‘Virgil Abloh: ‘Figures of Speech’ and What Happens To An Object Not Produced For A Museum

By

Damon Chatas

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Sponsor: Melissa Forstrom

Second Reader: Ragnhild Utheim

“From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came. I was told before arriving that I would probably be a "sight" for the village; I took this to mean that people of my complexion were rarely seen in Switzerland, and also that city people are always something of a "sight" outside of the city. It did not occur to me-possibly because I am an American-that there could be people anywhere who had never seen a Negro.”

- An excerpt from *‘Stranger In The Village’* by James Baldwin, an influential piece of writing for Virgil Abloh when reflecting on his place in the history of Louis Vuitton creative directors -

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Forward: “You’re Obviously In The Wrong Place”

There are moments in time when a designer comes along and captures the attention of the world seemingly out of the blue. Designers that aren’t limited by the boundaries of one medium and decidedly want to stretch their creative muscles on different fronts. A renaissance man/woman that shows skill in every medium that they approach, all while keeping a level of humility in doing so. Born in Rockford, IL, a child of immigrants from Ghana, Virgil Abloh exemplifies all of this and is what one might call a modern day renaissance man.

Graduating from University of Wisconsin–Madison in 2002, Abloh would go on to complete an undergraduate Bachelor of Science degree in civil engineering. In 2015, he would return to design commemorative tees for the university to highlight his humble beginnings. Rumor has it that on the day of his graduation, he skipped his final critique to take a meeting with Kanye West’s then-manager John Monopoly. West and Abloh begin officially working together soon after, only to then step into the role of creative director at West’s creative agency Donda. Returning to school, Abloh completed his master’s degree in architecture from the Illinois Institute of Technology in 2006. During his time at IIT, esteemed architect Rem Koolhaas, known for his work on runway designs for the luxury fashion powerhouse Prada, was constructing a building for the campus. When it was completed, Abloh later sighted it as one of the reasons he became interested in fashion as a creative medium.

With those degrees under his belt, Abloh’s only traditional fashion training came from his mother. A seamstress who wanted to teach her son how to sew. However, despite the lack of traditional fashion industry education he would go on to found Pyrex Vision in 2012. He purchased deadstock Ralph Lauren flannel shirts for $40 each, and screen printed them with the

word *'Pyrex'* and the number 23, an homage to his childhood hero, Michael Jordan. They sold for $550 each. Life was not long for Pyrex, despite the hype upon arrival, which only a year later would become his main fashion label Off-White in 2013, a multi-platform creative endeavor based in Milan, thus propelling him into the luxury streetwear stratosphere. At Off-White, he combined ideas of streetwear, luxury, art, music, and travel, defining the brand simply as, "the gray area between black and white as the color Off-White." From the start, the hovering quotation marks and the helvetica font style incorporated into the garment's designs became Abloh's signature which would be used for the rest of his career.

Perhaps his highest achievement in the fashion world came in 2018 when appointed Men's Artistic Director at Louis Vuitton by LVMH group. Abloh stepped into the role vacated by his friend and mentor Kim Jones to lead the house into a bold new direction. A historical appointment by the house as the first black creative director, a rarity across the board at French luxury houses, Abloh designed with a sense of childlike wonder and imagination. Through his 'Boyhood Ideology', as it would later come to be known as at the house by members of his team, he wanted people to stop treating each other according to how they look, or where they grew up, or what their job might be. As he would say, limitations are man made. Tapping into his inspirations from his predecessors like Marc Jacobs, the aforementioned Kim Jones, and countless black creatives, he developed a eight show run that would go on to be a turning point for modern luxury fashion.

Following his first show at Louis Vuitton, he went on to define his mantra for design as a 'Tourist vs. Purist' approach. To quote Abloh from a 2019 interview with i-D Magazine;

"I often use the phrase 'Tourist and Purist' to describe my approach to work. The purist knows everything about art history, every museum in every country and what's going on across the world. And the tourists, in this context, well they know what a dookie chain actually is."

This approach to creation was about marrying the two areas of the art world as experienced by Abloh in the various industries he was involved in. The end goal was to create work that could be understood, or easy to form an emotional connection to, regardless of your background in education, race, income, and so on. Those who aspire towards the dominion of knowledge and those who already inhabit it were seen as equals, everyone deserves a seat at the proverbial table so that we might find common ground and foster deeper human connections.

In July 2019, he learned that he had a rare form of heart cancer but had decided to keep his illness secret from all but his closest friends. In an interview with The New York Times, his wife Shannon Abloh would detail that this choice was made to keep up appearances for everyone looking up to him, "It wasn't like we knew that he was going to pass… He didn't want people to look at him and think, "Are you OK?" (Friedman, 2022). In November 2021, at the young age of 41, Abloh passed away within the comfort of his home in Chicago surrounded by his family, leaving behind a legacy of outside the box thinking. Say what you will about his work, but there's no denying the larger impact of his oeuvre that will surely be felt in the culture of fashion for years to come. His meticulous attention to detail and approach to creation will continue to inspire young designers well beyond his time on this earth.

Survived by his wife Shannon, his children Lowe, and Grey, his sister Edwina, his parents Nee and Eunice Abloh, Virgil Abloh was a highly educated creative who expressed himself within every genre of arts. A stranger in a village not familiar with his kind, not unlike the poet James Baldwin before him, Abloh pushed through the barriers upheld by those in high

art and fashion. Often met with the phrase “You’re obviously in the wrong place”, he decidedly wanted to become a disseminator of information for the masses that followed him, all while leaving the door open and throwing the keys to those who would follow behind him.

Once it came time to create For the subsequent *‘Figures of Speech’* exhibition for the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art in June 2019, Abloh worked closely with his creative team and curator Michael Darling to foster an experience rooted within this approach to design. The show would serve as a retrospective of the artist’s work throughout his life from 1980 - 2019 with the intent to let the visitors in behind the curtain to see his creative processes and demonstrate Abloh's great successes to inspire the public.

