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[Walter Benjamin: Places of Re-remembering](#)

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Wer in unseren Tagen nach Berlin kommt und eine bestimmte Telefonnummer wählt, kann Zeuge einer verwirrenden Einrichtung werden. In einem Hinterhof im Bezirk Friedrichshain, etwa zwei Kilometer östlich des Frankfurter Tors, wo das neo-klassizistische Pathos der Karl-Marx-Allee sich in die pastellfarbenen sanierten Ostberliner Aussenbezirke verliert, befindet sich in einer Privatwohnung das *Museum of American Art*. In zwei Räumen vereint das Museum zwei Sammlungen:

„Eine ist das Museum of Modern Art, ein kleinformatiges Museum, das die moderne Kunst der ersten Hälfte des XX. Jahrhunderts in nuce umfasst, so wie sie von Alfred Barr, dem Gründungsdirektor des Museum of Modern Art in New York gedeutet und weitervermittelt wurde. Der Gegenstand der zweiten Sammlung sind vier Ausstellungen moderner amerikanischer Kunst, die von Dorothy Miller vom Museum of Modern Art kuratiert und nach Deutschland (und das übrige Europa) gebracht wurden, darunter „Moderne Kunst aus den USA“ (Frankfurt 1956) und „Die neue amerikanische Malerei“ (Berlin 1958). Diese Ausstellungen bildeten die Basis für den späteren Vorrang der modernen amerikanischen Kunst auf dem westeuropäischen Kontinent.“

In einem dritten Raum – einem in der diskreten Strenge der späten 50er Jahre häuslich eingerichteten Salon (Abbildung 1) – hängen in grossformatigen Kopien die berühmtesten Vertreter des abstrakten Expressionismus: Pollock, Motherwell undsofort. Doch damit nicht genug. Denn betritt man das *Museum of American Art*, so spielt Jazz-Musik, und auf Anfrage wird ein Kaffee gereicht. Auf den Tischen liegen alte *Life*-Ausgaben zum Lesen aus, in Vitrinen stehen die Ausstellungskataloge, an den Wänden hängen gezeichnete Kopien von Fotografien der Kuratoren und Künstler. Es ergibt sich, mitten in Berlin, eine Kopie, ein in sich geschlossenes Environment jener „spezifischen Interpretation moderner Kunst, die sich mit der Zeit zu dem vorherrschenden Narrativ entwickelte, wie wir es heute kennen.“ Ein Reenactment all dessen, was wir meinen, wenn wir sagen: die *Moderne*.



Nun gut: Wie einige sich vielleicht erinnern, hat der IIPM-Ambassador Alexandre Kojève auf diesen Seiten viel treffender und eingehender von diesem so kühlen, so klaren und doch so verwirrenden Ort berichtet. Und einige werden sich vielleicht sogar daran erinnern, dass Monsieur Kojève sein Zeugnis, das wir mit seiner Erlaubnis veröffentlicht haben, an einem vielleicht noch seltsameren Ort ablegte: in einem Nachbau (oder eher einer Dokumentation) des *Kabinetts der Abstrakten*, jenem von den Nazis zerstörten und in Hannover nach dem Krieg wieder aufgebauten Tempel abstrakter Kunst, der in der *Halle für Kunst Lüneburg* im Spätwinter des Jahres 2009 zu sehen und zu betreten war.

Ich hatte das Glück, Alexandre Kojève bei seiner Eröffnungsvorlesung als Übersetzer zur Seite stehen zu dürfen (Abbildung 2). In diesem Zusammenhang lernte ich auch einen anderen Mann kennen, Alfred Barr, der sich als „technischer Assistent“ des *Kabinetts* und auch des *Museum of American Art* vorstellte und mir bereits ein Jahr zuvor in der von Inke Arns kuratierten Gruppenausstellung *History will repeat itself* aufgefallen war (falls es sich um den gleichen Mann handelte, denn damals nannte er sich Walter Benjamin). Da Mister Barr in die Magie dieser Orte eingeweiht schien wie kein zweiter (falls *er selbst* nicht zwei- oder gar dreifach existierte), bat ich ihn, mich auch durch das *Museum of American Art* in Berlin zu führen, von dem ich ja bereits aus den Erzählungen Monsieur Kojèves Kenntnis hatte. Nie werde ich den Abend vergessen, den wir zusammen in jener kleinen Berliner Wohnung verbrachten, in der sich die Klarheit des High Modernism und die metaphysische Verzweiflung des Jazz Age begegnen – so wie sich Tod, Geometrie und Ewigkeit in der Darstellung eines atomic mushrooms auf dem Titelbild einer alten *Life*-Ausgabe kreuzen, die im Salon jener Wohnung zur Lektüre ausliegt.

