

Museum as Selfie Station

wonders of Ancient Egypt or Masters of Impressionism.

But the current trend towards the spectacular is powered primarily by developments outside of the museum world, from the spheres of tech, marketing, and finance, where being an “influencer” has just as much social cred as being a curator. New models are emerging that focus exclusively on spectacle, sharing more in common with commercial trade shows than with the traditional museum exhibition.

Take for example, the Museum of Ice Cream (MoIC), a wildly popular “experience” of Instagrammable moments, founded by 25-year old Maryellis Bunn, whom *New York Magazine* dubbed the “Millennial Walt Disney.”³ It is not surprising that the MoIC is more branding opportunity and photo-op than conventional museum, given Bunn’s previous role as the head of forecasting and innovation for Time Inc. For \$38, visitors can wander through the social media-friendly maze of candy-colored, interactive exhibits, culminating in a pool of synthetic sprinkles. (Plastic sprinkles which so cluttered the streets surrounding their Miami Beach pop-up that they were considered an environmental hazard and the Museum was fined \$3,000 by the city.)⁴

“The old traditional experiences—take museums, for example—are the institutions that become more and more archaic,” Bunn told *New York Magazine*. “They just haven’t been able to reformulate for the shifts in what people are interested in.” It is worth noting that Bunn and her partner chose to center their experiential museum around ice cream in large part because it retained its general popularity through the last recession.

Another popular museum-cum-spectacle is 29Rooms, organized by lifestyle blog *Refinery29*, which appropriately features 29 rooms “curated” by artists, brands, and celebrities, including Jake Gyllenhaal and Jill Soloway. It is an “interactive funhouse of style, culture, and technology brought to life by a group of global artists and

Should a trip to the museum be about entertainment or cultural enrichment? And relatedly, who exactly is the museum for, educated aesthetes or “the great unwashed”? Since the Museum Age of the 19th century, the institution has been grappling with these questions. Many U.S. museums began as showrooms for the collections of prosperous industrialists, who only reluctantly agreed to open their doors to the public in exchange for land or tax breaks. At the same time, exhibitions like 1851’s *Great Exhibition* in London appealed to, and welcomed, a broad audience, reportedly seeing 6,000,000 visitors pass through its halls. Embodying these dichotomies is one of the guiding principles of the British Museum, which specified that its collections were “not only for the inspection and entertainment of the learned and the curious, but for the general use and benefit of the public.”¹ Although its origins may be rooted in social stratification, it is no question that the audience for public museums is now considered to be the general public.

The idea of spectacle in art is certainly nothing new. Pre-photography, crowds would line up to see paintings of natural wonders while, in the mid-1800s, P.T. Barnum built the collection of oddities and freaks he was well known for, founding Barnum’s American Museum in lower Manhattan, which reportedly attracted 15,000 visitors daily.² Museums have long tried to entice audiences with blockbuster exhibitions on the



Guests interact with Adidas' *Here to Create* installation at *Refinery29's 29Rooms Los Angeles: Turn It Into Art* at ROW DTLA, during the opening night party on December 6, 2017 in Los Angeles, California.

Gabrielle Union, *Refinery29* Global Editor-in-Chief, Co-Founder Christene Barberich, and Yara Shahidi attend the opening night party for *Refinery29's 29Rooms Los Angeles: Turn It Into Art* at ROW DTLA on December 6, 2017 in Los Angeles, California.



Instagram selfie by @huyfinity in Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field* (1965/2017), installed at The Broad.

Instagram selfie by @eevee in Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field* (1965/2017), installed at The Broad.



Instagram selfie by @tkmee_ in Yayoi
Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field*
(1965/2017), installed at The Broad.

visionaries across mediums, and powered by you,” reads the website’s description. This last point is a shared thread among many of these experiences—dubbed “Big Fun Art” by *Artnet*’s Ben Davis⁵—in that they claim to wrest power away from elitist institutions and place it back in the hands of the people.

“Big Fun Art doesn’t require any historical knowledge, context, or even patience to be enjoyed (except the patience of waiting in a line),” writes Davis. “On the other hand, that also means you don’t really need something like a museum to vouchsafe it.”⁶ It is a populism that echoes our current political moment, where insiders are enemies, experts are not to be trusted, and people are elected because of, not in spite of, their lack of institutional experience or specific knowledge.

Social media also plays a large role in the supposed empowerment of visitors, disrupting entrenched hierarchies (much as it did with the presidential election). “We encourage people to document it,” *Refinery29*’s co-founder Piera Gelardi told the *New York Times*.⁷ “They feel like they are the stars of the show here.” Traditional museums have picked up on this as well, not only encouraging visitors to post pictures online with suggested hashtags (like LACMA’s #lacmaplusyou campaign, which encourages visitors to post photos of themselves while at the museum), but also by building exhibitions for maximum Instagrammability.

These new forms of exhibition-making threaten the hegemony of the traditional art museum, which in turn is coming up with its own forms of spectacle. Within hours of going on sale last fall, 50,000 tickets to *Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors* at The Broad sold out at \$25 a piece, hearkening back to the blockbusters of 40 years ago, when people lined up at dawn to get tickets to view the treasures of King Tut’s tomb. Although entrances were timed, visitors waited in lines between each of the dozen or so mirrored enclosures, before having just 30 seconds to themselves inside. Judging from the flood of quite

similar images that visitors posted online, most of that time was spent posing and taking selfies.

