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Introduction

EMMA BARKER

What are the conditions in which works of art are experienced today? In this book we will seek to answer this question by considering museums, galleries and other contexts of display. In so doing, we will be concerned not simply with the arrangement of objects in space but also with the politics and economics of art institutions. The context of display is an important issue for art history because it colours our perception and informs our understanding of works of art. This is the fundamental point of this book: that museums and galleries are not neutral containers offering a transparent, unmediated experience of art. Rather, we need to consider them in terms of ‘cultures of display’, that is, with reference to the different ideas and values that can shape their formation and functioning. The central aim of this introduction, therefore, is to explore the problematic nature of display.

Although we are primarily concerned here with the conditions for looking at art that prevail today, it is impossible to understand them properly without considering the ways in which they have changed in recent decades. The book itself is structured so as to bring out a sense of these developments, moving outwards from an examination in Part 1 of the changes that have taken place within art’s traditional sanctum – the museum – to consider in Part 2 the increasingly important phenomenon of the temporary exhibition, and finally in Part 3 by addressing the wider context in which art is produced and viewed today. Critical discussions of the current state of art often suggest that it is subsumed within a culture of ‘spectacle’; we will examine this term later in this introduction. First, however, we will open up some key themes and issues by examining the concept of the ‘museum without walls’.

The museum without walls

This phrase originated as a loose translation of the French writer André Malraux’s Le Musée imaginaire (the imaginary museum), which was first published in 1947 (Plate 1). It has since gained wide currency as a useful shorthand for the diffusion of works of art beyond the museum by means of photographic reproduction. The museum without walls was, however, conceived by Malraux as referring primarily to a massive expansion of art beyond the classical canons of taste that had continued to prevail (just about) in the museums of the nineteenth century, to embrace works of every time and place that had previously been unknown or unappreciated. By means of photography, he argued, ‘a “museum without walls” is coming into being, and ... it will carry infinitely farther that revelation of the world of art, limited perforce, which the “real” museums offer us within their walls ...’ (Malraux,

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1 In this book both the American term ‘art museum’ and the British usage of describing a public collection of fine art as a ‘gallery’ will be employed.

2 On the classical canon, see Perry and Cunningham, Academies, Museums and Canons of Art (Book 1 of this series).
The creation of an expanded audience for art is the corollary of this: 'a new field of art experience, vaster than any so far known ... is now, thanks to reproduction, being opened up. And this new domain ... is for the first time the common heritage of all mankind' (The Voices of Silence, p.16).

For Malraux, the museum without walls is the latest stage in a process of metamorphosis begun by the museum proper. It is the museum, he argues, that transforms an object (such as a fourteenth-century altarpiece) into a work of art by allowing it to be appreciated for its formal qualities alone without regard to the setting for which it was made or the function it once fulfilled. Photography extends this decontextualizing effect by stripping objects not only of their original significance but also of their material specificity: scale, texture, colour, etc. Malraux positively welcomes the overall homogenizing effect that this produces. According to him, it 'imparts a family likeness to objects that have actually but slight affinity', thereby making it possible to dignify them as works of art in a 'common style' (The Voices of Silence, p.21).

By enlarging an ancient carved figurine so that it resembles a semi-abstract sculpture or by isolating a detail from a larger work in accordance with a modern preference for the fragment over the whole, moreover, photography can endow them with 'a quite startling, if spurious modernism' (The Voices of Silence, p.27). These visual tricks, especially the latter, remain standard in reproductions today.
Malraux’s acknowledgment of the way that photographic manipulation assimilates objects from different cultures to a modernist aesthetic points to a fundamental problem at the heart of the museum without walls. Photography, he suggests, allows innumerable different styles to be distinguished and assessed in their own terms, thereby undermining the authority of any single aesthetic norm. But the diversity of this ‘world of art’ is based on a formalist approach – largely excluding consideration of both content and context – that is distinctively modernist.3 The museum without walls can thus be viewed as a form of cultural imperialism, imposing a modern western conception of ‘art’ as well as a modernist aesthetic on objects from different cultures and periods. It is implicated in the conquests and thefts that have brought many such objects into western collections: Malraux himself, as his unsparing critic Georges Duthuit pointed out, had (in 1923) detached sculptures from the temple at Angkor in Cambodia (cited in Krauss, ‘The ministry of fate’, p.1005). As Case Study 6 shows, this kind of tension between the appreciation of objects from ‘other’ cultures and their appropriation (actual or aesthetic) is a major issue for contemporary museum display.4

