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Jeff Koons, Rabbit (1986),
exhibited in the Salon de l'Abondance,
Château de Versailles, 2008

THE BOOK IN WHICH WE LEARN TO READ

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AND THEIR PLACE WITHIN HISTORICAL MUSEUMS

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"... And this, gentlemen of the press, curators, critics, experts and others, is the claim we painters make in regard to the old masters. They are ours, not yours. We have their blood in our veins. We are their heirs, executors, assignees, trustees. We are pious sons, but henceforth it is we who are the interpreters of their wishes, with full power to set them aside, and substitute our own, whenever and wherever it seems fit for us to do so. They would have wished it so."

Walter Sickert (1860-1942)ⁱ

The painter Walter Sickert was a partisan and a provocateur, but his strong-worded assertion quoted above is not entirely without basis in fact. The presence and engagement of living artists within the

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halls and galleries of historical collections has long been taken for granted, since it was primarily for their benefit that many such museums were conceived. When the Museum Central des Arts (today known as the Louvre) opened its doors on August 10, 1793, it did so under the directorship of its first governors, the painters Hubert Robert, Fragonard and Vincent, the sculptor Pajou, and the architect de Wailly. Admission was free, but the museum was opened to the general public for just three days of the ten day week of the new revolutionary calendar. Priority was given on the remaining days to artists, many hundreds of whom took the opportunity to study paintings formerly hidden from view in the private collections of the French royal family and aristocrats who had since fled abroad.

A decade before the Louvre began drawing its first crowds, the imperial picture collection in Vienna had been installed at the Upper Belvedere, the former garden palace of Prince Eugene of Savoy, at the instigation of Empress Maria Theresa. For the first years of its presentation, only academic pupils (and the occasional travelling aristocrat) were granted access to the collection, which was documented in one of the first public catalogues to be compiled according to scholarly criteria.ⁱⁱ Over the course of the next century, one great museum after another was founded with the same purpose: to educate, encourage and inspire the contemporary artist. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (1815), the Prado, Madrid (1819), The National Gallery, London (1824), and the Altes Museum, Berlin (1830) each set about collecting and presenting objects which living artists could study. All over Europe, students of art and practising artists were invited to listen in to the conversations that had taken place across the centuries, and indeed to become part of the conversation themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

During the years since the founding of such museums, living artists have continued to make use of them. If nothing else, they provided answers as to how artists of the past had solved certain problems. Sir Herbert Read's 1954 lecture 'The Museum and The Artist'

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listed a number of specific cases in which museums and their collections had shaped the development of contemporary art: the influence of Japanese prints on Whistler and Gauguin, of Persian miniatures on Matisse, of nonwestern sculpture on Picasso, "all fruitful influences which came from museums."^{iv} But such influences were very often tempered by resistance. Cezanne famously referred to the Louvre as "the book in which we learn to read", but it is the subsequent, less often cited part of his statement which is perhaps more revealing. "We must not be content to memorise the beautiful formulas of our illustrious predecessors. Let us get out and study beautiful nature. Let us try to discover her spirit. Let us express ourselves according to our own temperaments."^v

His contemporary Pissarro went further, describing the Louvre as a graveyard of art and insisting that it should be burnt to the ground. The Italian Futurists, had he lived long enough to know them, would have gladly helped him find the fuel. Whether or not he was serious, this was just one example of many repeated attempts on the part of artists to annihilate tradition and dismantle what they perceived to be the cult of the past. In words attributed to the 18th century painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, the Old Masters were both "models to imitate... and rivals with whom to contend".^{vi} In a National Gallery catalogue essay titled 'Remembrance of Art Past', Robert Rosenblum attempted to rationalise such arguments. "Of the abiding myths about modern art, one of the most stubborn would tell us that artists of the last two centuries kept unburdening themselves of the past, hoping forever to wipe their eyes clean of history. Like many grand generalisations, this one is both true and false and something in between. If the history of modern art is taken to begin with such masters as David and Goya who, born in the mid-eighteenth century, responded to the irreversible upheavals that marked the next revolutionary decades, then this precarious balance between respecting and destroying tradition is at the very roots of our heritage."^{vii}

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Some of the greatest artists of the twentieth century were content to mock historical museums while simultaneously absorbing and appropriating from them with ironic detachment and a certain promiscuous abandon. But as Rosenblum points out, the revolutions of modern art faced backwards every bit as much as forwards. "Picasso, once heralding everything new in the twentieth century, has slowly been transformed into the guardian of the past, as we discover that his terrorist attacks on tradition turn out to be a way of rejuvenating, not destroying, our heritage, even preserving for us the conventional subject hierarchies of ambitious figure paintings, ideal nudes, portraiture, landscape and still-life."^{viii}

