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UNDER OBSTRUCTION: LOOKING AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

BY

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UNDER THE ADVISORY OF:

PROFESSOR M. MARK

SENIOR THESIS PROJECT, WRITTEN PORTION

In partial fulfillment of the MEDIA STUDIES MAJOR

VASSAR COLLEGE

POUGHKEEPSIE, NEW YORK

MAY 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to give my most profound thanks to my Thesis Advisor, Professor M. Mark, for believing in me, and having the patience and determination to guide, support, and advocate for me throughout this entire year.

Also, I express my deepest gratitude to Professor Molly Nesbit, who guided my nascent thoughts on obstruction toward a concrete theoretical base.

I would like to thank Professor Giovanna Borradori and Melissa McAlley for their stewardship and command of the Media Studies program; without their work, none of this would have been possible.

I want to thank by name Professors Slattery-Quintanilla, Blumenfeld, Cann, Harvey, Mask, and Patch. For their generosity and kindness throughout my years at Vassar, I am sincerely indebted.

Additionally, I want to express my thanks to:

My Mother and Father, Effie C. Doscas and Herbert C. Butler, for their love and hard work, as well as encouraging me to stick it out these past three years, in order to bring my degree to fruition.

Kirk Patrick H. Testa, for tirelessly helping me workshop my ideas throughout the drafting process of this work. We were in the trenches together.

Joaquim J. Gonçalves and Roger D. Vera. Words are unfit to describe how meaningful it is to me to have access to such genuine and considerate love, advice, and empathy.

Nina I. K. Line, for taking me to the Pompidou Centre in 2015, and for 5 years of friendship, love, and selfless compassion.

And for the chaperone on my 5th-grade field trip to Washington, D.C., who made me look at a Barnett Newman for the first time.

DEDICATION

This Project is Dedicated to my Two Grandfathers

Christ V. Doscas

and

Seaborn C. Butler

May their memories be eternal and everlasting

ABSTRACT

In order to obstruct the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I argue that at least part of what is being obstructed ought to be visible. This creates a kind of formal permeability, that allows the spectator-witness to understand that there is a tactical obstruction taking place. The notion of the completely wrapped or fully obscured building has an entirely different ideological attitude in my mind: in effect this form of obstruction takes on its own ontological type of being¹. In other words, the opaque obstruction gives a building new façade unto itself, rather than obfuscating it from view. Therefore, I envision the façade of the Met, as being obstructed by scores of prominent steel cross-girders, echoing the stylistic tendencies of the High-Tech or Inside-Out architectural style championed by Richard Rogers. This motif would extend across the entirety of the Fifth Avenue frontage of the museum, rendering it a leviathan scored with neatly-arranged steel girders, not intended to uglify or to scaffold, but to obstruct in a neat and clear way, signaling the ‘obstructed-ness’ of the cultural monolith.

The interior lobby, known as the Great Hall, would feature aluminum-paneled drop ceilings, scored with mounted fluorescent lights, evoking at once the precarious sterility of the neocolonial monument, and the structural features of oft taken-for-granted public spaces such as the subways, schools, and bus terminals. Text and semiotics would flood the museum patron’s field of view, dis-orienting the space of the Great Hall from one that is wandered through, or marveled at, to one that is transitory, and callous with regard to its patrons. Such a space begs simultaneously: what of the Great Hall has the museum patron taken for granted, and what does

¹ I.e. Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Ref: <https://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wrapped-reichstag>

the obstruction reveal by its tactic of making the museum physically unseen, but intellectually hyper-visible?

The inclusion of what I have referred to as a ‘manual of style’ provokes additional questions by prodding further at the museum-going public: how do we negotiate the idea of private-public space assuming the role of public monument? Why is it that the museological institute, the sterile petri-dish of ‘culture’ is the destination of beauty for the public, while architectural ‘beauty’ and social priority is not owed to the space of the proletarian quotidian (i.e. the subway, the office space etc.)? Briefly, The manual instructs docents to create a subconsciously more hectic environment for the public, as a facet of the critical obstruction. All of this is not to co-opt the spaces or “image” of poverty², but rather to force reflection and to instill a memorandum within the museum-goer of the contemporary regard for large swaths of public space in the city around the museum. This project is a very direct instigation, deployed to cause the museum-goer to consider what spaces they may take for granted, and also to consider why so many purely public, quotidian spaces, typically spaces of visual and socioeconomic poverty, are deemed acceptable to neglect.

