

'Museums & Present-Day Art'



CAA Panel, Feb. 2, Washington, DC

□ Hilton Kramer, the *New York Times* art critic, conducted this panel, with William Lieberman of MOMA and Martin Friedman, director of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

It was conducted at a brisk pace, featured some unthreatening questions from the audience, and finished abruptly to accommodate the airline schedules of the panelists.

Since the title was announced originally as "Museums and the Reality Principle," the masochistic artist-listener expected an adrenalin-rousing discourse on exhibition politics, how artists are chosen or ignored, the manipulations of trustees, the perfidy of curators and their lovers, etc. Instead, the Reality Principle of the panel, quite reasonably, concerned the costs of running a museum, the problems of attracting a broad public, and, having done so, how not to go broke being popular.

Kramer sees the task of a museum as changed over the past 30 years, from an agency showing classics of modern art to an institution whose function is to introduce new and emerging artists and movements as well.

Friedman pointed out that the total exhibition program must be constructed to build a pattern of shows that are "ongoing reportages of art." A museum, he maintains, must never schedule a series of one-artist shows, but must alternate single artists with classical modernism and a diversity of media. He refers to "crucial examples" from the past as essential to intelligent shows of classical modernism (such as Cubism, Futurism, or the Cezanne show). These examples are then reinterpreted in the light of today's taste.

Friedman emphasized his idea of several museum audiences; first, the continuing audience in the habit of museum-going; second, the specialized audience drawn to certain media such as photography, design, or architecture; and third, the first-time audience, brought by the publicity for a special show, such as King Tut. Even though museums plan shows of what they think has ongoing significance, the Reality Principle does not allow them to ignore the existence of these separate audiences.

Kramer: To what extent do you perceive "box-office" considerations entering into the choice of museum shows?

Lieberman [the most *soigné*, detached, and ironic of the three]: More important than it used to be, because more corporations are funding the shows and they see popularity as the yardstick of success. Titles are important for shows. MOMA doesn't have the money today to do shows with no large-audience appeal.

Friedman [conscious of audience of CAA members, after all]: We cannot limit programming to "the popular."

Audience member addressing Kramer, referring to his article about art museums run as businesses: What about the businessman as top director, over the curator?

Kramer responded by paraphrasing Alan Shestack of Yale, who said that every decision made in a museum, including the collection of garbage, is an aesthetic decision.

Lieberman thinks the divided leadership running the Metropolitan seems to be working, but Friedman objects to this system. He feels strongly that the chief officer of a museum should be a scholar and art historian,

that the core of a museum must be "artistic," and that artists and art historians are "not necessarily" financial morons. Perhaps, he concedes, very large museums involved in big investment funds and city politics are exceptions to the rule of scholars.

Kramer sees museum trustees as failing in their responsibilities these days. They ought to worry more, not less, he says, and they prefer a financial type at the helm because they have less work if the administration belongs to the "world of money" rather than scholarship. He pointed out drily that we must view with alarm the results of America's leading universities, publishing houses, and newspapers being run by "administrators" instead of scholars, men of letters, and journalists. We should not let the future of museums go the same way.

Next the panel took up the question of corporate support, and what that means to new artists. Lieberman conceded that it is very hard to raise funds to show contemporary work. Most corporations prefer the work of the past. It is safer, attracts a larger audience, and causes less controversy. The British Council, he points out, gives funds to MOMA to show British artists, not just any artists, and the few private donors left are nervous about the new and unknown.

All three panelists made the point several times that art is a commodity, vying for the "leisure time" of audiences, in competition with movies, theatre, sports, and so forth, and that the need to attract mass audiences brings unending new problems.

To an audience question about the profitability of the Cezanne show at MOMA, Lieberman said that MOMA *loses* \$2 for each person who walks in and buys a ticket. The popularity of a show like Cezanne is offset by the expense of extra guards, attendants, etc. In fact, MOMA closes one day a week to save money. He agreed that boards of trustees today still view themselves as a "club" of art-sponsors. Since the museums get public money they must justify their activities to the community at large.

To what extent does this affect aesthetic decisions? asked Kramer. Or, as one audience member put it, "Isn't this concern for the mass audience making an art museum a media event, rather than an art event?"

Friedman conceded that this was largely so, and hoped to find ways to solve the problem. One answer might be to schedule a "younger artist" show at the same time as a Cezanne blockbuster to catch the larger audience.

The panel also addressed questions of catalog expenses, the trend toward elaborate labeling, extended graphics, and long cassettes; also the difficulty of looking at works with too many people at the popular hours. In short, to educational "overkill." Popularity of the museum experience can carry the seeds of its own destruction, and newer artists might one day have no place to show.

Friedman suggested that university museums and alternative spaces might be an answer—for lesser-known artists.

The panel ended all too briskly just as this last topic ripened for discussion, the participants having to catch planes to fulfill their appointed rounds. One thing is certain: artists may rise and fall and rise again, but the institutionalization of art is here to stay.

—Abby Goell

Art Bank Liability

□ "Deaccession," a provision of the *Art Bank Bill* recently before Congress, was the most controversial aspect of the bill and the one most frequently protested by artists. As the bill was originally written, an artwork acquired by the Bank could be auctioned off "at the discretion" of a museum. Although theoretically an artist had the option of buying the work back at "original price plus one half the appreciated value," in practice this could have been a serious burden to many artists.

According to the office of Sen. Harrison Williams, the *Art Bank Bill* is now being re-written; lawmakers are "looking very hard at the buy-back issue" and "investigating whether there is a need for deaccession at all." These modifications seem to be a direct result of protests made by artists and the concerned public—a reminder, if one is needed, of the importance of artists' keeping a voice in politics.

One of the most eloquent of these artists' voices is June Wayne's. The following excerpts from her letter to Sen. Williams' office detail the pitfalls of deaccession.

If an artist is obliged to buy back a work at the price the Art Bank paid for it, the artist also loses the substantial commission that will have gone to the dealer who handled the transaction. . . . In my experience the majority of artists (however young) have some kind of agreement with a dealer. These usually include the responsibility of the artist to forward a commission to the dealer (!) if the artist makes a sale directly. The more fragile the career of the artist, the more unfavorable the agreement. Therefore a good half (if not more) of purchases made by the Art Bank will involve commissions to dealers.

Assuming an artist sells a work to the Bank for \$5,000, the following attrition takes place:

—Commissions range from 33% to 60%. Averaging at 45%, the artist pays the dealer \$2,250.

—The artist will pay approximately 12% in income taxes—about \$330.

—The artist will have paid overhead in making the art; also, probably, shipping to the Bank, travel, etc.

—The artist will have invested many hours of creative time.

You can see that buying back the work costs the artist much more than what was received. In addition:

—The object may have been damaged.

—If the sale is rescinded, no income will have been received for the work during its years in the Bank.

—The artist cannot depreciate the work as he or she could by renting it.

—The artist must have the \$5,000 for a buy-back, either putting aside some capital for that purpose, or borrowing it at interest unpredictable at any given moment.

—If the artist does *not* repurchase the work, having it auctioned or "deaccessioned" could be a public humiliation, with possible toxic effect on the artist's career at that time. ■

Evelyn Britton, 1919-1979

New York City artist Evelyn Britton died of leukemia in February. She was a charter member of Womanart Gallery, a member of the Art Students League, and president of One Star Ltd. Theatrical Productions.