

Artist-Curators and Art Historian-Curators at the Edge:  
How the “Modern West” Revealed Boundaries of Curatorial Practice

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This paper takes as its starting point two related projects: *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890-1950* (October 2006-June 2007) and “Two Edges” (April 12, 2007). *The Modern West* was a major exhibition curated for Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) by Emily Ballew Neff, Curator, American Painting and Sculpture, and it traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).<sup>1</sup> “Two Edges” was a virtual exhibition (never mounted) curated by artist Diana Thater for her participation, with LACMA Director Michael Govan, in the museum’s “Conversations with the Director” series, part of the suite of free public programming associated with the presentation of *The Modern West* at LACMA. Thater’s alternative “modern west” exhibition, created using “Virtual Gallerie” software and PowerPoint and presented digitally in a verbal “walk through,” was fully realized conceptually and functioned as a critique of Neff’s *The Modern West*, which she believed perpetuated and celebrated the mythology of the American West.

Austen Barron Bailly, author of this paper, coordinated and installed *The Modern West* in Los Angeles and attended Thater’s presentation. As coordinating curator, I was responsible not only for deciding how to install the exhibition for LACMA but also for working with the museum’s Education Department to help develop all public programming for the exhibition—with one notable exception: Thater and Govan’s presentation. I was not involved, nor was I expected to be, in preparations for the

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I would like to thank Rita Gonzalez, Assistant Curator, LACMA, for encouraging me to write this paper. Our conversations shaped my thinking and her critical feedback on an early draft helped me articulate the

Director's program. Neither Neff nor I were aware in advance of Thater's "Two Edges" exhibition, the presentation of which departed from the general content promoted for the evening's presentation.<sup>2</sup> From my curatorial perspective in the audience for Thater and Govan's discussion, I was something of third party observer to both projects, and I was struck by rhetorical force of Thater's vigorous critique.<sup>3</sup> I detected, given the privileged position of a well-known contemporary artist presenting her views and ideas in conversation with a famous museum director, a potential disconnect between artists, art historians, and the curatorial methods exemplified by these two projects. That disconnect inspired this paper.

Thater's title, "Two Edges," referred to the meeting—indeed collision—of reality and myth, also articulated by Thater as the "didactic" and the "beautiful," that occurs in the American West. To Thater, *The Modern West* failed to deal adequately with either. Neff's *The Modern West* and Thater's "Two Edges" were inevitably at cross purposes, ideologically and art historically. Nevertheless, their exhibitions complemented each other in significant, even troubling ways. Considered together, their differing approaches can enlarge our understanding of the West, its histories and its art histories, its myths and realities, as well as curatorial practice. Considered independently, important histories and perspectives from both sides can be lost.

Consequently, from a museological perspective, I will argue that the "two edges" posited by Thater are equally the meeting, or collision, of the virtual exhibition and the

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issues discussed. Veronica Roberts, Curatorial Assistant, Museum of Modern Art, New York, informed my discussion of artist-curated museum exhibitions. The frank comments and pointed suggestions I received from blind reviewers for *Invisible Culture* were invaluable. I am indebted to Michael Govan, Director, LACMA, whose initiatives have sparked all these discussions and therefore inspired this paper. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Emily Ballew Neff and Diana Thater, not simply for their support of my paper, but, more importantly, for their original and provocative work.

museum exhibition—the critique and art history; the artist and the curator—in the museum. While on some levels it is unfair to compare Thater’s virtual critique presented in an evening’s conversation with Neff’s multi-year exhibition and scholarly catalogue,<sup>4</sup> I was nonetheless compelled to use *The Modern West* and “Two Edges” as a comparative case study to explore the museological edge between artists and art historians, myth and reality, and the “didactic” and the “beautiful,” in order to address its implications for curatorial practice in art museums.

The exhibition *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890-1950* set out to challenge the common perception that the idea “modern west” is an oxymoron. To confront longstanding aesthetic, art historical and cultural biases about “Western art” and “modern art,” *The Modern West*, in the words of Neff, “takes visitors on an epic journey through the American West that touches on the subjects of history, time, geography, geology, and ethnography. Through 110 paintings, photographs, watercolors, and pastels by artists from Frederic Remington to Jackson Pollock, *The Modern West* explores the definitive impact of the western landscape on modern art in America, a story that has never been told in a major museum exhibition before.”<sup>5</sup>

Within the bounds of standard curatorial practice at major fine art museums such as the MFAH or LACMA, *The Modern West* departed from traditional exhibitions organized by “painting and sculpture” curators in several important ways. First, the ideas developed out of a desire to approach modern American artistic responses to the West from an interdisciplinary perspective, one rooted as much in American studies as in American art history. Second, photographs comprised nearly half the exhibition. Third, the exhibition included works by abstract expressionists, which, though mid-twentieth-

century American paintings, typically have been the preserve of “modern and contemporary art” departments at major museums. Fourth, modern paintings by Native American artists—widely overlooked as both modern and American in traditional conceptions of American art history—were included.<sup>6</sup> Neff sought to expand a canonical vision of American modernism by establishing a more inclusive and longer trajectory for images of the western landscape in American art. This broader conception of the modern West proposed that images of the western landscape in the United States are inevitably informed by an artistic, cultural, and indeed national relationship to Native Americans, and that they can include the drip paintings of Pollock, an artist born and raised in the West and profoundly influenced by Navajo sand painters.<sup>7</sup>

Neff developed an important revisionist narrative, which was commended critically, about modern art and the American West through which audiences might come to understand these histories anew.<sup>8</sup> These revisionist methods may not be radical, but they did ignore long-established boundaries between art historical fields and curatorial departments, divisions still very much intact in American museums.<sup>9</sup> *The Modern West* boldly took on two of the most contentious subjects in art and history—modernism and the American West—to assert that “place matters.”<sup>10</sup> Where artists are from, and how that experience relates (or not) to where, what, and how they are painting, are some of the notions of place that underscored the “geography of art history” *The Modern West* endeavored to map.<sup>11</sup>

The imperative that “place matters” meant something altogether different, however, to Thater. Her virtual exhibition functioned not only as a critique of *The Modern West* but also as a critique of its assumptions about place—both the place of the

West and the place of the museum.<sup>12</sup> Yet Thater is not an artist who practices institutional critique in the tradition of Michael Asher, Andrea Fraser, Hans Haacke, or Fred Wilson. A video artist and critic, her installations thematically “focus on relationships among animals, human beings, and technology and the near-impossibility of experiencing nature outside the influences of culture.”<sup>13</sup>

Relevant to these themes was Thater’s title for her virtual exhibition, “Two Edges.” One edge, the historical reality of the American West, constitutes at its most fundamental level the near destruction of American Indian populations through disease, war, and dislocation. It is also the historical and ongoing ecological damage imposed on western land and life, from nearly wiping out the buffalo to the rapacious treatment of the West’s natural resources. The other edge, the myth, is understood to lie in the aesthetic realm of images celebrating, marveling, and reveling in its history, land and lore.

Thater deemed all the art included in *The Modern West* in this mythic category. She believed that these works of art, presented as important aesthetic objects to be celebrated within the revered and privileged setting of the museum gallery, effectively hid the “reality” of the West from viewers. Rather than considering objects in *The Modern West* individually and the ways in which they had been selected to trouble standard celebratory narratives, indeed myths, about the West and about American art and modernism, Thater judged that Neff’s entire exhibition perpetuated the loss and invisibility of the West’s tragic histories. In their discussion, Thater and Govan evinced that in a postmodern world we are always aware, and must be aware, of both the reality and the myth, noting that artists and curators have to deal with what functions as the artistic parallel to reality and myth: the “didactic” and the “beautiful.”<sup>14</sup> Thater had taken

the discussion further, developing these ideas through her virtual interpretation of the “modern west,” to express her view that Neff’s “modern west” dangerously promoted the myth (of the “beautiful”) without the reality, which is also to say, without critique.

