



## **Roundtable Discussion on the “New Whitney” - August 7, 2015**

*The Whitney Museum of American Art was founded in 1930 by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney with the primary intention of serving artists. The original space featured art studios, a school, and a recreation lounge where artists could socialize with one another. In 1966, the Whitney moved to Madison Avenue and E. 75th St., where it became neighbor to world-class art institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. The Whitney’s uptown home was designed by Marcel Breuer and has often been compared to a fortress, because of its domineering concrete exterior and its placement among the crowded high-rises of the Upper East Side. After five years of construction downtown, the museum has finally moved into its new space on Gansevoort Street, in the Meatpacking District, where it sits at the intersection of New York’s blue-chip art galleries and the high-fashion district which has recently descended on the cobblestoned area once defined by the Hudson River’s port factories. The “New Whitney” opened to the public on May 1, 2015, with a debut rehang of its permanent collection that occupies four floors and is entitled “America is Hard to See” (May 1—September 27, 2015).*

**Allison Young:** One interesting way to start might be to compare the experience of entering and moving through the space. What’s different about your experience as a visitor to the new space on Gansevoort, as opposed to the Upper East Side?

**Julia Pelta Feldman:** Well, it’s impossible to avoid how much more commercial the new site is—the “largo,” as they optimistically call it—in which you actually see the restaurant before you realize you’re at a museum.

**Dana Liljegren:** It’s true. I agree with that.

**AY:** I think that Untitled, the restaurant in the old building, was only created fairly recently, too.

**JPF:** Well, they had a café before then. But it was clearly not a space that had been designed for a restaurant.

**DL:** Exactly, and it was tucked away. It wasn’t one that greeted you on your arrival the way it happens in the new space.

**JPF:** Exactly. It's obvious enough that museums have, for whatever reasons, increasingly had to emphasize things like restaurants. The museum is no longer even primarily a space to see art. It's a place where maybe you'll see some art, maybe you'll see a movie, maybe you'll get dinner, maybe you'll meet a friend, maybe you'll buy a book.

**DL:** It's true. I think back on the time when museums were once on a similar level as libraries, for instance, as a space that one would enter with a degree of reverence and quiet contemplation, reflecting on what's around in a solitary, meditative state. With this new emphasis on social spaces, and places where you can see and be seen, it feels as if that museum-going experience is being replaced by something dramatically different.

**JPF:** And always in the name of being nicer to the public and giving the public what they want.

**AY:** I have to say, though, that even with the presence of the café on the top floor, and those commercial spaces below, one of my first impressions of *America is Hard to See* was that the top floor actually did feel very quiet and contemplative. Of course, it inevitably will feel different from the contemporary art floor, where you hear the clanking of the Joan Jonas video and the loud TVs, so this might just be a marker of how art has changed at the same time as museums have evolved. So when we're seeing art that was created before the commercialization of museums and the art world, that art necessarily brings you into more of a contemplative space.

**JPF:** Well, I will say that I was very impressed that the installation was clearly very sensitive to the kind of work being displayed. There was not only one format or one idea of how a group of paintings is supposed to look. Even the fact that the eighth floor is a smaller scale is really nice, so that basically everything pre-Abstract Expressionism is not hung in the giant airplane-hangar spaces that predominate downstairs and that have become the default for contemporary art spaces. Earlier works look ridiculous and tiny in those spaces, since, of course, artists wouldn't have conceived of them when they were working in the 1910s.

**DL:** I think that's a great point, actually. The spaces in which art lives are evolving in the same way that art itself is. And the dialogue that exists between a work of art and its home, so to speak, is changing in that same fashion.

