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DEFINING MUSEUM INTERVENTION: AN ANALYSIS OF JAMES PUTNAM'S

TIME MACHINE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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By Caitlin Smith Hanbury, M.A.

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Virginia Commonwealth University, March 2012

Director: Dr. Margaret Lindauer, Associate Professor, Department of Art History

In his 2001 publication *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, independent curator James Putnam coins the term 'museum intervention' to describe a type of artwork created by some artists as a means to critique organizing principles of the museum. Putnam's book analyzes examples of museum interventions, including his own 1994 exhibition, *Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art*, but fails to offer a definition for the term. This thesis analyzes the trajectory of exhibition practices leading to the publication of the new term through an examination of historical changes in museum display. The paper then analyzes examples of museum intervention included in Putnam's book in order to develop a definition for the term. The paper examines *Time*

Machine in relation to the new definition and, contrary to Putnam's assertions, concludes that the exhibition is not a museum intervention.

Introduction

Independent curator James Putnam coins the term ‘museum intervention’ in his 2001 publication *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* to describe artworks that critique organizing principles of the museum. He presents his book as a catalogue of these works that “show an emerging museological tendency in art which is matched by the use of the traditional museum as a site for artists’ intervention.”¹ Tracing the history of museum display traditions through the current “reappraisal of the ideas underpinning the museum,” Putnam describes common elements of museum intervention in an effort to show how artists have developed works as a means to critique weaknesses, bias and inconsistencies in traditional museum practice.² He successfully identifies and categorizes common elements within the works and demonstrates how they participate in and contribute to museum criticism at large, but Putnam ultimately fails to articulate a definition for his new terminology.

Putnam incorporates his own 1994 exhibition entitled *Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art* into *Art and Artifact* as an example of a museum intervention. Describing the curatorial objectives of the exhibition in the accompanying catalogue, he intends to connect a modern European audience to the British Museum’s ancient Egyptian collection by introducing site-specific artworks by contemporary artists into the

¹ James Putnam. *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 2001), 7.

² Ibid, book jacket.

museum galleries.³

This thesis paper examines the history of modes of museum display, establishes a clear definition for ‘museum intervention’ based on examples of museum interventions identified in Putnam’s book, and analyzes whether Putnam’s exhibition, *Time Machine*, can be considered a museum intervention based on the newly-formed definition. The first chapter examines relevant conceptual implications of historical changes in museum display. The second chapter establishes a clear definition for ‘museum intervention’ based on an analysis of Putnam’s book, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*. Finally, the third chapter examines Putnam’s 1994 exhibition, *Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art* in relationship to the new definition.

³ James Putnam and W. Vivian Davies, eds. *Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art*. (London: The British Museum, 1994), 8. Putnam notes, “I hope that the contemporary art shown here makes valid statements both for the concept and the space and succeeds in creating a harmony and conversation with the antiquities rather than merely a contrast. In this way, it also opens avenues for viewing the antiquities in a fresh light and not just as the remains of a dead civilisation.”

Chapter One: The History of Art Museum Display

Since the early twentieth century, the art museum's display of objects has been a subject of both interest and critique in scholarly and art circles. As art museums have shifted from a collections and acquisitions focus toward public service and outreach, the politics of display, and the history from which it was built, has been scrutinized in an effort to strip away the bias associated with museum practices.⁴ In the introduction to *The Power of Display*, art historian Mary Anne Staniszewski urges an exploration of installation history as a means to understanding the authority imparted by museum interpretation. She notes that "art history consists predominantly of histories of individual artworks in which the installations are ignored... [yet] a work of art, when publicly displayed, almost never stands alone; it is always an element within a permanent or temporary exhibition created in accordance with historically determined and self-consciously staged installation conventions."⁵ This interest in the object's interpretation as a condition of the unique and specific environment in which it was made and collected widens the scope of museum scholarship to include art installations as a distinct aesthetic medium.

⁴ Gail Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift* (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 1.

⁵ Mary Anne Staniszewski, "Introduction: Installation Design: The 'Unconscious' of Art Exhibitions," in *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. (London: MIT Press, 1998), xxi.

In order to understand museum installation styles as a vehicle for interpretation, it is important to consider the history of those styles. Scholarship concerning museum display traces a developmental trajectory of art exhibition practices beginning with the *Kunstkammer*, moving through the salon period to the formation of the modernist white cube. The conceptual implication of each new exhibition genre, evident in the way artworks were arranged in an exhibition space, attempted to establish new organizing principles or critique past principles.

The *Kunstkammer*, considered as a precursor to the modern museum, was organized to represent the knowledge, aesthetics or worldliness of its owner. Amassed by royal families, church clerics and/or scholars beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing through the mid-seventeenth century, *Kunstkammern* were typically conceived and arranged to create harmony among dissimilar objects—including artworks, minerals and other cultural artifacts. The composition of these art cabinets, as they were also known, represented collectors' sense of a "unifying principle of the universe."⁶ In other words, the arrangement of artworks and artifacts symbolically conveyed the organizer's perceptions about the universe.

