The Power of Display

A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art

"Creating Installations For Aesthetic Autonomy.."

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The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

pp 60-85

Creating Installations for Aesthetic Autonomy: Alfred Barr's Exhibition Technique

The Museum of Modern Art's founding director, Alfred Barr, did not select the paintings for the Museum's inaugural exhibition, *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh*—but he did install them. A. Conger Goodyear, the Museum's founding president, chose the works for the show, which was held from November 7 to December 7, 1929 (fig. 2.1).[1] Its installation may now look utterly unexceptional; this manner of presenting paintings has become so conventional that its significance may be completely invisible. But it marked the beginning of several decades of innovative exhibition design at the Museum of Modern Art. *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh* also contributed to the introduction of a particular type of installation that has come to dominate museum practices, whereby the language of display articulates a modernist, seemingly autonomous aestheticism.

For this first exhibition, Barr—who perhaps more than any other individual has influenced the reception of modern art in the United States—thought it important to experiment with the installation. The young director did not completely eliminate traditional, symmetrical conventions of installing pictures according

Hanging pictures is very difficult, I find, and takes a lot of practice. . . . I feel that I am just entering the second stage of hanging when I can experiment with asymmetry. Heretofore I followed perfectly conventional methods, alternating light and dark, vertical and horizontal.

—Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to Edward S. King, letter (10 October 1934)

There is no such thing as a neutral installation. A work of art is so much like a person—the same work of art reacts differently at different phases of history. Installation is a very complicated exciting subject.

—René d'Harnoncourt, in "Profiles: Imperturbable Noble" (1960)

2.1
Museum of Modern Art's inaugural exhibition, installed by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 7 November to 7 December 1929. Alfred Barr installations such as this one enhanced a sense of the work of art, the exhibition, and the viewer's autonomy. This type of installation method has become so standard that its language of form goes unnoticed and seems "invisible" to most viewers. But, as is the case with all exhibitions, this is a representation in its own right.

to size and shape. There were, for example, arrangements such as the large van Gogh *Irises* placed in between two very small self-portraits and framed by two landscapes nearly identical in size. For the most part, however, Barr departed from traditional display methods of treating paintings as room decor and presenting them "skied," in salon-style installations.

In keeping with the new installation methods for painting and sculpture that were being developed within the international avant-gardes during the 1920s and 1930s, Barr covered MoMA's walls with natural-color monk's cloth and eliminated skying. Installing paintings at approximately eye level on neutral wall surfaces in spacious arrangements became a common practice during the 1930s. Previously, even in avant-garde exhibitions, paintings were almost always hung very close to one another in traditional interiors and were skied. Two of the best-known modern art installations of the first quarter of the twentieth century—the 1913 *Armory Show* in New York and the Kazimir Malevich gallery at the *0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings* in Petrograd in 1915 and 1916—were arranged in this manner (figs. 2.2 and 2.3).[2] With the establishment of the spacious, modern display method as the standard in the 1930s and 1940s, it has become relatively rare for a collection of modern art to be installed according to a skied plan; one such exception is found at the Albert C. Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania.[3]

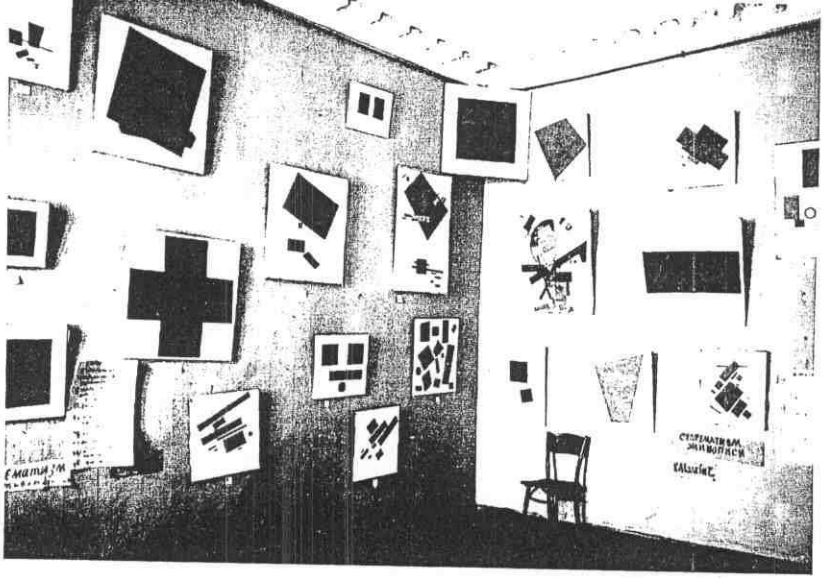
Barr's wife, art historian Margaret Scolari Barr, was emphatic in a 1974 interview about the importance of his innovative exhibition technique for MoMA's first show.

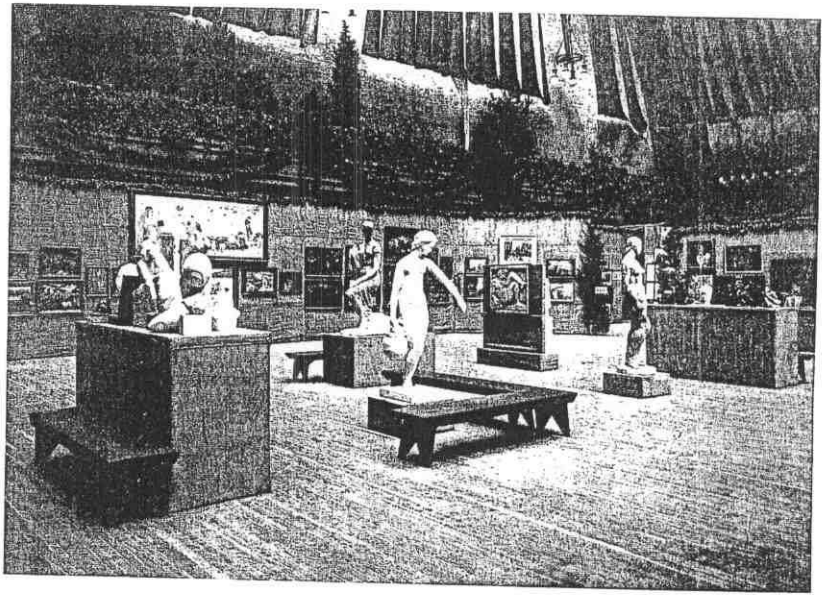
It occurred to me that I have not made it clear . . . what was so novel about this kind of exhibition. What was novel, apart from the choice of paintings . . . was how they were installed . . . they were installed on plain walls; if the walls were not totally white then they were the palest gray, absolutely neutral. And in the most novel way they were installed not symmetrically. . . . [I]n 1932 still in Paris pictures were being hung symmetrically and by size, not by content, not by date . . . and they were "skied." Whereas in the Museum, right there in that first show in the Fall of 1929, there were no pictures above other pictures, all the walls were neutral, and the pictures were hung intellectually, chronologically. . . . Previously, the walls would be either paneling or else they would be brocade—red brocade, blue brocade, green brocade which would suck the color out of the pictures. Instead, the idea was to let the pictures stand on their own feet.[4]

Beaumont Newhall, who was hired as MoMA's librarian in 1935 and later served as the director of the photography department from 1940 to 1947, helped Barr install the 1935 *Vincent van Gogh* exhibition (fig. 2.4). In a recollection published in 1979, he also emphasized Barr's exhibition technique.

The van Gogh *exhibition, like so many of Alfred's shows, was more than a superb loan collection. The pictures were not hung symmetrically by size, with the largest in the middle of the wall, the next largest at the ends and the smallest in between, as in most museums of the time. No, the pictures were hung in logical sequence depending on style and period, well spaced so they did not impinge upon one another, and with explanatory labels. Alfred believed that an exhibition should elucidate as well as give aesthetic pleasure. The labels for this show, besides giving title, date, and name of lender, contained excerpts from van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo, often describing the very picture on display. Alfred asked me to help tack them up.* The Good Samaritan *label included a small mounted photograph of the Delacroix painting upon which van Gogh had based his painting.*[5]

Although there were no labels in the first show, didactic labels had become a hallmark of Barr's exhibition technique by the time of the *van Gogh* exhibition and were another indicator of





2.2

0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, Petrograd, 1915–1916.

