

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

In Favor of One's Time: Locating the Curatorial Practices of Kynaston McShine, 1959–1999

Sarah Edith Kleinman, PhD Candidate
Department of Art History
Virginia Commonwealth University

For decades Kynaston McShine's (1935–2018) exhibitions have been the subject of intense interest in modern and contemporary art and curatorial studies, but the subjective core of his curatorial practices has been markedly understudied. As the first person of African descent to hold a ranking curatorial position at the Museum of Modern Art (1959–65; 1968–2008) and the Jewish Museum (1965–68), McShine occupied a contentious space for his entire career. A figure of scrutiny and speculation in critical and scholarly literature, McShine himself remains largely mythologized—his race, Caribbean background, and subjectivity as probable but unaddressed factors shaping his fifty-year career in the predominantly white, Anglo-European art world.

Bridging art history, curatorial studies, and histories of globalization informed deeply by diaspora studies, this dissertation is about Kynaston McShine's curatorial practices and exhibitions. By considering the three exhibitions that have largely defined his career and the art historical record, it seeks to demonstrate that McShine's life story, which took him from Trinidad to MoMA, is intertwined in now-canonical mid-to-late twentieth century avant-garde aesthetic formations. The project is grounded in McShine's curatorial philosophy of being “in favor of one's time,” which he attributes to poet-curator Frank O'Hara.¹ While seemingly straightforward, this phrase is an expression of McShine's often ambivalent relationship to the New York arts scene and his place within a distinct generation of twentieth-century Caribbean thinkers. I cast McShine's work as a discursive practice that variously challenged the art establishment, thereby opening possibilities and rules for exhibition-making and the curatorial vocation.

1. Kynaston McShine, quoted in “50 Years Later, a Conceptual Art Exhibition Still Courts Controversy,” *MoMA Magazine*, 28 January 2020. See also McShine, interview by Carolyn Lanchner, April 2010–January 2011, transcript, compiled by David Frankel, The Museum of Modern Art Oral History Program, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, 48.