

What Comes after the Museum? Remembering PMOMA (The Portland Museum of Modern Art)

~~~~ *Libby Werbel*

*Figure 1.*  
Portland Museum  
of Modern Art  
(PMOMA), inside  
Mississippi  
Records, 2013

*Figure 2.*  
Michael Sterling  
performing  
an evening Raga,  
2013



Is it possible to grow your own museum? What would it look like? How would it be different from the museums you have come to know? In 2012, along with a coalition of artists, performers, and world builders, I set out to make my own deconstructed version of what a museum could be, outside of the mess they had become. In the basement of a record store that used to be an auto mechanic shop, I set out to build the Portland Museum of Modern Art.

By claiming that our small basement space was a “MoMA,” we were able to share the power of that name with anyone who joined in on the project. Portland is small enough that people outside of it wouldn’t know that we didn’t have a Museum of Modern Art. Through this intentional satire, both the artist and the audience were bonded in the long con. And because of the name, I would benefit from quicker responses to email requests, artist inquiries, and research projects, while the artists we exhibited would benefit by receiving faster access to their next opportunity—one that might require formal, institutional validation. All of this subverted the very notion of a museum and spoke directly to my general inquiries around authority in the arts.

I also believe that through this title, we conjured some important questions right off the bat. Who gets to determine what a museum is and what it collects? How do museums function within their communities? How have they helped our culture? How have they harmed it? Why have museums become synonymous with wealth, tax evasion, and cultural theft? What are the stories told about the objects and art in museums? Who did the art belong to first, and how did it get there? What gives museums so much power?

How could one circumvent that power—completely?

PMOMA

was a humble little space, positioned inside the basement of Mississippi Records, and underneath the dry storage of the cafe Sweedeede. To build it, I constructed some plywoodbacked walls, installed some cheap track lighting, bought a five-gallon bucket of white paint, and put a hand-painted sign over the entry that read “Museum.” It didn’t really matter what the physical space looked like. What mattered to

me was the ideas it would hold and the artists it would support, the community it would harness, and that it was free and available to all. These were the beginnings of this small intentional community art center—this future-thinking experiment.

One of my early agendas was to level hierarchies around who exhibited in the gallery, and upend any class or social status attached to the art. I would organize exhibitions by internationally acclaimed artists, right after a show of watercolors by neighborhood kids. Visitors wouldn’t know what to expect. They could show up and find a whole



show of original WPA oil paintings from the 1930s, a series of sequined cardboard cutouts of giraffes by a Navajo Nation artist, or cellphone-made self-portrait collages by teenagers from Mali. The surprise was part of it. My goal was to always present something that felt like a deep cultural cut people should know about. I wanted to tune people into different kinds of art and educate them, not by giving them didactics or written information about the importance of the work, but by showing them something so special they felt inspired to learn about it on their own. The shows were all equally important and helped establish the tone and vision of dismantling the hoax of fame.

As a city, Portland has never had a major contemporary art museum, and I could sense how thirsty it was for someone to point to how that affects the culture of a place. I now have to admit a few major blind spots I negotiated at the uptick of my investigation. I hadn't done much research about the fertile history of self-organized or artist-run spaces that had informed Portland's art ecology for many years prior. Looking back now, after learning about the lack of citywide infrastructure to support the arts, I think it was better that I didn't let those other projects inform me. Their findings, successes, and failures might have dissuaded me from trying at all. I instead had looked at models such as: FOOD (Gordon Matta-Clark's 1970s Soho project); Artists Space, operating with an *artist curating artists* model and still thriving in New York; Either/Or Gallery that was based in Seattle; Vox Populi in Philadelphia; and the Wrong Gallery, an infamous, glassed-in door front gallery in Chelsea. These art projects helped guide me in developing the principles of PMOMA, but mostly, I just winged it.



Foundationally, PMOMA started with a basic strategy for each exhibition to be collaborative. My aim was to explore collective ideas of mutual care through the lens of institutionality with different artists I worked with. It was always fun and always exceptionally hard work. Over the course of five years PMOMA saw countless collaborators, but some seminal people remained constant throughout: Eric Issacson of Mississippi Records; artists Chris Johanson, Johanna Jackson, and Vanessa Renwick; performance artist Jibz Cameron (Dynasty Handbag); Eloise Augustine of Sweedeedee; musicians Michael Hurley and Brian Mumford; writers Patrick DeWitt, Jon Raymond, and Lily Hudson; and Christopher Kirkley of Sahel Sounds.

