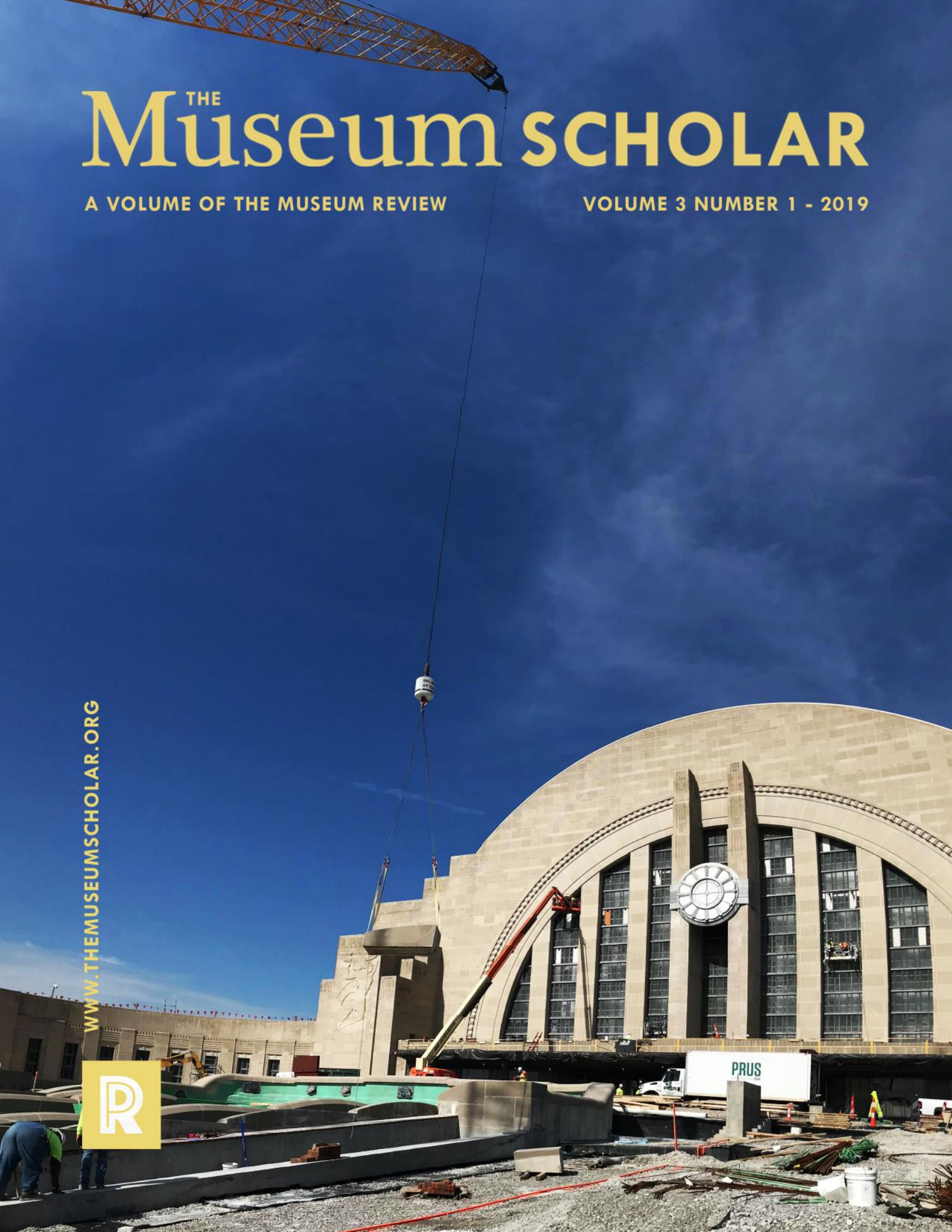


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Cover photo: Restoring the exterior of the Cincinnati Museum Center, Ohio, as part of the two-year renovation. Reopened 2018. Photo by Maria Dehne – Cincinnati Museum Center.

