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PRINT JANUARY 2020

## THE KIDS ARE ALWAYS RIGHT

HELEN MOLESWORTH ON THE REINSTALLATION OF MOMA'S PERMANENT  
COLLECTION



View of "Hardware/Software," 2019–, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Foreground, from left: Joan Semmel, *Night Light*, 1978; Maren Hassinger, *Leaning*, 1980; Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. I*, 1977/2003. Background: Cady Noland, *Tanya as Bandit*, 1989. Photo: John Wronn.

**THE VIBE** started to trickle out via Instagram. For a few days, my feed was inundated with pictures of all the cool new shit on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. You could smell victory in the air: The artists were happy. Then the *New York Times* weighed in and touched the wide shoulders of the new, bigger-is-better MoMA with their magic wand. Could it be? Had MoMA, the perennial whipping boy of art historians, radical artists, and cranky art critics, gotten it *right*? And by right, at this moment, we mean that the collection has been installed with an eye toward inclusivity—of medium, of gender, of nationality, of ethnicity—and that modernism is no longer portrayed as a single, triumphant narrative, but rather as a network of contemporaneous and uneven developments. Right means that the curatorial efforts to dig deep into MoMA’s astounding holdings looked past the iconic and familiar (read: largely white and male). Right means that the culture wars, somehow, paid off. Right means that MoMA has finally absorbed the critiques of the past three decades—from the critical tear-down of former chief curator of painting and sculpture Kirk Varnedoe’s 1990 show “High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture” to the revisionist aspirations of former chief curator of drawings Connie Butler’s “Modern Women” project (2005–). With these possibilities hanging in the air, to be overtly critical or hostile toward the once-reliable bad object of MoMA suddenly felt just shy of churlish.



**Louise Lawler, *Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?*, 1988**, silver dye bleach print, text on Plexiglas wall label. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019. Photo: John Wronn.

There is indeed much to love about the improved MoMA, although it's important to note that while the experiment with diversity writ large is novel for this institution, it isn't new for many museums across the country. This work has been going on for the past three decades. It happened slowly, through the contributions of many individuals: academics, curators, artists, activists, all rethinking and deepening our ideas of parity, colonialism, and medium specificity in order to better understand a transnational art history and a remapped present without centers and peripheries. Curators have been reinstalling their galleries in ways that made sense for their heterogeneous audiences—one need only look to the Saint Louis Art Museum; the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas; the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond; and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York for examples of how the work of diversification and parity in the name of a more complex story of art has been ongoing for some time now. MoMA was slow to take the challenges to white-male

modernism seriously. Museums are big ships that turn slowly in the night, and MoMA in particular, as the grandest one in the modern and contemporary fleet, operated at the leisurely pace that is the privilege of vessels so imposingly gigantic they don't have to worry about outsailing threats.



View of “**Breaking the Mold,**” 2019–, Museum of Modern Art, New York. From left: Anne Truitt, *Catawba*, 1962; Rasheed Araeen, *(3+4) SR*, 1969; Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1967. Photo: John Wronn.

To be sure, while these glacial changes were taking place, I was deeply impatient—as were many others in my part-Boomer, part-Gen X cohort of curators and academics who had been struggling for years to diversify our permanent collections and syllabi. We fought small but heated battles in institutions across the country, battles largely forgotten because we “won” and because the generation we railed against has largely left the field and/or the earthly plane. Who even thinks about Hilton Kramer anymore? But, remembered or not, these minor-key victories accrued. Now that they are on display at MoMA, it feels like we are witnessing the apotheosis of road-tested ideas, and as they take up residence in

Midtown Manhattan, both the critical establishment (whatever that means) and the public can tell they are a success. Any institution that isn't on the bus now—i.e., any place working on an Olafur Eliasson and a Gerhard Richter show simultaneously; any museum that isn't thinking about the overall inclusivity of its program at every exhibition and acquisition meeting—better hop on quick, while they can still trot along.

**As the market scaled upward to accommodate trustees' pocketbooks, it's possible that many of us who had been laboring on issues of diversification pulled our punches too many times for too long.**



View of "Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman," 2019–20, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: John Wronn.