2.3

The "Armory Show," The International Exhibition of Modern Art, Sixty-ninth Regiment Armory, New York, 17 February to 15 March 1913.

Barr's curatorial departure from decorative exhibition installations. Margaret Barr stressed the importance of the type of labeling her husband introduced: "The labels that my husband used to write were not only labels for each picture, but they were general intellectual labels to make people understand what they were seeing . . . they explained the general nature . . . of that room or of the whole exhibition. . . . Such a thing had never been done before."[6] These Alfred Barr exhibitions did not consist of artworks in decorative, or even vaguely stylistic, arrangements; they were compositions in which wall labels explicitly linked the works of art historically and conceptually, making visible the unity and coherence of the show. Barr's labels enhanced the sense of the exhibition as an entity unto itself.

When asked about the neutral, non-skied installation method inaugurated at MoMA, Philip Johnson, who was curator of MoMA's architectural department from 1932 to 1934, stated simply: "That was Alfred Barr." Johnson, whose installation designs for MoMA's 1932 *Modern Architecture* and 1934 *Machine Art* shows are among the rare exhibition installations that have retained a prominence in both the art and the architectural literature, quickly added that "Alfred Barr and I were very close. We didn't do anything separate."[7] Having met in the spring of 1929 when Johnson was a classics major at Harvard and Barr was teaching at Wellesley, the two men were friends and colleagues whose relationship was founded on their passion for modern art and architecture.[8] By the summer of 1929 Barr had accepted the directorship of the Museum. In September of the following year, after he had finished his degree, Johnson moved to New York, where he and the Barrs rented apartments in the same building. Both men had traveled, individually and together, throughout the Continent during the late 1920s and early 1930s, and their creative exhibition methods were conceived within the context of the museological innovations taking place in Europe. Johnson in 1993 outlined the genesis and formulation of his and Barr's new installation method:

Alfred Barr and I were very impressed with the way exhibitions were done in Weimar Germany–at the Folkwang Museum in Essen especially (fig. 2.5). That's where they had beige simple walls and the modern was known there. It wasn't known in this country at all. For instance, here all our museums had wainscoting. Of course, that's death to a painting. It skys the painting. That was the big battle in hanging paintings. . . . The Metropolitan got used to skying pictures because of those idiotic dados. But if you let the wall go down it's much better. You naturally look slightly downward. So if you sky a picture you're in trouble. Since then everybody's hung their paintings low. . . . Barr thought beige, that brownish stuff that he used, the monk's cloth, was the most neutral thing he could get. After some time, the modern design people got hold of it and made it white paint. . . .' They painted the walls white. . . . Before that it was always the cloth. And, of course, the cloth was much better. Because it doesn't leave marks and the beige color was far better for painting than white. Never, never use white for painting. Then your frame is much brighter than your picture. . . . If the area around the painting is brighter than the painting you're taking away from the painting. This is what Alfred felt. . . . And so the Folkwang Museum especially impressed us and in Basel what impressed us was the sparsity of the hanging which Alfred tried to use . . . of course we knew those famous rooms of Alexander Dorner in Hanover. Essen, on the other hand, was a more reactionary, normal museum and they still hung paintings low, against neutral backgrounds, without trim, and in an architectural manner.[9]

Johnson also discussed the problems of installing an exhibition in MoMA's first building, a townhouse on Fifth Avenue,

where "we just had little office rooms to do things in." These commercial offices, in what was known as the Heckscher Building, underwent slight renovations to ensure that walls within the existing interiors were unobstructed. Architectural detailing such as pilasters were eliminated, and the rooms' corners were chamfered to provide additional space for hanging paintings. These renovations were an attempt to encase these interiors in a neutral, monk's-cloth, aesthetic "shell." By May 1932, the Museum had moved to a larger building on 53rd Street, which also was renovated with monk's-cloth walls. Reflecting on these first exhibitions—in what from today's perspective were extremely modest inaugural galleries—Johnson in retrospect agreed with Barr that they were experimenting with the new field of exhibition design.[10]

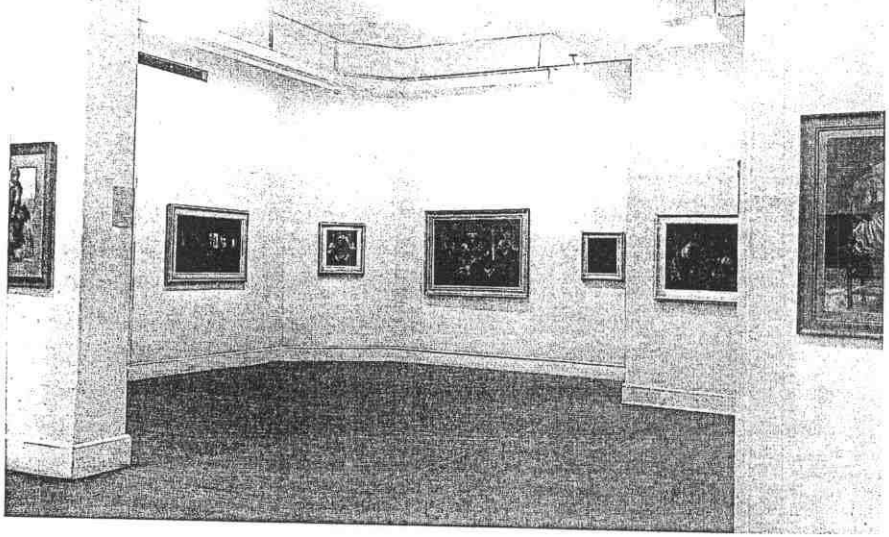
The placement of paintings on neutral-colored walls at just below eye level and at relatively widely spaced intervals created a "field of vision" (to use Herbert Bayer's term; see chapter 1) that facilitated appreciation of the singular artwork. These changes let the paintings "stand on their own," as Margaret Barr put it, somewhat anthropomorphically.[11] In Barr's "modern" installations, works of art were treated not as decorative elements within an overpowering architecture but as elements within an exhibition whose aesthetic dimension took precedence over architectural and site-specific associations. Even the wall labels, however historical, served as documents underscoring the aesthetic validity of an exhibited work. (During these years one of MoMA's primary challenges was, of course, to promote the acceptance of modern art in the United States.) Barr strove to create seemingly autonomous installations in neutral interiors for what was conceived as an ideal, standardized viewer. The various elements of these shows were explicitly woven together conceptually by the inclusion of wall labels. All of these conventions enhanced the perceived autonomy both of the works of art and of the exhibition.

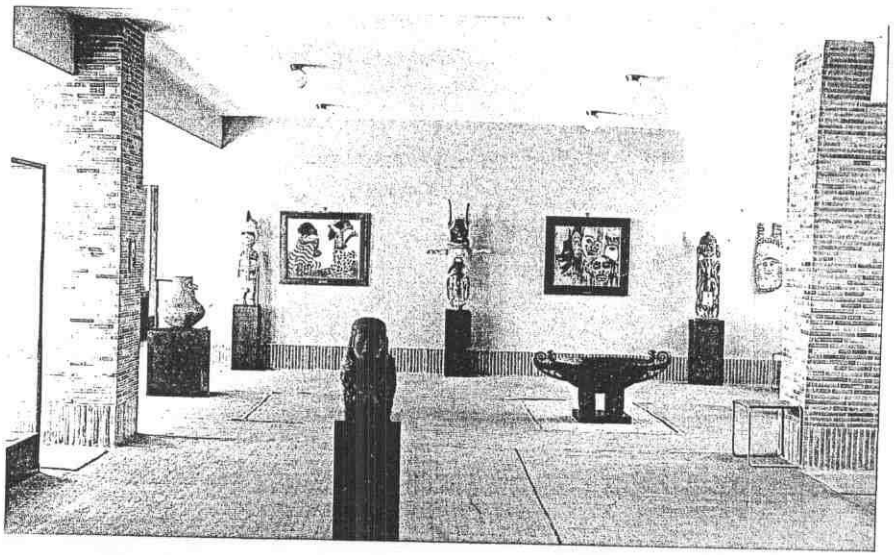
The logic that shaped an installation such as the *van Gogh* exhibition was aesthetic: style, chronology within this style, and the subjects constituting the oeuvre. This method of installation would dominate Barr's exhibition technique throughout his career. In one of the rare documents in which Barr wrote about his installation technique, he described the 1940 *Italian Masters* exhibition as being arranged in an "almost perfect chronological sequence. . . . No effort of any kind was made to suggest a period atmosphere, either by wall coverings or accessories. In other words, the works of art were considered as objects valuable in themselves and isolated from their original period."[12] Observing Barr's exhibitions with some historical perspective, we see these aestheticized, autonomous, "timeless" installations created for an ideal viewer as modernist representations in their own right.[13]

Barr did more than place paintings and sculpture in spare, beige installations: he staged a seemingly autonomous site for a stationery, ideal viewer. In Barr's exhibitions, the viewing subject was presumed to fit a specific standard and to match an ideal height. Such an arrangement treated the viewer as an immobile, atemporal being (fig. 2.6). Both the work of art and the viewing subject were framed in these suggestive, neutral interiors as if each were unfettered by other social formations. It is extremely suggestive that this installation method has become the norm within twentieth-century modern museum practices, so common and so standardized that its language of form and its function as a representation have become transparent and invisible. But this conventional manner of displaying modern culture and art is itself far from neutral: it produces a powerful and continually repeated social experience that enhances the viewer's sense of autonomy and independence.