No less significant and indeed problematic is Malraux’s conception of the museum without walls as ‘the common heritage of mankind’. Here, too, he saw photography as extending a process begun by the ‘real’ museum in making works of art accessible to people beyond a wealthy elite of art collectors. A commitment to promoting access was the starting point for Malraux’s policy as France’s first minister of cultural affairs between 1959 and 1969. It found its clearest expression in the nation-wide network of cultural centres (maisons de culture) that was established during these years to bring art to the people. In practice, however, this policy was at best controversial, at worst a complete flop. A fundamental problem, it can be argued, was Malraux’s quasi-religious belief that people need only to be brought into contact with art in order to be able to understand and appreciate it. According to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for example, ‘the love of art’ is far from universal but depends on the possession of a class-specific ‘cultural capital’ (as exemplified by the kind of formalist approach employed by Malraux).5 Malraux’s ministerial career represents in extreme form the tension between high art and cultural democracy that, as many of the case studies here show, is now a crucial issue for museums. The central paradox of Malraux’s museum without walls is that it embraces photography but essentially restricts it to the role of a mechanism in the service of art. A very different analysis is offered in the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin’s influential essay, ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical

3 For a discussion of the modernist emphasis on the formal qualities of works of art, see the Introduction to Wood, The Challenge of the Avant-Garde (Book 4 of this series).
4 These tensions are exemplified by demands for the return of cultural treasures to their country of origin, such as Greece’s claim to the Parthenon marbles in the British Museum. On this issue, see Case Study 2 in Perry and Cunningham, Academies, Museums and Canons of Art (Book 1 of this series). See also King, Views of Difference (Book 5 of this series).
reproduction’ (1936). Welcoming photography’s potential for emancipating the masses, Benjamin argued that it undermines the quasi-magical ‘aura’ of the unique work by creating a multiplicity of copies in place of a single original. Take, for example, the *Mona Lisa* (Plate 2): its very familiarity in reproduction means that the actual picture in the Louvre tends to strike viewers as smaller and less impressive than expected. Its ‘presence’ as a unique object can be said to have been depleted by the ubiquity of the image. Nevertheless, the crowds continue to gather around this most famous of paintings. Despite the significance of Benjamin’s analysis, it is undeniable that the fascination of the unique original has been substantially enhanced by the mass production of images.6 Photography (and, more broadly, the mass media) has undoubtedly thereby contributed to the vast increase in visitor levels at art museums and galleries that has taken place since the mid-twentieth century.

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6 This is a complex issue that we can only touch on here; the key point is that, if copies did not exist, it would be impossible to define any object as an original.
While Malraux's emphasis on photography's popularizing role has been proved correct in this respect, his conception of the museum without walls nevertheless fails to register the extent of its impact. Today the status of an object as 'art' no longer depends on its unique existence as an original work from the hand of an individual artist. Certain forms of photography have now gained the status of an art form and are exhibited as such in museums. Many contemporary artists reject the traditional media of painting and sculpture and work instead with pre-fabricated materials and photographic media (see Plates 76 and 153). Admittedly, of course, the identification of such practices as art is a contentious issue for many people (inevitably so given that even early twentieth-century abstract art has yet to be uniformly accepted). To say that it depends ultimately on their presence in the museum might seem to confirm often expressed suspicions that modern art represents an art world 'conspiracy' perpetrated on the public. It can also, however, be seen in terms of the phenomenon that Malraux called metamorphosis: that is to say, the quasi-magical transformation of objects into art. From this perspective, the expanded definition of art now current can be understood as an extension of metamorphosis. The crucial point here is that the institutional power of the museum (considered more fully below) works against the levelling effect of photography and continues to uphold, however problematically, the distinction between what is and what is not art.