My goal in obstructing the Met ought to be read as an objective denial of form. It is a critical indictment of the the Beaux-Arts tradition of Architecture, by countering it with a form of architecture that exists in direct formal opposition to the American Beaux-Arts. It is also a critical indictment of the politic and attitude of the colony-museum, merely by virtue of the architecture being obscured. My wish is that the museum-goer is able to consider *what* is being

² Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux*, no. 10 (November 2009).

obscured from a critical distance, when confronted by the unavoidability of the obstruction.

Because the obstruction is presented as an actuality, a physical reality, it is thus inseparable from the object of its modality. This inevitability is at the center of the project in my mind, because the project exists not merely as the physical plant of the museum with a new shell, but exactly within the identification between the spectator-witness and the physicality of the museum. There is a relational aspect that exists only when the critical obstruction is in dialogue with those who created the need for the obstruction in the first place. Thus, I read the project as replicable, and applicable to a plurality of institutions of power and regard, because of the Obstruction's existence within the intellectual bond between spectator and physical obstruction-matter. To be clear, there are two obstructions, the physical obstruction of the plant, and the capital-O Obstruction—my critical thesis, which occurs in the moment of identification between spectator-witness and lowercase obstruction.

UNDER OBSTRUCTION:

LOOKING AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

I. Defining the Gallery

In order to see the Museum in its entirety as a framework for this type of critique, I want to walk backward, and consider Brian O’Doherty’s thoughts on gallery space. O’Doherty helps delineate the gallery as a space that gradually became the framing device for the frame itself, as art began to “push itself up”³ against the frame, and break out of it entirely. It is by following this logic that we are allowed to consider further boundaries for ideological examination. Once the gallery is understood as a frame— itself the purification of the liminal space between ‘art’ and the ugly exterior world, in my mind, it becomes necessary to consider the lobby and the exterior of the museum as framing the mind of the museum witness, as they pass into the series of galleries which contain the art.

What better way to invite this kind of intimation than to invoke William Anastasi’s *West Wall*⁴: by remediating the wall of Dwan gallery, by replicating it on canvas? Anastasi draws attention to the ready-made object of the gallery that has been in full view the entire time⁵. This kind of logic that O’Doherty is instrumental in illustrating, is a key basis to the ideological tactic of ‘obstructing’ in the first place. Without calling attention to the ‘thing’ by referring to the

³ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, (San Francisco: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴ *West Wall*, William Anastasi. Ref: https://66.media.tumblr.com/7bc7923629f4e046e78be0662b4b00df/tumblr_o8zszv165v1vvt29io1_1280.jpg

⁵ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, (San Francisco: University of California Press, 1999).

‘thing’ itself, but rather by covering it up with a representation of itself, Anastasi draws out in the spectator a testament to the gallery’s active presence and role in framing the art displayed from within it.

II. The Spectator-Witness

Much of my basis for this project is centered around the the involvement of a ‘spectator-witness’, as the relationship between the obstructed space and the individual who witnesses it is key. While creating this type of insurgent, theoretical art project provides a platform for the questions I’m asking about the institution, it is impossible to ascribe meaning, or to derive any sort of critical conclusions from the project without a plurality of voices engaged with what is being presented. It is one thing to propose an obstruction grounded in critical thought, but if the work is unable to give voice to the questions that I’m asking by positing this obstruction, then In my mind, the fundamental capital-O obstruction, has not taken place. It is incumbent upon the obstruction, as a public artifact, to involve the conclusions of the spectator-witness. This idea of motivating critical theory, and mediating it through the work of preeminent architects, artists, and art practitioners who ask questions about the institution, relies on the response from the public in order to dissolve the boundary between art object and critic, by commingling the art and the spectator-witness. As a single mode of the art experience, the distinction, this negotiation of observer-and possessor, is removed.

By making the spectatorship of the obstruction a part of the work itself, I hope to underline the problematics of the hieratic relationship of the artist-above-spectator. Hopefully, by

enabling the spectator-witness to become an effective participant in the art, I am contributing to the abstractification of art ownership, and the ability to possess art.