The title “Two Edges” was taken from the title of Barnett Newman’s painting *Two Edges* (1948; Museum of Modern Art, New York) and inspired by Bruce Nauman’s *Setting a Good Corner (Allegory and Metaphor)* (1999), the video chosen to open Thater’s virtual exhibition for its simultaneously “didactic” and “beautiful” qualities and because it is set in the West.<sup>15</sup> In *Setting a Good Corner* Nauman records himself on his own New Mexico ranch performing the necessary task of “building a corner to stretch a fence and hang a gate.”<sup>16</sup> We watch Nauman repetitively setting the two edges of the corner in a scenic Southwest landscape until he is finished and has made, in his words, “a beautiful structure.” Evocative of romantic myths of cowboy culture and the western landscape, but grounded in the reality of ranch life, and in the making of art, *Setting a Good Corner* introduced the ways in which contemporary artists can deal with the “didactic” and the “beautiful” at the same time in their work. Like Nauman, Thater aims for this “beautiful” melding of myth and reality in her own art. By extension, as a critic and an artist-curator, she expects that museums achieve this balance as well. “Two Edges” proposed three ways to balance the modern and the West, and the “didactic” and the “beautiful,” in three linked galleries. (Figs. 1a, 1b)

The first virtual gallery included a very dense, salon-style installation of historical photographs covering all three available walls. (Fig. 2) Windows comprised the whole fourth wall of each room. Photographs of American Indians, including famous portraits by photographer Edward Curtis, were juxtaposed with photographs of their murderers,

such as General Custer, and other real wild west figures like Kit Carson; a photograph of lone buffalo roaming was next to a photograph of a man standing on top of a heap of 40,000 buffalo carcasses; photographs of Indians in traditional garb were adjacent to photographs of assimilated Indians in boarding school uniforms; Geronimo's portrait was next to a Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show poster, and so on. Clearly intended as the "didactic" gallery, these walls of images were deployed to explode the myths of the "noble savage" or the "heroic" endeavors of Americans during the era of westward expansion, reminding us of the almost unfathomable human and natural costs of the nation's Manifest Destiny policies and their legacies. But the underlying conception for this gallery established a troubling parallel: ethnography and history, the Indians, and their fate, were presented as the "other" to the beautiful, expressed in the next virtual gallery as a kind of modernist sublime.<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 3)

With the reality of the West in mind, the visitor would then encounter Albert Bierstadt's six-foot-high and ten-foot-long *Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (1863; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) facing Barnett Newman's nine-foot-high and twenty-foot-long canvas, his largest, *Anna's Light* (1968; Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Sakura, Japan).<sup>18</sup> (Figs. 4, 5) The Bierstadt represents the ultimate myth of the West, which is bound up in highly romanticized, nineteenth-century European modes for painting landscapes—modes that, Neff demonstrated, artists represented in *The Modern West* deliberately began to abandon in the early twentieth century: in a misty background majestic mountains that look more like the Alps than the Rockies; a grand waterfall flowing into a serene lake in the middle ground; and a peaceful scene of an Indian encampment complete with horses, blankets, and even a cow's skull in the foreground.

Newman eviscerated such conventions with paintings such as *Anna's Light* by engulfing the viewer in an intense length of red arrested on either end by two vertical white strips. In the context of Thater's virtual exhibition, Newman's sublime is meant to evoke all the expansiveness, grandeur, and space of the West, even the underlying horrors of its histories, but solely through a vast red field. In addition, each window wall in the virtual exhibition was designed to be twenty feet wide, based on the width of the Newman painting. The immense scale of *Anna's Light* thus provided a symbolic and physical touchstone for the structure of the exhibition spaces.

The powerful dominance of the red and its physically overwhelming presence in relation to the Bierstadt set up the final virtual gallery featuring Thater's own *Abyss of Light* (1993), a three-part video installation that literally and figuratively evoked the West and its sublime. (Fig. 6a) Thater disrupts and confronts our utterly mediated perception and experience of nature and the West by flooding spaces with color, transforming the gallery into a kind of landscape. And she filmed, for instance, the iconic, "beautiful" vista of Monument Valley, Utah, from the "didactic" vantage of the actual signpost "John Ford Point," posted there because so many scenes in famous westerns were framed and filmed by the film director Ford from that spot.<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 6b)

For her part, Neff knew that the modern paintings and photographs to be presented in the museum focused more on objects that "beautifully" conveyed the aesthetic and formal aspects of western land and life; the art history, rather than the history. Like most museum exhibitions of historical art, *The Modern West* necessarily privileged the "beautiful"—the assumed beauty of the western landscape, the assumed beauty of the art chosen using skills of connoisseurship and art historical expertise, and



the assumed beauty of the museum galleries into which this worthy art is expected to be carefully installed and spotlighted according to both formalist and aesthetic conventions of museums and their audiences. Most museum curators, including myself, operate under the assumption that historical art and the “beautiful” can be, but are not exclusively, “myth.” To avoid folding the “didactic” (the critique), overtly into exhibition installations in the dramatic ways Thater marshaled in “Two Edges” in an attempt to expose historical trauma and to address “reality,” art historian-curators generally attempt to allow individual objects to express such trauma.

For example, Neff included a section of Depression era paintings and photographs, works that portrayed the catastrophic social and ecological effects of the Dust Bowl years. Two of these were major essays, arguably “beautifully” executed, by a now lesser-known painter from Texas, Alexandre Hogue: *Mother Earth Laid Bare* (1938; The Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma), an “anthropomorphized landscape” with its symbolic “phallic” plow now lying fallow, and *The Crucified Land* (1939; Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma), unflinchingly showing “a desolate and dying Texas landscape” in vivid color.<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 7) Both paintings literally and figuratively represented the “terrifying beauty” of the rape of the land and its erosion respectively.<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 8) These very paintings by Hogue, which Neff states demonstrated in the 1930s a “radicalism...which exposed the myth of the American landscape,” ironically are ridiculed today precisely for their “didactic” quality by such critics as the *Los Angeles Times*’s Christopher Knight, who reviewed *The Modern West* in L.A.

Knight’s assessment of Hogue’s and other narrative American paintings on view revealed his bias against such literal and metaphorical means of expression and his

preference for traditional art historical exhibition modes, writing that “what [they tell] us is that the exhibition is focused more closely on subject matter than on art's qualities as a material object. That's a mistake.”<sup>22</sup> Neff’s inclusion of such aesthetically controversial objects, meaning that they represented subject matter conveying historical trauma (the “didactic”) and that they were included as “beautiful,” though they had not yet come undisputedly to meet such aesthetic standards already established by more canonical artists, could have been seen as a manifestation of the West’s “two edges” and an implicit critique of the celebratory narratives and standards Thater was also trying to disrupt.<sup>23</sup>

Neff used other explicit strategies for dealing with the “reality” that traditional physical and aesthetic frameworks and expectations of art historical exhibitions cannot, or will not, wholly encompass. First, Barry Lopez, a National Book Award-winning author widely considered to be the nation’s preeminent writer on the American landscape, accepted Neff’s invitation to contribute the lead essay to the catalogue.<sup>24</sup> Lopez probed the West as a physical place in American cultural and historical experience and as a space in our imaginations as Americans. In confronting the fact that there are so many lost histories in the West, Lopez provocatively related his ideas to the exhibition by suggesting that artists traditionally have used the West solely as an imaginative catalyst for their art, effectively disregarding its past and its people. However, Lopez’s critical perspective was not incorporated into the exhibition display or text materials at MFAH or LACMA.<sup>25</sup>

Instead, Lopez, art historian Janet Berlo, who specializes in indigenous arts of the Americas, and others, presented papers in the symposium Neff organized for MFAH, *On Modern Ground: The America Western Landscape in Painting and Photography, 1890-*

1950. The papers given offered a broader range of perspectives on the larger issues and critical ideas suggested by *The Modern West*. In similar fashion, in addition to the Thater and Govan program presented, LACMA had organized *Re-SITE-ing the West: Contemporary Photographs from the Permanent Collection* to be on view simultaneously to *The Modern West*. *Re-SITE-ing the West* represented a kind of contemporary corrective to the historical images presented in Neff's exhibition and displayed photographs that confronted the West "with imposed illusions, allusions, and romantic pretensions laid to rest."<sup>26</sup> Both institutions offered programming developed to expand the scope of the museum exhibition.<sup>27</sup>

Second, throughout her catalogue, Neff wove extensively researched information about modern Euro-American artists' interest in Native American art and culture. Her text thoroughly discussed modern American Indian watercolors in particular, a twentieth century practice in its own right, even though the western conception of landscape is not a tradition in Native American art.<sup>28</sup> Third, six aesthetically and thematically relevant works on paper by American Indian artists were included in the exhibition, two from the 1870s and four from the 1920s and 1930s, as well as a portfolio of prints made in 1943 representing a Navajo war ceremonial sand painting.<sup>29</sup> The four modern watercolors were presented in counterpoint to the canonical modern artists on view in the "Southwest" section of the exhibition, such as Ansel Adams, Stuart Davis, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Paul Strand. Their display demonstrated the challenge works by modern Native artists posed to constructions of American art history and its presentation, methodologically, and museologically.

