

SABINA OTT

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MUSEUMS



Catching a glimpse of the "Mona Lisa" through the crowd at the Louvre in Paris can be a challenge, particularly if a sea of cellphones is up trying to capture the moment.

There's nothing wonderful about the big museum crush

BY ALYSSA ROSENBERG | Washington Post

There are a lot of wonderful things about France in the springtime: the flowers blooming in the Luxembourg Gardens, the Parisians ambling along the Promenade Plantee, the green woods around the Chateau de Chenonceau in the Loire Valley and the fabulous produce that makes its way into Paris' restaurants. But as traveling abroad so often does these days, my recent trip to Paris reminded me just how utterly horrible it can be to try to see some of the world's greatest works of art.

At the Louvre, my husband and I ducked briefly into the crowds around the Venus de Milo and skipped the "Mona Lisa" altogether in favor of Leonardo da Vinci's "Virgin of the Rocks." And after braving the masses around "The Winged Victory of Samothrace," which is easier to see than some of its equally famous counterparts thanks to its position on a grand staircase, we fled back to the marvelous — and shamefully underattended — Islamic art wing.

The Louvre's audience control issues aren't unique to that institution; at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, you have to work your way up to Rembrandt's "The Night Watch" through the crowds of people clustering around in the hopes of snapping a selfie with the monumental work, which at least gives your eyes a chance to linger on all of Rembrandt's magnificent faces.

Though I'm frustrated by trying to

look at art through a flurry of loathed cellphones, I can't exactly blame anyone for the impulse to snap a picture of a great work. (People who take pictures with tablets in museums, on the other hand, are history's greatest monsters.) We live in a moment when an experience might as well not have happened unless it's documented and broadcast as widely as possible. But it is completely exhausting and discouraging that museums haven't found a way to balance the demands of museumgoers who want to take snapshots of art and people who want to actually look at it with their eyes instead of through a lens.

The addition of cellphones and digital cameras may have changed what crowds do when they get up close to famous works of art, but the crowds themselves, and the difficulties museums face in dealing with them, aren't exactly new issues.

In 1907, the Louvre put the "Mona

Lisa" under glass after another picture was vandalized, a decision that "has caused dismay to art-lovers, who declare that the effect of the picture is ruined by the false lights and reflections." The New York Times reported. The painting was stolen in 1911, and after it was recovered in 1913, it was displayed in Italy on its way home to France. "So great was the pressure of the crowds around" the Brera Gallery in Milan "that about 200 police officials and carabinieri had difficulty in preserving order."

When the Khrushchevs visited France in 1960, Madame Khrushchev behaved a lot like modern tourists at the Louvre: "The museum tour left little time for contemplation," wrote one correspondent. "She stopped for only a few of the major pieces — such as Venus de Milo, Mona Lisa and Bonaparte's crown." And when the French government finally allowed the painting to be displayed in America in 1963, "The president's mother, Mrs. Joseph P. Kennedy, could not squeeze through the mob, so she found a seat in a side gallery." More than a million people visited the "Mona Lisa" when it went on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York last year.

Sending works like the "Mona Lisa" on tour might help disperse the crowds at the Louvre by letting more viewers see the piece in their home countries. But Louvre officials have

said that the painting won't be traveling; it's simply too fragile to weather overseas trips.

So what's to be done? What about dedicated spaces for important works? The Sackler Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which houses the Temple of Dendur, is one of the most magnificent exhibition spaces anywhere. But it works because of the temple's scale; even if the "Mona Lisa" were exhibited in a bigger room, or even if the Venus de Milo had a more dedicated gallery, the pieces aren't monumental; you'd still want to get fairly close to them to get the full effect.

That leaves carefully timed tickets as the most realistic way to thin out crowds around the most popular exhibitions. That adds logistical complexity, and potentially extra costs to a visit to a museum like the Louvre, where entrance fees already start at 15 euros (about \$17). Giving audiences a limited amount of time with a piece, whether they want to contemplate it or simply document that they were there, might not seem fair. But the current massive crowds aren't serving anyone, whether your goal is to grab an Instagram-worthy shot in a sea of other cameras or an intimate communion with a lady with an enigmatic smile.

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DO IT NOW

Sabina Ott, 'who cares for the sky?'

Sabina Ott has built an 8,000-cubic-foot mountain out of canvas, cardboard, polystyrene and wood at the Hyde Park Art Center that resembles the massive snow fort you wanted to build as a child. Her work is meant to contemplate the human fascination with viewing and climbing "the mountain" but another of Ott's inspirations is Gertrude Stein's "The World is Round" (1938), the modernist author's only children's book. The story follows a little girl, Rose, in her struggle to climb a difficult mountain in order to understand the world better from the top. "I chose to focus my work on Stein's tale in the hopes that the narrative's innocence, persistence, fortitude and discovery will come through in the installation and connect with the Art Center's multigenerational audience," Ott has said about her monumental work.

Like Ott's previous installations, this mountain is an immersive space. Visitors may enter the depths of the mountain via a tunnel that leads to a small cave, scale the exterior and climb to the peak. The tunnels, caves and grottos will be filled with sculpture as well as sound, cocooning visitors in Ott's creative world. Visitors who want to recreate Rose's journey may use a single staircase to the peak of this 16-foot mountain. Along the interior, Ott has invited fellow artists to create smaller installations embedded into the mountain. The mountain's intricacies are designed to completely envelop visitors and transform the main gallery.

