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## ***Museum and Multiculture***

**David Ross, Ida Gianelli**

*Ida Gianelli* I don't believe in national cultures, and I am convinced that isolation cannot produce interesting discussion and that there can be no development if we don't enter into dialogue with other cultures. This is why I feel it is essential to exhibit works of many different backgrounds, and this is why American art today seems to me to be particularly interesting, for it brings together various ethnicities. I would like to know why you felt the need to put together an exhibition of the last twenty years of American art with works from the collection of the museum you direct.

*David Ross* The idea came about after we started looking at the way the Museum's collection had been formed, in part, by the kinds of decisions that had been made for the Biennials our museum has organized since 1933. One of the things we realized was that many of the masterpieces, many of the works that the public feels strongest about, and which have earned a special place in the consciousness of visitors to the Whitney over the decades, have been works that were bought when they were very new, generally acquired during the Biennial exhibitions. One of the things that distinguishes the Whitney is that it often collects artists well before the market recognizes them, and provides them with certain visibility from which their careers subsequently develop. As time has passed, the Whitney has become one of many institutions playing that role, but when we began in the 1930's, we were the only museum doing that on a consistent basis. And still, because of the special place that the Biennial has within the American museum landscape, the Whitney maintains a very strong commitment to new art, and to emerging artists, and to the re-consideration of older artists. Much of the work in this exhibition was acquired either by purchase or by gift, during Biennial exhibitions over the last twenty years. A great deal of the work that we acquired over the last twenty years isn't seen for long periods of time. Rather than have that work languish in storage, we put together an exhibition that allowed us to look at and try to analyze certain trends of development in American art, through the matrix of material that had been collected over the last twenty years. Thus this exhibition, which looks at works in the permanent collection in the 70's, 80's and early 90's, really is a reflection both of the kind of collecting that the Whitney Museum has done, and of the range of directions to which the Museum has tried to remain open during that period.

*Ida Gianelli* Working in a public institution, I found your exhibition very interesting precisely because you are attempting to simultaneously analyze two interwoven themes, the development of art and the function of the museum. Was the choice of artworks influenced by the fact that the show would travel to countries in Europe?

*David Ross* No, I think that would be pandering. This is an exhibition that I would show in New York, or Turin, or Barcelona. I don't think you can say, "Well, this is a show that would work in Italy, so I have to find artists that I think an Italian audience would like." I think that's talking down to the

audience, that's not taking them seriously enough. The way in which we put any exhibition together is based on a sense of what we all believe in strongly, and, generally speaking, where you present it, with certain exceptions, of course, is not an issue. There are obvious exceptions. If you do an exhibition of contemporary American art in some parts of the world where, for instance, they don't allow nudity, you have to deal with those cultural norms. And even today, if you want to send contemporary art to China, you have a problem. Until recently, 1993, you couldn't do that in Korea. But when we showed Charles Ray's *Family* there in 1993, it was the biggest hit of the exhibition, because it was the first time a sculpture incorporating completely nude figures had been seen publicly - and there were huge crowds. But in Italy, we're dealing with a very sophisticated country. In my experience, Italy isn't so interested in contemporary art, because many Italians feel the overwhelming presence of ancient art and antique European art. Even so, in organizing this show, we included work we felt was strong and resonant and beautiful and interesting.

*Ida Gianelli* And was there any concession in the choice of title?

*David Ross* Well, the title is something that has changed as the exhibition has traveled. For instance, when we originally brought the exhibition to Greece, its title was to be "The Nature of American Culture," but when we translated the two words "culture" and "nature" into Greek, they didn't mean what we meant in English. We sought a title that was both slightly provocative and poetic and would lead to the formation of questions. I think that's what exhibition titles are supposed to do. They're supposed to create questions in the minds of visitors, not answers. They should provoke people to want to see the work and then ask more questions. So the title we've been using is meant to provoke some fairly basic questions.

*Ida Gianelli* But when you choose certain works to put together a certain type of exhibition, which you present with a carefully thought out title, "Multiple Identities," aren't you also providing answers, or better, stating your ideas?