2.6

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., looking at Alexander Calder, *Gibraltar* (1936), in 1967. Photograph: © Dan Budnik.



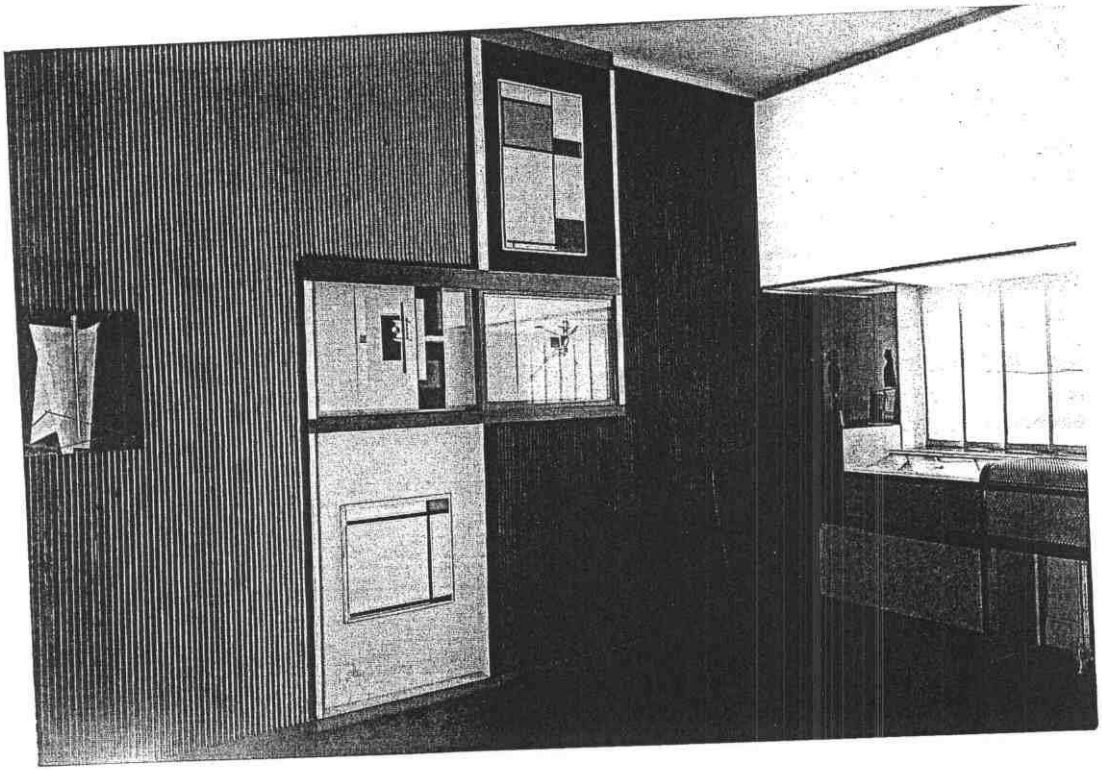


2.4

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Vincent van Gogh,* Museum of Modern Art, 4 November 1935 to 5 January 1936. One of Barr's didactic labels thumbtacked to walls can be seen in this photograph.

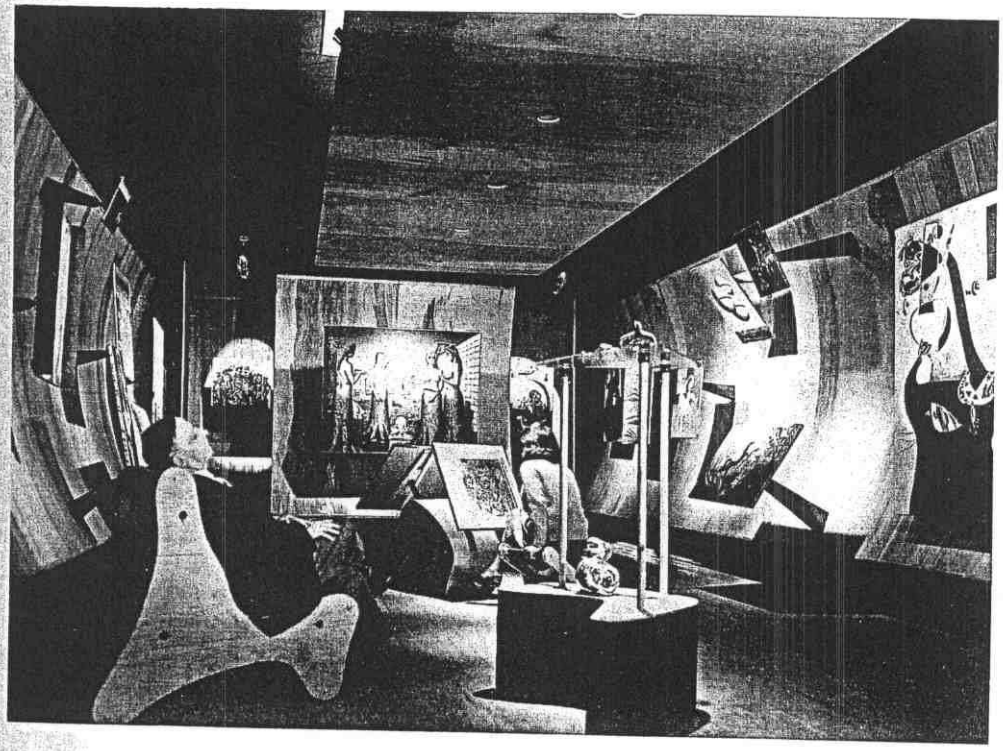
2.5

Folkwang Museum, Essen, ca. 1934.



2.7
El Lissitzky, *Abstract Cabinet*, Landesmuseum, Hanover, 1927 and 1928.

This is not to say that Barr's installation design was the only option for presenting modernism within the international avant-gardes. Lissitzky's *Room for Constructivist Art* of 1926 and *Abstract Cabinet* of 1927 and 1928 also provided aestheticized installations for painting and sculpture that were autonomous in the sense of being disengaged from the original architectural features of the site (fig. 2.7).[14] But however much Lissitzky's creations were aestheticized interiors for abstract works of art, his method produced a dynamic, interactive space for the viewer. Lissitzky's viewer-interactive cabinets, composed of walls that flickered as the visitor moved through the space, made visible the fact that the reception of art occurs within an ever-changing interaction between the viewer and the artwork. It was one of his stated intentions for his *Room for Constructivist Art* that "now our design should make the man active."[15] Lissitzky's installations suggested that the reception of art is inextricably intertwined with a particular viewer at a particular moment and thus, by implication, with the processes of history—a very different ideological perspective from that of Barr. Lissitzky's method was not surprising, given his commitment to historical materialism



2.8
Frederick Kiesler, *Surrealist Gallery*, Art of This Century, 1942.

and the Soviet revolution, which by the late 1920s would become explicit in his exhibitions and writings.[16]

