

Tchau Tchou, Birds!

INCIDENT NUMBER: IR- [REDACTED] - [REDACTED]

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO - DEPARTMENT OF PROTECTION SERVICES
INCIDENT REPORT / Report date: Saturday [REDACTED], 2021 - [REDACTED]:[REDACTED]

TITLE: ART RELATED INCIDENT

DATE: [REDACTED]/[REDACTED]/2021 [REDACTED]:[REDACTED]:[REDACTED] PM

TIME: [REDACTED]/[REDACTED]/2021 [REDACTED]:[REDACTED]:[REDACTED] PM

BUILDING: Michigan Ave

INCIDENT NARRATIVE:

On the above date and time, a small live bird was observed flying around in Galleries [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. It was not immediately captured. AUS Security Professional [REDACTED] called a supervisor to the area. Representatives of both Security and Facilities responded and notified curatorial and conservation staff. A representative from Smithereens's bird division responded, tracked the bird through the galleries, and ultimately trapped it in the low-ceiling mothers room ([REDACTED]-[REDACTED]). The bird was released outside. It is unclear how it entered: doors and vents were ruled out as points of entry. It is possible that it entered on equipment, seeking warmth.

Four walls and a door; an artificial nesting cavity. These are the minimum requirements for a birdhouse, or nest box.

Depending on what sorts of birds you want to attract with your nest box, the specific requirements vary. However, according to Cornell Lab of Ornithology's "NestWatch," all nest boxes should ideally be made with the following features:

- Untreated and unpainted wood, constructed with galvanized screws for a better seal and greater structural longevity;
- A sloped roof with an overhang to keep water from coming in through the box's entrance, and a recessed (slightly raised) floor with drain holes to keep the nest from getting wet;
- Thick walls (at least 3/4") with at least two ventilation holes on each side to help regulate temperature;
- No perch, which can help predators gain access to the box, and in some cases, more advanced forms of predator guards such as a collar, stovepipe, or noel guard;
- The correct size hole for the bird your box is intended to house, in order to help keep out predators and other unwanted occupants;
- Rough interior walls or interior grooves to help fledgelings leave the nest when they are ready.¹

In 2017, the Art Institute of Chicago mounted an ambitious exhibition on the radical Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica. The show allows visitors to "take off their shoes and walk through sand-filled installations, view Amazonian parrots, and try on exhibition copies of Oiticica's *Parangolés*, objects he created to be carried or worn and among the artist's most radical contributions to contemporary art."² One of the show's centerpieces was the artist's immersive 1967 installation, *Tropicália*. The installation—first exhibited in Rio de Janeiro in 1967, and then at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 1969—sparked a radical cultural movement of the same name against Brazil's right-wing government (formed after a US-backed coup in 1965).



Among the carefully staged stereotypes of a tropical paradise—sandy pathways through tropical foliage and pools of water in makeshift structures modelled after favelas—the viewer encounters a large walk-in bird cage featuring the two aforementioned “Amazonian parrots.” Oiticica specified that these parrots should be macaws, but Art Institute curators and administrators decided to instead use a sun conure named Sona and a red crowned parrot named Danaë, both borrowed from a local cage bird sanctuary. Art Institute staff volunteers took on the role of caretakers for these two birds, ensuring that they were properly socialized and fed and that their cage remained clean.³ This last point served not only the birds, but also the museum; uncleanness and evidence of the passage of time are anathema to the white walls of the institution.

It is strange to walk through the galleries of a major encyclopedic art museum and hear the calls of tropical birds in the distance, as if time and space are being collapsed. It is a foreign experience in a building which so carefully controls one’s experience of both time and space, carefully framing narratives, attempting to contain the natural messiness of being in the world.

The earliest bird houses replicated natural nesting cavities. Structures for attracting and housing doves, called dovecoats, are known to have been utilized in ancient Egypt and Iran. The Romans subsequently introduced the doveote to Europe, where it became popular in France and Great Britain. Often, these structures were built into or added onto human dwellings. The purpose of the doveote was sustenance based; pigeons were, and continue to be, a primary food source throughout the world, and their droppings are used as fertilizer.