The museum without walls as it was formulated by Malraux certainly cannot be taken as an unproblematic concept. As we have seen, the rhetoric of diversity and openness is at least partly belied by his assumptions about the nature of art. Nevertheless, the term (especially in its translated form) has many resonances pertinent to the contemporary conditions for viewing art. It can, for example, be taken to refer to temporary exhibitions (discussed in Part 2) as opposed to museum collections. In a later edition of his book, Malraux described exhibitions as 'those brilliant and fleeting dependencies of the museum without walls' (Museum without Walls, p.160). The museum without walls might also be understood as the architectural counterpart to the works of art within museums, appropriately so since Malraux as minister was much concerned with the preservation of France's historic buildings (this issue is touched on in Case Study 2 and discussed in Case Study 8). Most apposite of all, perhaps, is to apply the term to open-air sculptures, otherwise known as public art; these certainly make art accessible beyond the real museum, as Malraux conceived the museum without walls as doing, but also raise difficult questions about the place of art in society (explored in Part 3).

For postmodern cultural critique, the central weakness of Malraux's argument is the failure to grasp that the museum without walls would promote an endless recycling of the images and styles of the art of the past (identified as postmodernism); see, for example, Crimp, 'On the museum's ruins', pp.54-8 (this article was first published in 1980). Aspects of postmodernism are discussed in the first two case studies.
Display

The condition of being on display is fundamental to the construction of the category ‘art’ in the modern western world. Art’s autonomy — its definition as a specialized set of objects and practices set apart from the more mundane concerns of society — is bound up with the existence of the museum, which, in displaying works of art, stops them being used for any purpose other than that of being looked at. By thus promoting specialized, distinctively aesthetic modes of looking, art museums function (according to Carol Duncan) as ‘ritual sites’ dedicated to the religion of art (Duncan, Civilizing Rituals, pp.7ff). It must be emphasized that this notion of a ‘religion of art’ should not be taken at face value. For Duncan, as for many cultural critics, the cult status of art is precisely what makes the museum problematic. However, display itself is just as much an issue here as art. We can put this in focus by noting that display is a verb as well as noun, active as well as passive: the point being that display is always produced by curators, designers, etc. As such, it is necessarily informed by definite aims and assumptions and evokes some larger meaning or deeper reality beyond the individual works in the display. In short, it is a form of representation as well as a mode of presentation.

Museums first and foremost impose meaning on objects by classifying them. This is true of any museum; a natural history museum, for example, will order the objects that it contains in accordance with categories derived from the biological sciences (for example, species and genus). Within an art museum, the classifications employed are derived from the discipline of art history; the works of art will therefore typically be arranged by period, school, style, movement or artist (or a combination of these). At the same time, the presence of a particular work of art in a museum (at least, in major institutions such as the National Gallery in London or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) already represents a form of classification: it has been distinguished from others that were not deemed worthy of inclusion on the basis of its authenticity, originality or some other quality (hence the phrase ‘museum quality’). The final arbiters here, the people who make the judgements justifying the acquisition of a work for a collection or its inclusion in an exhibition, are museum curators and directors. The nature of their role has been nicely summed up by the French artist Daniel Buren, who, commenting on a 1989 exhibition that identified contemporary artists from around the world as ‘magicians’, ‘suggested that the real “magicians” of contemporary society were the museum curators’ (Deliss, ‘Conjuring tricks’, p.53).