**JPF:** I thought the question had been settled when the new MoMA building opened in 2004, and it became clear that this was a building for a very particular kind of art—giant contemporary works—that struggles to do justice to anything else. It seemed that the art world had finally gotten the message when, for example, the Drawing Center decided not to move into a brand-new building, to

keep their small, adapted space, which was universally lauded. Now it seems to me that the Whitney hasn't learned much from the Taniguchi problem. Which is to say that this building mostly seems designed for the particular art of the moment, and will likely seem dated in five years. The best example with MoMA is its atrium, which never made any sense to me until I realized that the big show when the new museum opened was the Richard Serra show. And if you're planning a giant Richard Serra retrospective, as Kynaston McShine was at that point, then of course you want this giant space—but everything else that hasn't been directly commissioned for it looks ridiculous. To one degree or another, every new museum building I've seen suffers from the same shortsightedness. Architecture can't afford to be so trendy.

**DL:** I would actually argue that the Whitney does a better job of this. For instance, just looking around at the space when I was in it, it was clear to me that on certain floors, they were making good use of temporary walls, which looked specifically constructed or adaptable for a given hanging.

**AY:** I'm curious about how the gallery space will be adapted in the future. The galleries are so beautifully light-drenched; but it will be necessary for curators to have the option of creating different configurations of spaces, such as more black box spaces for films and videos. But that expansion in the sheer amount of square footage is certainly one merit of the new building. You finally have the space to devote whole rooms to installations like Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al.* or Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*.

**JPF:** You're right, that's something they couldn't do in the old building. It didn't really have the space for exactly the things that you mention, the Hans Haacke or Nan Goldin. But those were really rare, actually. Overall, you mostly encounter a single giant room, with a few partitions, and I found it really disorienting. One of our topics for consideration was the relative freedom or closed-ness of the circuit. To me it's a little too open. You're sort of wandering from space to space. It's almost like you can wander forever.

**AY:** This made it difficult with regards to the chronological hang, because there was the narrative that began where you would exit the elevator, and there was the narrative that began when you came inside from the outdoor terraces.

**DL:** Exactly. I felt that my experience of moving from top to bottom, floor to floor, made the chronology of twentieth century American art legible. Then on each individual floor, there were pockets that, as you mention, seemed to want to guide you in a specific way. But throughout, as in the sixth floor, which featured Pop Art and Minimalism, there were sequestered rooms, like the one devoted to RAW/WAR. And this light-drenched quality, I think, is such an interesting way to compare and contrast the Breuer building with this new space, because it's such

a prominent feature of the new space. In these terraced, sun-filled spaces, you feel naturally pulled in that direction, as the work that's installed on those terraces also wants your attention.

**JPF:** There's a lot of lip service given to free circulation. but who actually wants that? Who are these people, who are so sick of "chronological exhibitions"? I love them! I love them as an expert on the art I'm seeing, and I love them when I'm completely ignorant of the art I'm seeing. I am very pleased that the hang was so coherent chronologically, that it grouped things together by time and space.

**AY:** Right. I think that by moving chronologically in this way, the curators allowed the timeline to really open up and reveal its hidden crevices. We might think that a chronological hang in this instance would be equivalent to a hang according to the development of style, but those are, of course, two different histories that are usually mapped onto each other when we tell the history of art. So when you're looking at any decade, obviously there are some art historical "trends" or dominant styles, but there's also a visual culture of the political and the vernacular. There are artists who are not canonical who are creating posters, who are taking photographs for advertisements. We're able to see, now, how we've mapped art history over the twentieth century, but also to see what gets forgotten or covered up.

**JPF:** Yeah, exactly.

**AY:** It's also a question of whether the Whitney can tell the story of Modernism *and* a regional story of artistic development.

**JPF:** That's a big question.

**AY:** Holland Cotter, in his review of the new Whitney, points out that the exhibition opens with a pair of Marsden Hartley paintings, which betray the influence—on an American artist—of what he saw in Berlin. The exhibition opens with the complex question, it seems, of American art's relationship to European Modernism at large. Yet several works nearby tell a different, more local story, of America's own "machine aesthetic," and the impact of industry on the city and on the rural landscape. This really brought to light the competing ambitions of a museum whose collection overlaps with those of modern art museums like MoMA or the Tate, but which is restricted geographically, in this case to American art. Perhaps "defining America" can be the next topic. How can the Whitney tell a social history at the same time as it chronicles the development of Modernist and post-Modernist style, which is an inherently international history?

