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First Interview with MoMA's new director Glenn Lowry on modernising the Modern

Gertrude Stein asks: museum or modern? MoMA's director replies

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When Glenn D. Lowry stepped into the directorship of the Museum of Modern Art two years ago, the institution had reached a crucial juncture in its history. Bursting at its venerable seams, the world's top repository of twentieth-century art wanted desperately to expand and the board was negotiating for property next door that would allow the museum to double its space.

Whoever succeeded the then director Richard Oldenburg, a veteran of twenty-one years, would need to know how to lead a major construction project and how to fund-raise, but also be able to keep peace among a staff of 580 and a coterie of extremely independent minded curators.

The job description seemed very broad, and the board of trustees did flirt with the idea of hiring a paid president to handle fund-raising and administration, thereby leaving the director to deal

with curatorial affairs. Instead they opted to seek a single chief executive, and after numerous candidates turned down the job, they found the museum's sixth director in Mr Lowry.

He was lured away from the directorship of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto to which he added a 100,000 square foot expansion for which he raised \$58 million in the harsh climate of Canadian recession. Despite his administrative qualifications, the forty-three year-old Harvard PhD was a surprise, not least because his training was in Islamic art, not modernism.

At MoMA, Mr Lowry's lack of modern-art credentials seems however to have worked peculiarly in his favour. Painting and Sculpture department chief Kirk Varnedoe, deputy director for Curatorial Affairs John Elderfield, and other powerful members of the senior staff greeted their new boss warmly, relieved that he was a true administrator, not a frustrated curator. At the same time, having himself organised exhibitions, Mr Lowry was familiar with the curator's role and is dedicated to a high level of scholarship.

Mr Lowry is now subtly transforming the museum with a newly democratic management style. Until shortly before he arrived, the six departments were, as one curator puts it, "balkanised"—each its own fiefdom protective of its own turf. "Now", says Mr Elderfield, "there's more interaction among the departments and more debate about how these different voices can be orchestrated. We're not six museums on one site anymore". The newly inclusive approach is reflected in the increased number of meetings, but opening up the decision-making process has not meant that Mr Lowry is not in charge. The day-to-day operating of the institution remains the director's responsibility.

The largest single item on Mr Lowry's plate is, however, the construction project and its associated fund-raising (see *The Art Newspaper*, No. 67, February 1996, p.10). The new building will let the museum show more of its collection as well as improve library and archives, storage and conservation.

Mr Lowry will have to deal with making the Modern more modern. An often quoted remark attributed to Gertrude Stein says that a museum can either be a museum or it can be modern. Mr Lowry's task is to prove her wrong.

Last year the Museum of Modern Art purchased a \$50 million parcel of land next to the present building so that the museum can double its space. How does this affect the museum's aims?

Glenn Lowry Our mission is to increase the appreciation, understanding, and enjoyment of

modern art. The nature of this place is to be a meeting ground of ideas, of art and of people.

What we want to do now is to revise how we present our collections, and rethink the whole relationship of public spaces to gallery spaces. At present, for example, our spaces are organised along a single “spine” provided by the rising escalators of the garden hall. There are no options but to follow the route laid out by this spine and the same is true once you enter the galleries and are compelled to move in a purely linear fashion from one space to the next.

With the new space we hope to be able to create a layout that is more “responsive,” or “open” in the sense of providing our visitors with choices of how they can move through the building and experience the galleries.

How will the display change?

I think we will probably rethink whether or not our permanent-collection galleries should be organised on a purely departmental basis. There will always be specific spaces devoted to departmental initiatives, and we will still have curators of specific media. (There is a difference between the way one collects and cares for objects, and how one displays them.) But I think there will be a much more integrated, seamless set of relationships between the departments that endeavours to deal with the larger questions of modern art.

Throughout its history, the museum has established a chronology that incorporates certain key works. Will you still have a permanent-collection chronology?

There will be a core dimension of the permanent collection that seeks to articulate a chronology, but it will no longer be the chronology; rather, a chronology. It will recognise that the history of modern art is much more complex and varied than what we have traditionally presented.

Will the chronology expand to include other artists?

Our collection is sufficiently large that even if we double the number of works of art we can show as a result of the expansion, it is still going to be an infinitesimal fraction of the total size of our collection. Therefore, we are more focused on how we show our collection and the kinds of issues we can raise in the displays. So, it is likely that we will show a broader range of artists than we currently show.

The canonical timeline now brings us up to the 1960s. Which artists will extend it into the following

decades?