The advent of salon-style installations in the seventeenth century brought a new social component to the display of art. The salon, installed with paintings ceiling to floor, was a host site for discussions of taste and emerging styles in visual art. American art critic Brian O'Doherty asserts that salon-style displays had a prescribed way of reading

⁶ Margaret Lindauer, "Curiosity Cabinets," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*. Edited by Marcia J. Bates and Mary Niles Maack (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2010).

where “each picture was seen as a self-contained entity, totally isolated from its slum-close neighbor by a heavy frame around and a complete perspective system within.”⁷ Viewers were intended to experience artworks as windows into other worlds as their frames separated one view from another despite the dense display design. However, as O’Doherty describes, salon-style display also leads viewers to consider a number of works within a short time period and a small physical space. As viewers scanned the works, close proximity was presumed to have invited judgments of quality of the painting or skill of the artist. Furthermore, according to art historian, critic and curator Germano Celant, the salon-style display also created a unity among paintings. In his words, “the lack of space between individual artworks thus seems to indicate an interest in merging one element with another, finally creating an ideal organic unity, that of the artistic universe.”⁸

Unlike the concentration of works within a salon-style display, the white cube of the twentieth century aimed to present modernist works in a neutral context. Popularized at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City under the direction of Alfred Barr beginning in 1939, the white cube was characterized by white walls and sparse hanging. The white cube dissuaded connections drawn between works, isolating artworks for independent consideration by the viewer. This gallery space aimed to neutralize the environment and remove

⁷ Brian O’Doherty, “Inside the White Cube.” Accessed April 2011.
<http://www.societyofcontrol.com/whitecube/insidewc.htm>.

⁸ Germano Celant, “A Visual Machine: Art Installation and Its Modern Archetypes,” in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greensberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (New York: Routledge, 1996), 374.

from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is ‘art.’ The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of aesthetics.⁹

More so than the *Kunstammer* and the salon, the white cube encourages its viewership to consider each work independent of its surroundings.

As art museum installation styles progressed, critics began to openly question the museum’s discursive authority including its system of classification, standards of display, and most importantly, the values inscribed in these practices. Calling for the rescue of the museum object from established taxonomies, decontextualization, and dominating interpretations prescribed by the museum’s curatorial authority, these critics demanded change to the existing structure of the art museum. Some argued that the authority of the modernist white cube deterred meaningful connections with the objects it displayed.

Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, founder of the Whitney Museum of American Art, chose to display her museum’s collection “in accordance with the most recent trends of modern domestic interior design” in order to “produce a more inviting, less imposing atmosphere.”¹⁰ By incorporating elements of domestic interiors into a public art gallery, Whitney hoped to provide a familiar and comforting environment.

Late twentieth-century written critiques of installation styles in art museums enumerated ongoing complexities and limitations in museum display practices. Some

⁹ O’Doherty, “White Cube.”

¹⁰ Evelyn C. Hawkins, “En/Gendering the Whitney’s Collection,” in *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America*, edited by Leah Dilworth (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 163-189.

have argued that the future of exhibition design is fertile with opportunity for new approaches in communicating with audiences while others have identified unavoidable challenges that will likely continue to plague its progress toward universal accessibility. Critics, artists and scholars have called for reform in the way that museums interact with visitors. Citing the need for change in the authority of the curatorial voice and interpretation of museum galleries, the Artist Workers Coalition, founded in New York City in 1969, called for radical reform in museum culture.¹¹ Since that time, others have continued this conversation and call for change. Duncan Cameron, Canadian museum scholar and critic, notes, “it is clear that there is a real and urgent need for the reestablishment of the forum as an institution in society ...while our bona fide museums seek to become relevant, maintaining their role as temples, there must be a concurrent creation of forums for confrontation, experimentation, and debate.”¹² Cameron calls for museums to serve as both the host to and advocate for this change.

Though critical of its history, some contemporary artists and scholars agree that the museum should be the primary venue for addressing these critiques. They see art museums as uniquely suited for this task since they act as the publicly-sanctioned forum for the interpretation of the visual arts. Describing the changing dynamics between audience and museum interpretation, cultural theory scholar Valerie Casey locates the museum’s “social authority through its ability to direct ways of seeing ...[and] has prescribed cultural value through objects, but in contemporary times, meaning is

¹¹ “Artist Workers Coalition: Open Hearing.” PrimaryInformation.org, accessed February 2012. <http://primaryinformation.org/files/FOH.pdf>.

¹² Duncan Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” in *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, edited by Gail Anderson (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 68.

communicated through modes of display.”¹³ By privileging the object with a permanent home in the museum, its original meaning is decontextualized, secondary or altogether absent within the museum—the ‘museum effect.’ Regarded as authorities on meaning, museums have perpetuated a performance of the object rather than define its significance.¹⁴

While some scholars view the museum effect as a source of difficulty in conveying an object’s meaning, others argue that the curator’s power to redirect interpretation will allow the museum to host healthy, and necessary, self-criticism. For example, professor of American art and cultural institutions, Philip Fisher sees such a process as inherent to the museum’s foundation and existence. He argues that the museum is

more than a location. It is a script that makes certain acts possible and others unthinkable. For objects assumed into the museum, those practices efface just what existed as the features that were the very essence of the object in its earlier life or lives, each life being in its turn, dependent on the suppression of yet earlier practices.¹⁵

The meanings of objects, scripted and constantly revised by the curator, are defined not within their own limits but rather in the larger environment in which they are positioned. Since the museum effect leads to the object being assigned conditional meanings based on context, the curator is able to suggest interpretations highlighting new or previously obscured meanings to achieve or support a particular theme or history. Agreeing that the

¹³ Valerie Casey, “The Museum Effect: Gazing from Object to Performance in the Contemporary Cultural-History Museum,” International Cultural Heritage Informatics Meetings, 2003. Accessed September 2011. <http://www.archimuse.com/publishing/ichim03/095C.pdf>, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid, 9.