**JPF:** I'm not very concerned by the omnivorousness of the way they answer the question of what defines an American artist, as long as it doesn't become

nationalist. Or about claiming, for example, that Lyonel Feininger is *either* a German artist or an American artist. It shouldn't be a competition.

**DL:** That's another thing I noticed about the eighth floor; there were a number of European-born artists represented, who expanded their careers in the US and died in the US and therefore fall under this umbrella of American art.

**JPF:** But those artists remain less "controversial" as Americans than . . .

**AY:** Nam June Paik?

**JPF:** Paik is a great example! Paik, I think, is quite interesting, because he had a retrospective at the Whitney in 1982. That was an early moment for the Whitney to be saying that this Korean-born, Japanese- and German-trained artist was now an American! And there's something to be said for that. As long as it doesn't become about how great America is.

**AY:** I don't think they have any interest in doing that. It seems, at least, from their new hang of the collection, that there is such an emphasis on how decidedly *un*-great America can be sometimes. This is reflected in the Whitney's own institutional history, which has been progressive at times, as the curators are eager to remind us.

**JPF:** I wasn't crazy about the way that they present their own history. It seemed unnecessarily self-aggrandizing. They do have a wall text which mentions some of their own exhibitions, which I think is legitimate, because this kind of exhibition history is inevitable in any big rehang like this. But they ended up suggesting that everybody who criticized their controversial shows, like the 1993 biennial or *Black Male* (1994), was simply uncomfortable talking about race. And this is just not true; not all the criticisms leveled against those shows were illegitimate. Roberta Smith, for example, had a very evenhanded review of the '93 biennial.

**AY:** In that review, she also contemplated the changing relationship between politics and art in the midst of an enormous shift in contemporary art. That show really challenged the orthodoxy of what viewers were accustomed to seeing in museums. In hindsight, the Whitney had really embraced, against popular taste, art that was political, art that commented on social topics, art as protest.

**JPF:** Which was very much on view here, on every floor, and I did appreciate that.

**DL:** I was pleasantly surprised to see the number of women artists represented in the current hang. And again, this is maybe an obvious comment, but I did find it

fascinating that we see an enormous Lee Krasner hung opposite a relatively small Pollock.

**JPF:** That was one of those statement moments where the thesis was clear: “Sorry! Sorry! Here’s our giant Krasner!”

**DL:** I think that strategy was apparent throughout other groups.

**JPF:** Something that they did quite admirably on every floor was to combine the must-see “greatest hits” with works that they have rarely or never shown. Like the Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists, as well as some things I’d never heard of before. And they did so in a sensitive and thoughtful way that made those works shine. They had Cy Twombly next to Alma Thomas. Susan Rothenberg in the center of the wall with Neil Jenny and Philip Guston on either side! When would you *ever* see that?

**AY:** And artists who we think we know are now presented in different ways. When you bring up Guston, for example. I tried to count how many times I saw his work on different floors, in different groupings and contexts. He’s presented as an Abstract Expressionist, he’s presented in protest of Jim Crow-era lynchings and in solidarity with the civil rights struggle, and he’s presented alongside contemporary painters like Elizabeth Murray and Chuck Close!

**JPF:** Yeah, absolutely.

**AY:** It was clear from this installation that we really do a disservice to artists when we place their work into such strict art-historical categories. Artists develop and change, and may participate in many different stylistic and social movements.