The artistry of the curator has been foregrounded over the course of the last century or so as a result of the increasing care devoted to the visual effect produced by the display of works of art within the gallery space. A sense that display itself has something of the status of a work of art is suggested by the double meaning of the term ‘installation’, referring, on the one hand, to

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It should, however, be pointed out that they sometimes make compromises: for example, if a donor offers a collection to the museum on condition that it is accepted in its entirety. Donors may insist that their collection be displayed together, thereby disrupting the orderly classifications of the museum (as has happened, for example, in the Metropolitan and the Musée d’Orsay in Paris).
the picture 'hang' or arrangement of objects and, on the other, to a type of art work that has developed since the 1960s, which may be site-specific and typically has to be disassembled in order to be moved (see Plates 78 and 79). The curator Germano Celant, for example, notes that 'exhibition installation becomes the new pretender to originality ... [it] is in and of itself a form of modern work' (Celant, 'A visual machine', p.373). The artfulness of modern display can produce an intensified aestheticization: careful spacing and lighting isolate works of art for the sake of more concentrated contemplation (as in the 'white cube' type of gallery space discussed in Case Study 1). Alternative strategies of display seek, by contrast, to recontextualize works of art in the world outside the museum. This can mean recreating the material setting in which they might once have been seen (as in the 'country house' style of display discussed in Case Study 8). In the case of exhibitions, it typically involves attempting to evoke their historical context with the help of information panels, documents, photographs, etc. (Plate 64). A recent example of such an exhibition was Art and Power: Europe of the Dictators (London, Hayward Gallery, 1995–6), which explored how art fared under the totalitarian regimes, both Fascist and Stalinist, of the period 1930–45.

Nevertheless, the fundamental aim of an art museum is to display works of art for the sake of their aesthetic interest. For contemporary museum critique, the particular significance of the aesthetic approach lies in the way that it seeks to bracket off or 'neutralize' the wider world beyond the museum. 'The alleged innate neutrality of museums and exhibitions', according to Ivan Karp, 'is the very quality that enables them to become instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience' (Karp, 'Culture and representation', p.14). This is also the point underlying Carol Duncan's account of the art museum as 'ritual site'; participation in its seemingly rarefied 'rituals' serves to confirm a particular sense of identity (in terms of class, race, gender, etc.) and thereby reinforces the ideological norms of society. Analysing the Museum of Modern Art in New York (see Case Study 1), for example, she argues that the dominance of male artists and the prominence of female nudes mean that progress through the spaces of the museum produces a 'ritual subject' (or identity) that is gendered masculine (Duncan, Civilizing Rituals, pp.114–15). This type of analysis is problematic (as Duncan acknowledges) in so far as it assumes that museum visitors passively absorb a uniform message rather than actively respond to display in different ways (for an example of a museum that has proved amenable to diverse 'readings', see Case Study 2). However, it does have the value of alerting us to the possible ideological significance of particular displays.

From some critical perspectives, however, all museum display is inherently problematic. For anyone who disputes the validity of the 'aesthetic' as a specialized domain (as, for example, does Bourdieu), display is necessarily

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9 Celant is one of a number of influential international curators; he was the curator of the 1997 Venice Biennale, for example. The essay quoted here was originally published in documenta vii in 1982 (for these international exhibitions of contemporary art, see Case Study 4).

10 Although the point about 'neutrality' is most easily made with reference to art museums, it is not just aesthetics ('experience') that is at issue here but also (as the 'education' reference indicates) the claims made by all museums to be disinterested, objective sources of knowledge.
understood as a form of fetishism. That is to say, by isolating objects for purposes of aesthetic contemplation, it encourages the viewer to project on to them meanings and values that have no real basis in the objects themselves. While the full logic of this argument is unacceptable to anyone who believes that it is possible to make distinctions between objects on purely visual grounds, the concept of fetishism is helpful in so far as it allows us to understand why some forms of display are more problematic than others. A case in point is the now standard practice of placing objects under spotlights in otherwise dimly-lit spaces so that they seem to glow of their own accord, endowing them with an air of mystery and preciousness. The problem here is that this kind of lighting is typically used for ancient and (as Case Study 6 shows) ‘primitive’ art – in other words, precisely those objects that are most alien to a modern western viewer – and can thus inhibit any engagement with the meanings and values they would have had in their original context. This does not mean that such lighting should not be used but rather, it can be argued, makes it important to ensure that the display as a whole fosters a degree of self-consciousness on the part of viewers about the cultural distance between themselves and the objects on show.