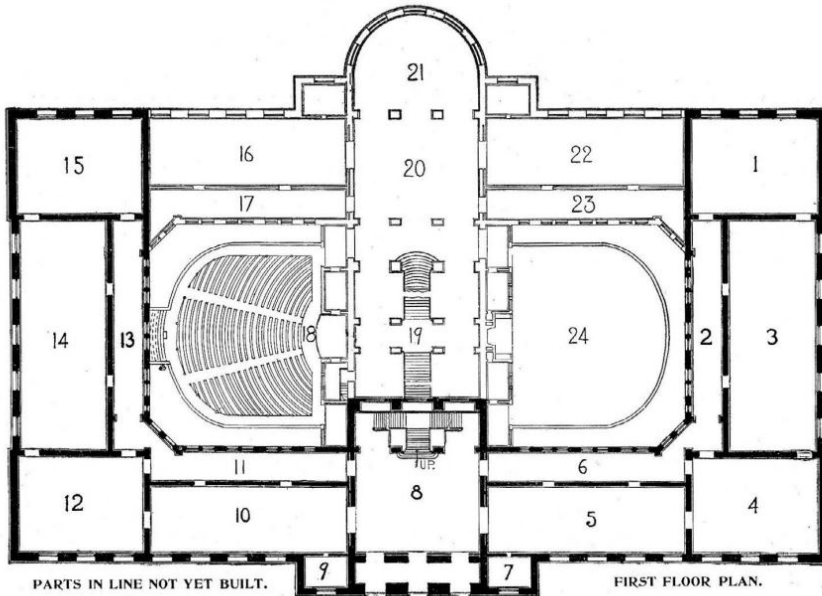
Hanging nesting cavities, such as hollowed gourds in indigenous north american cultures or clay pots in Europe, represent another formal development of birdhouse use. Again, attracting birds to areas populated by humans primarily served the human population. The birds helped to control insects and continued to serve as a food source. In pre-Ottoman Turkey, elaborate nest boxes which mirrored the local architecture were constructed as appendages directly on the walls of buildings.

In the early-19th century the British naturalist Charles Waterton developed the bird house as we know it today, not for sustenance, but for aesthetic appreciation and natural preservation. Later in that century, a German ornithologist named Hans von Berlepsch developed nesting boxes for woodpeckers and the other cavity-dwelling birds which occupied the woodpeckers’ former dwellings, in an attempt to curb insect activity through an increased bird population. His birdhouses replicated the natural “woodpecker lodges” that he observed in local forests. As both decorative and functional birdhouses gained popularity across Europe and the United States in the 19th- and 20th-century, their form often mirrored developments in popular architecture.



The new building was not deliberately planned as an architectural monument but inevitably became one from the dignity of its purpose and the necessary amplitude of its extent... A museum of fine arts should convey the positive assurance that that which is to be seen within shall be of the best that men have imagined and wrought. For such a conception the architectural style at once suggested is the classical.⁴

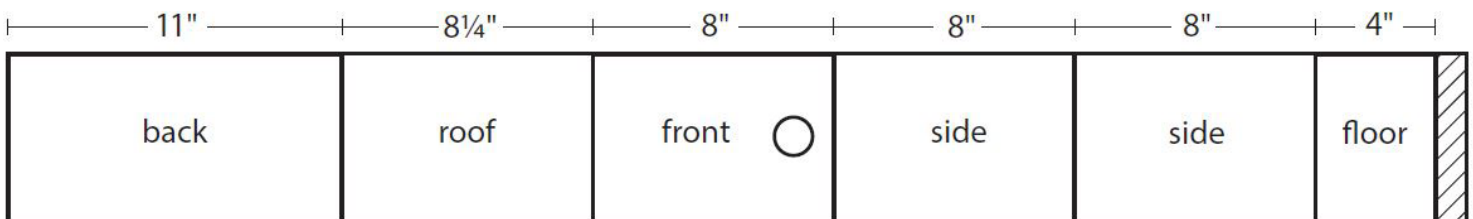
In the late-18th century, when the freestanding museum was a relatively new kind of building, the museum reflected rationalism and Enlightenment ideals by mirroring the architecture of the temple or the church (the Altes Museum, Karl Friedrich Schinkel). An interest in stewardship and protection in the 19th century led to fortress-like museums, Gothic or medieval in their style (Wadsworth Atheneum, Ithiel Town and Alexander Jackson Davis). At the end of the 19th century, the quintessential American museum plan emerged, combining classical styling with Beaux-Arts organization structures. Like the original Michigan Avenue building of the Art Institute of Chicago, these museums are “unabashedly civic monuments, facing street, park, or plaza with a self-assured integrity, and movement toward and through them is deliberate and ceremonial.”⁵

