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### Transcript: Authority and Anxiety with MoMA director Glenn Lowry



Guest Glenn Lowry with host Charlotte Burns. Photo credit: Colin Miller

By  Charlotte Burns

executive editor of In Other Words

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**Charlotte Burns:** Hello and welcome to In Other Words. On today's episode, we're joined by Glenn Lowry, the [director](#) of MoMA in New York. Hello, Glenn.

**Glenn Lowry:** Hello.

**Charlotte Burns:** Thank you for being here. Glenn is the sixth director of [The Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York, joining the institution in 1995 and leading it through one renovation so far and partly through another. The first phase is complete as of this summer, am I right?

**Glenn Lowry:** Correct, and the second one I hope will be finished in about a year.

**Charlotte Burns:** MoMA will be moving into the former home of the [American Folk Art Museum](#). When that news first broke, there was a lot of negative reaction to it. Where do you feel we are now?

**Glenn Lowry:** Well, I think there were two different reactions. There was an inside the art world reaction, which was different from the public reaction. I think the public reaction was not particularly concerned about this expansion or even the fact that in the process, we were going to take down the former Folk Art building. Whereas inside the art world, there was concern about a building that had had only a short life no longer existing.

The reality was that Folk Art was on the verge of bankruptcy and couldn't afford the building that they had built, and we

were able to help them avoid bankruptcy by acquiring it and, after a great deal of study and agonizing, determined that the only way to make that space work for us was to build a new building on the site. We'll be judged by the quality of what replaces it.

**Charlotte Burns:** I remember when I [interviewed](#) you a few years ago now for The Art Newspaper, you and I were talking about the issue of space and crowding in museums, specifically at MoMA. You said that: "Had our attendance grown by 25% to 30%, which is what we figured it would with the 2004 expansion, you still would have had those moments of solitude." How much did attendance grow in those years?

**Glenn Lowry:** Well, to our complete amazement, it doubled, and it has continued to grow—although much less dramatically. But we went from an institution in 2000 that had 1.6 million or 1.7 million visitors to an institution today with close to 3.2 million visitors—

**Charlotte Burns:** Wow.

**Glenn Lowry:** —partially because the program we developed hit a chord with the public, but also because there's been an explosion of interest in Modern and Contemporary art. That explosion, which has affected many other museums, affected us perhaps even more than most.

We've now managed to resolve many of the crowding issues that affected us initially. We found ways of processing people so that the whole ticketing moment is less crowded. We found ways of accelerating the coat check and improving the coat check. And already in this new project. We have a second coat check, which has relieved one of the big pressure points. Over time, you learn how to work with what you have.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Glenn Lowry:** This new project will provide not only a great deal more gallery space, but a completely reconfigured entrance sequence that I think will alleviate much of the anxiety that many inside the art world felt about the crowding at the beginning of one's journey through the museum.

Having said that, museums are social spaces. People come there to be with other people. We're well aware that we have to provide a variety of experiences that engage everyone who's interested in the museum—from those who want to be alone or in a quiet moment with a work of art to those who enjoy looking at art with other people.

**Charlotte Burns:** In that same interview, you said to me: "My background is as a historian of Islamic art. And, of course, I lament the loss of solitude, but I'm also a pragmatist. Solitude is probably gone, regardless."

I thought that spoke a lot to our time. But when people think of the MoMA that they're nostalgic for, the museum was a different thing. It served a different function in society. It was a little bit less popular and populist. More elitist. So, probably there were just fewer people going.

**Glenn Lowry:** Well, I think golden moments exist in people's imagination and rarely in reality. If you go back and you read Dwight MacDonal in [The New Yorker](#) in the 1950s, he talked about The Museum of Modern Art as a nine ring circus that was popular and populist. This was really a reflection of the fact that the museum always sought from its very inception to be a place that engaged the largest possible public and developed a whole range of tactics and strategies to do so. While that public has continuously expanded, what people remember from their childhood or early years as an adult doesn't always match what was actually there.

