LOOKING AT ART:

PHOTOGRAPHS OF MUSEUMS AND VISITORS AS INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

by

ALEXI NICHOLE RIGGINS

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Waco, Texas

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PHOTOGRAPHS OF MUSEUMS AND VISITORS AS INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

Thesis approved:

Dr. Mark Thistlethwaite, Major Professor

Dr. Frances Colpitt

Dr. John Rohrbach, Amon Carter Museum of American Art

Dr. H. Joseph Butler, Graduate Studies Representative for the College of Fine Arts
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The Museum/Gallery is not the neutral place one would like us to believe but certainly the single viewpoint where a work is seen and in the final analysis the single viewpoint from which the work is produced. In order not to be taken into consideration or to be considered as natural/matter of course, the Museum/Gallery becomes the mythical framework, distorting everything that goes into it.

— Daniel Buren, “Critical Limits”

Buren was one of the first practitioners of institutional critique, a practice in which artists interrogate and expose the systems and inner workings of a specific institution, such as an art museum, in order to interrupt the viewer’s ordinary perception of that system and context. Though the concept can be traced to Marcel Duchamp and the historical avant-garde, the term “institutional critique” emerged in the 1980s to describe post-studio practices of Buren and other artists from the 1970s, including Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, and Marcel Broodthaers.\(^1\) In the same vein, many of the art works of Tim Davis, Louise Lawler, and Thomas Struth are forms of institutional critique because their photographs of the interior of art museums examine critically the context and reception of art to reveal that the meaning of an art work is not autonomous, but continually restaged in the present and bound to its environment.

Works by Asher, Broodthaers, Buren, and Haacke were part of the first wave of institutional critique, which aimed to challenge the authority accumulated by museums and galleries through various art works, writings, and interventions. They sought to break down the barriers of the institution from their place on the outside. During the second wave of institutional critique in the 1980s and 1990s artists such as Andrea Fraser claimed

\(^1\) There is disagreement as to whether Andrea Fraser or Benjamin Buchloch coined the term, but the phrase “institutional critique” first appeared in an essay Fraser wrote about Louise Lawler. See Andrea Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” *Art in America* 73 (June 1985): 122-129.
that there was no outside, acknowledging that “we are the institution.”

Second wave artists often were complicit with the institution in their critiques, and critiquing practices expanded to other institutional spaces besides the art institution.

Davis, Lawler and Struth address an array of customs of displaying and viewing art, which can be seen as part of the second wave of institutional critique by the way they “examine the . . . reception and contextualization of art.”

By situating themselves within the art museum, the artists shift the viewer’s perception and accentuate the practices of the art museum that viewers had previously overlooked, critiquing the presentation of art in museums and viewer experience. Their photographs function as critical observations of the contextualization and viewer reception of art within the institutional space of the museum. Lawler focuses on the presentation of art in museums, Struth focuses on the viewer’s experience of looking at art, while Davis does both. I argue that all three artists utilize institutional critique by exposing the institutional framework of the art museum responsible for presenting and contextualizing a work of art. While Lawler and Davis dissect the museum, pointing to the facets that shape viewer reception, Struth and Davis dissect the act of looking, exposing how the viewer receives an art work.

Of the artists discussed in this essay, Lawler is the only one who is regularly associated with the practice of institutional critique.

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2 Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” in Institutional Critique and After, ed. John C. Welchman, (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 133.


4 See Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” 122-129; Philipp Kaiser, introduction to Louise Lawler and Others, by George Baker et al. (Basel: Kunstmuseum, 2004), 9-11; Ann Goldstein, “In the Company of Others,” in Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back), ed. Helen Molesworth (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 133-142; Louise Lawler, Johannes Meinhardt,
“critique” was first used to describe her work in a 1985 article by Fraser, in which the author explained the theoretical practice of deconstructing art institutions from within.\(^5\) Naturally, such an article would influence subsequent interpretations of Lawler’s work in terms of institutional critique, but why have not Davis and Struth been critically analyzed similarly to Lawler? Perhaps because Lawler’s work came soon after that by Haacke, Buren, and Broodthaers, whereas Struth’s museum photographs date from the 1990s and early 2000s, and Davis’s from the early 2000s, when institutional critique was no longer an unusual artistic practice or an original theoretical methodology.

A review of the literature on Davis, and Struth does not uncover the term “institutional critique,” yet their observances and photographs echo Lawler’s in the sense that their work also solicits question on the museum’s role in the perception of art. For instance, Struth has commented on the audience of his photographs, saying, “because the viewers are reflected in their activity, they have to wonder what they themselves are doing at that moment.”\(^6\) By highlighting museumgoers in the act of viewing art, Struth provokes the viewers of his photograph to consider what they may have previously overlooked, namely, how viewership is conditioned by the context of the institution. Davis has also commented that “museums [are] ostensibly there to portray things in a certain way.”\(^7\) Although he may not associate his work with the term “institutional critique,” he does admit that the meaning of an art work is not fixed within the object, but dependent on the

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5 Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” 122-129.
7 Tim Davis, in discussion with the author, July 2013.
museum or institution, which is capable of altering the reception of the object, therefore restaging the object in the present. Although Tim Davis and Thomas Struth do not overtly acknowledge an affiliation with institutional critique, I see their works as picking up where Louise Lawler’s end. All three artists depict the same subject matter, institutional display, but while Lawler points to the presentation of art in museums and how that affects reception, Struth points to that reception in viewer experience, while Davis points to both.