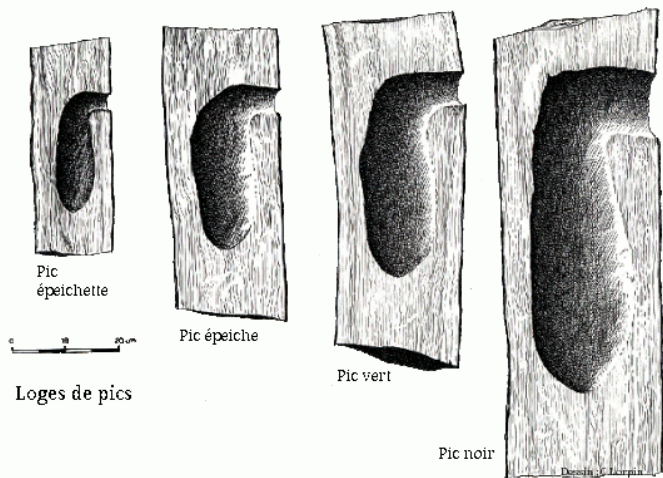


The 1920s brought inspiration and education to “The Museum of Tomorrow” (Clarence Stein). In the middle of the century, International

As the form and style of the nesting box developed parallel to the changing tastes of contemporary architecture, so did the approach to the design of art museums. The earliest buildings designed to house collections of art for public consumption emerged in the mid-18th century. *New American Art Museums*, a 1982 survey of contemporary museum architecture by the Whitney Museum of American Art, tracks the development of museum architecture over time. Through the examples laid out in the catalogue’s essay “American Art Museum Architecture,” one can see the ways in which museum buildings reflect the societal and political desires of their times.

Style reigned strong, emphasizing open plans for flexible spaces and temporary exhibitions; the museum as volume (“Museum for a Small City,” Mies van der Rohe). A dichotomy of style emerged in the 70s and 80s: the “strong box” (the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Philip Johnson) and the “green house” (Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo’s 1980 American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art). Since the 80s, architectural style in museum design has widely diversified, and architects approach the task with as much of their own independent style as the needs of the museum’s function. We are living in the age of starchitect museums.





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Consistent throughout these changing architectural modes is the reinforcement by the museum's exterior form of its claim to objective value for the objects and ideas inside. The earliest Western museums were cabinets of curiosities—*wunderkammer*—which gathered objects and specimens from mostly colonized lands, organizing and ordering them so as to create a rational and controllable version of the world. Artworks intermingled with sacred relics and stolen artifacts. The “natural order” imposed on the complex and unruly world was intrinsically linked, through the work of these museums, with a political order being made to appear natural, given.

This is a primary desire of the museum: to appear neutral. To appear natural.

