

Carol Duncan & Alan Wallach The Museum Of Modern Art As Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis*

In recent years art historians have become increasingly interested in understanding works of art in relation to their original physical settings—the churches, palace rooms, or temples for which they were made. These efforts reveal how a context can endow its objects with meaning, and, reciprocally, how the objects contribute to the larger meaning of the space they decorate. In our society the museum is the characteristic place for seeing art in the original. Like the church or temple of the past, the museum plays a unique ideological role. By means of its objects and all that surrounds them, the museum transforms ideology in the abstract into living belief.¹

Museums, as modern ceremonial monuments, belong to the same architectural class as temples, churches, shrines, and certain kinds of palaces. Although all architecture has an ideological aspect, only ceremonial monuments are dedicated exclusively to ideology. Their social importance is underscored by the enormous resources lavished on their construction and decoration. Absorbing more manual and imaginative labor than any other type of architecture, these buildings affirm the power and social authority of a patron class.² But ceremonial monuments convey more than class domination. They impress upon those who see or use them a society's most revered values and beliefs.

The museum, like other ceremonial monuments, is a complex architectural phenomenon that selects and arranges works of art within a sequence of spaces. This totality of art and architectural form organizes the visitor's experience as a script organizes a performance. Individuals respond in different ways according to their education, culture, 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. Indeed, the museum experience bears a striking resemblance to religious rituals in both form and content.³

In the museum, painting and sculpture play the same role as in other types

of ritual architecture. In a church or palace, walls function primarily to mark out and shape a space appropriate to specific rites or ceremonies. The paintings, statues, and reliefs affixed to or embedded in the walls constitute an integral part of the monument—in a sense its voice. These decorations articulate and enlarge the meaning of the activities on the site. In most traditional monumental architecture the various decorative elements, taken together, form a coherent whole—what art historians call an iconographic program. These programs usually rest upon authoritative literary sources—written or orally transmitted myths, litanies, sacred texts, epics. Monumental iconographic programs frequently evoke a mythic or historical past that informs and justifies the values celebrated in the ceremonial space. As visual commentaries they elucidate the purpose of the consecrated ground.⁴

Thus, the images of John the Baptist that often decorated the walls of baptistries gave meaning to the ritual of baptism. Monastery dining halls frequently incorporated images of the Last Supper so that the monks could associate their own mealtime gatherings with Christ's sacrifice. Similarly, medieval choir screens—partitions separating the church choir from the surrounding ambulatory—sometimes displayed reliefs that illustrated the principal moments of the Crucifixion. Obviously, neither the church, nor the ambulatory, nor the choir screen was built solely to provide space or a wall support for the reliefs. Rather, the reliefs were intended to give meaning to the pilgrim's walk around the choir.

The museum serves as a ceremonial monument; its space and collection present an ensemble of art objects that functions as an iconographic program.⁵ Historians of premodern and nonwestern art usually acknowledge ritual contexts,⁶ but conventional art historians ignore the meanings works of art acquire in the museum and insist that the viewer's experience of art is—or should be—shaped by the artist's intention as embodied in the object.⁷ Museums almost everywhere sanction the idea that works of art should, above all, be viewed one-by-one in an apparently ahistorical environment. They define the museum's primary function as housing objects in a neutral space within which they may be contemplated. According to prevailing beliefs, the museum space itself, apart from the objects it shelters, is empty. A structured

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ritual space—an ideologically active environment—usually remains invisible, experienced only as a transparent medium through which art can be viewed objectively and without distraction.

Museums, like medieval abbey churches, town cathedrals, and palace chapels, tend to conform to one of a few well-established types, the two most important in the West today being such traditional state or municipal museums as the Metropolitan Museum of New York and such modern art museums, as New York's Museum of Modern Art.⁸ Generally, each corresponds to a different moment in the evolution of bourgeois ideology and has its own iconographic tradition. Indeed, the iconographic program of any particular museum is almost as predictable as that of a medieval church and is equally dependent on authoritative doctrine. The conventional art history found in the encyclopedic textbooks of Gardner, Janson, Arnason, and others¹⁰ supplies the doctrines that make these modern ceremonies coherent.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York City (MOMA) in its way represents the Chartres of mid-twentieth-century modern art museums. As Chartres provided the prototype for the High Gothic cathedral, so MOMA provides the prototype for the modern art museum. Representing a new and foreign taste when built in the 1930s, it quickly became a model not only for every American city with aspirations to high culture but for all the capitals of the West.¹¹ More than any other museum, MOMA developed the ritual forms that translated the ideology of late capitalism into immediate and vivid artistic terms—a monument to individualism, understood as subjective freedom.

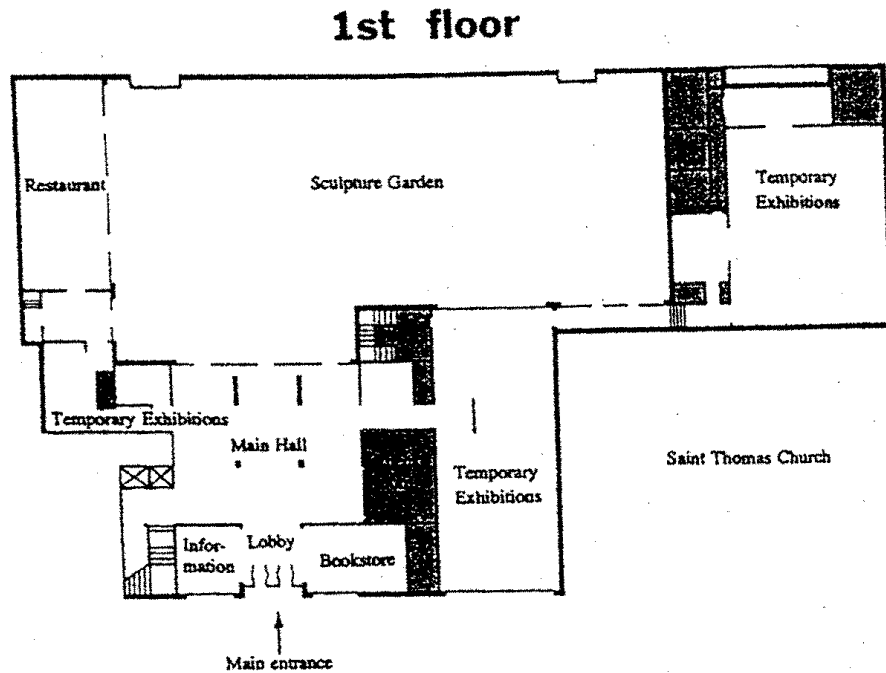
A visit to MOMA begins with the façade. To appreciate fully its original effect, the visitor must imagine away all the post-World War II construction in the neighborhood. When planned in the 1930s, the neighborhood, although rapidly changing, still consisted mainly of elegant residences that dated from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. When new, the clean, purified forms of MOMA's gleaming steel and glass façade announced the coming of a new aesthetic—a future of efficiency and rationality.¹² Since World War II the area around the Museum has become crowded with high-rise corporate headquarters, almost all built in the International Style MOMA pioneered. MOMA is now overwhelmed by its megalithic neighbors. But, originally, it offered an outpost of modernity, and its crisp, unsentimental lines strikingly contrasted with the Victorian rhetoric of its neighbors.