It is critical that the mode in which the artists under consideration here critique occurs through photography. Institutional critique has been approached through various mediums, from Haacke’s questioning political and business affiliations among board members of both the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum to Broodthaer’s directorship of a fictional museum, but photography establishes a connection with the art museum that other forms do not because photography simultaneously critiques the museum while distancing itself from it.

In his seminal article, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin attributed this distancing effect to the advent of film and photography. In the age of reproduction almost all art is reproduced through photography. Though written in 1936, Benjamin’s arguments still apply today. The way we learn about art in the twenty-first century is primarily through reproductions in books, slide projections, on the Internet, etc. Regardless of the reproductive medium, reproductions rarely convey all the features, characteristics, and nuances of the original work of art. Reproductions mediate our relationship to the original art work and change the way we view and experience it.

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Benjamin argues that circulated reproductions of art works strip an art work of its aura, or the ability of original art works to close the distance in time and place between the art work and the viewer looking at it. He asserts that the reproduction lacks the original art work’s “presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” Benjamin saw the loss of aura as a positive effect of mechanical reproduction. Because circulated images lack the authenticity and aura of their sources, they are able to enter the “mainstream of life, over which they no longer, in themselves, have power.” In essence, the art works become free and available.

André Malraux’s book, Museum Without Walls, demonstrates how some of Benjamin’s ideas about reproduction apply to the art museum. Malraux argues that museums “have imposed on the spectator a wholly new attitude toward the work of art.” However, when works of art are made available through reproductions, they are freed from the time and place when they are confined in a museum. Like Benjamin, Malraux saw reproduction positively. Viewing an art work in reproduction means that the art work is no longer dependent on the museum, and thus strips the museum of some of its aesthetic authority.

While mechanical reproduction liberates art from the time and place in which it is usually confined, photography is especially significant in liberating art because photography functions outside the art world, meaning that photography exists apart from art because not all photographs are art. In fact, most photographs are not art, but usually forms of documentation and publicity. I do not mean to imply that other artistic mediums

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9 Ibid., 222.
10 I quote Berger here because many of the ideas is his essay were taken from Benjamin. John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: British Broadcast Corporation, 1972), 32.
are always considered art and exist as part of the art world. However, photography’s regular use for non-artistic purposes and its ability to document and replicate makes it a medium that is well suited to interrogate the art museum’s authority as it is able to circulate a proliferation of images of the museum’s art works, while also depreciating the aura inherent in the originals.

Davis’s, Lawler’s, and Struth’s photographs diminish the aura of the works represented in their photographs because they suggest that the reception of art is contingent on its present context and environment. While the aura closes the gap between the art work’s inception in the past when it was created, these photographs widen the gap by showing how art is continually restaged in the present and not bound to the past of its original setting and reception. As Benjamin declared: “the reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition . . . [and] emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.” ¹²

Photography is a significant tool to institutional critique because of its relation to Benjamin’s notion of reproduction, but it is also crucial because the acceptance of photography as a significant artistic medium disrupted the discourse of modernism’s allegiance to originality. Douglas Crimp discusses this disturbance in On the Museum’s Ruins and argues that photography signaled the end of painting. Because painting’s principle destination is the museum, photography also led to “the museum’s ruins.” Crimp adopts Benjamin’s idea of the aura, re-asserting that photography diminishes the aura. Because the characteristics of photography include its multiplicity and the ease with which it can be

reproduced, it ignores and rejects modernism’s claim to originality. This interference led to postmodernism, which embraced photography as one of its principle mediums.

In photographing paintings and other art works, Lawler, Struth, and Davis reproduce the art and expose the original work’s potential for repetition and reproduction. Reproducing paintings or other art forms in a photograph not only functions to diminish art’s aura, but also causes the viewer to reflect on the reception of art, revealing the museum’s authority in framing the viewer’s reception. Their photographs disturb notions of where artistic authority and value are located, calling attention to overlooked facets in the institution that affect an art work’s reception.

There are two ways to demonstrate art’s dependence on its present reception for comprehension. One is to document art in its context and call attention to museum surroundings. This involves careful selection and framing on an artist’s part to examine certain controlling aspects of the museum of which the average museum visitor may or may not already be aware, and foreground those elements in the art work to promote the visitor’s contemplation of the extent to which the museum directs the reception of works of art. The second manner in which artists question reception is to document the process of looking by analyzing how visitors interact and engage with art.

Louise Lawler’s photographs employ both modes of documentation, but more often highlight art’s context. She dissects facets of the institution by focusing less on the art than what surrounds it, showing that art is tied to its mode of presentation. In her 1984 series Fragment/Frame/Text, every photograph captures a fragment of a painting, its presentational frame, and its accompanying descriptive text label. Her titles include snippets of phrases from the text, which lead the viewer to question the information
provided by the museum, what it might be withholding, and how the presentational mode affects the reception of the art work.

