# The 21st Century Museum as a Lab: Lessons Learned from MoMA's Educational History (1937–1969)

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When thinking of a 'Lab', the most common image that comes to mind is that of a special facility that contains beakers, burners and other tools and instruments necessary to carry out experiments. Regarding the concept of a museum, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines it as:

> *a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment (International Council of Museums, 2007).*

At the intersection of these two notions (the laboratory and the museum), working models of machines, devices for hands-on activities and invitations for people to help in gathering specimens for collections (Wittlin, 1949, p.155) have emerged. The underlying element that makes this intersection viable is that many museums no longer want to exhibit incontestable truths but want to provide an environment for ideas to be tested, challenged and co-created.

In 1939, in the catalogue of the exhibition *Art in Our Time*, The Museum of Modern Art's first director Alfred H. Barr (1939, p. 15) wrote, "The Museum of Modern Art is a laboratory: in its experiments the public is invited to participate."

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) under Alfred H. Barr was a laboratory for experimentation not only in the artworks on view, which included painting, sculpture, American Popular Art, photography, film and paintings by children, but also in the way they were displayed. Modern and contemporary creative processes involved a sense of experimentation, and MoMA was a risk-taker in hosting examples of modernism to a New York City audience that was relatively new to it.

Barr's view of participation envisaged a future MoMA being shaped by the public's response to the *Art in Our Time* exhibition. This wish for participation had been reinforced when in 1937 Victor D'Amico was hired to direct the Educational Project at The Museum of Modern Art. Victor D'Amico was a pioneer of art education who championed ideas of art as experience, learning by doing and teaching as a modern art practice. D'Amico's tenure, from 1937 to 1969, was characterized by the persistent effort to design modern art laboratories within the

museum where people could explore art processes through a personal creative experience. These spaces were targeted at different audiences, such as young people and adults, and were designed by D'Amico in collaboration with architects like Frank Vitullo and Philip Johnson, known for their works in Modern and Postmodern architecture. This research looks at these laboratories with an aim to extract elements that may inform the museum of the 21st century: decentration of curation, motivation and experimentation, responsiveness to social needs, long-term programing and the consideration of the museum beyond its walls

## Decentrating curation at the Young People's Gallery (1937-1957)

The Young People's Gallery opened in 1937 and was an "educational experiment" with the intent of "making the Museum's collection more accessible to New York schools" (D'Amico, 1940, p. 2). Decentralizing curation at The Young People's Gallery took the shape of an exhibition of works selected and hung by high school student juries. Material for the exhibition was assembled from the permanent collection of the Museum, as well as loan exhibitions from private collections and art galleries. The project sought to foster a curating experience while simultaneously producing art exhibitions. The exhibitions were visited by individual students and class groups and were later discussed with teachers and D'Amico (D'Amico, 1940).

The Young People's Gallery was a lab in two different ways. On one hand, the high school students were encouraged to experiment with different ways of presenting original works of art while curating exhibitions at the gallery. On the other, the aesthetic decisions the students made helped the museum to study the nature of appreciation and creative character of the adolescents. For both research threads to be successful, the design of the spaces was of great importance, to guarantee the relevance of the data extracted. D'Amico designed special equipment in the Young People's Gallery so that it served both as gallery and art studio. This included community easels, a continuous chain of desks folded flat against two of the walls and a large screen which covered an entire wall of the gallery and could be opened to form narrow drop shelves. On these shelves paintings could be placed and easily removed to make way for more paintings during demonstrations and lectures.

The sample schools that took part in the experiment included "pupils from varied nationalities and racial backgrounds of a large metropolitan city" (D'Amico, 1939, p.1). The selected schools were both public and private and were defined as: "a fair representation of the wide variety of differences among our pupils, namely racial, national and religious differences, low and high mentality, gifted and average art ability, verbal and manual individuals, students trained and untrained in the arts" (D'Amico, 1939, p.1). The immediate goal of this study was to help develop a creative city individual, and the findings of the project were meant to throw light upon the nature of adolescence in all situations and localities.

The Young People's Gallery worked as a laboratory in taking the center of curating exhibitions outside of the museums' offices to a place in-between where decisions where negotiated with pupils of different backgrounds. Co-creating exhibitions at the Young People's Gallery relied largely on the use of motivation and experimentation as strategies.