However, by inviting the public to opine from ‘within the obstruction’, I do not mean to efface the art critic. For better or for worse, it can be concluded quite comfortably that were this project come to fruition as it is proposed, it would be subject to the same sort of art criticism as any site-specific installation.

Despite my best interests, and desire to remediate spaces of power through architectural resistance, my thesis is, at its very essence, born of Western tradition, of Western art historical theory, and twentieth-century critical thought. So, even at the core of this transformation, a legacy of what I am attempting to undo exists, by proxy of my conditioning under Western ideological conditions, my upbringing and early exposure to art, and my environment in the Global North, an imprint that influences my response to convention in this transformation of form. So, the critical obstruction does not mean to be usurpation or a dogma, but rather an exploration, and a complete response to the question of the institution, and the question of bringing art, and its relation with the spectator-witness to art into different spaces of thought.

III. The Hierarchy of the Image

Because this project, is predicated on the gaze of the spectator-witness, the philosophical relationship of the gaze and the frame comes under scrutiny. Of course visual art owes an immense privileging to the eye, which, throughout time has been trained to contain its gaze from within a frame of view. This cutting-off point is has been iterated from the edge of the canvas to

the physical frame, the film screen, to and onto the digital screen. This privileging of the framed image becomes interpolated within the obstruction of the Met. In my mind at least, when I am considering the idea of a cultural monolith, and the essence of a museum, I am given a mental image of the museum, that is inherently framed within my mind. The frame is a precarious barrier, which is why, to an extent, nothing in this work is framed outright. The obstruction becomes framed only by the limitations of the witness and the human gaze. And so, the obstruction is constantly framing and being re-framed, because the frame and the idea of the frame is rendered fragile, the notion of ‘scope’ being renegotiated in realtime by the spectator-witness’, as they move through the obstruction.

Now of course, especially in the case of sculpture, it could be argued that to an extent that movement reframes the artwork. However, sculptures possess a fixture, a base or mounting point, so in this sense, the sculpture becomes framed by its three dimensional mounting point. The obstructed Met has an impulse, an antagonism to the frame, because the physical plant of the building is so large that it refuses to be framed in any permeable way. So, when encountering the obstruction, the spectator-witness is constantly re-framing, and framing interior space by moving through it. Not only does the thesis, or core ideological principle of the Obstruction not tangibly exist, the central image of this piece does not exist in any one place, because of the boundaries and limitations of frame itself. It is impossible to capture the entire structure of the obstruction on the canvas, or from within the frame. And in that sense the original, or the ‘genuine portion’ of the obstructed Met is constantly movable— the original and the experience of the original is neither in one place, nor any place, decentralizing the idea of the frame as able to contain art, and as able to contain the essence of what an art-object might be. While the obstruction may

physically ‘cage’ the museum, it signifies and replicates the activity of the museum: the framing and containing of art.

IV. Contemporary forms: the ‘High-Tech’ style as a weapon against the Beaux-Arts

I think that it is important to solidify my critical basis for selecting a specific architectural style and logic to employ in the critical obstruction of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There is, in my mind, a very potent basis for the use of High-Tech architecture from a formal perspective. The High-Tech style itself, as pioneered by architect Richard Rogers of Riverside, was bred out of Rogers’ own predilection for replicability, and ease of manufacture⁶. He was intent upon creating a modular building, using components from buses, and other prefabricated objects. Eventually Rogers’ form became crystallized in the Pompidou Centre in Paris⁷, where components traditionally hidden from public sight, internal elements of buildings such as pipes, ducts, escalators, and structural supports, were rendered on the exterior, making them visible surfaces, exaggerated through bright painting. This hypervisibility of the ‘guts’ of an edifice that in history had been deemed too ugly for display, has been championed as an aesthetic achievement in the history of design. This inversion of logic in form is exactly what motivates my desire to apply it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whose Richard G. Morris Hunt

⁶ Tom Neville and Vicky Wilson, eds, *Richard Rogers: Inside Out*, (Royal Academy of Arts, 2014).

⁷ Completed 1977 alongside Renzo Piano. Ref: <https://www.rsh-p.com/projects/centre-pompidou/>

designed façade and Great Hall, are an exhibition of the American Beaux-Arts, a byproduct of the Gilded Age.