**JPF:** I was thinking about exactly that when you mentioned some of the “pleasant surprises” of the chronological hang before. One of my favorite passages was the pairing of a Lee Bontecou with a Louise Nevelson, which first of all just looked fabulous together. For me, that was a great moment, because I’m accustomed to thinking of those as two completely separate generations: Abstract Expressionism, and then Post-Minimalism or whatever that is—Bontecou’s really doing her own thing. But the Nevelson is from ’59 and the Bontecou is from ’61. Those works are done almost at the same time. And they absolutely belong on a wall together. It’s a lovely thing to see.

**AY:** That was one of the sections—“Scotch Tape” on the fifth floor—that also made a great effort to bring out similar formal operations made in very different mediums. It was not a pre-packaged movement. They also presented reactions *against* the kind of consumerism on display in the Pop Art section directly adjacent to it, to show that these artists perceived the downside of the postwar

economic boom, of all the junk that was accumulating, all of the political strategies and secrets that were hidden behind our prosperity as the Cold War was developing. So it was cool to see these kinds of formal comparisons that link artists we don't normally draw together, here connected in terms of their use of constructions and assemblages, but at the same time, also on this point of social reaction. Some of the spaces maybe did a better job of that than others, combining the stylistic and historical.

**JPF:** I thought that was done well. What did you both think, since we're moving in that direction, of the Pop Art installation?

**DL:** My first thought was of, as you mentioned earlier, the "greatest hits." In the Pop Art installation, of course, you have a couple of iconic Warhols, as well as a Rosenquist, and a lot of it has the sheen of advertising. That particular aspect is front and center. There's the Oldenburg cigarettes, along with a Wesselman on the opposite wall. But I think there's a pleasing visual collection going on, even if it's just in the form of flattened images, the use of primary colors, bright colors. A lot of things fit together, even if it's just in a formal way.

**AY:** Weren't there also some surprises? For example, that day-glo painting by Peter Saul, which was right across from Romare Bearden and Yayoi Kusama. Those potentially fit our understanding of Pop Art but aren't examples that would normally come to mind. They were responding to the everyday environment in ways that were a little bit radical, that departed from the surface engagement with advertisements and consumer culture that has come to dominate our textbook definition of Pop Art. The Whitney seemed to want to push the edge of what Pop is or was. And I thought that the Warhol works in particular were used in order to emphasize its multifarious nature.

**JPF:** That's a good point. I'm sure they have other Warhols they could have shown.

**AY:** Yes, and hanging *Before and After* right next to that Malcolm Bailey was provocative.

**DL:** That was an interesting juxtaposition.

**JPF:** That was an interesting juxtaposition, yeah. I don't know Bailey's work, and I wondered: Is this really Pop?

**DL:** I had the same reaction.

**AY:** But the sight lines were on point in that gallery.

**JPF:** They were.

**AY:** Standing in front of the Peter Saul, with its fluorescent palette, you could see a Keith Sonnier neon sculpture to the left, which served as a kind of formal echo. But that was also the first time I spotted the Malcolm Bailey, which I hadn't seen before. I was looking at this painting that was such a hallucinogenic and psychedelic image, referencing the Vietnam War and acts of sexual assault, some very heavy issues; and then I saw this somber, almost diagrammatic piece that also presented a troubling social critique, but in a completely opposite formal language.