Introduction

‘Virgil Abloh: Figures of Speech’ made its debut in New York City at the Brooklyn Museum on July 1, 2022. Chronicling all of the prolific designer's significant work from 1980 - 2019, according to the artist himself, his creative partners, and organized by Michael Darling, the exhibition initially resided within the walls of the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art until September 2021. The show served as Abloh’s only solo exhibition before his tragic passing. While the legacy of Abloh is likely to live on in designers and creatives today, the version of the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum inspecific showcased an incomplete and, at times, confusing museum going experience that unsuccessfully communicated to the vast public what his legacy is to begin with and why he is regarded as a modern day renaissance man by individuals like myself. Rooted in the intersections between commerce, the museum itself, exhibition design, and the “museumification” of an object as it pertains to visual culture, I argue that, in this instance

regarding Abloh, trying to showcase the totality of an artist respective work within the confines of this exhibition space both fails and succeeds based entirely on the individual visitors prior knowledge about the artist, the exhibition design and accompanying pamphlet/catalog.

These factors created a museum going experience inherently tied to elitism, something that Abloh fought against in all manner of mediums, and left me wondering if this was yet another instance of the 'Tourist Vs. Purist' mantra, ironically, proposed by the artist himself as a marker for success. Within this paper, I explore a possible binary of visitor experience by examining the showcasing of the artist's oeuvre within both the confines of the Brooklyn exhibition space and design, where the exhibition could either enlighten or confuse the public based entirely on the individual visitors' prior knowledge about the artist. The work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, specifically his idea of cultural capital, and Christopher Whitehead's concept on process vs. product based interpretation serves as a lens in which the ideas of this examination will be undertaken and viewed.

These sources defined above create the idea of cultural capital and going forward it will be used as a tool to analyze how *'Virgil Abloh: Figures of Speech'* expects the visitor to have a certain level of cultivated cultural capital to walk away from the exhibition with likely anything more than a picture of unreleased Nikes. With this, the paper focuses on how I believe these factors unwittingly created a museum-going experience inherently tied to elitism, which ironically was something that Abloh fought against. Before we can get into the exhibition, we must first discuss the history of museums and their approach to object interpretation. By doing so, it will provide the necessary context as to the ways that museums operate, how they communicate to the public and why this exhibition falls into the trappings of these practices used by museums to this day.

The Early Museum Model

From their European inception, museums have stood as a symbol of power and wealth. In the early days of museum building, as it relates to the the United Kingdom specifically, there was a goal to focus on educating and maintaining a status of class among the vast public opposed to the wealthy, “In the wake of the report of the 1834 Select Committee on Drunkenness, whose establishment he had prompted and which he had chaired, Buckingham brought three bills before parliament proposing that local committees be empowered to levy rates to establish walks, paths, playgrounds, halls, theaters, libraries, museums and art galleries so as 'to draw off by innocent pleasurable recreation and instruction, all who can be weaned from habits of drinking' (Buckingham, cited in Turner 1934: 305),” (Bennett, 1995, p.19 - 20). With that in mind, it’s clear that museums were indeed focused on bringing in the public, however it was in a way that served the needs of the wealthy in a sort of ‘savior complex’ ideology. Bennett details this early museum ideology focused on the sophistication and reform of society at the time informed the museum going experience by writing, “…the capacity that is attributed to high culture to so transform the inner lives of the population as to alter their forms of life and behavior. It is this that marks the distinction between earlier conceptions of government and the emerging notions of liberal government…,” (Bennett, 1995, p.20), which he then goes onto say, “(In relation to the establishment of museums) Museums might help lift the level of popular taste and design; they might diminish the appeal of the tavern, thus increasing the sobriety and industriousness of the populace; they might help prevent riot and sedition,” (Bennett, 1995, p.21). This informs the studies being done in new museology today, especially when it comes to visitor experiences. Often, there is a disconnect between the ‘art world’ and the mass public because of the lack of

perceived inclusivity when it comes to the museum going experience, “Museums continued to be characterized by similar kinds of exclusiveness during the period of their articulation to the institutions comprising the bourgeois public sphere,” (Bennett, 1995, p.27). These effects brought on by high society values have plagued museums even to this very day, resulting in a continued effort to create a more inclusive system and while strides have indeed been made, there are many barriers that still tie into these founding ideals.

The Purpose of a Museum and How They Communicate

According to Barry Lord and Maria Piacente, museums fulfill their purpose through the functions of collecting, preservation, education, and research (Lord and Piacente, 2014, p.9). All of these functions then serve the main function of museums, also discussed by Lord and Piacente as exhibitions, which has continued to shape public perception of museums and influences attendance to this day. Collecting, as defined by Lord and Piacente, is; “The acquisition of works of art, artifacts, or specimens…” (Lord and Piacente, 2014, p.9). Historically, this process has been a building block for every major institution around the globe, especially as it relates to colonialist values here in American and British museums. By participating in this process, museums have grown collections that, put simply, are too vast and sprawling of multiple generations to showcase all at one point in time, lead alone under the same roof. In the event of a museum exhibition, the institute has the ability to showcase parts of their permanent collection to the public, creating a sense of exclusivity and celebrity when it comes to these objects.

