details which it is about to discover.²

Maurice Merleau-Ponty refigures context as a liminal and infinite horizon. There is a curiosity and hopeful openness to this notion, one that anticipates an interest in discussing the contemporary state of curatorial practice. The essays and projects that comprise this issue of *Invisible Culture* speak to this need, and constitute just a fragment of the ways in which the themes of curating and context can be expressed.

Austen Barron Bailly takes us into the modern American West from an insider's perspective by analyzing the traveling exhibition *The Modern West* as a curator at one of its venues. She defines the logistical and ideological considerations at stake in the display of paintings, photographs, and other projects by artists from or working in the region in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. By analyzing the curatorial decisions made for the exhibition's construction as well as the alterations enacted in the exhibit's subsequent venue, Bailly traces the push-pull between aesthetic and politics, revealing the trials and successes produced by the curatorial pursuit of an ideal, beautiful, ethical, and educational exhibition.

Amy Noell also analyzes her own curatorial project *Visualizing Trans*, an exhibition of contemporary art held in an industrial warehouse, a non-conventional exhibition site in Madison, Wisconsin. Noell deploys Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome as a theoretical model for the practice of curating. For Noell and her

curatorial partners, this theory offers a tangible way to articulate the varied applications of terms incorporating the prefix “trans” such as transgender, transculture, transnation, transsensory, and transhistory in contemporary art practice. Her essay depicts a physical and practical model for displaying art that is engaged in the boundaries of social, political, and cultural concerns.

Like Noell, Vince Dziekan examines “the spaces between” in his analysis of digital aesthetics and exhibition design, using an exhibition example that, he contends, spatially represents the notion of networks. Dziekan’s project is of particular interest as a format and methodology utilizing a visual layout. By illustratively mapping his argument, juxtapositions of word and image give way to textual connections, affording a more visually suggestive reading of the spatial relations between the visitor and the virtualized, digitized art object in the museum space.

In her essay, Lucia Vodanovic questions the very purpose of permanent museum architecture through an examination of Cedric Price’s ephemeral, decay-oriented, and often obsolescent projects. In an era of continual demolition and redesigned expansion of the contemporary museum, Price’s radical perspective on building and architecture seems against logic, and yet offers a productive way to approach the problems of museum design. After reading Vodanovic’s history of this work, one might imagine how Price’s counter-logic set a precedent for projects such as Alfredo Jaar’s one-day paper museum in Skoghall, Sweden and Thomas Hirschhorn’s Albinet Temporary Museum in Aubervilliers, France.

Moreover, permanence and durability are certainly central concerns as one builds an archive. In an insightful interview that delves into this process, Alison Mandaville

talks with Sandra Kroupa, curator of the University of Washington’s book arts collection, which holds more than 14,000 volumes. Through their dialogue, the curator is seen as an educator, investor, and architect of the collections that students, academics, and artists search for inspiration. Kroupa personifies the passion that drives the curatorial acts of selection, collecting, and the ongoing stewardship of art for archives.

Finally, Jo-Anne Duggan’s digital exhibition is an aesthetic embodiment of the notion of context with its rich images of Italian museum and palazzo interiors. Her photographs incorporate not only the age-old paintings that grace the walls but the sumptuous wallpapers, furniture, and gilded frames that contextualize visits to such museums. Here, the curators’ placement of canvases in frames and adjacent to lavish furnishings becomes itself a centerpiece, offering an apt illustration of the nature of viewing and experiencing art – an experience that is at once impossible to completely define but is also intrinsically full of possibility:

To see is to enter a universe of beings which *display themselves*, and they would not do this if they could not be hidden behind each other or behind me. In other words: to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it.³

¹ I borrow the phrasing “rhetoric of framing” from Paul Duro’s insightfully edited book *The Rhetoric of the Frame* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2002), 78.

³ Merleau-Ponty, 79.