The concept of fetishism also has relevance, however, to the display of western fine art and, in particular, to the Old Master and modern paintings that are the most highly prized objects in our society. Here, it is specifically Karl Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism that applies: the suggestion is that the special value attributed to such paintings serves to obscure or ‘mystify’ their real condition as commodities in a system of market exchange. Of course, this may seem irrelevant to the present discussion given that the primary function of the museum is to take works of art out of commercial circulation and make them accessible to people who could not afford to buy them. Nevertheless, it can be argued that an awareness of the prices that a work of art would fetch should it come on the market profoundly informs the experience of display. Consider, for example, Vincent van Gogh’s Irises (Plate 3), which (temporarily) became the most expensive painting in the world when it was auctioned for just under $54 million in 1987 (though, in the event, the Australian businessman who bought it proved unable to pay) and now hangs in the world’s best endowed museum (no other could afford it). While the unique ‘aura’ (in Benjamin’s term) of Irises ostensibly derives from the ‘genius’ of Van Gogh, the experience of the painting is now inescapably bound up with the fascination of sheer concentrated money. Clearly, this is an extreme case but not a wholly unrepresentative one. Moreover, in so far as the commodity status of art is here being not so much denied as celebrated, it takes on further significance as evidence of the contemporary culture of spectacle.

11 For a brief discussion of this term, see Case Study 11 in Perry, Gender and Art (Book 3 of this series).
12 The introduction of some element of cultural contrast is presented as the only solution to the problem of displaying other cultures in Karp, ‘Culture and representation’, pp.18–19. A similar element of self-consciousness about display is also often recommended as a strategy for museums in general; see, for example, Saumarez-Smith, ‘Museums, artefacts and meanings’, p.20.
13 The fundamental question here is whether (as Benjamin argued) ‘such outmoded concepts as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery’ are wholly reducible to symptoms of commodity fetishism (Benjamin, ‘The work of art’, p.212). For a discussion of the relevance of the concept of the commodity to art, see Wood, ‘Commodity’. As a related point, it can be noted that the type of lighting discussed in the previous paragraph originated in a retail context as a device for the display of commodities.
Spectacle

In its most literal sense, this word signifies a dazzling visual show. What we might call art-as-spectacle can be exemplified by the Wrapped Reichstag (Plate 4), a work by the husband-and-wife team of artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, which consisted of covering the Reichstag building in Berlin with silvery fabric to spectacular effect. The work had a political dimension: what allowed the Christos' long-contemplated project to get official consent in 1994 was the end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany (the Reichstag was subsequently to become the country's parliament building once again). Also significant is the sheer scale of the enterprise, which was completed in June 1995: it required a work-force of over 200 and reportedly cost some £8 million to carry out. From this follows a further point: huge amounts of time and money were expended to create not a permanent monument but a temporary construction.14 But, of course, the Wrapped Reichstag survives still in a multitude of photographs; even during its fleeting existence, it was seen not only by over five million people in Berlin but also, through the medium of newspapers and television, by many more around the world.

14 The Wrapped Reichstag was dismantled after only two weeks; the artists also produce more permanent works (drawings, models, etc.), the sale of which finances the wrapping works. Their refusal to accept subsidy for their work (among other factors) means that it should not necessarily be seen in the negative Debordian terms outlined below.
INTRODUCTION


Spectacle is a key concept for analysing the condition of art in the era of mass media. Its currency in contemporary critical discourse can be traced back to Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), which elaborated the ideas of the French cultural revolutionary group known as the Situationists (in which he himself was a major figure). Their central claim is that, under the prevailing conditions of capitalist production, life is largely mediated through images. The ‘spectacle’ is not simply a mass of images, however, but constitutes a frozen and distorted version of actual social relations. This argument draws on Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism, which already suggested that capitalism has the effect of obscuring fundamental social realities as it subordinates ‘use value’ to ‘exchange value’. The concept of the ‘spectacle’ develops directly out of a tradition of Marxist cultural criticism that laments the increasing commodification and bureaucratization of everyday life (and, more especially, leisure time) in the twentieth century. Its main concern is with the consumption of a highly technologized mass culture which, so it is argued, upholds the interests of capital by alienating the majority from their real needs. With Debord, this concern is accompanied by a particular emphasis on the image as the domain of illusion and ideology or, to put it another way, on visuality as a form of domination, one that dazzles and deceives, seducing or stunning the spectator into submission. This suspicion of vision makes ‘spectacle’ a valuable but also problematic term for considering the production and consumption of the visual arts.


