



New York Museum of Modern Art. *Installation Following the Executive Order of January 27, 2017.*

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Since February 3, 2017, to ascend from the Museum of Modern Art's atrium to the collections, visitors pass between Gilbert Baker's unfurled *Rainbow Flag* (1978) and Siah Armajani's *Elements Number 30* (1990), a kiosk constructed of a diamond-plated aluminum sheet, a slanted barn door, a metal plinth, a box window tilted to reflect green light, and a rust shelf on its side. [Figure 1; <http://tinyurl.com/yc2ljzv8>] Understated sans serif wall text crisply describes *Elements Number 30* as a piece of "vernacular architecture" and reports the artistic intention: "to substitute synergy for gestalt." Below it, however, a second paragraph, this time in urgent italicized typeface, signals the aberrance of its installation. Like a visa, it precisely circumscribes the terms of inclusion: "*This work is by an artist from a nation whose citizens are being denied entry into the United States, according to a presidential executive order issued on January 27, 2017. This is one of several such artworks from the Museum's permanent collection recently installed, along with others throughout the fifth-floor galleries, to affirm the ideals of welcome and freedom as vital to this Museum, as they are to the United States.*"

An art-laden trolley had trundled through the fifth-floor galleries the night before.[1] By the end of its amble, works long cloistered in the museum's storage, some for uninterrupted decades and others since acquisition, were now hanging in

eight of the vaulted halls. Each work, "by an artist from a nation," took the spot of one *not* from a nation listed in the so-called Muslim ban Donald Trump dictated six days earlier (hereafter the EO). Curator Christophe Cherix explained the approach: "The idea was to be inclusive and not disruptive. We wanted to have one in each room to create a rhythm." [2] A protest beat resounded: not, not, not, *from* (an EO country); not, not, and so on throughout the galleries. Within hours, art writers proclaimed works signed by established greats Zaha Hadid, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Parviz Tanavoli, as well as the unsung Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Faramarz Pilaram, and Marcos Grigorian, and younger artists Tala Madani and Shirana Shahabazi, each hung with their accompanying italicized paragraphs, "competitive masterpieces" [3] and "almost uniformly impressive." [4] To many a reviewer, Cherix's rhythm sounded a clarion call to Americans to retreat from the brink of self-destruction.

Upon entering the famous "Picasso Room" (Gallery 1 of the Alfred H. Barr Jr. Painting and Sculpture Galleries) during the 2017 College Art Association (CAA) Annual Meeting, I felt a thrill shiver down my spine: the iconic reverence of all-white walls, subtle curatorial pronouncements, muffled footsteps, and burnishing glow of artificial light now ensconce *The Mosque* (1965), a painting by Ibrahim El-Salahi, in MoMA's canon-

setting permanent collection. This phenomenal vision had seemed impossible when, as an art history major in 1990, I would trek every weekend between the MoMA and the Center for African Art, where I docented. Susan Cahan establishes in *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (2016), that US museums responded to the 1960s desegregation movement by regressively entrenching whiteness. Legend has it that the center of art shifted in the 1940s from Paris to New York, but maybe that map lies. Art activity abounded in Paris in the 1950s and 60s. Indeed, Paris became “an important meeting center for postcolonial artists and intellectuals,” as Iftikar Dadi notes in *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, not because French authorities or audiences encouraged it but because the fall of empire started opening the city to the previously colonized and making the French aware of their need for *indigène* recognition.[5] Maybe it’s not that art’s center shifted; it just browned.

African artists could move from Paris to New York, as El Salahi did in 1964, but, like their African American colleagues, they could not move their work into MoMA’s galleries. To wit, William Rubin included only two named African Americans in his 1984 “Primitivism” show—one was El-Salahi’s crony Romare Bearden, whose work had been accessioned decades before—but still textually segregated their work by denying it a single page in his catalogue. Such silences speak volumes. Therefore, in 2017, the standard sans serif placards for work by El-Salahi and Armajani suggested that the color wall was cracking. Some at the CAA meeting rejoiced that our art world could host such an impudent but elegant response to the EO; others were skeptical but still grateful for any mainstream exposure. But the italicized text spelling out who may enter, when, and why, like a visa, reminds us of the carefully circumscribed terms of inclusion. To review MoMA’s latest “installation” of long-accessioned but underdisplayed work, I focus, as an AMCA contributor, on the silences sustaining Cherix’s protest rhythm

and determining contemporary practices of inclusion, exclusion, and, quite possibly, the future of the framework for studying modern art.

