

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

In Favor of One's Time: Locating the Curatorial Practices of Kynaston McShine

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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 (1959–64; 1968–2008) and the Jewish Museum (1964–68), 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, sexual orientation, and subjectivity as probable but unaddressed factors shaping his fifty-year career in the predominantly white, Anglo-American art world.

Bridging art history, museology, and 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 Trinidad is intertwined in now-canonical mid-to-late twentieth century avant-garde aesthetic formations.¹ 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.² 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. In this study, “McShine's Trinidad” refers to the specific sociocultural context of McShine's upbringing, education, social circles, and personal experiences in Port of Spain, Trinidad from 1935 to 1954.

2. Kynaston McShine quoted in “50 Years Later, a Conceptual Art Exhibition Still Courts Controversy,” *MoMA Magazine*, 28 January 2020. See also Oral History Program, interview with Kynaston McShine, 2010 and 2011, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, 48.