

***In Search of A Lost Avant-Garde: An Anthropologist Investigates the Contemporary Art Museum.* Matti Bunzl. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 128 pp.**

Reviewed by Pamela G. Smart

In response to art world critics who have decried the increasing populism of museums and its consequences for art and its audiences, Matti Bunzl, in his ethnographic study of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), argues on behalf of the efforts of its curatorial personnel to insist on the responsibility of the museum to support innovation and experimentation, to champion "new and difficult art" (13). The pleasure of Bunzl's engaging account, I suspect, lies less in these arguments, than in its invitation to peak behind the scenes of an institution that works assiduously to manage its public profile. This privileged access, for those who are not already familiar with the circumstances that Bunzl describes, is all the more alluring, perhaps, insofar as the experience of the public art museum, as Didier Maleuvre has observed, tends to be marked by exteriority. "Looking at art," he observes, "has become synonymous with being an intruder in the realm of art" (Maleuvre 1999:99). This book invites us in.

Bunzl presents in this slim volume a narrative that deftly acknowledges complex exigencies with which museum staff struggle, exigencies occasioned by neoliberal "withdrawal of the state and the marketization of all realms of social and cultural life" (12). Far from the loss of public funds causing museums to scale back their operations, as has been the case with many cultural institutions, they have instead found themselves locked into relentless expansionary pressures.

Under these circumstances, curators' commitments to work that is challenging, discomfiting, experimental, and really new—what Bunzl glosses as "the avant-garde"—come to be pitched against the departments of marketing, education, and development. In distinction to what Bunzl construes as the curatorial department's commitment to art itself, these departments are embodiments of "institutional needs" (89), specifically, the need to appeal at once to audiences that exceed the precincts of the "art world" and to the interests of donors. The imperative to appeal to ever larger audiences is, in this account, a function of the museum's physical expansion (45)—occasioned, according to this somewhat simplified story, by the ambitions of donors—and the need to justify it through increased attendance, an impulse intensified by the museum's obligations to the interests of donor corporations, foundations, and state agencies in "bringing up the next generation" (56). And here we see the linkage between the concerns of the education, marketing, and development offices: while the fostering of audiences and its attendant rhetoric of "democratization" might seem quite distinct from attention to the interests of donors, Bunzl shows that they are thoroughly aligned within a logic of growth. Moreover, it is this logic that threatens the whole enterprise, at least from the perspective of the museum's curators with whom Bunzl clearly identifies. When he notes that the MCA's significant reorientation toward making the museum "accessible and appealing" to young audiences "requires the formulation of a whole

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new institutional narrative, one that is tailored to a vastly different intellectual and experiential horizon,” Bunzl does not see in this any cause for celebration (46). And notwithstanding his own emerging stature as a collector of contemporary art, albeit on a modest scale, and his recognition of the financial and reputational stakes that collectors have in what it is that curators exhibit and acquire, he worries about the self-serving interests of collectors and the influence their promise as benefactors allows them to exert.

Bunzl pursues his analysis through astutely observed accounts of unfolding events in the planning for which the fault lines between the curatorial staff and those serving “institutional needs” are acutely felt. These events—exhibitions and acquisitions—are of course the central concerns of curators, and the organization of the narrative invites us to regard curators as the stewards of the foundational mission of the contemporary art museum, to serve as a home for art that resists pleasurable consumption, and that has not yet been made comfortable by familiarity. Curators pursue their unwavering commitment to “avant-garde” art, in the face of education personnel intent on meeting curricular priorities, and family friendly leisure preferences, the populism of marketing people, and the pandering of the development department. Compromises are made by everyone, but it is the curatorial staff who fight the good fight.

Attention to these disparate convictions that must be negotiated at every turn offers a welcome corrective to the tendency in scholarly analyses of museums to treat them as more or less monolithic institutions whose interests are portrayed as singular, or at least as seamlessly coherent. And the museum’s pursuit of those interests has in the literature overwhelmingly been construed critically. By contrast, *In Search of a Lost Avant-Garde*, is offered at the outset as a defense of the museum: “where others diagnose failure of nerve, I thus see a set of strategies devised to persist during a particular economic and cultural moment. If the avant-garde is dead, the museum is not to blame for killing it” (7). But throughout, it is really a defense of the curatorial project that, for Bunzl, really *is* the museum. This is especially evident in the fact that what is offered as an ethnography of the museum is really an ethnographic engagement with the curatorial department as it interacts with just three of the museum’s other departments, and with artists and donors.

It would take a more substantial volume to address with commensurate thoroughness the commitments of personnel in the education, marketing, and development departments, among others, not to mention the perspectives of the director, herself formerly a curator, and members of the board. It would also produce a messier, though perhaps a more surprising narrative that might complicate Bunzl’s division of the museum into two competing forces, in which “curators are the unsung heroes in the struggle over the institution, seeking to preserve an avant-garde vision against ever-increasing odds” (13). Notwithstanding the text leaving me wanting more, it stands as a compelling and persuasive set of insights into the struggles that today animate museums of contemporary art.

## Reference Cited

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