

**THE GUGGENHEIM,
CORPORATE POPULISM,
AND THE FUTURE OF THE
CORPORATE MUSEUM**

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for Art and Politics at The New School

FOREWARD

In publishing Michael Brenson's essay, we wanted to pay tribute to John McDonald Moore, a revered teacher of art—its history, its contemporary practices, its vision—who taught at The New School for more than 30 years. In addition, we wanted to initiate a discussion on changes in artistic culture. This essay, we feel, is an entry point into issues of great import and complexity. Ten years ago, we founded The Vera List Center for Art and Politics as a place where we could explore the multifaceted interface of two seemingly different dispositions. Many of the debates and discussions we have organized were given relevance by the “culture wars” which, if nothing else, have shaken our certainties about what constitutes art and what is meant by politics. When we have challenged orthodox views, we have sought not to silence positions to which we might be opposed. While we have tried to present a wide range of positions, some of which challenge the received wisdom and some of which reaffirm long-held ideas, we have been mindful of allowing for open debate. Michael Brenson's essay, our fifth occasional paper, is in the spirit of our place and we thank him for allowing us to bring it to public attention.

Sondra Farganis

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IA little more than a year ago, *Newsweek* ran a rare feature story on the visual arts.¹ It was titled "State of the Art." Its subject was not artists or contemporary art but a new kind of museum boom. "It's the age of museums," the article announced, "not the musty kind, but ultramodern showplaces that are betting big on marketing culture to middle America."² The article reported on the ingenious, occasionally wild building plans of more than two dozen museums around the country, from Cincinnati and Milwaukee to Fort Worth and San Francisco; the competition among them for superstar architects, like Frank Gehry and Rem Koolhaas; and the roles these flamboyant affirmations of the brave new union of populism and high culture were expected to play in urban America. "This new museum architecture is not only shaping the identity of institutions, it's shaping the aspirations of communities," the writers, art critic Peter Plagens and art reporter Cathleen McGuigan, wrote. "Museums are now seen as urban jump-starters, capable of attracting hordes of visitors, good press and even new business." In order for an American city to show the world it was an ambitious, hip, upwardly mobile, "world class" metropolis, the article implied, it had to have one of these "ultramodern showcases." In the new global economy, art museums were proof of cosmopolitanism, certifications of civic accomplishment and pride, and substantiations of a healthy social and economic ecosystem in which multiple interests worked together for the common good.

As much as the article's pronouncement of a new museum world, and, by extension, of a new art world, what struck me was its lack of inquiry. It offered little or no analysis of the changes in museums. The writers were unconcerned with the impact on artists and art of the increasingly institutional weight of the art museum that is an inevitable consequence of its expanding symbolic importance and the growing number of economic and social interests it must serve. They took for granted that museums now had to compete for audiences with the entertainment and sports industries without asking how museums could avoid being homogenized, Disneyfied, or Armani-ized by allegiance to the global corporate entertainment industry-mass media-electronic technology network that so many aspiring and established art museums seemed desperate to join.

The article identified the brightest star, or perhaps the sun, in this new cultural constellation as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the first “global museum,” the one whose success had convinced other museums that architectural audacity, glittery special effects, and an economic infrastructure and exhibition program shaped by the hypermobility and transnationalism of globalization were indispensable to the 21st-century art museum’s health and survival. “At the forefront of forward-thinking museums is the Guggenheim,” Plagens and McGuigan wrote. “It’s expanding with a global franchise to reach far more people and generate money from new sources. And it’s been a pioneer in using cutting-edge architecture since Frank Lloyd Wright’s spiral building opened on Fifth Avenue in 1959.”

The Guggenheim now has branches in New York City, Las Vegas, Venice, Bilbao, and Berlin. It just got a long-awaited go-ahead on a Hans Hollein Guggenheim in Salzburg, Austria. From its Fifth Avenue New York headquarters, it is planning other branches in Brazil and elsewhere, as well as a *pièce de résistance* Guggenheim, the mother of all Guggenheims, \$680 million, some 45 stories tall, with half a million square feet of exhibition space, near Wall Street in Manhattan. This grandest of all Frank Gehry extravaganzas would be an emblem of 21st-century architectural imagination and a catalyst for economic development, as well as the biggest museum complex in the world. For several years after Thomas Krens took over as Guggenheim director in 1988, his priorities, ambition, and style made many journalists and scholars uneasy. Ten years later, however, the Guggenheim Bilbao was a triumph, 3 million people a year were visiting the Global Guggenheim, *The New York Times* Arts & Leisure section had made Krens the poster boy of the museum future, and in a United States intoxicated with its Cold War triumph, any wariness of corporate confidence and desire could be laughed off as a leftover of failed ’60s radicalism. Art critics and art historians basically stopped paying attention. For the news media in general, and for an increasing number of museum directors and boards, the idea of the museum the Guggenheim had ushered in had become both pragmatic and prophetic. Krens has said repeatedly that he did not create the conditions he has been responding to. At a lecture two years ago, he referred to a “concept of globalization which is not an environment that we are shaping. It is being

shaped around us. To try to resist these forces, or to somehow pretend they don't exist, I think, is *suicidal* [italics mine] from an institutional standpoint."³ The changes in art museums, he maintained, including their bold designs, their expanding investment opportunities, and their growing attention to hospitality and visitor services, are responses to global developments no museum can ignore. From the *Newsweek* article, it seemed that more and more American museums were convinced by his visionary realism. Let's get a piece of the action, they seemed to be saying. With a dazzling and popular art museum, our cities, too, can become tourist magnets, commercial hubs, and global players. It's a can't-miss investment.