Tucked into the middle of that last sentence is a word which has come to define the complex relationship between living artists and the history of art: tradition. That which is passed down from one generation to the next, and, should it be judged to remain relevant, to successive generations beyond. It is a common instinct within human nature to develop a certain antipathy towards that which one has been taught to admire. In his catalogue foreword to the 1980 exhibition that presented some of his favourite works from the collection of The National Gallery in London, the American painter R.B. Kitaj felt it necessary to explain his selection of several Post-Impressionist works from the museum's holdings. "Maybe the very freshness of depiction of those men from 1890 has been too attractive to too many millions of people for our art to stomach. We have been brought up to cherish doing our own thing and our ideologues have insisted on a primacy of the one against the many."^{ix} Kitaj was an admirer of the poet T.S. Eliot, whose own thoughts on the subject were published in a 1919 essay titled 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. In it Eliot endorses the indispensability of tradition, while acknowledging its inherent troublesomeness.^x

Many artists through the ages have proclaimed themselves to be against tradition, by which they mean the art of the past. As has been often pointed out, the difference is between those who have studied

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the past and need to unburden themselves from it in order to find new means of expression, and those who have refused or failed to learn from it and are therefore likely simply to repeat it or to register forms of hollow protest. In certain cases it is more a question of semantics: artists have spoken out against tradition when in fact what they mean to attack is academicism, and its lifeless, inevitable predictability. In a recent article for the art magazine *Frieze*, Vivian Rehberg sought to unpick the stigmatisation of tradition. "Despite contemporary art's current, well-documented fascination with history and with the art-historical past, the word 'tradition' - which stands for conservative style and value, not to mention the threat of 'traditional modes of representation' - has been nearly thoroughly evacuated from present practice and discourse... It is a truism that there is nothing new under the sun, in art or elsewhere - the word 'new' is as outmoded as the word 'tradition' - but what is the point of mining the past if not to tell us something significant and potentially useful about the present, and to allow us to realize our roles as agents within it? The urgency of historical work, whether undertaken by artists or by historians, lies here."^{xi}

The educational-academic role prescribed to historical museums by their founders, and the nature of the relationship between those museums and living artists, have become increasingly ambiguous over time as the institutions and their collections become ever more gradually removed from the present day. The points in time at which their collections suddenly stop - 1848 in the case of the Louvre, for example, or 1900 in the case of The National Gallery, London - drift further away from us with each new year that passes. As a result, museums that no longer collect the work of artists practising today, or indeed of several generations before them, are having to rethink the way in which they engage with living artists.

The most direct and confrontational means to create a visual dialogue between the art of different periods is arguably that adopted in recent years by the

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Château de Versailles. Under the directorship of Jean-Jacques Aillagon, the Château has provoked howls of protest from what is dismissed as 'a conservative minority' for its placement of large, sculptural works by celebrated international contemporary artists within the former royal quarters and gardens. Two of the first artists to be selected, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, are among the most marketed and high-profile of their generation. "The presence of contemporary artworks in an historical setting", argues Aillagon, "awakens the glance of the visitor who passes through the royal rooms. It makes him reflect on the perenniality of the artistic experiment, on the relations that the artists of today maintain with the artists of yesterday. It also allows the visitor to become more committed to what he sees and to avoid this terrible disease often seen in museums and in monuments, which is the lethargy of the glance."^{xii} Certainly in the case of Murakami, the press did not agree and unleashed a barrage of withering criticism. The artist made a run for the high ground, suggesting that contemporary art "is difficult to decipher for visitors who lack the necessary knowledge and references."^{xiii}

Whether or not there was any failure on the part of the visitors, the Château, or the artists and their capacity to engage with their historic surroundings, the exhibitions have successfully delivered two things that are precious to any cultural institution these days: attention and audience. More than a quarter of a million people are said to have visited Koons' exhibition within its first two months, a huge increase on normal figures. A similar leap in attendance was recorded at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, and more recently at the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, during those institutions' similarly flamboyant presentation of Damian Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull entitled *For the Love of God*. Shock, a commodity in which many of the Old Masters very knowingly traded, has in certain cases become an important part of the strategy to link them with the artists of today.

