

The Discourse Shift from Curatorial Arguments to Brand Narratives

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Abstract: Determine if, after transitioning from art sponsorship to exhibition production, the curatorial discourse in brand museums has shifted from a curation-centric mode to a branding-led narrative system. Museum branding and brand museums are not the same phenomenon; therefore, this study focuses on brand-founded exhibition spaces that have become cultural agents for a commercial brand. According to Paul O'Neill's idea of the curatorial turn, the paper defines curatorial argument as the body of knowledge claims that can be produced through selection, organisation and space in an exhibition, and exhibition narrative is regarded as a way to present such a claim to the audience. WAVES at Casa Sanlorenzo in Venice and Sueño Perro at Fondazione Prada in Milan will be selected as the subjects for a comparative case study. Based on the above analysis, WAVES generally creates an aesthetically pleasing environment in line with the luxury concept of identity, whereas Sueño Perro shows stronger characteristics of archival and media specificity. The paper does not think that brand narrative will automatically substitute for a curatorial argument; instead, it demonstrates that when aesthetic unity is emphasized over critical propositions, brand narrative may stand out.

Keywords: Brand museum; curatorial argument; exhibition narrative; luxury brand; Casa Sanlorenzo; Fondazione Prada; Paul O'Neill.

1. Introduction

The top-tier luxury brands are gradually moving away from endorsements and charitable foundations to renovations, culture spaces, self-operated exhibition areas, etc. If the brand leads at the exhibition, the curatorial text may move away from showcasing art and focus instead on promoting the brand's cultural legitimacy and public awareness.

The subject of this study is the brand museum or the brand-established cultural institution; it is a place where a commercial brand serves as a cultural subject. Therefore, the research problem is as follows: When a luxury brand switches from being a sponsor of an exhibition to the subject of exhibition creation, does the curatorial text change from presenting an argument for selection to building a brand narrative?

To address the above problem, this paper compares WAVES at Casa Sanlorenzo in Venice and Sueño Perro: Instalación Celuloide by Alejandro G. Inárritu at Fondazione Prada, Milan. Both are related to the cultural platforms of luxury brands and use immersive spatial language, but their language strategies are not the same. WAVES creates a soft sensory world for the wave, and Sueño Perro is organised around archival footage, 35mm materiality, and the memory of Amores Perros.

Section 2 shows the theoretical differences among curatorial argument, exhibition narrative and brand narrative. Section 3 Introduces the selected cases and analysis methods. Section 4 introduces the two exhibitions. Section 5 is the implication for Brand Museums. Section 6 concludes that the main problem is not whether a brand has been mentioned, but whether the exhibition still makes a claim that goes beyond what the brand has stated itself.

2. Theoretical Framework: Curatorial Argument, Exhibition Narrative and Brand Narrative

2.1. Curatorial argument

Paul O'Neill's talk of the curatorial turn is good: exhibitions are not neutral; they also have their own talk. Curation is not merely the selection of works; it is the construction of an idea by choosing some works and not others, arranging them in space, and guiding the audience's experience of them [1]. O'Neill's later works have also pointed out that curators are now visible producers of culture rather than hidden custodians of collections [2]. Curatorial argument refers to the main claim or critical proposition that an exhibition puts forward in this paper. The supporting materials for the evidence include written text, objects, space-time sequence, material contrast, light and shadow, sound and rhythm, etc. Why are these works displayed together, and what problem does the exhibition hope to address? Therefore, the definition does not need to be a general mood. A single show does not need to be a lecture. It is argumentative when the relationship among the works raises a question, a tension or a position that can be discussed outside of aesthetic appreciation.

2.2. Exhibition narrative

Exhibition narrative is not the same as curatorial argument, but they are related. If curatorial argument is the main idea, then exhibition narrative is the space and language that help visitors experience this idea. According to Mieke Bal's idea of exhibition as a series of encounters, meaning is produced through movement, alteration and changes in the perception of objects experienced by visitors [3]. Macdonald and Basu also believe that exhibitions gather people, objects, ideas, texts, spaces and media to create a special knowledge situation [4].

The narrative of the exhibition includes wall texts, captions,

the arrangement of galleries, spatial division, sound design, colour, light and visual dialogue, etc., all of which attract the public's attention. If it only creates emotions, lifestyles or a sense of belonging, the exhibition will be understandable but lack critical depth.

