Mega-museum vs. art museum

In *The Voices of Silence* (1952), André Malraux speculated that advances in photography and printing were on the brink of ushering in the age of the museum without walls, putting at our fingertips resources that would carry infinitely farther that revelation of the world of art which the real museums offer within their walls.

Yes, well. It has turned out, of course, that walls are the one thing museums cannot get enough of. Everywhere one looks, museums are engaged in ambitious (i.e., huge and expensive) expansions. This is especially true of that vaguely oxymoronic phenomenon, the museum of contemporary art. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum—what might be more accurately called the Guggenheim Consortium—was a pioneer in this dubious development. Under the entrepreneurial directorship of Thomas Krens, the museum did not simply expand, it went global, consigning its permanent collection of modernist masterpieces to adjunct status and adding outlets, that is, branches, not only in SoHo but also around the world. The most recent one is Frank Gehry’s titanium-clad structure in Bilbao, Spain, which gobbled up a season’s worth of adulation and publicity.

If the Guggenheim was in the vanguard, other institutions have been quick to catch up. Consider the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Some months ago in this space, we reported on MOMA’s new plans to embark on the largest expansion in its sixty-year history. It somehow seemed appropriate that part of the expansion was to be into space now occupied by an abandoned hotel: here today, gone tomorrow might well be the motto of many museums of modern art these days. More and more, it seems, museums are bent on what MOMA’s director Glenn D. Lowry described--apparently without irony--as privileging the contemporary. What this means in practice, we pointed out, is that the museum will compromise on its curatorial obligations for the sake of more ephemeral rewards: publicity, box office triumphs, and what Tina Brown has taught us to call buzz.

Museums in other countries, too, have been quick to follow suit. London’s Tate Gallery is a case in point. The museum recently opened large branches in Liverpool and St. Ives; it is undertaking a gigantic expansion of its home galleries in Millbank, London; and it is in the concluding stages of converting a huge disused power station directly across from St. Paul’s in Bankside into the Tate Gallery of Modern Art at a cost of £134 million (due to open in May 2000). When Tate officials
came to New York last spring to publicize their new museum of modern art—the presentation, appropriately, was held at MOMA—they might as well have been announcing a new theme park for the Disney company. Attendance figures loomed large in the presentation: we forget how many millions of visitors per year were predicted. A slick video was shown that might have been advertising the latest copy machine or roadster. Our tour of the construction site in London this summer did nothing to dispel the impression of the higher hucksterism. We predict that, like so many industrial spaces that have been converted into art galleries, the best thing about the Tate Gallery of Modern Art will be its building.

This is small consolation, however. For at the Tate, as at MOMA and virtually every other gallery or art museum devoted to contemporary art, a battle is being waged. It is a battle to determine the basic principles that will guide museums in the coming decades. Will connoisseurship and aesthetic discrimination provide the lead? Or will publicity considerations be allowed to trump artistic considerations? Will quality prevail? Or will quantity triumph?

We are not optimistic. For not only have museums of modern and contemporary art rushed to embrace "the new" or what they believe to be new at any cost, but similar imperatives are increasingly at work at traditional art institutions. An especially grim augury was the news that Malcolm Rogers, the director of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, had undertaken a program of what we might call "aesthetic cleansing." At the end of June, Mr. Rogers suddenly announced that the museum, in addition to embarking on a huge building program, was going to be "restructured." He eliminated eighteen positions, summarily dismissed two highly regarded and long-serving curators (one day they were told to clean out their desks and be gone by 3:00 P.M.), and amalgamated the museum's departments into what The New York Times rightly called "mega-departments," organized not according to medium but geographically. The New Art of the Americas department, the Times reported, unites the departments of American paintings, American decorative arts and pre-Columbian art, while Art of Europe combines European paintings and European decorative arts. The message could not be clearer: at the Museum of Fine Arts, multicultural goulash would henceforth be given priority over aesthetics and art historical scholarship. An art gallery, André Malraux also wrote in The Voices of Silence, is one of the places which show man at his noblest. That was in 1952. We wonder what, were he still with us, he would say about the art gallery of today.