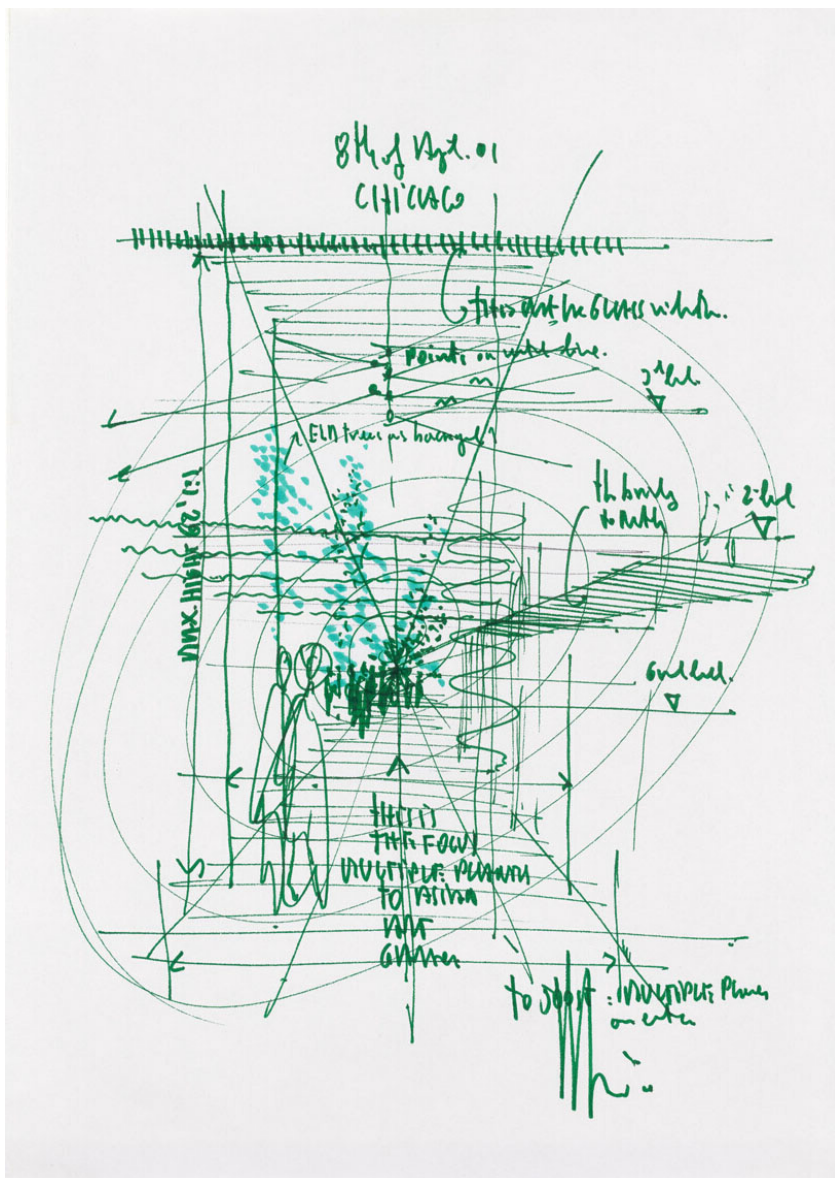
Art is only an excuse for the building housing it, which is the real symbol, precise as a chalk screeching on a blackboard, of the culture of the new rich... So much money spent on architecture in the name of art, much more than goes to art, is wrong, even if the architecture were good, but it's bad.⁶

The objective of a nest box, however, is not just to attract beautiful birds to your backyard for personal enjoyment. The nest box is a tool used in the conservation of declining bird populations. Natural nesting sites, whether in the hollow cavity of a tree or among the grass in a prairie, are becoming scarce as urban development pushes outwards from

cities and suburbs. Installing a nesting box in your yard or under the eaves of your home could help to sustain declining bird populations in your area. A nesting box is an apparatus of care.

The nest box is not defined simply by its form—functional, architectural, decorative—but by what it contains. The box is a vital site, inhabited by birth, life, and death. It accrues the markings of time: the nests and debris, eggshells, and droppings of that which it shelters.

How is a museum like a bird house? On its surface, a museum is also a container—a home for objects. And both are an architecture of care. The care of the museum, however, is ultimately self-interested. It seeks only to expand and protect its collections in order to grow its power and influ-



ence in the field. Care becomes a smoke-screen in the museum, concealing the ways that value and meaning are being constructed and upheld.



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In this way, too, a museum is like a birdhouse. A birdhouse should not appear to the bird like a constructed and artificial environment. It should appear natural, indiscernible from the nesting cavity which it mimics. Ideally, the bird never knows that it is in a birdhouse.