Alfred Barr erwähnte, dass es solche Orte auch in anderen Städten, etwa in New York geben würde und verabschiedete sich von mir mit der Entschuldigung, er werde in Serbien in einer ähnlichen Wohnung erwartet (oder war es Slowenien?). Es vergingen einige Wochen, in denen sich meine Verwirrung steigerte. Was hatte all das zu bedeuten? Warum diese Wiederholungen, diese so ausführlich reinszenierten Räume, Orte und „Narrative“, über die ganze Welt verteilt? Ich schickte deshalb Alfred Barr eine Mail, in der ich ihm den Vorschlag machte, mir einige meiner drängendsten Fragen zu beantworten. Er willigte ein, jedoch mit der Bitte, ihn „Walter Benjamin“ zu nennen.

Milo Rau: As I visited the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* in Lüneburg and the *Museum of American Art* in Berlin, I asked myself: What are these places representing? What is the meaning of repeating such exhibitions (or such incidents as “The Modern Art”) in this way?

Walter Benjamin: Both the *Kabinett* and *MoAA* are relating to two “chapters” of modern art narrative. While the subject matter of the *Kabinett* is the art scene in Germany (and Europe) during the 20es and 30es (Weimar Republic and the Third Reich), the theme of the *Museum of American Art* is basically the ‘rebirth’ of the post-war modernism in Europe that was supported by the circulating exhibitions of American modern art organized by MoMA during the 50es (Cold War period).

These two chapters directly relate to each other. Namely, one can argue that the art scene during the Weimar period was perhaps the most international and open to all avant-garde movements in Europe. This is why, for example, the museum ‘experiment’ such as *Kabinett der Abstrakten* as result of collaboration between Soviet artists El Lissitzky and the director of the Provinzial-Museum in Hannover Alexander Dorner was possible. However, with the advent of National-Socialism the cultural context in the 30es underwent a radical change. It was quickly transformed from internationalism and modernism into nationalism and traditionalism. Under these circumstances anything that was either avant-guard or non-German was removed from the public sphere. That was the destiny of the *Kabinett* as well. It was dismantled by the end of 1936 and the next year some of the works from there were last seen in public at the exhibition *Entartete Kunst*. That was the period when the entire European continent was submerged in traditionalistic and nationalistic mode and there was no place for modern art any more. Since there was no coherent modern art narrative established prior to this, it was not surprise that in a short time it practically disappeared from the European scene and was practically forgotten.

On the other hand, across the Atlantic, in a new modest private museum in New York called *Museum of Modern Art* in 1936 Alfred Barr organized the exhibition “Cubism and Abstract Art”. This exhibition was practically the first historization of the three decades of the 20th century modern (almost entirely European) art. Also, it represents the moment when the entire paradigm changed. Instead of the 19th century concept of „National Schools“ Barr introduced „International Movements” as the key notion for this new narrative. Since the backbone of the narrative was abstract art, memory on all European modernistic movements and phenomena were well preserved in this story, including the *Kabinett der Abstrakten*. When, after the war, Europe was looking for a ‘fresh start’, the international and modern narrative established at MoMA became the ‘new memory’ soon adopted in many European countries. Then in the 50es came the series of MoMA circulating exhibitions of American abstract art that traveled through Western Europe. Regardless of the Cold War context, from today’s prospective it is clear that those exhibitions helped establishing the first post-war common European cultural identity that was based on internationalism, individualism and modernism.

