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Exit MASS MOCA

It looks as if the farce known as MASS MOCA is finally over, a casualty of its own inanition and a symbol of the spendthrift ambitions—long on hype and swagger and short on substance—that characterized so many of the excesses of the contemporary art scene in the 1980s. MASS MOCA—the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art—never actually existed, of course, as anything but a bureaucratic and public relations fantasy. The likelihood of its ever existing in palpable and functioning form, moreover, was always exceedingly remote. Yet for several years the illusion of its viability persisted in the press, in certain circles of government, and in the overreaching imagination of the people who dreamed up this bizarre project, which promised to bring to one of the most woebegone areas of the depressed New England economy the biggest (in size) and most parochial (in aesthetic outlook) museum of contemporary art in the world.

MASS MOCA never was a viable idea. What this chimera was supposed to consist of was the transformation of an abandoned twenty-eight-building factory complex in the town of North Adams, Massachusetts, into a world-class museum of mostly 1960s Minimalist art. The scenario called for this elephantine enterprise to be the joint venture of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and the state of Massachusetts. The cost was projected at around $77 million just to open the doors—among many other problems, a good deal of toxic waste would have to be removed from the site—with $35 million coming from the "Massachusetts Miracle" economy of the then governor, Michael S. Dukakis.

Remember the Massachusetts Miracle? It was to the political economy of New England what MASS MOCA has been to the world of contemporary art museums—a publicist's invention masquerading as a proud public achievement. There never was any Massachusetts Miracle; there was only subterfuge and debt. There never was any MASS MOCA, either; there was only smoke and mirrors. The vast spaces of those converted factory buildings in North Adams were to be filled with loans of Sixties Minimalist art—Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, et al.—from the collection of Count Panza di Biumo, and we were asked to believe that the audiences that flock to Tanglewood each summer to listen to the symphonies of Beethoven and Brahms would be eager to spend their daylight hours gorging themselves on Judd boxes and Flavin fluorescent-light tubes.

And all the while the economically beleaguered citizens of North Adams were told that this fantasy project would bring prosperity to their town, with mobs of free-spending tourists filling not only the mammoth museum but the motels, the restaurants, the shops, the luxury apartments, etc., that would be built as part of the deal.

The principal beneficiary of this fantasy deal turned out to be Count Panza, who sold, not lent, a sizable part of his Minimalist collection to the Guggenheim Museum. (To pay for it, the Guggenheim had to sell a Kandinsky, a Chagall, and a Modigliani out of its permanent collection, so the New York art public ended up footing at least part of the bill for the MASS MOCA dream scenario.) Then it turned out that the collection acquired by the Guggenheim from Count Panza wasn't entirely real, either. Many of the acquired "works" consisted of sketches on paper that had never been made, and couldn't be made without the permission and supervision of the artists, which were not likely to be forthcoming. In the end, the Guggenheim Museum refused to go along with the fantasy project, the state of Massachusetts proved to be bankrupt, and MASS MOCA just another Eighties art world debacle.

The author of the debacle—Thomas Krens, who came into the directorship of the Guggenheim Museum with the promise of this mega-Guggenheim branch museum in North Adams—has come out of it pretty well, too. He is now busily at work selling the idea of other Guggenheim outpost branches in Austria, Italy, Japan, and—well, who knows where? Another collaborator in the MASS MOCA dream project—David Ross, the former director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston who served on the MASS MOCA Cultural Planning Commission—has come out of this debacle with something, too. He got the directorship of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. So two of New York's most important museums of contemporary art are now under the leadership of the men who brought us the MASS MOCA fantasy—yet another example, perhaps, of nothing succeeding like failure.

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