**JPF:** You could also see George Segal from there, though he was kind of pushed off to a corner. I don't want to be too critical about this, because it's very easy for me to be too critical, but I did think that the Pop installation was, to a certain extent, a missed opportunity. It's a great example, along with Abstract Expressionism, of a very New York-centric, very familiar, easily postage-stamped movement that has a standard story, and they troubled it a little bit, but not really as much as I think they could have. They showed a Marisol; the fact that they had Romare Bearden there was interesting; and, Kusama, as you said, Allison, was another very interesting choice. But almost all of those artists were part of Ann Temkin's reinstallation of Pop Art a few years ago, after she became head of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA and reinstalled their permanent collection galleries. The Whitney galleries strike me as following her model, in which the permanent collection is installed as an exhibition, but instead of one big wall text and then a chat label for every work, each room has a short wall text that brings a lot of works together, and then just a few of those works get a longer chat label. I think it's very effective—and I must admit, I would fall on my sword for Ann Temkin, I think she's great. But I wasn't seeing anything new developed from her new model of Pop. Having the Robert Bechtle there, having that one canvas of Photorealism there, made me think, Where is the rest of this? Photorealism is a great example of an American art movement that has been ignored by museums and scholarship, and I bet the Whitney has more work they're not showing. Because it was so hot for a minute. I did feel that the Minimalism room was more effective in disrupting expectations. It was a lovely integration of Donald Judd with Alvin Loving, Thomas Downing, David Novros . . . Even John McCracken rarely gets to be part of the Minimalism conversation. And only a small Sol Lewitt, which was kind of an unusual piece for him. Another thing that's really interesting is looking at the acquisition dates for all of these works, because some of it was quite telling.

**AY:** Were there any examples in particular?

**JPF:** Well, something they had there that I thought didn't quite fit was Ann Truitt. I think Ann Truitt is a great artist, who frankly has not gotten a fair shake, not only

because she's a woman but also because her work is rather unique. It looks like a lot of things without actually fitting into any of those things. But I happened to look at the wall label and notice that the Novros was acquired in '69, the year that it was made, and that this Truitt sculpture from the '60s was acquired in 2006. Obviously they are trying to make up for past mistakes here, but I do think it's important to remember that the Whitney's collection did have a lot of oversights, and that not all of those have been rectified. But as I said, there were some wonderful choices. I loved seeing Chamberlain in Abstract Expressionism. That gallery was not exactly revolutionary, but it was great to have a small Pollock dwarfed by a giant Krasner being given pride of place, as Dana pointed out. And while they have some great David Smiths, and I'm certainly glad that they were there, it was also nice that those works weren't given center stage. Instead, at the center of the gallery, you saw Mark di Suvero—and why is he never talked about in terms of Abstract Expressionism?

**AY:** And they had it very obviously echoing the Kline.

**JPF:** Which was wonderful.

**AY:** It was a really great cue to highlight something that a lot of people are not taught to notice, so I thought that was a really important juxtaposition. And seeing those different sculptures in the context of the views of the city, outwards, I felt that the city changed when you saw it through the lens of Abstract Expressionism, and then again through the lens of Minimalism. In fact, I think the relationship between the building and the city is magnificent, and prompts some reflection, where relevant, between the city and the artworks themselves. The Whitney's marketing banners and subway advertisements—which claim that American art is “at home” now in the Meatpacking—clearly encourage this line of thinking. It's true, absolutely, for some of the collection; when I saw *Shapolsky et al.*, with one image after another of New York City buildings, suddenly I thought the exterior stairways that connect the Whitney's outdoor terraces looked strikingly like fire escapes. There were several such moments in which the collection was in dialogue with the building and its views of the city, which, from this particular vantage point—where you can see both Gansevoort Market and the loading decks of Weischel Beef, one of the last surviving meat purveyors in the district—really emphasize the historical and architectural layers of New York.

**DL:** I think that's an interesting point to think about, and furthermore it leads me to consider the ways in which the Whitney's collection relates to New York as a city. Abstract Expressionism, for example, emerges around the time when the “capital” of modern art was essentially moving from Paris to New York, marking one of the first purely homegrown American movements.

**JPF:** That's actually not quite fair. It is, rather, one of the first American movements to become popular and important in traditional art historical terms...Which leads me to another question: Is this an exhibition of American art, or of New York art?

**AY:** Well, this issue has certainly been raised in some reviews of the "New Whitney." Christopher Knight, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, mentions the absence of Color Field painting and Light & Space, which is true. We don't see Turrell, we don't see many "Finish Fetish" works. It's dangerous to dwell on omissions, but West Coast artists like Kienholz could have easily been included in the "Scotch Tape" gallery.