As for MoMA, better late than never. There's no arguing with the stuff the curators have recently acquired or pulled out of storage. I mean, come on: The contemporary galleries open with a Louise Lawler! And what about the double Frida Kahlo portrait with the mirror? The quietly staggering Anne Truitt? The early Eva Hesse painting of a schematic face? An entire gallery dedicated to weaving? Amy Sillman's collection mash-up, dedicated to the problem of shape (rather than to those old sawhorses line and color)? The Édouard

Vuillard painting of the woman emerging from the wall? The James Ensor frieze of ghouls rendered in the colors of seashells? The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's *Dada Portrait of Berenice Abbott*? As they say in New York, "What's not to like?"



View of "Taking a Thread for a Walk," 2019–20, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Denis Doorly.

And while I'm in praise mode, allow me to call out the extraordinary curatorial feat in the second-floor contemporary galleries, where we find a spectacular Senga Nengudi corner piece in the same room as a subtle Maren Hassinger sculpture. "Just Above Midtown," indeed. The pairing feels like the old days of Picasso and Braque. But this juxtaposition is not all about righting the wrongs of history with intimacy and sisterhood. The room is arranged such that, beyond Hassinger's field of floor-bound bundles of rebar, you can catch a glimpse of what is to come: Cady Noland's die-cut and screen-printed metal sculpture depicting Patty Hearst in her Symbionese Liberation Army gear. (Truth be told, I initially misremembered it as one of her Oswald sculptures—such is the capacity of Noland's work to both isolate and conflate the violence of America.) Visible from the same spot, and adding to the complexity of this attenuated triptych, is Joan Semmel's massive nude self-portrait, which, installed in the same room as the Nengudi and Hassinger, acts as a vicious

fulcrum between a generationally bound, 1970s self-regard and the looming antifeminist backlash of the '80s. As you move from one room to the next, with the Noland always in your sight line, you find a gorgeous and devastating Ana Mendieta sculpture, a relief-like articulation of a female form that looks as if it's made of mud lying horizontal on a low pedestal. Never in a million years would I have thought to pair Mendieta and Noland. But the stage-set flatness of each work—the exploration of sculpture without volume—poses the question of what it might mean to think about bodies as hollow, as shells that might deflate into mere images.

**The work of diversification and parity in the name of a more complex story of art has been ongoing for some time now.**



**James Ensor, *Masks Confronting Death*, 1888, oil on canvas, 32 × 39 1/2".**

This new lineup of proper names—Nengudi, Hassinger, Semmel, Mendieta, and Noland (now *there's* a corrective to the popular art-history textbook *Art Since 1900*)—made my synapses fire on all cylinders. The overall effect is a radical reframing of the critically beloved and largely unassailable Noland, one that provisionally suspends her work's typical cynical snarl to make way for the pathos that accompanies the at once quotidian and world-historical effects of patriarchal violence. All the while, behind you, Mendieta's ur-female form lies mute, silently attesting to the way women's lives are unspeakably fucked with by men. I wouldn't be surprised if the ghost of Jackie O. herself occupies the room every now and again.



Édouard Vuillard, *Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist*, 1893, oil on canvas, 18 1/4 × 22 1/4".

Whoever installed those two galleries is a genius, and the new MoMA should strongly consider abandoning the old-fashioned custom of curatorial anonymity in the collection galleries. I want to know who did what. Let us have these conversations—both laudatory

and critical—publicly. This is particularly important given what I consider to be the failure of the presentation of “installation art” on the sixth floor. The staging felt more like the special-projects section of an art fair than a carefully considered curatorial statement; you could practically feel the fatigue of too many long-haul flights. I say this regretfully, since I have enormous admiration for most of MoMA's curators and for many of the artists included. However, the long arm of the art fair–biennial circuit reaches everywhere in museum culture today, and if we don't wrestle with its meanings and effects, it will eclipse what remains of the contemplative and scholarly in our institutional work.



Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, 1960, oil on canvas, 18 × 15".

