

HALL

ART FOUNDATION

"On a Wing and a Prayer," *The Economist*, 21 December 2013.

The
Economist

Special report: Museums ▼

Contemporary art

On a wing and a prayer

Why so many museums are venturing into new works

Dec 21st 2013 | From the print edition

IT WAS A dark, damp winter in 2003 when Olafur Eliasson came to London. The 36-year-old Danish-Icelandic artist, who specialised in large-scale sculptures and installations, had a plan for Tate Modern: the "Weather Project" (pictured). He covered the ceiling of the Turbine Hall with a mirror and filled some humidifiers with a mix of sugar and water to create sweet-smelling mist. Visitors lay on the floor to watch a giant sun made out of hundreds of yellow lights rise out of the gloom, arranging themselves in distinctive groups to see their small reflections on the ceiling. Over the five months the installation was open, more than 2m people came to bask in a glow that was at once primeval and warmly communal.

The "Weather Project" made the global reputation of Tate Modern, which opened in 2000 to a mixed reception. Though its building was vast and impressive, its collection was small and unremarkable. Mr Eliasson's work was a perfect example of what the museum was trying to do: create an experience in which the visitors themselves play a big part by harnessing technology to an artist's imagination. This was the new contemporary art, and the public loved it.



HALL

ART FOUNDATION

Most significant new museums or museum wings built in the rich world over the past decade have been for contemporary art. (The few exceptions include Alice Walton's enormous Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas, which concentrates on the 19th century.) Several dozen such new buildings have been completed in the past two or three years alone in cities as diverse as Buenos Aires, Cleveland, Cracow, Rome, Oslo and Sydney.

Contemporary art seems to be what the public wants—and artists, their dealers and museums are happy to supply it. Since the 1960s art-lovers have become accustomed to accelerating change. As veterans of cinema, television and more recently computer games and the internet, they are used to mixing visual languages and receptive to new ideas, however off-the-wall. "The interest in contemporary art is much broader, much richer and much deeper than it was when I started out 30 years ago," says Paul Schimmel, a Los Angeles curator-turned-dealer.

Among museums, grand institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in New York are seen as stuffier than the *Kunsthallen*, the not-for-profit municipal art galleries found in many German cities. Earlier this year the Ludwig Museum in Cologne opened a retrospective by Andrea Fraser with a video of the artist having sex with one of her collectors. Los Angeles-based Ms Fraser is well represented in public collections in Britain, France and Germany, but considered too daring for an American retrospective.

The rise of contemporary art is closely related to the growth in the art market, which has become global in its reach. Successful sales at the main international auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's,

generate a vast amount of publicity. This makes life easier for dealers who need to persuade collectors that contemporary art is worth huge sums. Jeff Koons's "Balloon Dog", a ten-foot-high shiny steel sculpture, comes in an edition of five, each a different colour. All the owners are world-class collectors such as Eli Broad and François Pinault. When the orange one was sold at Christie's in New York last month it fetched \$58.4m, a record auction price for a work by a living artist.

Special report

Temples of delight

The Bilbao effect

On a wing and a prayer

Mad about museums

Feeding the culture-vultures

 Sources & acknowledgments

 Reprints

Contemporary art seems to be what the public wants—and artists, their dealers and museums are happy to supply it