In the installation at MFAH, Neff interspersed the Native American watercolors within a display of fifteen works on paper installed densely on one wall, not wholly unlike Thater's dense installation of photographs in her first virtual gallery. (Fig. 9) The stylized arrangement was anchored on either end with watercolors by Native artists: Julian Martinez's *Conventionalized Design of Symbols (Sacred Avanyu)* (1930-40; MFAH) and Pylen Hanaweaka's *Zuni Altar with Ceremonial Bowls* (1920-30; MFAH). The other two works by Native artists, Alfonso (Awa Tsireh) Roybal's *Mountain Sheep* (1922; MFAH) and Riley (Quoyavema) Sunrise's *God of Germination* (1930s; MFAH), were integrated into the display featuring watercolors by Marin and photographs by Strand and Adams. Though Adams' renowned photograph, *Moonrise over Hernandez, New Mexico* (1941; MFAH), occupied the pinnacle in this grouping, the layout was meant to demonstrate equivalence between these Native artists and these iconic modernists as much as show how these artists from differing traditions actually borrowed from each other.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, for LACMA's installation, I tried to highlight the few modern American Indian works more emphatically. In the MFAH installation I found they appeared visually marginalized, subsumed as they were into a modernist pattern, albeit a striking one, on the gallery wall. For our iteration of the "Southwest" gallery, a vista wall was physically built out from the wall behind and painted a contrasting color to set off these works with explanatory labels. (Fig. 10) This placement still allowed for comparisons with formally similar works hung nearby such as a Marin, or Raymond Jonson's *Cliff Dwellings, No. 3* (1927), the cover image for the catalogue. (Fig. 11) But it also offered an opportunity to consider all these works independently, as works by nearly

all the other artists in the exhibition were displayed throughout the Houston and Los Angeles installations.<sup>31</sup> (Fig. 12) Additionally, I added an explanatory panel, using Neff's text pulled directly from her catalogue, about American Indian watercolor painting in an effort to clarify, in the gallery space, the presence of these works in the exhibition. Otherwise, I was concerned their significance as modern American art and artists in their own right might be overlooked by those visitors who would never read the catalogue.

As the above described strategies exemplify, a variety of scholarly and curatorial methods were employed to deal with the critical and complex issues raised by the conceptions of the "modern" and the "West" and the role and experiences of Native Americans and Native American artists in those narratives: critical essays; object selection that challenged a traditional modernist canon as well as expressed historical trauma, rather than functioned as it; public lectures and complementary exhibitions; as well as specific installation strategies, from explanatory material to object placement.

Thater included no art by Native Americans, only images of them, sidestepping questions about this absence by arguing that American Indian works were apart from the "work" of her "Two Edges" critique. Govan attempted to describe this lacuna from the standpoint of Thater's virtual exhibition as institutional critique. Thater has paraphrased: "He said that the virtual show was really dealing with the position of art museums positing the world from an intrinsically "Western" perspective (since the museum and art history are both Western inventions) and that those works in my show would be in some way ignoring the barriers between the two ways of seeing and reasoning art." Indeed, Thater's view remained that in the context of "Western" art museums (meaning the western hemisphere, not the western United States) the strategies employed by MFAH

and LACMA—for proposing points of connection between these different perspectives, understood here as “Native American” and “American,” or for proposing to ignore existing barriers or gaps—come up utterly short. In Thater’s words, showing her original emphasis, “*The virtual show was about seeing that gap and knowing it cannot be closed.*” Knowing this should not preclude doing the exhibition [*The Modern West*] but should be used to complicate it.”<sup>32</sup>

Such ideological perspectives have made many averse to the framework of such (institutional) critique. Yet critique is now central to contemporary discourse, especially art historical and artistic discourse, even though it has its own problems, demonstrated by Thater’s conception of the “didactic” with regard to historical photographs. Moreover, institutional critique presented by artists is privileged and can have the numbing effect of being a final word, the only point of entry—inviolably the artist’s territory. Where does this leave the critically aware or revisionist art historian-curator?<sup>33</sup>

Ironically, Neff’s inviting Lopez, a writer outside the field, to provide the “reality check” to the art historical aims of the exhibition paralleled Govan’s inviting Thater to develop her alternative exhibition as its own check to Neff’s. These strategies for dealing with historical reality raise challenging questions about how museums can ever successfully deal with critique: is it more misleading to relegate actual historical critique to public programming or an exhibition catalogue? Or, is using photographs of Native Americans to express historical trauma and critique museum practice using images in a visually “didactic” section, as Thater proposed, far more problematic? Thater’s virtual installation challenged the dominant exhibition-catalogue model, but did her means compromise her ends? Do dense patterned installations inevitably create a “didactic”

effect, whether thematic or artistic? Such questions demonstrate that existing curatorial methods on the part of both artists and art historians for art selection and presentation can be at odds with exhibiting a revisionist or historiographic approach.

Art historian-curators in museums do attend to the realities behind the mythologies, but, as discussed and cited above, they do so in the realm of a catalogue, explanatory wall labels and text panels, installation strategies, public programs, lectures, a film series—even complementary exhibitions such as *Re-SITE-ing the West*, mentioned earlier. But are these varied efforts to present the complexities of issues at hand moot because they are not presented as art in the primary physical exhibition space, as Thater proposed?<sup>34</sup> Must the “didactic,” the “reality,” visually be in and of the exhibition for a viewer to understand the inherent lie in the aesthetic?

Where does critique fit in when the very mythology of the West *was* the reality for modern American artists? If they didn’t think or care or even conceive of the reality that the “country was built on genocide,” in Thater’s words, when they saw modernist form and artistic potential in the geography of the West then, from traditional art historical perspectives, it would be ahistorical to portray it otherwise in the gallery. And some artists in the exhibition dealt explicitly with reality. Many modern American artists tackled the travesty of the Dustbowl, as mentioned earlier, but profound critical distaste for narrative American paintings such as Hogue’s—Knight harshly described these paintings in his review as “mediocre” and “wince-inducing”—revealed a position of disinterest in what an exhibition like *The Modern West* was trying to do in the first place. The validity of critique should be considered compromised when critics essentially pre-judge an exhibition and its art. Thater’s more engaged and more meaningful public

critique is another example of the challenge facing art historian-curators who provocatively aim to enlarge the field of vision about a modern, as opposed to postmodern, historical topic. How deep can—should—the art historian-curator go into a historical image? Are the “didactic” versus the “beautiful” irreconcilable in presenting how historical art objects came to be? While this question is largely rhetorical, one can approach it from another angle, that of media. The inclusion of photography in *The Modern West* played a very important role in the exhibition and in influencing the range of reactions to the historical paintings on view.

In the traditional hierarchy between media, one that is played out with special force in museums, paintings reign supreme. As mentioned earlier, half of the works in *The Modern West* were photographs. Their presence represented a targeted effort to level the playing field between these media by looking at modern American art from broader artistic and art historical perspectives. However, concerned that the photographs would appear as illustrations of the paintings, appear decorative, or suffer from too much exposure to light if adjacent to paintings, Neff segregated the photographs onto separate walls from the paintings. Was this division an attempt to protect the black and white images from not measuring up to the painted canvases, literally and figuratively? Despite the resulting opportunity to look at groups of photographs alone and these legitimate installation concerns, Neff unwittingly may have revealed a dominant and lingering curatorial and museological bias toward paintings as the most important objects in art history and the museum. (See Fig. 12) Though Thater did not see the installation at Houston, the revered importance of paintings to museums and to an exhibition like *The Modern West* perpetuates traditional views about art historical hierarchies and is



anathema to, indeed fuels the critique by, postmodern (video) artists and critics like Thater.