¹⁵ Philip Fisher, “Art and the Future’s Past,” in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, edited by Bettina Carbonell (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 446.

museum is the host site for this process, Beatrice von Bismarck, professor for art history and visual studies, asserts that the “possibilities for such connection [between objects] are manifold and, once the objects have been removed from their original contexts, can also be constructed anew.”¹⁶ The role of the curator can be the source of new direction as well as questions about the arbitrary nature and imposition of institutional narratives.

Because an object is typically displayed within a grouping of objects, some critics have proposed that the making of meaning occurs not just from the curatorial voice—typically an anonymous, authoritative assertion of objective facts—but also within the context of an exhibition. Fisher asserts that exhibitions have been seen as the

primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained, and occasionally deconstructed. Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions—especially exhibitions of contemporary art—establish and administer the cultural meanings of art.¹⁷

As Fisher suggests, scholars and critics have rejected the notion that meaning is inherent within an object, agreeing instead that interpretations of artworks are constructed, in part, through exhibition narratives.

Generally speaking, some scholars have associated critique of categorizations or taxonomies, perpetuated by traditional museum practice, with growing skepticism toward historical compartmentalization of academic disciplines. Art historian Debora Meijers discusses how this outlook has compelled museums to respond using new standards of categorization. In her examination of trends in exhibition display, she asserts,

¹⁶ Beatrice von Bismarck, “Curatorial Criticality—On the Role of Freelance Curators in the Field of Contemporary Art,” in *Curating Critique*: 18-23. Accessed September 2011. http://www.on-curating.org/documents/oncurating_issue_0911.pdf.

¹⁷ Reesa Greensberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, eds. *Thinking about Exhibitions*. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1.

There are more general indications today that traditional notions of chronological development and separate styles are no longer acceptable. There are doubts regarding history as an evolutionary process. Who still dares to state that humanity progresses, and that each stage evolves irreversibly from the previous one?¹⁸

The need for new organizing principles contributed to the advent of what Meijers dubs the ahistorical exhibition, as artists and curators looked for ways to address the crisis within the museum environment. Dislocating artworks from an evolutionary framework, ahistorical exhibitions abandon traditional chronologies in favor of new organizing principles, such as subject matter or medium. Some scholars have gone further, questioning the nature of all established classifications. Mieke Bal, cultural theorist and critic, notes that “the humanities have developed toward an increasing awareness of their own limitations: of the arbitrariness of disciplinary boundaries, of the aesthetics on which much of humanists’ work is based, of their separation from real social issues, relegated to the social sciences.”¹⁹ This state of uncertainty prompted some artists to act against those conventions that were perceived to uphold dated or orthodox interpretation.

The confluence of the history of art installation styles, scholarship on the museum’s social role in the making of meaning, and artist-led museum critiques has led a new generation of critics to call for interventions of current museum practice.

Attempting to shed such criticisms as the “ivory tower of exclusivity”²⁰ and place of

¹⁸ Debora J. Meijers, “The Museum and the ‘Ahistorical’ Exhibitions: the latest gimmick by the arbiters of taste, or an important cultural phenomenon?” in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greensberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (New York: Routledge, 1996), 18.

¹⁹ Mieke Bal, “The Discourse of the Museum,” in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greensberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (New York: Routledge, 1996) 201.

²⁰ Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum*, 1.

“stupendous inertia,”²¹ museums have been transformed from collections-focused institutions into educational organizations. Critics have contributed to this shift by questioning the subjectivity in curatorial practice and the neutrality of the museum environment while noting political distortions at work in display methods and classifications.²²

A number of new sensitivities at work in exhibition practice demonstrate a shift in curatorial intent, moving from a concentration on display of the object toward a focus on the categories and taxonomies by which objects are organized. As French conceptual artist Daniel Buren notes, the dilemma of the museum gallery is grounded in its historical function as “the single viewpoint (cultural and visual) from which works can be considered, an enclosure where art is born and buried.”²³ As Buren acknowledges, critics recognize the museum as both the source of these challenges and the only venue in which to correct them.²⁴ The following chapter outlines this tension through an analysis of Putnam’s observations of those artists who have engaged museum practice and environment as a basis for their critique.

²¹ Robert Smithson, “Selected Writings by Robert Smithson,” *Robert Smithson*, 1979. <http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/void.htm>.

²² Sheldon Annis, “The Museum as Staging Ground for Symbolic Action,” in *Museum International* 38 (1986): 168-71. Accessed March 2011. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0033.1986.tb00637.x. Annis enumerates that “In presenting them, museums assure visitors that objects are valid and illustrative of larger frames of meaning [...] By selecting and framing objects, they bestow legitimacy on them.”

²³ Daniel Buren, “The Function of the Museum,” in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 104.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 103. Buren describes his view of the implications of museum display, stating that, “The Museum/Gallery instantly promotes to ‘Art’ status whatever it exhibits with conviction, i.e., habit, thus diverting in advance any attempt to question the foundations of art without taking into consideration the place from which the question is put.”

