

## Art Agency, Partners

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## Let the World In

### MoMA's International Program

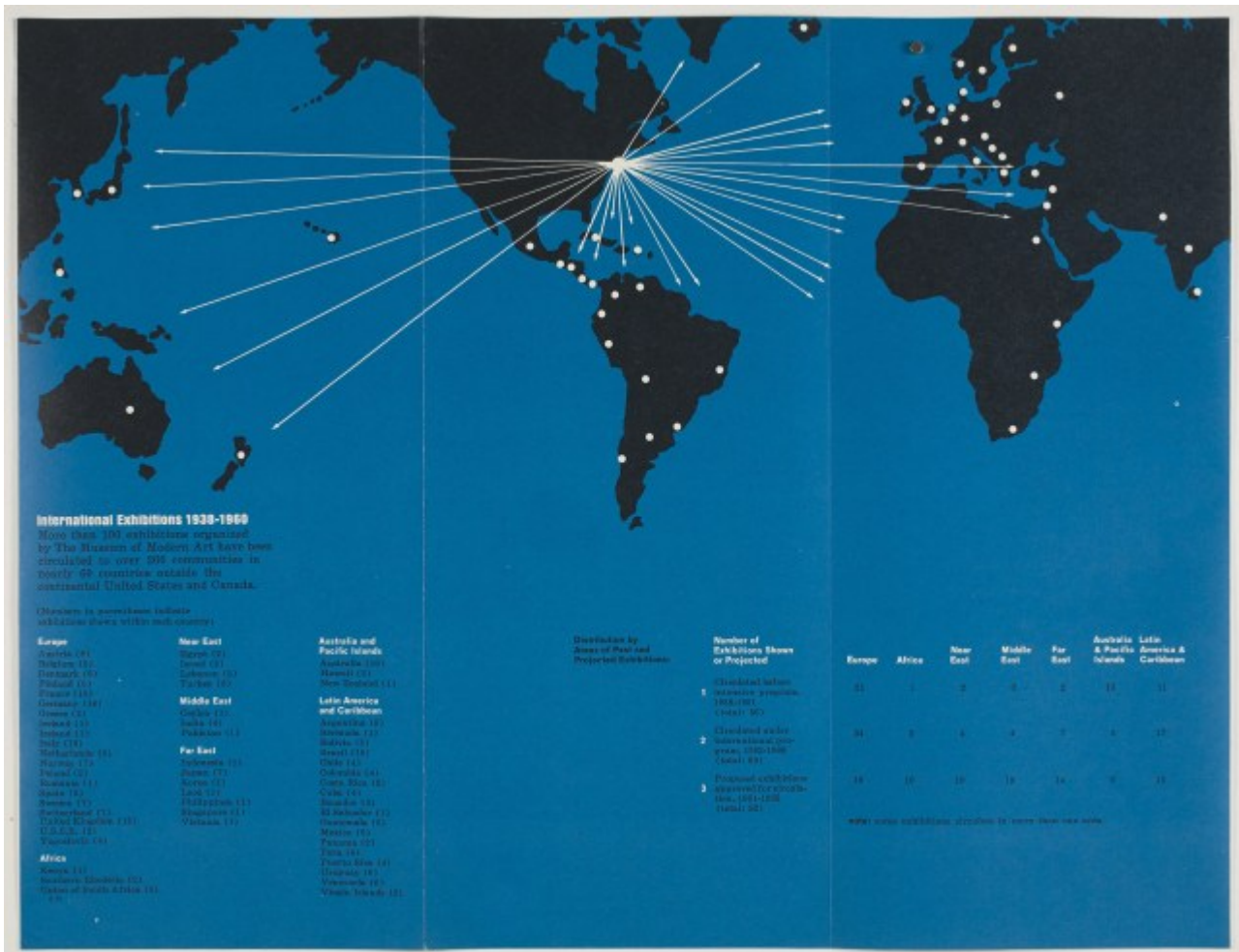


Diagram prepared by The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art documenting over 100 exhibitions circulated to over 260 communities in nearly 60 countries outside the United States and Canada, 1938-1960, interior page spread from the brochure, The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art, 1961 © MoMA

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Much has been written about the early history of the Museum of Modern Art's International Program, which was founded in 1952 to organize traveling exhibitions for global circulation. Supported at first by a grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and later by MoMA's newly-formed International Council, the International Program was intended initially to circulate major exhibitions of contemporary American painting and sculpture abroad, with a special emphasis on younger artists, and then

to broaden its mission to include shows of other American media, like architecture and design, as well as art from other countries.

While the achievements of the International Program in these first years were extraordinary by any standards—by May 1954 the department had already organized 27 shows for circulation, one of them the groundbreaking “Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors”, which included works by Edward Hopper, Ben Shahn, Arshile Gorky, Stuart Davis, and Jackson Pollock—most critical attention has focused on a more intriguing and controversial issue.

## The CIA’s Role?

A number of writers have claimed that the entire initiative was the result of collusion between MoMA and the Central Intelligence Agency aimed at promoting an image of American culture abroad that underscored its absolute freedom from governmental constraints by emphasizing Abstract Expressionist paintings in the traveling exhibitions. The theory was that international audiences would see these works as exercises in artistic liberty, contrasting them implicitly with Soviet Socialist Realist art, which followed rigid government-mandated canons.