After September 11, 2001, the Krens Guggenheim seems unsteady and the museum boom seems neither inevitable nor trouble-free. It was one thing for Krens to develop the Global Guggenheim at a time when entrepreneurial capitalism was taking over the world and the United States was led by a democratic president who visited Africa and demonstrated passionate interest in the social and economic realities of countries in need of international attention and economic development. It is another to promote the same vision in an America shaken by corporate corruption and led by an unilateralist president intent on promoting a Manichean world of "moral clarity" in which the American empire is good and any individual, group, or nation that is not convinced of the inherent efficacy, decency, and wisdom of the free market and the corporate matrix on which it depends can be dismissed as adolescent, fanatical or other. Last fall, the Guggenheim was the first of the big New York museums to lay off staff members—nearly 80; the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art followed. The Guggenheim cancelled or postponed several shows, including ones devoted to Kasimir Malevich and Matthew Barney that are as much curatorially as strategically driven. The New York City press, after years of turning the other cheek, was again ready to pounce. In February 2002, Jerry Saltz began his *Village Voice* column titled "Downward Spiral: The Guggenheim Museum Touches Bottom" with the words: "It's time for Guggenheim director Thomas Krens to go."⁴ In the April 14 *New York Times* Arts & Leisure section, architect-

shaped around us. To try to resist these forces, or to somehow pretend they don't exist, I think, is *suicidal* [italics mine] from an institutional standpoint."³ The changes in art museums, he maintained, including their bold designs, their expanding investment opportunities, and their growing attention to hospitality and visitor services, are responses to global developments no museum can ignore. From the *Newsweek* article, it seemed that more and more American museums were convinced by his visionary realism. Let's get a piece of the action, they seemed to be saying. With a dazzling and popular art museum, our cities, too, can become tourist magnets, commercial hubs, and global players. It's a can't-miss investment.

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ture critic Herbert Muschamp, Krens' most ecstatic supporter when Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao opened in 1997 and plans for Gehry's Lower Manhattan Guggenheim were unveiled in 2000, wrote a review of the Guggenheim Las Vegas in which, in effect, he declared his love affair with the museum over. "The Guggenheim's efforts to remake itself in the image of a multinational corporation," he wrote, "with outposts for culture consumers in Spain, Germany, Austria, Japan, Brazil and elsewhere around the world—have reached the point of philosophical collapse." Near the end of his article, some of the concerns that defined the press response to Krens when he took over the Guggenheim resurfaced: "Krens has been a great architectural patron," Muschamp. "But the Global Guggenheim has created an atmosphere in which art and architecture have become secondary to institutional promotion. The art of the deal is what the museum is practicing now, and one does not care to see the ideas of artists presented in such surroundings or to feel that the public's attendance serves mainly as a form of credit for leveraging the next deal. We end up feeling used, and to no purpose of overarching cultural value."⁵

Clearly the world has changed. It is as much bordered as borderless. Air travel is no longer effortless. The telecommunications industry is no longer a source of unbridled optimism and growth: in a May 1, 2002, editorial, the *Times* proclaimed the "meltdown of the nation's telecom sector." Thanks to the colossal greed and narcissism of Enron executives, the cruel and exploitative tendencies of corporate culture are alarming to pretty much everyone except the men who run this country. The assumption that only free trade, the global market, and franchise participation can ensure global stability is still pervasive, but museums can no longer think effectively about the global market and franchise participation without appreciation of and curiosity about local conditions and a far more insightful and courageous engagement with the histories of 20th-century art and with the complexities and possibilities of the art experience than the Global Guggenheim, or any of the new "ultramodern showcase" museums, has permitted. All the giddy talk about a museum boom has ended.

One of my goals here is to clarify the conditions in which museums are now working. Without understanding the real problems and restraints museums are confronted with, it is not possible to think constructively about the Guggenheim or any other emblem of 2002 museum reality.

Another goal is to encourage discussion both of the corporate museum and of the corporatization of the American museum. "Corporate" is obviously a loaded word that many people, including me, have had a tendency to use carelessly. I want to begin to define Krens' corporate style and operating procedures. I want to ask whether embracing a corporate model presumes that a museum will adopt a similar institutional style and promote certain kinds of art, and certain approaches to art, and not others.

I do not see Krens in black and white terms. I have profound questions about his exhibition program: together the two major 2001–02 winter shows—the Norman Rockwell retrospective, with its feel-good antimodernism, and the defiantly anti-intellectual *Brazil: Body and Soul*, which turned Frank Lloyd Wright's ramps into a disco tourist spectacle—represent the most recent museum nadir for me. Whenever there is a danger that populist rhetoric will be used to reinforce corporate interests, that rhetoric and those interests must be examined. But I respect Krens and want him to succeed. The Fifth Avenue Guggenheim's events programming—panels, lectures, and performances—is less predictable and more inventive than that of other New York City museums and evidence of a curiosity and daring that could bring intellectual and aesthetic vitality to the entire New York art scene. In addition, years ago, well before most other museum directors, Krens recognized the insularity of the institutional art world and the importance of integrating the museum in the larger society. If he had not responded effectively to entrenched museum problems and pressing global realities, he would not have been approached by numerous countries (in the spring of 2000, the number he gave was 60) interested in exploring the possibility of their own Guggenheim branch. The Krens Guggenheim raises basic questions about the meanings, possibilities, and uses of art in an increasingly interconnected yet increasingly

divided post—Cold War world. Furthermore, a museum director who believes in art and artists and who has the ears of political and economic leaders has the potential to be an influential arts advocate in a country that continues to find the abuse of artists an irresistible source of fun and money.

