

Thoughts on Museum Display

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Organization of this lecture:

- A. Immersion versus self-reflexivity
- B. Revealing the economics of the art world
- C. Marking paths and implying narratives

A. Immersion versus self-reflexivity

Two fundamental themes in museum display:

I. Immersion

The work is seen as if it were alone and without context

II. Self-reflexivity

The work is presented as part of historical, critical, and comparative contexts

I.

Immersion

Three topics:

1. The seductiveness of real immersion

2. Practical problems with immersion

3. Philosophic problems with immersion

I. The seductiveness of real immersion

Immersion is recommended in my book
*Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who
Have Cried in Front of Paintings.* — any strong
emotional response depends on immersion

Techniques for immersion:

- A. Avoid the ordinary wall labels
(condescending, unctuous, opaque)
- B. Spend time (an hour, more) in front of just one object
- C. Don't go to the museum with friends
- D. Don't go intending to see more than one object
- E. Find low-lit galleries, go in off-peak hours
- F. Promise yourself to return

2. Practical problems with immersion

A. It's difficult to put individual works in darkened rooms

B. It's difficult to manage traffic so that people can be alone

(etc. etc.)

3. Philosophic problems with immersion

A. The idea of a work in pure isolation,
disjunct from history, in pure presence,
in a kind of plenary phenomenological state,
is itself a construction of modernism



Caspar David Friedrich, *Erinnerungen an das Riesengebirge* (c. 1835)

3. Philosophic problems with immersion, continued

B. Much modern art is constructed as a
critique of immersion, so to produce
absorptive experience is non-historical



Gaylen Gerber, mockup for painting behind the roundtable *State of Art Criticism*, Morton Auditorium, Art Insistute of Chicago, 2005

3. Philosophic problems with immersion, continued

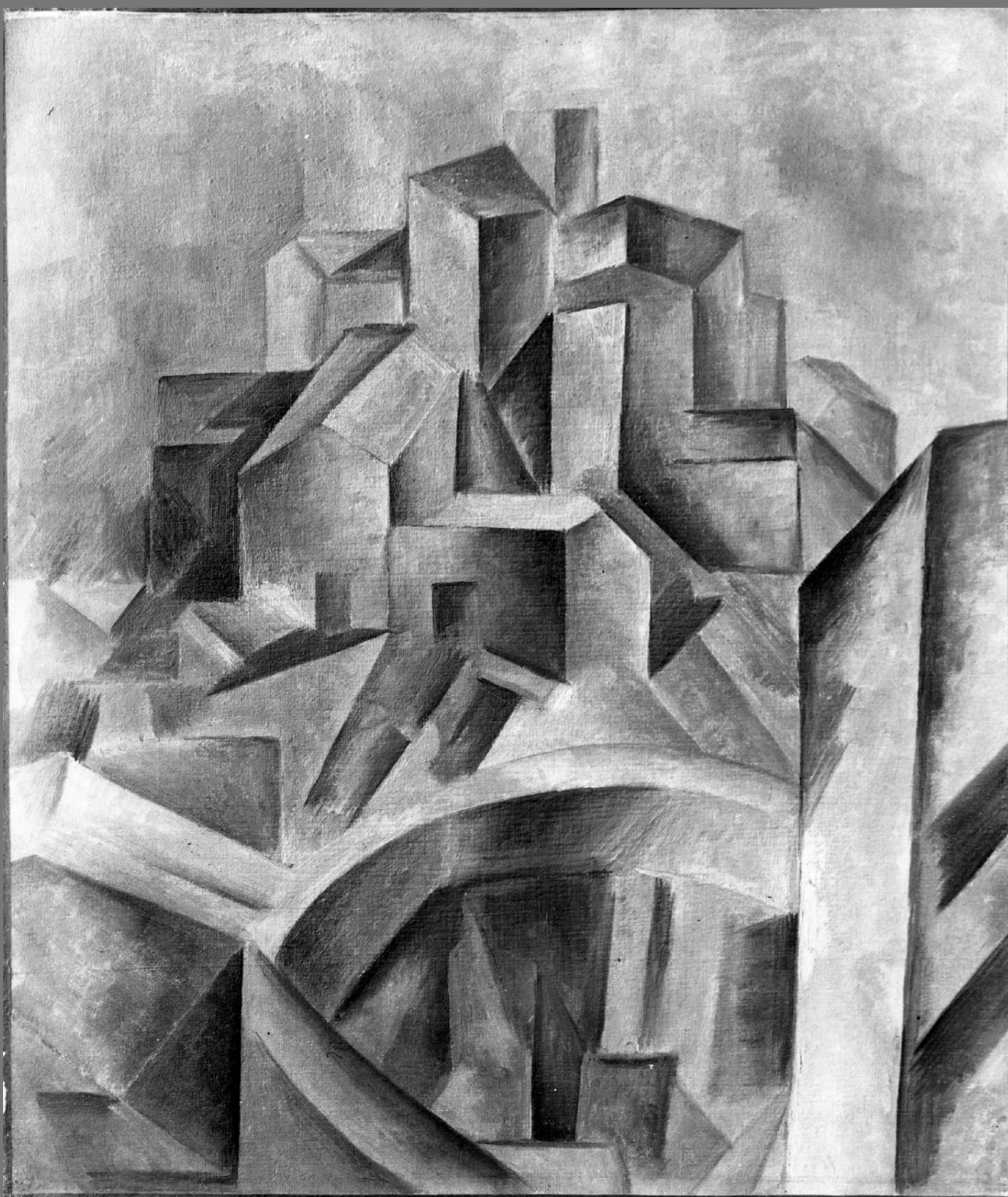
C. The historical reception of some modern art depends on non-immersive properties, so exhibiting work as immersive is an intervention in historical understanding



Rothko (1957).
Kunstmuseum,
Basel

3. Philosophic problems with immersion, concluded

D. The historical reception of some modern art depends on more or less extensive analyses, so presenting the work without (a hint of) the analyses misrepresents it



Picasso,
*Reservoir at
Horta de Ebro*
(1909)

II.

Self-reflexivity

Three topics:

1. The seductiveness of self-reflexivity

2. Practical problems with self-reflexivity

3. Philosophic problems with self-reflexivity

I. The seductiveness of self-reflexivity

Self-reflexivity is necessary for teaching and learning. Otherwise the art experience can appear to be idiosyncratic or solipsistic, and the cultural significance can be lost.

2. Practical problems with self-reflexivity

Learning, in museums (including natural history museums) is at an all-time low, and has never been the norm in fine art museums.

3. Philosophic problems with self-reflexivity

There are moments in history when art has depended on individual encounters, and if they are not reproduced or mimicked, those dimensions of the art are lost.

III.

Proposals