So, yes, there was a museum that some remembered that was perhaps quieter in the sense that the people who were going were more homogeneous. The population that comes to The Museum of Modern Art today—to many museums—is heterogeneous: not from the same social class, not from the same educational class, not from the same ethnic groups. It's a much more varied experience. For some, that's off-putting. We like the familiar, and the familiar can be defined in so many different ways. We think of the museum as a crucible—a place that anyone can come to and engage in.

If I was trained as a scholar, it was because I love thinking about the history of art, but I've come to realize as a museum director that our responsibility in a museum is to embrace as many different publics as we can and to recognize that the experience of looking at art in a public space is a fundamentally public and social experience.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Glenn Lowry:** There's a lot to do with that. That means being very thoughtful about ensuring there are different ways to engage for different people, at different moments during the day even. There's a reality that the morning's going to be quiet, midday's going to be very busy, and the afternoon's going to be quiet again. That's just the cycle of visitation in most museums. So, you can start to work with that in terms of the kinds of programs you develop, the ways in which you engage membership.

There's a huge amount of pleasure that most people take from going to museums. Certainly, we see that in the extensive audience in visitor surveys we do at The Museum of Modern Art. Very few people complain about the crowding, or the noise or all the things that irritated people 15 or 20 years ago. What most people comment on is that they don't understand the art.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Glenn Lowry:** Well, that's perfect because that's what our job is: to create a context in which to help people gain that understanding. That's the right challenge for us.

**Charlotte Burns:** What do you think the role of culture is today? When you're thinking of engaging the publics, do you have specific missions in terms of the message that you want to be sending out into world, that you want people to take away from The Museum of Modern Art? Is there something that ideally your audience would grasp?

**Glenn Lowry:** When you realize that the audience is actually many different audiences, you want a whole range of issues to be on the table and possibilities to exist.

Our first and most important mission is to help those who come to the museum understand the voice of the artists who are present in the institution. That's what drives all of us. And to do that in a way that provides perhaps an interesting social, intellectual, and cultural context to understand the world in which we live. And to underscore the values that we think are really important: an open and inclusive society; a generosity of spirit; a curiosity; and a deep and profound commitment that artists have important roles in our life, and that museums are places where you can engage the voice of the artist and learn from them.

**Charlotte Burns:** I know a topic that you're very interested in is this idea of who has authority. Who gets to speak for whom, and how do we acquire—how do we arbitrate—that authority? I remember you saying to me recently that you felt that this was the single biggest issue facing museums today. Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

**Glenn Lowry:** I think in this particular political moment in which we live, the question of authority and voice—not just in terms of museums but in terms of the world in which we engage—has become increasingly important. And how we navigate that. Who has the right to speak for whom? How do we imagine someone else's voice? Is it possible for us to get outside our bodies, our skin, our mind to empathize with those who are different from us? And what does that mean? I think museums are places where you can begin to grapple with those problems in an open—I hope—thoughtful way.

When you look at the dysfunction that we have at so many levels in the world today, if we can't find a way to engage with those who are different from us and to learn from them, we're just going to become ever more insular. And I think that's my great anxiety today, that certainly I feel a kind of closing off of possibilities across the full spectrum of political issues.

So, the question of authority becomes fundamental here because we have to give each other license to imagine. What we're trying to do at The Museum of Modern Art is create an environment that enables people to engage with Otherness, with what they're unfamiliar with. If all we do is reify what people are familiar with, we're failing fundamentally in our role. Challenging people to think differently, challenging people to engage with artists that they're unfamiliar with, or whose messages may be disturbing, is at the core of what any institution that wants to enable a richer, more thoughtful conversation must do.

**Charlotte Burns:** There have been various controversies this year. In each instance, the institutions have had to figure out what line they take in terms of censorship and safety. The threats of violence against staff are one thing that museums have to consider very carefully. I am sure somebody in your position takes that very, very seriously. And then on the other hand, this idea of defending an artist's right to speak or a curator's right to place work in a public forum. How do you think about that? Do you think we're in a particularly flammable moment in terms of censorship?

**Glenn Lowry:** I think we're in a very flammable moment, not necessarily because of censorship, but because people feel vulnerable. I think this is one of the consequences of the 2016 election: that so many different communities feel threatened, and when you are threatened you take actions that you might not otherwise do if you felt confident. It doesn't really matter which group you talk to. It can be based on: sexuality; gender; ethnicity; race. You go across the spectrum, and I think all of us feel vulnerable and threatened.