As established, museums have a track record of making decisions without taking the public’s wants or desires into account. This disconnect from the public can lead to an inward

focus that affects all processes of the museum that Lord and Piacente discuss. Thus, curators of exhibitions are left to ultimately judge what is and isn't of value to show as it relates to the exhibition, creating a perceived sense of importance for the public to decipher for themselves or, in many instances, following along with. But what about all the other objects not on view? The ones that the public don't see in storage and/or simply not chosen for exhibition. Object preservation is also a key factor when it comes to a curator choosing what should go on display for exhibitions. Ultimately, preservation of objects can inform the exhibition and curation process for the museum. The function of preservation goes back to the collection process that was previously before. Museums are, "[…] committed to the preservation of material culture or the heritage with which they are concerned" (Lord and Piacente, 2014, p.9). Some traditionalists in the field would argue that the museums primary priority should be to conserve these objects in their preserved state if they want to have the liberty to display them in future exhibitions. With this preservation comes research on the object, sometimes years and years of extensive work put into understanding both the cultural significance as it relates to the object but also the historical significance as it relates to the institution it is housed in. It is important for the museum to properly understand the significance of the object so it may communicate to the public in attendance why it is of value to the show but also of value to their understanding of the exhibition. The exhibition process should, above all else, educate the visitors, another function of the museum, leaving a lasting impact on the public's understanding and perception of the world around them. Exhibitions fundamentally combine all of these functions we have discussed into one streamlined experience, to provide the public with a unique experience representative of the functions of the museum itself.

Museums, and therefore exhibitions for that matter, use a variety of communication forms to provide the audience with a unique interpretative experience. As discussed earlier, the educational factor of an exhibition is considered an important marker representative of success for the exhibition in question. A tool that museums often use in this process to communicate the research, historical significance, or the intended message of the objects/art on view are exhibition texts. These can be a reflection of the museum's communication agenda as well as the educational intentions of an exhibition. Though the results can be completely dependent on the audience imagined by the institution. According to Louise Ravelli and the writing on museum's texts as a communication form, "In the past, a curatorially driven agenda, developed with an audience of peers in mind, could function successfully with just minimal labels, noting such details as the date, scientific classification, and source of a specimen, for instance…directed largely at fellow scholars…" (Ravelli, 2006, p.3). In this instance, Ravelli suggests that for a presumably more educated audience that is more familiar with the art world and museum going as a whole, exhibition texts take on a more broad form excluding those that the institution might see as ill equipped to handle the exhibition. Alternatively, there is another version of exhibition texts that is used with the greater public in mind, as Ravelli continues, "However, a thematic, open, educationally oriented exhibition, aiming to appeal to a wide range of visitors, needs to make use of expanded texts, which contextualize an object, and which make explicit the basis of interpretation," (Ravelli, 2006, p.3). This represents most exhibition texts we see today, at least some variation of this, especially if an exhibition is aiming to be considered a success (at the very least in an educational way).

Another lens to view museum communication with the public is through 'semiotics'. Defined by Innis in Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's chapter of Gaynor Kavanagh's '*Museum*

Languages Objects and Texts' as; "the doctrine of general theory of signs […] [which] deals with meanings and messages in all their forms and all their contexts," (1991, p.49), semiotics is a important tool used by museums to guide visitors to exhibitions and other events that might take place within the walls of the institution. As this directly relates to exhibitions, there becomes a certain reliance on the museum's curators, yet again, by the public that they are providing them with the authentic way to navigate an exhibition. Which then begs the question: who is correct in the interpretation of a perceived route? To quote Hooper-Greenhill once again, "From the point of view of the analysis of intended communication, the distinction between indices and signs is crucial, because it enables the observation of the selection of indices," (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991, p. 54). In short, exhibition signage is crucial to the public's understanding of the institution's audience and thus they become reliant on it, much like the exhibition texts, to understand the intended interpretation. If the museum doesn't have said signage, the institution might remedy this with a map or, in the case of a special exhibition, provide a pamphlet including a map of the space and objects on display. This source of communication in particular will be discussed later in the analysis portion of the paper.

Continuing on from the example above, Hooper-Greenhill makes a distinction between the "intended meaning" of museum communication systems and the "theoretical model". Museums must balance the role of being a transmitter (exhibitor) with the medium (real things) so the public, the receiver, can infer and interpret the information. Hooper-Greenhill makes a deliberate effort to separate this concept of a theoretical model in her writing from the more intended meanings that influence the exhibition going experience for the public. It is important to do this within her research to show not only the unpredictability of the museum going experience in spite of this theory, but also the way in which communication systems implemented in

exhibitions can affect the experience separate from what is theorized. For example, intended communication systems put in place by the museum can illustrate the desired meaning to be drawn from an exhibition. As previously discussed, semiotics can partially make up this system. The concept of 'pertinence', a broad term which covers things like point of view and expressions of communication systems, is something that plays into this idea of semiotics in museums and intended meaning. According to Hooper-Greenhill this concept is important to keep in mind when discussing how museums have gone about communicating with the public, "…the concept of pertinence allows us to study how a given set of objects are related for the purposes of, say, an exhibition: the study would include an identification of which elements of the material phenomenon (the object) had become indices, and which approach to display had been followed for what reason," (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991, p.58). So, things like introductory texts, object labels, maps, diograms, etcétera, all have been designed by the exhibition planners to convey the relevant information to the visiting public in an international and deliberate delivery in a form of communicational pertinence. As Christopher Whitehead describes it, "It is through the curatorial and/or accidental orchestration of these components that narratives, messages, and discourse are produced," (Whitehead, 2009, p.33). Oftentimes, this form of communication can inform opinions on the exhibition and can reflect its success, especially if the design of these things follows the more 'open ended' exhibition that is education orientated like Ravelli suggests. Curators, while oftentimes a guiding voice for an exhibition, ultimately control what is intended to be perceived from an exhibition but even they can be influenced by the museum's theoretical model for understanding and disseminating information to the public.

So, now that it has been established how museums came to be, how they communicate information to the public, and what communication models institutions might use to do so, let us

begin to analyze how high societal values surrounding art and culture are upheld by museums to perpetuate this cycle.

Pierre Bourdieu and The Dynamics of 'Cultural Capital'

"There is no way out of the game of culture; and one's only chance of objectifying the true nature of the game is to objectify as fully as possible the very operations which one is obliged to use in order to achieve that objectification," (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 12).