**JPF:** Kienholz is a surprising omission.

**AY:** In a sense, though, the Whitney is debuting a new space in New York City, where the museum has always been sited, and it can't include absolutely everything. And the East Coast emphasis might also give some context to many of the postwar generation of artists migrating from Europe, most of them probably congregating in New York.

**JPF:** I hesitate to point out what was excluded because it seems unfair—of course you can't include everything. And there were plenty of things even from New York that they didn't include. Actually, I thought the complete absence of Fluxus was a little surprising.

**AY:** Although they did have that one John Cage...

**JPF:** Yes, and like you, I loved that "Scotch Tape" room, but the Cage had no business being there.

**AY:** I thought so, too.

**JPF:** It was completely irrelevant. It did occur to me that, in terms of Fluxus, they may simply not have anything. Because museums weren't collecting Fluxus in the '60s and '70s when it was made. Then again, it's also a legitimate curatorial choice. Overall I found myself thinking about what it means to be an American artist, and the museum's clear effort to put all this diverse art in a context that is kind to it—in the sense of showing it to advantage. But it's much easier for the Whitney to create that context with work from New York, or by an immigrant to New York, or even just a foreigner briefly visiting New York, than it is with regionalism. A friend of mine referred to some of those works on the seventh floor as "American folk art," and we're talking about artists who are formally trained.

**AY:** Like Hopper?

**JPF:** No, these were names that I don't even know...The triptych with people working the land...This is exactly the stuff that is hard for people like us, who are professionally trained to not know anything about it, because so few people take it seriously. It isn't even a criticism of the Whitney, really; I think it's very hard to tell a story about that work in the context of the dominant story, the Europe-in-New York story.

**AY:** That's a great point, Julia. Along those lines, I think the museum actually did a great job of broadening a story that we often tell mainly through photography. While painting and sculpture are usually the "dominant" mediums, with photography or ephemeral material supplementing those narratives, we actually know the New Deal in art primarily through the work of Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans. Now, suddenly, we see painters, and maybe to a lesser degree sculptors, who were responding to the same circumstances and set of issues, to life in the country. Again, it's also the later Beat artists— mainly photographers—who capture scenes of rural America, and they were actually quite cosmopolitan artists merely traveling through. So it was great to see some of that "folk art," if you will, hitherto unknown to many of us, and to see painting supporting photography.

**JPF:** I thought some of the most interesting, innovative, and meaningful curation was happening on that seventh floor. Starting with the brilliant move, very subtly done but very effective, to claim Hopper as an American Surrealist. It's not my period, so perhaps it's not as innovative as I think, but it makes so much sense. For a long time, in the old building, Hopper was relegated to a corner of the Whitney's permanent installation, because they didn't seem to find a way of putting him in context with the art they wanted to show. Almost pretending that he doesn't exist.

**AY:** Or that he's singular.

**JPF:** Yeah! Which is always a damning move. And putting Cornell and other American Surrealists in that room allows Hopper's work—which we are accustomed to interpreting as completely realistic—to acquire a patina of strangeness that gives it a whole other dimension.

**AY:** A de Chirico kind of strangeness.

**DL:** Yes, exactly.

**JPF:** It made me like Hopper more than I ever have.

**AY:** The section that they called “Fighting With All Our Might,” which was where we encountered some really moving and troubling images of the Jim Crow era and the Great Depression, was stunning and stopped me in my tracks. I can't believe I've never encountered some of those works in a classroom before. It made me want to *bring* them into the classroom! I think that while we definitely are more comfortable with political art today than we were a few decades ago, we still need to make a case that socially engaged art can be visually poignant. To declare that it can be significant in its artistic merit as well. And I think that they were very cognizant in showing this.

**JPF:** If we're going to make a case for a uniquely “American” art, then that art from the '30s—that New Deal stuff that nobody likes—is great work, and such a strong political legacy that is sorely needed now.