I think the tragedy is when controversies that should be resolved through debate and discussion are closed down because of the threat of violence. That's just inexcusable. I know as a director of an institution when your staff is threatened by physical violence and possibly death, you have to take that very seriously. When groups feel so angry that they are willing to resort or threaten to resort to physical violence, that's a reflection of the breakdown of our society. That's not a normal process.

Protest, debate, discussion, heated argument—that's the mix of democracy. That's what we should be encouraging. In fact, all of these debates are worth having. But they should unfold in an environment that, first of all, accepts that there are

different and alternative points of view. That's the nature of a civil society: that we have ways of negotiating different positions through discussion, not by resorting to violence.

There's something profoundly tragic when groups start to threaten physical violence rather than engaging thoughtfully in a discussion.

**Charlotte Burns:** This problem is broader than an institution. It's broader than the art world. I was thinking this morning about social media. It's not a creative, generous way to spend your time. People are just shouting opinions rather than engaging in dialogue. This is a long-winded way of saying that it occurred to me that maybe what's missing is that creative response to this time in creating platforms for exchange and discussion and democratic debate. How can an institution like MoMA be that for the people?

**Glenn Lowry:** First of all, I think slowness is a virtue, not a problem, when it comes to thinking. Social media encourages a kind of instantaneous response, when in fact many of the issues we're dealing with need to be carefully thought-through—slowly, considered, discussed, unpacked—in a more meditative way. You try to create an environment at a museum for public programs through interventions in the galleries, through installation strategies that slow people down rather than accelerate them.

I hope someone who comes to The Museum of Modern Art intending to spend 15 minutes spends three hours. The reason for that is that often it takes time to digest a complicated idea or to think your way through something that's unexpected or unfamiliar. I worry that many of the controversies that have erupted in the last year have erupted precisely out of a misunderstanding generated by the rapidity of response.

Now, I'm a realist, and I know you are as well. Social media isn't going away. We live in a world in which people feel compelled to act quickly and respond instantaneously. I've tried to train myself not to respond immediately to every email I get, but I'm ADD like everybody else. We've all become ADD because we live with our devices in front of us, and rather than just taking the pleasure of not doing anything, downtime, we grab our cell phone or whatever it is we have around us and immediately start surfing for whatever information we're looking for.

I'm just thinking it through. Slowness is one of those things that we have to find ways of encouraging. Slowness of thinking, slowness of movement, but it's also probably an uphill battle.

**Charlotte Burns:** Well, a slow battle then?

**Glenn Lowry:** Yes. Right.

**Charlotte Burns:** I think that is an interesting segue into how a museum can move with the times, in terms of technology. I was thinking about the expansion and renovation in which you're going to be giving a lot more space to arts which have been traditionally a little bit more sidelined by institutions.

There is going to be more space for performance art and for video art, and that's a trend that we're seeing in institutions internationally. How can you make sure that you're allowing for the speed with which technology is moving? iPhones came out ten years ago. Where will we be in ten years and how do you build that into the DNA of this phase of the expansion?

**Glenn Lowry:** When we talk about technology, we are really talking about digital technologies. Most museums have learned how to use that to help create conversations, disseminate information. We'll use whatever is available as it evolves over time and experiment with it. I just see that side of the equation as liberating. The more sophisticated these technologies become, the easier to use and to disseminate, the better they are for us in terms of giving the full richness of information and ideas embodied by the institution.

I used to think that there was a divide between the virtual and the real world. One of the things that has occurred over the last, let's say, decade is a collapsing of that divide. If one thinks of a 24/7 loop of engagement for people interested in what we do, how great is that? That you can connect to the ideas of the museum wherever and whenever you want. As these technologies enable this collapse of the virtual and the real world, they also simultaneously expand the space of the institution from a location to any location. I think that's actually a really interesting thing to think about. How do we use that intelligently? How do we create the communities of engagement that benefit from the knowledge that's available?