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu theorized that cultural capital was the subtle way in which high societal values surrounding art and culture were created/upheld by those with more capital than others. In theory, the more capital you have the greater power you hold within society as popular taste applies the schemes of the ethos, which pertain in the ordinary circumstances of life, to legitimate works of art, and so performs a systematic reduction of the things of art to the things of life (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 5). Culture, as it were, also has its titles of nobility-awarded by the educational system-and its pedigrees, measured by seniority in admission to the nobility of the individual.

"The relative weight of home background and of formal education (the effectiveness and duration of which are closely dependent on social origin) varies according to the extent to which the different cultural practices are recognized and taught by the educational system, and the influence of social origin is strongest-other things being equal-in 'extra-curricular' and avant-garde culture," (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 1).

Bourdieu specifically describes three differing sources that create a greater cultural capital. Families inherently pass down their own capital onto their children by introducing them to the arts at an early age. Taking them to galleries and exhibitions, theater performances, introducing them to music, all perpetuate the definition of what legitimate culture within our

society appears to be. Bourdieu defines this source of capital as objective. Education of said values was also seen by Bourdieu as the institutionalized form of cultural capital, something that was connected to the varying nature of the educational system of a society. The level of education and qualifications awarded by such education present the subject with an opportunity to cultivate more capital.

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Embodied capital are things like the language one might use in their life and the manner in which they carry themselves, importance is attached to manners. Manners that can be understood once it is seen that it is these imponderables of practice which distinguish the different-and ranked-modes of culture acquisition, early or late, domestic or scholastic, and the classes of individuals which they characterize (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 2).

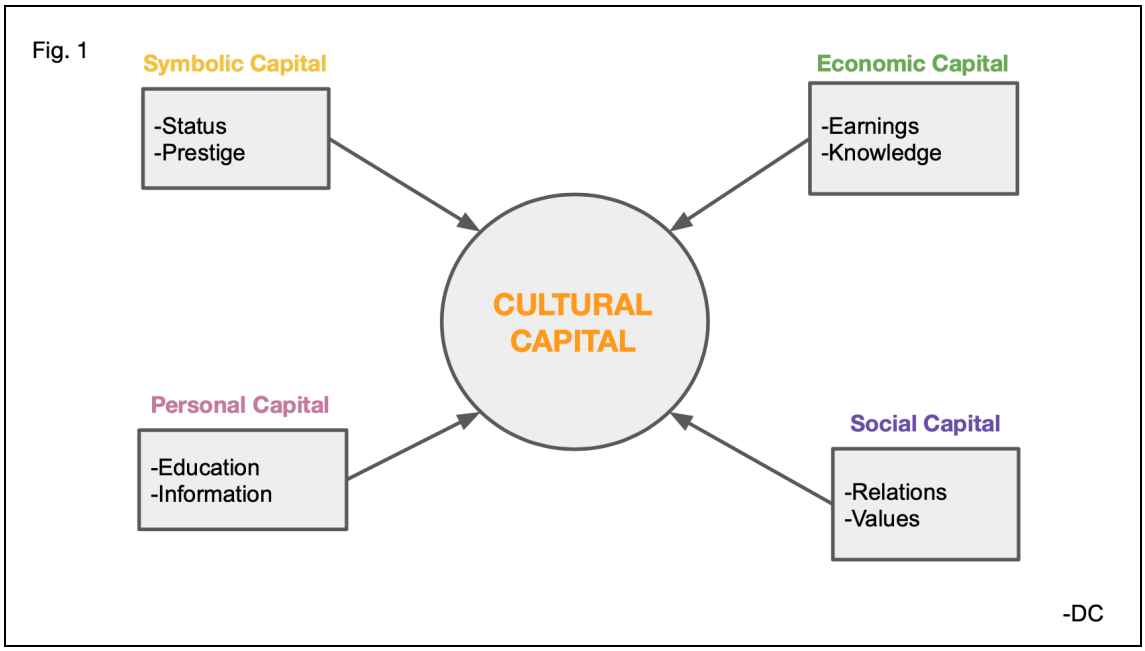

Figure 1: Diagram of the factors that create Cultural Capital, design by author

Whitehead's "Product and. Process Based Interpretation"

Museologist and Art Historian, Christopher Whitehead suggests that a principal characteristic of art museum cartography is the focus of interpretation on works of art as objects which embody the history of art. Indeed, on a conceptual level, Whitehead has created two broad categories as it relates to the interpretation of art.

> "The sorts of questions and issues which are incorporated into a product-based approach are: who is the artist; what are the visible characteristics of the work in terms of technique and style; how are they different from those of the works of predecessors and other artists generally, or indeed from those manifest in other parts of the same artist's 'oeuvre'; how important is this object; how important is the artist?" (Whitehead, 2012, p. 36).

Product-based approach is where objects are understood as outcomes of the creative act – as products This tends to hide from view the role of process within the production of such

objects and the role of such objects in artistic and other social processes. Process-based approaches ask different questions, literally about the processes in which art is embedded: why was this object made; for whom; how was it paid for and by whom; what contract existed; what contingent historical circumstances existed; how was it displayed and viewed; how does all of this relate to what it represents; how does it relate to societal concerns (Whitehead, 2012, p. 37). In short, art objects can be mapped in relation to different cultural concerns in museum interpretation, and indeed the two axes of product-based and process-based interpretation can intersect (Whitehead, 2012, p. 37). When a museum is developing the interpretation for the objects on display, the end result often lacks the understanding that a visitor is going to be trying to read it in the first place. Object interpretation is sometimes the only way in which the museum/curator communicates to the visitors what they are seeing and why it is so important. With that comes a responsibility to provide visitors with clear and helpful details to further contextualize the object. In doing so, the institution has begun to take steps towards providing a more visitor centric experience, as modern museums have learned that their origins exclude the public from the big picture. As writer Duncan Cameron discusses in a chapter titled, *'The Museum, A Temple Or The Forum'* from Gail Anderson *'Reinventing the Museum the Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift'*, art museums were developed as a place for those with higher economic, social, and cultural capital to visit expecting the exclusion of the public. The rich aristocrats could all enjoy the arts and understand the importance with or without interpretation, which was largely aimed at only those in the "know" to understand in the first place. However, now that museums claim to cater to the public and their needs, so too should the interpretation that is, in theory, used to educate and communicate with visitors. "The public museum was now an institutionalization of the individual collecting behavior. Thus the public

