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The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's Approach Toward Contemporary Curatorial Practice

Marsha Goss
West Virginia University

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**The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's Approach Toward Contemporary Curatorial
Practice**

Marsha Goss

**Thesis submitted to the
College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

**Master of Arts
in
Art History**

**Examining Committee:
Kristina Olson, M.A., Chair,
Robert Bridges, M.F.A.
Kristen Harkness, Ph.D.,**

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**Keywords: Contemporary Curating, Curator-as-Artist, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,
Gutai Art Association, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, James Turrell, *James Turrell: A
Retrospective***

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ABSTRACT**The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's Approach Toward Contemporary Curatorial Practice****Marsha Goss**

This study is an analysis of contemporary curatorial practice at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, New York. The Guggenheim Museum demonstrates how contemporary museums are updating exhibition practice, despite the difficulties of spatial engagement encountered in Frank Lloyd Wright's building. This thesis presents an analysis of the curator-as-artist, meaning that frequently contemporary curators are acting like artists as they seek to elevate audience engagement. An initial chapter explores how Wright originally conceived the museum as an exhibition space compared to how it is used in current times. Two recent Guggenheim exhibitions, *Gutai: Splendid Playground* (2013) and *James Turrell: A Retrospective* (2013) will be used as case studies, allowing an analysis of how the Guggenheim Museum specifically approaches contemporary curatorial practice. The conclusion offers my findings on the Guggenheim Museum and insight on the limitations of this analysis.

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In the time it took to complete this thesis there were many struggles and triumphs in the process and for every up and down my family and friends supported me. I am forever thankful to my mother and father, Robert and Lytane Goss, who have endlessly encouraged me to crave knowledge. I am also immensely grateful to Joseph Chavez for always supporting this endeavor. Without the encouragement I received throughout this process I would not have been able to achieve this accomplishment.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary curatorial thought is a topic of rising interest in the art world. This thesis provides an analysis of what contemporary curating is and how the Guggenheim Museum approaches this topic. Contemporary curators are mediators, collaborators that engage with the exchange of ideas, and for this specific analysis it is in the way they approach the space of a museum. Instead of assuming set installation techniques for the works of art entering the museum, a contemporary curator takes into consideration the wishes of the artist(s) to create a unique experience for viewers. Through this mode of display the viewer experiences various interactions that occur between the art and the space in which it is displayed.

Within this study I analyzed two recent publications on contemporary curatorial discourse written by Terry Smith and Paul O'Neill, as well as a few art journals and blogs, which mainly contributed to this thesis. This analysis will focus of which I am aware on the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and how the museum's staff utilizes contemporary curatorial practice. I do not offer the Guggenheim Museum as a model for other museums to follow because it is a unique space for contemporary curatorial practice. The Guggenheim Museum (1943-1959) located in New York, New York exemplifies contemporary curatorial practice because the curators and museum staff engage with the artworks that enter the museum, creating a unique experience for viewers. While this is the goal of many museums, the Guggenheim Museum's staff approaches their curatorial work with a perspective that is flexible to the space of the museum, engaging for viewers, and brings a new point of view to the work they display. Thus, I use the Guggenheim Museum as a case study of contemporary curatorial practice.

Chapter One analyzes the modes of contemporary curating and how they differ from past practices. Chapter Two briefly explains the history of the Guggenheim Museum, which with and

contrast to how Frank Lloyd Wright and the museum's second Director, James Sweeney, disagreed about exhibition techniques. This chapter explains past exhibition techniques at the Guggenheim Museum and how the museum's staff currently approaches their exhibition techniques. Chapters Three and Four analyze two recent exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum, *Gutai: Splendid Playground* and *James Turrell: A Retrospective*.¹ For these exhibitions, the curators sought innovative techniques to create viewer immersion and spatial engagement. While the curators created a strong historical reference between the artwork and the museum in these two exhibitions, they also created a bond between the museum and the exhibition by relating both shows to the museum's history. Curators Alexandra Munroe, Ming Tiampo, Carmen Giménez, and Nat Trotman provided a specific lens on the exhibitions they prepared, creating an experience that was unique for both viewers and the museum space.

During the use of the "white cube" mode of display, which will be further discussed in the next section, curators frequently appeared absent from the show, making the collective group of works in the museum appear as if they were installed without anyone directing what works should be selected for an exhibition. No longer does the curator appear absent from an exhibition, instead contemporary curators are frequently present and are referenced throughout the exhibition, revealing themselves to the public as key figures in the *Gutai* and *James Turrell* exhibitions. Now curators are visible to the public, making the audience aware of their curatorial ideas through didactic information, videos, podcasts, and the exhibition catalogue. This new, creative curator can be seen as an artist liberating curatorial techniques, approaching each exhibition anew, advancing the museum's mission and expanding the audience's knowledge.

¹ The *Gutai: Splendid Playground* exhibition was from February 15 to May 8, 2013. The *James Turrell: A Retrospective* exhibition was from June 21 to September 25, 2013.

² Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, New York: Independent Curators International, 2012, 128.

³ Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (MIT Press, 2012), 6.

This thesis contributes to the discussion of contemporary curatorial techniques by specifically analyzing how the Guggenheim Museum fits the mold of a contemporary museum and, in some cases, diverges, creating a unique experience that cannot occur elsewhere. This thesis differs from previous studies of contemporary curatorial practice because it applies Terry Smith's and other scholars' theories to one specific museum and examines how the Guggenheim Museum's staff contributes to contemporary curatorial dialogue. While other authors have introduced the idea of contemporary curatorial practice to the art world, there has been no in-depth study of how museums use contemporary curatorial methods.

CURRENT IDEAS ON CONTEMPORARY CURATORIAL PRACTICE:

Terry Smith's *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (2012) was the guiding source for this analysis of the Guggenheim Museum. Dr. Smith, who is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory at the University of Pittsburgh, posed the question "what is contemporary curatorial thought?" In answer he discussed the shift that has occurred in exhibitions, artists as curators and curators as artists, curating contemporaneity, and current curatorial practice. Throughout this text Smith referred to various exhibitions and curators who live up to his definition of contemporary curating. Smith acknowledged that curatorial work is no longer tied to an art museum, nor is a curator tied to one institution. Smith argued that the curatorial realm has branched out and now has to be concerned with the public sphere and audience engagement.² The conclusion of *Thinking Contemporary Curating* is a calling for others to contribute to this field.

² Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, New York: Independent Curators International, 2012, 128.

While Smith addressed the contemporary aspects of curatorial work, in *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (2012) Paul O'Neill examined the emergence of the independent curator, which is further discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. O'Neill is recognized in the art world as a curator, artist, and writer. This text offered a brief history of exhibition making since the 1920s, the impact that biennials and international exhibitions have had upon curatorial work, the concept of the curator-as-artist, and ultimately sought to reveal "how curating has changed art and how art has changed curating."³ O'Neill revealed how the art world has evolved to accept the curator-as-artist and declared that curators of contemporary art organize exhibitions as a form of self-representation and the exhibition space is their medium.

The Guggenheim Museum has also been a major resource. The museum's website has an array of information that allowed me to analyze the history of the museum, the exhibitions *Gutai: Splendid Playground* and *James Turrell: A Retrospective* (discussed in full detail in Chapter Three and Four, respectively), and the work of the various curators involved in these two exhibitions. The Guggenheim Museum reaches out to the public through their website, Guggenheim.org, and mobile applications that allowed viewers to listen to the curators speak about their inspirations and missions for *Gutai* and *James Turrell*. The Guggenheim Museum also released resourceful catalogues for the *Gutai* and *James Turrell* exhibitions. I am indebted to the curators' thorough analysis of the exhibitions and insights they revealed in the catalogues.

Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum, published by the Independent Curators International in 2001, offered a collection of essays that serves as a guidebook for anyone interested in contemporary art and curating. Jean-Christopher Amman, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Marcia Tucker, and other well-established curators provided their experiences and tips.

³ Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (MIT Press, 2012), 6.

Neil Levine's *Frank Lloyd Wright* (1997) provided information about how Wright approached space in his designs. While information about Wright's earlier designs are beyond the scope of this thesis, it is imperative to understand how Wright applied his organic theory to the Guggenheim Museum because this affected the exhibition techniques used in the museum. Levine's record of Wright's career and the history of the Guggenheim Museum's design and construction allowed my thesis to be structured upon solid information.

Throughout this analysis it was important to understand the changing nature of curating, as well as the history of modern and contemporary curatorial approaches. Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1999) was used to gain an understanding of modern curatorial ideas. O'Doherty's text stems from a series of three articles published in *Artforum* in 1976: "Notes on the Gallery Space," "The Eye and the Spectator," and "Context as Content," with the addition of "The Gallery as Gesture," written in 1999. In these articles O'Doherty describes what he calls the "white cube": a gallery or museum space where "The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The art is free, as the saying used to go, 'to take on its own life.'"⁴ What O'Doherty was describing is an exhibition space that is completely separate from politics and outside experience; the gallery is detached from everything and stands on its own.

Carol Duncan provided another perspective about museum history with *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (1995). Duncan provided a model known as "the museum as

⁴ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

temple,” which reveals the similarities between larger art institutions and Greek temples. This will be discussed further in Chapter One.⁵

To gain a broader understanding of curatorial history, Hans Ulrich Obrist’s *A Brief History of Curating* (2008) informed me as to how curatorial practice was approached in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Obrist interviewed curators Walter Hopps, Johannes Cladders, Franz Meyer, and Lucy Lippard. While Obrist’s text was valuable, it provided a limited analysis of contemporary curatorial practice because these curators were all born before 1950 and so Obrist does not address the most current generation of curators.

Understanding the history of curatorial techniques allowed me to be aware of how current curatorial work differs from prior practices, especially in audience engagement, which this thesis further elaborates. Due to the scope of this thesis, I do not reflect upon international exhibitions, biennials, commercial art galleries, or art fairs, such as the annual *Armory Show* in New York, New York and *Art Basel* in Miami, Florida. All of these have changed the way the art world approaches the viewing, buying, and selling of works. These exhibitions have altered the way curators approach their practice by creating a network that has generated open lines of communication among varying perspectives and generated a major dialogue in contemporary art.

While all of these sources have added to the scholarship on contemporary curatorial practice and the Guggenheim Museum itself, there is still a need for a more concrete analysis. This thesis provides a closer look at contemporary curatorial practice by applying the criteria discussed above to specific exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum. It thus allows an in depth look at one specific museum and its unique approach to curating contemporary art.

⁵ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

Chapter I: Three Modes of Contemporary Curating

Contemporary curatorial practice has varying modes that contribute to curatorial dialogue. This analysis focuses upon three: the independent curator who has no affiliation with a specific institution, the artist-as-curator who approaches the museum as their medium, and the curator-as-artist who are concerned with audience engagement. O'Neill and Smith described these three as the major roles and functions a contemporary curators draw on in their practice.

The independent curator travels among various organizations creating exhibitions. While the other modes of contemporary curating may function independently from institutions, the curators perspectives are different.⁶ This mode of curating contributes to the transnational aspect of contemporary curating and the changing nature of contemporary art. Independent curators vary exhibition techniques to be seen in different museum or gallery spaces internationally.⁷

Nicolas Bourriaud defined the next mode of curating in the 1990s as the artist-as-curator. Smith borrowed from Bourriad and defined the artist-as-curator as artists who make the exhibition their core medium.⁸ In this mode the artist is “more interested than others in the languages of display used not only in museum and gallery settings but also commercially and elsewhere in capitalist culture.”⁹ Since the 1990s many artists have worked in the curatorial vein due to self-representation or from their experiences of working so closely with museums.

⁶ Melissa Milgrom, “BEHIND THE SCENES; Independent Curators: Have Art, Will Travel,” *New York Times*, 24 April 2002.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 129.

Now the focus is on the curator-as-artist dynamic. Like artists, curators synthesize information and then formulate it into a visual expression of an idea. Contemporary curators seek the audiences' attention and engage with the public. Smith defined the curator-as-artist as:

acting as quasi artists, by envisioning museum spaces as if they were studios, staging places for artistic ideas-in-formation, or as if they were museums from another time and place, past or future. Sometimes they were not museum spaces at all, but rather environments that housed an alternative, parallel world. The curator-as-artist approach meant foregrounding one's vision in the publicity for the show and in its presentation in the gallery, thus making the curator's thinking a conscious factor in the visitor's experience.¹⁰

The curator-as-artist creates an immersive experience that elevates viewers' knowledge. The curator-as-artist is concerned with how the viewers' experience is impacted in the museum through the layout of the exhibition and the spatial relationship between works. The curator-as-artist is concerned about audience engagement and the relationship the museum shares with the public.

The curator-as-artist is the subject of this chapter; they approach art museums as their medium and engage with the placement of art objects in the way that an artist would arrange the composition of a painting.¹¹ The curator-as-artist brings forth a new perspective, allowing the curator to engage with both the works of art and the audience, making the curator a public figure in the museum. While there are many implications for the curator-as-artist mode, studying it in a specific setting like the Guggenheim Museum reveals how many museum professionals are approaching exhibitions in this mode.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 131-132.

¹¹ I do not use the term curator-as-artist meaning that the curator physically created the work in the exhibition, but rather that their craft of curating is an art form that should be noticed separately from the works in an exhibition. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 128.

¹² Ibid.

The curator-as-artist and the artist-as-curator work with two very different perspectives.¹³ Curators-as-artists have typically had training stemming from a more academic approach, bringing with them a different lens. Artists-as-curators are also occasionally coming from academia, but not all artists are academically trained, which provides a different approach towards their curatorial lens through their previous experiences in gallery and museum spaces from the perspective of an artist. For example, a curator-as-artist such as Massimiliano Gioni, who approaches a space in the sense of comparisons, in the *Encyclopedic Palace* Gioni works differently when compared to Fred Wilson, which will be elaborated upon later in this chapter. Fred Wilson is known for reorganizing the Baltimore Historical Society's collection to highlight the history of slavery in America in his 1992 exhibition *Mining the Museum*.¹⁴ Fred Wilson works by pairing objects, bringing forth a different perspective on them, as seen in *Mining the Museum*.¹⁵ While both curators are taking on controversial issues, they are very different, because of the curators' perspectives. While Gioni was making a theoretical comparison that would typically only be acknowledged by people "inside" the art world, he was also creating a visual comparison between professional artists and outsider artists. Wilson compares objects like a polished silver dining set with slave shackles in *Metalwork* (1992), which contained pieces dating from 1793-1880. Perhaps the largest difference between a curator-as-artist and an artist-as-curator is that while both acknowledge that they are curators and artists, the curator-as-artist is

¹³ Terry Smith addresses the differences between the artist curator and the curator-as-artist. For more information on these differences see: Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 128-138.

¹⁴ Fred Wilson is a New York based artist who was born in 1954. PBS, "Fred Wilson Biography," Art 21, Accessed on February 6, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/wilson/>. Art 21, "Fred Wilson Biography," Art 21, Accessed on February 6, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/wilson/>.

¹⁵ Art 21, "Fred Wilson Biography," Art 21, Accessed on February 6, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/wilson/>.

first and foremost a curator and the artist-as-curator identifies as an artist. While both have a creative view of curating, their difference is in approach and mindset, while they were both responding to objects they did not create.

All three modes contribute to the discourse of contemporary curating. It is important to note that there are other modes of curating that still contribute to curatorial dialogue, like the academic curator, who still practice today.¹⁶ However, for the purpose of this study the academic curator is classified as a person who works specifically with historical exhibitions and ancient works. Academic curators are still actively curating exhibitions. Academic curators work with historical works and artifacts that require a different curatorial approach than what is used with contemporary art. An example of academic curators today is Susen Arensberg and Mary Louise Hart, co-curators for *Art of Byzantium from Greek Collections* was on view at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. from October 6, 2013 through March 2, 2014.

To understand how scholars like Smith have arrived at the notion of contemporary curating the history of curating must be addressed.

BRIEF HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY CURATING:

Paul O'Neill explains that around the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the Guggenheim Museum's exhibition techniques were being formulated, curators were allowed a proactive role within the museum that allowed them to be more creative within their practice.¹⁷ Curating as viewers perceive it today is an experience where they are surrounded by white walls and the works have been placed along the walls with space between, allowing contemplation of each

¹⁶ Academic curators still curate contemporary exhibitions. In this mode the curator is presenting works in a historical linear timeline perspective.

¹⁷ Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 9.

work individually. In 1976 Brian O’Doherty called this experience the “white cube.”¹⁸ The white cube implies that while viewers are in a museum or gallery space they leave the world outside and only contemplate the work before them.¹⁹ The white cube eliminates exterior experiences to impact the way viewers interpret the pieces they are viewing.