**Charlotte Burns:** When I think about talking with you, it always occurs to me that you are somebody who is very happy in a liminal area. You're happy not being of fixed opinion, of being in the middle of the process rather than getting towards an end goal. You gave a [talk](#) recently at Harvard in which you spoke about in-betweenness. You were specifically talking about the Middle East, and you said: "It ought to be a case study for self-identity and location in a changing world." And you said: "Anxiety needs to be incorporated into the object of critical attention. Anxiety is the effective address to the world that reveals itself as caught up in between frames." I thought that was really interesting. Both this sense of in-betweenness and also the idea that anxiety is something not only to be embraced and understood, but perhaps even the starting point for a

lens of viewing the world.

**Glenn Lowry:** I was quoting [Homi Bhabha](#) there, who's been an enormous influence on my own thinking. I've been looking at a lot of Contemporary art from the Middle East for last 20 years, for last decade, and trying to understand the particular voice of a generation of artists that I'm interested in, whether it's [Walid Raad](#) or [Bouchra Khalili](#) or [Wael Shawky](#). I can go on and cite any number of really interesting artists, and interestingly they often cite this notion of in-betweenness as essential to their own work, this liminal space.

I think that's one of their great contributions: to recognize that liminality is a site of incredible possibility. And liminal not simply because it's geographically liminal. That's too descriptive. Liminal emotionally, psychologically, affectively, as Homi would have said. So, I've been trying to write about that and think about, what does it mean to work within a liminal space?

And I think it offers an enormous amount of opportunity for a generation of artists who are caught between many different positions. They're caught between the origins of their background and the realities of their current life, the politics of one world and the politics of another world. Between a deep understanding of one culture and the visual language of another culture. They are caught between a whole range of emotional and affective conditions. And so, unpacking that space—and here, I'm thinking of the space in a metaphoric way—has been a really fascinating exercise.

**Charlotte Burns:** I know you're talking about space metaphorically, but I'm also thinking literally. Is that why you've allowed into the plans for the expansion and renovation space that can be manipulated, space that can be changed?

**Glenn Lowry:** We've thought a lot about the different kinds of space we need. Almost any museum wants to have a portfolio of spaces: some that are fixed and determined, and that you can react against; others that create very specific conditions, whether it's for a studio for performance or a theater for film, and yet others that have great flexibility that can be reimaged on a regular basis.

What we realized was that those highly flexible spaces we've tended to use for our temporary exhibitions, which we remake on a quarterly basis, and we started to think: "Well, actually, we want to look at our own collection with the same intensity that we look at temporary exhibitions."

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Glenn Lowry:** We want to invest in the collection that capacity to be reimaged in the way we would reimagine one exhibition after another. So, the current expansion gives us a portfolio of galleries that have much greater flexibility than we had in the [\[Yoshio\] Taniguchi](#) project, but those more configured galleries of the [Taniguchi project](#) are essential to the overall portfolio of spaces that we will have.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right. Talking now about the ways in which the institution can interact with the permanent collection, this is something that various people in the museum world are thinking about, right? How to make more of the permanent collection.

I want to take us down two paths here. One is the possibility of sharing your permanent collection, and the other is legacy institutions and the question of whether there is an imminent threat on the horizon to funding for legacy institutions.

I know MoMA's in its own class here when it comes to talking of the endowment, but we're seeing trend lines that legacy institutions—by which I mean grand museums, opera, the ballet—there's a move away from funding those institutions. That this generation of philanthropists is more engaged and excited by donating to small grass-roots organizations than donating to legacy institutions. Is that something you're seeing, shifts in terms of philanthropy?

**Glenn Lowry:** The problem is less about shifts in philanthropy per se than it is about the simple reality that most of our institutions are woefully undercapitalized. So, we find ways episodically to raise considerable sums for renovations or expansions, but we rarely can find ways to grow our base support or our endowments in a parallel way.

So, it doesn't matter whether you're The Museum of Modern Art, the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) or any number of other institutions in this country. We're all under-capitalized. You can look at the Met's multi-billion dollar endowment, and that only tells you that they've raised a lot of money for their endowment. But they're still under-capitalized. They still struggle to find funding, as we do at The Museum of Modern Art. No one is unique here, in that respect, except perhaps an institution like the [Getty](#).