“One of the things you have to think about if you see these works in the gallery, is that if you have ban, then *you don’t get to see* the works,” curator Jodi Hauptman reportedly told a journalist the morning after the trolley’s trundle.[6] I’ll confess, what I was thinking about as I paced the galleries to Cherix’s world beat: *until* we had the ban, we didn’t get to see the works. Does this mean we are to reject Trump’s manning the borders but not the borders themselves? Are we to allow others across only for the services they offer us? Having consulted for the MoMA’s Primary Documents series, which fills lacunae created by the museum’s canon, I marveled at Hauptman’s inverted logic. [7] Curators regularly rotate the contents of the Alfred H. Barr Jr. Painting and Sculpture Galleries to catch up on—according to the entrance wall text—the “countless ways to explore the history of modern art and the Museum’s rich collection.”[8] To attribute this rhythm-producing mini-rotation simply to the EO, however, hushes both the history of MoMA’s acquisition of these works and the complicitous history of their non-exposure.

To address the silence on acquisitions first, consider that rhythm-master Cherix, for one, is not only a chief curator of the “paintings and drawings,” aka the canonical collection, but also a key contributor to C-MAP (Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives), a program pursuing “deeper knowledge of the broader historical context for future acquisitions and programs.”[9] Arguably, it is the MoMA that is trying to catch up with what Whitechapel curator Iwona Blazwick called “a burgeoning awareness that the story of art as we’ve known it and thought it and presented it is only one story, and that there are ... multiple modernisms.”[10] Blazwick spoke for *Art News*’s 2015 investigation into art world responses to the Arab uprisings, noting how new economic circuits, migration patterns, and digital accessi-

bility expanded the art world's map and shifted its boundaries, both contemporary and historical. With increasing frequency, MoMA and peers venture into zones previously unmapped and unmarketed by their staff, as C-Map and the Primary Documents series attest. Viewed from AMCA's perspective, the dots connect into a solid line from MoMA's February 2 rotation to recentralizing the MoMA's collection as *the* source of "other possible histories."

If the EO explains their inclusion, what accounts for their previous exclusion? Eschewing a mea culpa, the italicized paragraph fails to acknowledge the historic flaws in MoMA's segregating framework. This second muted history, like a bass sostenuto, undergirds the current rhythm of the Barr galleries. Shiva Balaghi has meticulously documented MoMA's practice of "closeting" most of the works rotated in on February 2.[11] El-Salahi's 1964 piece, for example, was acquired within a year of its making, shown at the Recent Acquisitions show that same year, and then left in the closet until the EO unfastened its locks. Zenderoudi and Pilaram's works from 1962 and Grigorian's work from 1965 received the same treatment: they were quickly acquired and just as quickly closeted. Tanavoli's sculpture, *The Prophet*, was accessioned in 1968, according to museum records, and never displayed.[12] That this confinement followed the usual elaborate scrutiny by layers of acquisitions committees (many populated by the funders themselves)[13] prompts Balaghi to query: "The various committees and the Board would have ensured that these artworks met the aesthetic and art historical mandates of the museum. The question remains, why then were they stored away for half a century?"

Balaghi suggests that American Cold War politics explain the systematic "closeting" of non-Western modernisms: showing Soviet-allied artists would have disrupted the paean to US free-world leadership. Although compelling, the argument may not be comprehensive enough. More

can be said about the impact of the closeting than the ostensible rationale, and much more must be said about what happens now. For not only did this closeting buttress "a canonical view of modern art as fundamentally Western," as Balaghi notes, but it also burnished that canon bright and shining white.

When Brian O'Doherty first wrote on the white cube in 1976, he called out the "apparent neutrality" of the modern art gallery's white wall as an "illusion": The gallery's white wall, he inferred, "stands for a community with common ideas and assumptions." [14] Backgrounding all those assumptions--about politics, economics, hierarchies, time, and other "physical" laws--made the white cube the space *par excellence* for "accommodat[ing] the prejudices and enhanc[ing] the self-image of the upper middle classes." [15] But whiteness must be maintained, and that continually happens by making invisible ideas and references that do not fit: upon entering the modern art gallery, "in an extraordinary strip-tease, the art within bares itself more and more, until it presents formalist end-products and bits of reality from outside [while] the wall's content becomes richer and richer." [16] Thomas McEvilley described the white cube's work for Rubin's "Primitivism": "All the curators want us to know about these tribal objects is where they are from, what they look like, who owns them, and how they fit the needs of the exhibition." [17] More damningly still, bell hooks analyzed the erasing effects of the white cube on even named, contemporary participants: For Jean-Michel Basquiat, *enfant terrible* of the 1980s New York art scene, to get a solo at the Whitney Museum in 1992 required stripping his work of its connections to African American art history, the very material that had been segregated at MoMA's Primitivism." Basquiat diligently sacrificed "those parts of himself they would not be interested in or fascinated by ... as though [he] were a new frontier, waiting only to be colonized." [18] Denuding his work of all but one context produced it as "part of a continuum of con-