O’Neill argues that “By the 1980s, the idea of the ‘curated’ exhibition had been established as an entity of critical reflection in its own right, with the figure of the individual curator at the center of debates as the sole author of the group exhibition form.”²⁰ O’Neill explained that:

By the end of the decade, [1980s] the appearance of the verb “to curate” began to articulate “curating” as a mode of proactive participation in the processes of artistic production, with the curated exhibition providing a distinct style and method of self-presentation and curators constructing “new truths” about art, often presented as universal narratives within an overarching curatorial frame.²¹

According to O’Neill, this trend continued into the 1990s when Michael Brenson coined the term “curator’s moment.”²² O’Neill elaborated upon this by explaining that the curator’s moment was when curators achieved “hypervisibility” and began curator-centered publications, like exhibition catalogues, which is still seen in today’s mode of the curator-as-artist.²³

Curating changed again when international exhibitions became popular. While these events have been occurring for over a century, there has recently been a shift in the curator’s

¹⁸ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 5.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

presence in these exhibitions. The curator of international exhibitions now receives exponentially more attention, which will be elaborated upon later in this chapter.

Contemporary curating, especially the curator-as-artist, differs from previous modes of curating because of the way the curator approaches a museum or gallery space. Previously, curators did not define their way of working as an art form, nor did they work outside an institution, like the independent curator. The major difference between previous modes of curating and the curator-as-artist is how they are concerned with audience engagement, which will be elaborated upon later in this chapter. The modes of contemporary curating vary, but allow viewers to understand the differing perspectives that occur in contemporary curatorial practice.

INDEPENDENT CURATORS INTERNATIONAL:

Independent Curators International, or ICI, represents the varying perspectives in contemporary curatorial practice. With blockbuster exhibitions that travel from museum to museum, what is the role of the curator? What happens when the curator loses the power of selection for his or her museum? Some exhibitions are rented and travel from museum to museum, limiting curators' specific choices of what pieces would or would not work in a particular museum. Organizations such as ICI are beginning to produce exhibitions that travel around with little guidance after their initial production.

ICI is a non-profit organization that is not affiliated with any institution or museum and:

produces exhibitions, events, publications, and training opportunities for diverse audiences around the world. A catalyst for independent thinking, ICI connects emerging and established curators, artists and institutions, to forge international networks and generate new forms of collaboration. Working across disciplines and historical precedents, the organization is a hub that provides access to the people, ideas, and

practices that are key to current developments in the field, inspiring fresh ways of seeing and contextualizing contemporary art.²⁴

ICI published Terry Smith's *Thinking Contemporary Curating* as well as one of the first books ever written about curating, *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art* (2001), which was a collection of essays from various curators. ICI has a vast influence on what course contemporary curatorial thought will take in the future and promotes the methods they see best fit for curators to use internationally.

INDEPENDENT EXHIBITIONS AND TRAVELING EXHIBITIONS:

By analyzing how ICI operates one is able to understand the full scope of contemporary curating. It is now becoming common practice for curators to have no affiliation with any institution, instead functioning as an independent curator who works freelance and roams from institution to institution creating exhibitions.²⁵ For example, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is an independent curator well known specifically for being the artistic director for dOCUMENTA (13) (2008-2012).

In addition to the independent curator, the artworld is now using independent exhibitions.²⁶ An independent curator such as Melissa Feldman, who curated *Free Play* (2013),

²⁴ ICI is based in the art community of New York City, but they branch beyond the NYC art hub in 42 different countries. Over the last 38 years ICI has produced over 128 traveling exhibitions, with curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist, Melissa Feldman, and RoseLee Goldbert, making ICI's influences international. Independent Curators International, <http://curatorsintl.org/about>, "Independent Curators International-Information," August 13, 2013.

²⁵ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is an independent curator, author, and researcher with interest in historical avant-garde and contemporary art. In 2012 she was named the most powerful person in the art world by Art Review's Power 100 listing. Art, "Northwestern Faculty-Carolyn Christov Bakargiev," accessed on February 5, 2013, <http://www.art.northwestern.edu/programs/faculty/bakargiev.html>. Melissa Milgrom, "BEHIND THE SCENES; Independent Curators: Have Art, Will Travel," *New York Times*, 24 April 2002.

²⁶ By "independent exhibition," I mean the rental of exhibitions that travel from museum to museum. These rental exhibitions are created by an independent curator initially and then go from museum to museum for a

formulates an independent exhibition for ICI, which then organizes rental exhibitions. For a fee ranging from \$7,500 to \$30,000 a museum can lease an exhibition for a period of time.²⁷ ICI described *Free Play* as “Traveling in an easy-to-ship box, *Free Play* includes smaller works and digital software, as well as instructions for building larger projects. Charged with a do-it-yourself imperative.”²⁸ The “do-it-yourself imperative” that ICI suggests leaves no interpretation for the specific space of the museum and eliminates the curator’s creative endeavor because it is a packaged exhibition that provides all needed materials.

The Guggenheim Museum has never rented an independent exhibition. Perhaps they have not rented an independent exhibition because it would lack consideration for the spatial design of the museum. An independent exhibition almost eliminates the need for a curator in the purchasing institution because once an exhibition is created there is only a limited amount of work left. When an institution receives a rented exhibition, the person who deals with installing the show is the exhibition installer or designer, who must make the rented exhibit work for the given space of the museum. Without exhibition designers and preparators these rented or independent exhibitions would be impossible.

When ICI creates an independent exhibition that is then purchased by a museum for an exhibition, ICI provides the research, execution, shipping, and the catalogue that is released to

rental fee. After the initial creation of the exhibition there is almost no further need for a curator, making this exhibition function independently from the curator’s creativity.

²⁷ Melissa Feldman is a Seattle based independent curator and writer. “Independent Curators International: Exhibitions *Free Play*,” accessed on February 10, 2013, <http://curatorsintl.org/exhibitions/free-play>. Melissa Milgrom, “BEHIND THE SCENES; Independent Curators: Have Art, Will Travel,” *New York Times*, 24 April 2002.

²⁸ Independent Curators International, “Independent Curators International: Exhibitions *Free Play*,” accessed on February 10, 2013, <http://curatorsintl.org/exhibitions/free-play>.

the public.²⁹ While independent exhibitions can be cost effective for museums, they eliminate the receiving institutions curators' creativity and do not create a different experience for viewers as the works are installed into various museums the same way as the exhibition travels. This limits the way that viewers experience the work, because the works of art that go into the exhibition are not being selected for the specific space of the museum, they are only being selected based upon the exhibition chosen by the curator of the museum. If one curator designs everything, then the public is looking to only one figure in the artworld to explain the mysteries of the art before them. Making one curator responsible for distributing all knowledge about the exhibition that is traveling to multiple museums eliminates any variety between exhibitions. If one curator plans every exhibition, then it also eliminates the possibility of the curator-as-artist at the receiving institutions because there is no longer any need for the curator to direct the exhibition.³⁰

An example of a planned exhibition that is then packaged and sent to multiple museums is *Create* by co-curators Lawrence Rinder and Mathew Higgs, which began in University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in May 2011. The whole exhibition tour ends April 2014. This exhibition is packaged with everything necessary, even a catalogue, to go with the show.

While the independent exhibition and the traveling exhibition may sound very similar, they are quite different. When one curator produces an independent exhibition, it then travels around to various museums with little to no interaction by the other museums' curators. For an

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ There are a few positives to renting an exhibition from ICI. The curator from the independent exhibition brings forth a different perspective and also potentially allows access to works that the receiving institution might not have otherwise.

independent exhibition, such as *Performance Now* (2012-2014) curated by RoseLee Goldberg a staff not affiliated with the receiving institution installs it.³¹ When staff installs works that have been mapped out by a curator not familiar with the space he or she is working with it is easy to miss opportunities to elevate the viewers' engagement level because of the curator's lack of familiarity with the museum.

Nevertheless, ICI states that it:

collaboratively produces itinerant exhibitions with artists, curators and communities all over the world. Every version of an ICI exhibition is different due to the participation of the hosting space and community. Our exhibitions consider collaborative exchange and a curatorial direction led by a combined perspective of many. This ensures that the artwork we present reflects crucial developments in the field of contemporary art and our exhibitions are a platform for differing artistic voices and opinions.³²

While this reveals how ICI views their exhibitions, the organization does not state how the exhibitions are different when they travel to different hosting museums. This mode of curating limits interactions that occur between the curator and the art, as well as the art and the audience.

The level of involvement by the curator is what separates the independent exhibition and traveling exhibition. Traveling exhibitions may be rented from other museums, or sometimes organizations like ICI, but the curator from the receiving institution is involved in the process of selection, installation, and brochure development.³³ In traveling exhibitions the curator-as-artist is not lost.

³¹ RoseLee Goldberg is an American based curator, art critic and curator. This exhibition traveled to Delaware Art Museum, Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University, Middlebury College Museum of Art, and H&R Block Artspace at Kansas City Art Institute. Independent Curators International, "Independent Curators International Exhibitions: *Performance Now*," accessed on February 9, 2013, http://curatorsintl.org/exhibitions/art_moves_performance_1960_to_2010.

³² Ibid.

³³ When speaking of the brochure made specifically for the museum, I am referring to the curatorial write-ups and the brochure that is unique to the exhibit, not the catalogue that is mass-produced to travel with the exhibition.

THE ROLE OF THE CONTEMPORARY CURATOR:

Academic and contemporary curators inspire, entertain, educate, and mediate. Can everyone or anyone be a curator, or is there a unique attribute that makes someone a curator? Curators have to analyze and reflect upon many aspects of an exhibition, they have to be aware of what they may or may not be implying by the selection and placement of works. Curatorial considerations of selection of works and placement of works are key to viewers' understanding and create the overarching theme for an exhibition. For example, the curators of *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, Munroe and Tiampo, were able to display work by Gutai artists in a cohesive manner that led to a clear understanding of what "Gutai" meant to the artists. This will be discussed further in Chapter Three. For now, it is important to note that, while important, placement of the works of art alone does not make a successful exhibition.

In recent publications, scholars and art historians have begun to use the phrase "death of the curator," signifying the change that is currently occurring in contemporary curatorial practice. For example, the National Gallery approaches curatorial work in a mode very different from the Guggenheim Museum.³⁴ Frequently at the National Gallery curators remain anonymous in the exhibition and they never have a public presence with the viewers, which is what Roos-Brown refers to as the death of the curator.³⁵ This occurs even in their contemporary art exhibitions, whereas the Guggenheim Museum frequently references their curators and they often become the face of the museum. The role of the contemporary curator is to engage the

³⁴ The phrase 'the death of the curator' does not refer to its literal meaning, but rather to how the role of the curator has shifted in recent times. Erinn Roos-Brown, "Is the Role of the Curator Evolving,?" August 6, 2013, <http://artsfwd.org/changing-curators/>. (Brown is the Program Manager for the Creative Campus Initiative at Wesleyan University's Center for the Arts in Middletown, Connecticut.)

³⁵ Ibid.

audience, bring forth new ideas, present something unknown to the public, and produce a higher level of interaction between the exhibition and the visitors.³⁶

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT:

Instead of the curatorial role emphasizing specialized knowledge, contemporary curators are now focusing on audience engagement and becoming more concerned about visitors' experience.³⁷ Focusing on the audience engagement means that the exhibition the curator is planning has to be attuned to the visitors' knowledge base. Art blogger Erinn Roos-Brown wrote:

Today's curator is more like a television producer than an academic scholar—they need to capture the attention of the audience through entertainment and engagement. While being knowledgeable of the subject matter is important for the integrity of the arts, it's only one slice of the pie for today's curators.³⁸

Curators today, like the Independent Curators International, with whom Hans Ulrich Obrist associates, are now focusing on viewers' experience. To capture viewer's interest museums are beginning to incorporate technology like iPads and other technological devices that viewers may interact with to learn more about the work of art before them. For example, the Guggenheim Museum has created an application named "Guggenheim Museum" that anyone can download onto his or her electronic device(s) for no cost. In this application viewers can listen to the curators speak about how the show was put together, what the curators' thoughts were about the process, and lead the viewers to higher learning by providing background about the works in the

³⁶ Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 131.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 131-132.

³⁸ Erinn Roos-Brown, <http://artsfwd.org/changing-curators/>, "Is the Role of the Curator Evolving,?" August 6, 2013.

exhibition. This application is downloadable to anyone who has a smartphone or tablet, furthers viewer engagement, reaches out to the community, and makes viewers feel included in the process. The only thing that the Guggenheim Museum insists on is that visitors not tour the museum while listening to this application, which allows the viewers to fully engage with the exhibition. While it is understandable that the museum wants to control the flow of foot traffic in the museum, it is disconcerting that visitors cannot listen to the application while in the museum to enrich their experience.³⁹

Even though the museum does not allow visitors to use the application while viewing exhibitions, the Guggenheim Museum does promote a relationship that makes the community feel as if they share a bond with the museum. The museum relates to the community by offering a variety of education programs for all ages and also reaches out to an international community through interactive elements on their website. This relationship furthers learning and the audiences' engagement. Through programs like this application museums can reach out to a broader audience without ever losing academic integrity. The curator-as-artist uses audience engagement in a way that reaches out to the public in a manner that has not occurred prior to the early 2000s.

THE CURATOR-AS-ARTIST:

Terry Smith suggests, "Curating is caring for the culture, above all by enabling its artistic or creative transformers to pursue their work. This facilitation is done, preferably, with empathy

³⁹ While viewers are not allowed to listen to this application while visiting the museum, they are allowed to purchase audio guides. It is likely that the museum does not wish to lose any profit from the audio guides and if they permitted viewers to listen to their application while in the museum, the museum would see a decline in their audio guide sales.

and insight, effectively, and with some style.”⁴⁰ Curators-as-artists synthesize complicated information from artists all over the globe and transform their ideas into a visual experience for viewers to enjoy and understand.⁴¹ Curators-as-artists across the world face difficult decisions about what ideas are important to convey to viewers and which works should be selected to relay the theme of the exhibition. Conveying meaning and knowledge is one of the ultimate goals for a curator.⁴² A curator must make sure that the intentions of an exhibition are conveyed to the visitors through visual means, whether this is accomplished through viewer’s visual or textual experience.⁴³ After the curator-as-artist has decided what information and ideas must be expressed in the exhibition, then he or she must be creative and explore new exhibition techniques.

Contemporary art may not fit in a museum’s space, so a curator must be innovative and explore new ideas and opportunities to make an exhibition work. Curators like Klaus Biesenbach, who curated Marina Abramovic’s retrospective *Any Ever* in 2010 at MoMA, break free of the boundaries set by previous exhibitions, whether it is a specific layout prescribed for an exhibition or a standard practice used in a museum.⁴⁴ This allows museum professionals to think specifically about the work they are dealing with, allows the work to transcend through

⁴⁰ Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 20.

⁴¹ This statement stemmed from Paul O’Neill’s idea on curating and the culture of industry. Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 88.

⁴² Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 20.

⁴³ Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 87.

⁴⁴ Klaus Biesenbach is the Director of MoMA PS1 in Queens, New York and the Chief Curator at MoMA in New York, New York. Christopher Bagley, “Artist Andrea Zittel creates sculpture, furniture and habitats that reflect on the human environment. Here, curator Klaus Biesenbach’s stripped-down Manhattan apartment inspired her to conceive a series of images that investigate domestic and urban life and one man’s design for living,” Accessed on February 3, 2014, http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/art-and-design/2009/01/klaus_haus.

them as a mediator, and allows new knowledge to be revealed through the placement of the work in the museum. This is where the task becomes complex. Is it really the curator's job to define the boundaries of exemplary contemporary art, is that the artist's job, or should that be left to the audience? As Carol Duncan stated: "We can also appreciate the ideological force of a cultural experience [or museum] that claims for its truths the status of objective knowledge. To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals in that community."⁴⁵

Duncan wants viewers to understand that those who control the museum control the representation of culture, which also presents the museum's audience with the broader question of if museums have the authority to represent cultural identity. Duncan frequently refers to the museum as a temple throughout her research; she believes the museum functions as a temple partially because there are expected behaviors for museum spaces.⁴⁶ Even prior to walking into a museum or gallery viewers are aware of the expected behaviors in the space, because the architecture of museums, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, New York reflects Greek temples.

