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Observational Study: MoMA and the Merchant's House Museum

On Sunday, March 18, 2018, I attended two shows at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. The bulk of my time was spent at a retrospective of the work of the photographer Stephen Shore (*Stephen Shore*), but I also spent some time at another exhibition, about New York's downtown arts scene in the 1980s (*Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village, 1978-1983*). On Monday, March 19, 2018, I visited the Merchant's House Museum in lower Manhattan. (The Merchant's House Museum only has one exhibition, and it never—or rarely—changes.)

A comparison follows. While both institutions are museums, they are radically different enough to beg the question of what exactly it is that makes a museum a museum, and what we talk about when we talk about museums.

MoMA: Stephen Shore and Club 57

I chose (unintentionally) the busiest day of the museum week to visit: Sunday. While I initially intended to focus exclusively on the Club 57 exhibition, my unplanned encounter with the Stephen Shore exhibition led me to linger there. The bulk of the show was photography (both analog and digital) and included one prominent moving image piece. I began my note-taking and observing with a room-by-room plan, an approach I soon abandoned, for reasons I'll explain below.

While I occasionally sat to observe a museum patron or two (or three), I primarily conducted my observations at MoMA on foot, going from room to room. The show was rather extensive. At MoMA, due to the enormous crowd size and the less-than-intimate general atmosphere, I did not interact much with other visitors. While I paid attention to the amount of time museum patrons spent on certain works of art, I was not so precise as to use a stopwatch.

To my untrained eye, it certainly appeared that most MoMA visitors approached the works on display to view them *prior* to perusing the adjacent labels. But this varied greatly from visitor to visitor. Some lingered at a particular photograph for at least five minutes at a time; others scanned the photographs at a fast clip. At points this rapid scanning was seemingly encouraged by the curatorial choices made by MoMA itself; smaller prints were clustered together so densely that it would have been difficult or exhausting to process them otherwise. On this note, my friend and partner-in-museum-visitation noted his sense that Instagram and other social media-based photography platforms were informing the way that he (and by extension others) process visual information, and that the dense clusters of small photographs as a curatorial style was in a sense a three-dimensional reification of Instagram's digital layout. (This read was supported by the curatorial decisions of the exhibition's final room, on which I'll add more below.)

As noted above, the Stephen Shore exhibition was short on moving image displays. The one exception of note was a screen suspended from the ceiling in the first room, displaying digitized video of some (apparently) Super 8 film work. It was by far the most ignored work in the room; no seating surrounded it. Its main curatorial purpose seemed to be to draw patrons in to look at what was otherwise a largely conventional collection of black-and-white photographs.

The Shore exhibition was designed more or less chronologically, with the first room (for instance) titled “The Early Years: 1961-1967.” This room—perhaps because of the moving image positioned at its center—was low-lit, with the walls painted a dark gray. The second room continued with black-and-white work from the same period, but in this (larger) room the atmosphere was brighter, with white walls and higher-wattage lighting. The third room combined the salient features of the first two, acting as a transitional liminal space. The museum patrons were not invited to sit down until the fourth room, which was the first to offer patrons a bench. Why this bench was placed specifically in *this* room was (and remains) a mystery to me, as the photographs on the wall didn’t seem to particularly call for it, nor was there any sort of time-based media installed in this room to which a viewer might feel compelled to devote extra attention. The fifth room was the largest gallery thus far, with one larger room and one smaller room off to its right and left. It was at this point that I, as a visitor, became confused about which direction to turn next. (This stands in stark contrast to my experience at the Merchant’s House Museum, as I’ll explain below.) The smaller room off to the right side focused on a particular contemporaneous (with the larger room) series of Shore’s work from the American west, while chronologically the show continued to the left, toward several other rooms and, ultimately, the end of the show, at which point the patron is brought back to the beginning and implicitly invited to start anew. I was unable to gauge to what extent other patrons ambulated back-and-forth in a contrarian nonlinear manner like myself, but I suspect the number was more than a few.

