René d'Harnoncourt and the Art of Installation

By Michelle Elligott. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018. 176 pp. Hardcover. $45.00. ISBN 978-1-63345-050-9.

An archives that relies solely on textual records would leave an incredible gap in human existence and expression. Visual materials comprise a significant portion of the historical record, and, when analyzed as documentary evidence, contribute significantly to the stories derived from archives. In her publication, *René d'Harnoncourt and the Art of Installation*, Michelle Elligott utilizes such visual materials to craft a narrative that contributes to the history of museum installation, which is greatly enriched by the supporting works that pertain to both René d'Harnoncourt's life (i.e., through documentary photographs) and his work (i.e., through his drawings and illustrations, and in photographs of the final products of his installations). Published by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in a typical coffee-table-book format, this publication focuses on a period of the museum's institutional history through an amplification of the legacy and influence of one of its former directors, René d'Harnoncourt. Elligott writes succinctly about d'Harnoncourt's approach to exhibition design as creative practice, while relying heavily on the visual documents that make up a portion of d'Harnoncourt's papers.

Elligott has served since 2014 as the chief of archives, library, and research collections at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Prior to assuming this role, she was the Rona Roob Senior Museum Archivist, during which time she supervised the efforts to arrange and describe the d'Harnoncourt papers. This intimate knowledge of the papers, along with twenty years of working with the MoMA archives, uniquely positions Elligott to conduct this in-depth research, as well as to make selections of materials that demonstrate the contributions of this individual to the field of exhibition design and installation.

While the author's discussion of the early foundational work of d'Harnoncourt lacks critical analysis (to be discussed further in this review), *René d'Harnoncourt and the Art of Installation* is well researched and beautifully illustrated with color reproductions. The book itself was designed by Miko McGinty and Rita Jules, who have successfully balanced the various sizes and media of the archival documents to create a cohesive visual narrative that serves to support Elligott's text. It includes full-page and double-page spreads that display reproductions of d'Harnoncourt's object studies, floorplan drawings, and photographs of the exhibits in situ. These reproductions are presented uncropped, revealing all four corners of the two-dimensional documents. This shows off a great deal of detail, while also demonstrating the scale of each archival document and providing visual evidence of its completeness, therefore inviting any further

interpretation with trustworthiness and authenticity. The book design, akin to that of a photobook, highlights the materiality and visuality of d'Harnoncourt's papers,[1] while also bringing attention to his exceptional artistic talent for giving life to a physical space on an unassuming notebook page.

The content of the monograph takes the form of a narrative style that blends facts about d'Harnoncourt's life and career with sections that highlight the specific installation and exhibition techniques he developed and popularized. Sections on "Installation Methodology" are scattered throughout the first half of the book and are differentiated from the main chronological narrative with robin's egg–blue pages illustrated with large reproductions of drawings and photographs that demonstrate each technique being discussed. The first half of the book chronicles d'Harnoncourt's early life as an aristocrat in Vienna, then his travels throughout Mexico and his work with contemporary Indigenous artists, which led to his work with the US Department of the Interior and the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, and finally his long, influential career at MoMA (first designing exhibits and later as director).

The second half of the book is a compilation of portfolios in the form of a catalog, with even more drawings, photographs, and other textual documents relating to each exhibition that d'Harnoncourt designed and curated. These portfolios are referenced throughout the narrative and provide excellent companions to the main text. Each entry includes basic metadata, listing information such as title, curator, number of objects included, location, circulating venues, and so on. This adds up to an additional five to ten images per exhibit, along with a brief analysis of installation and design techniques utilized, as well as supporting sources from the visitor's perspective.

Overall, the book is successful in its stated mission: to bring attention to the contributions of René d'Harnoncourt within the field of exhibition design. Researching and writing such a comprehensive history, extracted almost exclusively from archival sources, is a commendable accomplishment. However, the glaring weakness of this project relates to the author's attempt to remain "neutral," which stems from a lack of critical engagement with issues surrounding d'Harnoncourt's work with Indigenous and non-Western material culture. The absence of voices from these communities in the planning, design, and implementation of the public displays of their cultural heritage further amplifies this. Elligott briefly mentions d'Harnoncourt's direct engagement with Indigenous Mexican craftsmen and "important contemporary artists" (p. 26) such as Orozco and Rivera for his first major exhibit on Mexican arts prior to his employment with MoMA. But the way Elligott discusses his work with Native American materials for his second major exhibit, *Indian Art in the United States and Alaska*, which she frames as "scouting the country for objects of aesthetic

and cultural value" (p. 26) rather than as a collaborative endeavor, is markedly different.