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Gazes and Open Spaces in Art Museums: About Visitors' Behavior

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Keywords Architecture; Museums; Museum Visitors; Contemporary Art; Sociology

Abstract The architecture of art museums often exposes visitors not only to the artwork but also to other visitors, resulting in an assessment both of the artwork and of other visitors. The case studies for this research are two museums in New York City, the Museum of Modern Art's Marron Atrium, on the second floor, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's spiral corridor, where both structures provide a spectacle of artwork, visitors, and architectural structure. To analyze how people act socially within these physical confines, this article uses sociologist Erving Goffman's theory (1959) on the presentation of the self in everyday life. Goffman argues that people always present themselves in a particular way when they imagine that others are observing them. To examine how people mark their social status and design their taste, this article considers aspects of economist Thorstein Veblen's theory (1934) on conspicuous consumption. By considering visitors' behaviors in light of Goffman and Veblen's theories, this research aims to unravel how visitors position themselves as conscious subjects consuming art by looking at other visitors in the modern art museums.

About the Author JooHee Kim was raised in Seoul, South Korea and graduated from the University of Chicago with a Master's degree in the Humanities. At New York University, JooHee is a graduate student in the Museum Studies program. She is currently a student researcher for the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base project, a resource aiming to collect information benefiting curators, conservators, and researchers interested in the work of Joan Jonas. After graduation, JooHee plans to pursue a Ph.D. in the area of contemporary art/museum studies.

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There is a correlation between architecture and art museums; architecture exposes visitors not only to the artwork but also to other visitors, resulting in an assessment both of the artwork and of other visitors. Specifically, this article examines two museums in New York City, the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) Marron Atrium and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's spiral corridor, where both architectural structures provide an overall view of artwork, visitors, and architecture.

The literature contains some prior findings on the relationship between museums' architecture and the visitors inside them. Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach claim that a museum is a ritual space with the goal of civilizing people with its temple-like architectural structure. Although visitors do not recognize that they are passing through ritualized spaces, the given structure of the museum, such as its installations, the layout of the rooms, and the sequence of collections, reflect rituals similar to those of a religion.¹ In other words, by following the structure laid out by museums, visitors acquire the civilized values of their society. Nevertheless, a crucial question must be asked: do visitors passively learn these values only through the architectural structure of a museum?

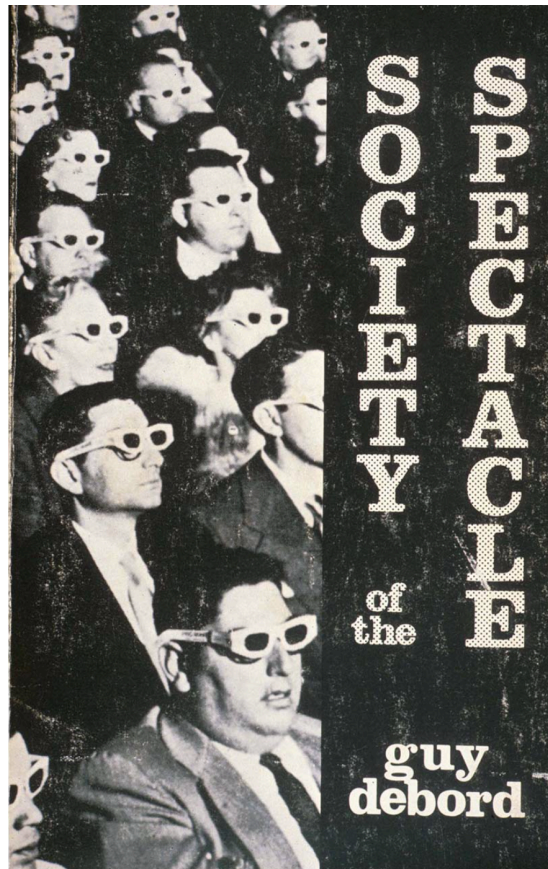


Figure 1. Cover of the English edition of *The Society of Spectacle* from 1983. Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*.

The term “spectacle” has multiple interpretations in recent history. In his book *The Society of Spectacle*, Marxist theorist and philosopher Guy Debord used the term to refer to the opposite of any social event’s direct experience.² That is, as the cover of the English edition of Debord’s *The Society of Spectacle* from 1983 shows, a spectacle is merely encountered by being watched by viewers; it can never be directly experienced (Figure 1). However, Tony Bennett used the term “spectacle” in relation to Michel Foucault’s descriptions of surveillance and spectacle.³ Whereas Foucault dealt with prisons in general, Bennett explored “the relations between knowledge and power effected by the technologies of vision embodied in the architectural forms of the exhibitionary complex” in the nineteenth century.⁴ According to him, museum spaces give their contemporary visitors opportunities for both surveillance and spectacle via their architectural structures. By doing this, visitors become subjects who can observe the spectacle while also being objects observed by others.