_Fragment/Frame/Text, “Shortly Before His Accident,”_ (1984; Figure 1) depicts a fragment of Jackson Pollock’s _Frieze_ (1953-55). The text reads:

Pollock worked on _Frieze_ over a two-year period, finishing it shortly before his fatal automobile accident in 1956. Distinctive of this and other late works is Pollock’s use of the brush, which he had rejected in the series of black and white drip canvases of the early 1950s. The result of combining bold brushwork with drippings is a lush web of strong primary color overlaid by a surrounding lattice of aluminum paint.

In the title of the photograph Lawler appropriates part of the text, “shortly before his . . . accident,” which questions what type of information the museum provides or should provide about the art and artist. For those visitors not previously aware of Pollock’s life, they now know from the text label that his life ended abruptly and tragically. For those more versed in art, this statement may reinforce the idea of Pollock as a mythic genius whose death was a tragic event. But why mention his death at all? Does that kind of information need to be shared and how does it alter what the visitor thinks about the work? By focusing the viewer’s attention on one part of the text Lawler makes the viewer question the rest of the text as well. For instance, the text draws contrast between the bright colors of _Frieze_ and the more subdued palette of his drip paintings. The text mentions the drip paintings as “black and white,” referring to his Black and White series from 1951. However, the wording of the text makes it seem like all Pollock’s drip paintings lack color, which they do not. By drawing attention to one mundane and seemingly objective aspect of the museum that is often overlooked, Lawler sheds light on and, ultimately, questions the institution’s authority and tendency to sensationalize an artist’s biography.
Lawler rarely grants interviews, but in one of her few interviews she explains her hesitancy, stating that she does not “want the work to be accompanied by anything that does not accompany it in the real world.” Lawler means that she does not want her words to affect the meaning of her work, since they are not part of the art work's presentation and reception in a museum or gallery. She believes that interviews are inclined to narrow the meaning of the work, which “limits its reception for the viewer.” Similarly, text panels in museums can have the same effect as artist interviews. Though text panels can be helpful to the viewer, they can also narrow an art work’s meaning, thus limiting the viewer’s reception of it.

In *Fragment/Frame/Text, “Shortly Before His Accident,”* the reference to Pollock's life in the first sentence is used by the institution to contextualize the work of art, regarding his death as one of the key facts to know when looking at *Frieze.* Lawler picks up on this in her title, which reinforces how a museum’s presentation of an art work affects the work’s contextualization, possibly limiting its reception by the viewer.

In another work from the same series *Fragment/Frame/Text, “Early 1660s”* (1984; Figure 2) Lawler takes as her subject Salvator Rosa’s *Tobias and the Angel* (early 1660s). In this instance, the title of Lawler's photograph does not come from the accompanying explanatory text, but from the approximate date assigned to the painting. She points out to the viewer that the exact date of the painting is not known, but the museum, in this case the National Gallery in London, narrows the date of the painting's creation. While a detail

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13 Ibid., 34.
14 Ibid., 38.
15 As of April 13, 2014, the National Gallery's website dates the painting to “probably 1660-73,” which offers a broader date range than “early 1660s,” further demonstrating the institution's authority over the work’s presentation.
such as an art work’s date may not have a great impact on the viewer’s reception of a work, Lawler shows how the National Gallery has the ability to determine the focus and meaning of a work.

The text on the label is over twice as long as the text on Pollock’s *Frieze*. For brevity, I only quote the paragraphs relevant to my argument:

In Rosa’s picture, the story of Tobias is dwarfed by the drama of the landscape itself. Broken trees, rocky cliffs, dark grottoes and the threatening sky create a turbulent backdrop for the narrative. The *Tobias and the Angel* was painted in Rome, after Rosa left the confining society of ducal Florence, and is a good example of his mature landscape style. This romantic conception of landscape, so different from the classical landscape of Claude Lorrain, was appreciated by collectors of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The frame on this picture has a type of modeling termed the “Salvator Rosa” style. It was made in the 18th century in England, where Rosa’s pictures were avidly collected.

Lawler’s title might also serve as a contrast to the information provided in the second and third paragraphs of the label. The text indicates that Rosa’s work was appreciated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even to the point that frames were modeled in the “Salvator Rosa” style. The frame that holds *Tobias and the Angel* is one of the distinguished features of *Early 1660s*, which is more ornate and detailed than the simple frame that encloses *Frieze*.

The frame portion of *Fragment/Frame/Text* should not be overlooked because it is essential to Lawler’s work that she focuses less on the art works than she does on what surrounds them. Lawler documents many features that surround art, but none so literal as the frame. In Lawler’s photographs, the frames of paintings offer a natural metaphor for the institution because each is a structure that supports and contains its object(s). Just as a

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frame borders a painting, so the institution delineates boundaries in which art can be received. And just as the frame enhances the art work, so does the institution highlight art objects.

Tim Davis also calls attention to art’s surroundings, specifically the way museum lighting, whether natural or artificial, can affect the perception of a painting. In his series titled *Permanent Collection*, Davis documents the irritating occurrence when lighting produces glare on the surface of a painting.\(^{17}\) Glare naggingly interferes with the contemplation of an art work because the viewers have to shuffle around until they can situate themselves in a spot where the harsh reflection disappears. Davis critiques the institution by drawing attention to museum lighting, a feature that the museum controls, which can affect how the viewer looks at a work of art.