While one major outcome of these exhibits was to alter the public view of "American art" to include that of the Indigenous communities,[2] Elligott's discussion would have been much more compelling and complete with the inclusion of Indigenous voices. This could have been achieved with sources in the archives (if they exist) or in the form of citing critics from Indigenous studies or Indigenous communities who have engaged with d'Harnoncourt's exhibitions. Discussions of later exhibits that he worked on (either as director or curator) offer no mention of community engagement, only that he worked collaboratively with curators on the installation process (p. 64).[3]

From a contemporary social theory perspective, this project comes across as a colonial apologist narrative centered around a wealthy, privileged European man, and, as it stands, the narrative is disproportionately one-sided. The author could have argued that d'Harnoncourt used this privilege to offer visibility for creators of "primitive" art to a contemporary Western audience, but she does not frame it as such. Instead, Elligott notes that "it is important to underscore d'Harnoncourt's motivation: promotion not appropriation" (p. 29) and that his "tolerant, enlightened view of humanity" and deep respect and knowledge of the cultures he exhibited somehow made him worthy of praise. Instead, this reads as if his privilege and status exempted him from the responsibility of including the perspective of actual contemporary people/creators beyond the initial selection of materials.[4]

I would claim that d'Harnoncourt's lack of collaborative engagement with these communities (at least from what is presented here of the archival record), combined with the author's minimal efforts to address the problematic nature of the language used (both in the archival evidence and in her own retelling) to present d'Harnoncourt's work particularly with native communities in the United States and Mexico, further demonstrates that the "visibility" being offered can only be interpreted through a settler lens with d'Harnoncourt at the center as the "white savior." Elligott measures the success of d'Harnoncourt's exhibits through their influence on important figures in twentieth-century Western art history (p. 46) without recognizing that most of these instances of influence were in fact acts of cultural appropriation. If we (the archival community) are not actively thinking and talking critically about the white/Western adoption and presentation of Indigenous art, then we are only working to perpetuate the narrative that museums, with all of their colonial history and baggage, are the sole form of legitimacy for artistic forms outside the traditional art historical canon.

Within an archival context, a reflection on the structure and scholarship of this book reminds us that institutional archives often support predominantly

white, colonial narratives, which, when presented without criticism, make for compelling stories about the genius of men. A significant amount of literature addresses the topics of the "postcolonial museum" or "decolonizing museums";[5] however, a great deal of work remains to be done outside of the academy to promote community-driven exhibition and archival practices. Members of the archival community can look to institutions and individuals working directly with marginalized and underrepresented groups, as outlined in UNC Libraries' "Community-Driven Archives" initiative.[6]

In terms of its usefulness to archivists, this book exemplifies excellent book design for presenting archival materials in a narrative format. The visual focus of this archives very much shapes the design, which also highlights the notion that visual materials are more readily adopted into book form to illuminate and provide intellectual context for the text. It is clear that Elligott has tried to retain a "neutral" voice in an attempt to avoid making value statements about the content of this archives, which makes sense given that she is writing for and about MoMA's institutional history. However, as we know, archives are not neutral, and this one is no exception.

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Notes

[1] In her acknowledgments, the author makes a point to thank the imaging staff, who also would have had a significant role in deciding how materials would be presented.

[2] As described by W. Jackson Rushing in "Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern: René d'Harnoncourt and Indian Art of the United States," in *The Early Years of Native American Art History*, which is frequently cited by Elligott. W. Jackson Rushing, "Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern: René d'Harnoncourt and Indian Art of the United States," in *Early Years of Native American History*, ed. Catherine Berlo (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992), 203–5.

[3] Rushing also mentions that the most significant items displayed in the *Indian Arts* exhibit were lent by other museums, further demonstrating the lack of community engagement and the role that the institution plays in deciding what is exemplary.

[4] Even then, it is unclear whether the communities self-selected the materials to be included in the exhibits, or if they were all selected by d'Harnoncourt.

[5] One example is Amy Lonetree's *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

[6] UNC Libraries, Louis Round Wilson Library Special Collections, "Community-Driven Archives Overview," https://library.unc.edu/wilson/shc/community-driven-archives/about.