had a right to expect that the collections presented and interpreted would in some way be consistent with the values of its society and with its collective perceptions of the environment or, if you wish, of reality," (Cameron, 2012, p.53). Thus, when museum staff are developing interpretation for an object, the understanding that visitors might not have the same exposure to the world of art like they themselves do. To reiterate, museum interpretation is directly tied to visitor centricity because it is arguably the most important (and sometimes the only explicit) way an institution can communicate with its visitors as well as educate. It affects their experience in a gallery space outside of just the understanding of an object. It can ease the social and cultural stressors that visitors feel when attending a museum due to thresholds not seen by the naked eye. "Museums and art galleries, like the majority of other established cultural institutions, must institute reform and create an equality of cultural opportunity," (Cameron, 2012, p.59).

To summarize everything discussed so far, museums have stood as a symbol of power and wealth, and such these effects brought on by high society values have plagued museums even to this very day, resulting in a continued effort to create a more inclusive system and while strides have indeed been made, there are many barriers that still tie into these founding ideals. According to Barry Lord and Maria Piacente, museums fulfill their purpose through the functions of collecting, preservation, education, and research (Lord and Piacente, 2014, p.9). Some traditionalists in the field would argue that the museums primary priority should be to conserve these objects in their preserved state if they want to have the liberty to display them in future exhibitions. The exhibition process should, above all else, educate the visitors, another function of the museum, leaving a lasting impact on the public's understanding and perception of the world around them. Museums, and therefore exhibitions for that matter, use a variety of communication forms to provide the audience with a unique interpretative experience. Bourdieu

theorized that cultural capital was the subtle way in which high societal values surrounding art and culture were created/upheld by those with more capital than others, this can be related to museums communications systems as discussed by Whitehead that suggests that a principal characteristic of art museum cartography is the focus of interpretation on works of art as objects which embody the history of art. Object interpretation is sometimes the only way in which the museum/curator communicates to the visitors what they are seeing and why it is so important. Museum interpretation is directly tied to these factors and should be tied to visitor centricity because it is arguably the most important (and sometimes the only explicit) way an institution can communicate with its visitors as well as educate. In the next section, I will briefly touch on why visitor centricity is so important as it relates to interpretation of art before entering into the exhibition analysis.

The Importance of Visitor Centricity

It has become a trend for museums to put more focus on removing barriers to entry to improve accessibility in an effort to reach a wider audience. However, despite their efforts to become a more inclusive environment, art museums have continued to struggle with reaching an expanded audience through visitor centricity. Oftentimes, museums are more likely to engage with their respective visitors in a manner that inherently involves them very little. To understand what it means to provide the visitors of your institution with a "visitor-centered" experience could be the key to finding a solution to the problems faced by the barriers discussed earlier. Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson discuss the issues museums have when trying to implement this approach and what they have found to be possible solutions to these issues. Within their findings, they specifically state that visitors to museums are "constantly looking for the inside

information that will help them get it too," (Samis and Michaelson, 2017, p.11) and conclude that museums are left wondering, "What do we provide our visitors?," (Samis and Michaelson, 2017, p.18). With this in mind, two barriers that affect visitors' experiences in the museum are lack of clear communication (language) in the museum text and the intimidation felt when engaging with staff. Writer Judy Rand composed a list of important human needs, seen from a visitors point of view, which was used by Samis and Michaelson as a base for their research when trying to discover ways to address these barriers. Comfort, respect, welcome/belonging, are among the *'Visitors Bill of Rights'* key needs that need to be addressed in order for visitors to feel more welcomed. For instance, gallery staff should be attentive and available for all visitors, "As long as the museum is providing interpretive assistance, visitors can feel supported," (Samis and Michaelson, 2017, p.10). This gives the unengaged visitor a sense of equality with the visitors who are already quite knowledgeable about the objects or show on display.

'Figures Of Speech' Introduced to the Museum Lexicon

The research previously discussed will be used as a lens in which to examine the Brooklyn Museum iteration of *'Virgil Abloh: Figures of Speech'* is set up, what it does to communicate to its audience, and if the exhibit could fit 'Tourist vs. Purist' design methodology/mantra and why this is important in terms of intellectual accessibility.

Opening in June 2019 and originally set in an immersive space designed by Samir Bantal, the Director of AMO, the research studio of Rem Koolhaas's renowned architectural firm OMA, the original Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition set out to offer an in-depth look at defining highlights of Abloh's career including a program of cross-disciplinary offerings that will

mirror the artist's range of interests across music, fashion, architecture, and design. The exhibition showcased a survey of this artist's output over nearly two decades. It was imagined as a way to pull back the curtain on his working processes to inspire and teach others. Including collaborations with artists Takashi Murakami and Arthur Jafa, and photographer Juergen Teller, among others; material from his fashion label Off-White; and items from Louis Vuitton, the exhibit is highlights use of language and quotation marks turns his designs, and the people who engage with them, into literal figures of speech. According to the description, "The artist uses the Black gaze to dismantle the traditionally white-crafted structures at work in fashion, design, architecture, and art, reconstructing new work through the lens of the Black cultural experience". The show remained on view at the MCA until September 2021, only to then reside in Fire Station, Doha, Qatar's leading contemporary art space, from November 2021 to April 2022 before eventually settling at its most recent location, the Brooklyn Museum, on July 1, 2022 - January 29, 2023.