It is a common misunderstanding that photographs in *Permanent Collection* incorporate light from a flash when in fact Davis never uses it in any of his photographs.\(^{18}\) He stresses that the "light is part of the meaning, especially if it is put there by someone else."\(^{19}\) Adding his own light to the situation would lose what is inherent in the lighting system designed by the institution.\(^{20}\) Relying solely on institutional illumination, his photographs can be seen as a critique of the lighting provided by and manipulated by the museum in order to present the art works in their collections.

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\(^{17}\) Before Davis created his series, Richard Misrach photographed art works in various museums in his series *Pictures of Paintings*, often depicting lighting glare as well. See Richard Misrach, *Pictures of Paintings* (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2002).

\(^{18}\) Davis, discussion.


\(^{20}\) Davis, discussion.
On one level Davis criticizes museum lighting, but on another level, he also makes use of it. By photographing the glare on the painting Davis recreates part of the museum experience that we are not aware of when looking at reproductions of the art works in books and elsewhere. Davis has commented that “all art ends up as photographs,” echoing the ideas of Walter Benjamin that in the age of mechanical reproduction the way we look at art it is mediated through reproduction. In a reproduction, usually only the image of an art work is depicted, while its material presence and presentational context are eliminated. Davis’s photographs reveal how museum lighting literally spotlights a work of art and can acknowledge its materiality, but also how lighting can obfuscate and distort the perception of a work of art, making the viewing experience difficult.

A destructive effect of institutional lighting is featured in The Artist in His Studio, an image of James McNeill Whistler’s 1855-56 painting, Artist in His Studio (Figures 3 and 4). Davis captures two large orbs of light that conceal the faces of Whistler and one of his models. In fact, the body of Whistler is not even immediately perceptible because, while the orb only obstructs the head and chest of the figure, the entire painting is flushed with a glare that casts a light wash on top of it, blending the bottom half of the figure in with its surroundings.

It is not unusual to find some art works poorly lit in museums, which is apparent in Permanent Collection since Davis was able to produce photographs in over fifty museums in the United States and Europe. It is a surprising problem given that along with preserving art, maintaining unobstructed sight lines of art is a goal of museums. Sometimes poor lighting is an effect of the building’s architecture, making it difficult for staff to properly

light art works because of the construction and design conditions with which they have to contend.22 Best exhibition practices include lighting, yet Davis makes it obvious that museum lighting continues to be an ongoing problem for museum visitors. It seems that of the “hundreds of millions of dollars expended by museums for new construction and upkeep each year, very little gets spent on improving the lighting.”23 Documenting an experience of viewing art in the museum, *The Artist in His Studio* illustrates the problem.

Poor lighting is not a factor in all museums, as many museums have lighting designers on staff or as consultants.24 Davis admits that Louis Kahn’s Yale Center for British Art (1974) was so well designed that he was incapable of photographing anything suitable for *Permanent Collection*. He was, however, able to produce photographs from the Yale University Art Gallery (1953), which was also designed by Kahn.25 Between the twenty-one years of the two buildings’ constructions, Kahn honed his ability to provide appropriate light for an art museum’s collections. For museum visitors, good lighting may be underappreciated, but bad lighting is difficult to ignore. If they cannot properly see a work of art, museumgoers probably will not spend much time reflecting upon it.

In addition to light, another important aspect of Davis’s work is the size of his photographs, which have the same dimensions as the paintings. The photographs recreate the experience of viewing the painting in person in the same location and under the same

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24 Davis, discussion.
25 Davis, discussion.
conditions. The photographs’ replication of a painting’s size creates a faithful portrayal of the museum environment. Certainly, Davis places his camera at an angle that generates the most interesting shot, but the conditions in the art work’s environment are those he experienced, as could any visitor. Davis’s replication of the painting’s size reproduces the painting without its aura. By obscuring the original image with reflected glare and emphasizing the materiality of the work the photograph depletes the aura of the original painting.

Coincidentally, Lawler and Davis both photographed the Renaissance painting Christ Carrying the Cross, attributed to the circle of Giovanni Bellini, in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Both photographs depict the environment and context of the work, which will forever remain the same. According to the stipulations of Isabella Stewart Gardner’s will, her collection must “remain installed as it was in her own lifetime.” The museum houses three floors of galleries that surround a central courtyard. Many of the art works are not labeled and the lighting is generally dim. The context of Christ Carrying the Cross differs from most museums, in that the Gardner is a house museum functioning as a shrine to Gardner’s wealth and taste. Rather than hanging on a typically pristine wall and

26 Ibid.
27 Sophie Calle has also created two series of works in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Though she focuses on the 1990 theft of thirteen works from the collection, she also examines the stipulations of Mrs. Gardner’s will by photographing the empty frames where the paintings were once located. In Last Seen (1991) Calle photographed the empty frames and interviewed staff members about their memories of the stolen works. In What Do You See (2012), Calle again photographed the missing works, but with accompanying texts of interviews with staff and visitors asking them to respond to what they saw in the room before them.
surrounded by other European paintings, *Christ Carrying the Cross* is surrounded by ornate furniture and other decorations in a bright red room known as the Titian Room because it contains Titian’s painting of Europa and the Bull. A photograph by Tomas E. Marr and Son shows the Titian Room as it was in 1926 (Figure 5). As Mrs. Gardner mandated, the environment has changed little in past decades, so the painting now reflects the historical and social context of domestic display from the early twentieth century.