This is, of course, not without its repercussions. The Great Hall resonates with the Gilded Age's colonialist history, and rigid social caches⁸. The architecture is ideologically replicative of these norms, and societal manifestations. Stylistically, The Great Hall is without question the architecture of empire. An architecture that epitomizes the romantic veneer of the Gilded Age by censoring the unagreeable, and covering what really holds the structure up.

This architectural erasure no better represented than by Phillip Johnson's 1001 Fifth Avenue⁹, the 25-or-so story apartment building standing directly opposite the museum. Its limestone façade extends beyond the roof into 40-foot stone pediment held up by visible steel girders; a middle finger to the architectural superficiality of New York's cultural basilica. By creating this penetrable obstruction that makes an intellectual ugliness visible, I hope to effectively weaponize the formal attributes of the very particular High-Tech architectural style against the Beaux-Arts architecture of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

V. Thinking through public-private space

It has crossed my mind, that based on the way I have thought through this obstruction, the general public without being aware that an 'obstruction' is taking place, might nearly consider the Met to be under renovation, or undergoing some sort of restoration process. There is a strong chance that such a reaction would engender frustration, or sadness with not being able to

⁸ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1995).

⁹ Completed 1971. Ref:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/15/nyregion/30-years-later-an-architecture-critics-voice-still-rings-true.html>

encounter the space of the Metropolitan Museum of Art as they been promised in tourist brochures or on the internet. I think that this direct entitlement to the idea of a space has a very interesting meaning, further, this notion that the public are ‘owed’ the splendor and spectacle of the Met at all times has a profound reverberation. What is it that the Met no longer offers, if we are upset that it is under obstruction? All of the art is still there. What is it that the Met as a public-private space offers us, In the way of influencing us subliminally, even if in its unobstructed state we take it for granted. In New York City especially— because the Great Hall does not require admission for entry, because the Met Steps serve as a prominent gathering space, the places of obstruction function as a gathering point for many New Yorkers, and are used very much as public space, though they are explicitly part of a precarious negotiation between the City of New York itself, and the institution of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The ‘Met’ itself, is a private operation, harking back to Duncan¹⁰, it relies on billionaire philanthropy to stay afloat, as it does not receive any federal funds for its maintenance as a museum and runs massive deficits regularly in order to survive¹¹. And so what is this ‘debt’ that the Met pays to New Yorkers, or other people from around the world who would like to simply ‘bear witness’, and meander through the Great Hall, or sit on the front steps and eat a hot dog? What is the promise that the Met as a museum gives us, as opposed to other forms of entirely public space such as the subways or the bus terminal, or public parks, that when they are taken away from us, it is normalized— what is it about the significance of the cultural monolith, that when it is taken away there is such a potential for a negative response? There are many ways to answer this proposition, of course. If a spectator-witness is unable to convey on their personal

¹⁰ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1995).

¹¹ The Met ran an \$10m deficit in the 2016-17 fiscal year. Ref:

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/metropolitan-museum-of-art-runs-10-million-deficit-1510873477>

social media channels that they were present at the Met, will it have ever happened? Perhaps it is an issue of subtle familiarity—the local, the New Yorker, who has transfixed their own emotional significance to the architecture of the Met to the degree that they have established their own personal relationship with the space, sees their romance with the building ruptured once it has been taken away.

Ultimately, it is hopefully the obstruction that calls into question this very sort of entitlement. When someone enters the space of the Great Hall during the obstruction, perhaps presuming construction is being undertaken, ultimately recognizing the obstruction as intentional, the question arises why? Why do this to the space? Why particularly these spaces? What does the Met represent that it needs to be obstructed in the first place? Once these things are taken from the spectator-witness' field of view, not only are their formal qualities interrogated, but their ideological bases become subject to questioning, and the meaning of the space to the individual, to the spectator-witness, is called into question as well. Without the obstruction, in my mind, these questions cannot be asked in a powerful enough way.