Embedded in this talk are issues of criticism. To me, it is part of the job of the critic to engage institutions and their administrations, and an indication of the institutional stranglehold on culture that Muschamp's ongoing debate with Krens and the Guggenheim is an anomaly in the New York press. Condemning the art in *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, a spring 2002 exhibition at the Jewish Museum, is easy. Considering what it means for *that* museum to do *that* show, at *that* moment, and the implications for a preeminent Jewish museum when it encourages a critical consciousness of the Holocaust industry, is more difficult and useful. Condemning the Brooklyn Museum of Art for its scandal-mongering in the 1999 exhibition, *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, and for its distressing collusion with the collector Charles Saatchi—and the contempt for curators it reflected—is essential. But so is recognizing that in a new century, this museum, with great collections, long known as a remote, sleepy, insular place, must transform itself so that it attracts younger, faster, and more diverse audiences and a lot more money. Writing thoughtfully, constructively and contextually about *Sensation* requires a distrust of quick, authoritative, us-it judgments and a willingness to engage American culture in a sustained and risky way.

It is also part of the critic's task to figure out the right questions to ask of institutions. With the Guggenheim, figuring out these questions is particularly difficult. It is even harder to determine how to have an effect on an institution structured in such a way as to broadcast to the world that it is immune to what any mere mortal who is not a global economic and political player thinks of it. I want to ask the right questions and I want to have an effect.

II

The most obvious of the conditions that now define museum life in the United States and Western Europe is that modernism is now generally assumed to be one belief system among many. The modernist art museum I grew up with and in many ways loved was the product of another era, and of artistic hopes and dreams that, in the '90s, seemed to have lost much of their urgency among postmodern generations, for whom the grandiose and totalizing claims with which modernism has been widely identified, often simplistically, can seem absurd, if not noxious. People can certainly still go to a museum, contemplate a Piet Mondrian, a Vasily Kandinsky, or a Constantin Brancusi, and from that encounter feel understood, moved, and inspired. But few ambitious museums would now think of embracing, or imposing, the modernist notions of art and audience on which the Guggenheim, like so many other museums, was founded. All museum directors are aware that we live in a world of multiple belief systems, many in conflict, each the product of particular conditions. Regardless of whether they engage different belief systems or try to assimilate them into a monoculture, most directors, including Krens, take cultural diversity as a fact of museum life, which means, in part, that they are not going to put all their eggs in any one aesthetic basket. They also take for granted that they are competing for the attention of audiences formed by the Internet and cellular technology, and that they are competing for them with films, sports, and the rest of popular culture. "We see the institution as dependent upon individuals for its support," Krens has said. "There is a very discriminating audience in a highly competitive field. You're making choices how to spend your leisure time." Twenty-five percent of the Guggenheim's revenue comes from admissions, an unusually high percentage for an art museum. This requires it to compete with popular culture more intensely than MoMA, the Whitney, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, at the same time that it is competing with those institutions for "high" art and world class museum stature.

Another defining aspect of the current museum situation since the eruption of the culture wars in the late '80s, when Krens came to the Guggenheim, is that directors know that the people who enter their museums can make trouble.

So can politicians and the press. As a result of the critical reporting on and blistering press reviews of *Mirroring Evil*, the Jewish Museum has lost members. Many times I have heard it said that the Brooklyn Museum got exactly what it wanted from the uproar over *Sensation*. Certainly the museum received massive media attention and the exhibition drew crowds, but the attacks by the press and by New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani clearly took a toll on the museum, whose reputation as a serious art institution dedicated to independent scholarship, and to the integrity and authority of its curators, has suffered. Since the savage political and public attacks on this museum, even some private foundations have become more wary in their grants. In an era in which the press, politicians, and general public show no signs of becoming less reactive and punitive, the Guggenheim has taken the tack of many big museums—which is to cast its audience net as wide as possible and to try, in its selection of exhibitions and its often insipid wall labels, to ensure that as many people as possible feel comfortable, including those who are uncomfortable with art and consider art museums elitist. Rockwell and motorcycles here, Giorgio Armani there, spiritual abstraction here, modernist sculpture there, a potpourri of conservative and radical approaches in 1900 here and there, everyone is welcome, make yourself at home, come back, please, we are no more frightening than Bloomingdale's or your neighborhood mall. You can count on us for entertainment, quality merchandise, and conciliation.

No aspect of museum life is more important to the current shape and tone of the big American art museum than its dependence upon collections. Ten years ago, Krens said: "I do believe that you build great museums by acquiring great collections, and you have to create the conditions that allow that to happen."⁶ More recently, he made a point of saying that "the Guggenheim still very much cultivates its traditional function. The collection is paramount. The conservation and preservation of the collection is an important function of the museum that will not change." One of his first decisive moves as director, for which he took considerable abuse, was to deaccession paintings by the modernist stars, Amedeo Modigliani, Marc Chagall, and Vasily Kandinsky, in order to get the money to

acquire 210 works, most of them Minimalist, from the Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo—an exchange and acquisition that literally and symbolically helped haul the Guggenheim into the last quarter of the 20th century. Those acts asserted Krens' interest in innovative and influential contemporary art collectors while dramatizing his institution's need for space in which to show the art he wanted to acquire. Obviously, museums committed to the art of the present must keep up, and a lot of contemporary art is big and bigger. Just as important, collections make exhibitions possible. This is even more the case since 9/11: because of insecurity about planes and the rising costs of airplane insurance, many museums have been less willing to travel their works. In order to convince other museums to lend the art that makes possible the sexy or groundbreaking exhibitions that bring in audiences and maintain an aura of influence and mission, a museum must have an expansive supply of art that other museums want. Krens' partnership with the Hermitage in Leningrad, from which he can borrow and perhaps also lend masterpieces, as well as MoMA's alliance with the Tate, makes sense in this regard. So does Krens' continuing search for dramatic spaces in which the Guggenheim's art can be shown. The Global Guggenheim is a collection lure. In order to attract art it cannot acquire by money alone, however, museums must also remain on good terms with dealers and collectors who control or own prominent contemporary art. The competition over collections and collectors has inspired ingenious strategies of seduction throughout the museum field, of which probably the most notable and unsettling has been the succession of inflated exhibitions of private collections in which the collectors, as much if not more than the curators, have called the shots.