## Motivation and experimentation at The Children's Art Carnival (1942-present (ongoing)).

The Children's Art Carnival (also called Holiday Circus, Holiday Fair and Holiday Carnival), organized since 1942 at the MoMA, introduced children to the fundamentals of modern art through play and creative techniques. It was a laboratory where the child's reactions to art were studied (The Museum of Modern Art, n.d.) and new media was explored in an informal way.

The child entered the Carnival through a gate shaped from the contour of an eight-year-old. Once through the gate, the child was surrounded by works of art and creative opportunities. The design was based on the principle that appreciation in young children is best developed through actual contact with works of art chosen for their particular interest in texture, color, and subject matter, integrated with creative opportunities. It used play appeal because for "the young child, play is an important element in learning, since the child's creative impulses are more acute and his sensitivity more alert in a play experience" (The Museum of Modern Art, 1949, p. 2).

The Children's Art Carnival's space was divided into two sections (D'Amico, 1960): a motivational area and a studio for direct experimentation with the materials. In the motivational area, the child found sculptures and playthings like the *Plastic Clown*, *The Fish*, *The Bird* and the *Wind Machine* designed by Toni Hughes. These hung from the ceiling, casting shadows on the walls. The *Furry Cat* that arched his back when stroked and a *Dancing Rooster* by Ruth Vollmar were placed on the floor so that children could touch them. *Color players* for "painting with light"– an elastic string design or a magnetic board for children to experiment with color and design – were also available (The Museum of Modern Art, 1957, p. 2).

The studio workshop gave children the opportunity to try out for themselves the use of color, texture, pattern and movement seen in the toys. Easels were set up around walls, equipped with large brushes, large sheets of paper, and poster paints (The Museum of Modern Art, 1950). In the center of the room was a large table on which a great variety of materials were arranged (feathers, pieces of tin foil, scraps of velvet, and silk). On the walls of this section of the carnival hung modern paintings selected to give the children an understanding of the variety that existed in the art of the time. It included African sculptures and paintings by Louis Vivin, Darryl Austin, Fernand Leger, Carol Blanchard, Camille Bombois and Karl Priebe (The Museum of Modern Art, 1955). The works

of art were selected on the basis of the children's interest and were hung at their eye-level, where they were able to experience them.

In 1957 the opportunity of testing the carnival in Europe came as part of the International Samples Fairs of Milan and Barcelona. For six months in 1958, the carnival was part of the US pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair. In 1963 the Carnival traveled to the major cities of India. In 1969 the Carnival was established in Harlem where it remains today.

The aim of creating spaces at MoMA had people's motivation and experimentation at its heart. Experimentation and motivation are two important components for the museum as a laboratory to foster participation around its contents. However, what happens inside the museum needs to respond not only to its own content but also to the social necessities of its audience.

## Responsiveness to social needs at The Veterans Art Center (1944–1948)

During World War II, MoMA responded to the so-called "war effort" and provided art materials to the Arts and Crafts Section of the Army's Special Services Division, held competitions for industrial design and for posters, and opened the museum facilities to members of the armed services.

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, one of the founders of the museum, realized that MoMA could also help veterans in their transition to civilian life. She and Stephen C. Clark, a trustee of the Museum, jointly sponsored the founding of the War Veterans' Art Center.

In October, 1944, the Center opened its first classes for men and women who had served in the armed forces and Merchant Marine of the United States. Classes were offered in painting, sculpture and ceramics, jewelry, woodcarving, industrial design, design, graphic arts, silk screen printing, lettering and layout, wood engraving and book illustration. Orientation courses for those unsure of what to pursue were also offered. Meeting twice a week, for three hours each time, students were introduced to various art mediums and techniques. D'Amico wrote that the challenge this project posed was that "there was no precedent for the kind of instruction required of the staff of the War Veterans' Center" (D'Amico, 1948, p. 6). The Veterans Art Center was conceived as a laboratory with the aim of devising a new teaching method for this particular need. Classes were held on the second floor of 681 Fifth Avenue across the Museum main building. The classrooms were set up so that when not being used for veteran's classes, they could be used for the Museum's children's classes and new classes for civilian adults. D'Amico designed the classroom space and chose the materials. In the work areas he placed long tables, also of his design, with washable white tops. The legs of the tables could be adjusted to lower the work surfaces for children and raise them for adults. D'Amico also designed display and storage areas, and even paint boxes for adults.