Other historical museums have chosen to adopt a more nuanced approach in their engagement with

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contemporary artists. More than thirty years ago, The National Gallery in London initiated a series of exhibitions titled 'The Artist's Eye', in which prominent artists such as David Hockney, Lucian Freud, Bridget Riley and Francis Bacon were invited to disrupt temporarily the usual historical display of the Gallery's paintings by making a selection of works and then hanging them in his or her own way. A small, personal 'collection', if you like, assembled from one much larger. The format took its cue from an earlier curatorial experiment, Andy Warhol's *Raid the Icebox*. Initiated by Dominique de Menil, the project presented an eclectic and typically irreverent selection of objects hand-picked by Warhol from the storage vaults of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, at museums in three different cities in the United States during 1969-70.^{xiv}

Where both projects succeeded was in their dismantling of conventional methods of historical display, and questioning of the value of certain objects over others. The artist was invited in as both curator and critic. While revealing unfamiliar aspects of familiar objects by altering their position and context, the process also serves to illuminate the selecting artist's own work, and the thinking and decisions that inform it. The challenge for the viewer is to match our eye to theirs, to understand the reasoning behind certain decisions. Tidy and familiar curatorial structures are dispensed with in favour of a more personal reinterpretation of the past, a form of historical argument that engages the museums' works as evidence and in doing so contributes to our reading and understanding of them.^{xv}

The role of the artist as curator was recently questioned in an exhibition by the Dutch artist Willem de Rooij at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. The work of De Rooij focuses on issues of representation, and on the selection and combination of images from often diverse media, in an attempt to interrogate the conventions of institutional practice. 'Intolerance', as his commissioned project for Berlin was titled, brought together a group of

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17th century Dutch bird paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter with a collection of 18th and 19th century feathered objects from Hawaii in what the museum's press material described as a 'three-dimensional collage'. Walking through the exhibition, visitors were uncertain whether they were looking at a curated selection of art made by others, or in fact a large artwork made by de Rooij himself. "What struck me most", wrote curator Elena Filipovic in a review of the exhibition, "was the project's questioning of the ideological underpinnings of 'the exhibition' in the process. What was the difference, after all, between an (autonomous) artwork and an exhibition made of others' art works? If artists have, as we know, been long involved in curating, rarely have they presented their exhibitions as signed art works so explicitly as this."^{xvi}

In recent years, a number of historical museums have engaged contemporary artists to contribute ideas to exhibition design and collection display. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, for example, has collaborated with artists including Franz West (on the display of a collection of recently-acquired Pacific Island art), Jorge Pardo (on the installation design of the museum's Pre-Columbian art galleries), and Robert Irwin (whose landscaping of the museum's palm garden remains an ongoing project). This adventurous approach has been taken a step further at the Louvre in a series of permanent interventions within the museum's historic buildings. In previous centuries, painters such as Charles Le Brun, Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres all contributed to the artistic embellishment of the museum's architecture during their lifetimes. A certain froideur towards living artists that took hold of the museum during the late 19th and early 20th centuries - epitomised by the museum's handling of Picasso, who had long desired to hang his work in the Grande Galerie and who was finally permitted to do so in 1947, on a single Tuesday when the building was closed to the public, and on the condition that they were removed by Wednesday - meant that further invitations were not readily extended.

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The practice was recently revived under the directorship of Henri Loyrette with commissioned works by Anselm Kiefer, François Morellet and most recently Cy Twombly, whose vast painted ceiling for the Salle des Bronzes was unveiled in 2010. "We're continuing with the renewal of history," Loyrette has stated. "The Louvre was always the home of living artists... I always say that in the Louvre's genes there's a need to incessantly move forward... For me, a museum that dies is a museum that doesn't arouse contemporary creation. It's a museum that no longer arouses the contemporary eye, and is no longer questioned by our contemporaries, but is instead turned exclusively toward its own heritage, and its own past."^{xvii} Today the Louvre also actively engages with contemporary artists as part of its temporary exhibition programme. It is here, Loyrette admits, that "we can allow ourselves to be more adventurous, take risks, and sometimes make errors, because it's temporary."^{xviii}

These are just a handful of the many contrasting approaches currently adopted by historical museums in their engagement with contemporary art and its makers. In examining their methods for such engagement, it is also interesting to examine their motives. Among the most frequently cited reasons for presenting projects with contemporary artists is the desire to increase the number of visitors, in large part through the capture of younger, more contemporary-minded audiences, without overly antagonising the more conservative elements of their museums' regular constituency.