Hope springs eternal that as the planned rotation of the collection unfolds, the curators will take more of the intellectual and affective risks I sense are possible at the new MoMA. In that spirit, I'll devote a paragraph (or two) to the types of suggestions superfans offer from their courtside seats. Much was made of the force of the contemporary irruptions in

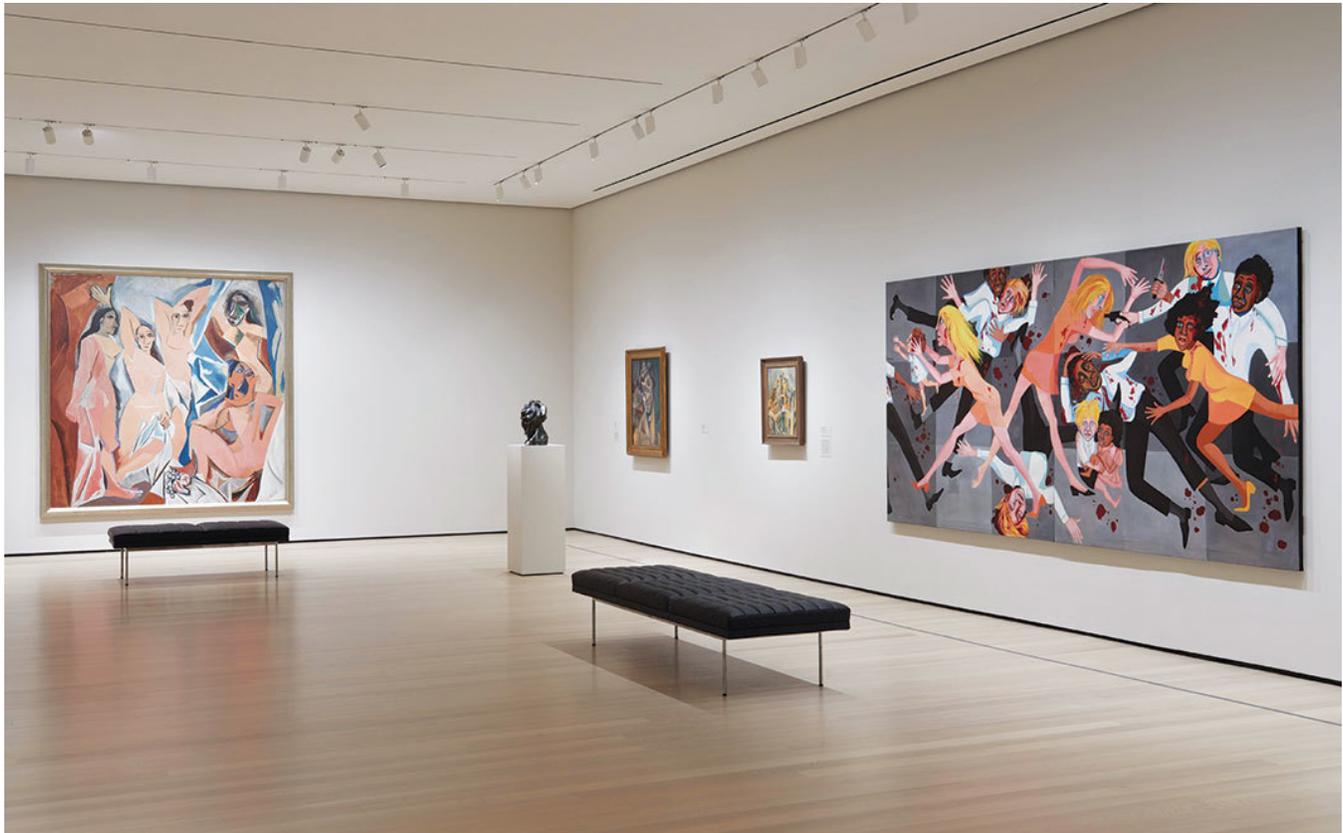
the modern galleries, most notably the installation of Faith Ringgold's *American People Series #20: Die*, 1967, to the left of modernism's juggernaut Pablo Picasso's 1907 *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*. I was thrilled to see the Ringgold enter MoMA's collection and pleased to see it moved out of its former hallway location. I was equally elated to see the Picasso back on a big, prominent wall, acting the thug, dramatizing, in one spectacularly efficient image, so many of the problems of white heterosexual masculinity while offering a classic example of that subjectivity's handmaiden, cultural appropriation. Ultimately, though, I found the Ringgold-Picasso pairing soft. Ringgold's epic picture does not disturb the iconicity of the Picasso—it confirms it, reiterating how powerful a force that painting is. Nor does it reframe the meanings of *Les demoiselles* (as the Mendieta so powerfully changes the Noland). Rather, the gallery feels like a ghost of the old MoMA story: you know, the one about swaggering men making triumphant pictures that change the course of history. In the game of collection rotation, I'm convinced the only winning play is to commit to keeping the Ringgold prominently on view for a few decades, in a gallery where *it* is the generating force. We can't unsee the Picasso. And I have no interest in canceling him; my critique of his work is born of an understanding of how important he has been and continues to be. But I am really curious about what it might mean, what it might feel like and what might be possible, if we made a work by an African American woman iconic. This picture could for sure handle it. But can MoMA? Can *we*? I mean these questions seriously. Can our bifurcated field—curatorial and academic—permit the work of a black woman artist to acquire the same value, influence, adoration, and denunciations that the Picasso has enjoyed for the past century? For we surely know by now that what we call greatness is not a metaphysical absolute, and that *Les demoiselles* accrued its iconicity and power through its constant display, through the way it was handled, discussed, installed, and imagined.



Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Dada Portrait of Berenice Abbott*, ca. 1923–26, gouache, metallic paint, tinted lacquer with varnish, metal foil, celluloid, fiberglass, glass beads, metal objects, cut-and-pasted painted paper, gesso, and cloth on paperboard, 8 5/8 × 9 1/4".

Perhaps the challenge to chronology shouldn't only happen via the appearance of the contemporary in the space of the modern; perhaps it's the modern that should disturb the logic of the galleries dedicated to the new. Why not move the Hilma af Klint down to the contemporary galleries? The recontextualization might prompt us to really process what it means that her work was almost totally unknown until the twenty-first century. Why suggest, by placing her in a gallery dedicated to activities that occurred around 1913, that we knew about her work all along? Where can that possibly get us? Another way to trouble art history's beloved chronologies is to stage the problem of reception. Why not tell the story of when things became available? Why not explore the effects of such oversights? Why not show the ripple effects such reclamations have on the work artists are making right now? (This is another way of pleading that museums imagine artists as their core audience and think of them first and foremost as they install their collections.)

Ultimately, I found the Ringgold-Picasso pairing soft.



View of “*Around Les demoiselles d’Avignon*,” 2019–, Museum of Modern Art, New York. From left: Pablo Picasso, *Les demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1907; Pablo Picasso, *Woman’s Head (Fernande)*, 1909; Pablo Picasso, *Woman with Pears*, 1909; Pablo Picasso, *The Reservoir, Horta de Ebro*, 1909; Faith Ringgold, *American People Series #20: Die*, 1967. Photo: Heidi Bohnenkamp.