**AY:** And it's so topical. It's amazing that so much of this art resonates powerfully with struggles that are still before us, in terms of the economic and social disparity that America currently faces.

**JPF:** And the exhibition is a reminder that art is part of that.

**AY:** Art is absolutely part of that. Which is why it was striking, also, to find that the grouping called “Course of Empire,” where the exhibition culminated with the art of our current era, was almost exclusively political! As soon as you walk past the Paul Chan, you were in that room on the 5th floor seeing artists who were working with newspaper headlines and with photographs of 9/11 and Abu Ghraib, building a complex picture of our times. Which I thought was bold, because that's very much *not* the only type of art we see today, but it's what they decided to show.

**DL:** I've been thinking about those newspaper headlines, with Rashid Johnson, for example; I think that telling the contemporary story in that way also creates ties back to the chronology that we've just come down from on the upper floors, making that a useful way to present those works.

**JPF:** A meaningful way.

**AY:** I was struck by the Sam Durant piece, which reproduced a photograph of the May 1968 student protests. I thought, at first, that it might have been a more recent photograph, and then it turned out to be an echo of an earlier era.

**JPF:** It's still to a certain degree innovative, and certainly difficult, to present work that we consider contemporary art as being historical in some way. And I think that was done beautifully. Again, I think Ann Temkin at MoMA was among the first curators to look at the '80s and '90s as if that work belonged to art history, as

if there was a perceptible continuity between the past and present, not a sharp line between “now” and “then.” I liked the way that younger artists were combined with current work by older modern “masters”—for example, there was an Ed Ruscha from 2004 in the same room as a Rachel Harrison from 2007.

**AY:** You get to see how Ruscha’s practice both has and has not changed.

**JPF:** And there were very sensitive, thoughtful presentations of political and identity art from the ’80s and ’90s. I thought it was very brave to spotlight Nan Goldin’s *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. For me, it almost became a metaphor for that whole half of the floor, in showing that this era is not ours anymore.

**AY:** That work in particular absorbed the frenetic energy of all of the very loud video works in the gallery that you emerge into from the elevator, but also reflected the elegiac, mournful quality of the gallery immediately adjacent to it, which presented so many sobering, poetic works themed around the AIDS crisis.

**DL:** Thinking again about that constellation of video works presented together, how did you feel about the ways in which the audio elements of the works permeated the galleries? I know that’s not unique to the Whitney, but I wonder how deliberate that kind of installation is.

**JPF:** I think there was even visual bleeding. This kind of slippage that allows you to move however you want through the galleries, I found it really disorienting. And it reminded me of what I like about Dia:Beacon, where these concerns were taken seriously. Robert Irwin was hired by Dia to redesign that building, and he did a beautiful job of helping visitors to orient themselves in an enormous, largely open space. For example, he chose different colors for interior versus exterior walls, and it’s not something you need to pick up on intentionally as you move through the space, but it helps orient you. Somehow you just always know where you are, and it feels good to be at Dia:Beacon, right? I had the opposite feeling at the Whitney. Even with the outdoor galleries, the city views didn’t help orient me. They built big walls in front of most windows, so I didn’t actually have any idea where the city was. It felt almost more like being at an art fair, moving from booth to booth, because there aren’t clear boundaries from one area to another.

**AY:** So you didn’t think it was seamless, between outdoors and indoors?

**JPF:** I didn’t find it at all seamless. And speaking of which, we’d be remiss if we didn’t talk a little bit about things like circulation in this beautiful new building. I’d say it’s objectively a disaster. It’s very confusing to find the stairs and the bathrooms, every passageway is always clogged, and the only defense I’ve heard from Whitney staff is that they didn’t expect so many visitors.

**AY:** That's why they moved downtown!

**DL:** And that's the reason that the gallery spaces look the way that they do, and feel the way they do, because they're meant to accommodate a certain volume of people. It's surprising that the other essential spaces don't.

