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Fernando DOMÍNGUEZ RUBIO, *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2020, 424 p.)

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The central figure in Fernando Domínguez Rubio's groundbreaking book is the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), a 708,000 square-foot behemoth of serious art in hushed white galleries. These are the sorts of things people associate with art museums the world over, to be endured, perhaps, as the price of touristic edification, or, more optimistically, to be appreciated as correct devotion to the visual arts. Because of the sameness of the modern art museum—and we learn a lot in this book about the why and how of museal uniformity—it takes a few pages to understand the novelty of *Still Life*. The white walls conceal a beehive of conservators, chemists, computer programmers, and forensic scientists striving to keep the artworks alive. For a work to be alive, in this setting, entails a careful balance between material arrest and social regeneration. If, when we look at Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, we perceive an unbroken connection with the artist's intention, then the museum's backstage workers have succeeded. It is, however, a temporary victory. The task of making "things" into "art objects" is unending. It is expensive. It is greedy. It neglects inferior works to make superstars of a small subset. For this reason, Domínguez Rubio argues, the art museum is not just a place to kill time or admire beauty. It is a "machine" [10], and the MoMA machine is one of the best in the business.

With an annual operating budget of \$267 million and approximately 2.5 million visitors per year, MoMA is a cultural powerhouse. It owns 200,000 artworks, including 1,200 by Picasso alone, as well as the entire Andy Warhol Archive. It has propelled artists to fame, and can make or break the careers of curators, architects, and critics. Its power shapes and is shaped by the *modern aesthetic regime*, a defining feature of which is an "extremely narrow 'regime of objecthood'"—or definition of what qualifies as an art object [44]. A frequent complaint about contemporary art is the loosening of material and aesthetic parameters that once governed artistic genres. Sculpted butter, piles of hard candy, messy beds, and farm animals suspended in formaldehyde are all, potentially, art. Domínguez Rubio acknowledges the infinite material possibilities, and then makes an important corrective: although almost "any-thing" can be art, not "every-thing" can be an art *object*. To be an art object is to be

legible as “the original, unique, and authentic representation of the artist’s intention” [44]. This type of legibility, in turn, is generated and sustained by practices of artistic care. Creative labor is key. He divides creative labor into two main types, mimeographic and neographic. The former refers to maintenance and repair, and is crucial for stabilizing the categories that organize contemporary art.

Mimeographic labor is normally hidden from the museum visitor, and sociologists of art have largely heeded that opacity by concentrating only on public-facing museal practices. But Domínguez Rubio insists that it is precisely what we need to examine if we are to understand why modern art exists as it does. Observing MoMA’s backstage staff working with each other and the objects in their care, he constructs an “ecological nexus” consisting of the material, atmospheric, semiotic, and imagined conditions in and through which art objects come into existence [8]. His key theoretical move is to link the ecological approach with a “labor of sense” or practical, everyday actions that create categories of meaning. After distancing his analysis from two competing traditions of categorical ontology, the genealogical and the logical, he chooses a pragmatist approach to make his case. As a result, seemingly small tasks or environmental elements take on metaphysical significance [62]. In making specific decisions about what to preserve and how, museum staff consign some objects to futurity and others to obscurity, and hence shape the central categories of the modern artistic imagination.

Conservation staff take center stage in *Still Life*. We learn quickly where they stand in the museum ecology because the boundaries governing their authority are clear: symbolism and meaning are the domain of the curators; material preservation and repair of the conservators [64]. This division of labor can lead to friction. MoMA is an organization of people, after all, and no matter their moral commitment to art and culture, they are also goal-oriented individuals in a hypercompetitive industry. Assistant curators are precariously employed, subsisting on temporary contracts with low odds on promotion to permanent roles. Everybody is jockeying for position: juniors for breakout opportunities, senior curators for exhibition space, conservators for workspace, executives for better compensation, and so forth. For this reason, Domínguez Rubio’s attempt at a “bottom-up” approach to exhibitions at times felt misaligned with the evidence. In the section on traveling exhibitions, he describes the planning stages and the curators’ list of works to be included, including works held by other museums. Domínguez Rubio likens this list to a child’s hoped-for Christmas presents, because few of those works will actually come through [265]. The ultimate decision rests with upper

management and is governed by money and inter-organizational relations, despite what the “bottom” wants to see. His analysis of power and social relations is on sturdier ground with his analogy to the Kula ring [204]. The circuits of debts and obligations through which artworks move beautifully captures the fluidity and recursivity of the museum ecology.