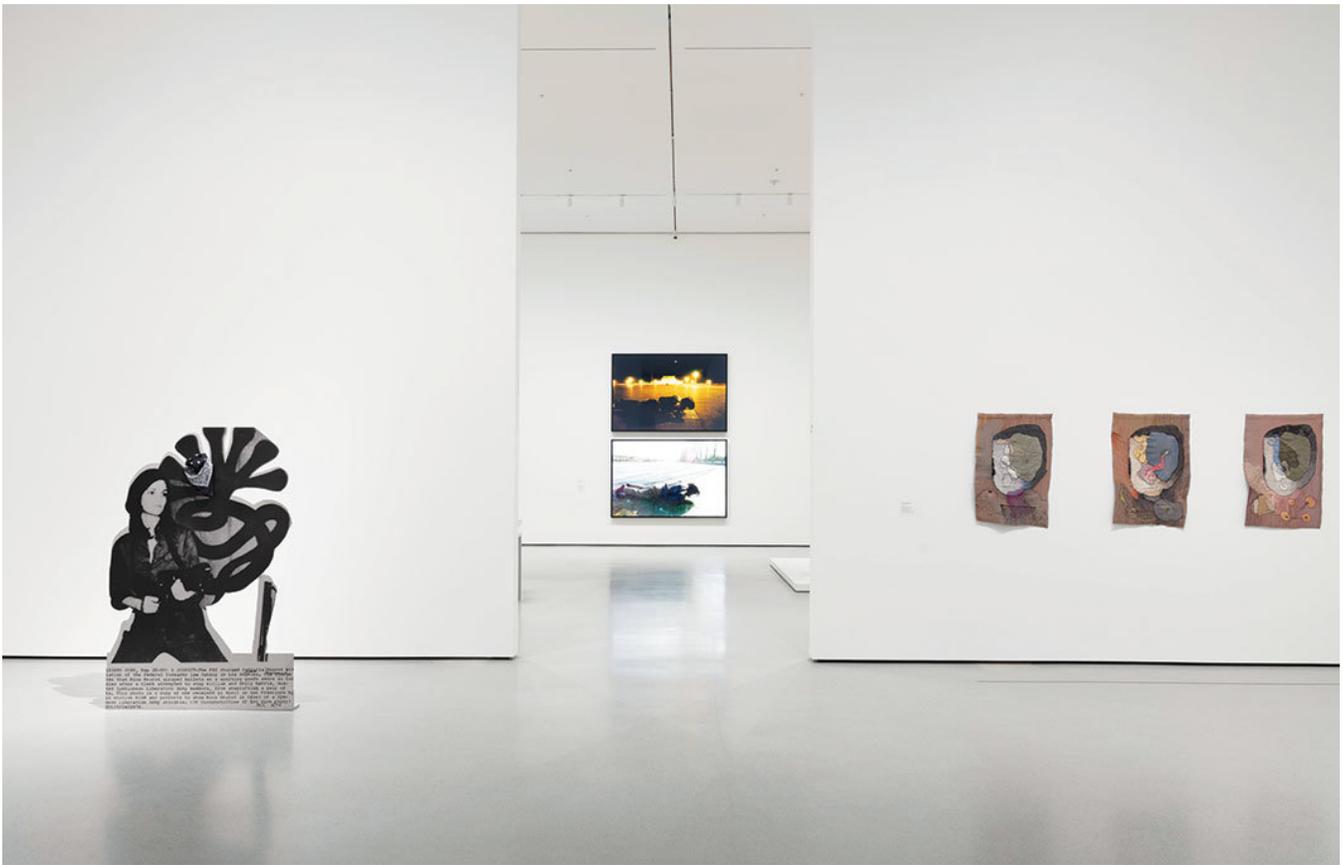
I could parse the MoMA galleries for days, and as the collection rotation unfolds, we will all have many more chances to weigh in. But, in keeping with the theme of “the times they are a-changin’,” I confess it feels like other questions are currently more pressing: What will happen if MoMA can no longer be used as art history’s straw man? What does a discourse, or a field, do without a bad object? These questions lead me to wonder if we are currently trading bad objects for bad actors. The protests held on opening night, designed to draw attention to the ways various MoMA trustees make their profits, suggest that even if the past thirty years of rabble-rousing have not quite completed their aims (since only 28 percent of the art currently on view has been made by the people we conventionally call

women, we can hardly claim a generational victory just yet), we find ourselves at the beginning of the next wave of critique. And, *plus ça change*, this fight will be waged by the newest inductees to the game. Bluntly put, there is a growing generational divide between museum staff in their twenties and thirties and those in their fifties and sixties. New battle lines have appeared around workplace culture (the call to unionization and the challenge to end unpaid internships) and around the structure of philanthropy (the call to remove trustees). Both of these issues go to the very heart of how museums function. The struggle will no longer focus exclusively on the content of what we exhibit, but rather will center on the form of the museum itself.