The need for the funds to build and program, like the competition for collections and collectors, means that big museums must constantly ally themselves with new money, which in the last few years has come largely from the technology and entertainment industries. Money brings with it particular systems of values. In Hollywood, for example, which in the last decade gained an increasing presence on big museums' boards, gate appeal and attendance are the first measures of success. The competition for collections and new money also

means staying away from art that might suggest to the potential donor of a power collection that the institution is not a hip, big-time, world-renowned place. The abysmal record of modern and contemporary exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum, whose 20th-century curator has spoken of his project of collecting collectors, is an example of the institutional timidity that results when courting collectors drives a museum program. The dependence upon collections is understandable, but the consequences of it—including the spaces of silence it builds into every aspect of the institution—can be so pernicious that many young curators want no part of big museums, and some of the most respected curators will only work in them if they retain the independence to organize exhibitions elsewhere.

The loss of public funding has had an impact on current museum conditions as well. The National Endowment for the Arts's museum program was marvelously effective in encouraging curators, in funding exhibitions with curatorial necessity, and in giving private money the confidence to be supporting partners in such exhibitions. Robert Storr's *Dislocations*, at MoMA in 1991, was a public-private partnership. So was Thelma Golden's *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, at the Whitney in 1994—a flawed exhibition that the press can't stop bashing, but one with fresh ideas that welcomed into that museum audiences that damned well had to be institutionally acknowledged during those multicultural years. Since the NEA was emasculated in 1995 when Congress eliminated grants to individual artists, there is, in effect, only private funding. Now the first museum questions, including at the National Gallery of Art, by name and location our *national* museum, are likely to be: how many people will it draw and whom might it offend? On a panel discussion in New York City a few years ago, Alan Shestak, the National Gallery's deputy director, pointed out that people in marketing departments now often get paid more than curators. He also noted that in the past, museums decided to do certain shows and then figured out how to get the money to pay for them. Now, as often as not, they begin with the desire to get people into the museum and then decide which exhibitions will help them meet this objective. The NEA

rewarded curatorial insight and courage with funds that leveraged other money. It helped give the museum field a center.

How have museums, particularly the big ones, responded to these changing conditions? Sze Tsung Leong, an architectural student of Rem Koolhaas, the architect who designed the museum at Las Vegas and is in the plans for one in Brazil, presented a useful language while writing about shopping and about what he calls “control space,” which, he writes, “represents the corporate desire for its own type of sustainability.” The new, open, convenient, all-purpose art museum of a kind that Krens built in Las Vegas and wants to build in New York can be seen in part, and I’m quoting Sze on “control space,” as “a survival mechanism within increasingly irrational, volatile, competitive and voracious markets.” In a world in which ideas of art and culture shift so quickly and capital is so fluid and elusive that it is not possible to tap or track it by remaining in place, museum spaces have been created that are intended to provide, in Sze’s words, “a type of stability assured by mechanisms that enable immediate retaliation of response to sudden change. Architecture grows increasingly flexible, increasingly ephemeral, increasingly targeted to changing needs and taste, increasingly mutable.”⁷ From these words, it is easier to understand why someone as attuned as Krens to the economic and cultural consequences of globalization has been more concerned with architecture than with art, why he has been exploring the possibility of magnetic and flexible franchises in major markets around the world, and why he and other art museum directors and boards believe the construction of adaptable multipurpose spaces is essential to institutional survival. In the current global and economic climate, many art directors see their institutions as having no choice but to become an “ultramodern showcase,” without a guiding aesthetic vision, dependent on one side on turnstile count and on the other on corporate patrons, inexorably driven to become more and more like a mall or department store, committed to access but wary of any aesthetic center and of critical and ethical engagement.

If you put all this together, you can see the shape of the new museum that was on the verge of becoming natural at the time of the *Newsweek* article. One that is hospitable and consumer-friendly but also fearful. One that is open to many kinds of art but unlikely to identify itself with any one approach and wary of any that might challenge vested interests or any base of institutional power. One whose bottomless needs for money and collectors can make it seem for sale. (Dealers and collectors have contributed heavily to Guggenheim art shows.⁸ In his *Voice* article, Saltz reminded us that BMW underwrote the 1998 *Art of the Motorcycle* exhibition and that Giorgio Armani reportedly paid \$15 million to the museum in connection with its 2000 exhibition there; when I was in Brazil in 2000, the informed rumor was that the Guggenheim was paid \$8 million to take the *Brazil 500 Years* exhibition that became the drastically slimmed down *Brazil: Body and Soul*.) One in which modern and contemporary curators, who understand how artists talk and dream and spend their days and nights thinking about them and their work, have little or no voice and substantial curatorial authority has to be earned by loyalty to major patrons and board members. One in which it is highly unlikely that any artist will be confirmed whose work does not serve vested board interests and grand institutional plans.⁹ One in which the board and staff effort required to realize a major exhibition is often heroic and every major international loan exhibition is a mini-miracle.



Many art museums in the United States depended on corporate support for a decade or more, but before Krens no museum director had run his or her museum as a CEO. He holds power tightly in his hands, making decisions, curatorial as well as managerial, based on his special connections and privileged knowledge of deals and resources, and preserving a division of labor that gives curators and education departments little or no access to management power. In his exhibition programming, he has repeatedly demonstrated his willingness to identify the Guggenheim with international, brand-name corporate trendsetters. By hiring John C. Hanhardt, one of the country's most respected curatorial thinkers in film and video aesthetics, by incorporating into installations, whenever possible, the newest video equipment, and by sparing no cost on visual spectacles devoted to artists like Jenny Holzer, Bill Viola, and Nam June Paik, who have been examining and reinventing media and electronic culture, Krens has aligned his institution with innovations in electronic technology. By so doing he has reached out to youthful audiences, as well as to the corporate elite.