Chapter Two: The Museum Intervention

In his book *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, James Putnam explores a number of ways in which artists have referenced aspects of museum practice in their works of art. Though he offers examples of museum interventions and identifies their common characteristics, Putnam fails to give a definition for the term. This chapter explores the examples set forth in the book and develops a definition based on Putnam's observations.

Concerned with the dialogue occurring between museums and artists that create museum interventions, Putnam suggests that all of the examples he describes in the publication simultaneously allow the viewer to experience typical features of traditional museum display while presenting a redemptive or restorative power that redresses shortfalls and inadequacies of museum practice.²⁵ For example, British artist Rose Rinn-Kelcey's 1988 work *Bureau de Change*, an installation recreating Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* in gold, silver and copper-colored coins overseen by a uniformed security guard, allowed its viewers to encounter and participate in a typical gallery environment while also implying the exchange of money for art taking place.²⁶ German-American artist Hans Haacke presents his 1985 work *MetroMobiltan* in a similar way. Critical of

²⁵ Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 156.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 91.

the political nature of museum sponsorship, he displays a banner announcing Mobil Corporation as a sponsor for a fictional exhibition of ancient Nigerian artifacts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.²⁷ Haacke provides his viewers with a typical feature of the museum, marketing material by an exhibition sponsor, while suggesting that the company is exploiting its relationship with the museum and the culture on display. In both of these examples, the artists intend to use the museum or gallery environment to present a critique of current museum practices.

Offering the publication as a study of exhibitions “interested in making viewers aware of rigid systems of interpretation, thus encouraging them to question rather than passively accept the ‘official’ version of things,” Putnam positions these works as a movement against traditional museum practice and the institutional bias it maintains.²⁸ Through an examination of selected artworks, Putnam locates and identifies three main “conversations” initiated by artists. In describing these projects, Putnam enumerates the elements at play when the museum is used as an artistic medium and suggests that a combination of these ideas put forth by artists in their works—artist as collector, artist as curator, and artist as critic—constitutes the emergence of a phenomenon he terms ‘museum intervention.’

Putnam identifies a number of artists whose works represent the artist as collector. For Putnam, American artist and sculptor Joseph Cornell’s work represents a process similar to the way museums determine which objects are publicly displayed and which remain in storage. As he notes, collection art such as Cornell’s hints at “an interesting

²⁷ Ibid, 108-109.

²⁸ Ibid, 90.

contrast between revealing and concealing,” both through the physical act of presenting objects in display cases and the conceptual curatorial exercise of selecting objects.²⁹ These acts simultaneously obscure and enhance aspects of the objects, pointing to the arbitrary nature of their inclusion and the implications of the creator’s subjectivity. Ultimately, Putnam asserts that collection art prompts questions about authenticity, namely by presenting inauthentic objects in a fashion that implies authenticity. For example, in his work *Museum* from 1944-48, Cornell presents various unknown materials and substances in small glass jars stored neatly in a velvet-lined box, implying their importance through the care taken in preserving and presenting them. Casting the curatorial act in the same light as the artist’s conceptualization, Putnam asserts that collection art also prompts questions about historical taxonomies, as well as the political and social values that determine the cultural worth of an object. In Putnam’s estimation, works such as Cornell’s challenge the museum criteria for the “object as a work of art, worthy of preservation,” by suggesting that these determinations and standards are arbitrary.³⁰

Putnam also provides examples of artist interventions that mimic aspects of exhibitions, thus, critiquing curatorial authority. In the 1999-2000 work *Tate Thames Dig*, installation artist Mark Dion unearths and displays an array of objects found on the foreshore of the Thames near the Tate Museum. Dion chose to indiscriminately juxtapose refuse with objects of traditional historical museum value.³¹ Through this

²⁹ Ibid, 16.

³⁰ Ibid, 68.

³¹ Ibid, 40.

comprehensive and unbiased display, Dion eclipses Cornell's act of closely scrutinized selection in an effort to reveal the politics of value behind museum practice, thereby reminding the viewer that museum collections represent not only inclusions but also exclusions. Not only does the work represent questions about an object's interpretive value but also the museum's maintenance of those hierarchies.

Putnam explores a second category of artists whose works center around the idea of artist as curator. Using examples by artists Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, he demonstrates the "aesthetic and conceptual influence" that museum display has had on contemporary art.³² Hirst and Koons respectively have incorporated museum-quality display cases and pedestals as an integral part of their work. For example, Koons' 1991 work *New Shelton Wet/Dry Triple Decker*, presents three well-lit shop vacuums stacked in a vertical plexiglass case.³³ Similarly, Hirst employs the use of museum-quality cases in his 1993 work *Dead Ends Died Out, Explored*, displaying dozens of cigarette butts lining white shelving.³⁴ Putnam describes the inclusion of these elements as an indication of the artists' desire to show the impact and pervasiveness of the museum artifice on the reception of an object. He goes on to discuss collection and installation art by Ann Hamilton and Karsten Bott in order to show that artists are also concerned with the way museums suggest or construct meaning through visual display. Hamilton's 1990 *Between Taxonomy and Communion* and Bott's 1993 work *One of Each* both amass and arrange hundreds objects on the floor space of the gallery in an effort to demonstrate alternative

³² Ibid, 35-37.