When Renzo Piano began thinking about the building he would design for the Art Institute of Chicago, he thought primarily about how to connect it to the public space across the street, at what was then under development into what is now Millennium Park. One of his solutions was the Nichols Bridgeway, a curved, almost floating pedestrian bridge across Monroe street from deep in Millennium Park, to bring the park to the museum. The other, much more subtle solution was to design the small pavilion type structures on the edge of the park, facing the new museum

building. The pavilions serve as the entrances to vast parking garages below Millennium park, but they illustrate one a central approach to Piano's work: they are anti-monumental, barely there structures. His subsequent Modern Wing is similarly approachable, with steps leading down to the entrance as opposed to the more traditional museum approach which mirrors that of a church: ascending the steps, preparing one's soul for the spiritual experience ahead. Despite its scale—much larger than any other building on the Art Institute's campus—the Modern Wing appears almost to float.

Inside, there is a grand atrium-like space, which was often referred to as the “main street” of the Modern Wing while the building was under construction. It is never referred to as “main street” now, and instead bears the name of billionaire hedge-fund manager, major Republican donor, and Art Institute trustee Ken Griffin. There is typically no art to be found in Griffin Court. Instead, the art is pushed to the galleries at the margins of this atrium so that the space can easily be transformed into a “winter wonderland” or “Paris in the 20s” for galas and weddings.

The first floor of the Modern Wing features an education wing, the ticketing desk, one of the museum's two retail shops, and a coat check, all before entering into the museum's paid areas. Behind the paywall, so to speak, the first floor offers the grand main street of Griffin Court, off of which can be found the Abbott Galleries for temporary exhibitions, the [Carolyn S. and Matthew] Bucksbaum Gallery of Photography, and the Stone Gallery black box for time-based media. There is also the Pritzker Garden, a small outdoor space for gathering.

Piano's attempt to minimize the difference between inside and outside, his linking of the museum to the public space of the park and his permeable, transparent entranceway, are a way to link art to society. To equalize the difference that a museum traditionally upholds. The museum's public is the public, this building tries to tell us. There is no barrier between art and life, between insider and outsider. This is the new ideal of the museum as told by the building.

In 1926, [Constantin] Brancusi created a sculpture of Bird in Space (now in the collection of the Seattle Art Museum) and sent it from Paris to New York City for an exhibition of his work at the Brummer Gallery (curated by his great friend and advocate Marcel Duchamp). Although the law permitted artworks, including sculpture, to enter the U.S. free from import taxes, when Bird arrived, officials refused to let it enter as art. To qualify as “sculpture,” works had to be “reproductions by carving or casting, imitations of natural objects, chiefly the human form.” Because Bird in Space did not look much like a bird at all, officials classified it as a utilitarian object (under “Kitchen Utensils and Hospital Supplies”) and levied against it 40% of the work’s value. Bewildered and exasperated by this assessment, Brancusi launched a complaint in court in defense of Bird in Space.

The initial question before the court was whether Brancusi’s work adequately resembled that which it was supposed to “imitate,” as indicated by its title. Passing that test would make it a sculpture (and therefore art) and exempt it from customs duties. The task of the trial became, however, how to define “sculpture”—and, for that matter, “art.” Testimony was provided by a number of experts, including the sculpture’s owner, Edward Steichen, an artist and future director of MoMA’s Department of Photography, as well as British sculptor Jacob Epstein and Brooklyn Museum Director William Henry Fox. During his testimony, the art critic Frank Crowninshield was asked by the court what it was about the object which would lead him to believe it was a bird. He responded: “It has the suggestion of flight, it suggests grace, aspiration, vigour, coupled with speed in the spirit of strength, potency, beauty, just as a bird does. But just the name, the title, of this work, why, really, it does not mean much.”⁷

In Planet Earth II (the particularly brutal one), there is a segment about *Gygis alba*, the white tern. White terns are small sea birds found throughout the Indian, South Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans. The segment is memorable because the white tern does not nest like other terns, which build their nests on the ground. Instead, it lays a single egg in the crook of a bare branch. No nest, no protection. The egg just balances there on the branch, exposed to the elements, while life forms—slowly and intentionally—inside.

Sometimes working at a museum can feel like that—precarious, but hopeful. The egg, while



fragile, is also full of potential. It is a beginning, an opening up into the world. It is both object and subject.