Museums as laboratories have an element of responsiveness towards what is happening locally and globally. The Veterans Art Center was an example in which a whole new museum space was created to address a contemporary challenge: the reinsertion of II World War Veterans to civilian life. In June 1948, the War Veterans Art Center ceased its work. The rehabilitative purpose was considered to have been fulfilled but a broader necessity had been created: a permanent laboratory for all kinds to people to make art inside MoMA.

## In the long run at The People's Art Center (1949-1969)

In 1948, the People's Art Center took over the activity of the War Veterans Art Center. This time, the laboratory was set to be a long term laboratory. The aim was to create an Art School for all kinds of people to experience Modern art through studio practice during the school year. After-school and Sunday classes were offered to school children, classes to preschoolers were held weekday mornings and adult classes in mornings and evenings. The classes were designed to appeal to beginners. Most adult students were between thirty and sixty years of age, though students as young as eighteen were accepted, and a few students were even in their eighties.

Observation was an important element of the laboratory as it served for future art educators to see the development of the classes. However, space in the center was limited. In 1964 Philip Johnson designed a new People's Art Center. This one met D'Amico's fondest dreams (Gollin, 1995, p.5). Reached from 54th Street through the Museum Garden, it contained studios, workshops, a research center and an exhibition gallery. D'Amico designed all the furniture and the equipment himself and saw that Johnson added viewing rooms from which classes could be observed through one-way glass windows.

The People's Art center closed in 1969. During its long run, the Center had developed long-term relationships with its participants. The closing was met with discontent on the part of the students, who organized themselves to continue the laboratory independently from the museum.

The People's Art Center could not have produced the results it did if it had been conceived as a short-term project. The museum as a lab was part of the broader mission of MoMA that led to this long-term endeavor.

## Beyond the walls of the museum at The Art Barge (1960- present (ongoing)).

In 1955, the Museum had offered summer classes for both children and adults in Ashawagh Hall, in the town of Springs, near the Hamptons, on eastern Long Island. The summer classes grew and in five years, larger quarters were needed. D'Amico then designed an entirely different kind of laboratory.

After considerable searching for a suitable place he found an old disused navy barge, had it towed to nearby Napeague Bay, refurbished it, and turned it into a summer center. The renovated barge, named the Kearsage, accommodated as many as 100 students at a time over an eight-week season.

In time, the MoMA withdrew its support from the barge classes, which then continued independently. Today the barge runs as the Victor D'Amico Institute of Art. The necessity of finding an offsite place was a chance to get closer to a different community. This expands the scope of the museum as a laboratory that may not be just a building but a frame for action.

## Conclusions

The Museum as a Laboratory departs from the acknowledgement of a very basic issue: People need space to experience the museum in an individual way. MoMA's educational laboratories addressed the design of spaces where people could experiment with Modern art processes. With many museums currently undergoing expansions there is an opportunity to ponder whether these are allowing room for people's experimentation.

Architecture, design and furniture constitute the physical boundaries that can facilitate or hamper people's motivation and experimentation, but the challenge goes beyond the physical environment. Museums should question how responsive they are in providing a safe space for people to approach current issues that affect individual lives. A laboratory constitutes a place for people to experiment with collections' content but also a place to make sense of the challenges of everyday living.

None of the aforementioned is possible without allowing experiments to evolve over time. Present institutional demands make it difficult to set up any long term initiative. However, in laboratories it is acknowledged that relevant results can only come with time. Time allows the museum to transcend its institutional boundaries to become a flexible frame for action.

The ICOM (2007) definition of the museum is that frame for action. The question is whether this definition as it stands today can operatively respond and embrace the features of the museum as a laboratory. How this definition can convey the encouragement of experimentation, the motivation of its visitors, the decentration of curation, the response to social needs, the challenge of long-term endeavors and the understanding of the museum presence beyond its own walls is the unanswered question of this research. Challenging the ICOM definition to explicitly include these elements is an opportunity for collectively exploring a museum that does not yet exist, recognizing in its audience a central element to reimagine itself for an unknown future.

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