The curator bears the weight of questions about authority when creating blockbuster exhibitions, such as international exhibitions like the *Carnegie International* in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and biennials like the *Venice Biennale* in Venice, Italy. These types of exhibitions attract large crowds and receive mass media attention. An example of a curator who is familiar with receiving mass media attention is Massimiliano Gioni, who is the Associate Director of

⁴⁵ Carol Duncan's book addresses how the power of the museum is assumed because the architecture of many art museums resemble the Greek and Roman temples, making viewers believe that their authority is unquestionable. Duncan leaves an impression that we should question this authority instead of assuming that the museum has viewer's best interest in mind. Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

The New Museum in New York and was also the Curator of the 55th *Venice Biennale* where he created the *Encyclopedic Palace*. With the *Encyclopedic Palace*, Gioni acted as a curator-as-artist by pairing together works by what he classified as “professional artists” and “outsider artists.”⁴⁷ By combining these two types of artists Gioni led viewers to question if there were any differences between them, furthering the curator-as-artist model by making viewers reconsider what they call professional artists and outsider artists, which brings forth new ideas and challenges the previous divide between professional and outsider artists.

Contemporary curators have begun to be recognized as much as artists, and many exhibitions bear the curators’ names because they are now the artists of the exhibition.⁴⁸ Curators use their creativity to best present the artwork to further the artists’ exhibition and careers. In the Guggenheim Museum, curators lay out exhibitions throughout the rotunda to further the artist’s work and organize it in a manner that best presents it to the public. Curators-as-artists are of great value in a museum, not just because they organize exhibitions, but also because they bridge the gap between the artist and the public. By mediating between the artist and public, the curator attempts to please both the artist and the public.

Curators, both academic and curators-as-artists, bear the weight of presenting culture; to represent culture is to reflect upon the time period and exhibit a civilization without misrepresentation.⁴⁹ To do so curators have to be in tune with their surroundings and what the average viewer will understand. Contemporary curating must seek to reach new boundaries and

⁴⁷ Sam Thorne, “The Encyclopedic Palace,” *Frieze Magazine*, accessed on February 13, 2014, <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the-encyclopedic-palace/>.

⁴⁸ Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (MIT Press, 2012), 90.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

constantly redefine itself as new works of art are presented.⁵⁰ Contemporary curators must appeal to scholars and the public; institutions like the Guggenheim Museum do not wish to lose academic integrity, but they must be accessible to and understandable by a general public. The curator must not lose the interest of those studying the discourse of art and curatorial practice, nor do they want an exhibition to be unappealing to those whose expertise lies in other discourses.

So now that Erinn Ross-Brown has responded to the idea of the death of the curator and museums have focused on the audiences' experience, one is led to wonder what is next? The death of the curator may be interpreted to mean that the academic curator no longer works with contemporary art, instead a new curator has emerged, the curator-as-artist.⁵¹ Curators in a sense, function the same as artists. While there may not be physical work like paintings, sculptures, or performances coming from curators, they are creators. Curators are the creators of the final product viewers see. Curators have the power to guide viewers' minds and control their experience while in the museum, which is related to Duncan's ideas about the curators' power to interpret culture.⁵²

The curator-as-artist reveals to the public the processes of the museum. Curators should seek transparency, revealing their thoughts about the exhibition, as well as the problems encountered when designing an exhibition and how they were successfully overcome. This can be conveyed through interviews with the museum staff, podcasts, videos provided by the hosting institution, or applications, all of which create transparency between the museum and the public.

⁵⁰ This statement stemmed from Terry Smith's ideas on contemporary curating. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 179.

⁵¹ Erinn Ross-Brown, "Is the Role of the Curator Evolving?" accessed on August 6, 2013, <http://artsfwd.org/changing-curators/>.

⁵² Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

In addition, contemporary art museums that have undergone additions and new art museums are using the transparent approach to appeal to the audience, which in turn makes the audience feel like they are a part of the process, creating a sense of community with the museum. For instance, institutions like the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland, Ohio (MoCA) have achieved transparency through architecture by placing glass walls in offices, so viewers become aware of the people who work in the museum.

Architect Farshid Moussavi designed MoCA Cleveland to be transparent to the public. Through a hexagonal design the museum is an intricate space with non-parallel walls creating an experiential exhibition area for viewers. The Chief Curator at MoCA Cleveland, David Norr, has made the space correspond to the museum's mission as a non-collecting institution. Viewers are submerged into an experience where there are no hidden rooms; glass walls expose the offices of the museum, and even the main gallery can be seen from a lookout for viewers to use when a new exhibition is being installed (figure 1). The lookout was designed so that visitors can ascend what the architect named the "monumental staircase" and look into the top floor exhibition space. Moussavi's and Norr's efforts are eliminating what Duncan called the temple quality of the museum and also making the space more relatable to viewers because the inner workings of the museum are exposed.⁵³ Moussavi's design does not reflect a temple; it is a space that commands viewers' attention, even if they are not aware from the exterior shape of the building that it is an art museum.⁵⁴ The reflections seen on the exterior of MoCA are made possible by the use of Rimex stainless steel, which allows imagery of the surrounding city to

⁵³ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside the Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 8-10. <http://mocasleveland.org/about/building>, "About the Building," March 3, 2013.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

appear on the structure of the museum. MoCA also reflects contemporary curatorial practice because of its outreach to the community of Cleveland, Ohio.

Curators-as-artists like Obrist and Gioni bring forth a different perspective to the museum. In this mode the curator is seen as a conductor that orchestrates the inner workings of the museum. If the curator-as-artist mode was used in a museum, the public and scholars would see a vast difference in the approaches taken for installation and the juxtaposition of work in the museum. The curators-as-artists do more than disseminate knowledge to the public; they are in charge of searching for new ways to exhibit works of art and new beginnings for a museum, forever changing future curators' approaches. The curator-as-artist consider the use of space and how they can lead the audience to a higher level of engagement. The curator is no longer invisible to the public, but is now present and available to the general audience. The next chapter provides an overview of curatorial practice at the Guggenheim Museum to facilitate better understanding of how the curator-as-artist functioned in both *Gutai* and *James Turrell* by providing knowledge about the Guggenheim Museum's building and their original curatorial ideas.

Chapter II: The Exhibition Space in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum as Envisioned by Frank Lloyd Wright

“It is with this sense of purpose that we make plans for the future, assured that the Museum created by Mr. Wright makes possible the exhibition of paintings and sculpture in a manner that will delight and refresh the public and stimulate their interest in art.”⁵⁵

Harry Guggenheim

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1943-1959) is the culmination of Frank Lloyd Wright’s (1867-1959) aesthetic, which ultimately created a space where art could harmoniously exist with the building in which it resides.⁵⁶ The Guggenheim Museum stands out from New York City’s skyline and displays Solomon R. Guggenheim’s non-objective art collection.⁵⁷ The design of the Guggenheim Museum challenged curators to find exhibition techniques that could be used in its unusual conical form. These techniques have evolved over time. Understanding the exhibition techniques Wright envisioned for the museum allows a better comprehension of the relationship Wright wanted the building to share with Guggenheim’s collection and how the museum exhibits art today. This chapter reveals the original curatorial techniques used in the Guggenheim Museum and contrast them to today’s approaches.

The design and construction of the Guggenheim Museum lasted 16 years and was not completed until six months after Wright’s death.⁵⁸ Throughout the design and construction stages, Wright experienced many triumphs and struggles. Guggenheim and Hilla von Rebay, the

⁵⁵ Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1960), 11.

⁵⁶ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is located at Fifth Avenue and 89th Street. The museum sits across from Central Park and is only a few blocks away from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This strip of Fifth Avenue is known as the Museum Mile.

⁵⁷ Guggenheim’s collection at the time the museum was constructed was only non-objective art, predominately Wassily Kandinsky paintings.

⁵⁸ Wright died on April 9, 1959 and the Guggenheim Museum did not open to the public until October 21, 1959. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://www.guggenheim.org/guggenheim-foundation/history/1950s-and-1960s>, 1950s and 1960s, June 23, 2013.

first director of the museum, expressed concern right from the start about the exhibition techniques that would be used in such a unique space.⁵⁹ However, Wright persuaded them to continue planning the museum as he envisioned (figure 2). In August 1949, the museum's progress was placed on hold due to the inflation in building materials after World War II. While ground was not broken until August 14, 1956, Wright continually worked on the design.⁶⁰ In resolving concerns about the interior exhibition techniques, Wright continuously battled the new director of the museum, James Sweeney, about how the art would be exhibited in the space, defending his vision of what the Guggenheim Museum would look like once art was installed.⁶¹

DESIGN OF THE MUSEUM:

Guggenheim's art collection began in the mid 1890s; originally he only collected the Old Masters and American landscapes, but after the 1920s he shifted his attention towards non-objective paintings.⁶² Wright envisioned a museum that captured the spirit of Guggenheim's art collection and embodied it in a form that resonated with ancient Babylonian ziggurats. He derived his design for the Guggenheim Museum from the Babylonian temples, even though

⁵⁹ Hilla Rebay was Solomon R. Guggenheim's art advisor and curator of the Guggenheim from 1937-1953. Even though the Guggenheim Museum was not completed until 1959 and Rebay was no longer the director, she controlled Guggenheim's temporary exhibition sites. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith With an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-1959," June 21, 2013.

⁶⁰ There are multiple reasons why the Guggenheim Museum's construction was delayed: Guggenheim's death in 1949, the possible cancellation of the project by the museum's committee, Rebay's retirement in 1952, and issues with meeting various fire codes. Ibid.

⁶¹ Rebay resigned as director on March 29, 1952. A few months later James Sweeney, who was the Museum of Modern Art's former head of the department of painting and sculpture, was elected director on October 15, 1952. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith With an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-1959," June 21, 2013.

⁶² Wright, 8.

he inverted the design for the museum.⁶³ Even though Wright derived the museum's design from ancient temples he was determined for the museum to look modern. The Guggenheim Museum was originally intended for modern paintings, so Wright felt compelled to have the museum's exterior and interior reflect modern ideas.⁶⁴

The way Wright wanted the museum to be experienced was about how the space felt for viewers and the ease of their journey through the museum. Wright's idea was that a viewer would enter the museum and be whisked upward by the elevator to the top floor (Wright considered this to be the highlight of the building) and then leisurely make their way down the spiraling ramp, casually viewing the art exhibited.⁶⁵ Wright's idea was to create a museum in which viewers could enjoy both nature and art in harmony, whether it was through the museum's proximity to Central Park, or how his design brought in various cues of nature; the ivy planted throughout the museum, the sunlight beaming from the oculus, and the pool of water at the base of the rotunda all refer to the elements of the earth. Wright believed he had created a harmony between nature and art; in a telegram in 1944 to Guggenheim he stated, "The more I think about it the wiser the choice seems. The building will be dignified by its surroundings not depreciated by them. The park is New York's real center and will grow more so as the place tightens up."⁶⁶ Wright believed that his total design advanced painting and created a social environment that would be a pleasurable experience for all visitors. Before the museum's completion, however,

⁶³ Wright, 17.

⁶⁴ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith With an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-1959," June 21, 2013.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁶ Telegram from Frank Lloyd Wright to Solomon R. Guggenheim, April 23, 1944. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith With an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-1959," June 21, 2013.

Wright faced many disagreements with Sweeney, and ultimately these disputes altered the final form of the museum.

WRIGHT'S AND SWEENEY'S EXHIBITION TECHNIQUES:

In October 1954 Sweeney and Wright disagreed strongly on the square footage allotted for the exhibition space because Sweeney expressed the need for more storage, offices, and a larger area for conservation. Wright responded:

It is now apparent that we cannot build Solomon R. Guggenheim's Memorial and at the same time build whole big buildings for carpentry, photography, storage, conservation. We can manage them all including all of the etc. But it seems to us your experts want about the entire area of the Guggenheim lot or about 23,000 square feet, excluding any building for exhibition purposes whatever, and allowing only a reasonable amount for corridors, circulation, etc. In short, with no galleries at all for exhibition, they want the entire lot area for such manufacture.⁶⁷

Wright believed the original design provided ample space for the museum's needs and was likely concerned about "clutter." Throughout Wright's career he was not willing to work with clients to change his designs to provide more storage, as seen in Wright's distaste for garages and basements. He rarely supplied any of his clients with areas for "clutter," as evident in the Kaufmann House (1936-1939).⁶⁸ Wright presumed that storage areas were a space for clutter to occur; this explains why Wright refused to enlarge his plans for the museum's need for storage.⁶⁹ However, storage is an important thing for a museum to have, especially for museums like the Guggenheim, because of the size of their permanent collections. The Guggenheim Museum's collection was already large at the time of construction and Rebay was still seeking new

⁶⁷ Frank Lloyd Wright, Letter (excerpt) to James Johnson Sweeney, October 13, 1954.

⁶⁸ Fallingwater Tour. Mill Run, PA. June 18, 2013.

⁶⁹ The tour guide at Fallingwater emphasized Wright's distaste for storage areas in the home. Wright would not give the client a basement for storage, nor would he design enclosed garages because he believed they encouraged clutter. Ibid.

acquisitions. As a result of Wright disregarding Sweeney's request for more space, Sweeney demanded that the top floor in the rotunda be used for storage, conservation, a library, and the registrar's department.⁷⁰ Harry Guggenheim, who was Solomon Guggenheim's nephew and oversaw the museum's construction after Guggenheim's death in 1949, supported Sweeney's approaches.⁷¹

Wright and Sweeney not only debated the size of the museum, but also the color of the interior and its impact on the works on display. Wright believed that the walls should be covered in thin cork slabs painted a pale grey; Sweeney believed the walls should be white because it was the most common color used in modern art museums, as seen the Museum of Modern Art's *Good Design* exhibition in the summer of 1950.⁷² Sweeney believed the color white allows little to no inference to occur between the walls of the museum and the art on display. Also, white allows viewers' eyes to rest when looking away from the paintings. Rebay however, frequently used grey in the temporary non-objective museum she curated before the Guggenheim Museum was built.⁷³ In 1939 Rebay transformed William Muschenheim's townhouse into a temporary art museum by covering the walls in grey velour and putting grey carpeting throughout.⁷⁴

The paintings, set in enormous silver frames 'like precious stones,' and hung against the velour background at nearly floor level, were to be viewed, under indirect lighting, from soft, velvet-covered seats while music of Bach and Chopin was piped into the room. The

⁷⁰ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith With an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-1959," June 21, 2013.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Wright, 17; <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith With an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-1959," June 21, 2013. The Museum of Modern Art, or MoMA, was already exhibiting in the manner that Sweeney was pushing for. Edgar Kaufmann Jr., "Large New Groups of 'Good Design:' Exhibits to go on View at Mart on June 22," accessed on December 16, 2013, http://www.moma.org/pdfs/docs/press_archives/1441/releases/MOMA_1950_0050.pdf?2010.

⁷³ Neil Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 312.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

museum remained at this location for ten years, during which time its reputation as a highly focused, rather eccentric, and quite personal institution developed in obvious comparison to its near neighbor, the more broad-based and market oriented Museum of Modern Art (figure 3).

Wright was inspired by Rebay's exhibition techniques and created a museum that would use similar techniques, including grey walls. In 1958, Wright began to express scorn for Harry Guggenheim for not listening to his ideas. Wright felt that as the architect he should have the final approval of all design issues.⁷⁵ In 1958 Wright realized that Harry Guggenheim supported Sweeney's exhibition techniques and begged him to "Lend me your ears!" about his proposal.⁷⁶ However, Harry Guggenheim responded:

The present director of the Museum, James Johnson Sweeney, is recognized throughout the art world, at home and abroad, as a master 'par excellence' in arranging and presenting exhibitions. This has been demonstrated to the great satisfaction of our Trustees, the art world and the public since Sweeney's directorship.

We all want to make progress in the presentation of art, and those most concerned in the improvement of our shows are Sweeney and the Museum Committee. Let us see what you propose and how we can make use of your proposals to enhance our exhibitions.

Whether or not the Committee accepts your method, your basic design of the building remains intact, perhaps to present art in your way, is not now, sometime in the future when others have reached that point of perception that you believe you have achieved now.⁷⁷

Wright felt that his opinions for exhibition techniques were not being heard. However, Paul O'Neill noted, "Ever since the 1960s, there has been a growing understanding and acceptance of curators as having a more proactive, creative, and political part to play in the production,

⁷⁵ At this time, Wright had grown very impatient and felt that he was being overlooked to the point that the museum had lost its connection to him as the architect. Harry Guggenheim expressed to Wright that regardless the color of the museum that it was still his design. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith With an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-1959," June 21, 2013.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Harry Guggenheim, Letter written to Frank Lloyd Wright in 1958.

mediation, and dissemination of art itself.”⁷⁸ Through the understanding that O’Neill has upon curatorial development in the 1960s it is plausible that this is why Sweeney was given so much control of the exhibition techniques in the museum.