**Ana Mendieta, *Nile Born*, 1984**, sand and binder on wood, 2 3/4 × 19 1/4 × 61 1/2".

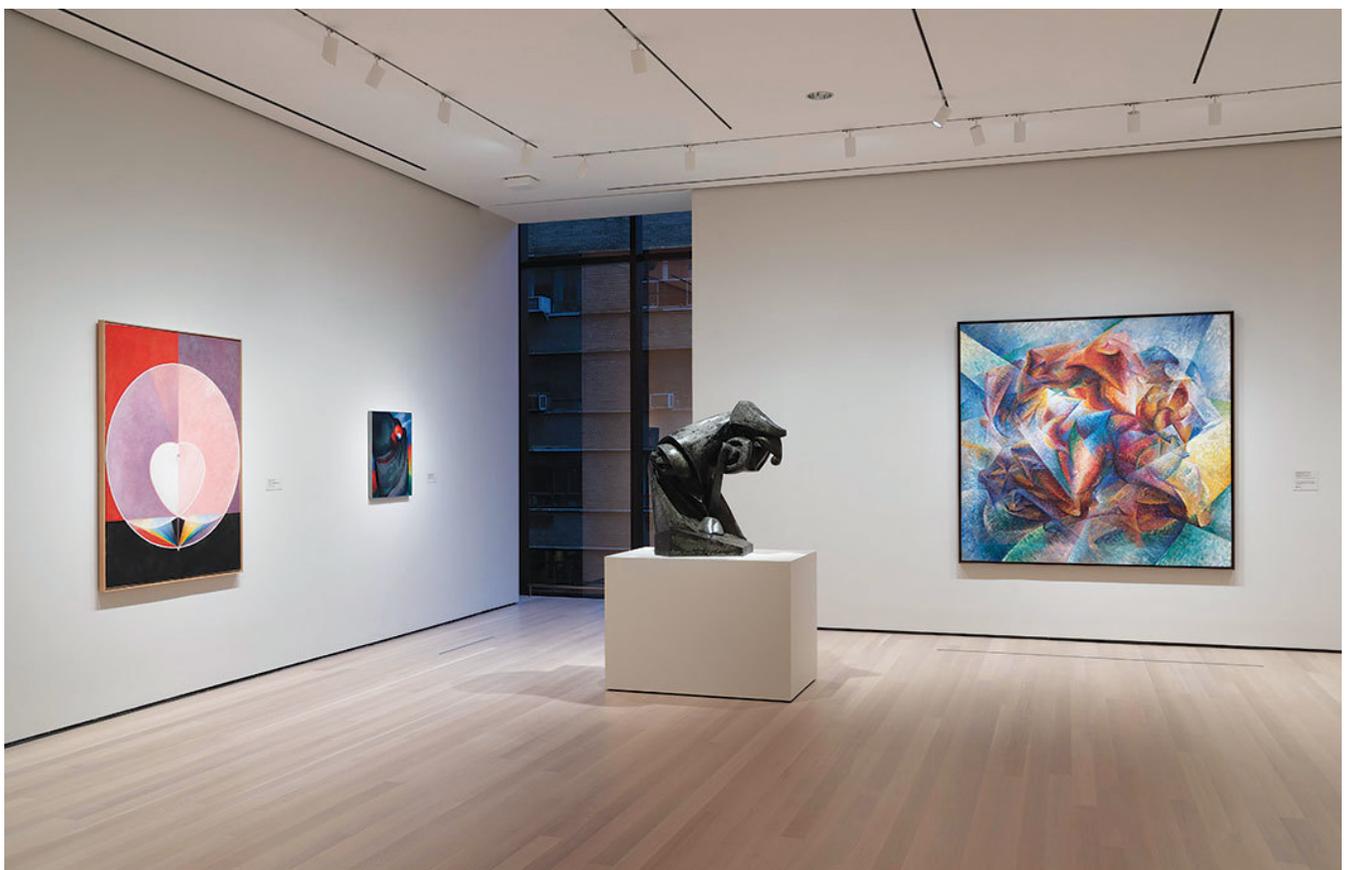
If I'm right, and this generation of emerging museum professionals has already staked out its claims for change, then talk of the wealth gap is going to move beyond Bernie and AOC and into museum boardrooms around the country. This is a potentially very powerful moment. Museums are one of the places in our culture where people from both sides of the income-inequality gap do more than just rub shoulders—they share the responsibility of running public institutions via a historical division of labor in which trustees donate money, art, their business acumen, and their rich network of connections, and professional staff enact their expertise and training in the form of salaried (and, alas, increasingly unsalaried) labor. Despite these different institutional roles, there is a tacit assumption that both trustees and staff share a passion for and commitment to the category “art.”



