

The State of Museums in Boston: A Conversation with Professor Melanie Hall Compiled and Edited by Bridget Hanson



Marsh Plaza at Boston University.

This interview was conducted via email between graduate students Bridget Hanson and David Silvernail, and Professor Melanie Hall, Director of Museum Studies and Associate Professor, History of Art & Architecture

Q: The inaugural issue of *Sequitur* features reviews of recent contemporary exhibitions and catalogues in Boston museums. How would you characterize the growing prominence of contemporary projects, and the difference in contemporary curatorial strategies at the MFA, the Gardner Museum and the ICA/Boston?

There has been a significant rise in interest in contemporary art internationally during the past 15-20 years, but such interest can also be subject to external forces. In the case of the MFA's *Permission to be Global*, the works come from an individual collector: Ella Fontanals-Cisneros, founder and president of CIFO. It is likely that any curatorial decisions will need to respect the wishes of the collection's owner, who may have ideas about how her collection should be displayed. The MFA also has strategies; the show helps to bolster the MFA's image as a locus for the Art of the Americas, and provided an engaging summer show that may have drawn communities who are otherwise unrepresented in the American wing.

The Gardner Museum is re-positioning itself to be a sort of "kunsthalle" or arts center. With a static collection, it needs to have ways of attracting new and repeat visitors while still maintaining the spirit of the benefactor's will. During her lifetime, Isabella Stewart Gardner supported contemporary artists, held concerts, and commissioned contemporary works.



Luisa Rabbia, *Waterfall*, 2014.

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA.

Image: <http://www.gardnermuseum.org>.

The ICA, on the other hand, has always been devoted to presenting contemporary art, and its space allows greater flexibility in the types of works it can show and how they can be displayed, which allows for more creative and innovative forms of exhibition. Some curators prefer a provocative approach; others want to create a more lyrical experience. A good exhibition should be able to stimulate viewers intellectually as well as visually. The ICA presentation of *Jim Hodges: Give More Than You Take*, focuses on one artist's work and is a mid-career retrospective that was co-organized by the Dallas Museum of Art and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, so no one museum has had an overall input in selecting works. The ICA's strategy? To create an engaging summer show and, perhaps, to acquire some of Hodge's works.

Q: How does the MFA compare to its peer encyclopedic institutions?

The MFA calls itself an "encyclopedic museum." I'm not sure its collection is encyclopedic: I would describe it as a very good regional collection, albeit with significant gaps in its holdings. It is not so large as the Metropolitan Museum or Smithsonian Museums, and does not constitute a national collection in the way that they do. Its focus in the American wing is really on Boston and "the Americas."

However, as a significant regional collection it is able to host international exhibitions. The current Goya exhibition is quite a coup for New England, and it has managed to attract loans from several important national collections (eg. Spain's Museo del Prado and France's Louvre). The MFA has an extensive holding of Goya's works, so they have been able to supplement their own collection for this show. Whether or not a museum can host touring exhibitions also speaks to an international reputation and ability to collaborate.

Q: Since Boston is a city full of colleges and universities, how do you understand the role of university galleries and museums in the Boston art scene?

While some Boston-area universities have museums, not all of them do. Boston University, for example, has a gallery that hosts a variety of exhibitions, including works by CFA students. Brandeis University recently decided to keep the Rose Art Museum, although its collection came close to being sold. We wait with interest to see what the new Harvard Museums will do. Previously, the Fogg (for example) had an emphasis on education with displays that explained the processes of making art. I hope that educational ethos is maintained.

Q: Beyond Boston, how do you see cultural institutions evolving in the next decade? What interpretations or methodologies do you see emerging? Which have you most excited?

There are many things I find exciting about museums. Some institutions are looking at their own pasts and re-displaying (and self-consciously re-interpreting) their own collections. For instance, the British Museum has been working with contemporary artists to mount projects in parts of Africa, and actively collects contemporary African art to supplement its extensive imperial holdings. This follows scrutiny of the museum as a public institution.



Cristovao Canhavato (Kester), Hilario Nhatugueja, Fiel dos Santos and Adelino Serafim Maté, *The Tree of Life*, Maputo, Mozambique, 2004. Product of Transforming Arms into Tools (TAE) project (Image © 2005 Christian Aid / David Rose, www.britishmuseum.org).

Museums are also engaging with the corporate world in new ways, and this is reflected in exhibition topics, including fashion, film and design. Corporate sponsorship of exhibitions tends to lead to popular blockbusters, so it can be difficult for curators to explore more complex, controversial or esoteric topics unless critics demand it. Some critics would like to see more emphasis on citizenship and diversity in displays, others would like to ensure that museums prioritize sensory engagement while maintaining

scholarship. Providing access for a wider range of people continues to be a concern for progressive museums.

All museums will need to keep up with innovations in media technology. For instance, “Impressionists on the Water” (2013) at the Peabody Essex Museum used digital technology to create the effect of Monet painting the Seine while floating down the river in his boat. It was delightful.