In addition to the amount of space given to the museum for storage and the interior color, Wright and Sweeney also disagreed about how natural and artificial light should be used in the museum. Wright believed that the natural light that pours in from the oculus, as well as some artificial light that would be used to emulate natural light, would appropriately illuminate the works of art. Sweeney strongly disagreed, believing that because of the changing nature of natural light it would be impossible to properly light each work of art throughout the day (figure 4). Natural light can also damage paintings from over-exposure.

Wright believed that natural light would allow viewers to experience the art in the utmost natural setting. Wright described the technique he would use to make natural and artificial light work together:

Three different ways of lighting from above the paintings placed in these alcoves are designed. One—from the reflected light directly overhead, from beneath the overhanging wall of the spiral. Two—the same but daylight regulated by invisible, semi-transparent, easily adjustable plastic blinds. Three—emphasizing the lighting of the picture by brilliant reflection from a continuous mirror placed on the opposite vertical wall-space of the overhead space of the ceiling-light itself. All three methods are supplemented by ample artificial lighting by fixture from the same source.⁷⁹

Ultimately, Sweeney rejected Wright’s idea and blocked off all natural light except for the oculus, and used a traditional lighting system that would illuminate the art from above: a series of panels in the alcoves that were angled downward towards the exterior parapet wall. The lights

⁷⁸ Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 9.

⁷⁹ Wright, 20.

above the works were used to illuminate each bay where viewers would stand to enjoy the works before them, while another set of lights were pointing down onto the art (figure 5).

Another major disagreement between Wright and Sweeney was how the works were to be placed in the museum. Since the design of the museum has outwardly slanting parapet walls, this naturally caused problems never seen before in other art museums. Wright's idea was that the works would be placed flush with the tilted parapet wall. Wright believed that this would make the paintings easily viewable for the visitors and that it would "yield to movement as set up by these slightly curving massive walls."⁸⁰ By slanting the paintings with the natural form of the building, Wright believed he had designed an environment that would be one with the building and create viewing ease (figure 6). Wright also accommodated the recent acquisitions of sculptures, believing they should be displayed on pedestals that mirrored the materials and shape of the museum.⁸¹ Wright invited the guests to sit down on furniture he designed in the alcoves of the spiraling ramps and contemplate the art before them (figure 7). In contrast, Sweeney believed that a system of rods and posts should be used to bring the paintings perpendicular to viewers (figure 8).⁸² Sweeney's approach towards exhibiting the paintings pulled the art away from the wall and into viewer's space.

Harry Guggenheim feared that the constant fight between the two strong-willed men would ruin the reputation of the museum before it even opened its doors to the public. On July 8, 1958 he told Wright:

⁸⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁸¹ Ibid., 20.

⁸² The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith With an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-1959," June 21, 2013.

Our opening can be and must be, thanks to your beautiful and grand building, an event of dignity and importance. We don't propose to have it marred by bickering, and we don't want it turned into a burlesque show by jabbering controversy of a highly theoretical nature as a publicity stunt.⁸³

In response, Wright presented an essay to the board of trustees defending his exhibition techniques in the museum, but Harry Guggenheim and the museum's trustees decided to use Sweeney's exhibition technique.⁸⁴ Wright considered this a defeat, believing that it should have been the architect's decision and wishing to complete his vision of how the Guggenheim Museum would appear to the visitors.

Wright wanted the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum to embrace the design of his spiraling museum in all aspects, stating:

What we wanted to do was to create an atmosphere suitable to the paintings. Each one would exist in the whole space, the whole atmosphere, not in its rectilinear frame in a rectilinear room. The whole atmosphere and spaciousness will be the frame. And once he stops having to think in terms of rectangles, the painter will be free to paint on any shape he chooses—even to curve his canvas if he wants.⁸⁵

Wright envisioned a museum that had an atmosphere that was made specifically for the paintings and would eventually free artists from their canvases, allowing them to produce works on any material desired. This statement reveals Wright as a visionary, and even though his opinions on exhibition techniques were not accepted, he designed a museum that did much more than simply display works of art; it changed how we would forever view art museums, defying the rectilinear rooms usually seen in museums.

⁸³ Harry Guggenheim, Letter written to Frank Lloyd Wright, July 8, 1958, Ibid.

⁸⁴ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith With an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-1959," June 21, 2013.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

THE GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM EXPERIENCE TODAY:

Curators now have the freedom to decide if an exhibition begins at the top floor or the bottom, which alters viewers experience of the museum.⁸⁶ Why curators were allowed this freedom is unknown, but it is evident that the museum tries to control the flow of viewers entering the museum. By beginning on the bottom floor of the rotunda visitors are able to walk up the ramp freely, instead of waiting in line for the elevator, which can hold a maximum of ten to twelve people. While this contradicts the way Wright envisioned for visitors to experience the wrapping floors, which mirrors a leisurely stroll, the museum is able to allow more visitors to enter because they can ascend from the bottom floor. This is more effective than the line that would form at the elevator to take visitors to the top floor, but alters viewers' experience of the museum by forcing them to climb up the ramp, instead of taking a leisurely stroll down.

ANNEXES:

As previously noted, one of the main concerns about the Guggenheim Museum was its the capacity for storage. Over time it became more evident that expansion would be necessary, so the construction of an annex began in 1963. When the museum was seeking out a new architect who could design something comparable to the Wright building, they reached out to Wright's son-in-law, William Wesley Peters.⁸⁷ Peters' addition provided more exhibition and

⁸⁶ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, http://media.guggenheim.org/content/pdf/new_york/foreign/guide_english.pdf, "Welcome to the Guggenheim Museum," March 13, 2013.

⁸⁷ William Wesley Peters designed a building that would be harmonious with Wright's vision for the museum. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/new_guggenheim/timeline.html, "Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation," July 16, 2013.

office space for the museum and complimented the design of Wright's rotunda.⁸⁸ The addition was completed in 1968. The building was originally to be a six story structure; however, due to budget limitations the structure was built with only four stories.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the foundation of the building was designed to hold a ten story structure. The museum staff knew that they would eventually outgrow the four story exhibition space and would need a larger building to house the museum's ever-growing collection and administrative needs.⁹⁰ This demonstrates how the Guggenheim Museum was forward thinking by building a foundation that would support a taller structure.

By 1982 the museum realized its shortcomings in terms of being able to exhibit larger contemporary works and contracted Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects to design a new annex. The 1963-68 addition was destroyed except for its foundation, and the 1982-1992 addition was constructed where the Peters building once stood (figure 9). This annex is eight stories and contains 14,250 square feet of gallery space, 390 square feet of office space, a restaurant, and new storage spaces throughout.⁹¹ The new addition also provided the museum with exhibition space on annex levels 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7. The exhibition space created by Gwathmey Siegel is rectilinear and allows the museum to undertake more exhibitions. While the Guggenheim Museum still uses offsite storage, the new annex solved some of the problems that the Wright building was not able to and opened new doors for exhibition techniques.

⁸⁸ It is important to note that the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum rarely mentions the Peters annex addition as a part of its history. The museum mainly emphasizes the Wright building and the 1992 annex and typically disregards the 1968 addition, but it is fundamental to understanding the museum's forward thinking and acknowledgment that they would eventually have to expand.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://www.guggenheim.org/guggenheim-foundation/architecture/new-york>, "The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum," September 16, 2013.

MUSEUM LIGHTING:

At an unknown date, the museum decided to modify the original lighting system in the museum. As seen at the first exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, *Art of Another Kind* (1959), lighting was from panels above the art found in the alcoves (figure 10). As the type of work the museum collected changed, the lighting had to change to illuminate the works better. When the Guggenheim Museum was completed in 1959, it was going to house only non-objective paintings. During the 1950s Sweeney began to collect Abstract Expressionist work, which was larger and did not always take form of paintings.⁹² Thus, the museum had to change the lighting and later had to add additional track lighting to provide more direct light onto the art.⁹³ Also, the new track lighting allowed light to be directed away from the alcoves and onto the ramp to illuminate sculptures, and eventually to be directed into the center of the rotunda, where art could be suspended in the open atrium of the museum. The track lighting allowed flexibility in the placement of works, giving curators the freedom to work beyond the original alcoves. As the museum's collection continued to grow, the curators realized that they also had to evolve to be able to display contemporary art. While adjusting lighting seems simple, it broadened the curators' horizons because they were no longer forced to stay in Wright's alcoves.

⁹² The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/interact/watch/exhibition-videos/guggenheim-inaugural-exhibition?tmpl=component&print=1>, "Guggenheim: Inaugural Exhibition," July 24, 2013.

⁹³ Lightolier invented track lighting in the 1960s. Originally, track lighting was used for residential purposes and it was not until the 1970s that track lighting was used for stores and office workspaces. While there is no available documentation about when track lighting was installed in the Guggenheim it is probable that it was not until the late 1960s-early 1970s. Lightolier, <http://www.lightolier.com/aboutus/history.jsp>, "History of Lightolier," September 12, 2013.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS:

Over time museums adapt to new exhibition styles that are in sync with the current artistic practice because they must include the new forms or shapes that art takes. The Guggenheim Museum presents many challenges when curators are installing exhibitions because of the shape of the building. The combination of the 1992 annex and the shape of Wright's building creates a disruption of space and a complex exhibition pattern for visitors to follow. Allowing visitors to travel freely between the two spaces when there are separate exhibitions throughout the museum disrupts viewers' experience of a single exhibition. This disruption of space also interrupts the traffic flow throughout the museum and can break up viewers' experience, leading them between various exhibitions, creating no continuous thought or theme.

While the form of the museum presents problems with how a visitor will travel throughout the building, the bays in the rotunda also present problems. Wright designed the alcoves to hold Solomon R. Guggenheim's collection of non-objective paintings, specifically his Wassily Kandinsky paintings. When Hilla Rebay was the first director of the museum, she collected only works that were then described as non-objective. However, when the second director of the Guggenheim, Sweeney, took over in 1953, he began to collect art like Jackson Pollock's paintings and other Abstract Expressionist works that were larger than Guggenheim's Kandinsky's and similar works that Wright had intended to be installed in the alcoves. During the opening of the first exhibition Rebay expressed her disapproval of Sweeney's combination of styles and exhibition of works that were not from Solomon R. Guggenheim's original purchases, altering the vision he had for the museum.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Rebay later sent Sweeney a telegram explaining her distaste for the pieces Sweeney selected for the exhibition and described the show as "aftermath trash." The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/interact/watch/exhibition-videos/guggenheim-inaugural-exhibition?tmpl=component&print=1>, "Guggenheim: Inaugural Exhibition," July 24, 2013.

With changes in the size and forms of contemporary art the Guggenheim Museum has had to revisit how they would approach exhibition techniques to present the work to the public properly. Currently, the museum still uses Sweeney's approach for works that fit in the alcoves. When exhibiting paintings that are larger than the alcoves, the Guggenheim staff constructs a custom frame for every work that pulls it away from the wall and the alcove (figures 11 & 12). The custom frame makes the back of the work visible and visitors may walk around and engage with all sides of the piece. Since the Guggenheim staff would have to construct many custom frames for works that are too large for the rotunda's alcoves, the galleries in the 1992 annex addition host many contemporary exhibits.

The Guggenheim Museum has also found ways to exhibit works that are too long for the alcoves by displaying them directly over the alcoves, extending across the bays for the length that is necessary for the work, as discussed in Chapter Three. Also, being aware of the problems of having slanted walls in the museum, the curators are selective about which works are exhibited in the rotunda; however, they do not allow it to limit them to specific sizes, nor does it hinder them from displaying a variety of art forms.

The curators and staff of the Guggenheim Museum are innovators who are aware of the difficulties of displaying art in a museum that has a distinct form. They work to create a flexible space that allows visitors to enjoy the museum. Over the decades curators' efforts to continuously question their exhibition techniques and explore other options, instead of assuming one direct path for their exhibition installation, have allowed for the Guggenheim Museum to stand as a forward thinking, contemporary art museum.

In Frank Lloyd Wright's original conception or in its current form, the Guggenheim Museum stands as a beacon driving contemporary curatorial practice. The next two chapters will

provide a detailed analysis of two different exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum and shed light upon how the museum embraces contemporary curatorial techniques.

Chapter III: The Transformation of the Guggenheim Museum into a Playground

*“Gutai aspires to present exhibitions filled with vibrant spirit, exhibitions in which an intense cry accompanies the discovery of the new life of matter.”*⁹⁵

Yoshihara Jiro

Gutai: Splendid Playground opened to the public on February 15 and closed May 8, 2013, was filled with a sense of laughter and enjoyment for all visitors the exhibition, was curated by Alexandra Munroe (Samsung Senior Asian Art Curator at the Guggenheim Museum) and Ming Tiampo (Guest Curator at the Guggenheim Museum and Associate Professor in Art History at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada), exemplifying how the Guggenheim Museum approaches contemporary curatorial practice. Munroe and Tiampo made use of the curator-as-artist mode, added to the Guggenheim Museum’s mission of globalization, sought out new exhibition techniques, and created an immersive environment for viewers. *Gutai: Splendid Playground* is an example of contemporary curatorial thought for other museums to follow.

HISTORY OF GUTAI ART ASSOCIATION:

The *Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai*, or the Concrete Art Association, existed near Osaka, Japan from 1954 to 1972, bringing together artists who wished to challenge traditional Japanese standards for art.⁹⁶ They worked in a variety of mediums, like painting, sculpture, and performance.⁹⁷ After World War II and the fallout of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan by American airstrikes in August 1945, many Japanese artists became reflective and “saw their task as reshaping Japanese society in ways that would protect it against fascism. For them, replacing

⁹⁵ Yoshihara Jiro, “Gutai Art Manifesto,” 1956.

⁹⁶ Joan Kee, “Situating a Singular Kind of ‘Action’: Early Gutai Painting, 1954-1957,” *Oxford Art Journal* 26.2 (2003): 121.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

the wartime aesthetic with a more democratic one was the most pressing post-war—or more precisely, post-fascist—task.”⁹⁸

The avant-garde artists who called themselves Gutai, meaning concrete, sought to replace pre-World War II Japanese social realism with a more expressive form of art. It is important to understand, however, that Gutai did not form just because of the repercussions of the war, it was also due to Yoshihara Jiro’s (1905-1972), the founder of Gutai, interests in modern art and based upon trips he had taken to leading modern art cities like Paris, France.⁹⁹ The Gutai artists sought to express their separation from Japanese nationalism and lead a modern movement that would have global impacts. In the 1940s and early 1950s the Japanese people needed to have something that promised a better future. The Gutai artists provided the people of Japan a new way to represent their culture and a new beginning by going against everything Japan once stood for. This group of artists led by Jiro consisted of 59 members, all of whom were of Japanese descent. The Gutai artists sought to diminish the boundaries between Western and non-Western art and contribute to the discourse of contemporary art. Gutai was about exploring the idea of play and interaction; they wanted to challenge the definition of art.

In Gutai’s 18 years of collaboration they produced paintings, happenings, performances, and interactive works. The Gutai artists did more than produce works of art. Jiro encouraged them to “perform powerful acts of self-expression [;] they also sought to develop autonomy in others—their audience, the general public, and especially children—by provoking them to think,

⁹⁸ Laura Hein, “Reckoning with War in the Museum: Hijikata Teiichi at the Kamakura Museum of Modern Art,” *Critical Asian Studies* 43.1 (2011): 93.

⁹⁹ Alexandra Munroe, interview by Tyler Green, *Modern Art Notes Podcast*, podcast audio, March 21, 2013, <http://manpodcast.com/post/48210484695/>.

create, and imagine for themselves.”¹⁰⁰ Munroe and Tiampo continued Gutai’s objective and expanded their mission of play and education with *Gutai: Splendid Playground*.