[It] perfected a self-monitoring system of looks in which the subject and object positions can be exchanged, in which the crowd comes to commune with and regulate itself through interiorizing the ideal and ordered view of itself as seen from the controlling vision of power – a site of sight accessible to all.⁵

Thus, in contrast with Debord's definition of spectacle, Bennett's spectacle consists of people who observe and are observed at the same time.

While Bennett's work is associated with the idea of the museum, this study aims to unravel how visitors position themselves as conscious subjects of consuming art by observing visitors in today's modern-art museums. To analyze how people tend to act socially within these physical confines, this article relies on Goffman's theory⁶ on the presentation of the self in everyday life. Goffman argues that people always present themselves in a particular way when they imagine that others are observing them. To examine how people mark their social status and design their taste in society, aspects of Veblen's theory on conspicuous consumption are also used.⁷

Museum Architecture

When visitors enter a museum, they are invited to encounter its architectural structure, or, as Duncan and Wallach define it, its architectural script.

[I]ndividuals respond in different ways according to their education, culture, and class. But the architecture is a given and imposes the same underlying structure on everyone. By following the architectural script, the visitor engages in an activity most accurately described as a ritual.⁸

The "ritual" here, means that the visitor becomes an "ideal citizen – a member of an idealized 'public' and heir to an ideal, civilized past."⁹ The moment that visitors pass over the threshold of a museum, whichever position they take is different from their position outside the museum. In 1978, Duncan and Wallach published *The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis*, in which they scrutinized MoMA's structure and its implications on visitors' experiences. In this museum, visitors must follow a prescribed route—later defined as an architectural script—according to the importance of the artworks in an order conceived by MoMA staff. Visitors begin with Cézanne's works, then move on to Cubism, Surrealism, and, finally, Abstract Expressionism. This pathway shows the major art history movements toward so-called "high art."¹⁰ Namely, passing through MoMA's structural script leads visitors to the realm of high art, whose value has already been attested to by the authoritative literature.

Duncan and Wallach's claim on the rituals of museums was elaborated further with their 1980 work, *The Universal Survey Museum*. In it, they used the example of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met), New York City. Most visitors reach the Met's entrance, which features a Neo-imperial facade emphasizing the Greco-Roman tradition, after climbing a grandiose staircase. Inside the museum, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and European art are visible from the main hall, again underscoring Western tradition. The Met, as the first universal survey museum in America, symbolizes the "actual history of the state."¹¹ Thus, visitors adopt a different mindset from what they had before; upon passing into the museum, they become, ideally, archetypal citizens. In other words, according to Duncan and Wallach, visitors are unconsciously transformed into civilized people who now conform to society's ideal beliefs and values.

Despite the above, Duncan and Wallach's research was limited to a universal survey of museum architecture constructed in the early history of museums and the role of architecture in analyzing museum visitors' experiences; MoMA redesigned its building in 1984 and 2006. It is arguable whether visitors are aware of their transformation into "civilized people" when they move through the architectural structures of modern art museums, particularly in open spaces where they can exchange looks with other visitors.

In contrast to Duncan and Wallach's work, Rosalind Krauss commented on postmodernist museums' open spaces—particularly the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City—and their roles in the visitors' experiences. Krauss defines a museum's open space as a place of sudden discovery. Visitors view it as "a flea market...the sudden opening in the wall of a given gallery to allow a glimpse of a far-away object, and thereby...interject within the collection of these objects a reference to the order of another."¹² The sudden opening, in contrast with Duncan and Wallach's argument on museum structure, allows visitors to be creative in terms of seeing the history or value of the objects inside the museum. Although Krauss recognizes the creative role of the viewer, she omits an important visual element in a museum: the throng of visitors as a spectacle in the eyes of the audience.

The Spiral Ramp at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is known for its unique architecture designed to display non-objective works by artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. The main building is a rotunda, so visitors must walk along the spiral ramp while viewing the works on the walls. Consequently, this ramp provides a spectacle of artwork, visitors, and architecture. As Krauss puts it, the Guggenheim ramp is understood to be the viewer's projected desire to master the space before him or her, a cognitive effort that precedes motion.¹³

Due to the museum's unique architectural feature, visitors can position themselves as spectators of other visitors and the works on display. Through the visual display of artworks, a spectacle is enacted that is similar to the spectacles observed in department stores. This was particularly evident during the 2018–2019 exhibition *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, based on how visitors behaved in the corridor.