*David Ross* No, but the issue of identity has been so central to the discourse of contemporary art in the United States and elsewhere in the world over the last ten years, that we feel one of the central questions that should be raised is, "which identities are we talking about?". American cultural identity is a hybrid, as in all countries. Italian culture is Greek, Italian, African, Central European, Mediterranean, it's many, many things that we all call Italian. The word "Italian" is recent, historically speaking. What we mean today by "Italian" is a historical invention from the mid-nineteenth century. In many ways, American cultural identity has come to signify a type of cultural identity in constant change. Whereas many countries today are trying to return to a set identity or are battling with tribal identities or nationalist identities taken to an extreme, in America we have no such root for our tribal or national identity. You can't compare the identity of someone from California or Texas or New York with the identity of someone from Umbria or Tuscany or Sicily. They're just different things, and socially, culturally and historically speaking, one is a recent invention and the other goes back thousands of years into cultural and geo-political history. So American art retains its sense of freshness and adolescence; it's always becoming something, it's always in the process of being redefined, in a very fresh and real way, and this is very confusing and disturbing to many people, especially Americans, who wish they had a more centered and historically rooted identity. When we say "multiple identities," we mean it as a poetic allusion. American culture inherently emerges from a group of identities, not a single one. So it would be impossible for us to present a singular American identity in the form of one exhibition of art made during the last twenty years.

What we can provoke is an interesting dialogue, which is, in fact, what artists and critical writers have been engaging in over the last ten years - a dialogue that functions as a public negotiation with the ongoing re-definition of American culture. And you see that in this exhibition. Now, you don't see it in an overtly didactic way, because I don't believe that those kinds of issues, which are still inherently poetical, should be argued out in didactic fashion, within the framework of a museum exhibition. We are still talking about art, and so the discourse takes place fully within the framework of visual art. Not within a textual or narrative discourse. It is the conversation between a Nancy Graves and a Martha Rosler, or between a Diana Thater and a Tony Oursler.

*Ida Gianelli* Since you have worked within a museum structure for many years, about twentyfive years, if I'm not mistaken, you clearly have a profound knowledge of the visual arts, but this doesn't prevent you from also being drawn to and understanding other forms of cultural expression, which you have brought into the museum. Do you think this same attitude exists in literature, in all other branches of culture? Or more in the visual arts?

*David Ross* I see the visual arts as the most accessible and direct site for this contest of ideas and values that takes place in within American culture. Clearly, it takes place in architecture too, although architectural language is far more abstract, complex and theory-bound. It also takes place in literature, where a great deal of the theory that underlies much of this thinking about this so-called negotiation of cultures has been born. Writers such as Homi Bhabha, the great Indian-born British literary theorist, really emerge from a theoretical, literary culture. But Bhabha and critics like him have begun to apply literary theory to the visual arts as well.

Essentially, the ways in which these ideas, this aesthetic theory, are abstracted within a visual frame allow for a much richer and much more free-flowing interaction. It also exists in film theory, in music and in dance. None of this is new - no one "discovers" this. What we've done is just opened our eyes and looked at what's around us, and admitted that complexity has value. Rather than dismissing much of what doesn't seem consistent with our prejudices, a new generation of curators, critics and artists has said, "We can't dismiss what we don't agree with; we have to recognize that we exist in constant and glorious conflict with opposing ideas." And this conflict is the stuff of culture. And what we see, in a microcosm, in this exhibition, and one of the reasons I believe it is such a fascinating and delightful exhibition, is a kind of contest or conflict that has taken place within a culture as heterogeneous, on the one hand, as American culture, but also one that is curiously homogeneous. After all, they're all Americans. There's something similar about all of them. They all share information sources, they all share food sources, they all share mass-media sources, they all share a political form of government, they all share so much in their culture, and yet the difference is still so pronounced and profound, and in fact is becoming more and more acceptable. I see this as a very positive sign and a very positive model for the way cultures can hopefully evolve in the 21st century. In contrast, the 20th century has generated the greatest genocides in history. Wasn't it von Clausewitz who said that war is the continuation of politics by other means? Perhaps we can say that art takes this continuation of politics and the negotiation of difference to another level and allows them to occur in a more healthy fashion - in a way in which everyone may benefit, in a way that's delightful and spiritually refreshing and renewing. Without trying to sound too sweet here and too optimistic, I do believe that art has within it the basis for providing a forum for a kind of open human interaction that leads us to another place and can perhaps provide positive models for ways in which cultures and societies can grow, because of the differences they contain.

*Ida Gianelli* I agree. But I have my doubts about institutions. As you just said, art is open, rich with

stimuli, always ready to be transformed, while the structures within which art operates seem rigid and inclined in another direction.