³³ Ibid, 36.

³⁴ Ibid, 35.

display categories and practices not used by museums. Similarly, Putnam includes works that bring the behind-the-scenes processes of museums into the galleries, citing Martin Kippenberger and Christian Boltanski as examples of artists whose works perform this action. Kippenberger's 1994 *A Man and His Art* brings art crates used in sculpture and painting storage into the galleries and presents them as works of art in their own right. Boltanski's 1991 installation *The Archive of the Carnegie International 1896-1991* represents a fictional archive of the Carnegie International. Boltanski's work brings inaccessible museum and library storage areas into the realm of the visitor. In all of these examples, Putnam suggests artists have taken the manufactured environment of the museum as a point inspiring critique, demonstrating that museums make "ordinary objects appear extraordinary."³⁵

Putnam extends his discussion of alternative narratives to include artworks curated by artists that alter established exhibition designs as a primary means of expression. Describing Fred Wilson's 1992 installation project *Mining the Museum*, he shows that artist interventions also have the ability to revise existing displays, draw new connections through surprising juxtapositions and elevate previously discarded concepts or objects. Challenging the Maryland Historical Society's traditional displays, Wilson creatively inserts objects to suggest alternative narratives and the racially-tinged distortions present in normative museum display. Displaying objects previously located within museum storage or reorganizing current displays, Wilson demonstrates the biased history presented in cultural institutions. Through the shock of the new displays, he is

³⁵ Ibid, 43.

able to help his audience achieve a heightened awareness of institutional exclusions and question the museum's unspoken agenda.

Finally, Putnam explores artists' work that use the museum or gallery environment to critique current practices. In his chapter entitled "Public Inquiry," he characterizes some artist interventions as an exercise in exposé, arguing that artworks of this nature work to reveal "the existence of alternative cultural narratives," namely those that are obscured or countered by traditional museum narratives.³⁶ He writes that the artwork is the site of exchange where the artist reveals or leads its audience to inquiry or new awareness. In particular, he notes that this category of artworks frequently broaches the relationship of art to economies and socioeconomic status. Putnam includes works by Andrea Fraser and Louise Lawler to demonstrate the range and influence these works have had in museum settings. Including a description of Andrea Fraser's 1989 piece *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, Putnam shows the ability of the artist to reveal the latent politics of museum practice. Fraser's gallery talk mocked the museum's social role as the arbiter of taste in the "continuous, conscientious and resolute distinction of quality from mediocrity."³⁷ By parodying the museum's language of judgment and its position of authority in this way, Fraser focuses her audience's attention on the style, tone and delivery of the museum's information. Similarly, Lawler's 1984 photograph *Pollock and Tureen* depicts seemingly unrelated objects, a Jackson Pollock drip painting and a ceramic tureen, within a non-museum environment, a collector's home. Though the title of Lawler's work describes the individual objects located within it, the caption indicates

³⁶ Ibid, 90.

³⁷ Ibid, 100.

the importance of the objects' relationship to one another, crediting the arrangement to the objects' owner. Not only does her work propose multiple layers of authorship—object authorship, authorship of arrangement and Lawler's own authorship of the photograph—but also implies a compulsion to identify the parties involved in such an arrangement.

Combined, Putnam positions these three discussions—artist as collector, artist as curator, and artist as critic—as catalysts to the rise of the museum intervention as a distinct genre. He refrains from offering distinctions between artist and museum interventions, though his book as a whole suggests that 'museum intervention' is the culminating combination of elements of the artistic discussions he explores. The book examines these elements in a survey of artworks through which artists have critiqued, redirected or redressed the museum's authority. Though it offers an insightful and convincing discussion of the genre's components and usage, his survey fails to synthesize these various elements and produce a succinct and clear definition of the term 'museum intervention.'

Putting aside his presentation of the 'museum intervention' in *Art and Artifact*, an examination of the word 'intervention' proves useful in understanding the connotations of his chosen terminology. Generally, the word 'intervention' is applied in instances where the action or ideology of one party is subverted and then dominated by another in an effort to redirect its action, or inaction, for the benefit of the dominant ideology.³⁸ Broadly speaking, the connotation of the word 'intervention' has been linked with a host of scenarios including but not limited to political agendas where one government or

³⁸ "intervention, *n.*" The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. March 2012. <http://www.oed.com>.

authority intervenes through economic sanctions, legislation or military force, as well as the mental health profession, wherein one party interrupts undesirable behavior enacted by an individual (e.g. drug abuse) in an effort to address, acknowledge and discuss the behavior of negative consequences.

In addition, art interventions demonstrate the objective by one artist to change the meaning of a work of another. In this instance, however, interventions can be endorsed and permitted by the originating party in an effort to amplify, promote or reveal previously obfuscated meaning. For example, American artist Jef Bourgeau invited his audience to alter the 2002 installation *kaBOOM!* by destroying exhibited works.³⁹ Through the participation of the audience, Bourgeau's intentions for revealing the actions of iconoclasts became the new focus of the works. Alternatively, unendorsed art interventions, or vandalism, as it is called by critics, take the meaning of the work of one artist and subject it to the ideology of another artist.

