

Contemporary Art Seen through the Lens of Walter Benjamin's Magnum Opus on 19th Century Parisian City Life

New York, NY, March 14, 2017 - The writings of Walter Benjamin, the influential German Jewish philosopher and cultural critic, are the basis for a contemporary art exhibition at the Jewish Museum from March 17 through August 6, 2017. ***The Arcades: Contemporary Art and Walter Benjamin*** examines themes in the author's magnum opus *The Arcades Project* via contemporary artworks in media ranging from photography and video to sculpture and painting, with annotations by the American poet Kenneth Goldsmith.

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) is widely regarded as one of the most astute commentators on early European modernity. He began *The Arcades Project* in 1927 as a short piece about Paris's nineteenth-century iron-and-glass vaulted shopping passages (arcades) and expanded it into a lengthy meditation on Parisian city life and the origins of consumer culture. Benjamin worked on the project for over a decade, leaving it unfinished at the time of his death by suicide while fleeing the Nazis in 1940. *The Arcades Project* was ultimately published posthumously in its German version in 1982 and in 1999 in its first English translation. The book is a sprawling collage of quotations, notes, and reflections on the city of Paris, which Benjamin regarded as the cultural and commercial capital of the nineteenth century.

This exhibition explores *The Arcades Project* and its ongoing relevance by highlighting contemporary artworks that relate to the subjects of each of the book's 36 chapters, called convolutes, from the Latin word for bundle, a reference to the folders used to organize the manuscript's handwritten pages. These subjects range from fashion to iron construction, and from dolls to Karl Marx. Visitors are encouraged to experience the exhibition as a *flâneur*, one who strolled through the city at leisure, encountering ideas, objects, and characters seemingly by chance and in no particular order.

[*The Arcades: Contemporary Art and Walter Benjamin*](#) features works by Walead Beshty, Milena Bonilla, Andrea Bowers, Chris Burden, Simon Evans, Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, Rodney Graham, Andreas Gursky, Raymond Hains, Pierre Huyghe, Voluspa Jarpa, Jesper Just, Mike Kelley, Tim Lee, Jorge Macchi, Martín Ramírez, Bill Rauhauser, Mary Reid Kelley, Ry Rocklen, Markus Schinwald, Collier Schorr, Cindy Sherman, Taryn Simon, Joel Sternfeld, Mungo Thomson, Timm Ulrichs, James Welling, Guido van der Werve, and Cerith Wyn Evans. New works by Nicholas Buffon, Haris Epaminonda and Daniel Gustav Cramer, Sanya Kantarovsky, and Adam Pendleton are also on view.

For Benjamin, the *flâneur* was the archetype of the modern artist that critically observed the world around him. The glass-walled arcades were one of the *flâneur's* favorite habitats—included in the exhibition are photographs by Lee Friedlander that depict similar retail spaces in Soho and along Fifth Avenue in New York City.

For Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, the nineteenth-century French poet, was the perfect *flâneur* and chronicler of modernity—nearly a fifth of the text of *The Arcades Project* is devoted to the convolute on him. The exhibition includes a

portrait of Baudelaire by Mary Reid Kelley, whose interest in nineteenth-century Paris derives from her sense that certain elements of its culture and politics resemble those of the present.

When Benjamin was compiling his text, many of the hundreds of arcades that once dotted Paris had been destroyed, and those that remained were dilapidated. Among the heirs of the arcade is the shopping mall, which, like the arcade, can be understood as emblematic of the cultural milieu that gave rise to it—namely, the car-commuting suburbs that proliferated across America in the second half of the twentieth century. To illustrate the convolute about the arcades and department stores, the exhibition features photographs from Walead Beshty's *American Passages* series (2001–2011), which depict abandoned shopping malls. These stark views of disused buildings suggest the decline of a way of life.

Nineteenth-century Europe was roiled by social unrest, as shifts in politics and industry led to the growing power of the working class. In contemporary America, entrenched injustices—vast disparities of wealth, enduring discrimination against members of minority groups—have recently sparked similar protest movements. Benjamin's convolute dedicated to social movement is represented in this exhibition by new work by Adam Pendleton. The artist turned to a foundational text of black literature—W.E.B. Du Bois's 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*—in a towering, wall-size graphic statement.

Poet Kenneth Goldsmith annotated each artwork in the exhibition with appropriated texts, extending Benjamin's reflection on Paris as the capital of the nineteenth century into New York as the capital of the twentieth.

Also on view are archival materials from the Walter Benjamin archive in Berlin, including facsimiles of pages of the original manuscript for *The Arcades Project* and historical photographs. A number of architectural models of the Parisian arcades that inspired Benjamin are also in the exhibition.

The Arcades: Contemporary Art and Walter Benjamin is curated by Jens Hoffmann, Director of Special Exhibitions and Public Programs, The Jewish Museum, assisted by Shira Backer, Leon Levy Curatorial Associate, The Jewish Museum. The exhibition and its accompanying publication have been designed by Project Projects.

About the Catalogue

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Jewish Museum and Yale University Press published a catalogue, edited by Jens Hoffmann. The book included the pairings of the contemporary artworks with the 36 convolutes in Benjamin's text. Bound into the main volume is a graphic novelette, in which Italian illustrator Vito Manolo Roma imagines Benjamin's dream the night before he committed suicide while fleeing the Nazis. Also included are scholarly essays by Hoffmann and Caroline A. Jones; text fragments accompanying the artworks selected by poet Kenneth Goldsmith; reproductions of Benjamin's handwritten notes; and a list of the main Paris arcades discussed by him. Featuring 136 pages, and 50 color and black-and-white illustrations, the paperback book is available worldwide and at the Jewish Museum's Cooper Shop for \$35.00.



Support

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About the Jewish Museum

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