MOMA presents a cool face to the outside world: impersonal and silent—a wall of glass. An older ceremonial structure, like the gothic revival church of St. Thomas next door to the Museum, addressed the world around it through its architectural language, implying the existence of an ideal community the values and beliefs of which it celebrated. The church's elaborate portals and sculptural decorations proclaimed the ritual meaning of the space inside. MOMA belongs to the age of corporate capitalism. It addresses us not as a community of citizens but as private individuals who value only experience that can be understood in subjective terms. MOMA has no message for a "public" world. The individual will find meaning only in the building's interior. The blankness of the translucent exterior wall suggests the separation of public and private, external and internal.

By employing the conventional rhetoric of public buildings, such traditional museums as the Metropolitan Museum of New York or the National Gallery of London dramatize the moment of passage from exterior to interior—from the everyday world to a space dedicated to the contemplation of higher values. Here, too, the architecture asserts the existence of a community. The entrance invites a first step in a communal rite, the different moments of which the architecture marks. At MOMA the script also begins at the entrance. But the terms of entry differ as much as the architecture. Only a glass membrane, stretching from pavement to overhang, stands between the street and the interior. No steps mark the passage. Even while still part of the flow of the street, you are visually drawn into the interior. Suddenly detached from the stream of pedestrian traffic, you pass through the revolving doors and move into the low but expanding space of the ground floor.¹³ There is no one conscious moment of passage. Separated from the movement of the street, you are released into the space of the interior like a molecule into a gas.

The ground floor is an open, light-filled space. You feel as if you can go wherever you wish. There are no architectural imperatives like those of the Metropolitan, with its grand stairway and succession of great halls. On MOMA's ground floor you experience a heightened sense of individual free choice—a major theme of the building as a whole.

Now you choose where to go. A museum, like a church or temple, serves different people in different ways.¹⁴ If you are a regular and informed visitor, you probably came to see a specific exhibition or film. If not, your unfamiliarity with the building may result in a sense of spatial disorientation.



Plan of first floor showing only ceremonial spaces (in white).

The space of MOMA's ground floor creates a tension that later stages of the architectural script will eventually resolve. At this moment the problem is to find your way.

Ahead is the garden—obviously a resting place not yet earned by the newcomer. To the left and right are temporary exhibition spaces. (See Plan.) The large spaces house major exhibitions and retrospectives, while the smaller, located near the cafeteria, accommodate recent trends. These first floor galleries normally increase the newcomer's sense of bewilderment. The experienced visitor already knows that you cannot comprehend them until you have traveled the main ceremonial route—the permanent collection located on the second and third floors.¹⁵

The aura surrounding MOMA's permanent collection is unmatched by any other collection of modern art. Educated opinion literally identifies MOMA's

collection with the mainstream of modern art history. Visitors come to MOMA convinced that they will find not simply masterpieces but works that stand as the turning points in that history: *Starry Night*, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, *Ma Jolie*, *The Red Studio*, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, *Guernica*. From the time of its founding, MOMA's trustees, led by the Rockefellers, promoted an image of glamorous modernity and liberalism that contrasted sharply with older types of museums and their nineteenth-century ideologies.¹⁶ No other collection of modern art received such generous support and publicity for acquisitions, exhibitions, publications, and public relations. Increasingly, after World War II MOMA's view of modern art achieved institutional hegemony in academic art history, art education, and the higher reaches of the gallery world and the art press.¹⁷ The image of the collection as the unique embodiment of modern art history remains established—that is, institutionally enforced. As the Museum recently said in its *Members Calendar* of June 1977:

The Museum of Modern Art's collection of modern painting, sculpture, drawing, prints, architecture, design, photography and film are the greatest in the world. A selection from the collections, on view in the Museum's galleries, offers an unrivaled review of the modern masters and movements that have made the period from about 1885 to the present one of the most varied and revolutionary in the entire history of art.¹⁸

The professionals who built the Museum's collection during the 1920s and 1930s held definite views about modern art and its historical development and sought out works accordingly. Alfred Barr, the Museum's first curator of painting and sculpture, regarded French painting, in particular Picasso and Cubism, as more significant than American art or other currents of European vanguardism. He and his colleagues insisted that they chose works on the basis of artistic quality. Reference to artistic quality or aesthetics can, however, obscure the role of ideology in selection. The works MOMA acquired express with extraordinary fullness and imagination a system of values, above all a belief in a certain kind of individualism. Trustees John Hay Whitney and Nelson A. Rockefeller emphasized this in *Masters of Modern Art*, a sumptuously produced guide to the collection:

We believe that the collection of the Museum of Modern Art and this publication

represent our respect for the individual and for his ability to contribute to society as a whole through free use of his individual gifts in his individual manner.¹⁹