VI. Obstructing the Met: A taxonomy

Façade

Steel cross-bracing is affixed to the entirety of the façade. These gestures are roughly square, and mirror the proportions of the 1914 McKim Mead & White Colonnade. They are iterated horizontally across the majority of the museum's frontage. Above them, along the pediment run pipes that carry air, water, and electricity for the obstruction within, penetrating the

surface of the façade through the most extreme windows on either side of the G. Morris Hunt façade. The majority of the the David H. Koch plaza is walled off with scaffolding panels, as are a significant portion of the Met Steps. This narrows the staircase, recalling its original proportions. An aluminum paneled marquis is affixed to overhand the central entryway of the Museum. Inside it, a lightbox illumines a translucent plastic sign: “THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART”.

Great Hall

A steel and cable superstructure supports an aluminum-panel drop ceiling at a height of approximately 9 feet, punctuated with flush fluorescent tube lights. Columns, created by the obstructing superstructure, supply the necessary ventilation and HVAC, as well as inoperative electrical outlets. All wooden benches are removed, and metal benches are introduced along the periphery of the room. The information desk is augmented to include full-height plexiglass paneling, insulating it from the exterior of the Great Hall. Its marble base is covered with plastic, and faux-wood panelling. Aluminum-paneled walls beckoned with neatly arranged advertisements, are underscored by stone is left visible below the base molding. The bottom parts of the interior colonnade, left visible underneath the drop ceiling, are encircled in protective glass and metal enclosures. Additionally the four convex pediments typically used to display massive bouquets of flowers, are converted into display cases, where art from the collection is visible through scratched plexiglass covers. CCTV feeds from cameras along the ceiling are visible on monitors surrounding the central information desk. Ceiling-mounted signage instructs patrons

toward exits, collections, restrooms, and other facilities. The portals to galleries are mediated by turnstiles, opened by an RFID chip in patron's tickets.

Identity Manual

The Met's public identity is altered to fall in line with the obstruction. This includes logotype, and forward-facing publications, such as flyers and maps distributed in the Great Hall during the period of obstruction, and on fabric posters draped along the façade. The home page of the museum's website and its social media presence, are styled to conform with the specifications outlined in Identity Manual, and there is an option to view the Met's web pages from within the aesthetic framework of the obstruction. A code of behavior for employees who work in the Great Hall is included, instructing them to incline toward indifference toward the patrons (not rudeness, nor unhelpfulness), exhibiting a proclivity to 'move people along', rather than taking their time, and chatting with patrons. Included also are modifications to the uniform, instructions on how to set the temperature in the morning (5 degrees cooler than the Met's current setting), and amended specifications for the cleaning and maintenance of the space.

VII. Obstructing the "_____": Bringing critical obstruction to other venues

I consider the notion of the critical obstruction to be replicable and able to be employed in different ways. In a sense, the "Critical Obstruction", becomes an open-source tactic to challenge institutions ideologically through formal practice, by challenging the space they consume. Though I conceived of this idea with specificity towards the Met, I do not believe that

any of the tactics or specific ideology employed in this example of obstruction are prerequisites for initiating a critical obstruction. In my mind the constituent elements of critical obstruction are:

1. The obstruction in question involves a tactile alteration of a physical plant that stands in for an institution or body of power, and/or their prevailing ideologies.
2. The obstruction takes advantage of this change in order to raise questions about the implications of the ideological standpoint of the architecture itself, as well as the ideology the targeted edifice or institution purports to represent.
3. The obstruction solidifies the role of the spectator-witness: ensure that the dynamics of the alteration cause the ‘act of Obstruction’ to occur from within the internal dialectic between the altered physical plant, and the spectator-witness.

As a part of this project, I engaged in an obstruction on the Vassar campus, to better illustrate the adaptability of the concept, and solidify my thesis work in practice:

The work, *Obelisk*, a night piece, does not function in the same manner as the Met obstruction, but rather illustrates obstruction through hypervisibility. *Obelisk* illuminates the Vassar Powerhouse smokestack at night, encroaching on the regular existence of such a powerful formal gesture that at night, falls largely into shadow. Immediately, it might give rise to questions regarding the purpose of the largely unseen structure, now disused— thoughts that might include its architectural viability, potential for renovation or maintenance, or risk of a fate

to the bulldozer. Intertextually however, the literal spotlighting of the smokestack sheds light onto Vassar's history of fossil fuel investment, and its reliance on natural gas to power the school. Ultimately, however, it is up to the plurality of thoughts, the nexus of interactions between those who witness the obstruction, and the obstructed subject that determine the Obstruction, and what might be seen through it.

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