In Lawler’s photograph, *Who Chooses the Details?* (1990), *Christ Carrying the Cross* appears on the left side of the gallery in a plain black frame, sitting on a small table with a simple descriptive label and small vase of violets in front of it (Figure 6). Behind the painting, the background is out of focus, but it is evident that the painting is part of a large ornate room with other paintings and sculptures meant to display the opulence of its owner. Lawler’s photograph anticipates Davis’s by showing the glare of the window to the left and a reflection of the room in front of it.

The title of the work, *Who Chooses the Details?*, questions who comprises the institution and selects what surrounds the art work and contextualizes it. Who decides what influences the reception of a work of art? Because the art works must remain in the location in which Gardner left them, someone subsequently decided what to add to the surroundings. The label in front of the painting is small and only contains basic information such as artist, title, date, and medium. The label does not include any additional text to explain the painting, though as previous discussion of Lawler’s *Fragment/Frame/Text* series shows, additional textual information can frame and possibly narrow the viewer’s reception of the work. Furthermore, based on the 1926 photograph, it is evident that the painting is positioned relatively low to the ground and was meant to be contemplated from
a sitting position. Today the chair is still positioned in front of the painting, but the visitor cannot sit to view the work, so the painting is no longer viewed at eye level. Therefore, not only does the average viewer have to bend down in order to properly look at the painting, but must also hunch over in order to read the text accompanying the painting. Is that the best location for the label? Though the painting cannot be relocated, who decided that the small label was beneficial to the viewer? Based on its installation *Christ Carrying the Cross* might be located in a spot that is overlooked by viewers. Furthermore, the reception of the work will be taken in combination with the house museum’s richness and opulence, and be viewed less as a private devotional image.

*Christ Carrying the Cross* was Mrs. Gardner’s favorite painting and she often placed a vase of violets in front of it. Lawler was undoubtedly privy to this information. When she asks *Who Chooses the Details?* it seems that the vase of flowers is one of the details to which she refers. By placing the violets in front of the painting, the museum maintains Mrs. Gardner’s tradition. And while the violets seem natural and intimate in this domestic setting, they would be out of place and confusing in a more standard museum with its white cube-like presentational structure. *Christ Carrying the Cross* would have a different reception if placed in another museum on a plain wall at eye level and without the violets. Viewers likely would not think of the social role the painting played in Mrs. Gardner’s life. The reception of art can change based on its context. By asking *Who Chooses the Details?* Lawler draws her viewer’s attention to the places and purveyors of authority within the institution that shape and interpret art.

Lawler’s photograph reinforces the authenticity of Davis’s series being derived from actual museum environments; his photographs do likewise for hers. Unlike Lawler’s image, Davis’s photograph, titled Christ Carrying the Cross (Figure 7), closes in on the painting with a more frontal composition, resulting in the glare and reflection being even more prominent and annoying than in Lawler’s work. In Davis’s photograph, the glare from the lighting and the reflection of the white window curtain are cast on the left side of the painting, which obscures Christ’s entire face. A reflection from a plaque in the room appears in Christ’s hair. Though difficult to discern, the glare also illuminates two creases in the painting. The painting’s composition is difficult to decipher, let alone admire, because the view is so obstructed. Davis’s image confirms what Lawler’s work suggests: that the painting does not occupy an ideal viewing location, especially when viewed close up.

Both photographs differ greatly from the reproduction of Christ Carrying the Cross on the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum website (Figure 8). The site even has a section where the viewer can “explore” the painting as well as the six other paintings, a bust, and three pieces of furniture that are all part of the Titian Room gallery. Benjamin’s thoughts on reproduction are relevant to Christ Carrying the Cross as its reproduced image is highly available and accessible. But Lawler’s and Davis’s photographs indicate that the image advertised on the website is different from the image in situ because the actual painting contends with factors detrimental to optimal viewing.

In their photographs, Davis and Lawler subscribe to the first mode of photographic institutional critique by documenting art in its context. Thomas Struth, however, follows the second method by focusing on the activity and context of viewership. While visitors

31 Ibid.
normally do not go to museums to look at the other visitors, Struth makes them the subject of his photographs. Sometimes he includes art works in the photographs, but other times he features solely the viewers.

Struth’s museum photographs explore the relationship between museum visitors and art as an exchange between spectator and object.32 Though many of his photographs record this exchange as it happens naturally, some of his photographs are staged. He uses a large format camera, so regardless of whether the photographs are staged or not, it is possible that many of his subjects are aware of his presence due to the large size of his camera.

Struth concentrates on museum visitors and spectatorship in a series of photographs taken at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. These photographs reveal aspects of the museum’s environment that affect the reception of an art work and which are hidden in plain sight. In Hermitage 1, St. Petersburg from 2005 (Figure 9), Struth captures a group of women as they look at Leonardo da Vinci’s Madonna with a Flower, though the painting is not visible in the photograph, nor is it mentioned in the title. At least nine figures are in the photograph, but the focus is on the four women in the right foreground, who are listening to the audio guides provided by the Hermitage. The three women furthest to the right appear to be listening intently, while examining the art work as the audio guide points them to interesting details and new information. The woman in green, however, seems less than impressed or engaged. Struth’s photograph reveals a duality inherent in the museum’s use of audio guides. They are tools to enhance artistic knowledge, but can also guide visitors passively throughout the museum. Although the device essentially acts as the

museum’s voice of authority, the photograph reveals that the information dispensed is not always engaging.