Putnam's term 'museum intervention' aligns itself with these aforementioned connotations where one ideology is subjected to the restrictions or revisions of another. The word 'intervention' implies a desire to change or disrupt the actions of the museum in an attempt to assert the ideology of the intervener. Keeping in mind the connotations of the term outlined here and Putnam's observations of artists criticizing the subjective nature of museum practice, I conclude that *a museum intervention is an elaboration of the creative aspects of museum display in order to call attention to the procedures associated with museum practice and their consequent influence over displayed objects.*

³⁹ Jef Bourgeau. "Art Damage: A night of creative destruction in Detroit," *MONA kaBOOM!*, 2005. Accessed March 2012. http://www.detroitmona.com/Jef_Bourgeau/jef_bourgeau_kaBOOM!.htm.

Unlike past challenges to museum practice, museum interventions aim to highlight the impositions of traditional display methods through the traditional surroundings of the museum. Interventions add to, enhance, or rearrange traditional modes of display while keeping at least some part of the original framework intact—traditional chronologies, taxonomies, interpretative texts or histories among others. Museum interventions work within these preexisting parameters of museum practice in an attempt to create awareness of the “ownership, censorship, privilege, [and] curatorial prejudice” of past modes of display.⁴⁰ Additionally, museum interventions have an element of free agency as the intervening artist is not subject to museum protocols and restrictions. Frequently associating the museum intervention genre with artistic activities, Putnam stresses that this exercise is “not constrained by any formal museological precepts and [has] the freedom to deconstruct the self-conscious, enforced neutrality of conventional museum displays.”⁴¹ Putnam insinuates that the artist, who is free from the limitations of museum practice, is uniquely suited to contribute toward these projects.

The extent to which the museum intervention makes these disruptions evident may vary greatly in style or intensity in each project. This is not the focus for this thesis. Rather, this paper examines Putnam’s exhibition *Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art*, as an example of a museum intervention as defined by this author. Putnam includes *Time Machine* as an example of a museum intervention in his book *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*; the ways in which it fits the definition put forth here will be examined in the following chapter.

⁴⁰ Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 90.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 136.

Chapter Three: Is *Time Machine* a Museum Intervention?

In a summary of the 1994 British Museum exhibition *Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art*, James Putnam describes the show as a means “to contest the idea that the British Museum and its ancient Egyptian artefacts are stagnant remnants of the past, with no connection with the present.”⁴² In an effort to enliven the British Museum’s permanent Egyptian collection, Putnam incorporated site-specific works of twelve contemporary artists into the galleries displaying the museum’s Egyptian permanent collection, proposing that their inclusion offers audiences a chance for deeper comprehension of the museum’s historical and ethnographic objects. In stating his intentions for the show, Putnam implies that the juxtaposition of contemporary art and ancient Egyptian artifacts more effectively engages a museum audience than does a traditional museum display.⁴³

In *Art and Artifact*, Putnam includes *Time Machine* as the only example of a curatorially-led intervention in museums. Based on the newly-formed definition of ‘museum intervention,’ this paper analyzes whether the exhibition fits this definition, and concludes that it does not. To qualify as a museum intervention, *Time Machine* must

⁴² James Putnam, “Exhibitions—Time Machine.” Accessed March 2011. http://www.jamesputnam.org.uk/inv_exhibition_01.html.

⁴³ Putnam and Davies, *Time Machine*, 8. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Putnam writes, “[t]hus [the inclusion of contemporary art] was hoped to create both a more interesting and varied exhibitions and a more sincere and meaningful contemporary perspective. To juxtapose the new with the old for shock value or as a way of reflecting current avant-garde art trends is certainly not the exhibition’s intention.”

exhibit an elaboration of the creative aspects of museum display and use that elaboration to call attention to procedures associated with museum practice. To evaluate the creative aspects of its display, it is helpful to describe the exhibition's conception as it is currently documented.

In the accompanying exhibition catalogue, Putnam introduces the project with a quotation by English sculptor Henry Moore that strengthens the notion that artists use the museum as a resource in reflecting on past artistic works and is instrumental in inspiring their new endeavors.⁴⁴ Following the quotation are two affirmations in support of Putnam's efforts, one a foreword by Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities of the British Museum, Vivian Davies, and the other by Gilane Tawadros, founding Director of the Institute of International Visual Arts in London. Both of these introductory acknowledgments describe connections between the Egyptian arts found in the British Museum galleries and subsequent works produced by artists who drew directly from past examples.

Both Davies and Tawadros also touch on the exciting and energizing nature of the collaboration between the British Museum and the contemporary artists whose work was incorporated as a part of the exhibition. Tawadros implies this idea, stating that "Contemporary art, like the art of ancient cultures, is too often perceived to be far removed from our present realities and everyday life. The exhibition *Time Machine* eloquently challenges these perceptions, bringing together the seemingly disparate worlds

⁴⁴ Putnam and Davies, *Time Machine*, 2. As reproduced in the *Time Machine* catalogue, Henry Moore's quotation reads, "...when I first visited the British Museum's Egyptian sculpture gallery, and saw the 'great arm' and imagined what the whole figure was like, which it had only been a part of—then I realized how monumental, how enormous, how impressive a single piece of sculpture could be. Though it wasn't just the size along which impressed me. Size and monumentality are not always the same thing. What I found in the Egyptian pieces was a monumentality of vision."