Thinking through diverse representation was a baseline, and remained consistent throughout the programming of PMOMA. We created this project on what was historically a village site for the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, and Chinook tribes, that later became the corner of Sumner and Albina in North Portland. In 1962, the Albina neighborhood housed eighty percent of Portland's Black community, and by 2012, the community had almost entirely been eradicated by gentrification. Because we were located in this historical neighborhood, right next to a high school with the highest ratio of Black and Brown students in Portland, consideration and inclusion of our neighbors, and their interests, was essential to the whole of it. Artists from a multitude of identities and intersectionalities were there with us, inside those walls, helping us envision

*Figure 3.*  
Lonnie Holley and Michael Hurley perform together at the opening of Lonnie Holley's self-titled exhibition, 2014

*Figure 4.*  
Rose Mackey's exhibition, "COSTUME," 2015. Artist-made costumes and performance



Figuring



something different and better together. Unfortunately, because we were in the basement of an old building, we were inaccessible to a whole population of people who could not navigate stairs, so even in its most aspiring moments, PMOMA was never truly able to be open to all. This is a hard and disheartening aspect of navigating the margins of alternative space-making without resources.

Despite our shortcomings, we still aimed for everything that took place at PMOMA to be warm and welcoming. Everyone who exhibited needed to agree with our goals of accessibility, and asking bigger questions, knowing the results would most likely be different than other exhibitions, based on the obvious limitations of size and resources. My collaborators knew that PMOMA was not trying to emulate the very thing it was critiquing. It desperately wanted people's bodies to feel good in the space. We weren't scared to let people know that this place was daring to be sincere, daring to lead with joy—and that too was radical.

Strategies of inclusion, belonging, and ownership, were critical. Through the first year of PMOMA I had friends and family in place at each opening who were tasked with approaching anyone they noticed standing alone, to welcome and party with them. After that first year I didn't have to install these "plants" to help strangers feel good about being there. Everyone was doing that on their own, with each other. Each public event or opening always had a performance, as a way to give people something else to focus on if they needed it. Some openings would have themes and people showing up in costumes. We had a deep well of musical acts to pull from because of our relationship and

*Figure 5.*  
Installation view,  
Chris Johanson,  
"SELF(ISH)  
EXPRESSION(ISM),"  
2014



gamelan band from Indonesia would be offering us a turmeric drink called *jamu*. I would never have thought that one critical key to a better museum would be having really good parties where people felt cared for, but I am certain of it now. Shouldn't our sites of cultural and civic record also celebrate the communities they support?

While juggling the roles of director, curator, financier, janitor, and caterer, PMOMA was also funded almost entirely by my waitressing tips, which would prove itself to be a constant drain on my financial stability. But I believe the economics (or lack thereof) was crucial to its success. I didn't have any money to pay anyone, but luckily, I had an established network of interested builders, makers, and designers. We had people volunteering at all the events, but the support extended so far beyond that. Once, when Dynasty Handbag showed up from out of town to perform with a neck spasm, she had free appointments within minutes to see a chiropractor and a masseuse. Someone even let her take a long soak in their bathtub before the show. This example of mutual aid happened during every exhibit. We all were working to make this thing exist, together. We wanted a museum that took care of us.

As PMOMA kept growing, I started getting requests from new collaborators that were usually reserved for better-resourced galleries and museums. The bar started rising, and while I was honored and wanted to keep up, it started to mean barely making rent each month, and living on fewer dollars each day. It was hard to reconcile my limitations financially with how grand I wanted PMOMA to be. It had to take care of everyone, as that became essential to the experiment, but often this would be at my own expense or detriment. In the end, by wanting PMOMA to be equitable and support artists in all the ways they deserved, I argued myself out of the project. PMOMA was "paused" in the fall of 2017. The physical space went away without any fanfare or announcement, but my research in alternative museum models continued and I began working on a larger public scale.

In the summer of 2016, I created a giant outdoor Portland Museum of Modern Art installation in Pioneer Courthouse Square. Working through some of the same questions around access, PMOMA brought its feral and audacious spirit to the city center and hosted free performances, interventions, and artworks for thousands and thousands of people. I went on to collaborate with the actual Portland Art Museum (PAM) to expand on my interest in institutional critique. This resulted in a full year of exhibitions and performances entitled *We.Construct. Marvels.Between.Monuments*. This



Figuring

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expansive project furthered my own research into the infrastructure, history, and mechanisms of museums, and propelled me in my own quest to discern whether or not there really is a place for museums in a radical, abolitionist future. Ultimately, I decided...not in their current state.

When I started PMOMA, it was out of a direct need to bring my own questions to action and make sense of a world I didn't particularly agree with. I learned that a museum doesn't have to be monumental or grand. It can be small, and exceptionally scrappy, and still create immeasurable change. It can be anything you want it to be. It doesn't need a collection or a board of trustees. It doesn't need deep pockets or docents. It should look like the thing that comes after the museum. We don't need anyone's permission to grow our own version of what comes next. And we definitely should.

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*Figure 7.*  
Lonnie Holley  
installing work,  
2014

*Figure 8.*  
Hand drawn logo  
by Eric Isaacson  
of Mississippi  
Records, 2012