*Hermitage 3, St. Petersburg* depicts a larger and more dense group of visitors in front of Leonardo’s painting (Figure 10). This photograph shows a different authorized representation of the museum, a museum docent, who also affects the visitor’s reception of an art work. She stands in the lower right corner of the photograph, points to the painting, and speaks to the visitors. Leonardo’s work is no doubt a popular attraction at the Hermitage, probably a stop on several tours throughout the day. Docents function similarly to audio guides and wall texts in the way they provide visitors with information that they might not otherwise know. However, docents can interact with museum visitors by asking questions, answer inquiries, and shaping their tours around the people present. Docents are generally well-meaning, but they have the power to influence the visitor’s reception of an art work. This is not necessarily negative, but as with audio guides, docents may induce passivity by telling visitors what they should know and think about a work, thus impacting the viewer’s reception of the art work.

*Hermitage 3, St. Petersburg* also reveals another aspect of viewing art that can affect the visitor’s experience of it, namely, issues of crowds and crowding. This is most often a problem with popular art works, like Leonardo’s *Madonna with a Flower*, and popular genres, like Egyptian art or impressionism. While an institution appreciates having, and often aims to attract, a lot of visitors, this can lead to crowding, which makes it difficult to contemplate a work of art. *Hermitage 3, St. Petersburg* shows how visitors may have to take turns viewing Leonardo’s painting close up. A young boy turns as if to make his way to the back of the gallery, while the young woman in the black shirt appears ready to shift into his
place. This kind of viewing experience makes it difficult to engage with an art work.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with others, knowing that someone is ready to take your spot, makes it difficult to appreciate and contemplate the work of art. Furthermore, prolonged looking can be discouraged in order to keep the “flow of traffic” moving. Such issues make it difficult to engage with art.

Lastly, *Hermitage 3, St. Petersburg* shows another potential problem affecting the process of looking, which relates to the proliferation of cameras in the technologically advanced culture of the twenty-first century. Struth’s photograph shows three men taking pictures of Leonardo’s painting. Taking pictures of art is not bad in itself, but in today’s culture it often causes visitors to look less closely at the art because they are more concerned with seeing it through the filter of their cameras. Unlike the man in the gray shirt in Struth’s picture, many museum visitors do not engage directly with an art work, but instead they snap a photograph of it to record their museum visit.  

They look, they document, and “end up seeing nothing.” This type of response to art may not be a fault of the institution, but it could be a response to improper engagement on the museum’s part.  

What if the visitor cannot look at the art through the lens of their camera? Would they look more purposefully with their eyes?

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35 The reaction to snap pictures can also be seen as the over-success of museums in engaging people. Today, museums have developed into places for social gatherings and entertainment. Visitors can often eat, shop, and watch films at museums, sometimes without even looking at the art. When visitors do look at the art it is sometimes as a way to gain or engage with culture, so their photographs of art act as souvenirs and documentation of their cultural experience.
Struth’s photographs differ from those by Lawler and Davis because his offer us a moment to see ourselves figuratively reflected. We realize that not only are there viewers in the photograph, but there are viewers looking at the photograph. While Lawler’s and Davis’s photographs often cause one to reflect on the museum and how it is responsible for the presentation and contextualization of art, Struth’s photographs cause us to reflect on how the museum as an institution affects its visitors and their engagement. Struth’s works are also much larger than Davis’s and Lawler’s, presenting the viewer with a visual reminder of what he or she is currently doing. This realization can cause Struth’s viewers to reflect on their own viewing practices and how those practices are conditioned by the museum environment.

Lawler also took photographs that depict museum visitors, but they make the viewer aware of different issues that affect reception. Glass Cage (Figure 11) is a 1993 black and white photograph that depicts an enclosure containing several sculptures by Edgar Degas, including Little Dancer of Fourteen in the Musée d’Orsay. Lawler used a long exposure to capture the movement of the visitors. Only one woman kneeling to the left of the vitrine, staring intently at one of Degas’s sculpted horses, remained still long enough not to be blurred. The visitors passing by seem to pay no attention to the glass cage. Notably, everyone ignores Little Dancer, even though her upturned face captures the brightest gallery light. Though her strikingly inelegant attitude demands attention, no one gives it to her. Glass Cage includes the following text:

The following year, her glass “cage” remained empty for the first two weeks of the exhibition. When finally exposed, she was likened by one critic to an “expelled foetus” which if smaller “… one would be tempted to pickle in a jar of alcohol.”
In addition to Degas’s belated completion of the sculpture for exhibition, Lawler’s text refers to the initial negative reception of the sculpture in late nineteenth-century Paris, when this Degas work caused a sensation. Many people were repulsed by the sculpture, thinking that Degas’s model, Marie van Goethem, was unattractive. Her appearance and pose did not represent the beautiful and graceful ballerina, a convention usually flouted by Degas. He also used materials such as wax, tulle, hair, and ribbon, which were all considered anti-Academic. The original audience of Little Dancer may have wished to ignore this piece when it was exhibited, as the visitor’s in Lawler’s photograph appear to do.