In an attempt to strengthen the position of photographs in the exhibition, I decided to fully integrate them with the paintings for LACMA's installation. (See Figs. 8; 10a) These adjacencies were intended to reveal more directly the comparisons Neff wanted to make: the strikingly similar or radically different artistic results imagined by different artists—often in front of the same landscapes or grappling with the same set of modernist formal concerns—working with a camera or a brush, black and white or color. As I had done for the labels to explain the Native American works in the galleries, I retrieved text from Neff's catalogue. In this instance, I selected text for the explanatory panel that critically addressed the implications of carefully composed, aestheticized “documentary” photographs included in the exhibition, such as those by Dorothea Lange, to cite a prime example.

By interspersing photographs with paintings in LACMA's installation of *The Modern West*, I also tried to acknowledge the “myth” that painting is the uncontested highest art form and address the “reality” that we live in a visual era that challenges the relevance of historical painting. As a curator in a department of painting and sculpture who holds a minor field specialization in histories and theories of photography, I did so deliberately, even though I am vested (even implicated) in rising to the challenges photography and new media pose to museum structures, display strategies, art history, and painting traditions. The integration of the photographs with paintings may have promoted an interest in the modernist photographs, an interest that contributed to the perception that, by comparison, many of the paintings in the exhibition were weak

examples of American modernism.<sup>35</sup> However, by challenging the “myth” of the traditional hierarchy between media in this way, did I exhibit a similar kind of critical awareness as the artist-curator? If so, why couldn’t such installation strategies, which include presenting more critical explanatory material in the galleries and, more broadly, the revisionist strategies employed by Neff, register as forms of “critique” that may be practiced by the art historian-curator?

Art historian-curators have long been expected to demonstrate a scholarly and formalist responsibility to, even reverence for, the art they research and interpret, particularly historical art. This “old fashioned” idea of curating has tended to limit the ways in which curators can “speak” for art objects in critical ways and has encouraged them to deflect critical approaches to spaces outside the museum gallery installations, or to other voices and perspectives entirely. Museums now know they have to contend with the “reality” of institutional critique as do many of its traditionally trained curators. Yet more and more museums are turning exclusively to, indeed relying on, artists to come at permanent collection or special exhibition displays from critical or unexpected perspectives.<sup>36</sup>

Artists are not considered bound to the history and the art history of art objects in the same manner as art historians. As art makers, artists have a freedom to confront historical art more freely on visual or thematic terms, which can mean ahistorically, and they are allowed, indeed encouraged, to realize approaches to the multiple histories of objects in real or virtual exhibitions, as Thater boldly did, as well as in the museum galleries. However, if the awareness of the “myth” of museums is understood by the institutions, and increasingly by its art historian-curators, is it necessary to relegate to the

artist the sole efforts to grapple with these factors and thus to shield the art historian from taking on such curatorial challenges for the museum?

The artist's creative license to intervene in traditional museum settings is generally privileged over the art historian's, especially as artists appear to have moved from the more polemical institutional critique epitomized by the groundbreaking work of James Luna's performance art, including *Artifact Piece* (1985-87), or Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* exhibition at the Baltimore Historical Society (1992).<sup>37</sup> Recent artist-curated exhibitions actually reveal a shift toward a more traditionally art historical and curatorial engagement with the works being selected by artists for special exhibitions. For example, Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum and American artist Kara Walker at The Metropolitan Museum of Art recently developed exhibitions using objects from these museums' permanent collections rarely, if ever, seen together. *Yinka Shonibare Selects: Works from the Permanent Collection: Modes of Transportation* (2005-2006) and *Kara Walker at the Met: After the Deluge* (2006) both offered fresh visual and contextual perspectives through provocative, small scale exhibitions without actively or intentionally critiquing the museum.

Each artist developed an exhibition around a theme relevant to contemporary and historical experience and their own interests as artists. Shonibare "mined the Cooper-Hewitt's collections to create an installation that addresses themes of transportation, imperialism, tourism, and cultural exchange" and produced new sculptures representing the Hewitt sisters, which towered and journeyed metaphorically over the gallery space installed with a diverse selection of objects the sisters had collected.<sup>38</sup> Walker's *After the Deluge* was organized for the Met in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and she "selected a

variety of objects from the Museum's collection that she juxtaposes with her own work in order to explore the banality of everyday life, water, and its impact."<sup>39</sup> These exhibitions, both of which I saw, were focused, dynamic, and engaging. They featured little-known objects as well as museum masterpieces. Art historically speaking, these juxtapositions could easily be deemed unrelated, since the objects on view were made in different times, places, and cultures. Consequently, they would have been pulled from multiple departments overseen by different art historian-curators in each museum. These installations, which included examples of the artists' own works, evoked new meanings and understandings of the historical objects in unexpected relation to each other, and to the curating artists' practice, in the context of the larger organizing theme selected by the artist. And these exhibitions were well received critically.<sup>40</sup> Such successes, internal and external to the museum, continue to inspire museum directors to turn to artists to break the mold of traditional exhibition presentations mounted by art historian-curators.<sup>41</sup>

For example, in 2006 Govan asked artist John Baldessari to create a surreal setting for LACMA's *The Treachery of Images: Magritte and Contemporary Art*.<sup>42</sup> Baldessari created a total environment: custom woven carpeting of blue sky and fluffy white clouds completely blanketed the floor and a vinyl, repeating image of a freeway interchange adhered over the entire ceiling became the "sky;" a view through a window to L.A.'s Wilshire Boulevard was seen through a New York city skyline scrim. While he did not curate or critique the exhibition, Baldessari's playful and thematically relevant gallery design unsettled expectations and accessibly engaged audiences.<sup>43</sup> (Fig. 13) Baldessari created a popular model for artistic intervention at LACMA that likely will be followed in future exhibitions and installations.<sup>44</sup>

Govan recently stated for the *Los Angeles Times*, “Artists have an incredible talent to help you work through the issues. In other times and places, if you were going to build anything, if you were the pope or a politician or a private person, you would always engage artists in the process and the thinking. One of the things I’m trying to bring to [LACMA] is that involvement with artists.”<sup>45</sup> Even if it challenges the relevance of the traditional art historian-curator, artists’ participation in museum practice represents an important development for artists, professionally speaking, and in the evolution of museums, which have long been criticized for not reaching out enough to living artists. Artists absolutely have an invaluable and often unique ability to encourage and inspire museum staff and visitors to see anew and to think about the past and the present more creatively and critically.<sup>46</sup> Museums must continue to pursue these directions; the exhibitions curated by Shonibare, Walker—and virtually by Thater—among others, certainly have demonstrated that to me.