16 In other words, when any relationship with actual human needs gives way to an essentially illusory monetary value; for a further use of these two concepts, see Case Study 4.
On this point, it is significant that Debord identifies two models of spectacle, though he says far more about ‘diffused’ spectacle – the capitalist version – than about the ‘concentrated’ form of totalitarian regimes (put schematically it is a case of television on the one hand and the Nazis’ Nuremberg rallies on the other). In the context of art, spectacle can be said to have found its defacing expression in the colossal monuments of totalitarianism, exemplified by the rival Nazi and Soviet pavilions at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition (Plate 67). As the Wrapped Reichstag demonstrates, overwhelming scale can also be an element in contemporary art-as-spectacle, though, far from functioning as propaganda for a totalitarian regime, this work does not impose any particular meaning on its viewers and could be taken to symbolize an end to warring ideologies. In the consumer society of today, it can be argued, the spectacle finds its typical expression in the image that serves to promote consumption. This would allow art-as-spectacle to be defined by analogy with advertising in terms of its high production costs, typically glossy surfaces and attention-grabbing impact. It could be exemplified by reference to the much-hyped ‘new British art’ of the 1990s, notably the work of Damien Hirst (Plate 74). It might even be thought significant that the major patron of this art, Charles Saatchi, made his fortune in advertising (on the Saatchi collection, see Case Study 4). All this begs the question: when used with reference to contemporary art, is ‘spectacle’ any more than a convenient derogatory term for policing the boundaries between high art and mass culture?

Any answer would need to consider the broader use of the term in support of the argument that art is being incorporated into a system of commercial entertainment, media hype and cultural tourism. In an article of 1992, deploring the widespread curatorial emphasis on high-profile exhibitions (spectacle in the sense of being ephemeral, attention-seeking ‘shows’), the Belgian artist Jan Vercruysse declared:

... our culture is sliding into a culture of spectacle. Media and spectacle-oriented performances and events with reference to art create a negative energy, turning art into an ‘art event’, a spectacle to be consumed for and by everyone. The attention for art roused by spectacle is bad since it is not founded on content but on the effect of its media existence. I contest the idea that all these media operations ‘serve’ art, resulting in an increase of real interest for art from more and more people.

(Quoted in Walker, Art in the Age of Mass Media, p.70)

The ‘culture of spectacle’ is identified as a crucial issue by artists and critics concerned about the future of modern art on the grounds that, in turning art into merely another cultural commodity for leisure-time consumption, it necessarily compromises the potential for art as a form of critical practice. In

17 Although the term is often applied to the nineteenth century (see Case Study 2) and earlier, it has been argued that spectacle in a strictly Debordian sense only emerged in the late 1920s with innovations in technology and the rise of Fascism; see Crary, ‘Spectacle, attention, counter-memory’.

18 Hirst’s Away from his Flock, one of his ‘trademark’ animals in formaldehyde, was parodied in an advertisement in 1994; the artist and his dealer threatened to sue, but the case was settled out of court. This interaction of avant-garde art and mass culture is not new in itself; rather, as Tom Crow argues, the borrowing of mass cultural forms by avant-garde artists has from the first been followed by their re-appropriation by commerce; see Crow, Modern Art in the Common Culture, pp.33–6. However, the whole cycle does seem to have speeded up of late.
the ‘spectacle’, the challenge of the avant-garde is restaged (so the argument runs) as a form of theatre, a case in point being the Turner Prize (see Case Study 4), which, with its short-list of rival artists, positively invites controversy. However, it is not only contemporary art that can be seen to be caught up in the ‘spectacle’; indeed, the above-quoted claim that exhibitions are all too often media-friendly pseudo-events that do not really succeed in popularizing art applies just as well if not better to the blockbuster shows of Old Master and canonical modern painting discussed in Case Study 5. The fundamental problem of ‘spectacle’, it can be suggested, lies in the way that it subordinates art and its institutions to commercial and managerial priorities, producing a democratizing effect at the expense of serious engagement with or even close attention to works of art. In the worst case scenario, art becomes a mere pretext for more direct forms of consumption (in the museum restaurant and shop).