**JPF:** You can't make a big, new museum today without recognizing that what you're doing is creating an attraction. You're creating a spectacle. And you are now, to a certain extent, in the business of moving people.

**DL:** And how do you both feel about how the museum-as-spectacle relates to the new location in the Meatpacking District? Earlier, we touched on the fact that the museum is now nestled among designer shops and the High Line. My question is whether the Whitney is trying to embrace that part of its new location, and create a deliberate connection to the glossiness of those relatively new attractions, or if it's trying to be something else.

**AY:** I think it's part of why they left the Upper East Side. It's too quiet, it's not trendy enough, it's not young enough. They must have been aware of joining in this "market" environment.

**JPF:** Yes, what's interesting is that I've heard people at the Whitney talk about accessibility to groups that don't get to see enough art, because the Upper East Side can feel fairly closed to outsiders. And yet, the old building was two blocks away from a major subway line, and it seems unlikely that school kids in Harlem are going to have an easier time getting to the new building.

**AY:** And getting through the cobblestones with a wheelchair would be extremely difficult.

**JPF:** By the way, they did not build a single bike rack, which is simply ridiculous. It's a small point, but I find it incredibly annoying.

**AY:** It definitely feels like a leisure area, in that regard, somewhere to join tourists who are strolling around the neighborhood.

**JPF:** If the museum has really become—and this I mean as a serious question—primarily a perfect location for your selfie, is that someone's fault? And if so, whose?

**AY:** I don't know if it's anybody's fault. I think this is a sign of our times.

**JPF:** Well, I don't know. A zeitgeist is not something that descends on us like a disease—

**AY:** Selfie sticks, however, might be. . . .

**JPF:** That's true. But museums have the power to encourage or resist certain trends. Some institutions find ways to engage visitors without the theme park flash, and others seem to encourage viewers to think that artworks aren't good for much more than selfies and themed merchandise.

**DL:** Right. I think that perhaps you're rephrasing my question about whether the Whitney is resisting this or is complicit in it.

**AY:** Well, the views are so photogenic, I think the outdoor space is definitely designed with Instagram and selfies in mind. In the galleries, I took a lot of photographs in preparation for this discussion, and nobody stopped me.

**JPF:** Of course my impulse is to condemn the art selfie. But I try to escape that, because if this is the way that people can engage with art—if taking a picture with a work of art allows you some access to it—then I'm all in favor of that. We want people to come to art museums, we want everyone to feel welcome.

**AY:** And you don't photograph every work, you photograph those that resonate with you or that you recognize.

**JPF:** Totally. It's how many people learn to think through works of art. But outside, I noticed people mostly just looking, not using their cameras.

**DL:** There is something to be said for the truly spectacular views.

**JPF:** Which are brand new views.

**DL:** Exactly. And the public cannot access them from any other landmark in Manhattan, and the architecture seems to keep that in mind.

**AY:** That's very true. We can see all the layers of the city that have built up over time, how architecture has changed.

**JPF:** Speaking of how architecture has changed, what do you both think about the building itself, as a work of art?

**DL:** I think it's pretty successful. I happen to like the use of steel, for instance. I think the steel staircases that connect a number of the floors from the outside are a great choice. I believe other critics have commented on the fact that this use of steel is a structural choice as well as an aesthetic one, and in that sense, I appreciate it.

**AY:** I thought the exhibition spaces were quite beautiful; I love the pine floors, and the finishes are really nice. Light is always going to present some difficulties with artwork, so while I appreciate how light-filled the spaces are, I'm sure that it might place some restrictions on what can be displayed or for how long.

**JPF:** Not a lot of photography or works on paper.

**AY:** All things considered, I do think the new building is a welcome addition to the city. The new neighborhood brings it into a more cutting-edge space than it was in the Upper East Side. The collection looks beautiful, and it was great to see some new things, so I'm excited to see what else they have in their vault.