Kiesler's interactive L and T system for installing works of art, created in 1924 and 1926, also set up a dynamic relationship with the viewer, as did his interactive installations for Art of This Century (see chapter one). Like the adjustable levels of his L and T system, in Art of This Century's *Surrealist Gallery* movable supports were used to mount the paintings so that the visitor could tilt them to the positions he or she desired for viewing (fig. 2.8). Kiesler defined the theoretical armature for his work—what he called "Correalism"—as "the science of relationships."[17] He specifically stated that the "traditional art object, be it a painting, a sculpture, or a piece of architecture, is no longer seen as an isolated entity but must be considered within the context of this expanding environment. The environment becomes equally as important as the object."[18] Even Alexander Dorner, whose theoretical foundation for the installations at the Landesmuseum was Alois Riegel's *Kunstwollen,* nonetheless placed works of art in historically suggestive interiors, which he called "atmosphere rooms" (see fig. 1.18).[19] Such placement of works in contextually

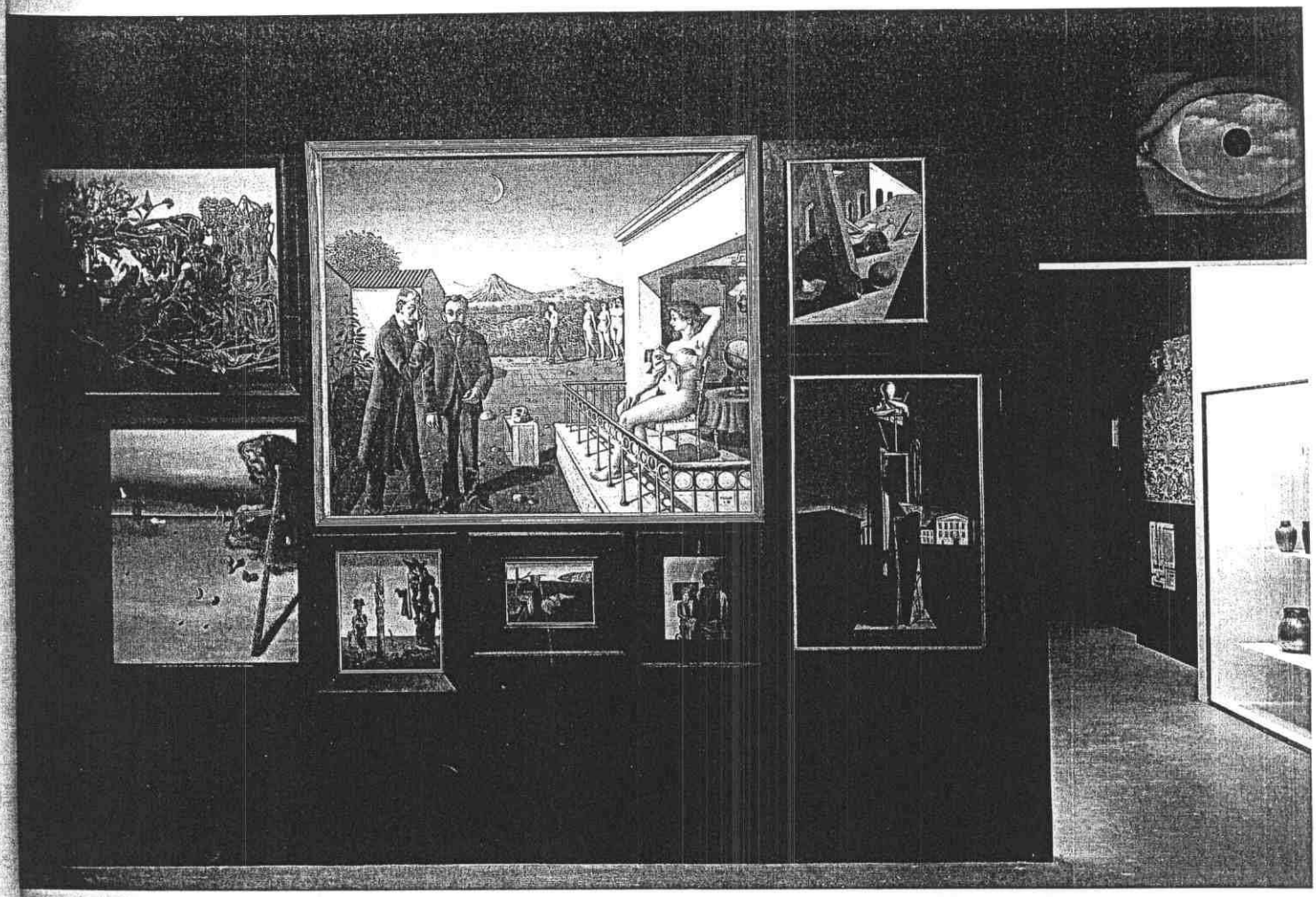
specific installations was an approach that Barr has stated he very consciously avoided when creating the 1940 *Italian Masters* exhibition.

It should be obvious that Alfred Barr's installation method—neutral-colored walls, with paintings hung at a standardized height and with sculptures placed on white or neutral-colored pedestals—created a very different ideological space and different spectator than those produced by Lissitzky, Kiesler, or Dorner. The viewing subject in these Barr installations was treated as if he or she possessed an ahistorical, unified sovereignty of the self—much like the art objects the spectator was viewing. These spare installations isolated the individual art object, creating a one-on-one relationship with the viewer. If the visitor's height was within the ideal range imagined by Barr, then object and subject were, to anthropomorphize these artworks, "face to face" or "eye to eye" with each other (see fig. 2.6). The result is a magnified awareness of the object's, and the individual's, independence. This aestheticized, autonomous, seemingly "neutral" exhibition method created an extremely accommodating ideological apparatus for the reception of modernism in the United States, where the liberal democratic ideal of the autonomous, independent individual born to natural rights and free will is the foundation of the mythology of the American dream.

That installations which frame and isolate the individual and the individual work of art have become the standard not only in the United States but within twentieth-century museological practices in general must be considered in relation to the rise of the modern museum and the development of modern subjectivity.[20] The creation of the museum in the West involved the shift from private, aristocratic collections to public, democratic ones. In many cases, this transformation of private collections in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was directly linked to the dissolution of a monarchy and establishment of a liberal democratic capitalist state; the Louvre provides perhaps the most famous example. It is important—and revealing—that the institutionalization of modernism within museums for modern art coincided with new installation practices that would magnify the viewer's sense of autonomy and individual experience, characteristics particularly significant for the modern sense of self in a liberal democracy. Moreover, the relation of these now standard installations to their viewers is complicated by their decontextualization: the interiors with their seemingly neutral settings foster a sense of aesthetic experience as something segregated from other spheres of life. Modern installations reveal much about fundamental modern aesthetic myths, such as genius, taste, and a conception of art as something universal and timeless.[21]

From today's perspective, Barr's installations for MoMA's first exhibition and the *van Gogh* show may seem unimportant and unremarkable. But what may appear to be only slight departures from existing conventions of picture hanging marked the beginning of aggressive and exciting experimentation in the field of installation design at the Museum of Modern Art. During these early decades of MoMA's history, the Museum's directors and curators were exploring how to institutionalize modern art in what I have called a "laboratory period" of museum conventions and installation techniques. As we have seen, Barr himself characterized the Museum as an "experimental laboratory," and almost thirty years later his successor, René d'Harnoncourt, agreed.[22] Comparing the exhibition techniques tested during the laboratory years at MoMA with the ones that have survived these experimental decades reveals the reduced spectrum of installation methods and the *institutional boundaries* of what has come to be the modern art museum in the United States.

In 1959 Barr installed an exhibition that demonstrated the acceptance of the conventions he had helped to institute earlier in his career. For this exhibition, *Toward the "New" Museum of Modern Art*, Barr skied paintings to dramatize the Museum's lack of space for its collection and its financial problems (fig. 2.9).[23]



2.9

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Toward the "New" Museum of Modern Art,* Museum of Modern Art, 16 November to 29 November 1959. This "skied" method was the standard at the beginning of the century, but several decades later, in this exhibition, Barr used it to articulate and publicize institutional crisis.

bition was timed to inaugurate MoMA's "Thirtieth Anni- Drive" to raise $25 million, for which the Museum pub- a brochure with a section titled "The Museum's Invisible lections." This "crowded" installation, which would have seemed perfectly conventional at the beginning of the century, now publicized institutional crisis.