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM AND *GUTAI: SPLENDID PLAYGROUND*:

The Guggenheim Museum thoroughly planned *Gutai: Splendid Playground* by working to make it seem an obvious choice to host the first solo Gutai exhibition in the United States in part because it has enough space to fully represent the eclectic group.¹⁰¹ The Guggenheim Museum first opened its doors to the public in 1959, only five years after the Gutai group was created, making a natural historical connection between the two as partners. From its beginning the museum has been interested in expanding and adding to the global nature of modern and contemporary art. Richard Armstrong, Director of the Guggenheim Museum Foundation, noted:

Gutai’s activities (1954-1972) coincided with a transformative period of increased focus on contemporary international art at the Guggenheim. Guided by directors James Johnson Sweeney and Thomas Messer, the museum undertook innovative exhibitions, acquisitions, and an award program based on far-reaching research of America, Asian, and European artists alike. Pursuing these international programs, curator Lawrence Alloway traveled to Japan and met with Gutai artists in 1963, selecting paintings by Yoshihara and Tanaka Atsuko for the *Guggenheim International Award Exhibition* the following year. Another Gutai artist, Kanno Seiko, showed in the exhibition *Contemporary Japanese Art: Fifth Japan Art Festival* at the Guggenheim in 1970. These forays were inspired by an optimistic sense of the postwar avant-garde as an interconnected global community, with artists from around the world pursuing various currents of abstraction and conceptualism.¹⁰²

Armstrong’s remarks underscore the Guggenheim Museum’s argument that it is natural that this exhibition should be displayed in its walls. Munroe and Tiampo exemplified being curators-as-

¹⁰⁰ The Gutai artists were continuously encouraged to take on new approaches towards their work and experiment with their techniques frequently. *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰¹ Munroe and Tiampo, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 9.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

artists when they tied the museum's exhibition to its initial connection to Gutai through Sweeney and Messer. Exhibition designer Melanie Taylor also justified why the Guggenheim Museum hosted this exhibition by stating:¹⁰³

One of the things I realized immediately was that there was a real correspondence between the Frank Lloyd Wright building and Gutai as an art movement. Frank Lloyd Wright was throughout his career looking at organic or natural principles that could inform his arc and his act of putting the spiraling organic space in the middle of the Manhattan city grid was a dramatic gesture and statement and Gutai similarly in moving their work out of the gallery and into the outdoor environment space, was also a radical statement. So, when I looked at those two things together I realized the Guggenheim's rotunda space was really ideally suited for presenting an exhibition of Gutai.¹⁰⁴

The Guggenheim Museum wanted to emphasize the connection because it is what separated their exhibit from previous ones where Gutai works have been displayed. For example, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) recently hosted the exhibition *Tokyo 1955-1970: A New Avant-Garde* (November 2012 to February 2013).¹⁰⁵ This exhibition presented numerous works by Gutai artists, but MoMA did not foreground the exhibition by making historical ties between Gutai and the museum. MoMA instead emphasized the growing interest that Americans have in Japanese culture and art and the strong relationships shared between American and Japanese curators.¹⁰⁶ Also, while the exhibition at MoMA did display works by Gutai artists, it was not an exhibition solely focused upon Gutai.

¹⁰³ An exhibition designer is in charge of the execution of the curators and/or the artists ideas for the exhibition. Typically an exhibition designer works directly with the curator and artist(s) to create the design in the museum or gallery space. For example, if a curator or artist(s) wishes to display a site-specific work, like Sadamasa's *Work (Water)*, then the exhibition designer has to figure out the logistics of the piece and how it will be installed in the museum.

¹⁰⁴ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "How the Guggenheim Installed 'Work (Water)' in Gutai Splendid Playground, *YouTube* video, 1:22, March 27, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fesZsOc_4bE. The Guggenheim Museum, "Guggenheim Exhibition Designer Melanie Taylor Describes Gutai's Design Concept," *YouTube* video, 1:38, February 25, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EJYF07yKlg>.

¹⁰⁵ Doryun Chong, *Tokyo 1955-1970: A New Avant-Garde* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 18.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Gutai: Splendid Playground transported viewers into a world that appeared to be natural for the space of the Guggenheim Museum because of the strong connection the curators shared with Gutai's mission "to think boldly and to act freely".¹⁰⁷

For Gutai, postwar Japan's most influential avant-garde collective, art was a liberating force for all society, and self-expression was a necessary ethical stance against the habits of wartime totalitarianism and reconstruction-era conformism. We take our title [for the exhibition] from the words of Gutai artist Shiraga Kazuo (1924-2008) who declared the world "a splendid playground." On behalf of the Guggenheim Museum's *Gutai* Project Team, we would like to express the sense of privilege that we have all felt in becoming a part of that extraordinary world, which has inspired us to reimagine the contours of art, of museum installation, even of art history.¹⁰⁸

Upon entering Wright's striking rotunda, viewers encountered a sense of childhood and what it felt like to play. They found themselves surrounded by jewel-like colors and laughter filled the rotunda. After experiencing the compression of the low overhang at the museum's entrance and then the release of space as it opens into the rotunda, viewers were greeted by Motonaga Sadamasa's (1922-2011) *Work (Water)* (originally created in 1956, reimaged in 2013), where the sun from the oculus beamed into the white rotunda along with bright blue, red, yellow, orange, green, and purple (figure 13).¹⁰⁹ The colors were suspended in air in clear plastic, filling the void of the rotunda and draping ever so elegantly from the parapet walls, reminding viewers of childhood summers spent freely in the sun. Taylor revealed that it was the curators' decision to place Sadamasa's *Work (Water)* as a site-specific piece. However, it was Taylor's work with Sadamasa that determined his installation would hang in the void of the

¹⁰⁷ Alexandra Munroe, interview by Tyler Green, *Modern Art Notes Podcast*, podcast audio, March 21, 2013, <http://manpodcast.com/post/48210484695/>.

¹⁰⁸ Alexandra Munroe and Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Splendid Playground* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2013), 11.

¹⁰⁹ Many of the works were refabricated for the exhibition because of the temporary nature of many Gutai works. The other alternative would have been to provide photographic documentation of the original performance or site-specific piece.

rotunda (figure 14). Taylor summarized the connection that the Guggenheim shares with Sadamasa's site-specific installation:

The Guggenheim was unusual that it offers this large rotunda space with the gallery spiraling around it so you really do have the opportunity to see all of these works in time and space against each other and not just in the linear narrative of the exhibition. Because Gutai artists were often installing their work in unconventional spaces there's a real provisionality to how things are installed. Things are propped, draped, staked in the ground, hanging, and so we really wanted to capture that spirit in the exhibition because many of the works demonstrate that quality and we wanted the exhibition architecture to be a part of that as well.¹¹⁰

The curators selected a strong piece to greet viewers and encouraged them to continue through the exhibition with the liveliness that Sadamasa's work captured.

After taking in the jewel-like drops suspended above their heads, visitors then realized the energy and vibration of the building, as the liveliness of the exhibition breathed life into the it. I witnessed visitors scurrying about with excitement and glee; this exhibition met the goal of inspiring happiness.

Before viewers could enter the exhibit located on the winding ramp in Wright's rotunda, they experienced another Gutai work that spoke to the collective art group's mission for creativity. Viewers were encouraged to draw on Jiro's *Please Draw Freely* (1956, refabricated 2013) (figure 15). The museum label specified:

Visitors to art exhibitions typically expect to be dazzled by the creativity of others. The Gutai group reminds us of the importance of creativity and freedom in our own lives—in the way we think and in the way we act. We invite visitors help make this ephemeral interactive painting, newly re-created for the Guggenheim. Please take a marker, and please draw freely (figure 16).¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, exhibition label for "Please Draw Freely" by Yoshihara Jiro, 1956 (refabricated in 2013) shown at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum *Gutai: Splendid Playground*.

Viewers were instructed to create their own work and be inspired, making viewers embody the Gutai way of making, thinking, and creating. The refabrication of *Please Draw Freely* made use of the curator-as-artist mode by making viewers understand how Gutai artists approached their work and encouraged their participation in creating a “great work of art,” which in return challenged the notion of what is a “great work of art.”

Jiro wished to “rebuild his life, his home, his career—and the artworld” after returning home from World War II.¹¹² Jiro explained that, “An innovative idea not seen in the prewar period must rise in the painting world, something akin to Dada that emerged after World War I.”¹¹³ The curators decided to highlight this aspect of Jiro’s art by placing *Please Draw Freely* as one of the first pieces visitors would experience, allowing them to contribute to Jiro’s painting, altering the art world’s perception of a painting.¹¹⁴ Jiro was an artist who encouraged his Gutai colleagues to think outside the box and the Guggenheim Museum did the same for their viewers, reminding them before they walked up the spiraling ramp that the exhibit would be unlike those at any other museum.

When visitors began to ascend up the ramp they heard noises echoing throughout the rotunda, starting from the top of the museum and reverberating all the way down to the ground floor.¹¹⁵ The sounds differed from the normal conversational mumble that reverberates throughout the museum: a series of bells rang periodically, and a faint low tone came from the very top of the museum. These sounds worked so well with the shape of the museum that visitors wanted to know more and explore, the same way that the Gutai artists encouraged

¹¹² Munroe and Tiampo, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 48.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

viewers to explore in their exhibitions in Japan, as demonstrated in the photographs and videos displayed in the High Gallery.

Visitors were directed to begin their journey through the rotunda from the bottom floor and make their way to the top by walking up the winding ramp; as noted in Chapter Two, this is opposite to Wright's intent. The first space encountered was the High Gallery, the only rectangular room in the rotunda. In this gallery viewers saw moving projected images and videos from previous Gutai exhibitions. By revealing how Gutai works were previously exhibited, the curators made use of the curator-as-artist mode by entertaining and educating the viewers. These photographs showed how the works were interacted with originally. For example, Sadamasa's *Work (Water)* (1956 version) was shown in a video where visitors to the outdoor exhibition were seen playing with plastic tubes filled with colored water that had been strung between trees like brushstrokes suspended in air.¹¹⁶ Sometimes visitors jumped up and grabbed the colors above them, making the plastic bounce and move, creating interaction and engagement for viewers of the time. Munroe and Tiampo's decision to display previous ways that the Gutai artists installed their work furthered the museum's connection with the Gutai artists and added to viewers' understanding of how their works originally functioned.

Also located in the High Gallery, and continuing viewers' immersive experience, was Yamazaki Tsuruko's *Work (Red Cube)* (1956) (figure 17). The curators wanted viewers to:

[i]magine that postwar Japan was a scene of rubble, a scene of no color. The radicality of these bright primary colors that had not been seen in Japan for decades and color is a very vital part of Gutai's understanding of material. Material and color were inseparable. As

¹¹⁶ Alexandra Munroe and Ming Tiampo, "Montonaga Sadamasa, *Work (Water)*," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum audio, 0.41. Accessed on October 3, 2013, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/4495/3>.

we step into Yamazaki's *Red Cube* we ourselves are immersed or bathed in this pure redness that is illuminated by the common stage lights that are installed in each corner.¹¹⁷

Work (Red Cube), made of wood, vinyl and light bulbs, was installed in the High Gallery so that visitors had to duck to enter it, encountering the work with their bodies, requiring a physical action to experience the pure red glowing all around them.

After viewers understood how Gutai artists approached the display of their work, they resumed their ascent up the rotunda to see how Munroe and Tiampo interpreted Gutai's full body of work. Munroe and Tiampo decided to address a particular issue raised in Gutai's work on each floor of the rotunda while maintaining a chronological display. As the visitors ascended through the museum, there was a description on every level, explaining the works viewers were about to experience. The didactics provided viewers with a knowledge base before they experienced Gutai's work because it is complex and challenges what average viewers might believe about art.

The levels of the rotunda were broken down into categories as follows:¹¹⁸

- 1) Play: An Uninhibited Act
- 2) Concept: Can a Piece of Cloth Be a Work of Art?
- 3) Network: To Introduce Our Works to the World
- 4) The Concrete: The Scream of Matter Itself
- 5) Performance Painting: Pictures with Time and Space
- 6) Environment: Gutai Art for the Space Age

This exhibition included 25 of the 59 Gutai artists and displayed 145 works of art. As viewers ascended, the type of work changed and viewers' knowledge grew as they continued through the exhibition. Given the difficult nature of Gutai's work, the separation of space allowed viewers to

¹¹⁷ Alexandra Munroe and Ming Tiampo, "Yamazaki Tsuruko, *Work (Red Cube)*," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum audio, 0.41. Accessed on October 3, 2013, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/4495/3>.

¹¹⁸ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "Guggenheim Museum Presents *Gutai: Splendid Playground*," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed on October 13, 2013, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/press-room/releases/5197-gutai>.

organize the various aspects of Gutai's art mentally and create an overall understanding about some of the contributing artists.

After an introduction to key concepts on the first level, viewers encountered Atsuko Tanaka's (1932-2005) *Work (Yellow Cloth)* (1955), which was literally three pieces of yellow cloth placed on the wall (figure 18). The curators wrote:

Tanaka's conceptual works using simple sheets of cloth garnered praise for pushing the limits of painting and redefining beauty. Questioning the minimal conditions for works of art, Tanaka created *Yellow Cloth* out of lengths of commercially dyed fabric, hung like monochrome paintings on the wall. The only artistic intervention can be seen at the seams, where Tanaka cut and glued the cloth. Otherwise, the work bears no mark of the artist's hand—no paint, no canvas, no signature.¹¹⁹

Tanaka's *Work (Yellow Cloth)* demonstrated how the Gutai collaborative challenged notions of art and was a prime example of what art may be. By placing this work at the beginning of the exhibition, the curators allowed viewers' to consider how Gutai artists approached their work and the ideologies behind their art, hopefully experiencing "the simple amazement Yoshihara [Jiro] so highly praised."¹²⁰ Since *Work (Yellow Cloth)* was frequently praised in the Gutai art community, it made sense that Munroe and Tiampo would feature Tanaka's work as one of the first pieces viewers saw in the exhibition as they climbed the ramp, while also adding the question "can a piece of cloth be a work of art?" to further explain to visitors how Gutai challenged the notion of what constitutes art.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ The curators carefully selected this piece to exemplify how Tanaka challenged notions of what art was at the time. The selection of this piece is important to understanding how Tanaka approached her works with a questioning nature, always searching for a new understanding of what art could be. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "Concept: Can a piece of cloth be a work of art?," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed on October 11, 2013, <http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/gutai/>.

¹²⁰ Munroe and Tiampo, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 144.

¹²¹ Ibid.

As viewers continued through the exhibition, the extensive planning that went into it became evident. Viewers experienced works like Tanaka's *Work (Bell)* (1955), which was originally installed at the *First Gutai Art Exhibition* in October 1955 (figure 19). The viewers were instructed by a handwritten sign stating, "Please push this button," and after the button was pressed a shrill series of bells rang in the gallery. This work stimulated viewer engagement and required viewers' interaction, which is frequently seen in Tanaka's work. The curators allowed visitors to interact with the work in the museum, furthering the notion of the curator-as-artist, and also reproducing the originality of Tanaka's work. When *Work (Bell)* was reimaged in the Guggenheim Museum (2013), a gallery attendant demonstrated it every 40 minutes. The series of bells that rang throughout the museum changed pitch with every step of escalation, echoing through the building, affecting the audience's bodies and senses as the sound reverberated through the museum.

As viewers walked along the wall where *Work (Bell)* was installed, they viewed a series of Tanaka's original drawings and plans that explained and described her process of creating the work. The presence of these drawings exemplified the curators' idea that they wanted viewers to understand how "she conceived of the wired bells as an acoustic 'hem' encircling the galleries and approached the installation as a painting incorporating time and space."¹²² The drawings encouraged a deeper understanding of the work, clarifying its history and evolution as it was installed in the Guggenheim Museum.

The next work that furthered the goals of contemporary curating was the series of paintings installed on the fourth and fifth floors of the rotunda. These paintings were expressive and lively, demonstrating Gutai's use of color as one of the strengths of the whole body of their

¹²² Ibid., 115.

work. A statement from Jiro best addressed how Gutai artists approached paintings installed in exhibitions, “Gutai aspires to present exhibitions filled with vibrant spirit, exhibitions in which an intense cry accompanies the discovery of the new life of matter.”¹²³ In addition paintings, a life-size recreation of Murakami Saburo’s *Passing Through* (1956) was on the fifth floor (figure 20). In the original performance of this piece, Saburo ran through twenty-one paper screens before collapsing at the end with a concussion.¹²⁴ Saburo’s physical interaction with the work pushed the boundaries of what art could be and, unlike Tanaka’s *Work (Yellow Cloth)*, the artist’s mark was fully present. This life-size recreation of the act spanned two bays in the rotunda and made viewers feel as if they were present at the original performance, running with Saburo and contributing to his act of violence. This again reinforced how the curators’ were acting as curators-as-artist because it immersed the viewer into the work. The curators deliberately selected the large size of Saburo’s recreation to enhance this effect.

The curators wanted Saburo’s *Passing Through* to illustrate “The destruction of painting itself and the destruction of cerebral construction of art as it had been known in the history and practice of modernism.”¹²⁵ Munroe stated that the Gutai artists were trying to overcome the attitudes about what painting was during the 1950s and attempted to end the ideology of modernism.¹²⁶ By displaying *Passing Through* as a life-size print, Munroe and Tiampo highlighted Gutai’s attitude and their reflection upon modern art.

¹²³ Yoshihara Jiro, “Gutai Art Manifesto,” 1956.

¹²⁴ Munroe and Tiampo, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 144.