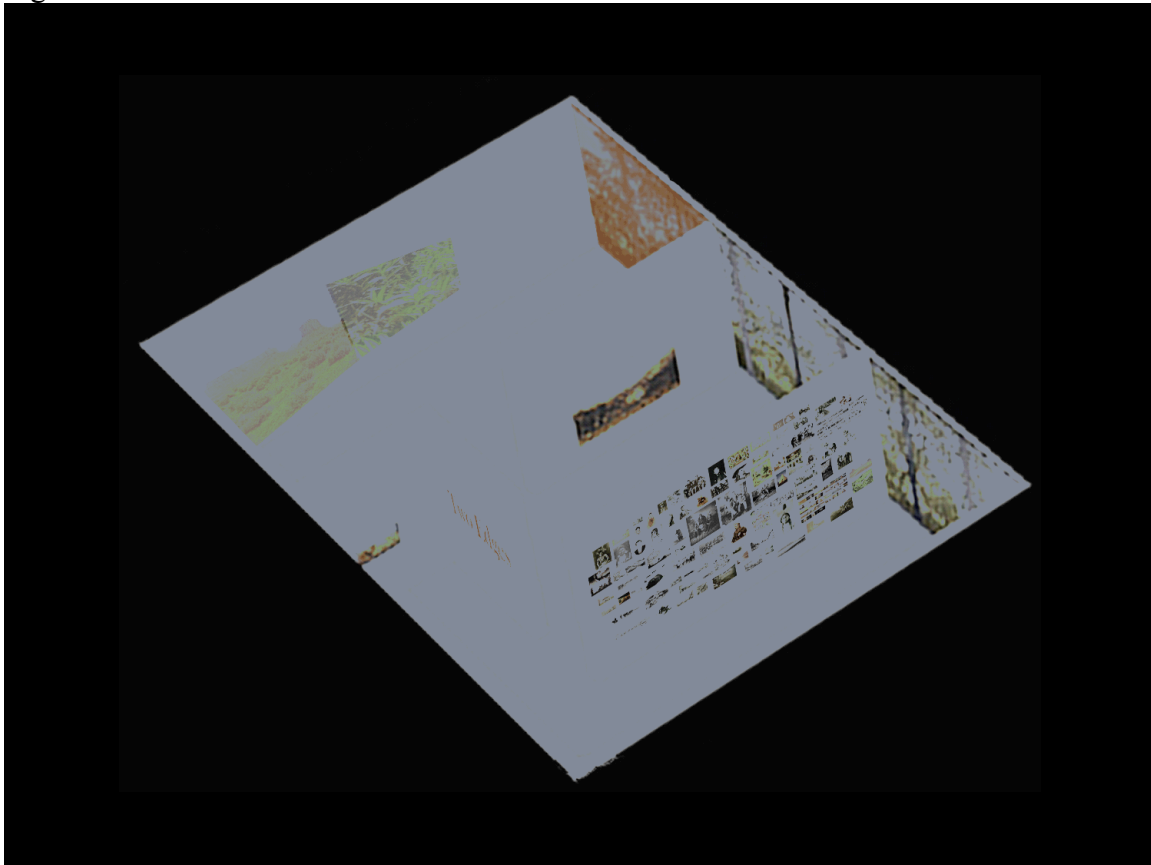
However, the view that artist-curators are not bound to the art historical traditions of the scholar allows museums to use artists somewhat single-mindedly as experimenters and confronters, particularly in an effort to view historical art through the lens of postmodern views of art-making and of history in the museum gallery spaces. Artists can visually probe the trajectory of historical images within artistic practice and imagination in ways that art historians can academically and methodologically. Are these sets of skills and approaches mutually exclusive when extended to curatorial practice in the museum? Indeed they may be, given the multitude of approaches—catalogues, wall labels and text panels, installation techniques, interviews, website features, public programs, lectures, films, performances, complementary exhibitions—developed to enrich visitors’

experience critically and educationally beyond what the museum gallery installation can provide.

Thater's "Two Edges" virtual exhibition and her critique as presented in discussion with Govan exemplify the importance of such experiences as well as demonstrate how such programmatic strategies protect the status quo of the art historian-curator and the museum. As Neff and I tried to demonstrate in different ways with regard to American Indian watercolors and to the photographs in *The Modern West*, art historian-curators can try to use traditional and revisionist curatorial methods to meet expectations for the "beautiful" and to challenge art historical and museological frameworks. However, the tendency is to disregard rather than develop these methods for art historian-curators as a form of critique. Ultimately, by not actively involving art historian-curators collaboratively in artists' activities and conversations in museums, by not engaging artists as well as art historians "in the process and the thinking," by deploying the critical energy generated by an art historian's exhibition exclusively to places and forums outside the galleries, or by privileging the artistic over the art historical—or vice versa—museums risk creating academic foils to artistic alternatives.

# Illustrations

Fig. 1a



©Diana Thater. Image courtesy of Diana Thater.

Overhead view of the layout of Thater's "Two Edges" virtual exhibition. The point of entry appears at center left in the PowerPoint slide showing the title wall and to the left, a monitor playing Bruce Nauman's *Setting a Good Corner*.

Fig. 1b



©Diana Thater. Image courtesy of Diana Thater.

Viewer's perspective at beginning of "Two Edges." The edge of the monumental Barnett Newman painting is visible and visually adjacent to the first gallery of historical photographs. The viewer could proceed into either gallery and easily go back and forth in between the two. He or she likely would proceed towards the photographs first because of its dramatic display and the larger opening into that space.



Fig. 2



©Diana Thater. Image courtesy of Diana Thater.

Detail of first “didactic” gallery in “Two Edges” featuring historical photographs documenting the “reality” of the American West. Note that the images in this slide are repeated on wall at right solely for the purposes of the PowerPoint presentation, but the artist’s intention was to replicate the style of the display on each wall using different groups of photographs, arguably to overwhelm the viewer with this intense display, both in terms of presentation and content.

Fig. 3



©Diana Thater. Image courtesy of Diana Thater.

View of the gallery juxtaposing Albert Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (at left) with Barnett Newman's *Anna's Light*, 1968.

Fig. 4

Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902)

*The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, 1863

Oil on canvas; 73 1/2 x 120 3/4 in. (186.7 x 306.7 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1907 (07.123)

Online image:

[http://www.metmuseum.org/Works\\_of\\_Art/viewOne.asp?dep=2&viewmode=0&item=07.123](http://www.metmuseum.org/Works_of_Art/viewOne.asp?dep=2&viewmode=0&item=07.123)

Fig. 5

Barnett Newman (1905–1970)

*Anna's Light*, 1968

Acrylic on canvas; 108.7 x 240.6 in (276.0 x 611.0 cm)

Collection of the Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art (Dainippon Ink and Chemicals, Inc., Tokyo.)

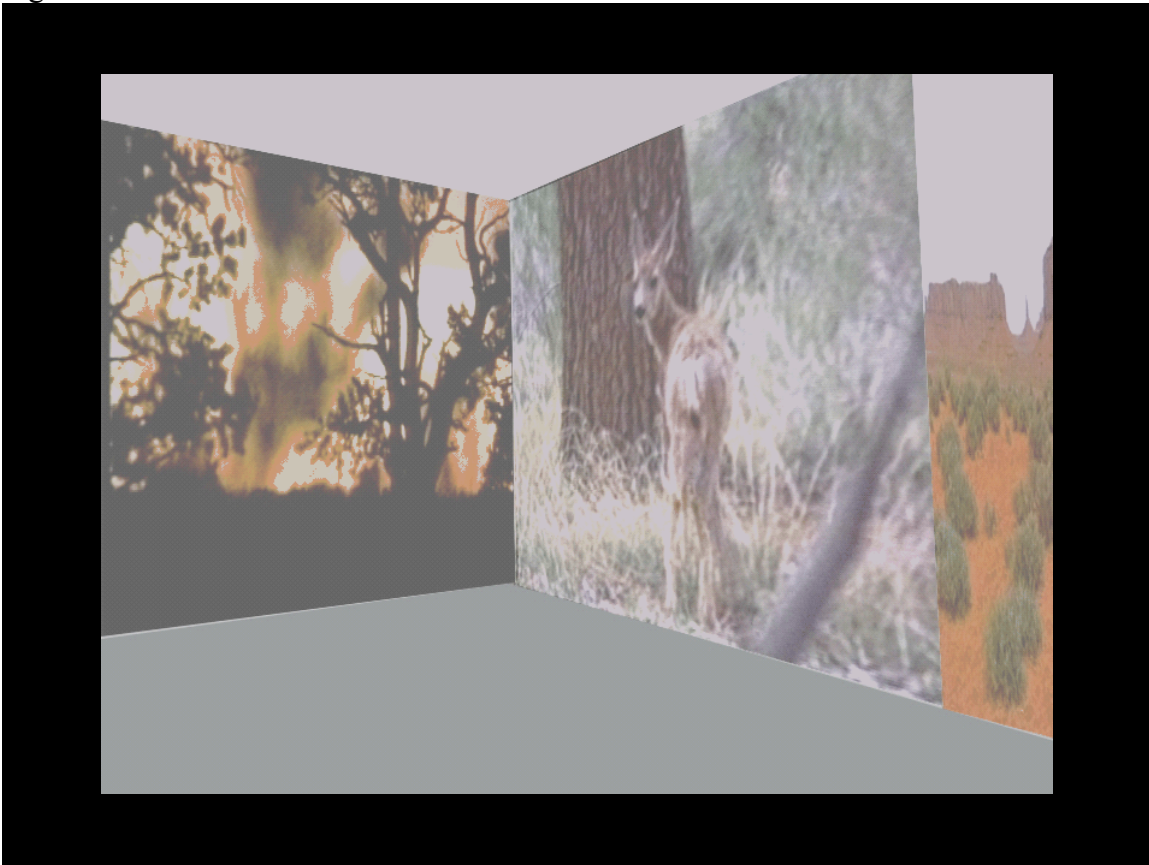
Online Image:

<http://www.menil.org/pdfs/Menil%20News-Anna's%20Light.pdf>

Photograph: Courtesy of Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art

© Barnett Newman Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

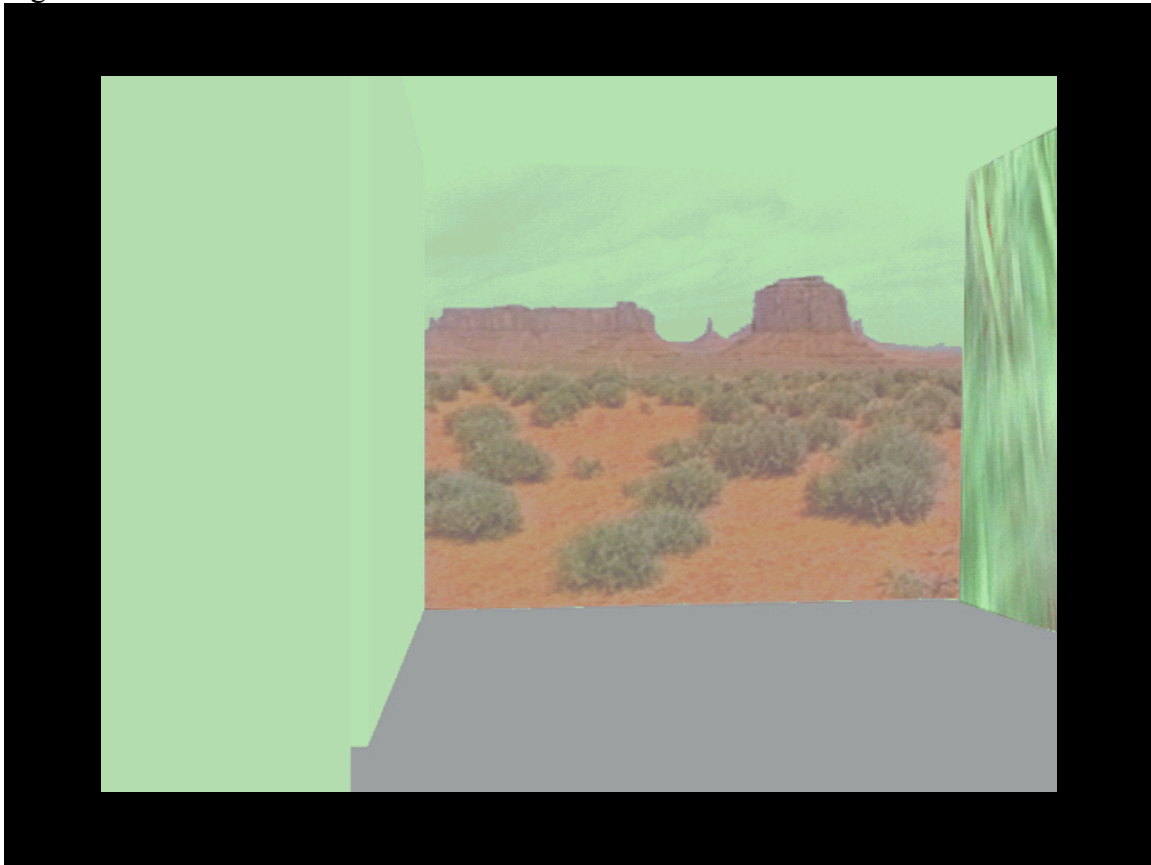
Fig. 6a



©Diana Thater. Image courtesy of Diana Thater.

Detail of Thater's *Abyss of Light* (1993) in the third virtual gallery of "Two Edges."

Fig. 6b



©Diana Thater. Image courtesy of Diana Thater.

Detail of Thater's *Abyss of Light* in "Two Edges" virtual gallery showing the projection on one wall of the "John Ford Point" vista.

Fig. 7

Alexandre Hogue (1898-1994)

*Crucified Land*, 1939

oil on canvas, 42 1/4" X 60"

Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa Oklahoma

Online image:

<http://www.gilcrease.org/images/Samples/0127.2000.jpg>

Fig. 8



© 2007 Museum Associates/ LACMA

View of LACMA installation of “The Dust Bowl” gallery. The two Alexandre Hogue paintings, *Mother Earth Laid Bare* and *The Crucified Land* appear at center (with *The Crucified Land* on the right in the pairing) adjacent to photographs; these include, at far right, Dorothea Lange’s photograph of abandoned houses of worship: *The Catholic, Lutheran and Baptist Churches, Great Plains, Dixon, South Dakota* (1938; MFAH)

Fig. 9



©Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Installation photo by Thomas DuBrock.

View of MFAH installation in the “Southwest” gallery of the exhibition showing the patterned display of modernist works on paper, by both Native American artists and non-Native American artists.



Fig. 10

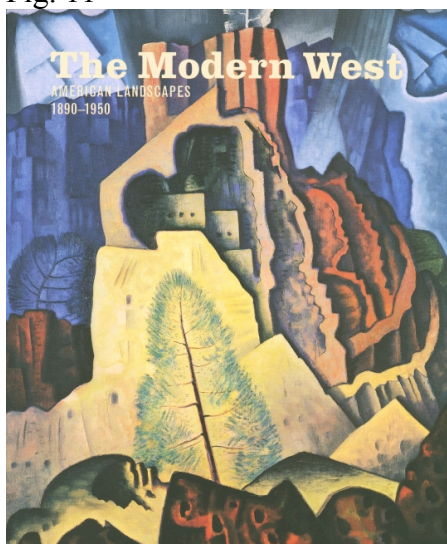


© 2007 Museum Associates/ LACMA

View of LACMA installation showing the view towards three modern watercolors by American Indian artists at center on terra cotta colored, built-out wall, with Jonson's *Cliff Dwellings* at right. The text panel about American Indian watercolor painting hangs at far left next to a John Marin watercolor. Note there two photographs, in black frames, on the left wall next to a Georgia O'Keeffe painting in the foreground at left.



Fig. 11



Cover of Neff's catalogue of the exhibition reproducing Jonson's *Cliff Dwellings*.

Fig. 12



©Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Installation photo by Thomas DuBrock.

View of MFAH installation showing the “Southwest” gallery and looking towards the “Dustbowl” gallery. Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Black Cross with Stars and Blues* (1929; Mr. and Mrs. Peter Coneway) commands the center of the gallery. This installation shot demonstrates the dominant style for the layout of the exhibition, where important objects were given pride of place, as they were in LACMA’s installation (see Fig. 10).

Fig. 13



© 2007 Museum Associates/LACMA

LACMA installation of John Baldessari's gallery design for *Magritte and Contemporary Art*, featuring Magritte's *Personal Values* next to Vija Celmins's *Untitled (Comb)*, with Jeff Koons's stainless steel *Rabbit* in the right foreground.