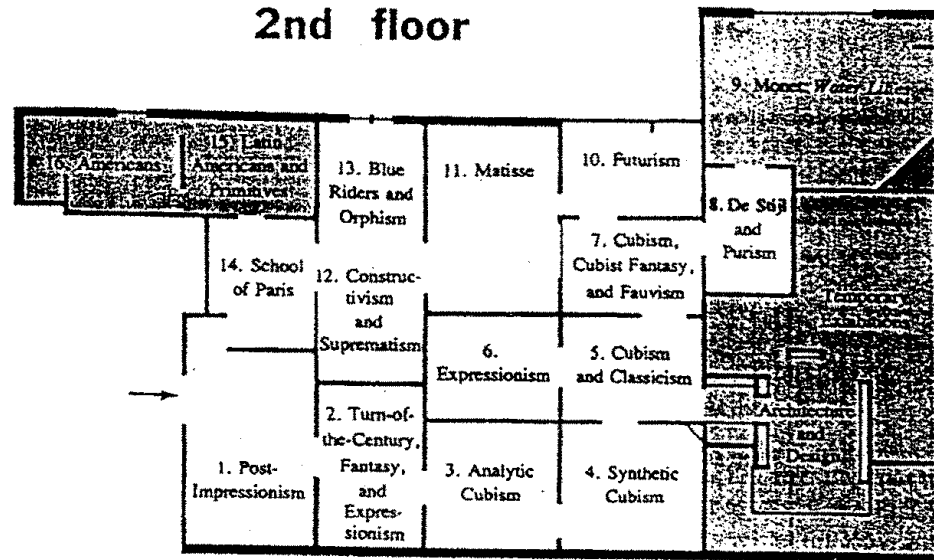
Nineteenth-century art contained individualism within the representational conventions of naturalism. However individualistic the content of the work, it addressed the viewer in a conventional—socially shared—visual language that represented a “real” and “objective” external world. Modern high art expresses individualism largely through the use of unconventional visual languages: Each artist strives to invent a distinctive one, implicitly denying the possibility of a shared world of experience. Increasingly, beginning with Cézanne and late Impressionism, Van Gogh and Expressionism, Gauguin and Symbolism, inner experience emerges as the more real and significant part of existence. The more subjective and abstract the visual language, the more unique and individualized the artist’s consciousness.²⁰

As you walk through MOMA’s permanent collection, you are aware of seeing a succession of works by artists whose uniqueness has been established in the authoritative literature and whose distinctive stylistic traits are easily recognizable. These works, although presented as emblems of individualism, conform to the Museum’s well-defined art-historical scheme. Individual artists acquire significance—art-historical importance—according to how much they contributed to the evolution of the total scheme. The installation makes this evident. As in all museums, the visitor perceives works of art as so many moments in a historical scheme. Michael Compton, Keeper of the Tate Gallery, speaking at a symposium of museum curators, rightly observed:

What we do is . . . present art in such a way that, you’ll notice if you watch people going around the museum, they will look at each painting for an average of 1.6 seconds. I think when they see a painting, they can hardly be thinking anything but ah, that’s an example of Cubism; an example of Pre-Raphaelitism; what a nice Mondrian; and so on. They never actually confront the individual painting.²¹

At MOMA the rooms that contain the permanent collection are linked to each other as in a chain, so that the visitor must follow a prescribed route. Off this main route are several cul-de-sacs and secondary routes, the content of which the Museum thereby designates as subsidiary to its central history of modern art. These detours and dead ends include the history of photography, modern sculpture, decorative arts, and prints.

2nd floor

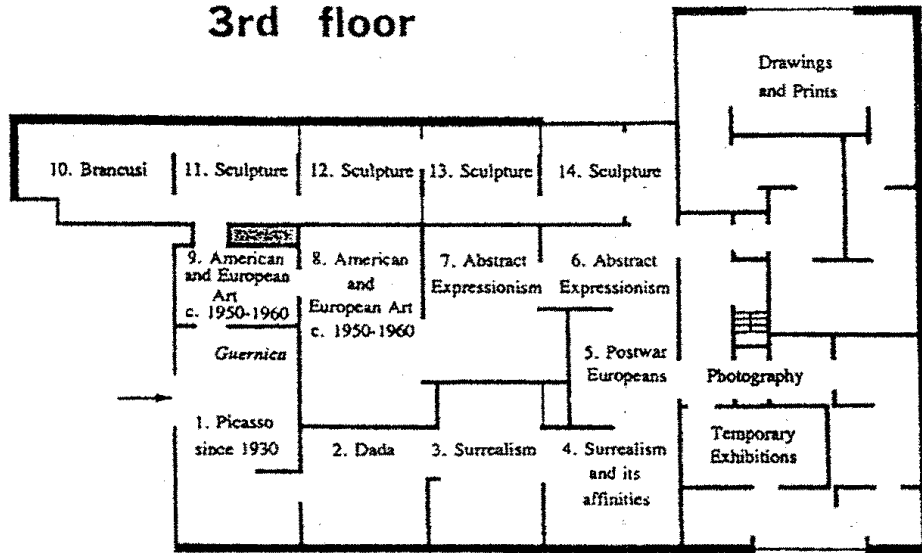


Plan of second floor galleries. The main route is white; secondary routes are shaded.