Any such shift away from direct involvement with – that is, actually looking at – works of art would certainly fit in with the general tendency of ‘spectacle’, as theorized by Debord, towards ever more mediated forms of experience. Here, it should be noted that his claims were subsequently developed into a much more extreme position by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. While Debord noted the increasing importance of cultural commodities or what he referred to as ‘image-objects’ to the world’s economy (The Society of the Spectacle, para.15, p.16), Baudrillard argues that this proliferation of images means it is impossible to sustain belief in the existence of an underlying social reality. According to him, ‘we are no longer in the society of the spectacle’ but rather in the regime of the simulacrum – that is, of the image without a referent outside itself (Baudrillard, ‘The precession of simulacra’, p.273). Furthermore, Baudrillard argues, this sense of being lost in a world of appearances produces a compensatory striving to recapture the real in all its intensity that he calls ‘hyperreality’. This concept is the most useful aspect of his work for us; it helps, for example, to explain the contemporary cult of heritage discussed in Case Study 8 (the hand-crafted past as more authentic than the prepackaged present). Equally, it could help to explain why the cult of the artist-genius seems, if anything, to have got stronger in recent years (the ‘unreal’ prices paid for Van Gogh’s paintings are bound up with the supposed ‘reality’ of his suffering and suicide). However, accepting the full logic of Baudrillard’s conception of a free-floating, essentially meaningless image world makes any further explanation or analysis impossible, whereas Debord’s ‘depth’ model allows ‘spectacle’ to be tied down to fundamental politico-economic causes and offers the basis for a critique of its socio-economic effects (for these issues, see Case Study 7).

Ultimately, however, it must be emphasized that ‘spectacle’ is simply a useful concept rather than a verifiable reality. Like any theory that seeks to offer a total explanation of the world as we know it, it needs to be treated with a great deal of caution. The debate as to whether or not the ‘society of the spectacle’ is still with us is predicated on the debatable proposition that it

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19 On the definition of the avant-garde and of mass culture as its ‘other’, see the Introduction to Wood, The Challenge of the Avant-Garde (Book 4 of this series). The present discussion neglects the crucial differences between art and mass-produced cultural commodities such as film; some of these are addressed in Case Study 4.
did exist at some point. For present purposes, the crucial point is that any analysis of recent developments affecting art and its institutions solely in terms of a consumerist, manipulated culture of 'spectacle' would be unduly negative.\(^{20}\) It means discounting the possibility that museums and galleries are not simply reinforcers of dominant ideology and may indeed have become more democratic over the last few decades. This suggestion can be supported by directing attention away from major museums closely associated with the rich and powerful (the 'usual suspects' of museum critique) to less well-established, especially non-metropolitan institutions (such as the Orchard Gallery in Derry, discussed in Case Study 9). Moreover, in so far as our world does resemble the one Baudrillard describes, it does not automatically follow that we have no option but to embrace the unceasing circulation of commodified images and abandon all idea of art as a specialized, privileged realm.\(^{21}\) On the contrary, it could be said that the display of works of art in a museum is significant precisely because it can break the circuit, arrest the flow, by encouraging us to stop and contemplate a still or at least (to take account of video and other new art forms) slow image.

References


\(^{20}\) The repressive implications of spectacle (or, in his terminology, simulation and hyperreality) are most starkly spelled out in Baudrillard’s discussion of the Pompidou Centre (see Case Study 1).

\(^{21}\) The suggestion that the saturation of society by photographic and electronic images means that art and everyday life have now fused into a seamless continuum is associated with the argument that the present era is a distinctively postmodern one; see Case Study 2.