While a moving image appeared only in the first room, time-based media was incorporated into the exhibition in other ways, and it was worth my while, I found, to observe the patrons

interact with it. One section featured a small series of work by photographers that had been influential for Shore. Under each photograph dangled a pair of headphones, which, a nearby label explained, featured Shore reading from texts of his own composition. Elsewhere, three machines featuring three-dimensional work by Shore found a sizeable audience, with small lines forming (not large lines, however, indicated, perhaps a lack of patience on the part of the patron). And, of course, the ever-present audio guide was available; not in the form of a freestanding walkie-talkie like instrument, but via the MoMA app, or a website accessible through any phone's browser.

While Shore's scrapbooks were on display, no digital facsimile presented itself to satisfy the urge of patrons to thumb through their contents; rather, their secrets remained obscure underneath a Plexiglas case. One room contained Shore's non-rare art books dangling from strings to be read at will by patrons. And, as hinted at above, the show ended with a station featuring four iPads containing Shore's current Instagram feed. Patrons seemed unimpressed by this, perhaps offended at the thought of paying for the quotidian ubiquity of social media—and one iPad's screen regretfully bore only the words "No Internet Connection."

Some loose ends: I briefly conversed with a guard, who informed me that MoMA contracts with a security firm that does provide a short briefing of the content of the exhibitions but does *not* require training in art history or any related field. And of course, MoMA has a gift shop, but, mercifully, they do not require patrons to exit through it.

Brief observations on *Club 57*: I simply noted that whereas Stephen Shore's exhibition was in a brightly-lit area near information booths, *Club 57* was relegated to the basement, near

MoMA's screening rooms, a sort of out-of-the-way location, the geographical inconvenience of which was seemingly reflected in the drastically smaller number of patrons enjoying it.

The Merchant's House Museum: Exploring the Seabury Tredwell House

The Merchant's House Museum shares some things in common with MoMA: it *is* a museum, and it traces its origins *as* a museum back to the 1930s. But the similarities end there. The museum is a small, blink-and-you-miss-it restored nineteenth-century house on east Fourth Street. The building itself is preserved as a US National Historic Landmark and as a New York City Historic Landmark, and is listed on the US National Register of Historic Places. It stands four stories tall, and contains a cellar and a well-maintained garden in the back.

Where MoMA leaves much of the directionality of its exhibitions up to the patron, the (much smaller) Merchant's House Museum hands the patron a rather dense self-guided tour booklet containing precise instructions about how to (in the author's opinion) get the most out of one's museum experience. The booklet is organized by floor, and it guides the patron as she ascends the stairwell toward what once served as the servants' chambers.

Only one staff member—possibly an unpaid volunteer— was on hand when I arrived. I failed to find out the volume of patron traffic on a busy day, such as a Sunday; I expected to be the only patron in the entire museum when I arrived at 3:30 on a Monday afternoon. But, in fact, three other parties came through: a pair of septuagenarian or octogenarian women, a family of European tourists, and a single woman. Each differed in the style with which they approached the museum. The two women proved the most thorough, spending up to fifteen minutes on each floor, and reading their booklets religiously—sometimes in reverential silence, sometimes out loud to each other. They spoke in respectful, hushed tones. The family of tourists

presumably had to contend with the attention spans of small children, and spent about five minutes on each floor before vacating the premises. The single woman spent about ten minutes on each floor, but moved through the museum in a nonlinear fashion, contrary to the dictates of the booklet.

Despite—or because of – its humble standing in comparison with larger museums, the Merchant’s House Museum did feature a gift shop. Also in contrast to MoMA (and most cultural institutions in New York City and elsewhere), the museum makes overt attempts to convert its patrons into activists and advocates (not simply donors). Despite its landmark status, the museum’s structural integrity is now threatened by plans for a twenty-first century skyscraper next door. Patrons are greeted at the outset by a sign bearing the words “A CALL TO ARMS: SAVE THE MERCHANT’S HOUSE.” A lengthy set of information below implores patrons to act on the museum’s behalf, and instructs them as to the courses of action they might take to do so. While there is no Merchant’s House Museum app, and no audio tour either, signs throughout the museum did invite patrons to follow the museum on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and to tag their photos with #merchantshouse. The museum thereby avoids the temptations of Luddism, even as it presents its users with an anachronous space in which to lose themselves for an hour or two.