As you advance along the prescribed route, the iconographic program emphasizes the principal moments and turning points of this history. Works given special weight are framed by doorways and are often visible from several rooms away. Works deemed less important hang in corner spaces, tiers, or off the main route. Certain works are to be experienced as signposts—as culminating moments in the authorized history—while others are secondary manifestations or, in the galleries off the main route, completely outside the mainstream of modern art history: Orozco, Siqueros, Hopper, Shahn.²²

In brief, that history records the increasing dematerialization and transcendence of mundane experience. The highlights of the route, which frame and define the history of modern art, are Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. Everything else—German Expressionism, Matisse, Dada—acquires significance in relation to these three central movements. Thus, according to MOMA, the history of modern art begins with Cézanne, who confronts you at the entrance to the permanent collection. The

3rd floor



Plan of third floor galleries. The main route is white; secondary routes are shaded.

arrangement makes his meaning obvious. He foreshadows Picasso and Cubism—that is, the decisive breakdown of tangible form. From Picasso and Cubism issue almost everything else: Léger, the Futurists, the Constructivists. Once the supremacy of Cubism has been established, you encounter other tendencies that appear derivative or subordinate: Matisse, die Brücke, Blue Riders. Before you leave the second floor, the history of modern art has already been detached from the material world—Kandinsky, Malevich—a moment of enlightenment marked by the first and only window on the main route. On the third floor the mainstream of modern art recommences with *Guernica*, which in this context represents not so much the horror of the Spanish Civil War as an inevitable development from Cubism to Surrealism. Here, after Picasso, Miró is presented as the prototypical Surrealist. With him modern abstraction reaches new heights of individualism and subjectivity. Up to this point the installation preserves the art-historical program MOMA's curators developed in the Museum's early years and have since extended to include American Abstract Expressionism. Indeed, in the

Museum Abstract Expressionism appears as the logical fulfillment of the original historical scheme.²³

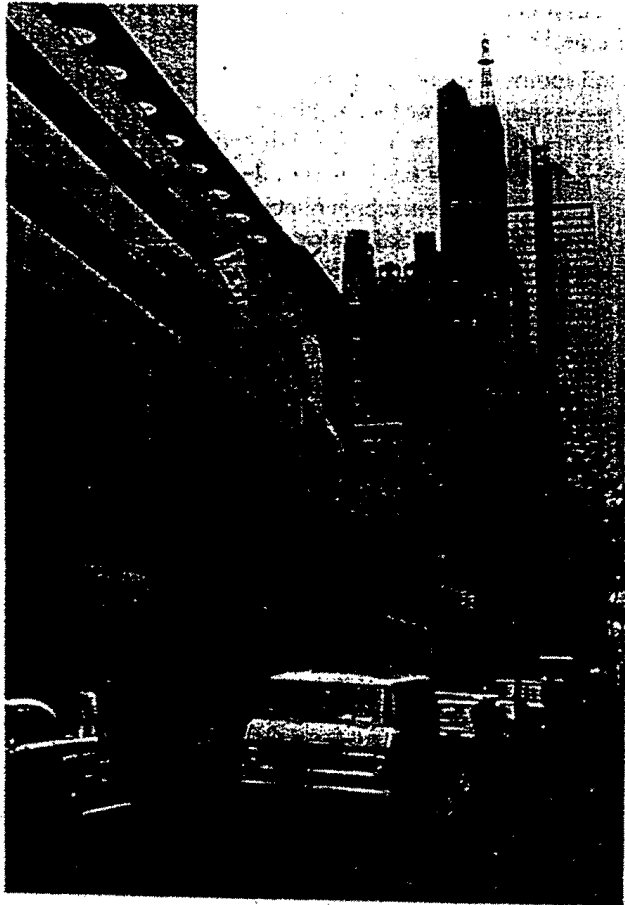
A succession of small rooms displays the permanent collection. There are no straight vistas, no large spaces, no organizing hallways. The route twists and turns. It is difficult to maintain a clear sense of direction. Of the twenty rooms along the main route, only one has windows despite the building's glass façades. To walk through the permanent collection is to walk through a labyrinth.²⁴ We intend more than a spatial analogy. The structure of MOMA's ritual conforms to the archetypal labyrinth experience.

The labyrinth, a basic image in world cultures, appears in literature and drama as well as in ceremonial architecture and other ritual settings. Whatever its cultural context, the image contains certain core elements:

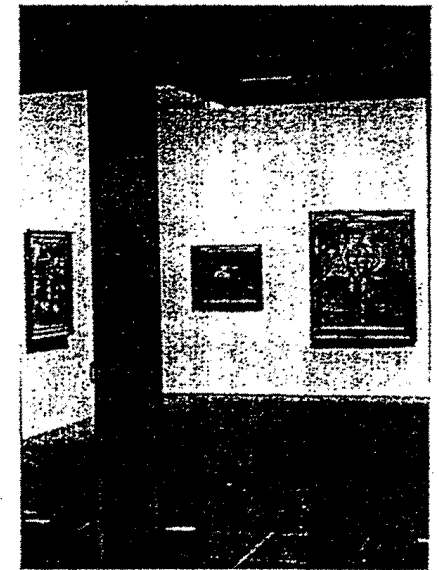
It always has to do with death and re-birth relating either to a life after death or to the mysteries of initiation; . . . the presiding personage, either mythical or actual, is always a woman; . . . [and] the labyrinth itself is walked through, or the labyrinth design walked over, by men.²⁵

Passage through the labyrinth is an ordeal that ends in triumph—a passage from darkness to light and thus a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment, integration, rebirth. The ancient labyrinthine structures in palaces and temples, as well as those described in primitive myths, were associated with the earth and the Great Mother Goddess and were often located underground.²⁶

MOMA's labyrinth, however, lies above the earth. Seen from the outside, the blue translucent glass of its exterior wall hints at the realm of transcendence to which the labyrinth will lead. From the outside, the glass wall is a mysterious curtain that reflects the sky. It is impossible to guess what lies behind it. MOMA's Bauhaus-inspired design signaled progress, science, and rationality. But, in effect, it is a rational cover wrapped around an irrational core, and, as one critic observed, even the rational-looking exterior does not correspond to the division of space inside.²⁷ We do not suggest that MOMA's architects consciously thought of a labyrinth when they designed the Museum, nor that MOMA's curators thought of a labyrinth when they installed the collection. We do suggest that the labyrinth form organizes ritual activity.²⁸



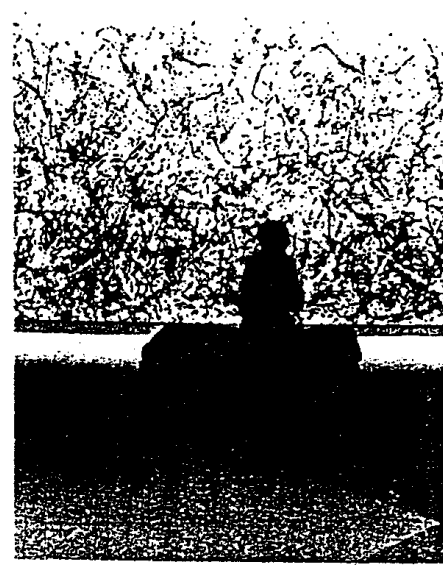
MOMA facade. Photos by Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach.