With this newest showcase, the Brooklyn Museum had their work cut out for them. Newly added for the Brooklyn presentation are never-before-seen objects from the artist's archive, as well as a "social sculpture," which drew upon Abloh's background in architecture. The installation offered a space for gathering and performances, and is designed to counter the historical lack of space afforded to Black artists and Black people in cultural institutions. To complete plans for the Brooklyn Museum's presentation after his passing, Abloh's design studio, Alaska Alaska, a creative studio in London, in tandem with Mahfuz Sultan, collaborated with the museum's Director of Exhibition Design, Lance Singletary, to ensure the artist's vision was fulfilled. Nordstrom served as a major sponsor of the exhibition by partnering with the Brooklyn Museum and Virgil Abloh Securities, a newly developed creative corporation to unite several of

Abloh's flagship projects after his passing under one banner headed by Shannon Abloh. Upon the exhibition opening party in June, the company continued to partner on events and activations with the Brooklyn Museum including the "Social Sculpture" series featuring Jian DeLeon, Men's Fashion and Editorial Director at Nordstrom, and their Teen Night programming where Nordstrom would participate in a mentorship session as well as the Brooklyn Talk series that honored the profound legacy of Abloh alongside members of his creative community. The likes of which included the notably mysterious Jim Joe, a New York based artist famous for his crude style of handwriting that inspired Abloh to write on all of his shoes with quotations.

Figure 2: A view of the first table beside the main entrance to *'Figures of Speech'*

Located on the first floor of the museum, the exhibition begins with first being handed a catalog that is to be used throughout the exhibition. Walking through the threshold of entry, to your immediate right you are greeted with a stack of records placed on the floor before a long

natural wood table covered in samples of Nike shoes developed by Abloh (see Figure 2), a green tufted rug from an Ikea collaboration with the text “WET GRASS” incorporated into the center of the piece, and a clear Rimowa luggage bag filled with Nerf Guns. On the wall above this hung a digital screen that played the original trailer for Pyrex Vision on loop. To your left, a foam mock up of the Chicago skyline with a singular red building made of plastic placed on the floor just before yet another natural wood table adorned with rough sketches, Abloh’s personal black books, a custom Pioneer DJ set with accompanying speakers, a custom bejeweled paper clip bracelet and necklace by Jacob & Co. and at the head of the table, a custom Off-White X Nike tennis uniform fashioned for Serena Williams.

From there, to your right the exhibition continues with yet another long national wood table located in the center of a long corridor, this time containing various items relating to his fashion ventures. Runway looks from Off-White and Louis Vuitton collections alike are found at the start and end of this table and in between, a spread of different objects like sample fabrics, an unreleased art book, and cardboard file boxes stacked on top of one another.

Figure 3: A view from inside *'Figures of Speech'* showcasing the center table in the second corridor

On the left side of this center table, clothes hang on bright blue clothing racks designed for the show (see Figure 4). These clothes spanned many of the Off-White fashion seasons with a few early pieces from Pyrex put in towards the front most rack. Though for many in the gallery, this would be hard to figure out due to the close proximity of the clothes to one another and the inability to move them on the rack. Anecdotally, when I made a visit to the exhibition for research, the museum workers inside the gallery space were consistently reprimanding attendees that reached out to look through the clothing rack presentation of objects for the show. This inherent lack of communication left visitors confused as to what they could and could not do when moving throughout the gallery space, resulting in the presence of the museum staff becoming a hindrance, or rather an interruption, in the overall experience.

Figure 4: A view from inside *'Figures of Speech'* showcasing the clothing rack-like presentation of pieces for the exhibition.

To the right of the center table with the Louis Vuitton rainbow race outfit (seen above), there was a final long table with items spread out in similar fashion to the one previously mentioned. Small projects of all kinds, a kite fashioned out of Louis Vuitton monogram nylon (Figure 9) and a few mannequins dressed in looks from Abloh's different runway presentations at Louis Vuitton. On the wall above, a clock with its numbers replaced with the Louis Vuitton logo and constructed to count backwards. At the end of this corridor resided a Louis Vuitton runway look, resembling that of an angel, that was added to the Brooklyn presentation after Abloh's final posthumous show at the house (Figure 5). To the right of that was a screen that played Abloh's first Louis Vuitton runway show and his last Off-White runway show back to back on loop for all to see.

Figure 5: A Louis Vuitton runway look, resembling that of an angel, added to the Brooklyn presentation after Abloh's final posthumous show at the house.

In the center of the C-like layout, the aforementioned 'Social Structure' was on full display. A massive wooden cabin built into the museum designed to incorporate the columns that occupy the gallery, this was meant to serve as the centerpiece to the Brooklyn presentation.