In a department store, customers purchase items from curated collections; in museums, visitors purchase the opportunity to see artworks in person for the price of an entrance fee. The department store Galeries Lafayette, established in Paris in 1912 and featuring an iconic dome, is a leading example of the store as spectacle (Figure 2). Externally, the store is square, but a rotunda is positioned beneath the dome, providing a spectacular view of the entire interior, products, and consumers. This architectural structure, which is also found in the Guggenheim Museum, is a space in which to see and be seen. The rotunda allows visitors to shift position from being the observer to the object observed, and vice-versa.



Figure 2. (Left) Interior of Guggenheim Museum, photo by author, (Right) Interior of Galeries Lafayette, photo by Wouter Hagens.

Manfredo Tafuri, an Italian architectural historian, commented on the type of spectacle found at Galeries Lafayette, “The arcades and department stores in Paris, like great expositions, are certainly places in which the crowd itself becomes a spectacle, and finds the spatial and visual means for self-education from the point of view of capital.”¹⁴ Visitors in museums find themselves to be consumers of culture, rather than consumers of products.

In the 2000s, the Guggenheim began to hold parties on a regular basis, indeed hosting more events than any other museum in New York City. The *Art After Dark* party is one of a series of art events that aims to increase the number of museum patrons, as indicated by an official statement on the Guggenheim’s website.¹⁵ After the general public has left for the day, the museum offers a special opportunity to loyal donors and guests paying a \$25 admission fee; they can enjoy the artwork and walk along the corridor inside the museum. By participating in these events, visitors also show their willingness to contribute to the art museum, and they place themselves inside the spectacle of other museum patrons.

The spectacle created by each event at the Guggenheim ensures that visitors find themselves as one of the objects and that they position themselves as one of “them” (Figure 3). “Them” is a reference to people who know how to act properly in a museum, who are prepared to consume culture, and who have the ability to identify and appreciate highly valued art.



Figure 3. *Art After Dark* at the Guggenheim, courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum. Photo by Scott Rudd.

Remarking that the principle of conspicuous consumption guides the formation of habits of thought, Veblen argues that this principle influences other norms of behavior:

Ordinarily his motive [of conspicuous waste] is a wish to conform to established usage, to avoid unfavorable notice and comment, to live to the accepted canons of decency in the kind, amount, and grade of goods consumed...especially as regards consumption carried on under the eyes of observers.¹⁶

The conscious behavior of the museum visitors when within the gazes of other visitors becomes more visible in the following case study of MoMA.

The Marron Atrium at the MoMA

In a modern art museum, some open spaces provide visitors with a good view of the interior. MoMA, located in Midtown Manhattan, has an open lobby on the first floor and the Marron Atrium is found on the second floor. The high ceilings of these spaces make their architectural structure invisible to the visitor, yet they are aware of others being in the same place, which in turn makes them aware of themselves.

The Marron Atrium's floor constitutes a large square. Three paths connect to the atrium via other exhibition spaces. Thus, visitors can go anywhere they wish, to and from the atrium. As a consequence of the open space, the atrium is normally considered a pathway to the galleries, rather than a gallery space.



Figure 4. Installation view of “Louise Lawler: WHY PICTURES NOW” at MoMA, April 30, 2017–July 30, 2017. Photo by Martin Seck.

In the 2010s, MoMA has been experimenting with the use of this area as a gallery space. In 2017, four benches were placed at the center of the atrium during the *Louise Lawler: WHY PICTURES NOW* exhibition. While the benches were an art installation, visitors mistook them for ordinary chairs on which they could sit, because of their ordinary appearance (Figure 4). Museum guards asked those who sat on the benches to move.¹⁷ Upon learning that the benches had not been placed there for their convenience, the visitors no longer sat on them, because they did not wish to be embarrassed a second time. Being told which pieces were artworks, and which were not, was likely an embarrassing experience for many. This embarrassment, as a consequence of being cautioned for improper behavior, then led to self-awareness, as the visitors realized that they had not presented themselves as proper visitors to the museum in front of others.