I have worked at the Art Institute of Chicago for four years. I am one of over 500 employees who work at the museum enacting a regimen of care and access, implementing the mission of the museum every day. Among these workers are custodians and curators, visitor engagement representatives, painters, security guards, conservators, art handlers, and registrars. There are engineers, carpenters, designers, and editors, fundraisers and data analysts. Some of this labor is visible, but much of it is not. Not visible even to those who rely upon it the most, to realize their grand visions and create exhibitions, to draw great numbers of visitors through the museum doors.

This system of care, a complex network of human workers carrying out a wide variety of tasks in careful coordination, becomes reduced through its invisibility to pure mechanization within the larger apparatus of the museum. The

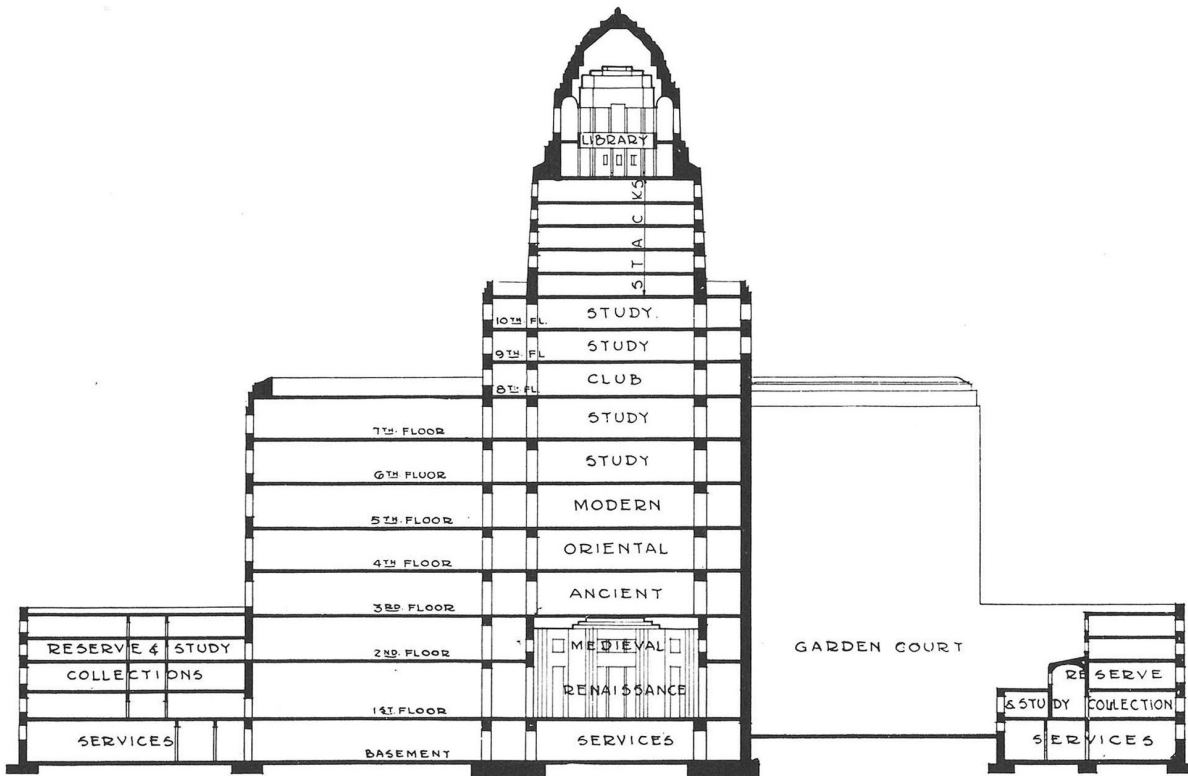
museum claims total authorship over the production of its workers. But the museum is not autonomous; it is not objective. It is not its director, or its Board of Trustees, or even its collection. The museum is its inhabitants—the visitors who engage it and the staff that support it; this is its life-force. And this is where its care fails.