**View of “Transfigurations,” 2019–**, Museum of Modern Art, New York. From left: Cady Noland, *Tanya as Bandit*, 1989; Song Dong, *Breathing*, 1996; Geta Brătescu, *Medea’s Hypostases II*, 1980; Geta Brătescu, *Medea’s Hypostases III*, 1980; Geta Brătescu, *Medea’s Hypostases IV*, 1980. Photo: John Wronn.

Many of us who have worked on diversifying collections and who ushered feminism into the museum rode the wave of economic diversification that hit museums in the '90s, allowing people who were not from wealthy families to enter a field that had traditionally (from the inception of the museum in the eighteenth century) been the near-exclusive province of the affluent. One effect of this was that the professional staff and the trustees no longer came from the same class, or even a similar class. As the trustees grew wealthier and the market scaled ever upward to accommodate their pocketbooks rather than the coffers of the museum, it's possible that many of us who had been laboring on issues of diversification, who had been trying to change things from the inside, so to speak, pulled our punches too many times for too long. In other words, the professional staff slowly stopped telling members of the philanthropic class what we felt, how we thought, and what we believed in, due to complex and situation-specific mixtures of exhaustion, cowardice, and strategy. And, conversely, in a period marked by the conflation of expertise with

elitism, the trustees and donors stopped asking questions of staff, many of whom had labored for years to develop areas of significant knowledge. There is no way to raise \$450 million without spending a fair amount of time in the living rooms of the donor class, and yet I suspect that most donors never find themselves in our homes. Many literally have no idea how those of us who go to work in museums every day live our lives, and consequently, they don't know what animates us, why we do what we do, or who we do it for. Further, as we progressed to whatever phase of capitalism this is and as the transactional came to dominate all of our interactions, personal and political, we, both museum staff and board members, lost touch with the powerful idea that to work in and around culture—and, pointedly, to work for not-for-profit institutions—is a form of service. Basic dictionary definitions of *service* include synonyms like *aid* and highlight the concept of public need. I offer this potted history as a way to flag that crucial to the concept of service is the desire, however inchoate, to labor toward a collectively imagined social good.



View of “Circa 1913,” 2019–, Museum of Modern Art, New York. From left: Hilma af Klint, *The Dove, no. 2, Series UW, Group IX*, 1915; Georgia O’Keeffe, *Lake George, Coat and Red*, 1919; Raymond Duchamp-Villon, *The Horse*, 1914; Umberto Boccioni, *Dynamism of a Soccer Player*, 1913. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar.

In other words, the infiltration of the not-for-profit world (comprising institutions that were previously imagined to exist outside of the market by virtue of the fact that they served a societal need such as education) by the logic of the for-profit world (what else accounts for the imperative to create “blockbuster” exhibitions? Why else would we see a rash of half-billion-dollar museum projects?) has led to a divergence between the values of those who give and those who work. Given these developments, how surprised can we be to find ourselves with a gap between donors and workers that feels almost insurmountable? Much to my surprise, the new MoMA actually gave me some hope that with time, patience, and hard work (the old words and values), and with transparency, equity, and empathy (the new words and values), change really can happen—the current gulf can be bridged. After all, as a student of history I know that gilded ages end, and as a Gen Xer, formed to my marrow by punk and hip-hop, I know that the kids are always right.

*Helen Molesworth is a writer and curator living in Los Angeles.*

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