Through May 1 at Hyde Park Art Center, 5020 S. Cornell Ave., www.hydeparkart.org
— Louise Burton



An untitled 2009 painting by Kerry James Marshall, part of a retrospective at Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

Kerry James Marshall: 'Mastry' at the MCA

For this retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Kerry James Marshall had to put into the hands of the show's curators his life's work, an explicit and present statement, in paint, that black lives matter. His vibrant, grand canvases will fill the MCA's fourth floor with his version of black American life, tableaux brimming, radically, with such ordinary pleasures as a couple's night out at a club, a pair of kids running through a wheat field.

"His paintings... are extraordinarily generous, visually generous," said Madeline Gryszczyk, Pritzker director of the MCA Chicago. "There is a richness of color, a richness of composition. There's an excess of giving back to the viewer on aesthetic terms. But underneath, there has been a deeply intellectual enterprise... Kerry is a quiet hero of this city. This is a person who has made it his point to live on the South Side of Chicago, to be inspired by the South Side... and to use it as a talking-off-point for topics and artworks that are relevant well beyond Chicago."

Saturday through Sept. 25, Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave., www.mca-chicago.org
— Steve Johnson

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ARTFORUM



View of "Sabina Ott: who cares for the sky?," 2016. Photos: Tom Van Eynde.

500 WORDS

Sabina Ott's 2014 exhibition "Here and there pink melon joy" at the Chicago Cultural Center exploded her previously painterly work into a multidimensional journey through purgatory, heaven, and hell. As Jason Fournberg observed on artforum.com, "This dream is no escape from reality; Ott builds the type of world she wants us to live in." Her new project, *who cares for the sky?*, is her most ambitious to date, featuring an eight-thousand-cubic-foot mountain that can be scaled on a series of stairs or burrowed into via a treasure-filled underground tunnel, presenting a lopsided monument to innocence, persistence, and wonder. The installation will be on view at Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago through May 1, 2016.

IT COULD BE THAT MOST ARTISTS have just one or two central ideas. In 1985, I painted a rose and a mountain. The oil paint was thick, and the material really became the subject. Then in 1990, after reading Gertrude Stein, I began a body of work with roses and wax. There's something so beautiful and inexplicable about the way Stein takes an everyday object, removes it from its context, and then places it next to another familiar thing in the wrong way. The syntaxes switch, everything is thrown up in the air and falls down, and then you can experience it again in a fresh way. The image of the rose, and Stein's technique, became important sources for me. Since beginning my work with foam in 2014, I've come to understand that the material was my way of expressing a desire to take painting into another dimension. The sculptures and videos in the exhibition achieve the kind of layering I sought in my paintings.

As soon as I walked into the gallery here, I knew I'd build a mountain. It fills this space—which is twenty-two feet tall, twenty feet wide, and seventy feet long—and it can be viewed on one side from a catwalk. It was built by a team of about ten people, mostly volunteers, over twenty-one days. The stairway that leads to the top of the installation is very steep, you don't know what to expect when you get to the top, but instead of a solitary summit there is a play space with benches and beanbags and children's chairs where people can interact, hang out, and watch one of the videos as an enormous projection. The great thing about mountains is that they position you in the middle. When you desire to get to the top of a mountain, you think you are going to the top of the world, but you end up between above and below. All three videos re-create the perspective shifts that occur by using aerial footage shot from a plane as well as footage shot of clouds from below. Individual letters float and then spin over the aerial landscapes, a letter becomes dislodged from a word, and then it becomes a frame for the landscape, a frame for movement. Language becomes a means of abstraction.

The tunnel represents, among other things, the community of artists that I joined when I moved to Chicago in 2005. I asked about seventy artists to each contribute a small, personal work that could be installed on the tunnel's walls. It's a very mixed batch of things from a very mixed batch of artists: There's a photograph of a carrot-head character framed in rubber by Jeanne Dunning, a small conspiracy drawing by Deb Sokolow, a photograph by Meg T. Noe, an altered painter's palette by Michelle Wasson, a drawing of an elf by teenager Zoe Gordon, a glittery piece by artist and critic Matt Morris, a painted entry buzzer by Kelly Loyd, a drawing of a backward American flag by six-year-old Naava Stein, and a small painting by Michelle Grabner. But it's not always clear that most of these pieces were made by professional artists. There's something that happens when you abstract a single piece from a body of work that renders it talkative. Each piece, seen on its own, has an emotional power that is quite different than the experience you'd have in viewing it in the context of the artist's larger body of work. The experience of the tunnel hovers somewhere between that of a shrine filled with offerings and that of a catacomb filled with bones.

I've always believed that my artworks offer a place where trauma can be transformed into something else by turning things inside out and dislodging them into a space of pure play. When I made paintings, I was experiencing that kind of play by myself and it was very personal. But here, in these spaces, it's very public. I feel like this space is really an offering. I was not in total control of this project at all and I loved that feeling. Someone who came to the show compared it to writing a poem: "You begin, but don't know how it's going to end. The mountain has an illusion of solidity, but it feels very temporary to me, perhaps even still growing, and in a way, that's a beautiful thing."

— As told to Chris Kraus