At Little Dancer’s first exhibition, it was displayed in a glass case, referred to as a cage. Lawler adopts the term “cage” in the title, perhaps as a metaphor for the “isolation and suffocation of art in the preserving institution.” Noting that museum and mausoleum sound similar, cultural critic Theodore Adorno wrote, “museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art.” Other critics and artists have commented on the deadening role that museums play in the life of a work of art, confirming that museums inevitably affect a work of art, even if it is only as art’s final resting place.

But rather than viewing museums as mausoleums, museums can be regarded less fatally as the possessors of aesthetic authority able to influence an art work’s reception.

37 Stack, Art Museum, 8.
Though the institution contributes to an art work’s framing and contextualization, it cannot be fully at fault for the death of a work. Some responsibility lies with the spectator and the effort they make to engage with an art work. While many of the visitors in Lawler’s photograph pass by *Little Dancer* without a glance, it is possible that they have either already engaged with the work, or they are making their way to other galleries to contemplate different art works in the collection.

Though the artistic choices of Time Davis, Louise Lawler, and Thomas Struth sometime overlap, their works differ in that Struth mainly photographs the audience, Davis photographs the art works, and Lawler’s practice lies somewhere in between. They all have different practices, but are united in their art-museum oriented subject matter and the way they show facets of the institution that are visible, but rarely considered.

Not only does their use of photography allow them to juxtapose sculpture and painting as the prevailing mediums exhibited in the museum, but photography also allows them to depict the institution with the sense of inescapable realness. None of the artists edit their photographs in post-production to significantly alter what they actually encountered at the museum. Therefore, their photographs can be considered documentary because they depict found situations. Struth and Davis use large format cameras, which limits the number of exposures based on their costly equipment. Though not dependent on using a large camera, as Lawler’s photographs indicate, Struth’s and Davis’s practice leads to looking carefully, which is a necessary artistic ability when pointing out aspects of the museum’s environment that affect the reception of art, but are often overlooked.
These artists critique the institution by presenting the museum, rather than passively being presented by it.40 In “The Function of the Museum,” Daniel Buren suggested that the museum is an “asylum protected from any kind of questioning,” but these artists show that the museum can be questioned. By turning the camera onto the museum and focusing the viewer’s attention on facets that reveal the presentational authority of the institution, the museum is no longer protected as Buren suggests.41

While revealing the importance of an art work’s contextualization, Davis, Lawler, and Struth also participate in that contextualization. Lawler has stated “it’s always the case that what is allowed to be seen and understood is part of what produces the work. And art is always a collaboration with what came before you and what comes after you.”42 The first half of Lawler’s statement could refer to the environment of the institution in which an art work is viewed and received. Part of the contextualization of an art work comes from its presentation, but it also comes from other art. Typically art works are situated within galleries, where the museum dictates the threads and tropes to connect one art work, artist, or movement to another. The second half of Lawler’s statement is an acknowledgement that individual art works and artistic practices are not autonomous, but dependent on history and the art world around them. Lawler could just as well have said that art is a collaboration with what surrounds it, referring to both the literal environment that encompasses a work of art, as well as the art historical context and institution, which oversees the production, promotion, presentation, and criticism of art.

40 Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” 128.
42 Lawler, “Prominence Given, Authority Taken,” 44.
In this vein, Davis’s, Lawler’s, and Struth’s works can be considered a form of collaboration. Lawler grounds their practices of photographing art museums in institutional critique. The literature on Struth and Davis does not reference them in terms of institutional critique, even though their work, too, exposes the framework of the institution whose presentation of art is critical to its understanding. Their works are linked together by the way they highlight aspects of an art work’s display and the effect of display on the art work’s audience.

I do not believe that any of these artists’s critiques are meant to be so harsh as to condemn the museum. Rather, they expose the control the institution has over presenting art to its public. They make viewers of their photographs aware that the museum has the authority to contextualize an art work and shape the viewer’s understanding of that work. This authority can be negative by channeling the meaning of a work, but the authority can also be positive by offering visitors new ways to see and experience art.

As one last example, I cite Tim Davis’s photograph of Thomas Eakins’s *The Oarsman* (Figure 12). The glare on the painting is so great that the image Eakins painted is not immediately perceptible. Instead, Davis utilizes the glare to call attention to the cracks on the painting’s surface. Though the subject of the Eakins work is almost unrecognizable, in the process of obscuring the oarsman, Davis proposes a new appreciation for the painting, not just as an image, but as an object. The undulating cracks create a design that a museum visitor most likely would not be aware of just by looking at a reproduction in a book or elsewhere. By photographing the glare on the painting, Davis incorporates part of the museum environment, but not just to critique the museum’s control over lighting. Davis shows that there are new ways to experience art, such as revealing the materiality of the
work, which is not always perceivable in reproductive form. Walter Benjamin may have liked reproductions because they distanced the image from its aura, but photographs like Davis’s may encourage viewers to return to the museum, to appreciate art as objects, rather than just as images.