Faith in the corporate model is also apparent in Krens' trust in the insights and challenges of capital. In other words, the ways in which money is made, invested and sometimes —as in the late '90s— wildly, even deliriously, disseminated and reimagined, provide access to the desires, aspirations, and possibilities of the moment. The primary forms in which Krens has allowed the energy, unpredictability, and transformations of money to be articulated are architectural. (Is it possible to see Gehry's fluid, weightless, paper-like, ever-changing architecture as the current shape, or dream, of capital?) Krens clearly believes that if he aligns himself with some of the brashest and most independent businessmen and other corporate leaders, and through them with the cutting edge of entrepreneurial capitalism—while at the same time enabling technologically sophisticated architects to build alluring and pioneering buildings—he will create a museum in the thick of desire and power. Influential museums not only show art but also construct it: think of all the artists who make art with MoMA or the Met in mind. Krens wants to lead. I think he believes that if the entrepreneurial and architectural imaginations are welcomed, supported, and institutionally incarnated, art will

follow. He assumes, and this is an assumption that shapes the current museum boom and perhaps the entire artistic situation, that money and architecture—like technology—are avant-garde and art is not. In order for the Guggenheim to survive and flourish, then, art must remain subordinated to the entrepreneurial, architectural, and technological imaginations. While the first responsibility of the Krens Guggenheim may be to the art it is its duty to protect and present, its heart and soul have not been art.¹⁰

When most people think about Krens' corporate style, they think about his language. Krens has spoken about the Guggenheim "brand," defined artworks in the collection as "assets" with which he could engineer deals at home and abroad, and used the word "conglomerate" to refer to the Global Guggenheim. The ease with which he has used the language of business to define his personal style has announced that he has no interest in modernist assumptions that even if art is implicated in capitalism, it must provide perspectives that expose its inner workings, push it to act as responsibly as possible, or propose value systems that do not perpetuate the logic and machinery of commodification. The ways in which Krens has managed and *voiced* his museum reinforce signature mid-to-late-'90s assumptions: there is no alternative to the capitalist system; everyone is dependent upon and complicit with it whether he or she wants to admit it; resistance, even critical analysis of it, is futile; and embracing the system and developing the infinite opportunities it provides for pleasure and fulfillment are primary goals. The Guggenheim opened in 1937 as the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, with thick gray carpeting and soft-velvet-covered seating and the music of Bach and Chopin wafting through the air. The wealth of Solomon R. Guggenheim, a copper magnate, was used to create an environment in which abstract painting could propel audiences to a more spiritual and peaceful world. In 1979, the Guggenheim gave Joseph Beuys, whose varieties of artistic expression were embedded in his analysis of society and nature and his will to change the world, his most important exhibition in the United States. In Krens' Guggenheim, virtually nothing remains of the idea of the museum as an intimate refuge; many of these "non-objective" paintings are now "assets"

inserted into the system of circulation that in the global market is essential to establishing value, and conflict about commercialism, or commitment to the artist as fiercely engaged and transformative poet and thinker, has largely vanished.

One of the keys to the authority of the Global Guggenheim is Krens' comprehensive strategy to establish the Guggenheim brand. Great architecture, great collections, the mobility of art objects, and economic and political partnerships are certainly marks of that brand. So is centralized power. As soon as anyone thinks of the Guggenheim, they probably think of the landmark Frank Lloyd Wright building—the splendid renovation of which has been a foundation of Krens' master plan—and probably also of upper Fifth Avenue, to whose aura of affluence and influence the Guggenheim has increasingly contributed. Just as important, they think of New York City, which Krens has described as “the center of world culture in many ways.” All significant Guggenheim decisions are made in New York. There is little room for curatorial initiative in any other Guggenheim branch, although each makes a particular contribution to the Global Guggenheim. For example, the two large white architectural sculptures in *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces* were commissioned by the Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, the branch that is expected to commission major works.¹¹

Just as important to the formation and potency of the Guggenheim brand, every major museum decision must strengthen the entire institutional system. Krens has spoken of all the aspects that have had to be understood together and *simultaneously* developed in order for the museum to prosper: physical plant, endowment, collection, staff, board, programming, and support. He has repeatedly said that it was only by this simultaneous development that the Guggenheim could respond effectively to the financial, spatial, and collection crisis he faced when he became director in 1988. This strategy did indeed lead the museum from precariousness to dominance. But the simultaneous attention to all these factors means that the Guggenheim exhibition program is driven by institutional rather than artistic or curatorial necessity. If each show is required to help the museum to develop collection, board, programming, endowment, etc., it is

almost impossible for the exhibition program to be defined by the personality and conviction that give art exhibitions a purpose substantially different from department store displays. No matter how much a Guggenheim curator cares about the artist he or she shows, and no matter how thoughtful his or her exhibition and its accompanying catalogue might be, the first subjects of almost every Guggenheim exhibition have been the institution itself. If the art shown by the museum invariably seems used, it is because it *is* being used by the institution in a way that makes it difficult for the art to command its own identity, which helps explain why it is the institution, not the art it shows, that provokes intense critical debate.

The corporate model also clarifies Krens' rogue mentality. Krens is not a joiner: he may be the only major museum director who never attends the meetings of the Association of Art Museum Directors. He has consistently thumbed his nose at common museum practices. There is almost no such thing as conflict of interest in his museum. It has kissed off other museum conventions I have never seen another museum disregard. For example, I went to see the Guggenheim's 1993 Rebecca Horn retrospective three days before it ended, and it had already been taken down, without apology or explanation. In addition, since the Guggenheim's schedule is always dependent upon the state of Krens' discussions and deals, his exhibition program is always susceptible to the processes of his interactions. Has any major museum's program been more unreliable than his? By forcefully exercising his own institutional and aesthetic judgment, however, while establishing working relationships with economic and political leaders and realizing extraordinary architectural goals, Krens has projected an image of himself as a CEO who will be recognized by other adventurous CEOs as a brilliantly effective maverick with whom they will want to partner because they know no individual, bureaucracy, or museum convention will prevent him from realizing his plans.