Clement Greenberg speaking at the opening of the exhibition, “Two Decades of American Painting 1945-1965,” March/April 1967, International Council and International Program Records. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York © MoMA

The evidence for this thesis was always circumstantial—no documentary “smoking gun” has yet been found—and the *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman’s analysis of the museum’s acquisitions and exhibitions during this early period [revealed no special preference](#) for Abstract Expressionist works. Nevertheless, with the CIA’s own records unlikely to become available, there may never be a definitive conclusion to this debate.

My own sense is that MoMA’s motives in launching the International Program were honorable, very much in keeping with the museum’s foundation as an educational institution in 1929, but that one of the primary goals—to spread the message of America’s artistic achievements to the world at large—clearly reflected the intense ideological competition that characterized the Cold War era.

The map that accompanied a 1960 brochure on the International Program, showing many arrows radiating out of New York toward distant continents, underscores this objective, as do the remarks of the influential critic Clement Greenberg at the New Delhi opening of MoMA's 1967 exhibition "Two Decades of American Painting 1945-1965". Greenberg participated in a MoMA-sponsored symposium on contemporary art at the Lalit Kala Akademi in which he pointedly admonished the director of India's National Gallery of Modern Art: "Traditional Indian pictorial art died 100 years ago. I don't see any point in talking about it."

### **American painting is not universal. A lot of it is terribly local.**

Today we can more readily sympathize with the [reported response](#) of Krishen Khanna, an Indian artist in the audience: "American painting is not universal. A lot of it is terribly local. The paintings of Frank Stella, for instance, are only important in the New York situation...They're not important here."



Nalini Malani, *Gamepieces* (2003/2009). The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of the Richard J. Massey Foundation for Arts and Sciences © 2018 Nalini Malani. Courtesy the artist

The recognition of local context, as Khanna insisted to Greenberg, has by now become widely acknowledged by art critics and historians as critical in responding to art produced outside the Western canon.

### **America as a Node, Not the Standard**

If the International Program's activities in the 1950s and 1960s reflected America's overly self-confident and assertive role in the postwar world, its current programs are more in keeping with today's dramatically different cultural environment. No longer involved directly with the museum's traveling exhibition program, the department has assumed a very different role, connecting MoMA to the world beyond its traditional focus on North America and Western Europe. These new programs, which foster and facilitate research activities by MoMA staff, are based on the recognition that America should be regarded more as a node in a global network than as the standard for all artistic comparisons.

The first of these programs to have been developed is a publication series begun in 2002. Under the rubric of “Primary Documents”, these books provide meticulously-edited translations of original writings about Modern art from various parts of the world. The volumes typically include artists’ manifestos, early criticism, and other primary texts, together with newly-commissioned contextual essays focusing on time periods that are especially important for an understanding of modern art in the particular nation or region.

## The Complexities of Modern Art

So far, two of the books have had a regional focus—on Central and Eastern Europe and the Arab World—and six have dealt with particular countries: Argentina, Venezuela, Brazil, Sweden, China and Japan. [These publications](#) are not intended to serve as traditional art historical narratives; instead, by presenting carefully-selected yet representative original texts, they allow English speakers to appreciate the complexities of the development of modern art in these widely-divergent places, most of which have attracted the attention of American audiences only in the last few decades.

A more recent activity, which has just completed its fourth iteration, is the museum’s annual [International Curatorial Institute](#), organized in collaboration with New York’s Center for Curatorial Leadership, a not-for-profit organization that provides leadership training for art museum curators.



Nicolás Paris, *Hurry Slowly 1-5* (2008). The Museum of Modern Art, Latin American and Caribbean Fund © 2018 Nicolás Paris

Each year two MoMA curators join ten colleagues from museums and contemporary arts spaces around the world in a two-week program that centers on an intensive series of management courses taught by senior Columbia Business School professors. The goal over time is to create a network of closely linked museum professionals who will remain in productive contact both with one other and with MoMA over the long term. No American museum can hope to replicate in its own staff the specialized knowledge that these international curators possess, making this type of network so valuable for both sides.

The most ambitious of the current programs is C-MAP (“Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives”). Started in 2009, it is focused on global research. Four cross-departmental groups of curators and other museum staff study modern and contemporary art and its origins in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa, respectively. Aided by graduate-level student fellows, the groups invite scholars, curators and artists from the region they are studying to MoMA to conduct seminars on their research and practices. The groups also travel at least once a year to the places they are studying, visiting museums, galleries and exhibitions and meeting with artists, curators and scholars. C-MAP also maintains a



[website for reports](#) on its activities and commissioned essays related to its investigations.



International Program Annual C-MAP Seminar © MoMA

## **Listening, Not Broadcasting**

While it was designed as a research project, without any specific expectation of results, the program has already had a significant impact on the museum's acquisitions and exhibitions, bringing into the collection numerous works of art that have already begun to enrich the collection galleries. In many cases these works open up the installations to include previously neglected or underemphasized narratives, making the postwar galleries, in particular, less America-centric than they had been in the past.

Looking back at that 1960 map of the International Program's activities, I sometimes think that the department in its earlier phase of activity was essentially broadcasting, sending messages about Modern art, and particularly American art, from New York around the globe. Its function now, more appropriate for the much greater interest in art of the non-Western world on the part of today's audiences, is to encourage critical listening by the museum's own staff to key voices from abroad, especially from the many parts of the world that were underrepresented in dialogues on modern art in the previous century.

As the art world has so dramatically expanded its global focus in recent decades, that type of listening has assumed an ever more critical importance.