temporary American art with a genealogy traced through white males: Pollock, de Kooning, Rauschenberg, Twombly, and on to Andy [Warhol]."[19] Critics treating Basquiat as "already" the child of the Enlightenment genealogy did not have to acknowledge those sacrifices. "White" Basquiat fits Sara Ahmed's novel analysis of white men as a "citational relational," one that, in recognizing others, only recognizes itself and thus concretizes a purely fantastic proposition: "Sexism and racism as citational practice are also a catering system; justified as a form of reassurance, a way of keeping things familiar for those who want to conserve the familiar. They are a way of keeping an acquaintance, a friendship, a kinship network, something that white men do on behalf of other white men, to reassure them that the system in which they reproduce themselves will be reproduced." [20] Amidst the established whiteness, the genealogy seems to extend itself organically, across time and space.

With the progenitor firmly fixed, the genealogy can extend even across a Trump travel ban and border wall. Numerous reporters of the rotation listed the artworks that would never be removed—"Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and Matisse's *Red Studio*" [21]—no matter how many rotations or bans. The repeatedly cited promise of an "inclusive and not disruptive" rotation engenders "*more* this idea of embracing those works *in our tradition, within the narrative of our collection*, within our values," Cherix told *Hyperallergic*. [22] More than what? If we lean into Cherix's ellipses, we clearly hear that the unstated potential is going outside "our tradition," beyond "the narrative of the collection," i.e., calling for its upheaval or overturning. Closeted modernisms, however, were finally released because they were alike enough that their inclusion would not change the collection's teleological narrative but only reaffirm it by subsumption within it. Artworks were displayed and discussed not for what they did but for what they did not: they did not differ too much. Ultimately, the understanding

of modernism MoMA has espoused for decades by excluding nonwhitened modernisms is not (deliberately) at stake.

What is "inclusion" when the enclosed space to which one is admitted has been created through exclusion? While most press reports agreed with Russett's assessment of the new entrants' "almost uniform impressiveness," they uniformly spent more time telling readers *who* they looked like (or hung next to) than *what* they looked like. The question arises of what MoMA and its visitors can learn from the uncloseted art. Since the EO only two of the thirty #ArtSpeaks events have addressed the new entrants, and both occasions were led by people without relevant research experience. [23] Returning to Armajani's sculpture reminds us that the instruments of inclusion do not automatically add up to equality for all admittees. While all the elements composing his "vernacular architecture" are available at any DIY store, they do not produce a habitable space, let alone an accessible one. The doors are tilted shut, and the glass is angled to reflect rather than transmit. Still, the whole piece has been mobilized to symbolize welcoming—by MoMA staff and for MoMA's (and the United State's) vitality. There is something grossly lopsided about that proposition. Those whom MoMA hails as "welcomers" are territorial proprietors all the same, *and* now in need of the outsiders' entrance for their *own* survival. This welcome acknowledges neither a mea culpa nor a debt. It bodes badly for the fate of these once invisible, still peripheral works. If MoMA (and the US) survive the presidential executive order (or the whole presidency)—do they go back into storage?

To receive MoMA's sans serif wall text is to achieve institutional value. The museum is not merely a reflection of modern art but its instantiation. The continuities between MoMA's display history and the most recent rotation, between new rhythm and the silences all reinforce that. Letting the artworks out without addressing the

institutional racism that suppressed awareness of them for so long obfuscates the continuity and culpability. Doing so, the MoMA justifies exclusion in as much as it objects principally to who gets to do the excluding. Instead of putting itself in the position of learning from the artwork about modernism as a globally created phenomenon, MoMA recreates itself as the guardian of a paradoxically Western-generated but chronologically universal one. Recently, MoMA and similar white cube bastions of whiteness have been under great pressure to maintain their centrality in the face of shifting art maps. Aesthetically I swayed to the new beat in the Alfred H. Barr Jr. galleries, but politically I felt jarred by the hypocrisy of "fitting in," when the trouble is the framework that has kept people, art, knowledges, lifeworlds out. Waving their flags, rainbows and all, and declaring the museum a safe space for the oppressed will not be a sufficient antidote, obviously. For AMCA members and readers, the stake now is the impact the February 3, 2017, rotation may have on the visibility of the artworks *and the framework*--"our tradition, the narrative of our collection, and ... values"--and where we might want to steer that.

Notes

[1]. Jason Farago, "MoMA Takes a Stand: Art from Banned Countries Comes Center Stage," *New York Times*, February 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/arts/design/moma-president-trump-travel-ban-art.html?_r=0.

[2]. Claire Voon, "MoMA Installs Work by Artists from Countries Targeted by Trump's Travel Ban," *Hyperallergic*, February 3, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/356224/moma-installs-works-by-artists-from-countries-targeted-by-trumps-travel-ban/>.