All this is still not enough to explain Krens' appeal. He would not be so interesting and so important to engage if the threads of a social vision did not exist within the fabric of his institutional vision. Already in the '80s, as director of the

Williams College Art Museum, Krens had the remarkable idea that art museums could find new purpose and stability by contributing to the development, or redevelopment, of economically depressed areas. Although it is no longer his institution and its success remains tenuous, Mass MoCA, its galleries in the abandoned Sprague Technology plant (with its 780,000 square feet) designed with the kind of art Panza collected in mind, has had an extraordinary catalytic effect on the formerly depressed mill town of North Adams, Massachusetts. The success of the Global Guggenheim, and indeed of Krens' entire operation, depends on the success of the Guggenheim Bilbao, which opened in 1997 and is, by all accounts, an irresistible building—its vast, flowing, titanium-skin body, alongside the port, itself a monumental sculpture with which no object in it could compete. As of 2000, the \$320 million museum, paid for by the Basque state, had drawn 1.4 million people a year and been an economic boon to Bilbao and to the entire region. “Those kinds of results,” Krens said then, “have caught the attention of virtually everybody. We have requests from every continent except Antarctica to build Guggenheim museums. This is harder to do than it has ever been before because the standard has been set with Bilbao.”

As Krens was developing the idea that a new and architecturally innovative art museum could reenergize the depressed New England town in which the abandoned Sprague plant embodied a proud, yet melancholy, psychological and labor history, he understood that art and culture were becoming ways in which countries struggling to emerge from colonialism were convinced they could end their economic and social isolation. Countries wanted a piece of the global economic and political pie and saw cultural recognition and tourism as a way to get it. By his record of architectural and technological success, by building influential contacts in the Northeast and also around the world—at a time when, in his words, “governments are seeking to get out of the culture business, so to speak, in terms of cutting their subsidies to most institutions”—and by the focus and vigor with which he established his institutional brand, Krens made the Guggenheim a museum many political and economic leaders have wanted to identify themselves with. He spread the message that the right kind of art

museum—*his* art museum—could be an effective response to profound, even desperate, economic and social needs. Many people agreed.

In March 2000, *The New York Times* ran an article about the disappointment in the Bangladesh village of Joypura when President Bill Clinton cancelled his visit. “It’s terribly sad because we were expecting so much,” said Rokeya Begum, a young mother. “We thought he would talk to us, and we would get to know each other. We thought he would hear our problems and he would tell us the solutions.” Another villager, Alam Ali, said: “I am so sad now. This whole area would have grown rich. Bill Clinton could have made this happen. He is a very great man, you know.”¹² These remarks suggest the depth of the division between the haves and the have-nots, as well as the divine magic the leaders of the electronic technology world are thought to possess by many people outside it. For these Bangladesh villagers, just the contact of the leaders of 21st-century technology and the global market with their preindustrial lives promised immediate deliverance from poverty and isolation.

I think that for people outside the United States drawn to the Global Guggenheim, what the Guggenheim brand has promised is entry into history. Since the mid-’90s, historical space has been monopolized and patrolled by institutional power, which within big museums and probably everywhere else became largely identified with the global corporate entertainment industry-mass media-electronic technology network. Cities and even nations around the world have been saying to the Guggenheim, in effect, we want you to build a great museum for us because we will then be part of this network. You give us access to the global present. Since Impressionism, advanced art—the tradition of the new—has been connected with the promise of access to modernity, which was essential to its aesthetic, economic, and political appeal; this is still in part why millions of Americans each year make their pilgrimages to big city museums, why many small or midsized American cities without an art museum want one, and why international biennial exhibitions have been proliferating all over the globe. Before Krens, however, I’m not sure that the proximity to art had ever promised

entire cities and regions, including in the United States, instant access to the global present.

In the summer of 2000, I spent a week in Bahia, Brazil. In Salvador, its capitol, I asked cultural officials with passionate connections to their economically impoverished yet culturally rich region about the possibility of a Brazil Guggenheim. They wanted it. They said it would generate greater interest in art and culture. They believed it was imperative for them to enter the new circuits of global power. As one cultural leader told me, if you are not part of that network you are not where you were before; you are further behind. You are less likely to decide and more likely to be decided. You have no chance to avoid colonization. Part of what she was saying to me, I think, was that this was a region that felt it could not compete with the technologically advanced nations but believed it could, with the help of an internationally connected and admired art museum, jump that gap and overnight become a global destination and financial center with a reputation for cosmopolitanism and a greater capacity for self-determination. The Frank Gehry masterpiece *did* make Bilbao a site of global desire. It made that city part of the 21st-century pilgrimage route, made it a world tourist destination. Perhaps it will be, as Krens has claimed, the Chartres cathedral of the 21st century.

What has made the Guggenheim brand desirable, however, is precisely what has made many other people, including me, squirm—its franchising, its centralization of power, its dependence upon a North American and Western European system of institutional confirmation, and its nonlocal emphasis. New York-controlled branches circulate artists that perpetuate the idea of a market-decided and-controlled artistic mainstream and develop the same economic interests in every branch, not one of which is allowed to program in ways that respect local histories and the needs and conflicts of place. Could the machinery of a museum be more imperialistic? But without this imperial authority, the Guggenheim would not have represented—and for economic and political leaders in many countries perhaps still represent—the possibility of access and self-determination.