¹²⁵ Alexandra Munroe, interview by Tyler Green, *Modern Art Notes Podcast*, podcast audio, March 21, 2013, <http://manpodcast.com/post/48210484695/>.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

The rest of the paintings installed throughout the rotunda were just as involved with the viewer's body as Saburo's *Passing Through*. Munroe and Tiampo wanted to embody how Gutai artists worked, revealing their processes and the physicality of their work, as well as allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the Gutai mission of color:

Aspiring to liberate painting from the museum, the wall, the frame, and even the paintbrush, Gutai artists moved in radical directions, going so far as to abandon the conventional word for painting in Japanese, *kaiga*, in favor of the more elastic *e*, or literally, "pictures." Early experiments focusing at first on process, investigating a variety of both art and nonart materials, ultimately resulted in "performance paintings" that incorporate time and space into their very being. . . . Gutai artists sought to overcome the boundaries of painting to create pictures that assimilate time and space. Murakami described their revolt as follows: "Gutai's will for discovery demands not only spatiality but also temporality in order to give a full aesthetic impact. Discarding the frame, getting off the walls, shifting from immobile time to lived time, we aspire to create a new painting."¹²⁷

As discussed in Chapter Two, Wright predicted that the Guggenheim Museum would be freeing to artists and would change how they would approach their canvases, as it turned out, he was completely correct. The Gutai artists freed themselves from size, shape, canvas, and even medium. As displayed in the Guggenheim Museum, their works only furthered Wright's idea about how art should function in the museum and fulfilled Wright's original intentions of how the exhibition space should be used.

The Gutai performance paintings were displayed with a video streaming on the inside parapet wall, facing the center of the rotunda. For example Akira Kanayama's (1924-2006) *Work* (1957) was placed in the bay on the exterior wall of the rotunda and a television streaming a video of Kanayama producing the work was seen on the inside wall (figure 21). The video showed how an automated electric toy-car device dripped paint onto the canvas (figure 22).¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Munroe and Tiampo, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 167.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 180.

The method the curators used of showing how the work was made added to their overall theme of how Gutai's work involved play and provided a primary source document about how Kanayama worked. By providing Kanayama's performance, the curators were furthering the curator-as-artist mode by creating an immersive experience for the viewers.

After viewers experienced the process of performance painting, they viewed another work that was not standard practice for artists at the time, *Gutai Card Box*, made by the Gutai Art Association (1962) (figure 23). The *Gutai Card Box* was placed later in the exhibition because all the previous works provided insight on how to understand this work. When originally exhibited in the 11th *Gutai Art Exhibition*, the *Gutai Card Box* was an interactive vending machine that dispensed original artworks in the form of hand-painted cards.¹²⁹

The *Gutai Card Box* was originally designed so one of the Gutai artists would stand inside the "machine" and dispense cards to those who pushed the button. Originally all of the proceeds collected through the *Gutai Card Box* were donated to a children's charity.¹³⁰ When this work was placed in the Guggenheim Museum, a gallery attendant stood beside it exchanging visitors' one U.S. dollar bills for a ten-yen coin; visitors could then place the coin in the machine and receive a postcard with an original Gutai design on it (figure 24). A gallery attendant stood inside the "machine" and dispensed the cards.¹³¹ In *Gutai*, Munroe and Tiampo worked with Mukai Shuji and the proceeds were donated to Ashinaga, Japan in support of its Tohoku Rainbow House project.¹³²

¹²⁹ Ibid., 99.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 11.

Munroe and Tiampo displayed this work knowing that it would require viewer interaction, again furthering the curator-as-artist mode through immersion. They wrote in the exhibition catalogue “*Gutai Card Box*, conceived as a comment on increasing automation in society, sought to democratize art.”¹³³ By including *Gutai Card Box* in the exhibition, the curators used this piece as a culmination of Gutai’s idea of how art should engage viewers.

The exhibition concluded as viewers descended from the rotunda in Wright’s semi-circular elevator. In the elevator, visitors were immersed in Mukai Shuji’s (b. 1939) dramatic, erratic black paint markings (2013) (figure 25). The last impression viewers received was of total submersion into the world of Gutai. This work transformed the semi-circular elevator, surrounding viewers with art. Viewers were free to interact with the work and fully experience Gutai.

CRITIQUES OF *GUTAI: SPLENDID PLAYGROUND*:

Gutai: Splendid Playground exemplified modes of contemporary curatorial practice through the use of engagement and the immersion created by the ties between the design of the museum and the unique art of Gutai. Through the concept of play the curators created an experience that made viewers felt as if they were relaxing and learning at the same time, the same experience that Wright would have encouraged in the museum. *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith acknowledged the curators’ attempts to elevate audience engagement by stating, “Whatever else you may think of these pieces, they relocate some of the origins of participatory

¹³³ Ibid., 99.

art, so much the rage today. While the Guggenheim's show also looks back, it does so with memorable panache and immediacy. Its revisions stand an excellent chance of sticking."¹³⁴

While there were negative reviews about the exhibition, the positives outweighed the negatives. Janet Koplos from *Art in America* recognized that the exhibition was a "blast of innovation and individualistic engagement," but critiqued the exhibition because many of the works were refabrications of the originals.¹³⁵ Ming and Tiampo acted as curators-as-artists by recreating the Gutai experience instead of only providing viewers with documented acts of the works. Since many of the works were reproductions used in the exhibition, it allowed viewers to be able to experience Gutai's work first hand, something that would not have occurred without them. The alternative to having reproductions of original pieces would have been to provide photographic documentation from the works' first installation. However, this would have limited the curator-as-artist's involvement because it would have detracted from audience engagement. The curators provided primary documents throughout *Gutai* to support the refabrications, as seen in Tanaka's *Work (Bell)*. The critical response seen within Koplos' review reflects how there are changes occurring within contemporary curatorial discourse that are not yet agreed upon.

The Guggenheim Museum and staff rose to the occasion and beautifully recreated many Gutai works that elevated audience engagement and provided a unique experience in the museum. Ming and Tiampo reinterpreted the works, and placed them appropriately to the specificities of the Guggenheim Museum's space, and still took into careful consideration the history of the works and the tie Gutai has with the museum. While there were alterations to the

¹³⁴ Roberta Smith, "The Seriousness of Fun in Postwar Japan," *New York Times*, 14 February 2013.

¹³⁵ Janet Koplos, "Gutai: Splendid Playground," *Art in America*, 3 April 2013.

works, the curators were keen to work with the artists who were still living, and friends and families of those deceased, to reproduce the original atmosphere that Gutai strove for between 1954-1972.¹³⁶ Munroe and Tiampo strove to recreate the original experience of Gutai's exhibitions in Osaka, Japan.

As a contemporary curatorial project, *Gutai: Splendid Playground* encouraged interaction and engagement and took advantage of the building design, immersing viewers in an experience that led to a greater understanding of the Gutai Art Association, which reveals how the curators functioned as curators-as-artists. Munroe and Tiampo presented the Gutai artists in a manner that was appropriate and respectful. However, this exhibition did more than respect the Gutai artists, the curators highlighted the work of the Gutai in an insightful manner, revealing new ideas in contemporary curating, which, in the words of Yoshihara Jiro, "Do[es] what has never been done before!"¹³⁷ Munroe and Tiampo acted as curators-as-artists through the layout of the exhibition and by elevating audience engagement. The next chapter will examine how the Guggenheim Museum furthered their contemporary curatorial endeavors for the artist James Turrell by creating a unique exhibition that will never again be viewed in the manner it was seen in their space.

¹³⁶ The curators stated, "Our understanding of Gutai's art and times was also enhanced through the kindness and friendship of the Gutai members and their families, who took us into their homes and shared their insights and memories with us." Munroe and Tiampo, *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, 9-11.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 10.

Chapter IV: The Master of Light Meets America's Master of Architecture: James Turrell at the Guggenheim Museum

*"James Turrell calls his art nonvicarious art because it can only truly be experienced firsthand. So all of the descriptions and photographs that you may see of it are somehow less than the real experience of the work."*¹³⁸

Nat Trotman

Known for his association with the California Light and Space Movement, James Turrell (b. 1943) has spent his career as an artist manipulating space and light to create an interest in the "sight of seeing."¹³⁹ In the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's exhibition *James Turrell: A Retrospective* (June 21-September 25, 2013), the sight of seeing was highlighted by a drastic, daring, and immersive transformation of the rotunda. It created an experience that was unique to the building and for viewers. Curators Nat Trotman (Associate Curator at the Guggenheim Museum) and Carmen Giménez (Curator of Twentieth-Century Art at the Guggenheim Museum) were able to bring Turrell's *Aten Reign* (2013), whose title refers to the divine sun disk of ancient Egyptian myth, and the Guggenheim Museum together in one of the greatest collaborations ever witnessed between two works of art (figure 26). This is a primary example of contemporary curatorial practice.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "James Turrell Video Transcript," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed October 15, 2013, http://media.guggenheim.org/content/pdf/new_york/exhibition/turrell_transcript.pdf.

¹³⁹ James Turrell has been frequently quoted saying that his work is about the "sight of seeing." This expression explains how Turrell's work is expressive of the idea of seeing, instead of the actual process. Richard Andrews, *James Turrell: Sensing Space* (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, 1992), 9.

¹⁴⁰ Nat Trotman, "Introduction," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum audio, 0.57. Accessed on October 16, 2013, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/4819/3>.

JAMES TURRELL'S BACKGROUND:

To fully understand Turrell's work it is important to know how his background that allowed him to formulate the ideas present in his art. Turrell completed his undergraduate studies at Pomona College in 1965 with a degree in psychology and mathematics.¹⁴¹ Turrell's knowledge of these subjects is what allows him to have a keen understanding of how to formulate his pieces and also how a person's mind will perceive his works. In 1973 Turrell completed his Master's in Fine Arts at Claremont Graduate School in Claremont, California, where his artistic career began.¹⁴² Turrell emerged as an artist at a time when many American artists such as Donald Judd and Frank Stella were using simplified forms. A new form of art was formulated at this time and was later called Minimalism. While Turrell is not classified as a Minimalist, he was directly influenced by their approach and applied the idea of minimal forms to his work.¹⁴³

While the theme of light has preoccupied artists for centuries-Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) wrote volumes about the importance of light and its impact on how artists render nature-Turrell has dedicated his whole life's work to light. Turrell is committed to his work and has proven this by his dedication to *Roden Crater*, which has been an ongoing project since 1972.¹⁴⁴ *Roden Crater* is a natural volcanic crater located in the Painted Desert of southeastern Arizona

¹⁴¹ James Turrell, "James Turrell: About," James Turrell, accessed on October 19, 2013, <http://rodencrater.com/james>.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Jennifer MacNair Stitt, ed., *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in association with the Museum of Fine Art of Houston and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2013. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Art of Houston, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, New York, 5.

¹⁴⁴ James Turrell, "Roden Crater," James Turrell, accessed on October 26, 2013, <http://jamesturrell.com/roden-crater/roden-crater/introduction/>.

that Turrell is transforming into a large-scale work through the medium of light (figure 27).¹⁴⁵

Roden Crater exemplifies the artist's dedication to his medium of light and also his willingness to transform unlikely spaces into works of art, making the void of the rotunda at the Guggenheim Museum a prime area for *Aten Reign* (2013).

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM AND *JAMES TURRELL: A RETROSPECTIVE*

James Turrell: A Retrospective was part of a series of exhibitions that occurred at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, New York; Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas; and Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los Angeles, California. All three of these exhibitions were held in conjunction with each other during the summer of 2013. These three museums introduced Turrell as an artist who is interested not only in light, but also in viewers' perception of light and its impact upon the body.

About *Aten Reign* Turrell said:

The idea that I've always been working with is this relation to inside to outside, from picture plane to in front of it and behind it, and this is a show that begins to continue that. You can see the physicality and feel light occupying space at the same time. You can come and see its advance toward it and have it disintegrate into its more ephemeral nature. Light is not like clay, you don't form it with the hands, you can't carve it away like wood, or chip it away like stone, or even assemble it through welding. It's almost like making the instrument first, as you see here this is quite an instrument, and then I determine to play it and to have it perform. The fact that if you put the shape of light on the wall it wouldn't reside on the wall, it had to be either looked at slightly forward of it or maybe almost holding it out. So this idea that was light is no longer something that illuminated other things, but was some thing itself that we see in that manner, was important to me. We have a full vision of the eyes closed in the dream with sometimes greater lucidity and greater resolution than with the eyes open. This light is not unfamiliar to us, it's just that we don't very often see it that way with our eyes open. So I'm interested to in some way to remind us that we do have this other seeing.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Blouin Artinfo, "James Turrell Makes the Guggenheim Glow," *Youtube* video, 2:15, June 25, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmL-l-sE2Yc>.

The exhibition opened at the Guggenheim Museum June 21, 2013 and closed on September 25, 2013 with a record breaking attendance of over 470,000 people.¹⁴⁷ Part of the explanation for this high attendance may be because it was Turrell's first exhibition in New York since his 1980 mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, but it was primarily because of how Turrell's work engaged the human body and viewers' perceptions of space and color.

Aten Reign has many commonalities with the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum. The curators recognized the similarity between the two and showcased this idea at the exhibition. In 1943 Hilla Rebay, Solomon R. Guggenheim's art director, requested to Wright to design a museum that was a "temple of spirit." In response, Wright designed the rotunda.¹⁴⁸ By relating *Aten Reign* to the history of the space, they exemplified the curator-as-artist mode. Trotman reflected upon the correlation between the rotunda and *Aten Reign* and how both make use of natural light.¹⁴⁹

There are a lot of similarities between Frank Lloyd Wright and James Turrell's vision of the world. Although Wright obviously was creating buildings and Turrell was creating light experiences. Both were very interested in the natural world and in harnessing natural light, especially in their work, as evidence in the design of the Guggenheim.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Judith Dobrzynski, "Turrell Shines at the Guggenheim, As Expected," accessed on October 2, 2013, <http://www.artsjournal.com/realcleararts/2013/10/turrell-shines-at-the-guggenheim-as-expected.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Jennifer MacNair Stitt, ed., *James Turrell: A Retrospective*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in association with the Museum of Fine Art of Houston and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2013. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Art of Houston, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, New York, 5.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "James Turrell and Frank Lloyd Wright's Shared Vision at the Guggenheim Museum," *Youtube* video, 2:13, July 3, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4L36y_k_7gU.

Giménez and Trotman tied the original idea behind the Guggenheim Museum, the temple of spirit, to Turrell's piece *Aten Reign*, which was the focus piece in the exhibition.¹⁵¹ By tying the museum to Rebay's powerful notion that the museum should function as a temple and grounding it with the founders' wishes, the Guggenheim Museum was setting up an experience that was in the present, but one with the past. Giménez stated:

Turrell has risen to a wide range of artistic challenges that have stimulated his curiosity and imagination. When he accepted the invitation to exhibit his work at the Guggenheim Museum, he could not have been indifferent to the peculiar shape designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The helical ramp in a truncated conical structure is rather like a volcano, a ziggurat, or the centrifugal and centripetal structures of the great Roman Baroque architecture of Gianlorenzo Bernini and Francesco Borromini, in which a vertical beam of light is shot through by transversal rays. Given the characteristics of Turrell's work, this exhibition is not restricted to the usual format of an anthological series of artworks. It is instead an installation in itself—one that transforms the space into a luminous experience, a sort of glowing ember, and a radiant entity that dissolves the border between the external and the internal. The complex organism designed by Wright has certainly never shone as it does with Turrell. No one who visits it can fail to be struck by the weightless, transfiguring grace of light.¹⁵²

Wright wished to free artists from rectilinear spaces and *Aten Reign* accomplished this.¹⁵³

The Guggenheim Museum's circular design freed Turrell and other artists from square or rectangular wall planes, making *Aten Reign* a possibility. Once viewers felt the intensity of Turrell's meditative work, which took advantage of the curved walls of the museum's interior, the notion of the temple of spirit is felt in viewers' bodies; it creates a somatic experience. Once

¹⁵¹ Carmen Giménez and Nat Trotman. *James Turrell*. New York, NY, in association with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2013. Published in conjunction with the exhibition *James Turrell: A Retrospective* in (New York, New York, 2013), 5.

¹⁵² Ibid., 24.