One can say that the both these exhibits are looking, not so much into narrative itself but rather into the process how the narrative was made, constructed. The timeline of MoAA exhibits is not one of the history of modern art that begins around 1900, but the timeline that starts with the beginning of the making the narrative, that is 1936. So, we have the first story and then we have the second story that tells us how the first story was made. Also, in the general History of Art, the story begins with Prehistory and ends with Modernism and Post-Modernism. On the other hand the making of the History of Art is a different story, it begins 1550 with Vasari’s “Lives”.



Milo Rau: In the MoAA the Modern Art is represented as African ritual. You can find there the priests, the fetichs and the “obsessed”. Everything there is neatly arranged and in some way finished. So a visitor could experience it as a environment: “Oh, this was Modernism...!” Which is the impact of such expositions? What are they DOING with the past – with the repeated history?

Walter Benjamin: I think you are absolutely right, in many ways this kind of exhibits are pre-modern, like what we call “African Art” or “Medieval Art”. While the African masks, sculptures and rituals are usually relating to the “myth of origin” of a certain tribe, the artifacts exhibited at MoAA are about the western “myth of origin” called History of Modern Art. As certain African mask could be replicated many times without changing its nature, here a copy of Rothko painting could be replicated endlessly without changing its meaning. By this simple procedure we could generate certain sets of artifacts and exhibits that would enable us to step out of the modern narrative, to see the History from the outside, to re-contextualize it. Museum of American Art is the museum of The Museum of Modern Art, where “American” stands for “Modern” in sense of “individualism”, “internationalism” and “progress”. Also because of the fact that modern art narrative, history of modern art is an American invention, an American story which was originally based only on European artifacts. Thus the theme, the internal subject matter of MoAA is both, the MoMA and the story of making the history of modern art.

Milo Rau: But everything we connect habitually with Modern Art is here totally irrelevant: the originality of the artwork, the philosophy and the fate of the artist – the modern hysteria of individuality. Nothing is individual in these places. Nothing is new, nothing is real, authentic. In what sense is that was is happening here still Modern Art?

Walter Benjamin: Since, by re-positioning ourselves outside of the historical narrative on some still undefined meta-narrative all these notions of originality, individuality, artwork, artist, are not important anymore. Those are formative notions for the History, but most likely they will be marginal, if not irrelevant in the meta-story. There is a precedent for this. When Historical narrative was beginning to emerge by gradually stepping out of the Christian story which dominated Western Europe for thousand years, it didn’t forget it, by simply re-contextualized. If on the Tintoretto’s “The Last Supper” even today in the St. Xavier church in Paris we could see Jesus and apostles to be the main characters in that story, by moving this painting to the Louvre museum, Jesus and apostles will not be the main(formative) characters, but the painter Tintoretto and the painting “The Last Supper” will become the main characters in this another, the museum story we call History. The History appears here as a meta-narrative to the Christian

story. We could anticipate that, in a way St. Peter as a character and his role as a 'saint' becomes irrelevant in the Historical narrative, it is very likely that Tintoretto and his role as an "artist" becomes secondary, if not irrelevant in the new, meta-narrative.

Milo Rau: But the way the MoAA "repeats" its "original(s)" is different from the way of repeating and appropriating in postmodern Art – as p. e. in the „Appropriation Art“. All that postmodern emotionalism and criticism is absent. The authorship and the eternal problems with it, the hate on the "Kulturindustrie" or the exaggerated love for it, the gender-, postcolonial- and difference-talk etc.: The MoAA and the Kabinett der Abstrakten are not interested in this fashionable "Who-am-I-and-what-is-Art"-discourse. These expositions are very cool, very OBJECTIVE, very out of present, but without the dandy-attitude. What I want to say with this: Not only Modernism but also the hysteria of Postmodernism seems to have come to an end here. Where does this "objective objectivism" come from?