*David Ross* Well, that's our fault, and it's our job to change that. I think that we can look at the art world as a very rigid and fixed place, insulated from consequence by the walls of our museums, by the grounds of our institutions, by the political protection afforded by our trustees and the money that supports and protects us. But we also can turn that around, and use those very same forces to connect us to broader discourses of power and to broader and more meaningful ways of participating in the general culture at large. I remain opposed to working within an isolated ivory tower in which an essentially inconsequential dialogue takes place for its own sake. I am not someone who can ever be categorized as a simple believer in art for art's sake, but I do believe that the power of art is profound and has profound social implications. I happen to believe it's important because it relates and communicates so directly to the lives of regular people. And it's our job as museum directors, and all of our jobs as people who care about art, to find ways of relating what we do to a broader range of communities. For example, the work of David Hammons touches upon extremely profound issues that go well beyond the specific edge of where the art world supposedly starts and stops and the real world begins. His world and his art insist on reaching out and occupying land on both sides of the fence, and of course he's not alone in that. He's part of a whole generation of post-war American artists who, in a reaction to the internalized nature of Abstract Expressionism, have sought a direct relationship with art and the world.

*Ida Gianelli* I didn't mean that the museum has no important function, or that the problem of the diffusion of art is anywhere near resolved. But I have a sense of uneasiness about the repetitious nature of a mechanism that seems to proceed more through inertia than through ideas and new beginnings.

*David Ross* I completely sympathize with your concern. The museum is also a very young institution. If you compare it to the Church, if you compare it to the institution of the monarchy, if you compare it to the institution of marriage, if you compare it to any of the other basic institutions in our lives, the museum is not much of an institution at all. And yet, we weigh it down; we expect it to carry an enormous weight in our culture. What did the museum mean in the late nineteenth century, compared to what it means in the late twentieth century? What the museum meant at the end of the age of mechanical reproduction was one thing - it stood for the power of the original. In its early incarnation, for example, when the Metropolitan Museum first opened, it was full of fakes. Not fakes that they didn't know about; it was a place where plaster reproductions of great European statuary were displayed for the education of the working class. Early museum professionals thought a plaster reproduction of a great Donatello was better than nothing. In general this was part of the idea of the wealthy giving back to the working class an education that they could never have; the working class could never make the *grand tour*. And that wasn't what was important. What was important at that point in time was the way they related to the whole history of European culture, of civilization in general, and to the idea of the awakening of the human mind. In the 18th century the Louvre was opened by Napoleon to share the treasures of the empire with the French people, but it was also opened another reason, which was to make sure everyone understood who was in charge, and who had the power.

So museums really began as the site of classic *noblesse oblige* - people with power, people with money, recognizing their responsibility to educate the poor working masses, but also with a chance to refresh everyone's memory of "who's in charge, who owns this stuff."

Since the 60's, American museums have completely changed their sense of mission.

The people who run them, the people who know and work in them, come from working class and middle class backgrounds. A generation ago, the only people who worked in American museums came from the families of the rich. So within one generation the actual working population of museums has completely changed. They're no longer here just to do parties for the rich, and to be a place where the rich can put their art during the summer when they go on holiday. If you look at a catalogue for a sale, like the recent Loeb sale at Christie's, you'll see that the Loeb family would put the great works in their collection, their Manet self-portrait, the Seurat, all the great masterpieces they had, on view at the Met every summer. Now that was a wonderful way of sharing, and also good because they didn't have air conditioning, and they were going away to the Hamptons for the summer anyway. It wasn't just the Loeb's who did that; all the great families of New York did. So museums were also a summer storehouse, a private storeroom. These citizens practiced *noblesse oblige* at the very highest levels, and they tried to imitate their European ancestors and create a sense of aristocracy, which, of course, is the great thing Americans lack. That's why we need Jackie, Marilyn, Madonna. Europe the problems are very different; you have an existing aristocracy, which is now powerless and just an echo of what it used to be, a shadow of what it was, and yet it still exists. On a certain level, its power exists absolutely, unabated and unchanged. So just what is the museum's role? How do European museum directors see their role in connecting the treasures, the culture, the notion of cultural heritage, contemporary cultural production, to people's lives, to the ongoing decisions that a community has to make, or a civilization has to make, in order to refresh and renew itself, and in order to remain consistent with some set of values that we all share? These are very difficult questions. And museum directors and museum curators as well as artists are, in fact, dealing with these issues, directly or indirectly, but simultaneously. We directly deal with them because we have problems of survival, we have problems figuring out where we fit and how we will exist in a community that includes universities and libraries, private collections and public museums, state museums and auction houses, and the continuous churning of wealth and objects of great value throughout the world. At the same time, much more profoundly, what we have in our charge, what we are literally responsible for, is the education of the whole new generation of children. They will grow up to be the audience making demands on these institutions in the future. Juggling these things is an amazing responsibility. It's what makes me interested in coming to work every day.