One of the main reasons for this expansion is to be able to present, much more contemporary art than has been possible up till now. We have been building a major collection that has only been glimpsed infrequently. Over the last couple of years alone we have acquired major works by Kcho, Mona Hatoum, Rachel Whiteread, Bruce Nauman, Tony Oursler, Cy Twombly, Glenn Ligon, Bill Viola, Wolfgang Laib, Gerhard Richter, and Ellsworth Kelly, not to mention having just purchased a complete set of Cindy Sherman's Film Stills, Andy Warhol's thirty-two Campbell Soup cans, James Rosenquist's "F111", and, of course, Elaine Dannheisser recently gave us her collection with its superb works by Robert Gober, Bruce Nauman, and Jeff Koons, among others.

Will the collecting mission be refocused on contemporary art?

Long before I came here, the museum shifted the principal emphasis of its collecting interest to the last twenty-five or thirty years, as opposed to the first twenty-five or thirty years of the century. We must have the broadest and the finest collection of modern and contemporary art possible. But we are already focused on contemporary art. (Our funds are divided by department, not by time period). One has only to look at our exhibition programme to see that there has been a real shift.

Are there any plans to collect and exhibit modern art from other regions of the world?

We have a deep interest in Japan in terms of architecture and design, video, film, and to a lesser degree in terms of printmaking, drawing and illustrated books.

The museum began by exploring the artistic achievement primarily of Europe at the turn of this century, and particularly the work of artists like Picasso and Matisse, and architects like Gropius and Mies van der Rohe.

But we have never seen ourselves as only focused on Europe; rather, we have been looking for different expressions, different modalities of modern art that we find of interest. We don't feel that we have an obligation to be encyclopaedic.

That said, a recent grant from the Aga Khan Award for Architecture has enabled us to look at new developments in contemporary architecture throughout the Muslim world and I suspect that this will lead to exhibitions and acquisitions in this area. Similarly, a curatorial travel fund

established by Gustavo and Patty Cisneros will permit our curators to explore recent trends in Latin America and Caribbean art.

Has the museum's considerable involvement with Latin American art been the result of perceived affinities with European art?

In the main, yes. But also because there was a sense that something important was taking place, in Mexico in particular, but elsewhere in Latin America during the first half of the century. The Museum of Modern Art was interested in Latin America from the start.

Is it MoMA's policy to organise the shows that it presents?

No, but it is the policy to prefer to organise or co-organise our exhibitions for the simple reason that we have a research staff and curatorial expertise devoted to developing exhibitions. But we are always open to collaborations.

MoMA has been very much involved in defining the history of modern art. Do you think of the museum as creating the history of modern art or simply as collecting and reflecting what is happening?

The nature of this institution over the last sixty years is that it has played such an important role in the process of collecting and defining what constitutes modern art, that it, of course, has helped create modern art's history. I don't think we are simply a mirror. We are a curatorially driven institution, which means that we are driven by ideas and by making discerning judgements about what we feel is important. We were, after all, the first museum to look at architecture and design, at film, at painting, drawings, and sculpture, prints and illustrated books as a whole—to recognise that modern art was far more complicated, far broader in its reach than what had been traditionally defined as the role of a museum.

Our goal is to ensure that our public has an opportunity to see and explore what we believe to be the most engaging and interesting art of the day. If we do this well, we will inevitably influence what our public, and perhaps a larger public, thinks about contemporary art.

1996 income

\$60 million budget, of which:

Income from \$8.7 million

\$250 million endowment

Membership \$5.4 million

Annual giving \$15 million

Admissions \$6.6 million

Circulating exhibition \$2.4 million

fees

The balance from various sources including retailing

Who's in charge

Administrators

Chairman: Ronald Lauder, 53, President and c.e.o. of Estée Lauder; MoMA trustee since 1976; President: Agnes Gund, 57, Collector and philanthropist, heiress to Cleveland banking fortune; MoMA trustee since 1976; Director: Glenn Lowry, 43, Harvard-trained Islamicist, former director of the Art Gallery of Ontario; MoMA director since 1994.

Curatorial department chiefs

Chief curator at large and deputy director for curatorial affairs: John Elderfield, 54, MoMA curator since 1975; Painting & Sculpture: Kirk Varnedoe, 50, MoMA curator since 1985; Drawings: Margitt Rowell, MoMA curator since 1994; former curator at the Pompidou Centre 1983-87, 1991-94; Reina Sofía 1990-91; Fundacio Joan Miró 1987-89; Guggenheim 1969-83; Prints & Illustrated Books: Deborah Wye, MoMA curator since 1979; Photographs: Peter Galassi, 46, MoMA curator since 1986; Architecture & Design: Terrence Riley, MoMA curator since 1991; former practicing architect; Film: Mary Lea Bandy, MoMA curator since 1976.

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