of Europe and Africa, the past and the present, the museum and art gallery.”⁴⁵ This collaborative spirit between artists and collections that Tawadros and Davies express is echoed in Putnam’s own words describing the museum “[a]s the intermediary between the artist and the audience, [providing] a site for the essential encounter with a work of art and . . . its traditional role as a philosophical institution, a place of stimulation and inspiration which serves to mirror aspects of the past, present and future.”⁴⁶

In the catalogue’s introduction, Putnam asserts that the artists involved in *Time Machine* were selected by him to participate through creation of site-specific works.⁴⁷ These artists include David Hiscock, Rita Keegan, Kate Whiteford, Igor Mitoraj, Mark Quinn, Jiří Kolář, Stephen Cox, Martin Riches, Peter Randall-Page, Andy Goldsworthy, Alexander Mihaylovich, and Liliane Karnouk. This group represents six countries working in nine different media including photography, painting, sculpture, sound media, and multi media. Putnam invited these artists because of their ability to invoke the “intangible force and energy” of the Egyptian works and “express these particular qualities of Egyptian art; who would not simply draw directly on Egyptian images but would explore the concept in a more thematic and evocative way.”⁴⁸ This creative aim, to forge a dialogue between the ancient works locked in a passive state with contemporary works that invade that space, is Putnam’s underlying goal.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁶ Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 7.

⁴⁷ Putnam and Davies, *Time Machine*, 8.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 8.

Interestingly, a discussion about time anticipates the arrangement of objects in *Time Machine*. In the catalogue introduction, Putnam describes the artists' "great sense of responsibility, even honour, at sharing an exhibition space with art that has been around for up to 5,000 years and stood the test of time."⁴⁹ Putnam characterizes connectivity between the artists and the ancient Egyptian via time. He also hints at how the contemporary art invigorates ancient works in stating that the newer works will "[open] avenues for viewing the antiquities in a fresh light and not just as the remains of a dead civilization."⁵⁰ Putnam implies that a greater accessibility exists between his audience and the contemporary works, indicating the works are more readily relevant to a modern audience.

The idea of time is also taken up in the title of the exhibition. Putnam, who authored the exhibition's title *Time Machine*, likens his curatorial project to a portal or vehicle for connecting two points in history through a shared space. Further, the title implies that the exhibition acts as an autonomous device, working for the audience, transporting them between two points in time. For Putnam, this bridge in time exists not only between the pieces, but in the manner in which they are exhibited. Embracing different approaches in a shared space, Putnam notes "Although the nineteenth-century encyclopaedic approach represents the very antithesis of methods of display in the modern art museum, the two types are in fact connected, not merely through the process

⁴⁹ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 8.

of museological evolution but also because many contemporary artists have been inspired by the wider notion of the museum which such places embody.”⁵¹

To that end, Putnam juxtaposes ethnographic Egyptian artifacts with contemporary works. His intentions for the exhibition, outlined in the catalogue’s introduction, aim at demonstrating a connection between the spirit of ancient and contemporary artists.⁵² In order to achieve this visually, he disrupts the expected artifice of traditional museum display with contemporary works. In some cases, the contemporary objects are integrated into the space of the ancient object (fig. 1), while other contemporary works are simply placed in proximity to their Egyptian counterparts (fig. 2 and 3). Putnam also positions work outside the walls of the museum (fig. 4) in order to promote the museum to outsiders as a place of new and exciting experiences.⁵³ In *Art and Artifact*, Putnam hints at strategic reasons for this type of display, arguing that there is a need by the museum to “cast off the staid image of tradition in order to attract new audiences, while also reflecting an increasing climate of institutional self-criticism and observing political correctness.”⁵⁴

Putnam also allows for an uninterrupted and shared space between the viewer and the contemporary works (fig. 2, 3, 4 and 6). Contemporary works are sometimes exhibited with intervening devices—pedestals, vitrines, barrier ropes or rails—conventionally employed to protect artworks from damage or decay. In *Time Machine*,

⁵¹ Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 8.

⁵² Putnam and Davies, *Time Machine*, 8.

⁵³ John Russell Taylor, “Clearing out the Cobwebs,” *The Times*, December 5, 2000. Accessed December 2011. http://www.jamesputnam.org.uk/press_07.html.

⁵⁴ Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 156.

Putnam forgoes these measures in favor of a more direct and immediate encounter with the exhibited works. Describing the display apparatus' stultifying effects, he explains that

The vitrine reinforces the notion of the unique, untouchable and unattainable and, perhaps significantly, has its roots in the medieval church reliquary. It therefore enhances the inherent visual power of an object to catch a viewer's attention and to stimulate contemplation.⁵⁵

Removing these divisive elements, Putnam aims to unite the space between ancient and contemporary works and facilitate an environment where the "creative forces of the ancient artist lives on."⁵⁶

Additionally, Putnam links ancient and contemporary works in more physical ways, intertwining and incorporating contemporary objects in and around Egyptian artifacts (fig. 5). The works in some cases seem organic outgrowths of the ancient pieces themselves, as Andy Goldsworthy's piece navigates and commands the space (fig. 3), or stand in contrast to them, commanding attention as with Stephen Cox's *Flask* (fig. 6).