Above: the main hall; *Below:* entrance to the permanent collection.



Above: the cubist rooms; *Below:* permanent collection with Boccioni's *The City Rises* and Matisse's *The Music Lesson*.



Above: the third floor with Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* and Miro's *Creation of the World*; *Below:* the third floor: Pollock and De Kooning.



Above: the garden with Lachaise, Maillol; Below: the garden with Maillol.

In MOMA you wind through a series of narrow, silent, windowless white spaces. These rooms have a peculiar effect. They inhibit speech: If you speak at all, you speak in low tones and only to those who have come with you. This is an intensely private place. You move silently over carpeted floors and between featureless, luminous walls, insubstantial by comparison with the works of art they support. You are in a "nowhere," a pristine blankness, a sunless white womb/tomb, seemingly outside time and history.²⁹ Here, as in most labyrinths, the substance of the ritual is an internal drama.

As you pass through MOMA's white, dream-like labyrinth night, the gaze of the Great Mother finds you again and again. Often she confronts you head-on, her two eyes round and bulging, the petrifying stare and the devouring mouth of the Gorgon Medusa now before you as the awesome and grotesque goddess-whores of Picasso, Kirchner, De Kooning. In the passage through Surrealism she is often a beast—a giant praying mantis. Everywhere she poses the threat of domination. Sometimes, as in Munch's man-killing vampire, her beauty is a snare. In Léger's sphinxes her look is frozen, her body a great steel machine. The entire labyrinth is her realm, but she is most present when you approach the threshold of a higher spiritual level—that is, at moments of art-historical "breakthroughs." Even before you enter the first cubist room, her eyes are on you (*Les Demoiselles*). She intercepts you (Picasso's *Girl Before the Mirror* and *Seated Bather*) just before you reach Miró's surrealist *Creation of the World*. You risk her gaze (De Kooning's *Woman*) as you advance towards Jackson Pollock. She personifies the dangers of the route first run by the artists themselves.³⁰

The labyrinth emphasizes the terrible aspects of the goddess, her power to engulf, ensnare, petrify, castrate. But in the garden outside, amidst trees, waters, animals, and earth, her power will be celebrated as a positive force, expressed by the swelling volumes of her massive body. Bronze statues of her are everywhere, standing high and triumphant on platforms and pedestals (Lachaise) or crouching low near the water where she washes clothes or plays (Renoir, Maillol). Nearby, MOMA's cafeteria patrons enjoy her bounty on warm summer days. Outside, she can appear in all her creative power because only there, in the realm of nature, can female creative power be acknowledged as fertility and procreativity. But even there she does not dominate. Near the garden's center, on the highest pedestal of all, stands Rodin's *Balzac* exalting male procreativity as artistic potency.³¹

Inside the labyrinth the principle of creativity is defined and celebrated as a male spiritual endeavor in which consciousness finds its identity by transcending the material, biological world and its Mother Goddess. Salvation, understood as a male norm, is alienation from the Mother and her realm. It is integration with spirit, light, intellect. The garden contains reminders of the Terrible Mother of the labyrinth (e.g., Lipschitz's *Figure*); just as images of the labyrinth occasionally echo the traits of the garden Goddesses (Matisse). In fact, both Goddess and Mother are different aspects of the Great Mother, who, in the labyrinth, emerges as dangerous. It is she who must be overcome. The way to do so is made clear by the iconography.

In the labyrinth the pictures lead you along a spiritual path that rises to ever higher levels of transcendence. They do so not only through their increasingly abstract formal language but also through their themes and subjects. On the second floor the iconography celebrates the victory of thought over matter and weight (Cubism, Purism, de Stijl), the supremacy of light, movement, and air (Futurism, Orphism), and the first triumphs of mysticism (Suprematism and Blue Riders). Your experience on the third floor becomes increasingly mystical, unnamable, sublime. Here spirit eclipses reason entirely. You begin with Surrealism, which unseated the last vestiges of reason and history and their hold on vanguard language, and you end in the Abstract Expressionist realm of myth as a substitute for history (Gorky, Pollock, Gottlieb, Motherwell) and mystical faith in which abstract form signifies the Absolute (Rothko, Newman, Reinhardt). The increasingly dematerialized and abstract forms as well as the emphasis on such themes as light and air proclaim the superiority of the spiritual and transcendent while negating the world of human emotions and needs. Images of labor are, for the most part, absent. When they do appear, as in Boccioni's *City Rises*, they are treated in mythic terms. Love as a reciprocal human relationship does not exist, while the need for love appears only in distorted, nightmare images of women—paralyzing Gorgons and devouring females. MOMA's ritual walk is a walk through an irrational world in which everyday experience looms as monstrous and unreal compared with the higher realm of dematerialized spirit. In effect, MOMA treats the content of everyday life as irrelevant—an obstacle to be overcome on the path to spiritual enlightenment. These "mundane" and "vulgar" aspects of existence must be suppressed. This suppression—a virtue according to the labyrinth script—leads to "aesthetic detachment." In the words of Mark Rothko:

Freed from a false sense of security and community, the artist can abandon his plastic bank-book, just as he abandoned other forms of security. Both the sense of community and of security depend on the familiar. Free of them, transcendental experiences become possible.³²

Enlightenment in the labyrinth means detachment from the world of common experience and material need. As the ritual unfolds, greater sacrifices are required. On the third floor history and then even myth are renounced. To quote Barnett Newman:

We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting . . . The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.³³

Without history or myth there remains only an underlying human condition. Rothko wrote:

I am interested only in expressing the basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on—and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I *communicate* with those basic human emotions. These people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.³⁴

But the logic of renunciation is relentless. It leads to the final revelation: The ultimate value is nothingness—the transcendent void. As Reinhardt described it:

No lines or imaginings, no shapes or composings or representings, no visions or sensations or impulses, no symbols or signs or impastos, no decoratings or colorings or picturings, no pleasure or pains, no accidents or readymades, no things, no ideas, no relations, no attributes, no qualities—nothing that is not of the essence.³⁵

The triumph of Abstract Expressionism, then, is the triumph of spirit. Now, at the end of the labyrinthine route, spirit and only spirit is visible, and only the visible can be "real." With Abstract Expressionism the ritual is complete. Through the ritual the visitor lives an experience the structure of

which follows a traditional pattern of Western religious thought that portrays human life as a struggle between the material and the spiritual—between the demands of corporeal existence and the longing for unity with the Divine. Traditional religious thought describes the triumph of spirit over matter as a necessary “alienation,” which frees consciousness from the demands of everyday existence.³⁶ The alienation of traditional theologies is in many ways equivalent to the concept of freedom as it appears in late bourgeois ideology. In the ideology of modernist art, as embodied in MOMA, it takes the form of aesthetic detachment—the ultimate value in artistic experience. A characteristic moment of both religious and aesthetic alienation is ecstasy—an overpowering sense of liberation and elevation. Abstract Expressionism produced similar feelings. Clyfford Still wrote:

By 1941, space and the figure in my canvases had been resolved into a total psychic entity, freeing me from the limitations of each, yet fusing into an instrument bounded only by the limits of my energy and intuition. My feeling of freedom was now absolute and infinitely exhilarating.³⁷

And Richard Pousette-Dart:

Art for me is the heavens forever opening up, like asymmetrical, unpredictable, spontaneous Kaleidoscopes. It is magic, it is Joy, it is gardens of surprise and miracle. It is energy, impulse. It is total in its spirit.³⁸

The everyday world, ostensibly banished from consciousness, nevertheless haunts the labyrinthine way. The labyrinth is, in fact, not a realm of transcendence but of inversions in which the repressed realities of the mundane world return, as it were, disguised as monstrous, overwhelming forces. Irrational powers that seem beyond comprehension own and rule both worlds. Anxiety and self-doubt characterize both worlds: The struggle for existence that pervades everyday life outside is reflected inside in the lonely, fearful, upward-striving of the individual. The labyrinth ritual glamorizes the competitive individualism and alienated human relations that characterize contemporary social experience. It reconciles the visitor to pure subjectivity by equating it with “the human condition.” And in the garden, as in the outside world, that which satisfies material needs appears not as the result of labor but as if by magic—gifts of a great nature goddess.³⁹

As an institution MOMA appears to be a refuge from a materialist society: a cultural haven, an ideal world apart. Yet, it exalts precisely the values and experiences it apparently rejects by elevating them to the universal and timeless realm of spirit. MOMA’s ritual is a walk through a hall of mirrors in which isolation, fear, and numbness appear as exciting and desirable states of being. Thus MOMA would reconcile you to the world, as it is, outside.

Notes

1. It has been frequently observed that museums produce ideology. However, critiques usually focus on the management of museums in the interests of an elite. Our concern is with the museum experience itself—with the way museums and museum art realize ideology.
2. Giulio C. Argan, discussing the Renaissance origins of modern urban monuments and the architectural tradition to which the public museum belongs, argues that these Renaissance buildings functioned ideologically as visible symbols of State authority. See *The Renaissance City* (New York, 1969), 22-29. Museums communicate authority not only to the affluent and “cultivated” museum user. For those who never venture inside, the visible—and usually prominent—fact of the museum may reinforce a sense of social exclusion. By contrast, the more the visitor knows the uses of the museum the more he or she is likely to identify with the social authority underlying high culture. For a critical sociological study of the museum public, see Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *L'Amour de l'art: Les musées d'art européens et leur public* (Paris, 1969). Bourdieu and Darbel found that “Museums betray in the smallest details of their morphology their real function which is to reinforce among some people the feeling of belonging and among others the feeling of exclusion” (p. 165).
3. Victor Turner, in “Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama in Public Liminality,” in Michael Benamou and Charles Caramello, eds., *Performance in Post-Modern Culture* (Milwaukee, 1977), 33-55, compares the products of modern high culture to rituals. According to Turner, such forms as the theatre, novels, and art exhibitions provide scripts or “doing codes” performed by individuals. He compares their structure to those of rituals in simpler and traditional societies. Turner’s *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), 94 ff., and Arnold van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage* (1908), trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, 1960), explore in detail features common to certain kinds of rituals. The notion of architecture as ritual form is brilliantly developed in Frank E. Brown’s *Roman Architecture* (New York, 1961). Brown argues that Roman architecture not only originated in ritual activity, but that “it required it, prompted it, enforced it” (p. 10).
That a museum visit is a ritual may at first appear to be stretching a metaphor. We live in a secular age. Museums, although often compared to temples or shrines, are deemed secular institutions. But the separation between the secular and the religious is itself a part of bourgeois thought and has effectively masked the survival in our own society of older religious practices and beliefs. From the beginning bourgeois society appropriated religious symbols and traditions to its own ends. The legacy of religious patterns of thought and feeling especially shaped the experience of art. While Winckelmann and other eighteenth-century thinkers were

discovering in art all the characteristics of the sacred, a new kind of cultural institution, the public art museum—Temples of Art, as the age styled them—was evolving a corresponding ritual. In 1768 Goethe described this new kind of art space—the Dresden Gallery—as a “sanctuary,” the splendor and richness of which “imparted a feeling of solemnity . . . which so much more resembled the sensation with which one treads a church,” but here “set up only for the sacred purposes of art.” *The Autobiography of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, trans. John Oxenford (New York, 1969), 346-347. Germain Bazin, noting this new religious attitude toward art, writes, “No longer existing solely for the delectation of refined amateurs, the museum, as it evolved into a public institution, simultaneously metamorphosed into a temple to human genius.” *The Museum Age*, trans. Jane van Nuis Cahil (New York, 1967), 160.