<sup>1</sup>*The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890-1950*, organized by Emily Ballew Neff, Curator, American Painting and Sculpture, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, was on view at MFAH from October 29, 2006-January 7, 2007. It traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from March 4-June 3, 2007), where Austen Barron Bailly, Assistant Curator, American Art coordinated and installed the exhibition for LACMA. For information about *The Modern West* and the MFAH's and LACMA's presentations of the exhibition, including related online features and images, see <http://www.mfah.org/main.asp?target=exhibition&par1=1&par2=3&par3=265> and <http://www.mfah.org/microsites/modernwest/default.asp> as well as <http://www.lacma.org/art/ExhibPast2007.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup>"The Director's Series: Conversations with Michael Govan: Diana Thater (April 12, 7:30 pm). Artist Diana Thater joins Michael Govan for a discussion of the mythology of the American West. The role of art and film in promoting or challenging the romantic notion of the West will be explored through images from LACMA's collection and the exhibition *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890-1950*. Thater, a San Francisco native who studied art history at New York University and acquired an MFA from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena in 1990, has exhibited her work in biennials and one-person shows around the world." <http://www.lacma.org/events/LecturesArchive.aspx>

<sup>3</sup>In email communication with me, Thater assumed full responsibility for the critical discussion and the virtual exhibition, noting that "Michael wasn't really involved in the virtual show except to choose some of the works. The critique was not his nor did it come from the museum—it was all mine." (Thater to Bailly, October 22, 2007)

<sup>4</sup>*The Modern West* was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities with both planning and implementation grants to research and write the catalogue and develop the exhibition.

<sup>5</sup>See Emily Ballew Neff's exhibition catalogue, *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2006). This description comes from Neff's introductory text panel for the opening gallery of the exhibition.

<sup>6</sup>Such scholarly traditions are only just beginning to change. Consider Neff's 2006 catalogue as well as Bill Anthes, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). This important new study includes chapters on, for example, "Art and Modern Indian Policy" and "'Our Inter-American Consciousness': Barnett Newman and the Primitive Universal." Anthes was invited to LACMA to give a public lecture about the subject "native moderns" and his book. His talk was presented on April 15, 2007 as part of the museum's free public programming for *The Modern West*.

<sup>7</sup>To further emphasize these connections, Neff included film clips without sound from Hans Namuth's *Jackson Pollock* (1950), showing Pollock at work in his Long Island studio, and Maxine and Mary J. Tsosie's *The Spirit of the Navajos* (1966), showing a Navajo artist preparing for and creating a sand painting. Shown side by side in Houston and Los Angeles, these films revealed similarities in how both artists prepared to make paintings and in how they executed them, demonstrating general, cross-cultural similarities in the artistic and creative process as well as ritualistic aspects of artistic creation.

<sup>8</sup>David Anfam wrote "*The Modern West* was that increasingly *rara avis*, a revisionist exhibition with a mission that managed to prove both intellectually coherent and visually satisfying. The accompanying catalogue is rich in scholarship and likely to become a standard reference point on the subject." See Anfam, "The Modern West," in *Burlington Magazine* 49, no. 1252 (July 2007): 517. Frances Colpitt stated: "A formidable undertaking, *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890-1950* and its book-length catalogue include a number of riveting works, some familiar and many not, strung together by a highly creative thesis." *ArtUS* 17 (March/April 2007): 62-63.

<sup>9</sup>But not in Germany, for example, where geographical and national distance from the American West has allowed for a stimulating exploration of its myths and images. The exhibition *I Like America: Fiktions of the Wild West* (Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2006-2007) examined the early nineteenth-century "motivations behind the German enthusiasm for the American West." See Pamela Kort and Max Hollein, eds. *I Like America: Fiktions of the Wild West* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2007) and the website for the exhibition [http://www.schirn-kunsthalle.de/index.php?do=exhibitions\\_detail&id=69&lang=en](http://www.schirn-kunsthalle.de/index.php?do=exhibitions_detail&id=69&lang=en).

<sup>10</sup>Neff, xiii.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas da Costa Kauffmann wrote, "if art has a history, it also implicitly had, and has, a geography; for if the history of art conceives art as being made in a particular time, it obviously puts it in a place." *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 7;13. Quoted in Neff, xiii.

<sup>12</sup>Thater clearly had been compelled to go beyond Govan's initial idea, which, as the announcement cited in note 2 above indicates, was simply to discuss the mythology of the American West through art and film. These topics were covered, but the focus became Thater's alternative exhibition exploring the concept "modern West" and the

different types of art and artists that could have been included in an exhibition of that title.

<sup>13</sup><http://www.cmoa.org/international/html/art/thater.htm>

<sup>14</sup>Throughout this paper “didactic” and “beautiful” will be used in quotation marks to acknowledge continually that these are very loaded terms, especially “beautiful,” as Dave Hickey, among others, has demonstrated. See Hickey’s *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993). An attempt to define these terms or discuss the larger issues raised by them specifically is well beyond the scope of this paper, but where possible I will take on the assumptions about these terms routinely made by artists, curators, and museums.

<sup>15</sup>I thank Thater for clarifying the layered references in the title of her virtual exhibition. The connection between the title of Newman’s painting and the Newman in the virtual exhibition, *Anna’s Light* (1968), discussed below, underscores the significance of Newman’s art to Thater’s exhibition and critique.

[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A4285&page\\_number=4&template\\_id=1&sort\\_order=1](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A4285&page_number=4&template_id=1&sort_order=1).

<sup>16</sup>DVD projection, color and sound, 59 minutes 30 seconds. For background on Nauman and clips of this film see <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/nauman/clip1.html>.

<sup>17</sup>Gonzalez helped elucidate these crucial points and also noted how Thater’s choices trouble the entire “didactic/beautiful” framework.

<sup>18</sup>According to Thater, Govan’s sole contribution to her virtual exhibition was the selection of the two paintings, which she asked him to provide. Govan chose the Bierstadt and the Newman (email communication from Thater to Bailly, October 22, 2007). *Anna’s Light* formerly belonged to the Dia Art Foundation, founded by members of the de Menil family. For information about the painting, now rarely seen in the United States, related to its 2003 exhibition at Menil Collection, Houston, Texas, see <http://www.menil.org/pdfs/Menil%20News-Anna's%20Light.pdf> and <http://www.houstonpress.com/search/events.php?oid=609101>.

<sup>19</sup>For a discussion available online of aspects of Thater’s work see [http://www.haunchofvenison.com/en/index.php#page=home.artists.diana\\_thater](http://www.haunchofvenison.com/en/index.php#page=home.artists.diana_thater). I have not seen *Abyss of Light*, as it was shown only as selected stills at LACMA and remains in a private collection.

<sup>20</sup>Neff, 232, 234.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 230. See Neff, 228-235, for a thorough discussion of Hogue and the fact that his “grim canvases of a raped and exhausted earth suggest not only the evisceration of the land itself but of a landscape tradition in American painting.”

<sup>22</sup>Christopher Knight, “Range Rovers; Western Landscape Stars in a LACMA Show Short on Masterpieces,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 March 2007:E1.

<sup>23</sup>Another example of Neff’s implicit critique of and challenge to American art canons was her yoking together the art of Frederic Remington and Georgia O’Keeffe. The juxtaposition of Remington’s narrative paintings and O’Keeffe’s abstract watercolors in the same gallery was presented to demonstrate that these two radically different artists, considered to be from two wholly different canons in American art—“western” and “modern” respectively—both found in the landscape of the Texas panhandle “a way of

turning what had been a cultural negative (the desert, the plains) into something artistically productive.” (Neff in email communication to Bailly, October 25, 2007.)

<sup>24</sup>Barry Lopez, “Out West,” in Neff, 1-9.

<sup>25</sup>To try to draw out the critical perspectives in another public forum, I referred to Lopez’s essay in an interview published on the LACMA’s website and in its membership magazines, *Connect* and *LACMA Insider*. Asked “What else would you like to say about the show?” I responded, “Barry Lopez’s essay for the catalogue is very, how shall I say, probing...He confronts the fact that there are many lost histories in the West. And the way he relates his ideas to the exhibition—by considering how artists use the West as an imaginative space for their art, effectively disregarding its past—is really provocative.”

See <http://www.lacma.org/art/BehindtheScenes19.aspx>

<sup>26</sup>Tim Wride, curator of *Re-SITE-ing the West*, wrote in the introductory panel for the show: “This exhibition, which includes approximately thirty works by artists such as Lewis Baltz, Hank Wessel, and Mark Ruwedel, continues the dialogue about—and affirms the enduring mystique of—the place we call the West...Reflecting on the realities of rapid development and exploring the terrain as object, the artists in this exhibition celebrate the West as a site in and of itself, with imposed illusions, allusions, and romantic pretensions laid to rest. This installation accompanies *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890–1950*.”