It isn't because of legacy, it's because we just haven't figured out how to get the balance right between capital support and operating support. And, over time I hope that will get sorted out. But it's a struggle, on a very regular basis for almost every small and large museum. This is not unique to scale. It is true across the full spectrum of our museums, and one of the things that I had been railing against with my colleagues is we have to rebalance what we do to put more energy, more resources, more time into programming and less into a whole range of activities that would include acquisitions, capital expansions—anything that takes away from the core mission of the institution, which in my mind is to engage the public with

rich programming.

That takes us to rethinking how we use our collections, and there are a number of efforts led at the moment by [Alice Walton](#) to create a network that would involve many different museums in sharing collections, and I think it's fantastic. I hope it succeeds. We're certainly eager to participate, as I know many of my colleagues around the country are.

We all know that it doesn't make sense to have works of art in storage. They should be in the public realm to the degree we can possibly enable that, so we've got to find ways of making that happen. If we can develop a collection sharing network that works for everybody, works for lending intuitions as well as borrowing institutions—and that's where Alice can play such an important and *is* playing an important role—then maybe we will have cracked one part of a code that will make the experience for our publics across the country better and more interesting.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right, because the publics change. Do you think you could have several different MoMAs in the same city?

**Glenn Lowry:** No. I don't.

**Charlotte Burns:** I guess you do have two, because you have [MoMA PS1](#) and MoMA.

**Glenn Lowry:** It all depends on how you imagine an institution. I think we have a story to tell, and we can't tell the story differently. In other words, if you actually believe that works of art are singular in their importance, then the narratives you create with your installations are not replicable. If you want to tell the story of Cubism with a [Demoiselles d'Avignon](#), it's either here or there, but it can't be in both places at the same time. So, I've always resisted the notion that you can replicate institutions and institutional narratives.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Glenn Lowry:** And besides that, I think it's more interesting to have multiple narratives. We live in a plurality, and that plurality is what makes life interesting. I'm not interested in seeing The Museum of Modern Art mirrored three different times. I'd rather see three different completely separate Museums of Modern Art that have nothing to do with each other. This notion that you could have multiple MoMAs pre-supposes that they're identical, and I just don't see how you do that.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Glenn Lowry:** We're not a commodity in that respect.

**Charlotte Burns:** Well, this comes back to [Alfred Barr's](#) founding mission. He always had a radical vision for the museum. He said he wanted to have an active and serious concern with the practical, commercial and popular arts as well as with the so-called fine art. And there's an irreverence when you read into the Barr archives that I always found really charming.

There's a story, which I'm definitely going get wrong about somebody at MoMA looking into how many works should be saved in the museum were there to be a Blitz-style event—around the time that the Blitz was happening in Great Britain. I think it was a curator who went to Barr and said: "I'm really sorry to tell you that X percent of works should be saved." It's a very small number—it was something like 20% of the works, and Alfred Barr apparently laughed and said: "Good God, man! You're an optimist. It's more like 15%."

**Glenn Lowry:** Well, the corollary to that is that Barr thought about collecting in a very strategic way. And what he basically said was that the sin of omission is far greater than the sin of commission, and I've always understood that to mean we should collect generously but edit rigorously. And from the inception of The Museum of Modern Art, it has de-accessioned works of art that it didn't feel were essential or important to its story.

And that came in part because one of our founding gifts from [Lillie Bliss](#) established her desire to see those works of art in her gift that were no longer important sold in order to buy more important works of art. And if you believe that the story of Modern art is an unfolding story—Barr's torpedo moving through time or the idea of a metabolic institution—then this approach of Barr's of generously collecting in the present but rigorously editing in the past is a very thoughtful way of ensuring that critically important works of art are available. Somewhere along the line I think he mentioned: "If you get right once out of ten, that's a pretty high percentage." There's a certain humility with that.

**Charlotte Burns:** Do you find that the current de-accession policies need adapting?

**Glenn Lowry:** Well, I have very strong opinions about de-accessioning, and I don't pretend for a moment to be aligned with many of my colleagues. I don't believe you should de-accession to fund operating costs. I think that is a categorical mistake.