The waning of experimentation in installation at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1960s and 1970s is related in part to an extremely significant change in policy that occurred in 1953. Previously, most works in the Museum's collection were eventually to be transferred to other institutions or sold. The collection was to possess, as A. Conger Goodyear put it, "the same perma-

2.10
Kurt Varnedoe with the assistance of Jerome Neuner, painting and sculpture galleries, Museum of Modern Art, 1997.

nence that a river has."[24] In February 1953, however, John Hay Whitney, MoMA's chairman of the board, announced that the Museum had decided to keep its acquisitions and would set aside special galleries for this permanent collection. On October 8, 1958, the Museum opened the first "permanent" installation of its collections in the second-floor galleries (fig. 2.10).[25] These galleries house the masterpieces of modern art, and idealized installations would perhaps be deemed appropriate for the display of such classics. This prominant addition to the Museum's mission certainly augmented the power and presence of the non-skied installations created within seemingly neutral interiors, which all worked to emphasize the autonomy of modern art and culture.

Alfred Barr's Multidepartmental Plan

True to the experimentation within the international avant-gardes during the first half of the century, Barr's modernist installation technique was merely one of a range of options being explored by himself and his colleagues at the Museum of Modern Art. Although MoMA's directors and staff had agendas and ideological considerations specific to the United States, they shared with their colleagues and predecessors in Europe an awareness of the representational diversity of exhibitions. This attention to the meanings of the installations was no doubt related to their conscious role in creating conventions for a new type of institution: the modern art museum. Using an approach to museology similar to Dorner's and that of the artists and architects creating innovative installations for the large international exhibitions, Barr envisioned exhibitions diverse in both theme and display methods that would deal with "primitive" and premodern art, popular culture, film, architecture, photography, design, and the modernization of everyday life.

This catholic approach to the institutionalization of modern art was outlined in Barr's "1929 Plan."[26] When Barr was invited by MoMA's founding trustees to be director of the Museum, he was asked to map out the Museum's scope and policy. The young director came up with a long-range proposal whose framework included the following departments: painting and sculpture, prints and drawings, commercial art, industrial art (posters, advertising layout, packaging, etc.), film, theater design (arts and costumes), photography, and a library of books, photographs, slides, and color reproductions. In 1941 Barr recollected: "The plan was radical not so much because it was departmentalized (most large museums are), but because it proposed an active and serious concern with the practical, commercial, and popular arts as well as with the so-called 'fine' arts."[27] According to Barr, the trustees agreed to a museum of modern painting and sculpture but told him that "the multidepartmental program was too ambitious and if announced might confuse or put off the public and our potential supporters and that anyway the committee was primarily interested in painting so that consideration of such things as photography and furniture design would have to be indefinitely postponed." Barr was disappointed but accepted the response, which he rationalized: "from a practical point of view [it] made a good deal of sense." With the approval of the trustees, however, Barr made additions to the Museum's charter: "to encourage and develop the study of modern art" and "the application of such art to manufacture and the practical life." He believed this "left the door legally open" for the implementation of the departments that were added through the years.[28] His amendment also led to the subsequent experimental exhibitions of the Museum's early years.

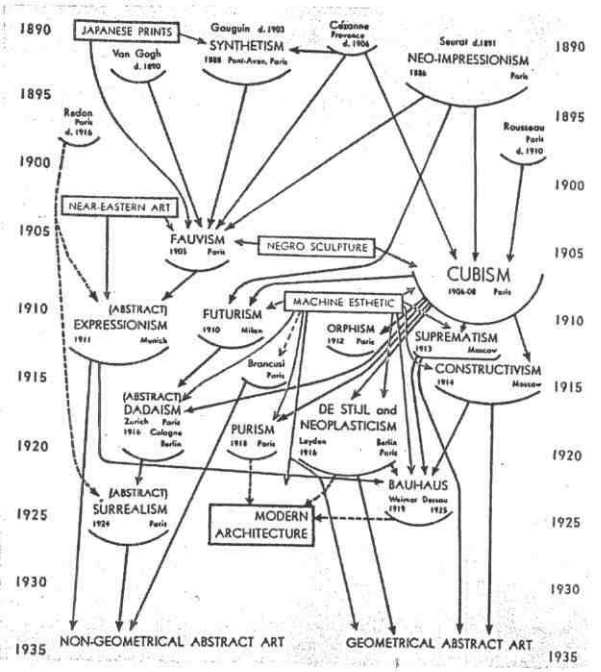
Barr's theoretical foundations are usually discussed in relation to the influence of one of his undergraduate professors at Princeton, medievalist Charles Rufus Morey.[29] Morey treated art history as a discipline with an independent internal development: art was examined in terms of an organic evolution of styles. Although Morey followed an evolutionary theoretical model, he rejected the privileging of one style or art over another and his writings dealt with applied and fine art on equal terms.[30] According to Barr, "The first anticipation of the plan . . . was a course given by Professor C. R. Morey of Princeton. . . . This was a remarkable synthesis of the principal medieval visual arts as a record of a period of civilization: architecture, sculpture, paintings on walls and in books, minor arts and crafts were all included." Barr considered Morey's and his own methodology to be what he called "synthetic"—an approach that shaped his early teaching career and his tenure at MoMA.[31] It is also standard for those evaluating Barr's early methodological development to take into consideration his visits with the international avant-gardes in Europe and the Soviet Union during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Particularly important was his 1927 trip to the Bauhaus, which Barr described as a "fabulous institution, where all the modern visual arts—paintings, graphic arts, architecture, the crafts, typography, theater, cinema, photography, industrial design for mass production—all were studied and taught together in a large new modern building. . . . Undoubtedly it had an influence not only upon the plan of our Museum which I was to prepare two years later but also upon a number of exhibitions."[32] Although the literature dealing with Barr generally acknowledges that his approach to modern culture included both popular and fine art and the commercial and aesthetic spheres, the degree to which Barr's "high and low" perspective—and specifically the 1929 Plan—shaped MoMA's agendas and exhibition installations has been ignored.

Barr believed that the the 1929 Plan was first realized to some degree in the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art,* where the entire "curatorial staff helped me prepare sections on architecture, posters and typography, photography, films, furniture and theater."[33] In *Cubism and Abstract Art,* modernist paintings and sculpture were displayed as a pinnacle of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century styles that subsequently proliferated and diversified within twentieth-century fine art, design, advertising, film, and architecture. The exhibition's structure was linear and logical, literally visualized in Barr's famous flowchart (fig. 2.11). The chart not only served as the cover for the *Cubism and Abstract Art* catalogue, but the exhibition galleries were studded with charts that marked the beginning of each stylistic section: "From Impressionism to Fauvism," "Analytical Cubism," "Futurism," "Constructivism." At the entrance hall, for example, beneath the lettering on the wall, "Cubism 1906–10," a flowchart and a descriptive wall label introduced the viewer to Cubism.

For the most part, *Cubism and Abstract Art*'s historical importance has been seen by the art historical and modern museum establishment as an influential paradigm of stylistic analysis.[34] But the full title of this exhibition, which filled the Museum's four-story townhouse, was *Cubism and Abstract Art: Painting, Sculpture, Constructions, Photography, Architecture, Industrial Art, Theater, Films, Posters, Typography.* The exhibition was also an attempt to document, however modestly, the diverse innovations that had taken place within the international avant-gardes. In one gallery on the fourth floor, for instance, each of the four walls was designated according to style: "German" and "Bauhaus," "Purism," "De Stijl," and the "influence of Cubism" and the "influence of Suprematism." The installation was constructed of documentary photographs, film stills, books, journals, posters, objects, didactic labels, a painting, and an

architectural model. The German section included small photographs of Walter Gropius's Dessau Bauhaus, Oskar Schlemmer's theater costumes, and a chess set by a student of the Bauhaus, Josef Hartwig (2.12). The gallery documented important exhibition and installation designs, such as the photograph of Lissitzky's *Abstract Cabinet* in the German section, the catalogue cover of the Soviet pavilion at *Pressa* in the Suprematist section, and a photograph of Kiesler's *City in Space* in the De Stijl section. Like Herbert Bayer, who at the *International Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* mounted Bauhaus chairs in a series on the wall, Barr mounted one chair each by Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier, and Gerrit Rietveld on the walls (fig. 2.13). In the Purism section there was a model of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye.