<sup>27</sup>I thank Neff for helping to articulate the collective aims of such “layered” programming in museums. In addition, during the run of *The Modern West* MFAH screened *American Desert (for Chuck Jones)* by Los Angeles based artist Mungo Thomson (2002). His five-by-five-foot DVD projection, in Neff’s words, “offered a pop culture sensibility to the project [*The Modern West*] that was not present in the show...and a contemporary one.” (Email from Neff to Bailly, October 29, 2007)

<sup>28</sup>See Neff, throughout, but 44-49 and 175-180 especially for specific discussions of Native American art.

<sup>29</sup>For documentation of these works in the exhibition, see Neff, “Checklist of the Exhibition,” 288, 291, 292.

<sup>30</sup>Neff clarified that she intended her display to represent a “two way street,” suggesting that these artists were “both borrowing from one another’s cultures, or demonstrating, visually, the hybridity of both cultures...In other words, at what point does ‘Native American’ become ‘American’ and vice versa?” (email communication from Neff to Bailly, October 26, 2007).

<sup>31</sup>Jonson’s *Cliff Dwellings* was selected as the cover image for the exhibition catalogue because of its visual impact and the significance of Native American history to Jonson’s particular vision of American modernism, one that looked to the western landscape rather than to the urban city: “Emblems of cliff dwellings and pines in higher New Mexico climes thrust upward like a New York or Chicago skyscraper...Jonson seems to articulate an ancient, indigenous pedigree for the modern skyscraper through what are likely glimpses of his experience at the Pajarito Plateau, just east of the Jemez Mountains.” Neff, 147.

<sup>32</sup>Thater in email to Bailly, October 22, 2007.

<sup>33</sup>The related question—“where does this leave the historian?”—emerged recently at a Donald Judd Foundation-sponsored panel discussion on the “use of oral histories for

preserving artists' legacies" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In her article about the panel, Kate Taylor asked the above question and quoted Dia Art Foundation curator Lynne Cooke, who warned that oral histories "are not revelations of truth [but] simply texts that we work with." See Taylor, "Artist's Own Words Can Drown Out Scholars," *New York Sun*, 16 May 2007. I thank Veronica Roberts for bringing this article to my attention.

<sup>34</sup> Art critic Doug Harvey was not put off by the location of LACMA's *Re-SITE-ing* exhibition, which he described as "definitely worth the escalator ride," because the photography on view, in relation to that in *The Modern West*, "throws some amazing shit into the mix." See Harvey, "The Other Coast," *LA Weekly* (28 March 2007), online at <http://www.laweekly.com/art+books/art/the-other-coast/15974/>.

<sup>35</sup> Harvey in his *LA Weekly* review posited that "the photographs constitute an exhibit in themselves." Christopher Knight's views were more pointed in his *Los Angeles Times* review cited above in note 22: "Almost always, the show's selection of photographs is superior to the more physically imposing works on canvas or paper... With few exceptions, virtually all of the photographers are first-rate. The same can be said of only a minority of the painters."

<sup>36</sup> For a recent and relevant examination of the impact of critical artistic intervention into permanent collection display and special exhibitions at major fine art museums see Jennifer King, "Perpetually Out of Place: Michael Asher and Jean-Antoine Houdon at the Art Institute of Chicago," *October* 120 (Spring 2007): 71-86. I thank Rita Gonzalez for bringing King's essay to my attention.

<sup>37</sup> For basic background information on these landmark projects see [www.jamesluna.com](http://www.jamesluna.com) and <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/wilson/index.html> on Fred Wilson.

<sup>38</sup> See [http://www.cooperhewitt.org/EXHIBITIONS/selects/yinka\\_shonibare.asp](http://www.cooperhewitt.org/EXHIBITIONS/selects/yinka_shonibare.asp). "In the third guest-curated exhibition... Shonibare has mined the Cooper-Hewitt's collections to create an installation that addresses themes of transportation, imperialism, tourism, and cultural exchange." An exhibition brochure was published featuring Shonibare's explanations about his quite celebratory exhibition. For example, Shonibare stated, "I hope your voyage through the Cooper-Hewitt collection is exciting, informative, and as surprising as it has been for me." (4)

<sup>39</sup> On Walker's exhibition, go to [http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se\\_event.asp?OccurrenceId=%7BE4F51062-8A08-4593-8273-8807B8201F95%7D](http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se_event.asp?OccurrenceId=%7BE4F51062-8A08-4593-8273-8807B8201F95%7D). The Met's website notes that the exhibition "was organized by Kara Walker, at the invitation of Gary Tinterow, Engelhard Curator in Charge of the Metropolitan's Department of Nineteenth-Century, Modern, and Contemporary Art. The installation is the second in a new series developed by the department to feature the work of contemporary artists."

<sup>40</sup> Ken Johnson wrote of Shonibare's installation that "Taken on its own, this rather random collection adds up to little more than the sum of its parts. But Mr. Shonibare's own sculptures cast the whole in a unifying light... and it is a measure of Mr. Shonibare's lightness of touch that he leaves the darker shadows of colonialism and its legacy—to which the Hewitt sisters were presumably oblivious—to the intelligent viewer's imagination." See Johnson, "A Sculptor from 2 Cultures Takes a Tour of Colonialism," *New York Times* (14 October 2005), online at

<http://travel.nytimes.com/2005/10/14/arts/design/14john.html>. Reviewing Walker, Roberta Smith touted “the show’s fascinating flow of images,” noting that “the candor with which Ms. Walker has explored America’s seemingly insoluble knot of race, gender, and sexuality can seem shockingly impartial.” Smith noted about Walker’s art that “*After the Deluge* includes no post-Katrina work by Ms. Walker. Instead it reminds us that poverty and even water have also been longtime themes for Ms. Walker; if anything, her work warned of the pathologies that Katrina unleashed.” See Smith, “Kara Walker Makes Contrasts in Silhouette in Her Own Met Show,” *New York Times* (24 March 2006), online at [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/24/arts/design/24walk.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/24/arts/design/24walk.html?_r=1&oref=slogin).

<sup>41</sup>Consider Smith’s review cited in note 40 in which she praised this “superb exhibition” because it “demonstrates that bringing artworks together from different periods almost always generates new perceptions, and not just regarding art. The show markedly revitalizes the Met’s relationship to contemporary art...It tilts the great weight of the museum’s holdings in a new direction and makes the Met feel like a different place.”

<sup>42</sup>The exhibition was on view at LACMA, its sole venue, from November 19, 2006 through March 4, 2007. For more information on the exhibition and Baldessari’s installation see <http://www.lacma.org/art/MagritteIndex.aspx>.

<sup>43</sup>A perfect example of the seductiveness of the artist-curated or artist-installed space was Los Angeles art critic Edward Goldman’s reaction to *The Modern West* at LACMA: “Compounded with its unimaginative installation inside a series of small, claustrophobic galleries painted in gloomy colors, this exhibition is a snooze, especially in comparison with its adventurous and imaginative predecessor, *Magritte and Contemporary Art*.” See Goldman, “Can Mediocre Art Serve a Good Cause?,” KCRW (89.9FM): *Art Talk*, April 3, 2007.

<sup>44</sup>Artist Jorge Pardo is involved in the reinstallation of the LACMA’s Latin American art collection and artist Peter Shire is working on a reading area for the museum’s American art galleries.

<sup>45</sup>Suzanne Muchnic, “Michael Govan’s Bright Ideas,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 May 2007:F1.

<sup>46</sup>Notably, the 2007 Annual Meeting of the curatorial professional organization, the Association of Art Museum Curators, held a panel entitled “The Artist and the Curator.” Alison de Lima Greene, Curator, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, was the moderator for panelists, which, pertinently and relevantly for this paper, included Michael Govan, Kara Walker, and Gary Tinterow, who invited Walker to create *After the Deluge* for the Met. I was unable to attend the 2007 conference, but Neff, who was there, brought this panel to my attention. An examination of the panel in relation to the issues discussed in this paper is not possible here, but the audio recording of “The Artist and the Curator” panel is available at [http://www.artcurators.org/programs\\_conferences.asp](http://www.artcurators.org/programs_conferences.asp).