*Ida Gianelli* The museum you direct is called the Whitney Museum of American Art, which means that you collect and exhibit only American art. But our dialogue has clearly revealed that today there is an interweaving of different cultures that makes it difficult to categorize artistic expressions by nation, especially in America.

Perhaps when the Whitney opened in the 30's, it was possible to think of a museum for American art, but what does "American art" mean today?

*David Ross* Even in the 30's, it was complicated. There were American artists who trained and practiced in Europe and then came back here. There were Europeans who moved here, both on the eve of the Second World War and earlier. Elie Nadelman, one of the great sculptors of the twentieth century, was an extraordinarily important American artist, whose influence in Paris was profound. This Polish gentleman, a Paris-educated sculptor, came to America, saw American folk art as well as other things, became engaged in American culture, and then invented his own forms. He took a very polished and sophisticated European modern sensibility and immediately transformed it into what we now look at as classic 20th century American art.

Francesco Clemente is in this year's Whitney Biennial. Clearly he's still an Italian. If you look at his

passport, it says "Italian." Yet he has children in school here in New York, and he's a world citizen. He spends much of his time in India, in Italy, in Mexico and here. He travels the world, but I think New York has become his home, in a kind of trans-national sense. Does the fact that he's in the Whitney Biennial make him an American artist? We're not a government institution, we don't state that people have a particular nationality or not. In fact, you can't be American. You can be a citizen of the United States, but the whole idea of "American" is a poetic notion, because people in South America and Central America think that they're American too. When we think of broader questions like cultural identity, then you see that the use of a provocative title like "Multiple Identities" is meant to provoke questions and set a frame of mind, within which you can then look at objects made by artists, some of whom, although not all, are dealing directly with the issue of identity. Ultimately the context of the perspective and point of view and aesthetic direction that we see in a brief and concentrated period of time, within the framework of one institution's collection, gives the Italian public a very compact and useful framework from which to construct an understanding of the variety of American aesthetic experience and points of view, even during a period of time as brief as the 70's to the 90's.

*Ida Gianelli* Let's talk about the recent Whitney Biennial. How many Biennials have you done?

*David Ross* Well, when I first came here in 1991, I arrived in January and the Biennial for that year was already pretty well organized. I had very little to do with it directly, although I think since they knew I was being offered the job, I believe that they selected a lot of artists that they knew I liked... So that was the first one I experienced as director, but I don't take any credit for it as director, because Jennifer Russell was acting director then, and Richard Armstrong, Richard Marshall, Lisa Phillips and John Hanhardt all worked on it together. 1993 was the first Biennial I got credit or blame for, and more blame than credit, although I was very, very proud of how strong and complicated and consequential the show was, even to the extent that there was a great deal of failure in it. The 1995 Biennial, which was Klaus Kertess's, was very beautiful and very poetic. Some people liked it, more people liked it than the '93 one, but, in fact, it was less memorable to many people, because it was more polite and more about an idea of beauty and transgression, within a metaphorical context. This year's Biennial, curated by Lisa Phillips and Louise Neri, was fantastic and very successful. These three Biennials were curated by individual curators, and that's something I've brought about as a sort of change. Because I believe that there needs to be curatorial responsibility for projects. They shouldn't be group or anonymous endeavors. It's not that it's an *auteur* issue, but group decisions lack authority. People need to understand that, just as the art itself comes from the mind of individuals, and reflects the highest level of the individual's spirit and intellect, the exhibition is also a product of individual minds. They are essentially a literary product, an aesthetic product, and they are organized by an individual curator. That curator may have a lot of help, or he or she may also choose to do the project alone. There is the idea of curatorial consequence, however, so that somebody takes responsibility for an exhibition, rather than it's just being some kind of generic, institutional statement.

*Ida Gianelli* Do you think these exhibitions, the Biennial and "Multiple Identity," reveal changes that are happening in art?

*David Ross* I think the Biennial showed what's happening in American art in two different ways. First, it showed how large the field has become, by insisting on making a selection within what has happened, rather than trying to present a complete overview of American art over the last two years. (That would be impossible, anyway.) And second, I think that Lisa and Louise accurately revealed a

very important and interesting aspect of art over the last two years, which is a dialogue from inside the arts... the idea of the narrative that is re-emerging.