Putnam's commitment to the new ordering system owes to the spirit of the project's conception. In breaking traditional notions of taxonomies, chronologies and display conventions, he hopes to achieve what the artists describe in their respective statements.⁵⁷ Importantly, the display and subsequent context Putnam provides is decidedly altered from the British Museum's Egyptian galleries' original appearance.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 36.

⁵⁶ Putnam and Davies, *Time Machine*, 8.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 10-57. Several artists also explicitly take up the topic of time in their statements included in the exhibition catalogue. Eleven of the twelve artists include some discussion on some aspect of time—object as memory or direct link to history, language as carriers of concepts through time, and human fascination with time to enumerate a few. The exhibition's design further evokes these ideas.

Interestingly, Putnam's *Time Machine* is focused more on convincing audiences about the relevance of the permanent collection and less on critiquing the museum and its conventions of display. Putnam's assertion that these juxtapositions constitute new awareness for the visitor begs the question: If *Time Machine* is a museum intervention where is the critique located? In considering his intentions for the exhibition and his claim that the project embodies an ideological exchange, Putnam seems to suggest a critical need to disrupt the viewer's traditional experience with new elements in order to forge a meaningful connection with the museum. This imposition of one display methodology onto another does not constitute an intervention in and of itself because it fails to register the second condition of the newly-formed definition—the elaboration of the creative aspects of museum display *must* reveal procedures associated with museum practice in the previous display.

As a further examination of *Time Machine* has shown, the dialogue of new concepts that he describes is less than clear. Though Putnam does not describe those devices or elements that might help to achieve these effects with any specificity, the exhibition components do not achieve critique. Without any didactic labels or accompanying essay as to what the juxtaposition might mean, this placement may not achieve the intended exchange and intervening force that Putnam describes for other museum interventions. Though the audience may be able to locate these differences between traditional museum display and the methods of Putnam's *Time Machine*, they do not offer a clear critique.

Though Putnam positions his exhibition *Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art* as a museum intervention, and despite the fact that it satisfies

requirements of having the defining elements of creative curating, this discussion has demonstrated that it does not do so toward a critical end. Museum interventions act as a mechanism to disrupt the museum experience for the visitor for the sole purposes of critique, as described in Putnam's 2001 publication *Art and Artifact*. In the stated aims for the exhibition, however, Putnam makes it clear that his participation in exercising museum intervention is meant to demonstrate the relevance of a collection to the community it serves rather than critique its practices or traditions.

Conclusion

James Putnam's term 'museum intervention' is an invaluable contribution to ongoing scholarship and criticism of traditional museum display. His book *Art and Artifact* clearly identifies a distinct genre of artworks that has influenced and contributed to this discussion. In this thesis, I have situated the museum intervention within the history of exhibition display and formulated a new, clear definition for the term, expanding on Putnam's initial scholarship.

An aspect of museum interventions not explored in this thesis is the extent to which the genre is effective in communicating with a museum audience. The role and effectiveness of the museum intervention as a means for museum critique remains an avenue for further research and study. Putnam suggests that museum interventions are successful in communicating the objectives of its creator, but he fails to describe how it achieves this. If the museum intervention is accepted as a practice, as Putnam suggests in *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, then measures of an audience's understanding and engagement are required to determine the validity of his statement. This area requires further consideration and research.

The museum's educational aims have become an increasingly central objective articulated in museum missions.⁵⁸ Beginning with Duchamp's 1917 readymade work *Fountain*, artist and scholar critics have called for museums to educate the public about

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum*, 2.

the privilege and prejudice inherent in the ways they collect, exhibit and interpret objects.

Museums have answered this call by welcoming criticism in the form of museum interventions. Scholar Valerie Casey articulates the importance of thinking critically about the relationship between museums and their current practices, writing that

while the museum has always perpetuated certain narratives, the way the contemporary museum performs its ideologies exposes the museum's social power ... [and] perhaps this new phase in museum practice which recognizes the museum as a medium through which cultural knowledge is produced, will create an opportunity to challenge ideologies and convey new narratives.⁵⁹

Artists creating museum interventions have initiated and developed the discussion that Casey describes. Through artists' creative efforts and cooperation by museums as host sites for new interventions, the dialogue will continue to challenge and advance museum practices.

⁵⁹ Casey, "The Museum Effect," 20.

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Illustrations

Vita

Caitlin Smith Hanbury was born on March 5, 1983 in Norfolk, Virginia. She graduated from Norfolk Academy in 2001. She went on to obtain a Bachelor of Arts in Art History and English Language and Literature from the University of Virginia in 2005, and a Master of Arts in Art History and Museum Studies from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2012. Her primary interests are exhibition design and modern and contemporary art. Caitlin worked as the programs manager and exhibitions coordinator for the Hermitage Museum in Norfolk from 2007-2009 and, beginning in 2009, as a Development Associate for Maymont in Richmond. She interned with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in both the curatorial and development departments, worked with the VMFA in association with the exhibition *Corot to Cezanne: French Drawings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon* and as a representative to the 2010-2011 College Advisory Council in addition to serving as a mentor in the inaugural year of the Museum Leaders in Training program in 2011. Caitlin was the recipient of Virginia Commonwealth University's 2010-2011 Bruce M. Koplin Award in Museum Studies.