[3]. Anne Quito, "Art World vs. Trump; MoMA has swapped out Picasso and Matisse paintings for works by artists from Muslim-majority countries," *Quartz*, February 4, 2017, <https://qz.com/902880/moma-has-swapped-out-picassos-and-ma->

[tisses-for-works-by-artists-from-iran-iraq-and-syria-to-protest-trumps-travel-entry-ban/](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/arts/design/moma-president-trump-travel-ban-art.html?_r=0).

[4]. Andrew Russeth, "In Elegant Riposte to Trumps Travel Order MoMA Installs Works by Artists from Banned countries," *Art News*, February 3, 2017, <http://www.artnews.com/2017/02/03/in-elegant-riposte-to-trumps-travel-order-moma-installs-works-by-artists-from-banned-muslim-countries>.

[5]. Iftikar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 161.

[6]. Raphael Pope-Sussman, "MoMA Hangs Art from Muslim Nations to Protest Trump's Muslim Ban," *Gothamist*, February 4, 2017, emphasis added.

[7]. The series opened in 2002 with *Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, and continued with volumes addressing Argentinian, Venezuelan, Swedish, Chinese, and Japanese art. Its goal is certainly not only "to make accessible to English-language readers primary documents relating to the visual arts of specific countries, historical moments, disciplines, and themes," as curator Jay Levenson put it in the foreword to the Chinese volume, but to make MoMA the entryway. (See Jay Levenson, foreword, in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung [New York: MoMA, 2010], xi.) As with the Chinese volume, most of the series self-consciously followed a rise in sales in the related region and involved MoMA staff and consultants in creating a standard for measurement, evaluation, and promotion. The volume on modern Arab art, edited by AMCA founders and contributors, issues in 2018.

[8]. Excerpt from wall text at the doorway to the Alfred H. Barr Jr. Painting and Sculpture Galleries. The galleries hold approximately 400 works. Given a permanent collection of 2,800 works from pre-1975, it would take six years to cycle through a complete display that allowed each work 18 months of visibility, but in fact some

works are never removed and some never displayed. See Ted Loos, "At MoMA, 'Permanent' Learns to Be Flexible," *New York Times*, October 22, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/arts/design/25loos.html?_r=1&ref=design; and Lee Rosenberg, "More Space for Temkin's Rehang: NY City Council Approves MoMA/Hines Tower," *CultureGrrl* (blog), *ArtsJournal*, October 28, 2009, https://www.artsjournal.com/culturegrrl/2009/10/more_space_for_temkins_rehang.html.

[9]. "Global Research at MoMA: Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives (C-MAP)," <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/international-program/globalresearch>.

[10]. Andrew Russeth, "Arab Spring: Modern Middle Eastern Art Finds New Audience," *Art News*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/04/02/modern-middle-eastern-art-finds-new-audience-in-the-west/>.

[11]. Shiva Balaghi, "MoMA's Travel Ban Protest Exposes a Legacy of Closeted Modernism," *Hyperallergic*, March 15, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/365397/momas-travel-ban-protest-exposes-a-legacy-of-closeted-modernism/>.

[12]. I have followed Shiva Balaghi's (2017) suit in using MoMA's online repository, MoMA Exhibition Spelunker, to compile this data. See <http://spelunker.moma.org/>.

[13]. Specifically, Philip Johnson, who provided the funds for the Zenderoudi purchase in 1962, and Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson, who funded the purchase of both the Piliaram and the El-Salahi works in 1962 and 1964 respectively. Both sat on the Committee on Museum Collections, according to the respective press releases.

[14]. See the reprinted essay "The White Cube" in Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica: The Lapsis Press, 1986), 76.

[15]. Ibid.

[16]. Ibid, 79.

[17]. See the reprinted essay "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief," in Thomas McEvilley, *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity* (New York: MacPherson and Company, 1992), 27-56; 47.

[18]. bell hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice: Remembering Basquiat," in *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, ed. Kimberly Pynder (New York: Routledge, 202), 341-352; 346.

[19]. Ibid, 342.

[20]. I thank Jessica Gerschultz for drawing my attention to this new text: Sara Ahmed, *Living A Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 151-152.

[21]. For example, Quito, "Art World vs. Trump."

[22]. Voon, "MoMA Installs Work," emphasis added.

[23]. #ArtSpeaks permits MoMA staff to select artwork they find personally meaningful and share with an audience the worldly changes wrought by art. On June 27, 2017, director Glenn Lowry spoke about Zenderoudi's *K+L+32+H+4. Mon père et moi (My Father and I)* (1962) and on April 25 curatorial research assistant Heidi Hirschl discussed Marcos Grigorian's *Untitled* (1963). See <https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/2840?locale=en#happening-occurrences>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-amca>

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