This self-awareness implies that museum visitors have an *imaginary audience*. Due to MoMA’s open spaces, visitors can see other bodies as well as artworks. This experience is not unique to the museum space. Indeed, being observed and observing is not so different from what people experience in everyday life. According to Goffman, who used the metaphor of theatrical performance for human behavior in social situations, people—as daily performers—change their roles in accordance with each social position. Goffman places our life on the front stage, where everyone can see the performer. Moreover, when people consider the imaginary audience in front of them, they tend to present themselves in an idealized role, “when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole.”¹⁸ Thus, people are prone to desire to offer their audience an idealized impression, one that comprises the official values of society.

Museums are no exception to the pursuit of idealized values and performances. Working-class people in the nineteenth century, for instance, were required to be educated on “how to act properly” in a museum before experiencing it. “[The museum exhibitions] sought to tutor their visitors on the modes of deportment required if they were to be admitted. Instruction booklets advised working-class visitors how to present themselves, placing

particular stress on the need to change out of their working clothes...indeed, [so as] to become part of it.”¹⁹ This meant that working-class visitors became part of the objects seen by others, and there was a proper, or ideal, way of presenting oneself as a subject going to see other objects. By learning these forms of appropriate behavior, the working class could become part of the middle class. Acquiring knowledge on presenting oneself in an ideal way in a museum is, thus, related to movement among and between classes.

Goffman summarizes the relationship between higher strata and idealized performances as follows: “In most societies there seems to be a major or general system of stratification, and in most stratified societies there is an idealization of the higher strata and some aspiration on the part of those in low places to move to higher ones.”²⁰ Therefore, contrary to Duncan and Wallach’s view, visitors’ idealized behaviors in museums are consciously conceived in light of the notion of an imaginary audience.

Conclusion

This article has examined two museums in New York City through Goffman’s and Veblen’s perspectives on people’s behavior in modern society. It focused on the open spaces of MoMA and the Guggenheim, visitors’ behaviors based on direct observations, and the museums’ social events held in these open spaces.

Goffman and Veblen both acknowledge that an individual’s behavior is affected by the presence of others. Goffman postulates that everyday life behavior, which refers to “all the activity of an individual that occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers, and which has some influence on the observers,” constitutes a performance.²¹ Veblen remarked that the principle of conspicuous waste guides the formation of habits of thought. The position presented here is mainly aligned with that of Goffman’s and the implication that museum visitors’ behaviors are consciously designed.

The goal of this research has been to examine actual visitor behaviors in relation to these theories by exploring the relationship between art museums and visitors’ consciousness. Ideally, this work will propel scholars toward a richer and more inclusive understanding of the reality of visitor behavior in museums, and will be used to guide art museums to make better plans for their future visitors.

The present paper is limited in scope, as only particular areas of the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum were considered. A further large-scale assessment, one that includes the Whitney Museum of American Art, the most recently established art museum in New York City, is warranted. This is because the Whitney does not confine visitor exposure to its interior; it also features an outdoor terrace and window wall. These architectural structures provide visitors with beautiful scenery that can be used to position visitors before the museum and in society. Thus, a broader approach is required. This is beyond the scope of the present paper.

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¹ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “Universal Survey Museum,” *Art History*, 3(4) (1980): 448–450.

² Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983)

³ Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” In *Thinking About Exhibitions* ed. Bruce W. Ferguson et al., (London: Routledge, 1996) and Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by A. Sheridan, (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 115-16.

⁴ Bennet, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” 84.

⁵ *Ibid*, 91.

⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

⁷ Thorstein Veblen and Stuart Chase, *The Theory of the Leisure Class; An Economic Study of Institutions*, (New York: Modern Library, 1934).

⁸ Duncan and Wallach, “Universal Survey Museum,” 450.

⁹ *Ibid*, 451-52.

¹⁰ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis,” *Marxist Perspectives*, Winter (1978): 28–51.

¹¹ Duncan and Wallach, “Universal Survey Museum,” 465.

¹² Rosalind Krauss, “Postmodernism’s Museum without Walls,” In *Thinking about Exhibitions*, edited by Bruce W. Ferguson et al., (London: Routledge, 1996), 347.

¹³ *Ibid*, 345-6.

¹⁴ Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), 83.

¹⁵ “Art After Dark,” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed December 12, 2018.

¹⁶ Thorstein Veblen and Stuart Chase, *The Theory of the Leisure Class; An Economic Study of Institutions*, (New York: Modern Library, 1934), 111-112.

¹⁷ Observed by the author.

¹⁸ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 35.

¹⁹ Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” 94-95.

²⁰ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 36.

²¹ *Ibid*, 22.

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