¹⁵³ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith With an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-1959," June 21, 2013.

viewers reckon with Turrell's understanding of sight, they become active participants in seeing, only then can they begin to comprehend his masterpiece *Aten Reign*.¹⁵⁴

When Tom Krens, the Solomon R. Guggenheim's then director, approached Giménez in 2007 and asked her to co-curate the exhibition she stated her initial reaction was:

I immediately said yes because I thought of the Guggenheim as a volcano and I thought that's the perfect place where I could transform the whole inside of the Guggenheim. Turrell was not an artist for the ramp; he was definitely an artist for the void. I was very clear that it has to be a piece that you see from the rotunda, where he was going to mix daylight with electric light in a completely very personal, special way.¹⁵⁵

Aten Reign was a work that could not have been conceived without Giménez and Trotman's interactions without their understanding of the museum. *James Turrell* was made possible through the collaboration of the whole museum staff, from curators to engineers. Without the curators' understanding of the museum and ideas of how Turrell's work should appear in the museum, *Aten Reign* might have never been created.

Upon entering the Guggenheim Museum viewers were immediately faced with the transformation of the museum. No longer did viewers experience Wright's original design of compression and expansion. There was no flood of light from the oculus; instead there was a dimly lit room where the original admission desk had been replaced with a smaller structure because of the temporary wall to viewer's left, which concealed *Aten Reign*. The curator-as-artist concept is seen through the drastic transformation of the museum. Through the curators' willingness to be innovative with the museum space they were able to provide the viewers with a unique experience that would never be seen again. Trotman noted:

¹⁵⁴ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "James Turrell Video Transcript," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed October 15, 2013, http://media.guggenheim.org/content/pdf/new_york/exhibition/turrell_transcript.pdf.

¹⁵⁵ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "James Turrell Video Transcript," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed October 15, 2013, http://media.guggenheim.org/content/pdf/new_york/exhibition/turrell_transcript.pdf.

His [Turrell's] shimmering and evanescent installations invoke the power of a waking dream, absorbing viewers into their radiant atmospheres through the sparest, if highly exacting, technical means. For his exhibition at the Guggenheim, Turrell has radically transformed the museum in the tradition of his most sweeping, large-scale projects. For the first time, the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed rotunda can be experienced only from below, as a volume of space floating overhead rather than a transparency to be looked across. No objects occupy the rotunda, aside from the structures the artist requires to reveal and amplify the luminous nature of the space.¹⁵⁶

While the temporary walls divided the entering group of people from the visitors viewing *Aten Reign*, the museum felt crowded, signifying the alteration of the space to accommodate the exhibition. Viewers could already feel the grandeur of the exhibition in the small admissions area since a soft glow from *Aten Reign* could be seen. People were stirring about with excitement and curiosity about what would be unveiled once they crossed into Turrell's land of light. The temporary parapet walls gently wrapped around the original Wright structure, sweeping viewers into the ground level of the museum, beginning their immersion in light.

Prior to entering the exhibition, viewers saw didactic information about *Aten Reign*, which placed the audience in the proper frame of mind to view the work. In the didactic Giménez and Trotman stated:

The centerpiece is *Aten Reign* (2013), a major new project the artist created especially for the Guggenheim. One of the most dramatic transformations of the museum ever conceived, the installation recasts Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic architecture—its openness to nature, its graceful curves, its magnificent sense of space and light—as a volume of shifting natural and artificial luminance. For the first time, the building's overlooks are enclosed and visitors experience the rotunda only from the floor; from this vantage the space appears not as an open void but as a massive expanse of dynamic light and color.¹⁵⁷

The curators of the exhibition were creating the setting for what viewers should expect after entering the exhibit. They prepared viewers for how the museum did not appear in the way that

¹⁵⁶ Carmen Giménez and Nat Trotman. *James Turrell*. New York, NY, in association with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2013. Published in conjunction with the exhibition *James Turrell: A Retrospective* (New York, New York, 2013), 29.

¹⁵⁷ Carmen Giménez and Nat Trotman. Exhibition label for *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, shown at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum *James Turrell: A Retrospective*.

Wright designed the space. Also, the curators were allowing viewers the opportunity to see the exhibit through their perspective, by revealing their thinking behind why *Aten Reign* was appropriate for the Guggenheim Museum, furthering the notion of the curator-as-artist.

Once viewers entered the exhibition, they were surrounded by an environment similar to Wright's design, but morphed as soft colors reflected off the interior white surfaces. There was a glow that was projected from the oculus, transforming natural light into artificial light as it filtered through a cylindrical ellipse that filled the void of the rotunda (figure 28). Trotman reflected upon the connection between how Wright and Turrell viewed light by stating:

Wright thought of the Guggenheim as a place where people could come together and have a communal experience that would be aesthetic and pre-linguistic. This gels very well with Turrell's own interests in communal spaces and the idea of meeting together to greet the light in contemplation.¹⁵⁸

Turrell's *Aten Reign* allowed a communal gathering to occur in Wright's rotunda; without Wright's initial concept of natural light flooding the open void of the museum, *Aten Reign* would have never been possible. The largest ellipse began 25 feet above viewers' heads, the work then rose in five concentric rings that grew smaller as they reached the top of the museum.¹⁵⁹ The shape of *Aten Reign* inverted the design of Wright's rotunda, making it larger at the bottom and growing smaller as it reached the top, which is the true form of a Babylonian ziggurat, the original inspiration for the museum's design.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "James Turrell and Frank Lloyd Wright's Shared Vision at the Guggenheim Museum," *Youtube* video, 2:13, July 3, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4L36y_k_7gU.

¹⁵⁹ Christopher George, "How the Guggenheim Installed *Aten Reign*," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, posted on June 21, 2013, accessed on October 13, 2013, <http://www.guggenheim.org/video/how-the-guggenheim-installed-aten-reign>.

¹⁶⁰ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith with an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-59," June 21, 2013.

The curators created an area in the museum for contemplation to occur by providing a space for viewers to recline and experience *Aten Reign*. The first floor of Wright's rotunda was completely transformed. The windows facing Fifth Avenue were blacked out and the only source of natural light, the oculus, was transformed into artificial light through *Aten Reign*. There was a continuous white bench that wrapped around the interior of the circular rotunda, only stopping at the entrance, exit, and Wright's water fountain. The white bench reclined so viewers could enjoy the work in comfort, which related to Wright's idea of how the museum should be a leisurely experience.¹⁶¹ As viewers lay, sat, or stood to view *Aten Reign* they felt immersed in Turrell's work (figure 29). The colors changed ever so subtly, and if viewers blinked they would miss the transformation. By remaining still they were able to experience a 60-minute loop of various colors shifting and changing before them.¹⁶² The mat lying on the center of the floor was circular, fitting the rotunda's shape. It was covered in grey leather that matched Wright's original circular benches, which are usually placed on the first floor and throughout the rotunda.

The conical structure above viewers, *Aten Reign*, filled the void of the usually open rotunda, enclosing the interior of the museum. There was a white sheath covering the exterior of the conical form, not allowing viewers to see the metal structure placed in the rotunda as they walked around the spiraling ramp (figure 30). It would have been a nice component of the exhibition to allow a glimpse of the conical structure at the top of the rotunda so that viewers

¹⁶¹ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, <http://web.guggenheim.org/timeline/index.html>, "Keeping Faith with an Idea: A Time Line of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943-59," June 21, 2013.

¹⁶² Nat Trotman, "Introduction," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum audio, 0.57. Accessed on October 16, 2013, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/4819/3>.

could see the mechanics of *Aten Reign*; however, this is part of Turrell's illusion. This would have given a transparent quality to the exhibition, which was largely missing throughout.

The conical structure was suspended below the rotunda's oculus from the museum's ceiling, which supported the whole structure's weight. The installation process of *Aten Reign* was innovative for the Guggenheim Museum not only because of the way it was installed, but also because of the curators' decision to fill the void of the museum, which furthered the notion of the curator-as-artist because of the curators' involvement in the process, not every decision about the work was completed by Turrell. While other exhibitions like Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), the installation of *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe* (2008), and Maurizio Cattelan's *All* (2011-2012) have engaged with the museum's rotunda, they did not transform Wright's design or alter viewers' experience of the interior the way that *Aten Reign* did.¹⁶³ Not only was the transformation of the museum drastic, but also the lighting system in *Aten Reign* was very complex.

There were thousands of LED lights placed in the ellipses above viewers. The lighting system that controlled the LED fixtures was from Philips Color Kinetics, which is a company that Turrell's assistants frequently work with.¹⁶⁴ LED lights were programmed to change subtly, softly, in an almost undetectable manner, from the top to the bottom of the structure. The Guggenheim Museum's lighting assistant, Brenda Gray, explained the complexity of the lighting system by describing how the media team approached working with the LED fixtures:

So pretty much what we've been doing here is addressing over a 1000 LED fixtures. We've been setting them up tier-by-tier, and even section of tier by section of tier. It is

¹⁶³ Alex Greenberger, "10 Artists Who Electrified the Guggenheim's Rotunda, From Barney to Buren," accessed on November 16, 2013, http://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/10_artists_who_electrified_guggenheim_rotunda.

¹⁶⁴ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "The Lighting System in James Turrell's 'Aten Reign' at the Guggenheim," *Youtube* video, 1:56, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FVhUFtoA78>.

the size of the ovals that are determining how many fixtures are on each. There are two full complete circles on each tier that has lighting. The lighting team has been unpacking a 1000 LED fixtures, labeling them, putting them together, and hooking them up so they can be addressed. So all of the fixtures have a unit number that has been determined by their location. Telling them what their name is in the program so you can call up the fixtures you want individually or in sections.¹⁶⁵

Aten Reign required a complex lighting with an intricate labeling system so the programmers could work with the fixtures and adjust them as needed to achieve the appropriate colors. The top ring was the lightest in color and each tier grew a deeper color as the natural light from the oculus diffused down. The natural and artificial light pouring down on viewers engaged their perception of light and the sensory effect it creates on the human body.

Turrell's work deals explicitly with perception. Turrell explained:

I really felt to be using light as a material [is] to work or affect the medium of perception. For me, it's trying to orient toward what the perception really is, rather than the object of perception, to actually, sort of, remove that. I have an art that has no image. It has no object. And even very little a place of focus, or one place to look. So, without image, without object, without specific focus, what do you have left? Well, a lot of it is this idea of seeing yourself see, understanding how we perceive.¹⁶⁶

The idea of "seeing yourself see" is a concept that Turrell applies to many of his works. To understand what seeing yourself see means, viewers have to submit to Turrell's work and wait. Turrell was raised as a Quaker and Trotman stated, "many of his pieces relate to Quaker meetings where people gather in silent prayer and meditate together until the spirit moves them to speak. So there's a mood of sort of quiet contemplation that comes through many of Turrell's pieces."¹⁶⁷ Seeing yourself see was achieved through this meditative act that was required while viewing *Aten Reign*.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "James Turrell Video Transcript," The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed October 15, 2013, http://media.guggenheim.org/content/pdf/new_york/exhibition/turrell_transcript.pdf.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

As viewers lay with their backs on the floor of the Guggenheim Museum, they felt the warmth and coolness from the colors changing above them. Viewers could sense the quietness that was entailed by this work. People surrounding you were whispering about the ideas behind Turrell's work and wondered about the cosmos and greater ideas. Turrell has commented, "You are immersed in this. It's a little bit like stepping into the painting, but not everybody will sit ten minutes in a darkened room before they can begin to see. And so, in a way, that's sort of self-selecting. I don't mind that."¹⁶⁸ From the viewer's perception *Aten Reign* appeared as a spiritual act of submitting oneself to a higher power, seeking a peaceful moment in time. However, viewers can only reach this mysterious place of contemplation found in Turrell's work if they were willing to wait and experience the art.

Given the nature of Turrell's work, it is difficult to exhibit an abundance of his art in the same enclosed space because the light from one work would impact another. For this reason, there were only a handful of Turrell's works available for the public to see in the Guggenheim Museum. While *Aten Reign* took center stage in the museum and was the highlight of the exhibition, there were four other perceptual works and a series of prints exhibited. The museum showcased a few of Turrell's earlier works in the High Gallery, Annex level two, and Annex level five.

After experiencing *Aten Reign*, viewers walked up the ramp into the High Gallery where they encountered *Ronin* (1968) (figure 31). *Ronin* was a reflection of Turrell's earlier body of work where he explored the *ganzfeld effect*, which was defined as a "total" visual field.¹⁶⁹ Trotman remarked, "His [Turrell's] Shallow Space Constructions emphasize temporality by

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Patrick Beveridge, "Color Perception and the Art of James Turrell," *Leonardo* 33 (2000): 305.

denying instantaneous comprehension and offering dramatically different experiences as viewers move through the space.”¹⁷⁰ *Ronin* is a fluorescent light installation that was placed in the left corner of the High Gallery and viewers were encouraged to approach the work and be immersed in light. *Ronin* appeared as if it eliminated the corner of the room with an explosion of light. The *ganzfeld effect* of this work made viewers find “themselves at times unable to discern whether they were experiencing an eye-based phenomenon, such as a retinally induced color field, or a vision based phenomenon, such as a homogeneous field of colored light at a distance from their eyes.”¹⁷¹ Viewers feel disoriented as they approach many of Turrell’s works.

Afrum I (White) (1967) was located in the annex level 2 of the museum (figure 32).

Afrum I (White) mimics a cube that appeared as if it was floating in space. Trotman stated that:

His [Turrell’s] earlier pieces, which he called Cross Corner Projections, employ high-intensity projectors to create vibrant geometrical forms that seem to hover in space but then, upon closer inspection, appear as simple planes of light straddling the junction of two walls. Among the first of these was *Afrum I (White)* adopts the shape of a glowing white cube suspended halfway up the corner of a room. A work like *Afrum I (White)* should therefore not be understood merely as a projected form, but as a holistic spatial arrangement that includes the nonarchitecture of its surroundings.¹⁷²

The curators placed this work in a corner and, from a distance, the viewers’ perception of the work was altered and you truly believed it was a cube suspended in air. As with many of Turrell’s earlier works dealing with the *ganzfeld effect*, as viewers moved closer to the piece it was revealed that the cube was only a projection and it lost its three-dimensional quality. The curators carefully placed Turrell’s *ganzfeld* works separate from each other, allowing each its

¹⁷⁰ Carmen Giménez and Nat Trotman. *James Turrell*. New York, NY, in association with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2013. Published in conjunction with the exhibition *James Turrell: A Retrospective* (New York, New York, 2013), 33.

¹⁷¹ Patrick Beveridge, “Color Perception and the Art of James Turrell,” *Leonardo* 33 (2000): 305.

¹⁷² Carmen Giménez and Nat Trotman. *James Turrell*. New York, NY, in association with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2013. Published in conjunction with the exhibition *James Turrell: A Retrospective* in New York, New York, 30 & 32.

own room, which is a typical installation technique when dealing with Turrell's work given its nature. The curators allowed each room the breathing space needed for the projected light so there was no interference between works and provided enough room for viewers to approach the work to understand the "sense of space," as Turrell intended.¹⁷³

As I traveled throughout the exhibition, I sensed confusion among the visitors after they exited Annex level two due to the way viewers had to travel through the ramp of the rotunda to get to annex level five. After viewers entered the High Gallery, where *Ronin* was displayed, and entered Annex level two, there were no other works in the *James Turrell* show until you reached Annex level five. Many of the visitors were questioning why there was no art placed on the exterior walls of the rotunda and others were confused about how to travel to Annex level five. Frequently viewers were traveling throughout the exhibition or walking along the ramp of the rotunda puzzled because there was no signage explaining the nature of Turrell's work. The curators should have explained to the visitors through signage how it would have been impossible to install any of Turrell's light and space works in the bays of the rotunda because the flow of light would have disrupted surrounding works. *Aten Reign* disrupted how viewers were supposed to travel naturally through the museum. While the museum did place signage directing viewers to go to Annex level five to view *Night Passage* (1987), which is in the Guggenheim Museum's permanent collection, but has never been exhibited before, there was still a sense of confusion.