4. Established art history generally studies iconography only in relation to literary sources, pictorial traditions, or religious beliefs. For us, iconography includes more than the correlation of images with texts or other images. We aim to understand the role iconography plays in mediating between ideology in the abstract and specific, subjective experience.

5. Most museum art was produced before museums existed and was usually intended for some other ceremonial setting. But the original purpose for which a work was made has never prevented its being put to a new use. Art history furnishes numerous precedents in which objects made for one context were transported to another and integrated into an entirely different iconographic program. Kurt W. Forster has studied an outstanding example in “Giulio Romano’s ‘Museum’ of Sculpture in the Palazzo Ducale at Mantua,” paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the College Art Association of America, 1978, New York City.

6. For examples, see Thomas W. Lyman, “Theophanic Iconography and the Easter Liturgy: The Romanesque Painted Program at Saint-Sernin in Toulouse,” in Lucius Grisebach and Konrad Renger, eds., *Festschrift für Otto von Simpson zum 65. Geburtstag* (Frankfurt, 1977), 72-93; O.K. Werckmeister, “The Lintel Fragment Representing Eve from Saint-Lazare. Autun,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXXV (1972), 1-30, and Anazee Hayum, “The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context Revisited,” *Art Bulletin*, LIX (1977), 501-517.

7. The original intentions of artists are not immediately relevant to this study since our concern is not the production of art but its reception—the way art institutions structure and mediate the experience of art today.

8. Less important types include museums that specialize in ethnic or regional art as well as the robber-baron mansion. A large traditional museum may swallow whole one or more of the less important types in such special sections as the Met’s Lehman rooms or the modern American wing.

9. For medieval iconography, see Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image*, trans. Dora Nussey (New York, 1958).

10. Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages* (New York, 1926, and numerous subsequent editions); H.W. Janson, *History of Art*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1977); and H.H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1977).

11. Terry Smith, the Australian art historian, analyzing the effects of American high-cultural imperialism, points out that “many American cultural institutions have international programs. The Museum of Modern Art is perhaps the most active—in the past twelve months it has toured exhibitions throughout Europe, South America, Australia and elsewhere. Such exhibitions may not be intended as tools of cultural imperialism, but it would be naive to believe that they do not have precisely this effect.” “The Provincialism Problem,” *Artform* (Sept. 1974), 59.

12. Long before MOMA moved into its new quarters, it had promoted the International Style—the steel and glass architecture of Gropius and the Bauhaus—as the true style of the twentieth century, the only style to embody the rational, scientific spirit of modern mass society. The Museum energetically advocated this line in a series of exhibitions beginning with the 1932 show, *Modern Architecture*. In the Catalogue (New York, 1932), 180, Louis Mumford called for a new architecture based on the values of the future: “science, disciplined thinking, coherent organization, collective enterprise and that happy impersonality which is one of the highest fruits of personal development.” When the Museum’s own Bauhaus-inspired building was completed, the press greeted its glass curtain walls and steel frame as “the last word in functional architecture” and “a definite object lesson in those kinds of beauty which are distinctively our own because they are obtainable only by means of twentieth-century materials and building methods.” See “Modern Museum Moves into its New Home,” *Art Digest* (May 15, 1939), 8; and Talbot F. Hamlin, “Modern Display for Works of Art,” *Pencil Points* (Sept. 1939), 618. Since the 1960s scholars have increasingly pointed to the ease with which corporate capitalism appropriated the machine-made look the Bauhaus glamorized. See, for example, Joseph Masheck, “Embalmed Objects: Design at the Modern,” *Artforum* (Feb. 1975), 49-55.

13. The original design of the ground floor level has been altered, but the effect of the exterior remains substantially unchanged. See Hamlin, *Pencil Points* (Sept. 1939), 616. For plans, elevations, and other details of the original building, see Philip S. Goodwin and Edward D. Stone (the original architects), “The Museum of Modern Art, New York,” *Architectural Review* (Sept. 1939), 121-124.

14. Bourdieu and Darbel, *L’Amour de l’art*, passim.

15. Yet Richard Oldenburg, MOMA’s Director, argues (to no avail, as he himself acknowledges) that what happens in the first floor minor galleries has nothing to do with the permanent collection upstairs. Speaking at a symposium on modern art museums, he said: “You get a confusion in people’s minds between the enshrined art and the art you’re trying to present for interest and edification.” Oldenburg also referred to the “awful assumption that too large a part of our public makes, that anything that is enshrined in the museum, even if just in a brief show of modest proportions, has some kind of direct relationship to the fact that on the second and third floors we have a permanent collection with acknowledged masterpieces.” “Validating Modern Art,” *Artforum* (Jan. 1977), 52. For an analysis of how special exhibitions and their installations reinforce MOMA’s art-historical mainstream, see Alan Wallach, “Trouble in Paradise,” *Artforum* (Jan. 1977), 28-35.

16. This image was well established in the press before the Museum moved to 53rd Street in 1939. The new glass building confirmed MOMA’s image as a new museum type. “Not a trace of the conventional, musty museum remains,” wrote one critic. “A Lesson in Museum Architecture,” *The Studio* (Jan. 1940), 21. Henry Russell Hitchcock, the architectural historian, also praised the new building as an embodiment of a new museum concept. Institutions such as MOMA, he wrote, “function in a way which is different if not impossible for institutions which conceive their essential duty as being the preservation of the old values rather than the discovering of new ones.” “Museum in the Modern World,” *Architectural Review* (Oct. 1939), 147-148. For a history of MOMA, see Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern* (New York, 1973).

17. William Rubin, present Director of Painting and Sculpture at MOMA, remarked in an interview: “Modern art education during and just after World War II was, in the first instance,

very much a question of this museum and its publications. I was Meyer Schapiro's student for many years. But even his sense of modern art was conditioned by what was to be seen in this museum." See "Talking with William Rubin: 'Like Folding Out a Hand of Cards,'" *Artforum* (Nov. 1974), 47. Interviewing Rubin were Lawrence Alloway and John Coplans.