Practical limitations prevented Barr from presenting more than documents and token examples of avant-garde architecture, design, and exhibition techniques, and those restrictions should be considered when assessing Barr's formalist exhibition methods. But the entries included in *Cubism and Abstract Art* were evidence of Barr's awareness of the international avant-gardes' experiments in exhibition design. Barr's theoretical interests in style and his actual restraints shaped the presentation of the exhibition's paintings, sculpture, publications, posters, architecture, furniture, and design objects. Separated from their original contexts or represented by documentary photographs, these selected entries were reinscribed within an aesthetic framework—as a canvas within a frame. Thus the Le Corbusier model of Villa Savoye provided the visitor with an exhibition experience closer to viewing sculpture than to touring the simulated reality of the modern world; the latter was enjoyed by visitors to a full-scale exhibition interior, like the *Esprit Nouveau Pavilion* at the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* of 1925. Nor did Barr duplicate the installation experience of Bayer's Werkbund gallery for the *Exposition de la Société des Artistes Décorateurs* (fig. 2.14). Bayer's rows of identical chairs on the wall



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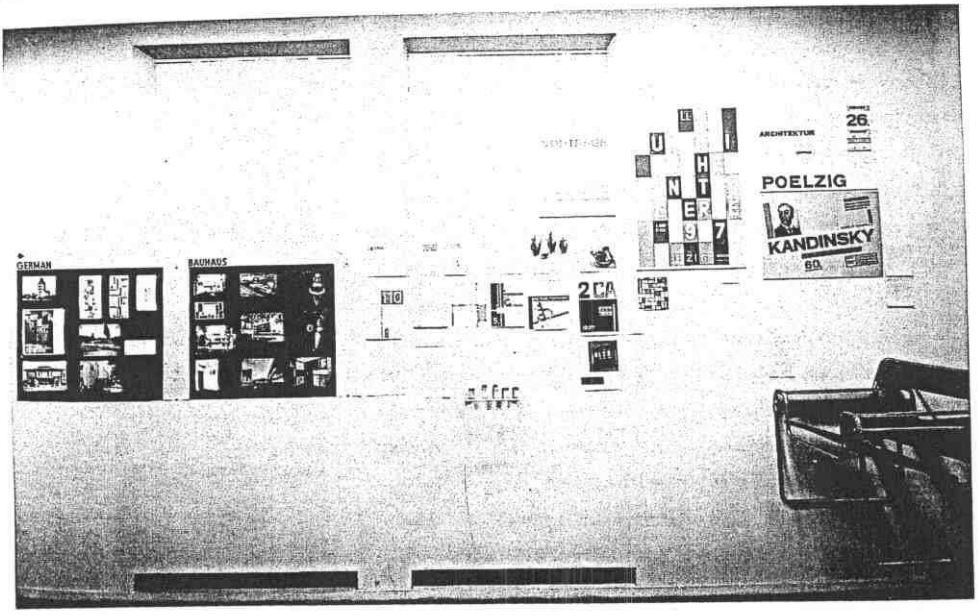
Alfred H. Barr, Jr., flowchart, reproduced on the jacket of the original edition of the catalogue: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).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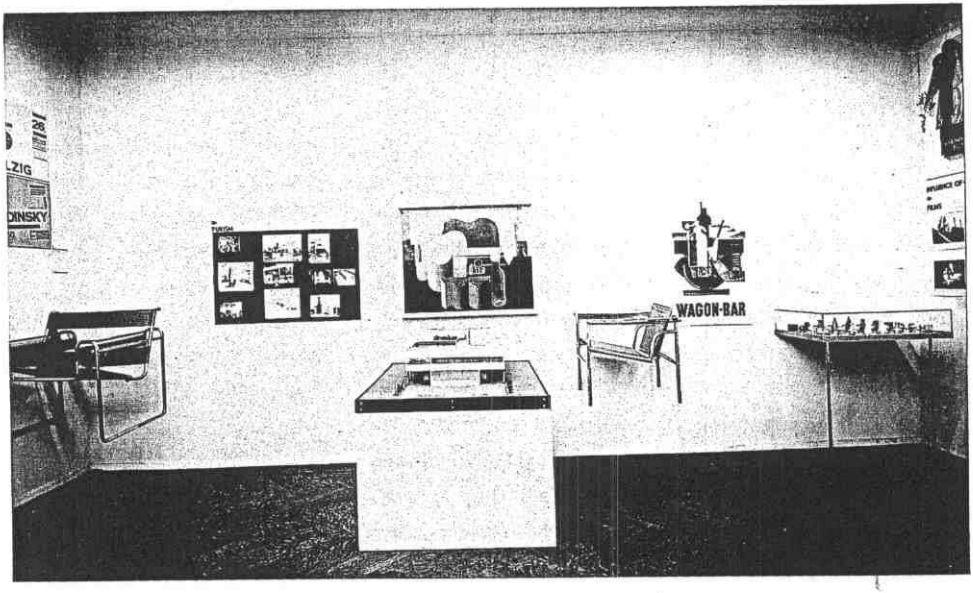
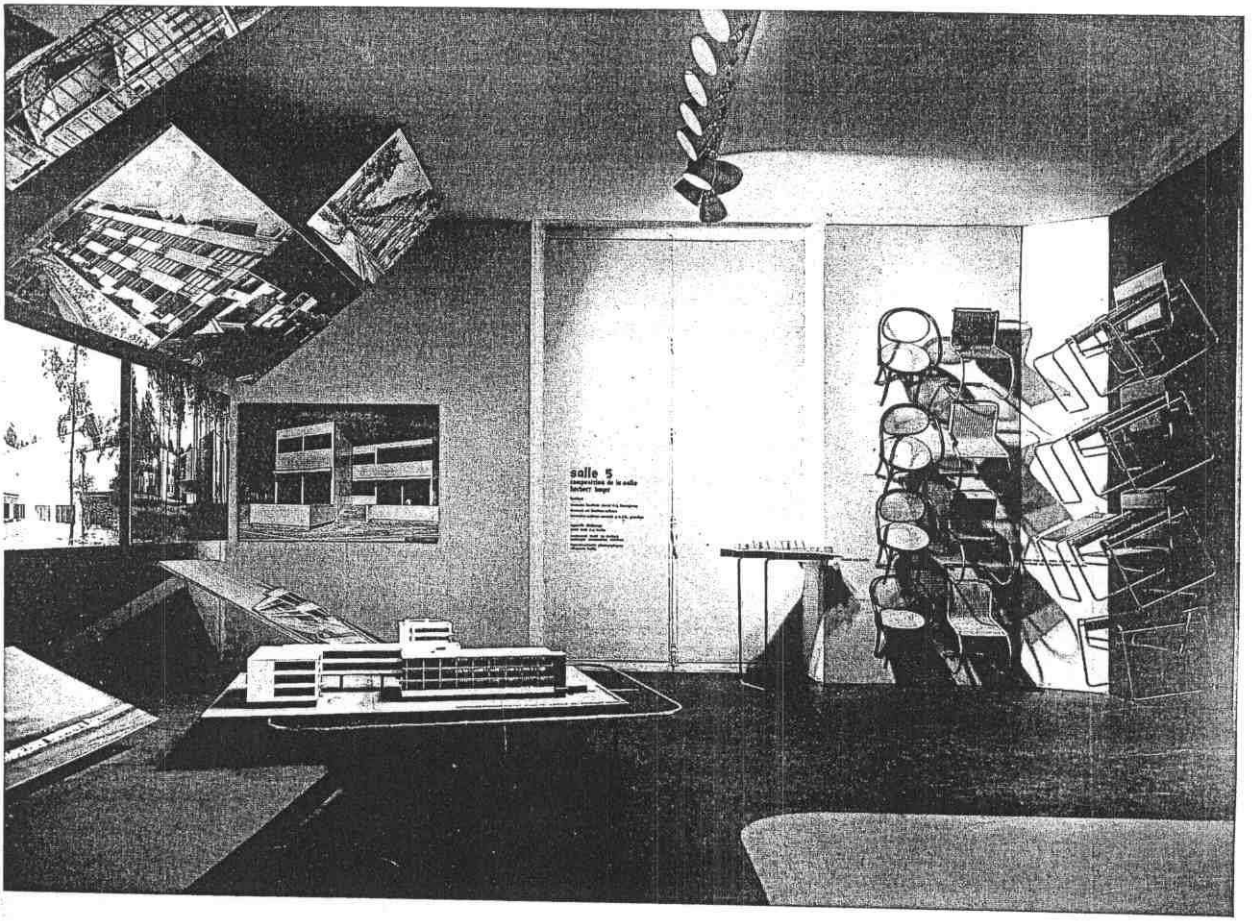

WAGON-BAR



2.12 ←

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., German section, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Museum of Modern Art, 2 March to 19 April 1936.