But I do believe that one should de-accession rigorously in order to either acquire more important works of art or build



endowments to support programming. Because for me, in the end, it's all about being sufficiently well-capitalized to program intelligently and to have as few works of art in storage as possible. It doesn't benefit anyone when there are millions of works of art that are languishing in storage. A— there's a huge capital cost to that that has a drag on operations. But more importantly, we would be far better off, in my opinion, allowing others to have those works of art that might enjoy them, but even more importantly, converting that to endowed funds that could support public programs, exhibitions, publications.

So, I have no issue with the anxiety about selling works of art to support daily operations. That's not an intelligent use of those funds. But I do think we need to re-examine fundamentally how we improve the quality of what we do and what the role of collections are in that context.

I'm an outlier in that respect. I've come to terms with the fact that many of my colleagues see it differently. But I also think I'm right that we are woefully under-capitalized, and there isn't a single museum in this country—and I put The Museum of Modern Art in that—that is doing a great job of programming, because we don't have the resources to do that. What we should be doing should be ten times what we're currently doing.

**Charlotte Burns:** What do you think you should be doing?

**Glenn Lowry:** More programs that engage more people across a broader platform.

**Charlotte Burns:** Right.

**Glenn Lowry:** The only reason most of us aren't doing that is we don't have the resources to do it.

**Charlotte Burns:** How did you grow the endowment so drastically? During your leadership, the endowment has grown from \$200m to more than \$1bn.

**Glenn Lowry:** Well, we have a fantastic investment team at that museum that's overseen by [James Gara](#), the brilliant chief operating officer at the museum, but that has also been led by terrific investment officers over time. We have a phenomenal investment committee that provides oversight of our endowment.

And we've gone out and raised money the old-fashioned way, by asking people to make contributions to the endowment. So, it's been a combination of the tremendous growth in the market, along with new funds that have been added to the endowment and the discipline of not spending more than a certain amount on an annual basis so that we're constantly piling money back into the endowment to grow it.

There's no magic to it. It's just hard work.

**Charlotte Burns:** Your board contract was renewed in 2015.

**Glenn Lowry:** Through sometime in 2020.

**Charlotte Burns:** So, do you have in mind what you're going to do after MoMA?

**Glenn Lowry:** I'm not thinking about anything at the moment other than successfully completing the building project, the capital campaign that we're using to support it and re-imagining how to install the collections and present the next iteration of the museum to our various publics. I live in the moment. Until I get through all of this, I'm not worrying about next moves or anything else.

**Charlotte Burns:** Final question for you. We were talking about solitude earlier. As the director of MoMA, you have tremendous access to some of the most amazing works of art in the world. If you have a few minutes to sneak off by yourself before the museum opens, do you find yourself going to look at a particular work more often than others?

**Glenn Lowry:** Well, I actually try to walk through the galleries in the museum pretty much every day, often before we're open to the public, just because I like to see how they look. What I get pleasure out of is not the familiar, although that can often be rewarding. I get pleasure wandering through the galleries and seeing something I hadn't seen before and going: "Oh my God, isn't that amazing?"

Recently, I've been wandering through an exhibition called "[The Long Run](#)" that looks at a generation of artists from the '70s and '80s, sort of in mid-career in full-flight, as opposed to early in their careers.

I just got a huge smile on my face the other day looking at Elizabeth Murray's [Do the Dance](#), one of the great paintings she did virtually at the end of her life in 2005. It's one of those wacky paintings. The more you look at it, the less it makes any kind of sense, and yet it's so utterly captivating. It's so full of energy and optimism and excitement and I was just thinking: "Wow. She just hit it out the park." She was dying of cancer, anxious about an exhibition of her that was about to open at The Museum of Modern Art. And she ripped one. And I thought: "Good on her."

That was yesterday's experience. Just surfing on the pleasure of seeing her pull off a great painting and thinking about how difficult it is to do that—all the things that have to come together—the logical and the illogical—to make a work of art sing the way *Do the Dance* does.

**Charlotte Burns:** Wonderful, well thank you so much for being our guest here today, Glenn.

**Glenn Lowry:** My pleasure.

**Charlotte Burns:** It's been a real pleasure.