Contributing to formal differentiation is the individual character of each museum's holdings. Programmatically, one might describe the museum as the public counterpart of the house, with the objects as the tenants. Just as relatively unrepeatable configurations arise in residential buildings when the architect seeks to satisfy the differing needs of the clients, so must each museum building respond to the special requirements of its collections.⁸

The view of the museum as a home only to artworks is an incomplete one. Museums may house objects, but they serve people. It is imperative that museums extend their systems of care beyond the objects in their collections to those whose labor allows the museum to function. The expectation that museum workers should be willing to sacrifice for the greater good—the so-called rational, objective good that the museum works so hard to uphold—needs to be replaced

by the expectation that museums pay their workers not just “market rates” in a woefully underpaid field, but wages commensurate with their value to the institution (not to mention their education and the debt incurred to obtain it). To this end, museums need to create pathways for advancement within their structures, with clear metrics for that advancement and transparency of salary both internally and in their hiring practices. When museums share their accumulated power—financial, cultural, and otherwise—with their workers and the communities they serve, they will better be able to hold themselves accountable not just to their present, but to their colonial pasts and their possible futures.

To be truly effective, care cannot be enacted on an individual level. It must be systemic. A single nesting box cannot repopulate a declining bird population. However, applying that one gesture of care towards a population—towards a collective—creates a change within the ecosystem itself, creating a system that can sustain growth, life. Following the logic of the nesting box, the museum must commit to systemic, radical care towards those who inhabit it, those who sustain it. Otherwise, a museum is just four walls and a door.



SECTION

This text was written in response to Julian Van Der Moere’s work *Tchau Tchau, Birds!* for Bird Show Chicago. Organized by Erin Toale, the work was on view via live Bird Cam from September 12 through September 22, 2021. Thank you to Julian for making this work, which sparked so many new thoughts and gave me an excuse to write this text, and to Erin for inviting me to write for Bird Show. Tchau.



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List of Images

- 1 *Installation view of Hélio Oiticica’s Tropicália, 1967, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in 2016.*
- 2 *Starling pot, 1650-1680, unglazed earthenware. Origins: Amsterdam, Netherlands (probably).*
- 3 *First floor plan of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1893, from Catalogue of Paintings, Sculpture, and Other Objects Exhibited at the Opening of the New Museum, December 8, 1893.*
- 4 *Plan for House Wren nest box, Cornell Lab of Ornithology NestWatch (<https://nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/birds/house-wren/>).*
- 5 *Baron von Berlepsch’s nesting boxes, made as exact reproductions of the nesting cavities of local woodpecker lodges.*
- 6 *Renzo Piano, Art Institute of Chicago Addition, Concept Sketch Perspective, 2001, green marker on paper.*
- 7 *William Russell Birch, Design for a Gothic Birdhouse at Springland, before 1805, watercolor.*
- 8 *“How They Know It’s ‘A Bird’ and Are Sure It’s ‘Art’” in America, March 13, 1927.*
- 9 *Section plan for Clarence Stein’s “Museum of Tomorrow,” 1929.*
- 10 *White tern (Gygis alba) egg, collection of Jacques Perrin de Brichambaut (photo: Roger Culos).*

End Notes

- 1 *“Features of a Good Birdhouse,” NestWatch, July 9, 2014, <https://nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/features-of-a-good-birdhouse/>.*
- 2 *“Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium,” The Art Institute of Chicago, accessed October 11, 2021, <https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/2531/helio-oiticica-to-organize-delirium>.*
- 3 *Jennifer Oatess, “Tchau Tchau, Birds!,” The Art Institute of Chicago Blog (Art Institute of Chicago, May 4, 2017), <https://www.artic.edu/articles/621/tchau-tchau-birds>.*
- 4 *J. Randolph Coolidge Jr., “The Architectural Scheme,” Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin, 5 (June 1907), p. 41.*
- 5 *Helen Searing, “The Art Museum in Nineteenth-Century America,” in New American Art Museums (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982), p. 36.*
- 6 *Donald Judd, “On Installation,” in The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), p. 230.*
- 7 *MaryKate Cleary, “‘But Is It Art?’ Constantin Brancusi vs. the United States,” InsideOut (Museum of Modern Art, July 24, 2014), https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2014/07/24/but-is-it-art-constantin-brancusi-vs-the-united-states/.*
- 8 *Helen Searing, “American Art Museum Architecture,” in New American Art Museums (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982), p. 12.*