Night Passage (figure 33) was the only work exhibited in the Guggenheim Museum that attempted to bridge Turrell's earlier works to *Aten Reign*. *Night Passage* is one of Turrell's Space Division Constructions, where "viewers observe a sensing space through a large opening

¹⁷³ Ibid., 37.

without physically entering it.”¹⁷⁴ This work featured a bifurcated room where visitors peered through a large opening in a partitioned wall with light fixtures flanking the opening in the room, which created “blushes of electrical light in the viewing space.”¹⁷⁵ In this work what originally looked like a flat wall with a projection on it, viewers began to sense depth in the room, only to realize there was another room behind the wall that was separate from the viewer.¹⁷⁶ Turrell noted about *Night Passage* that it:

Has nothing of itself, and it looks out onto another space, as with a camera. It takes all its energy from this other space, through an opening or an aperture. The room isn’t empty and there’s something in there—a quality of light that’s very different than the quality of light that’s in the room you inhabit.¹⁷⁷

Night Passage required unique exhibition techniques to create a space to accommodate the work. The Guggenheim Museum has never displayed this work prior to this exhibition, however, for *James Turrell* the curators provided a deeper insight into the museum’s willingness to exhibit works that require unique installation techniques, further demonstrating the curator-as-artist mode. Trotman believed that:

Perhaps the strongest precedent for *Aten Reign* lies in Turrell’s Space Division Constructions, in which viewers observe a sensing space through a large opening without physically entering it. In *Iltar* (1976) [a Space Division Construct similar to *Night Passage*, both works produce the same effect upon viewers], one of the earliest of these installations, the rectangular aperture appears to be a solid gray-green panel on an otherwise neutral wall. As visitors approach, however, what looked like a panel slowly acquires a sense of depth, with a misty ambience filling an unquantifiable space behind the quality of the space on the other side to be materially different from that in which they stand. A perceptual skin forms across the aperture; while intangible, it is

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, “James Turrell Collection,” accessed on November 14, 2013, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/4096>.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Carmen Giménez and Nat Trotman. *James Turrell*. New York, NY, in association with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2013. Published in conjunction with the exhibition *James Turrell: A Retrospective* (New York, New York, 2013), 37.

nevertheless physical, created solely in the eye by the variation in light between the two spaces.¹⁷⁸

Typically when works like Turrell's *Space Division Constructions* are installed in a museum it is a permanent installation, as seen with Turrell's *Danaë* (1983) at The Mattress Factory museum of art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (figure 34).¹⁷⁹ Through the dedication of the Guggenheim Museum's staff, *Night Passage* was made possible in a temporary exhibition.

The Guggenheim Museum sought new exhibition techniques, as seen with *Aten Reign*, and made use of complex installation processes with *Night Passage*, which provided viewers with an immersive experience into Turrell's idea of what "sensing space" is. The curators and museum staff worked extensively with the artist to create a drastic transformation of the museum interior. It is undeniable that their techniques are among the most avant-garde of contemporary museums and contribute to the dialogue of the curator-as-artist. While exhibiting artists may see the interior of the museum as a challenge, the curators embraced the curvilinear lines of the museum and became inspired by its shape. The curators carefully selected works that complimented the design of the building, and in so doing expanded the Guggenheim Museum's engagement with contemporary curatorial thinking.

When installed in the Guggenheim Museum, James Turrell's work embodied Wright's ideas of natural light and the design of the building, and expanded upon the origin of the museum, which highlighted contemporary curatorial thinking, especially the curator-as-artist mode. The curators carefully planned for the installation of *Aten Reign*, drastically transforming the museum to the point that the interior of the rotunda no longer appeared like Wright's original

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ The Mattress Factory, "James Turrell," The Mattress Factory Art Museum, accessed on November 16, 2013, <http://www.mattress.org/index.cfm?event=ShowArtist&eid=45&id=216&c=>.

design. Through their willingness to seek out new exhibition techniques, Carmen Giménez, Nat Trotman, and the Guggenheim Museum staff exemplified the necessary elements for contemporary curating. The Guggenheim Museum was representative of the curator-as-artist mode in this exhibition through the flexibility in space, the immersive experience for viewers, and new approaches towards exhibition techniques. Through the combination of these ideas the Guggenheim Museum created an experience that was exciting and immersive for the museum staff and most importantly, the viewers.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary curating is undeniably flexible and innovative, changing with the needs of contemporary art. While it may be impossible to use the Guggenheim Museum as a model for contemporary curatorial practice, because the museum is well endowed and presents a unique architectural experience, nonetheless it demonstrates a forward-oriented approach towards contemporary curating. Their conceptual approach can serve as an example for other institutions.

The Guggenheim Museum continuously seeks new ways to approach exhibitions, every time delivering something fresh to viewers who walk through the museum's doors, as seen within *Gutai* and *James Turrell*. The mode of the curator-as-artist is particularly evident in the Guggenheim Museum's viewer immersion and audience engagement. The curatorial staff of the museum set themselves apart from other modern and contemporary museums, exhibiting contemporary art in unconventional manners to further contemporary curatorial discourse.

There are shortcomings when analyzing the Guggenheim Museum's contemporary curatorial practices. The Guggenheim Museum is a large institution with an abundance of resources. While all museums face difficulties with budget and space, the Guggenheim Museum charges for admission and has many contributing donors. Not all museums or institutions have the financial ability to support such large endeavors like *Gutai* or *James Turrell*. However, other museums can still replicate some of the techniques used by the Guggenheim Museum without a large budget by engaging the works with the physical space of the museum.

Viewer immersion and interaction was achieved in the *Gutai* and *James Turrell* exhibitions through spatial engagement. The curators of both exhibitions understood the design of the museum and how the art and viewers occupied space. Spatial engagement relates to the

curator-as-artist mode because of the curators' specific understanding about the design of the building and placement of works. Placement is key to not only how viewers perceive the exhibition as a whole, but also how individual works are experienced. In *Gutai* viewers were exposed to the *Gutai Card Box* (1962) by Gutai Art Association after they were able to formulate an understanding of what Gutai meant. If this work were placed at the beginning of the exhibition viewers would have had difficulty understanding the concepts behind Gutai. Spatial engagement was also important in Turrell's *Night Passage* (1987). Viewers experienced Turrell's earlier works first, such as *Afrum I (White)* (1967) on Annex level two.¹⁸⁰ It was not until viewers understood Turrell's *ganzfeld effect* that they were exposed to Turrell's Space Division Constructions with *Night Passage* (1987) on Annex level five.¹⁸¹

The curator-as-artist mode was continued when the curators of both exhibitions referenced the history of the museum as it related to *Gutai* and *James Turrell*. The curators employed this mode by creating ties between the museum's history and the current exhibitions. The curators created a sense that it was natural for these exhibitions to occur at the Guggenheim Museum. This created a unique experience for viewers that could not be observed anywhere else. While this may not be possible in all institutions because they do not have the rich history like the Guggenheim Museum, or have been recently designed; they may, however, reveal the overarching theme of the exhibition to the public through how it relates to the museum and its mission statement, which creates a connection between the museum and pieces in the exhibition.

¹⁸⁰ Patrick Beveridge, "Color Perception and the Art of James Turrell," *Leonardo* 33 (2000): 305.

¹⁸¹ Carmen Giménez and Nat Trotman. *James Turrell*. New York, NY, in association with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2013. Published in conjunction with the exhibition *James Turrell: A Retrospective* (New York, New York, 2013), 37.

The Guggenheim Museum's curators embraced the unique shape and design of the museum to symbolize modernity and used its shape to liberate exhibitions from rectangular rooms.¹⁸² The curators in *Gutai* and *James Turrell* acted as curators-as-artists by furthering Wright's idea that "the painter will be free to paint on any shape he chooses—even to curve his canvas if he wants" by allowing art to fill the void of the rotunda, as seen in Sadamasa's *Work (Water)* and Turrell's *Aten Reign*.¹⁸³ While some curators may fear the struggles of working in a complex circular space that has undergone an addition, the curators at the Guggenheim Museum embraced the design and created unique exhibitions in an equally unique museum.¹⁸⁴

While this thesis focuses upon the curator-as-artist because of how the curator engages with the audience, it is important to understand the controversy that this term entails. Curator-as-artist is not a common idea in the artworld. Some curators reject the term curator-as-artist. Robert Storr emphasized that, "[Curators] act as interpreters of art and as presenters of art, hopefully with a light rather than a heavy hand, and that they bring art that is not generally known to the public to the general public. They bring a more sophisticated understanding of the art that is known and also the changing interpretation of art that is known or unknown to that public as well."¹⁸⁵ Storr defines curators as being the interpreters and presenters of art objects. Storr diminishes the possibility of the curator-as-artist and dismisses curators who approach a

¹⁸² While the Guggenheim Museum does have rectangular exhibition space in the annex, it was not a part of the original Wright design. Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ The Guggenheim Museum is the only art museum Wright designed throughout his career. As previously stated, Wright was very reluctant to alter his original design of the museum to make it more practical for installation purposes and storage. Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Jennifer Restauri, "'Not only creators, but also interpreters': Artist/Curators in Contemporary Practice" (Bachelor of Fine Art thesis, Baylor University, 2012), 84.

museum as their canvas.¹⁸⁶ Storr, who is an artist-as-curator, rejects the idea of the curator-as-artist because he believes that “I am both an artist and a curator. When I am a curator, I am a curator. When I am an artist, I am an artist. One of those criteria I would use roughly: an artist has every right to be ruthless with materials at hand in order to make their work. If those materials happen to be another artist’s work, they do not have the right.”¹⁸⁷ When a curator acts as an artist some may ask, who is the more important person in a museum, the curator or the artist?

Another issue with the curator-as-artist is how blockbuster exhibitions, which may or may not be traveling exhibitions, are promoted.¹⁸⁸ While they are positive in the sense of attracting the public to the museum, they may also be considered a negative because it may appear as if the museum has displaced scholarship and replaced it with flashy titles and gimmicks to attract the public. The rebuttal the term curator-as-artist has received signifies that the current status of contemporary curatorial practice is in flux.

The Guggenheim Museum curators of *Gutai* were also faced with the decision of if it is appropriate to display modern works of art in a contemporary way. Ming and Tiampo chose to act as curators-as-artists and displayed the modern works of the Gutai Art Association in a contemporary manner. However, when the museum’s curators install an exhibition containing Kandinsky’s works or other non-objective pieces the museum uses Sweeney’s exhibition

¹⁸⁶ Terry Smith notes the controversy around the curator-as-artist and uses Storr as a primary example of the resistance this idea has received. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 135-136.

¹⁸⁷ Jennifer Restauri, “‘Not only creators, but also interpreters’: Artist/Curators in Contemporary Practice” (Bachelor of Fine Art thesis, Baylor University, 2012), 83-84.

¹⁸⁸ The blockbuster exhibition can be traced back to 1967 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, New York when Director Thomas Hoving created the exhibition *Harlem on My Mind*. Blockbuster exhibits were originally meant to draw in large crowds of people and create public interest. The Art Bulletin, “Art History and the ‘Blockbuster’ Exhibition,” *The Art Bulletin*, 68. 3 (1986): 358.

techniques because it is natural to the museum, which defies the curator-as-artist mode.¹⁸⁹ In the curator-as-artist mode there is controversy because this mode is a newer topic that is still disputed by scholars.

Another limitation of this study is how little information is known about the Guggenheim staff such as the exhibition designers and engineers who contributed to these exhibitions, which limited this study to the curatorial decisions in *Gutai* and *James Turrell*. Also, it is important to note that while I was conducting research for this thesis severe restrictions were placed upon my access to the curatorial documents for *Gutai* and *James Turrell* because of intellectual property rights. This limited the amount of primary documents from the *Gutai* and *James Turrell* exhibitions.

Curators are prominent in the artworld more than ever before, impacting not only the art community, but also the surrounding culture and potentially even making a global impact, as the Guggenheim Museum does. Contemporary curating has many layers and I have addressed what I consider the most prevalent in my analysis: the independent curator, the artist-as-curator, and the curator-as-artist.¹⁹⁰ In the future of my own practice as a curator, I wish to act as a curator-as-artist specifically through audience engagement. I believe the engagement of the audience is key to allowing viewers to understand contemporary art because of its complexities. The Guggenheim Museum makes great strides toward this goal with their catalogues for *Gutai* and *Turrell*. In my own practice I wish to further their endeavor by taking it beyond elite institutions,

¹⁸⁹ It is not appropriate to analyze how to approach ancient artifacts and their display in modern museums given that the Guggenheim Museum does not collect or exhibit those objects. For more information on this aspect please see James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America* 73 (1985): 351-368.

¹⁹⁰ These ideas of the independent curator, artist-as-curator, and curator-as-artist stemmed from Terry Smith. All of these ideas are modes of contemporary curating and add to the dialogue of contemporary curatorial practice. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 128.

and allowing other audiences to interact with the concepts integral to an exhibition, making them feel a part of the exhibition furthering their knowledge about the process of creating an exhibit. This, I believe, is the future of contemporary curating.

FIGURES

Figure 1
Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland
Plan Drawing
Farshid Moussavi
2012
MoCA Cleveland

Figure 2
Initial drawing for The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
Frank Lloyd Wright
July 27, 1944
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 3
Museum of Non-Objective Paintings in 1939
Example of Rebay's exhibition techniques
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 4

Example of how natural light pours into the museum causing issues with properly lighting the works of art.

Figure 5

View of first exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum
Detail of the lighting selected by Director James Sweeney
1959
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 6

The Watercolor Society: Top Ramp

Detail of drawing exemplifying how the paintings would slant with the natural curving walls of the museum's interior.

Frank Lloyd Wright

1958

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 7

The Masterpiece

Detail of how Wright believed the paintings should be viewed in the museum.

Frank Lloyd Wright

1958

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 8

Photograph of Sweeney demonstrating how he believed the painting should be displayed.

Sweeney brings the painting perpendicular to viewers by the use of rods.

1959

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 9
1982-1992 Annex Addition
Gwathmey & Siegel Associates
Photograph by author

Figure 10

View of first exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum
Detail of the lighting selected by Director James Sweeney
1959
MDID

Figure 11

Example of custom frame, projecting the work from the alcove in the rotunda.
Photograph by author

Figure 12

Back view of custom frame

Detail of how viewers can engage with the painting, when it is removed from the wall.

Photograph by author

Figure 13
Sadamasa Motonaga
Work (Water), 1956
Refabricated 2013 for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
Photograph by author

Figure 14
Sadamasa Motonaga
Work (Water), 2011 refabrication
3-Dimensional plan sent from Motonaga to the Guggenheim Museum
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 15

Yoshihara Jiro

Please Draw Freely, 1956

Refabricated 2013 for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Detail of viewers interacting with work

Photograph by author

Figure 16
 Yoshihara Jiro
Please Draw Freely, 1956
 Refabricated 2013 for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
 Detail of label instructions
 Photograph by author

Figure 17

Yamazaki Tsuruko

Work (Red Cube), 1956

Installed in the High Gallery at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

http://underargue.rssing.com/chan-1743273/all_p87.html

Figure 18

Atsuko Tanaka

Work (Yellow Cloth), 1955

Emphasis upon challenging nature of work

http://www.guggenheim.org/images/content/arts_curriculum/assets/Gutai_ArtsCurriculum.pdf

Figure 19

Atsuko Tanaka

Work (Bell), 1955

Image of Tanaka at the original installation of *Work (Bell)* at the 1st Gutai Art Exhibition, 1955

<http://blogs.artinfo.com/modernartnotes/2013/03/the-modern-art-notes-podcast-gutai/>

Figure 20

Murakami Saburo

Passing Through, 1956

Installation of life size print in Guggenheim Museum

<http://www.luxuriousprototype.com/events/gutai-splendid-playground-guggenheim-museum/>

Figure 21

Akira Kanayama

Work, 1957

<http://www.adhikara.com/gutai/sitemap.htm>

Figure 22

Akira Kanayama

Work, 1957

Performance of how Kanayama created *Work*

<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/education/school-educator-programs/teacher-resources/arts-curriculum-online?view=item&catid=764&id=188>

Figure 23

Gutai Art Association

Gutai Card Box, 1962

Installation at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

<http://gcva.blogspot.com/2013/02/conference-report-caa-in-new-york-2013.html>

Figure 24

Gutai Art Association

Gutai Card Box, 1962

Card from *Gutai Card Box*, refabricated for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2013

Photograph by author

Figure 25

Mukai Shuji

Tagged Elevator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2013

Photograph by author

Figure 26
James Turrell
Aten Reign, 2013
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 27

James Turrell

Roden Crater, (1972-present)

<http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/james-turrell/roden-crater-southwest-view-2000>

Figure 28

Cyndrical cone placed in Guggenheim Museum
Detail of mechanics of *Aten Reign* that are hidden to viewers
<http://www.thisiscrisp.net/category/art/>

Figure 29

Viewers experiencing James Turrell's work *Aten Reign*, 2013
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/scottlynchnyc/9186764897/>

Figure 30

Example of white sheath that blocks viewer's view of seeing the mechanics of *Aten Reign*, 2013
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
<http://blog.photoframd.com/2013/07/29/sony-cyber-shot-dsc-rx100-m2-initial-review-james-turrell-at-guggenheim/>

Figure 31
James Turrell
Ronin, 1968
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 32
James Turrell
Afrum I (White), 1967
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 33
James Turrell
Night Passage, 1987
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Figure 34

James Turrell

Danaë, 1983

Permanent installation at The Mattress Factory Art Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
The Mattress Factory Art Museum

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