2.13 ←

Barr, wall-mounted chairs, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936.

2.14

Herbert Bayer, Deutscher Werkbund installation: furniture and architecture gallery, *Exposition de la Société des Artistes Décorateurs*, Paris, 1930.

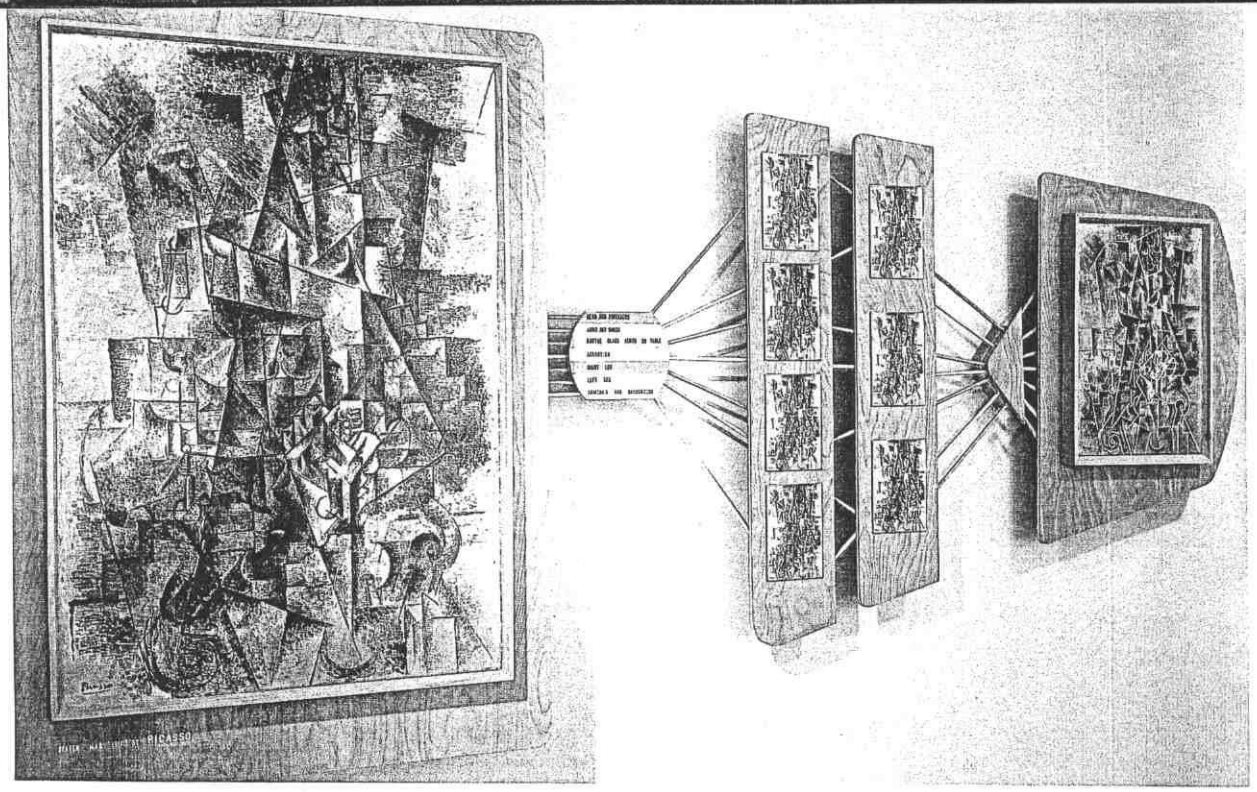
in the 1930 exhibit made visible the standardization and mass production that were important components of the Werkbund agenda to present design prototypes for the modern world. To be sure, hanging a Breuer chair on the wall was an unusual formulation for an American museum curator in the 1930s. However, at MoMA, the meaning of the Breuer chair was reduced to its aesthetic dimensions—to being an art object mounted on a wall. This perception was reinforced by the De Stijl chair by Rietveld and the "Purist" chair by Le Corbusier mounted on neighboring walls, representing their respective styles.

Despite *Cubism and Abstract Art*'s practical limitations and Barr's reliance on a master narrative of style, within which the various agendas of the international avant-gardes were reinscribed, the exhibition was a groundbreaking introduction to the spectrum of avant-garde experimentation. This presentation of the diverse practices of the international avant-gardes was one of several important subtexts of the show. Inchoate in the exhibition were many of the ideas that were soon to be realized in MoMA's installations. Barr's idealized installations, created for the autonomous artwork and a standardized viewer, represented merely one exhibition technique among many. The variety of MoMA's installations during these years is seen, for example, in the Museum's architecture and design shows. Two years after *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Bayer, in collaboration with Walter and Ise Gropius, curated the *Bauhaus* exhibition at MoMA. Not only were Bauhaus ideas and creations presented, but the exhibition itself was representative of the school's involvement with innovative installation design. Bayer created an installation that actually expanded many of the ideas of his European projects. Over the next several decades, MoMA's directors and curators would create a variety of architecture and design installations: they would present signs from the city streets, build houses in the Museum's garden, and display cars in its galleries.

Barr's interest in the didactic dimension of *Cubism and Abstract Art*—the flowchart, wall labels, and galleries titled according to style—took independent form in a supplementary exhibition for *Picasso: Forty Years of His Art* (1939–1940). One of MoMA's most unusual didactic exhibits, it was installed in the sixth-floor gallery that was reserved for Museum members and Advisory Council. Designed by Frederick Kiesler and Sidney Janis, the *Visual Analysis of the Paintings by Picasso* consisted of reproductions of Picasso paintings—fragmented, dissected, drawn with diagrams mounted on interconnected wooded panels that mapped out the development of Picasso's work (fig. 2.15).[35] The silhouette of a group of interconnected panels suggested an arrow, as the last in the series was somewhat triangular. This show-and-tell approach to Cubism was a strikingly literal manifestation of the educational component of MoMA's early exhibitions.

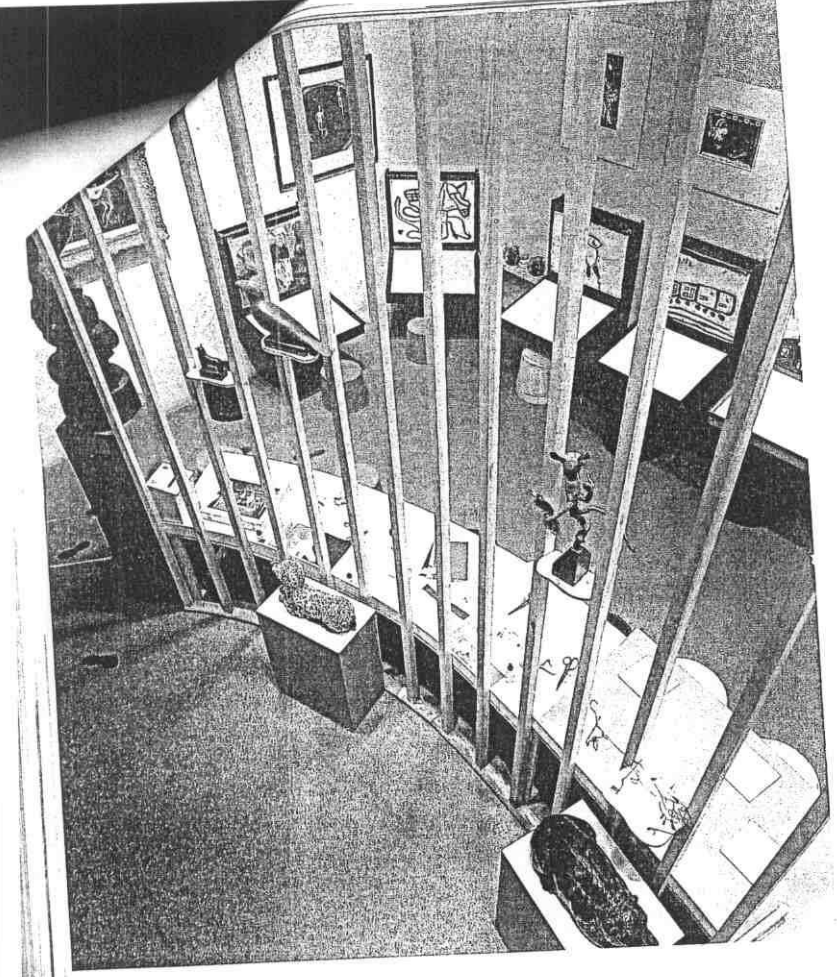
The *Visual Analysis of Paintings by Picasso* is representative of Barr's and his colleagues' sensitivity to the reception of exhibitions. Barr, in particular, was interested in the broad range of the Museum's audiences and in creating different types of installations and publications for different publics. In a 1933 report to the Museum trustees, Barr delineated the types of audiences, which included the trustees (and museum committees, such as the advisory committee), "the 400" (critics, scholars, collectors, dealers), the social group (museum members, the wealthy, the "socially inclined"), the action group (business people "who want to 'do something' about what they see . . . the people who build gasoline stations in the international style" or "have murals painted in office buildings"), students, and the general public.[36] The *Visual Analysis* exhibit was created for a particular selection of viewers who would have access to the members' galleries on the sixth floor of the museum: the trustees, the 400, the social group.