18. MOMA often informs the press that its new acquisitions are of the highest art-historical importance. See, for example, "Picasso Gives Work to Museum Here," *New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1971.

19. *Masters of Modern Art* (New York, 1958), 7.

20. Eli Zaretsky analyzes the modern conditions in which this new realm of subjectivity develops. See *Capitalism, The Family, and Personal Life* (New York, 1976).

21. William Rubin talked at length about his installation of the permanent collection in the *Artforum* interview (supra, n. 18). His aim, he says, is to place "large key pictures" on "the axes of the viewer's passage" (through doorways) in order to make visible certain art-historical relationships.

22. MOMA orthodoxy has led to an art-historical bind. Abstract Expressionism perfectly completed the inner logic of its doctrines. Although MOMA has collected post-Abstract Expressionist art, it is not integrated into the Museum's permanent iconographic program. Art of the 1960s and 1970s appears in temporary installations, usually on the first floor. Since MOMA orthodoxy is so deeply rooted in the art ideology of the 1950s, during the last decade or so the Museum has lost much of the influence it once had in the art world. Lawrence Alloway and John Coplans question William Rubin about this development in an interview in 1974. See "Talking With William Rubin: 'The Museum Concept is Not Infinitely Expandable,'" *Artforum* (Oct. 1974), 51-57. In another interview (*Artforum* [Nov. 1974], 46-53), Alloway and Coplans ask Rubins about the Museum's presentation of early twentieth-century art. These critics clearly think that the collection and its installation present a biased view of art history: "You wanted to bring in Cubism good and early to show a nice, secure basis for a constructive Cubist line, which is sympathetic to you . . ." Rubin defends the "art historical judgement" that determines the installation. He also discusses MOMA's acquisition policies of the past, largely the work of Alfred Barr. Rubin admits "lacunae" in Barr's selection, but says, "I find that my own views about the collection and about the exhibiting of it are very much like Alfred's. That's partly because I was brought up on Alfred's museum and on the collection as he built it."

23. *Artforum* (Jan. 1977), 38.

24. When the building first opened, Talbot Hamlin complained about the "disquieting feeling as of being in a labyrinth" produced by the division of the interior space into "a large number of small rooms, one entered from the other" and "the circulation from one to the other so irrevocably fixed." *Pencil Points* (Sept. 1939), 618.

25. John Layard, *Stone Men of Malekula, Vao* (London, 1942), 652. Layard drew from his own field work in Malekula and elsewhere as well as from the work of others. According to C.N. Deeds, who studied ancient Egyptian, Cretan, and Greek labyrinths, the labyrinth was originally a tomb structure and later evolved into a temple. Its architectural form was determined by the ritual activity—dances and dramas—it contained. The myths thus dramatized involved the annual death and resurrection of a king god, often symbolized by a sacrificial bull. See Deeds, "The Labyrinth," in Samuel H. Hooke, ed., *The Labyrinth*:

Further Studies in the Relation between Myth and Ritual in the Ancient World (London, 1935), 1-42.

26. Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother* (New York, 1963), 76; Vincent Scully, *The Earth, The Temple and The Gods* (New York, 1969), ch. 2; and Deeds, "The Labyrinth," 26.

27. Talbot Hamlin observed that "a glance at the interior shows that the great thermolux window has little relation to what exists behind it—two stories of gallery and one of offices. It is not logical . . ." *Pencil Points* (Sept. 1939), 615.

28. In fact, the preoccupation of the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists with myth and ritual—nourished by the writings of Freud and Jung—is well known. Labyrinth imagery (bulls, minotaurs) frequently appears in their work, e.g., Picasso's cover design for the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* which hangs in MOMA. Pollock's *Pasaphae*, 1943 (Lee Krasner Collection, New York), and De Kooning's *Labyrinth*, 1946 (Allan Stone Gallery, New York), also refer directly to the labyrinth myth; and Motherwell's numerous *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, one of which hangs in MOMA, suggest, as one critic put it, "the phallus and 'cojones' of the sacrificial bull" (Eugene Goosen, cited in Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* [New York, 1970], 207).

29. "The experience of the labyrinth, whether as a pictorial design, a dance, a garden path, or a system of corridors in a temple, always has the same psychological effect. It temporarily disturbs rational conscious orientation to the point that . . . the initiate is 'confused' and symbolically 'loses his way.' Yet in this descent to chaos the inner mind is opened to the awareness of a new cosmic dimension of a transcendent nature." Joseph L. Henderson and Maud Oakes, *The Wisdom of the Serpent: The Myths of Death, Rebirth and Resurrection* (New York, 1963), 46.

30. A. Bernard Deacon, the anthropologist, recorded a Melanesian myth with a labyrinth that has exactly the structure we are describing here: a devouring female guarding the threshold to a realm of spiritual transcendence. "Geometrical Drawings from Malekula and Other Islands of the New Hebrides," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, LXIV (1934), 129-130. See also John Layard, "Maze-Dances and the Ritual of the Labyrinth in Malakula," *Folklore*, XLVII (1936), 123-170.

31. In the *Balzac*, Rodin consciously equated virility with creativity and thought of Balzac's grasping his erect penis under his robe as the preliminary nude studies show explicitly. See Albert E. Elsen, *Rodin* (New York, 1963), 88-105.

32. Rothko, in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley, 1970), 548.

33. Newman, in *ibid.*, 553.

34. Rothko, in Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* (New York, 1975), 215.

35. Reinhardt, "Art-as-Art," *Art International* (Dec. 1962), 37.

36. Trent Schroyer, *The Critique of Domination* (Boston, 1975), 47.

37. Still, in Maurice Tuchman, ed., *New York School* (exhibition catalogue, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1965), 32.

38. Pousette-Dart, in *ibid.*, 26.

39. For an analysis of the specific conditions of production and consumption that MOMA's iconography celebrates, see Zaretsky, *Capitalism, The Family, and Personal Life*, esp. 56-77.