I do not believe Krens sees people in countries considering Guggenheims only in market terms. I think he really wants, as well as believing that it is economically, socially and politically essential, to bring into the system people and countries that have felt painfully removed from power. He is himself an outsider-insider. Raised in East New York, in Brooklyn, crossing Europe on a motorcycle, going to SUNY Albany for a masters degree in studio art (as well as to Yale for a masters in management and strategy), coming to the Guggenheim from a university museum, he did not follow a familiar big-time museum director path. Even with his dependence upon certain bases of big-time artist, dealer, and collector power, he is not enamored of the institutional art world, which he understandably feels has consistently misrepresented and underestimated him while remaining mired in institutional perspectives that have prevented it from rethinking itself in a world in which many old assumptions no longer apply. I think he has more than a touch of screw-you-art-world anti-elitism and takes pleasure seeing motorcycle buffs in black leather jackets roaming a former temple of modernist purity. I think he feels empathy for people who make the effort to visit his museum after not being comfortable in museums before. I think that getting outsiders into the system is driven not only by institutional imperatives but also by personal mission.

Some of the right questions to ask about the Krens Guggenheim are these: What is the system Krens wants to enable people to enter? What kind of relationship with that system will the Guggenheim allow when people enter it? The Krens Guggenheim, like many other museums mentioned in the 2001 *Newsweek* article, emerged or took shape during a moment of missionary corporate confidence. Technology corporations wanted to infiltrate the world with their machinery and rhetoric of connectivity and in the process provide access to people who had not had it, while controlling that access so that they (the corporations) would remain the body in which the world not only communicated but in which connectivity and communication would be conceived. Is the Krens Guggenheim the fullest museum embodiment of that moment or is it something more substantial and enduring? After 9/11 and the current American wariness of corporate culture, as well as the international ambivalence about the American empire,

can the Guggenheim make sufficient room for the individual and collective yearnings and stories that drive the desire for Guggenheim branches outside the United States as much as the economic and political rewards of joining the international culture circuit, or will it only pay lip service to them while reinforcing local power elites, and with them, global master narratives?

Can the Guggenheim remain a viable museum without an artistic soul, or center?

IV

One of the most serious reservations about Krens when he was appointed director was that he did not really care about, or have a sufficient understanding of, the art in the Guggenheim's collections. Intellectually and temperamentally, he was drawn not to European modernism but rather to the post-1960 American art of Robert Morris and a Minimalist generation known for its no-nonsense matter-of-factness; its love of fabricated and industrial materials; its rejection of European notions of touch and interiority and of pretty much every other remnant of studio aesthetics, including categories like "painting" and "sculpture"; its feeling for expanded scale; its groundbreaking awareness of context and site; and its informed and sophisticated architectural imagination. In many ways, Krens has proven himself an outstanding caretaker of the European modernism with which the museum continues to be identified. Along with restoring and expanding the Wright building that is the museum's home base, he has been resolutely committed to documentation and conservation and to generating architectural conditions in which an ever-increasing percentage of the Guggenheim's art can be dramatically shown. But his connection to the European modernist art that defines the 1937 to 1988 Guggenheim Museum remains a fundamental question. Part of what gives this art its urgency around the world—and what makes the Guggenheim marketable in cities and countries outside the circuits of power—is its radical investment in freedom, struggle, self-awareness, healing, invention, and transformation. These are immense themes, difficult themes, themes that will continue to contribute to the necessity of art no matter how persistently they are analyzed or attacked. Camille Pissarro, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Brancusi, Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Joan Miró, and Alberto Giacometti, as well as Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and David Smith who took essential clues from the Europeans while striving to establish the United States as an artistic center, helped develop these themes into narratives that could be perpetually reenergized by individual and collective stories. By wedding these powerful themes, with all the desires they evoke, to international corporate power, Krens has inspired hope that the economic vitality and global success of a local Guggenheim will contribute to actual liberation, healing, and transformation. Does the Guggenheim understand that these core

modernist themes have contributed to its global appeal? Can it engage the institutional implications of the conflicts between the beauty and radicalism of pre-1950 European modernism and the beauty and radicalism of the influential post-'60s American art that the Krens Guggenheim has acquired and exhibited? Does the museum appreciate the difference between the languages with which artists investigate and develop these themes, and the languages and investigations of corporate culture?

What does it mean for a museum to do justice to the art it owns or shows?

The Guggenheim must allow art to breathe. To do this, it needs to be more improvisational, less suffocatingly strategic, more determined to allow the unpredictable intelligence and poetry of modern and contemporary art do its work, whatever that work may be. Muschamp wrote of Krens: "I prefer his ostentation to the demure connoisseurial posturings of his colleagues at other museums. But flamboyance is no substitute for self-reflection, and without that quality Krens has come to resemble a modern version of Wagner's Bavarian patron, mad King Ludwig, putting up palace after palace until his wits gave out."¹³ Krens' wits won't give out, but if an art museum seamlessly enmeshes itself in the networks of globalization without a daring engagement with the hopes, yearnings, perceptions, arguments, and rages driving the art that has shaped it, it will end up diminishing and even betraying that art, and that museum's internal silences and irresolutions will eventually enable the conflicts and contradictions of globalization to threaten the museum with philosophical collapse.

No issue is more important to the viability of the Guggenheim, as well as to the viability of all corporately controlled museums, than agency. Agency does not mean freedom to buy, freedom to interpret, or freedom to come and go as one pleases, although each is essential. Agency is active, engaged. It can be mobilized by an institutional mode of address, by a stance or attitude that advocates intensity over diversion, consciousness over consumption. MoMA has its own problems, but Anne Umland and Carolyn Lanchner's Alberto Giacometti

retrospective last fall, and Robert Storr's Gerhard Richter painting retrospective and Okwui Enwezor's *Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (at the MoMA/P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center) in the spring of 2002, were intended to encourage an undistracted encounter with the art in them and the feelings and thoughts it raised. Each of these exhibitions served large institutional narratives, but if visitors wanted to concentrate on the art without, or before, thinking about the institution, they could. I've seen a number of Guggenheim exhibitions in the last decade for which I'm grateful, including *Picasso and the Age of Iron*, *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, *Felix-Gonzalez-Torres*, *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, and the cautious but still instructive *Amazons of the Avant-Garde* on Fifth Avenue; and *Bill Viola: Fire, Water, Breath and Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* at the Guggenheim SoHo, which Krens was forced to close soon after 9/11. But with the museum's blatant commercialization, expediency, and spectacularization, being with art and thinking about art there have become almost impossible for me. The Guggenheim's emphases on edifice and institution are now so overwhelming that the dreams, refusals, and struggles—and with them the poetry and beauty—that make art an urgent matter seem constricted or repressed.