But beyond swollen attendance figures and the column inches of press attention that tend to accompany them, they are more essential, more fundamental reasons for historical museums to engage with living artists, reasons that take us back to their beginnings and to the spirit of Enlightenment that provided their ideological foundation. One of the primary objectives of such museums is to show their visitors where they stand in time and place, within the broader evolution of mankind. The great art of

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the past is great precisely it manages to communicate with us today in a manner independent of its time, that collapses time. "There has always been good painting and bad painting," wrote Hsieh Ho in the 6th century in 'Six Principles of Chinese Painting', "but in art, the terms ancient and modern do not have citizenship."^{xix}

To hold a conversation with the past, to seek a natural continuity even when it might at first appear both improbable and unpredictable, demands both simplicity and sophistication. It will provoke endless debate and the risk of failure, but it can also bring great reward. "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves," wrote T.S. Eliot, "which is modified by the introduction of the new work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order... will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."^{xx}

i Walter Sickert, quoted in *The Artist's Eye: An Exhibition Selected by R.B. Kitaj at the National Gallery, London*, exhibition catalogue, (London: The National Gallery, 1980).

ii In 1891, the picture collection was relocated (along with the other imperial collections) to the recently completed Kunsthistorisches Museum on Vienna's Ringstrasse.

iii The educational role for such museums was not limited to fine art. The Victoria and Albert Museum, founded in London in 1852, was conceived as a repository of designs that could be copied and adapted for the purposes of modern industry.

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iv Herbert Read, "The Museum and The Artist," *College Art Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer, 1954), pp. 289-294.

v Paul Cezanne, quoted in Herbert Read, "The Museum and The Artist," *College Art Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer, 1954), pp. 289-294.

vi Sir Joshua Reynolds, quoted in James Hall, "A Sublime Roller Coaster Ride Through Art History," *Tate Etc*, No. 17 (Autumn, 2009).

vii Robert Rosenblum, "Remembrance of Art Past", *Encounters: New Art From Old*, exhibition catalogue, (London: The National Gallery, 2000), p. 8.

viii Rosenblum, "Remembrance of Art Past", p. 13.

ix R. B. Kitaj, introduction to *The Artist's Eye: An Exhibition Selected by R.B. Kitaj at the National Gallery*, London, exhibition catalogue, (London: The National Gallery, 1980).

x T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1917, reprinted in *Perspecta*, Vol. 19, (1982), pp. 36-42.

xi Vivian Rehberg, "Shock of the Old," *Frieze*, No. 134 (October 2010).

xii Jean-Jacques Aillagon, quoted in "The Q&A: Jean-Jacques Aillagon, provocateur," *The Economist Prospero blog* (25 November 2010), www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2010/11/takashi_murakami_versailles.

xiii Takashi Murakami, quoted in "International News Digest," *Artforum.com blog* (5 October 2010), <http://artforum.com.cn/archive/3107>.

xiv Raid the Icebox I with Andy Warhol travelled from the Institute for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, Texas (29 October 1969 - 4 January 1970) to The Isaac Delgado Museum, New Orleans, Louisiana (17 January - 15 February 1970) to the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island (23 April - 30 June 1970).

xv In recent years The National Gallery has taken further steps to integrate contemporary artists into the activities of the museum. Its board of trustees, for example, always includes at least one artist whose point of view is considered crucial in determining important questions of policy or direction. Since 1990, the museum has also operated an artist-in-residence programme, during which time

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Associate Artists including Paula Rego, Peter Blake, Ron Mueck and, most recently, Michael Landy have been given the opportunity to work within the museum for a period of two years. A similar programme has operated at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston since 1992.

xvi Elena Filipovic, quoted in "Looking Back, Looking Forward," *Frieze*, No. 136 (January-February 2011). The recently initiated series of 'Artist's Choice' exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, are also relevant to this discussion.

xvii Henri Loyrette, quoted in "Hitting the Louvre ceiling," *Los Angeles Times* (27 March 2010).

xviii Loyrette, quoted in "Hitting the Louvre ceiling," *Los Angeles Times* (27 March 2010).

xix The Six Principles of Chinese Painting were established by Hsieh Ho (also known as Xie He) a writer, art historian and critic in 6th century China. For more information, see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_principles_of_Chinese_painting

xx T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1917, reprinted in *Perspecta*, Vol. 19, (1982), pp. 36-42.