HALL

ART FOUNDATION

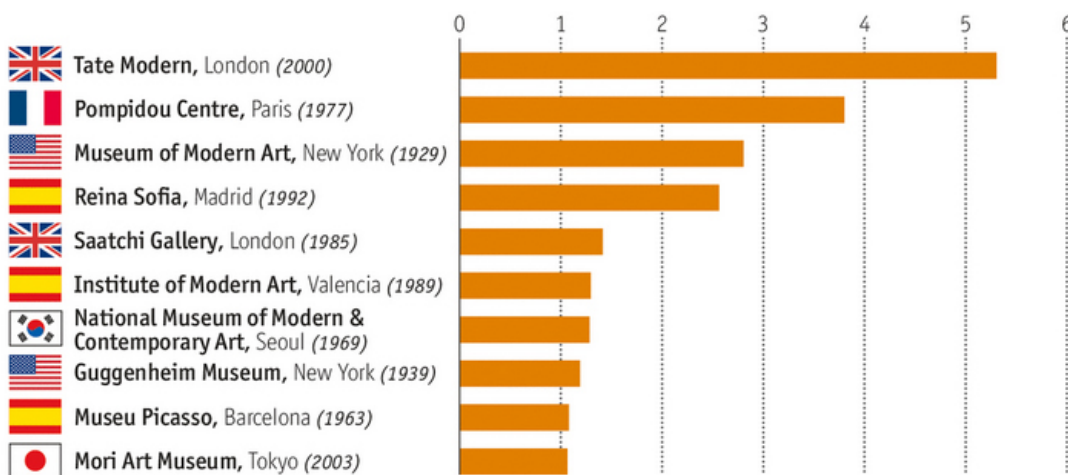
Collectors want to be sure that the art they are buying is of museum quality and widely sought after, and that it is part of a long art-historical tradition. To reassure them, dealers increasingly turn their showrooms into museum lookalikes. When Larry Gagosian, a famous dealer, showed a series of Richard Serra's massive steel sculptures, "Torqued Toruses", in one of his galleries in London in 2008, he presented each one on its own in a white-walled room. The settings echoed the artist's 40-year retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2007 and a show at the Grand Palais in Paris a year later.

In the past three decades thousands of people have become super-rich, many of them in the financial sector in New York, London and Hong Kong and in natural resources in Australia and Central Asia. Since the 2008 financial crisis, investment consultants have taken to advising wealthy clients that art is a good way to diversify their portfolios. Contemporary art has become the universal benchmark for the new rich.

Superstars

2

Ten most popular modern art museums*, by 2012 visitors, m
(Opening year)



Sources: *The Art Newspaper*; individual museums

*Holding mainly 20th-century and later

An early ambition for many of them is to join a museum board. In America the unwritten rule is to "give or get out of the kitchen"; board members are often a museum's biggest donors. In exchange, membership of a museum board offers them entry to exclusive social circles and marks them out as serious art collectors. This is part of a long tradition: wealthy benefactors were responsible for starting many museums in the 19th century.

HALL

ART FOUNDATION

The Art Institute of Chicago has 50 trustees and 49 former board members who are now life trustees. Its director, Douglas Druick, says that keeping the trustees happy takes up at least a quarter of his time. He expects to be out with them four nights a week and recently had a record run of 14 nights in a row.

Being attentive has paid off. When the board decided that the Art Institute needed a new contemporary art wing, trustees agreed to cover a significant part of the \$300m cost. It is now open, and Mr Druick (who likes to remind people that his institute was the first American museum to show Picasso) thinks that it has encouraged donors to hand over or promise more than 300 works, including several “pivotal private collections”, which would not have been forthcoming without it.

Perhaps understandably, museums want the setting they provide for their contemporary displays to be as new as the art itself. In Los Angeles Eli Broad’s new museum will open late next year and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has big renovation plans. In New York the Whitney Museum of American Art is building a new outpost designed by Renzo Piano, an architect of the Pompidou Centre, close to the fashionable High Line park in Manhattan. It will allow the museum to exhibit three times as much work as it does now, including its collection of contemporary art. Not to be outdone, New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art is separating its modern and contemporary collection from its 19th-century European paintings and giving it a new home of its own: the building the Whitney is due to vacate.

In Britain, even the grand 330-year-old Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, which used to house the stuffed body of the last dodo in Europe, is planning to build itself a new gallery for contemporary art. In July it announced a partnership with two renowned American collectors, Andrew and Christine Hall. To start with, Sir Norman Rosenthal, a controversial curator and art historian, will be putting on three displays from the Halls’ collection at the Ashmolean. Both sides hope the relationship will become closer.

From the print edition: Special report