Art now serves the institution far more than the reverse. The institution and the global network it is part of are the message, not the art and whatever rivers of feeling and thought might flow from an encounter with it. I can experience art. I cannot experience an architecturalized spectacle system. Art encourages confusion, revelation, disjunction, connection. A spectacle system shocks, freezes. Its first enemy is process. If a museum is equivocal about process, it cannot respect agency. Without a commitment to process and agency, the Guggenheim's populism is ersatz. It can present—and *sell*—a social impulse, or idea, but it cannot offer or build a social vision. It can attract visitors but it cannot build a constituency.

In the 1999 and 2000 lectures I listened to, Krens spoke about the dinner at the New York Stock Exchange at which he met the president of Deutsche Bank; he showed slides of his motorcycle club that included Dennis Hopper, Laurence Fishburne, and Lauren Hutton; he showed slides of himself, the Mayor of Bilbao, and New York City Mayor David Dinkins; he talked about being flown into Bilbao by helicopter by the Basque president. He spoke passionately about collaborating with Gehry and went into fascinating detail about Gehry's creative process, including the differing roles of hand and technology in his work. His discussion of art and artists was shorter and less persuasive. He spoke with pride about the Guggenheim's collaboration with Richard Serra, and how extraordinary his massive steel sculptures looked in the Bilbao Guggenheim, and with Francesco Clemente, whom Krens believed had made his biggest and best work for his museum. Working with these artists was unmistakably important to him, and he communicated both a rare feeling for and a responsibility toward the creative process, but his enthusiasm for artists and process paled before the pride and pleasure with which he spoke about institutional accomplishment and his political, economic, Hollywood, and architectural connections. Krens is clearly a museum professional of exceptional talent and vision. I believe he wants to be remembered as a great collector and program director—as a great *art* supporter—not just as a great architectural patron and institution builder. In the Guggenheim, the architect has been the artist; the businessman has been the artist; the museum director has been the artist. It is not too late for Krens to open the museum to multiple languages and to value the pressure of the individual as much as the enveloping spectacle system. Neither the Guggenheim nor any other corporate museum can survive as, or become, a great museum without an unwavering investment in artists' and curators' voices and visions.

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NOTES

1. This paper is a revised version of "The Guggenheim, Consumer Aesthetics and the Implications of the Corporate Museum," the 2002 John McDonald Moore Memorial Lecture, given May 2, 2002, at the New School University. That lecture evolved from two others, "The Rhetoric of the New Museum," delivered at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York, March 26, 1999, and "Art, Corporate Populism, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum," May 18, 2001, given at "Museum, Community, World," a symposium at the Museum of Art and History in Santa Cruz, California.
2. See Peter Plagens and Cathleen McGuigan, "State of the Art," *Newsweek*, March 26, 2001, pp. 52–61.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all Krens quotes have been taken either from his lecture at *The Art Show*, at Manhattan's Seventh Regiment Armory, February 20, 1999, or his lecture at the Neuberger Museum of Art, March 5, 2000.
4. See Jerry Saltz, "Downward Spiral: The Guggenheim Museum Touches Bottom," *The Village Voice*, February 13–19, 2002, p. 65. Under a different title, "GuggEnron," the column was also published online by www.artnet.com/magazine, February 13, 2002.
5. See Herbert Muschamp, "When Art Puts Down a Bet in a House of Games," *The New York Times*, Arts & Leisure Section, April 14, 2002, p. 32.
6. See Michael Brenson, "Big Time at the Guggenheim," *Art & Auction*, April 1992, pp. 90–95 and 129–131, p. 130.
7. See Sze Tsung Leong, "Control Space," in *Mutations*, initiated and directed by Francine Fort and Michel Jacques, Actar (Barcelona) 2000, pp. 187, 189, 193.

8. In a recent article in *The New York Times Magazine*, Deborah Solomon wrote that “in 1999, the Sensation show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art erupted into controversy in part because the museum had failed to disclose a \$160,000 pledge from Charles Saatchi.” Solomon added: “What was unknown at the time is that Saatchi had hoped to do the show at the Guggenheim and Krens had asked for even more money. I was told by Saatchi that he scrapped the idea after Krens said the show would require a ‘donation’ of \$1 million.” See Deborah Solomon, “Is the Go-Go Guggenheim Going, Going...,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 30, 2002, p. 39.
9. Almost all the artists to whom the museum has made a commitment—including Barney, Georg Baselitz, Ross Bleckner, Francesco Clemente, Jim Dine, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jenny Holzer, Ellsworth Kelly, Mario Merz, Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, Nam June Paik, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, David Salle, Richard Serra, Bill Viola, and Rachel Whiteread—are part of a power dealer-collector-museum nexus connecting New York, the United States, and Western Europe.
10. In her *Times Magazine* article, Solomon emphasizes Krens’ preference for architecture over art. She relates Frank Gehry’s frustration with Krens’ refusal to use the system of walls he designed to break up the Guggenheim Bilbao’s signature 430-foot-long space and make that space, and the entire museum, more hospitable to art. Solomon, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
11. When this exhibition was shown at the Fifth Avenue Guggenheim in the spring of 2002, the one name on the accompanying wall label was not that of a curator but of Deutsche Bank.
12. See Barry Bearak, “Big Day Spoiled for Bangladesh Villagers,” *The New York Times*, March 21, 2000, p. 1.
13. Muschamp, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

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