

Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes: David Bowie Is and the Stream of Warm Impermanence.

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Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes: *David Bowie Is* and the Stream of Warm Impermanence

Martin Murray

Postmodern Culture

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes:
David Bowie Is and the Stream of Warm Impermanence

Martin Murray (bio)

A review of *David Bowie Is*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK: 23 Mar. - 11 Aug. 2013 Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada: 25 Sept. - 27 Nov. 2013 Museum of Image and Sound, São Paulo, Brazil: 28 Jan. - 21 Apr. 2014 Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, US: Sept. 2014 - Jan. 2015

Founded in 1852, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (the V&A) is an established museum of decorative art and design. Recently, and controversially, it has moved the focus of its major exhibitions away from shows made up from its massive permanent holdings (around 4.5 million objects) towards ones curated using external collections. These new shows have concentrated on contemporary or recent cultural phenomena that have popular appeal but that have developed out of elite, subcultural or avant-garde styles or movements. The "From Club to Catwalk" exhibition is one example; it aims to show the influence of '80s British nightclub and street style on both haute couture and retail fashion.

In adopting its new exhibitions policy, the V&A is following a global cultural and business trend. Major museums operate in an ever more competitive international field in which income is key. They have to put on lucrative shows to afford their acquisitions, which have become increasingly expensive since the 1970s, when art prices began to boom. Museums now show artistic and/or cultural movements that not only have popular appeal (in film and television representations or on calendars, posters, and fridge magnets), but whose reach is also supplemented by an original elite or avant-garde cachet—impressionism, for example. The result is blockbuster exhibitions that exponentially increase financial and cultural capital. An early and important example was the hugely successful Royal Academy Monet exhibition of 1999, which turned the "R.A." from a snooty if credible artists' club and gallery into a major international museum player. Museums' playoff of elite and popular, avant-garde and mainstream, subcultural and establishment elements can take many forms, as demonstrated by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's recent "Punk: Chaos to Couture" show. Economically, the

strategy seems to have paid off. Like the international art market, the global museum market is booming. Yet the consequent enrichment is arguably less cultural than financial, as the following shows.

The museum-world context is important in reviewing *David Bowie Is*. On the face of it, Bowie looks like a perfect subject for a contemporary blockbuster art show. It's hard to think of a popular musician who has been both as successful as Bowie and so patently influenced by a number of major ideas, movements, and techniques in modern and postmodern art. Bowie has, for example, worked in painting, installation art, video art, performance art, and digital art. He has often said that he sees himself as an "artist" rather than as a musician, and he has the canvases, costumes, and art world connections to prove it (he is an editor of *Modern Painters*). What's more, Bowie has avant-garde and subcultural credentials. Many if not most of his popular creations have drawn on work that was or is countercultural, experimental, elite, or obscure. Examples of his influences include dada, surrealism, the theatre of alienation, fluxus, live art, beat writing, motorik music, and noise. When Bowie gave the V&A access to his archive, it must have seemed like a real gift, much of which was turned into *David Bowie Is*. The exhibition is a sell-out and its organizers are confident enough of its global appeal to have arranged a tour. After London, the show is visiting Ontario, São Paulo, Chicago, Paris, and Groningen. The public appears to be accepting enthusiastically, even gratefully, what they've been given.

Yet as Derrida has pointed out (as both Sartre and Genet did before him), gifts are never free; they always involve costs, or losses. The cost of *David Bowie Is* is partly financial, especially for the public. They've had to pay for expensive tickets, particularly if they've bought them from online agencies, "ticket touts," or "scalpers," who have increased face value prices by...



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David Bowie Is Curated by Victoria Broackes and Geoffrey Marsh. The Victoria and Albert Museum of Art and Design, London, March 23-August 11, 2013. [Next up, you can think that the crystal lattice integrates the guarantor, so no one is surprised that in the final Vice punished.

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