In the second *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition, in 1942, Barr created didactic exhibits reminiscent of the Picasso *Visual*



2.15
Frederick Kiesler and Sidney Janis, *Visual Analysis of the Paintings by Picasso*, Penthouse Gallery, created in conjunction with exhibition, *Picasso: Forty Years of His Art*, Museum of Modern Art, 15 November to 7 January 1940.

Analysis show; but in this case they were produced for the general public, in miniature, and they dealt with various styles. Installed under Mondrian paintings, for example, were wall labels with text and eight small reproductions of other Mondrians that mapped the artist's development from realism to abstraction. Victor D'Amico, who developed MoMA's education department, created another innovative type of pedagogical installation for yet a different audience: children.[37] Initially D'Amico established the *Young People's Gallery* in 1939, where high school students would curate shows, artists would present demonstrations, and children would take studio classes. These activities expanded to include more elaborate "children's carnivals" from 1942 to 1960 (figs. 2.16 and 2.17). The installations included some works of art, but they were primarily exhibition playrooms with artwork on the walls, where children painted on easels, molded clay, and cut and pasted materials on specially designed tables and desks. These carnivals were one of a number of educational projects the Museum initiated in the late 1930s; the first was a high school art appreciation program in 1937. The development of MoMA's education department reflected increasing interest in the educational dimension of museums in the United States during the late 1930s and the 1940s.[38]

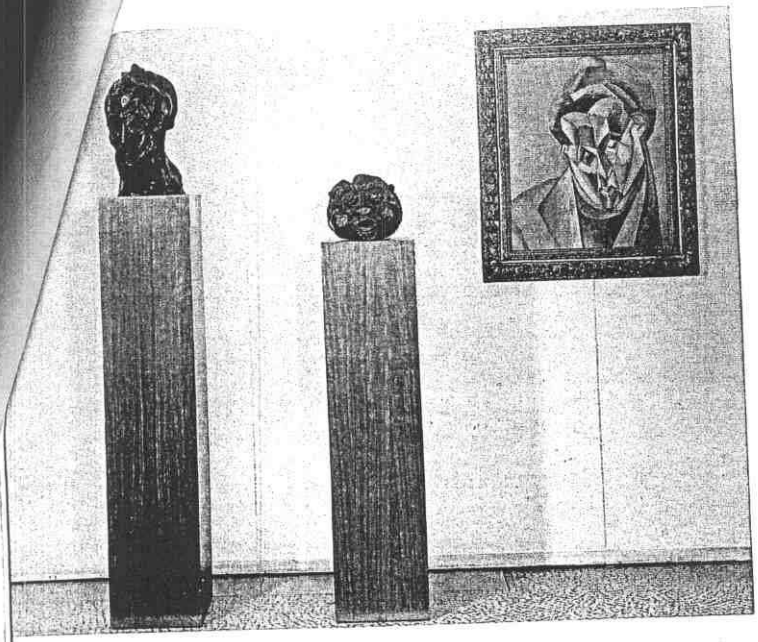


2.16, 2.17
Victor D'Amico, *Children's Holiday Circus of Modern Art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 8 December 1943 to 3 January 1944. These annual holiday exhibitions were open only to children until 1949, when D'Amico opened them to adults as well.

One of the explicit yet understated functions of the 1936 *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition was to countermand the dissolution of Cubism, abstraction, and avant-garde experimentation due to the restrictions imposed by the totalitarian regimes in Germany and the Soviet Union.[39] Nevertheless, in both the catalogue and within the installation design, Barr disavowed any political or social analysis of art. In what is probably the most famous review of the catalogue, "The Nature of Abstract Art," Meyer Schapiro challenged Barr, criticizing his approach for being "unhistorical" and not tethered to the "conditions of the moment."[40] In fact, in the catalogue's introduction Barr does mention some historical background. He discusses the Nazi and Soviet dismantling of the avant-garde and then dedicates the essay and exhibition "to those painters of squares and circles (and the architects influenced by them) who have suffered at the hands of philistines with political power."[41] But except for these introductory remarks, which in no way connect the analysis of the objects with their historical conditions, Barr ignores the political and historical implications of the work exhibited and of the show itself. Within the decade, curators at the Museum of Modern Art would be engaging in political work, though not the type of political analysis sought by Schapiro: they would put their exhibition design in the service of explicit political propaganda in the series of famous wartime shows (discussed in chapter 4), which included *Road to Victory* (1942), *Power in the Pacific* (1943), and *Airways to Peace* (1945).

Cubism and Abstract Art (1936) also contained the elements of an exhibition technique that was a counterpoint to Barr's evolutionary stylistic framework. On the one hand, his method was time-bound in the sense that it was founded on self-reflexive development. On the other hand, there were aspects of Barr's installation that presented modern art as a timeless and universal language. In several places, Barr juxtaposed "primitive" and premodern pieces with modernist painting and sculpture. This was a relatively common practice among the avant-gardes in the early twentieth century; the 291 exhibition installed in 1914 by Edward Steichen of "primitive objects," works by Braque and Picasso and "Negro" sculpture exhibitions held at the Whitney Studio Club in 1923, and the Surrealist object exhibition at the Charles Ratton Gallery in Paris in 1936 are just three examples.[42] In the first gallery, "Cubism 1906–10," an African Gabon "ancestral figure" (n.d.) was displayed next to Picasso's painting *Dancer* (1907–1908), and an African Cameroon mask (n.d.) was placed in between Picasso's *Head of a Woman* (1909–1910) and Cubistic bronze *Head* (1909) (fig. 2.18). In the Italian Futurism section, a white plaster cast of the *Nike of Samothrace* (135 B.C.E.) on a relatively high pedestal towered over Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) (fig. 2.19).

Exhibitions structured to articulate a universalist presentation of culture thrived during MoMA's first several decades. Ambitious and innovative techniques emphasizing the timeless aspects of modern art were explored soon after *Cubism and Abstract Art*—in fact, *Timeless Aspects of Modern Art* was the title of a 1948–1949 MoMA exhibition. This approach was central to Barr's very next major show: *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* of 1936 and 1937 included not only Dada and Surrealist painting and sculpture but also premodern art and artifacts, folk art, children's art, comics, and "the art of the insane" (fig. 2.20). Even more obviously than his evolutionary and stylistic arrangements of artworks in neutral, idealized spaces, the universalist exhibition technique Barr created for *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* presented art, and the viewing subject, as timeless. Although various installation designs were employed at the Museum of Modern Art during its first several decades, these are the two types that have survived MoMA's laboratory years and have come to dominate institutional practices within the American museum establishment.



2.18
Barr, "Cubism 1906–10," *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936.

2.19
Barr, Italian Futurism section, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936.

2.20 →
Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, Museum of Modern Art, 7 December 1936 to 17 January 1937.