



In Search of a Lost Avant-Garde: An Anthropologist Investigates the Contemporary Art Museum

Matti Bunzl

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In 2008, anthropologist Matti Bunzl was given rare access to observe the curatorial department of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. For five months, he sat with the institution's staff, witnessing firsthand what truly goes on behind the scenes at a contemporary art museum. From fund-raising and owner loans to museum-artist relations to the immense effort involved in safely shipping sixty works from twenty-seven lenders in fourteen cities and five countries, Matti Bunzl's *In Search of a Lost Avant-Garde* illustrates the inner workings of one of Chicago's premier cultural institutions.

Bunzl's ethnography is designed to show how a commitment to the avant-garde can come into conflict with an imperative for growth, leading to the abandonment of the new and difficult in favor of the entertaining and profitable. Jeff Koons, whose massive retrospective debuted during Bunzl's research, occupies a central place in his book and exposes the anxieties caused by such seemingly pornographic work as the infamous *Made in Heaven* series. Featuring cameos by other leading artists, including Liam Gillick, Jenny Holzer, Karen Kilimnik, and Tino Sehgal, the drama Bunzl narrates is palpable and entertaining and sheds an altogether new light on the contemporary art boom.

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