The backstage work is intense and Domínguez Rubio’s subjects are aware of the pressure to get it right. A high percentage of the museum’s acquisitions fail as art objects, through the vicissitudes of taste, public interest, artist reputation, and unruly materials [183]. We hear the cautionary tale of Joseph Beuys’s ill-fated *Felt Suit* (1970), which was poorly conserved while in storage at the Tate Modern and was pronounced “dead” after a moth infestation [44]. Humans are art objects’ saviors, but are also their greatest enemy. A major part of the conservator’s task is to protect the works from *us*. Skin cells, oily fingertips, sweat, respiration, and camera flashes take their toll. The museum needs ticket-paying visitors to fulfill its mission, but the art objects would be better off without us. As a compromise, conservators strive to create an *anaesthetic void*: “a controlled, neutral, and invariant environment designed to suppress, or at least mitigate, any ‘sensual pollution’ that might alter the conditions of perception” [225]. If a particular artwork is too fragile for even this carefully managed environment, conservators will leverage their scientific authority and refuse to allow the curatorial staff to display it. In this ecological nexus, curators’ work is ultimately dependent on conservators’ ability to preserve the art.

Mimeographic labor is a serious undertaking, and it is to Domínguez Rubio’s credit that he also sees its foibles—often to hilarious effect. One of the best moments in the book comes when two MoMA staffers interview the artist James Rosenquist about his intentions with the painting *Marilyn Monroe, I* (1962). The curator and the conservator probe Rosenquist’s memory as to why he made very specific decisions about the work [142–144]. Fifty years have passed, and the artist does his best to answer their questions. Eventually they ask why the artist chose a particular metallic paint to create the skywriting effect in the lower register. He has already answered several questions about the lettering, which incorporates the iconic Coca-Cola script as a bittersweet epitaph to the film star’s suicide. “It’s bright and shiny, or it’s dead. That’s it,” Rosenquist says, apparently tired of the topic. The conservator wants more: “And now can you tell us...”. Rosenquist interjects, “You’re talking too much about it.” The conservator laughs and gamely proceeds but, from here on out, it is clear that the artist and the staffers see things differently. The artist does not attach meaning to the same matters. He chose the metallic paint because it popped; he does not have a theory

about it. He is flippant and irreverent. But the interview is not really about him. It is about the painting. The MoMA professionals are there to extract precise information for the machine that will keep *Marilyn Monroe, I* alive forever.

Does the ecological approach sustain Domínguez Rubio's overall theoretical ambition, which is to show that meaning and imagination are not abstract mental forms imposed by us on the world, but rather ecological forms that are physically composed *in* the world? [259] Throughout the book, he brackets the role of discourse. This holds true even through his thoughtful analysis of "artwords," the artists' own words about their work. For Domínguez Rubio, artwords are "currencies" mined by art world professionals to add to an object's file, like sales receipts and historic auction catalogues [120]. As such, the words are just "representations" of intent but not generative of new meaning. I found myself thinking about where to locate hermeneutic significance in the interplay of discursive forms, from artwords and didactic labels to mission statements and annual reports. This seems especially important after the art world's war of words during summer 2020, as artists held museums to account for decades of anti-Black racism. Museums are under pressure to redefine themselves, and MoMA is attempting to do this under intense scrutiny. Meanwhile, the "mass tourist" is voting with her feet. By ticket sales, MoMA's popularity was eclipsed in 2019 by the Museum of Ice Cream, a multi-sensory "experium" that features a giant pool of sprinkles and the world's largest ice cream sundae. It is the fleeting thrill of pink sprinkles that people want, not entombed sculptures. These and other forces external to the white walls are disrupting the museum ecology in ways that require pragmatism, as well as hermeneutics, to understand.

In the end, these are the sorts of questions that inevitably arise from an innovative and provocative contribution to theories of meaning. By contending with the complex interplay of things and people that generate aesthetic values, Domínguez Rubio has opened a novel line of analysis that pushes us to reconsider long-standing assumptions about ideology as the driver of artistic worth. *Still Life* should leave us unsettled about our attachment to art objects and why we marshal vast resources to care for them. It is in that spirit that Domínguez Rubio's book offers perhaps its most significant achievement—namely, a new understanding of the social conditions of imagination itself.