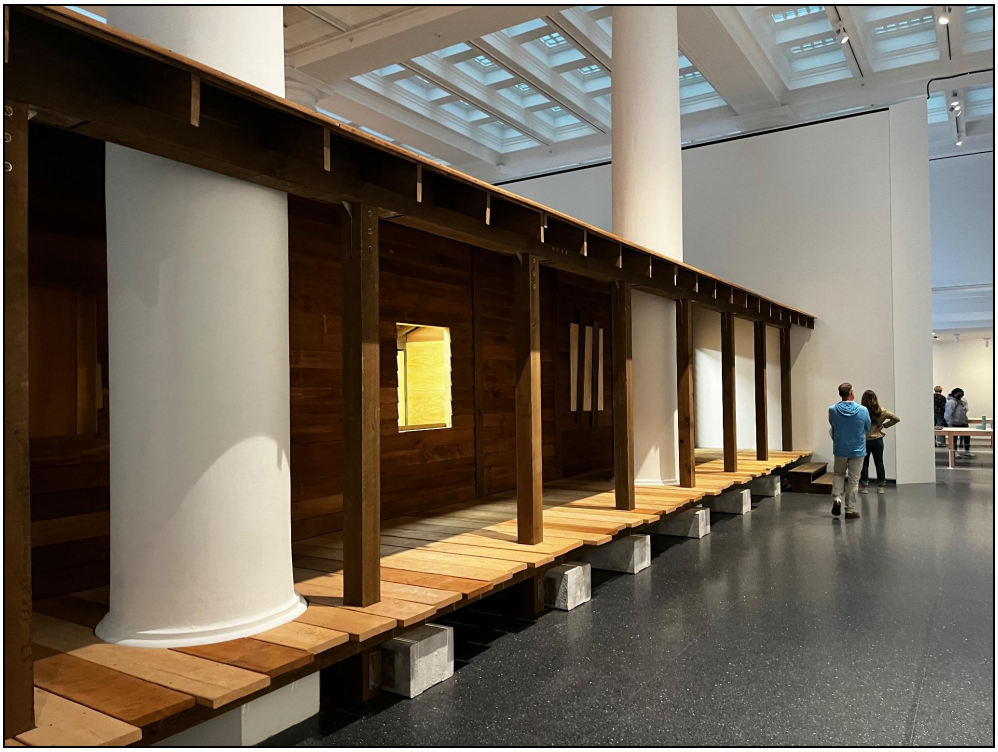

Figure 6: The ‘Social Structure’, constructed with the help of Alaska Alaska, built for the centerpiece of the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum

Once finished in the center portion, visitors would make their way back to the final corridor which was dedicated almost entirely to the ‘Church and State’ art store. A large red screen flashing various phrases and quotes that would play behind Abloh during his DJ sets on the adjacent wall illuminated the storefront, where visitors could purchase exclusive clothing, the accompanying catalog for the exhibition, and even an Off-White haute-couture dress.

Within the confines of the exhibition space, it can be argued that the audience that attends this exhibition is expected to have a certain amount of cultural capital to be able to understand the objects that are on display. As discussed by Bourdieu, it is clear that education has its ties to cultural capital. One's previous knowledge and education about the artist's work lends to the benefit of the individual visitor's experience but excludes those who came to the exhibition to

learn in the first place. This is most evident in the examples of object interpretation found in the booklet handed out to visitors upon arrival.

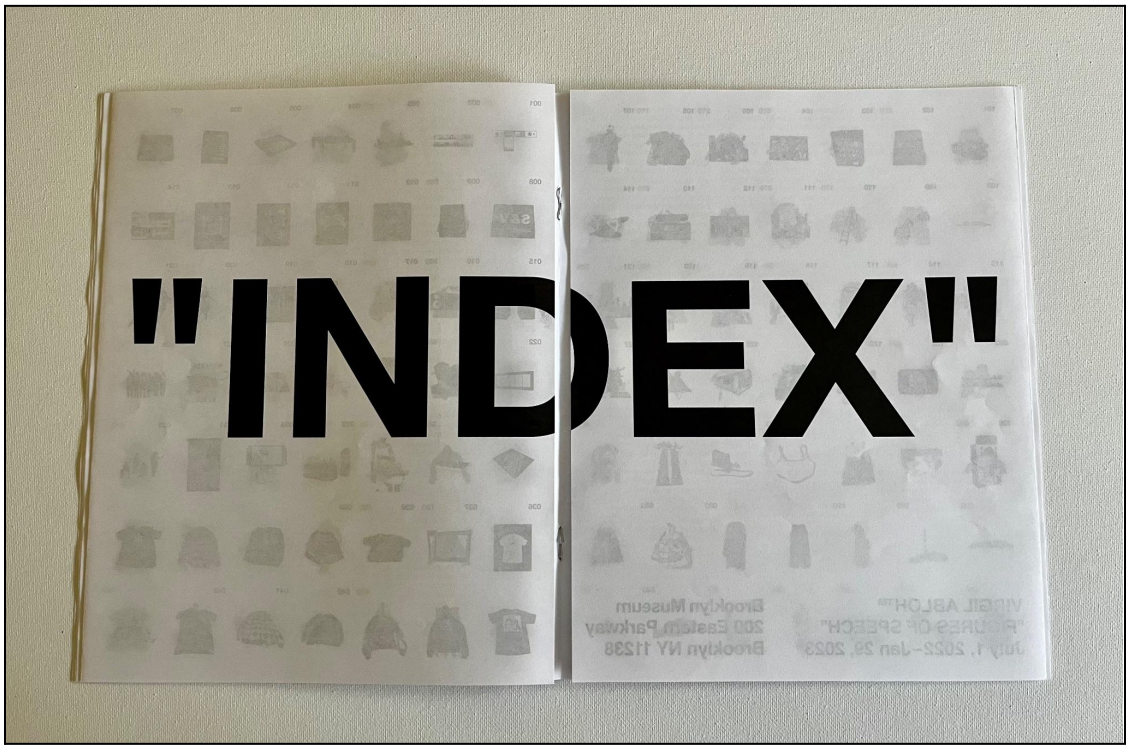

Figure 7: The “INDEX” section of the booklet given out at the start of the exhibit

When it comes to addressing the museum barrier of communication, it is within the interpretation of the objects on display within the gallery space where interpreters can effect change. “Decidedly, museums can be baffling, bewildering places, where even physical space can be intimidating. With limited knowledge or context, even easy works—the pleasing or seemingly recognizable ones—may be hard to understand,” (Samis and Michaelson, pg.9). Visitors need the added context that the curator knows to better appreciate an object. Staff engagement across disciplines within the institution can help with this. If object interpretation

can be easily accessible to your visitors you are trying to reach, then they have learned something new and experienced an instance of clear communication.