Walter Benjamin: I agree with you. I think any first person discourse, artist in first person speak, is empty today, it is obsolete. These exhibits we are talking about, being views from the outside, are in some way 'out of present', but one can argue that this makes them "most present" of all 'presents' we could find around today. From the perspective of MoAA it is not only 'past' that is past, but it is 'present' that is past as well, and perhaps even the 'future' is the past, regardless how silly it might sound. Since, the internal narrative, the subject matter of MoAA is a story that is based on notions past-present-future.



Milo Rau: What do you think what these expositions do to the visitor? Modernism was obsessed by the "Now" and the "Real" – the "Choc", as Walter-Benjamin-I used to say. Postmodernism plays with the erotic of the immaterial, the absence and the „Phantomschmerz“ of the Real. To which places do THESE expositions lead to? What is their philosophy?

Walter Benjamin: If Modernism could be interpreted as a process of turning unknown into known, then these exhibitions are turning known into unknown. And the "shock of the new" is here substituted by the more subtle "shock of the old". We are walking through a familiar landscape but gradually become aware nothing seems right, that all this is not what it seems to be. And that might be very scary.

Also, while art history is written after previously established data base (collection of objects, characters, events), in the case of MoAA and the Kabinett we have artifacts (paintings), events (exhibition), characters (Alfred Barr, Walter Benjamin) generated and produced after the history. Further more, not only the artifacts and characters could be replicated without changing their meanings, but the entire exhibit could be replicated as well. Thus, if you like MoAA or the Kabinett, you can simply make it yourself. And this 'replica' will have the same meaning and value as the 'original' exhibit, unlike the relationship between the 'original' and 'copy' in the art history narrative.

Milo Rau: If there is a place out of History (even if it is just the history of Art), what kind of stories are told there? What kind of sensibility dominates in this context? And in what sense are the MoAA or the Kabinett examples (or simulations) for this future sensibility?

Walter Benjamin: I think there is no meta-narrative established yet, it will take some time, but I am sure that some of its features might be anticipated today. Since the notion of the uniqueness of the main characters (artist and artwork) is fundamental for the history of art, we could assume that it is not going to be the constitutive in the meta-narrative. Also, if the art history will be re-contextualized, then the very notions of artist and artwork will become of secondary importance. Places like galleries will transform into something else or become obsolete, while the museums will redefine themselves. But, there will be places with some kind of short and long term exhibitions.

Most likely this meta-narrative will not be linear (chronological) but rather a web of various interconnected but independent stories one of which would be art history. From that meta-narrative or meta-position we could have access to any of the particular narrative/position. Some of them could be cyclical (myth-like) and some linear with one or both ends open, like for example history.

This also means that we could play different roles/characters in different stories, and thus having not one but multiple identities. That will, among other things, blur the line between fiction and reality. This is not going to happen only in relation to the Art History, but to the society in general. It would redefine the meaning of the notion of the society.



Milo Rau: What do you think comes AFTER the MoAA? Which Art (and which history of art) can follow it? So: What comes after Postmodernism?

Walter Benjamin: The history of art is not only the story about past, the way we remember it. But it is also gives us direction for the future. What kind of story about past we select will determine what steps we'll take, what kind of future we will have.

One way to describe these places would be 'memory'. Memory is a picture (impression) in our brain of a certain event. When the event is long gone, this impression, this memory is the only thing we have. But it is not the event itself; it is just an image, emotion, some kind of picture in our brain. That is in fact an antithesis of the event that is being remembered. In a similar way, both exhibits MoAA and the Kabinett are remembering certain events from the modern art history, they are some kind of 3D memories, but they themselves are not modern. They are based on copy, not on original; therefore the notion of an author doesn't apply here. These works/entities are in fact antithesis of modern art. Copy of an abstract painting is not an abstract painting. Because of that, we could think of copies as memories. Often imperfect but sometimes that's only we are left with now and here.

As I said before, artifacts shown at these exhibits, and the exhibits themselves, are not works of art. They are rather souvenirs, selected specimens of our collective memory. If post modernism is in its essence a position of forgetting, entities such as MoAA and the Kabinett are places of re-remembering.

Alle Zitate in den einleitenden Bemerkungen stammen aus einem Informationsblatt des *Museum of American Art*.

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