To some degree, all the art works that these three artists depict are in some stage of calcification, but that does not make them dead. Art is continually re-presented in the present and contingent on its environment. Though an art work may break with the past in terms of garnering different audience reactions, as with Degas’s *Little Dancer of Fourteen*, this is not necessarily negative. Time, as well as culture, has the ability to alter an art work’s reception, but the institution factors significantly into that alteration. In a culture where perhaps we stroll though museums too quickly, Tim Davis, Louise Lawler, and Thomas Struth equip themselves with a camera and observe the museum environment to reveal to us how an art work’s reception depends on its presentation and viewing context, and how we should be aware of and, perhaps, question the institution’s impact and authority.
Figure 1.
Louise Lawler
*Fragment/Frame/Text, Shortly Before His Accident, 1984*
Cibachrome
13 x 19 ½ inches
Metro Pictures Gallery, New York
Figure 2.
Louise Lawler
_Fragment/Frame/Text, “Early 1660s,”_ 1984
Cibachrome
13 ¼ x 19 ½ inches
Metro Pictures Gallery, New York
Figure 3.
Tim Davis,
*Artist in His Studio*, 2003
Chromogenic Print
18 ¼ x 24 ¾ inches
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Figure 4.
James McNaill Whistler
*The Artist in His Studio*, 1865-66
Oil on paper mounted on panel
18 ¼ x 24 ¾ inches
Art Institute of Chicago
Figure 5.
Tomas E. Marr and Son
*Titian Room*, 1926
Reproduced from http://www.gardnermuseum.org/explore/#/3rd_floor/titian_room/christ_carrying_the_cross
Figure 6.
Louise Lawler
*Who Chooses the Details?*, 1990
Cibachrome
17 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches
Figure 7.
Tim Davis
Christ Carrying the Cross, 2004
Chromogenic Print
19 ½ x 14 inches
Van Doren Waxter Gallery, New York
Figure 8.
Isabella Stewart Garner Museum
Screenshot of *Christ Carrying the Cross* from website, 2014

*Christ Carrying the Cross*

*about 1505–10*

*Circle of Giovanni Bellini*

Oil on wood, 49.5 cm x 30.5 cm

Genre: European Art, Paintings

Location: *Titan Room*

Accession Number: F20517

In the late fifteenth century, new types of private devotional pictures emerged in Italy. This painting is innovative in its depiction of strong emotion to aid prayer and meditation. The subject has been excerpted from narrative representations of Christ carrying the cross to Mount Calvary. However, lacking distracting details or any indication of setting, this image focuses instead on the tear-streaked face of Christ, who stands out at us melancholically, as well as the tiny wood cross over which he casts a shadow. It is an intimate and intensely personal depiction of a suffering more emotional than physical. This type of dramatic close-up was perfected by Giovanni Bellini, who was influenced by devotional images derived from the work of Leonardo da Vinci. This work is in turn based on a composition by Bellini (recorded in a painting in the Toledo Art Museum), and was made by a close follower of the artist, perhaps Vincenzo Catena (ca. 1470–1537).
Figure 9.
Thomas Struth
_Hermitage 1, St. Petersburg, 2005_
Chromogenic Print
44 ¾ x 56 ¾ inches
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
Figure 10.
Thomas Struth
*Hermitage 3, St. Petersburg, 2005*
Chromogenic Print
44 ¾ x 57 inches
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
Figure 11.
Louise Lawler
Glass Cage, 1993
Accompanying Text: The following year her glass “cage” remained empty for the first two
weeks of the exhibition. When finally exposed, she was likened by one critic to an “expelled
foetus” which if smaller “… one would be tempted to pickle in a jar of alcohol.”
12 x 15 inches
Reproduced in Louise Lawler, Johannes Meinhardt, and Douglas Crimp. Louise Lawler: An
Figure 12.
Tim Davis
*The Oarsman*, 2003
Chromogenic Print
15 1/8 x 21 7/8 inches
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven
Bibliography


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VITA

Alexi Nichole Riggins was born in Sacramento, California, on February 14, 1990 to Robert and Lise Riggins. She attended school in Grapevine, Texas, and in January 2008 graduated from Grapevine High School.

The following August, Alexi entered Baylor University and in May 2012 received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Art History. While at Baylor University she served as a teaching assistant to Dr. Nathan Elkins. She was a member of Alpha Lambda Delta Honor Society and was selected as the Allbritton Art Institute Art History Scholar for the 2011-12 school year. That spring she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and graduated summa cum laude.

In August 2012, Alexi enrolled in the Art History graduate studies program at Texas Christian University and was awarded TCU Stipends and Kimbell Fellowships. While working on her Masters in Art History, Alexi served as an intern in the curatorial department at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, where she researched and created an illustrated collection guide for the Fred and Jo Mazzulla Photography Collection. She also participated in the Graduate Student Lectureship Program at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. At TCU, Alexi worked in the Visual Recourses Library and served as a teaching assistant to Dr. Mark Thistlethwaite, Dr. Lori Diel, and Dr. Babette Bohn.
Abstract

Tim Davis, Louise Lawler, and Thomas Struth photograph the art museum as a form of institutional critique to expose the structures that shape and contextualize a work of art. By interrogating the museum’s authority, they reveal to viewers how art is continually restaged in the present and how the museum impacts their reception of art. By using photography as a critical tool, they not only dissect aspects of the museum and point to facets that shape viewer reception, but also dissect the act of looking to reveal how the viewer receives a work of art.