Figure 8: The ‘Index’ section of the prescribed booklet given out to visitors as a tool to navigate the exhibit

Trying to capture everything on display, a staggering 128 objects in total, all with varied levels of interpretation, could be found in this one booklet (Figure 8). Each number displayed on the table next to the object matched with an object in the booklet, the only interpretation of said object found inside the gallery is what you see here. In most cases lacking critical context, descriptions or reason of significance. For instance, here is one example of such a description of an object from the show.

Figure 9: Object 094 as presented in the exhibition

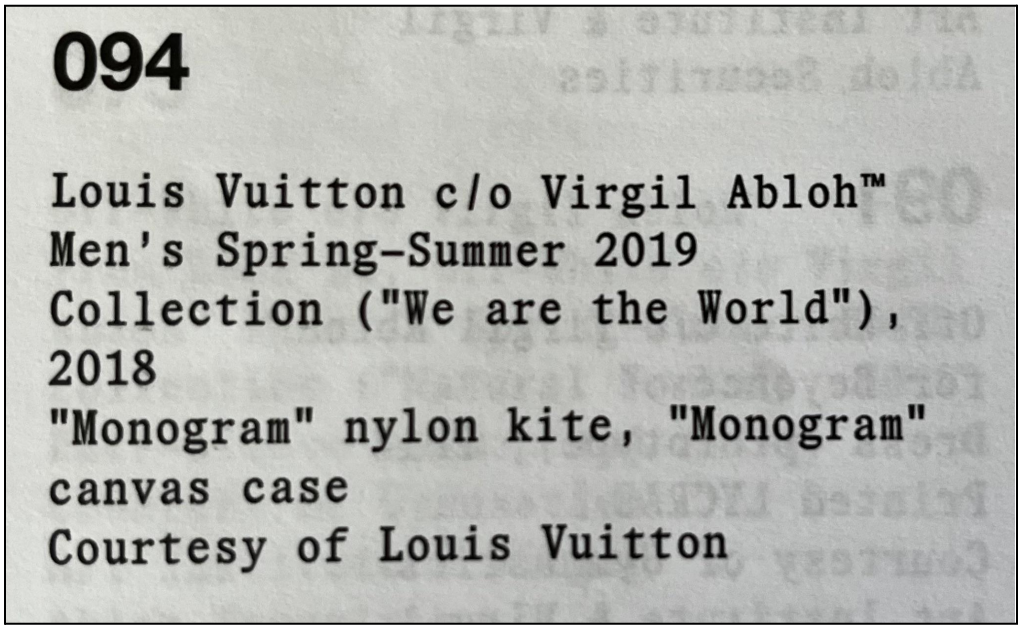

Figure 10: The interpretation of Object 094 as found in the exhibition booklet

Kites, paper airplanes, balloons and even bouncy castles carried a significant symbolism to Abloh. As a fixture of his ‘Boyhood Ideology ' when conceptualizing and designing for the house, they represented the childlike imagination he wanted to instill in the eyes of his audiences, but as an architect, he was also fascinated with their structure. He wanted us to see life and humanity through the untainted and non judgemental eyes of a child. Within this object interpretation, none of that is communicated to the visitor of the exhibition (Figure 10). What is there is simply a bare bones tombstone which describes what the object is made of and where it comes from. None of this context is present. The object presentation lacks any of the presentation that Whitehead discusses when talking about product and process where objects are understood as outcomes of the creative act – as products or interpreted in a way that asks different questions, literally about the processes in which art is embedded.

Abloh's approach to creation was about marrying the two areas of the art world, the tourists and the purists, in the various industries he was involved in. The end goal was to create work that could be understood, or easy to form an emotional connection to, regardless of your background in education, race, income, and so on. This exhibition and subsequent booklet alienate the visitors who would fit into the tourist mold. The purists are the only ones that are able to walk away from this exhibit with anything of value about the objects on display. Not because they were able to learn something new, but because they were able to see something they already knew about in person. Those who aspire towards the dominion of knowledge and those who already inhabit it were seen as equals by Abloh, everyone deserves a seat at the proverbial table so that we might find common ground and foster deeper human connections for this exhibit to be successful within the ideals of the artist.

In Conclusion, Question Everything

To understand why the object is on display and the story behind it leads to not only a greater appreciation of said object, but a feeling of time well spent within the gallery space. A feeling of belonging and understanding. “Museums are intimidating spaces with a language all their own,” (Samis and Michaelson, pg.10). If we are to combat this language barrier and others, within the world of the museum, then we must present visitors with an experience developed for their needs and not what the institution believes they need. This booklet is a prime example as to why this is the case. Its design is confusing at best and at worst elitist to anyone who lacks the cultural capital to understand the objects on display before entering the gallery. Completely taking you out of the experience to thumb through an encyclopedia-like tool meant to help only results in further confusion. Fundamentally, this design choice excludes the tourist, only catering to the purists visiting the exhibition. Abloh’s mantra of inclusivity when approaching design, on all fronts, is nowhere to be found. As seen above, the exhibit was organized in a way that goes against Abloh’s inclusive approach to design and worldview. Abloh’s artistic intent is lost in a sea of confusion and elitism that plagues museum interpretation to this day. These factors created what I believe to be a museum going experience inherently tied to elitism, something that Abloh fought against in all manner of mediums. Perhaps some more practical ways to combat this in the future would be to cut down on the overwhelming amount of objects and focus on interpretation for the tourists in the audience. Curators, while oftentimes a guiding voice for an exhibition, ultimately control what is intended to be perceived from an exhibition but even they can be influenced by the museum’s theoretical model for understanding and disseminating information to the public, so their purist perspective is valued but needs to be channeled to keep the visitors

engaged. Perhaps another solution would be to make the exhibition free to all visitors of the museum. A special ticket price for entry can sting even more when the exhibition leaves you contemplating as to why you went in the first place.

I believe these factors unwittingly created a museum-going experience inherently tied to elitism, which ironically was something that Virgil Abloh fought against.

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