Ironically, one of Kusama’s guiding principles was self-obliteration, which followed from a frightening childhood experience of feeling like she was “reduced to nothingness.” In her reclaiming of this self-obliteration, “being overwhelmed is a celebratory choice, not a feverish ordeal.”⁸ The act of taking a reflected self-portrait in these spaces, however, accomplishes just the opposite. It declares, “I was here,” again placing the visitor at the center of her own narrative, favoring static image over immersive, temporal experience.

Still, should we decry the fact that thousands of people simply used Kusama’s work as the background for their Instagram stories? Or rather celebrate that The Broad was able to introduce a wide audience to the work of this octogenarian female artist, who had been overlooked for decades? And does it matter if the general public doesn’t get her art in the way that curators and experts think they should? Is it not patronizing to assume that visitors cannot Instagram works of art and appreciate a deeper meaning?

Even though this trend towards the spectacular may strike some as counter to the museum’s pedagogical and civic role, its emergence signals a problem with the status quo. After a century of steady growth in museum attendance, those figures have been on the decline recently.⁹ Museums have been forced to rethink their relationship with and obligation to the public.

“Traditionally, we have not been speaking to our core constituency,” Christopher Bedford, director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, told the *Baltimore Sun* recently.¹⁰ “You can’t expect a population who hasn’t seen your institution as relevant to come to your museum. You have to make an effort to break down your own walls.”

So while the spectacle may be a response to the disconnect between the museum and its public, it is not the only option. Take for example Atlanta’s

1. John Gallagher, “The most curious man in the world,” *The Irish Times*, August 26, 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-most-curious-man-in-the-world-1.3194402>.

2. Bob Mondello, “A History Of Museums, ‘The Memory Of Mankind,’” *NPR*, November 24, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97377145>

High Museum, which has tripled their non-white audience over the past two years.¹¹ Rather than pandering to visitors with empty cultural calories, they responded to the needs of the city's residents, only half of whom are white, by increasing the number of exhibitions featuring artists of color. They also invested in diversity behind the scenes, participating in a Mellon Foundation program that provides curatorial fellowships for historically under-represented groups. How can audiences find a museum relevant if they don't see themselves reflected on the walls and in museum positions?

The debate over free admission can also provide some answers. Mounting exhibitions costs money, especially the blockbusters that attract large crowds, but admission revenue generally accounts for a small percentage of a museum's budget—as low as 5% by some tallies. Opening doors free of charge may play a larger role in attracting an audience than flashy, expensive exhibitions.

"Museums speak of wanting to attract larger, more democratic audiences," wrote Roberta Smith a decade ago in *The New York Times*.¹² "They cannot even begin to know this audience, much less accommodate it, until they lower the barriers, at least to their permanent collections." She noted that the Baltimore Museum tripled the number of non-white visitors during their free hours.

In 1793 during the height of the French Revolution, the Louvre was turned into a public museum, exactly one year after the overthrow of the King. Now the world's largest art museum, the building originally began as a fortress, and then became a royal residence, a symbol of the very inequality the Revolution was attempting to overthrow. In essence, the people had reclaimed their cultural heritage from the Monarchy, and now, over two centuries later, we're still deciding what that should look like. Will it be the cake that Marie Antoinette cynically offered (or ice cream?), or the bread that the people so desperately needed?

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3. Anna Weiner, "The Millennial Walt Disney Wants to Turn Empty Stores Into Instagram Playgrounds," *New York Magazine*, October 04, 2017, <http://nymag.com/selectall/2017/10/museum-of-ice-cream-maryellis-bunn.html>.

4. Eleanor Gibson, "Miami's Museum of Ice Cream fined for causing ocean pollution with sprinkle pool," *Dezeen*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/01/11/miami-beach-museum-of-ice-cream-miami-plastic-pollution-fine-sprinkle-pool/>.

5. Ben Davis, "George R. R. Martin's Santa Fe Art Space Is an Odd Force," *Artnet News*, June 28, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/george-r-r-martin-backed-art-collective-556880>.

6. Ben Davis, "State of the Culture, Part I: Museums, Experiences, and the Year of Big Fun Art," *Artnet News*, January 2, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/state-of-the-culture-part-i-1184315>.

7. Melena Ryzik, "29Rooms Is a Creative Playhouse for the Instagram Set," *The New York Times*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/06/arts/design/29rooms-is-a-creative-playhouse-for-the-instagram-set.html>.

8. Rachel Taylor, "Kusama and Self-obliteration," *Tate*, April 3, 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/kusama-and-self-obliteration>.

9. Patricia Cohen, "A New Survey Finds a Drop in Arts Attendance," *The New York Times*, September 25, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/26/arts/a-new-survey-finds-a-drop-in-arts-attendance.html>.

10. Mary Carole McCauley, "In Baltimore and nationwide, art museums fight sharp declines in attendance," *Baltimore Sun*, January 22, 2018, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/arts/bs-fe-museum-attendance-20171002-story.html>.

11. Julia Halperin, "How the High Museum in Atlanta Tripled Its Nonwhite Audience in Two Years," *Artnet News*, December 24, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/high-museum-atlanta-tripled-nonwhite-audience-two-years-1187954>.

12. Roberta Smith, "Should Art Museums Always Be Free? There's Room for Debate," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/22/arts/design/22admi.html>.