2.3. Brand narrative and brand museums

A brand story is also a type of speech. It does not usually ask what the work is about; instead, it seeks to determine how the institution or brand should be known. Research on corporate museums has found that these spaces help organise the company's memory, identity and selective history [5]. Research on the brand identity of art museums shows that institutional identity can be built through products, services, symbols, people and organisation characteristics [6]. Curatorship in the luxury sector is also employed to build an all-encompassing brand experience and goes beyond traditional museum work [7].

Museum branding and a brand museum are not the same thing. The start of museum branding was a wish for public recognition. A brand museum begins with a brand and creates cultural legitimacy through museum-like forms. Cultural heritage and organisational memory can be turned into valuable brand assets in such places [8]. Recently, scholars of brand museums have proposed that they can commodify and disseminate organisational heritage through historical artifacts, interactive displays and narratives of innovation, as well as visitor co-creation [9].

The brand's story is not inherently negative. A brand museum can offer resources, exposure and space for experimentation. The problem is that the exhibition's argument is reduced to a demand for brand consistency; if the works serve mainly to reinforce the brand's atmosphere, values or lifestyle image, the curatorial discourse becomes mere support for brand narrative.

3. Case Selection and Analytical Approach

This paper will use a qualitative comparative case study. The two cases are luxury brand cultural institutions that differ in the structure of their discourse. Sanlorenzo Arts presented

WAVES at Casa Sanlorenzo in Venice from May 6 to June 28, 2026, for the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. Sergio Risaliti and Cristiano Segnanfreddo were the curators of the group exhibition, and works by Alexander Calder, Lucio Fontana, Fausto Melotti, Tony Cragg, Christine Safa, Marcello Maloberti and Friedrich Andreoni from different sections of Casa Sanlorenzo [10] were shown in the interior, garden and bridge areas. Almine Rech's exhibition information also lists WAVES as a group exhibition supported by the science of Ersilia Vaudo Scarpetta and a dialogue among modern masters and contemporary artists [11]. Analysis of WAVES also incorporates the author's own exhibition experiences and observations at the scene to describe things such as the mood in a certain place, relationships among works, and visitors' emotions at Casa Sanlorenzo.

The second is Sueño Perro: Celuloide Installation by Alejandro G. Iñárritu: Shown at Fondazione Prada in Milan from September 18, 2025, to February 25, 2026. Fondazione Prada has referred to it as a world-class multi-sensory exhibition at the intersection of cinema and visual arts, designed for the 25th anniversary of Amores Perros, and based on never-before-seen footage in the film archives of the National Autonomous University of Mexico [12]. LACMA's page for the later Los Angeles screening lists that the exhibition was jointly organised by LACMA and Fondazione Prada and presents film as living material made up of time, light and space [13].

As with WAVES, the analysis of Sueño Perro also utilizes the author's own visit and on-site observation at Fondazione Prada to present a spatial sequence, as well as the materiality of projection and the responses of visitors that institutional texts fail to document.

The four comparison criteria for the two exhibitions are agency, object-text relations, spatial narratives and audience address. Agency refers to who is speaking in the exhibition text. Object-text relations refer to whether a particular work is interpreted as a sign of extended identity. Spatial narrative refers to whether a place generates a sense of crisis or is more atmospheric. Audience address refers to whether a visitor is in a state of deep observation, actively engaging in sense-making, or a member of a brand community.

Table 1. Comparative coding of exhibition language strategies

Dimension	WAVES, Casa Sanlorenzo	Sueño Perro, Fondazione Prada
Institutional agency	Brand as autonomous cultural producer.	Foundation as platform; artist and archive remain central.
Object-text relation	Works are unified by the wave metaphor.	Footage, 35mm and archive define the problem.
Spatial narrative	Fluid, resonant, controlled luxury atmosphere.	Celluloid, montage, memory and violence.
Audience address	Immersive aesthetic experience.	Critical encounter with archival fragments.
Discourse tendency	Brand narrative absorbs argument.	Argument remains visible within brand frame.

4. Case Analysis

4.1. WAVES at Casa Sanlorenzo: the wave as perceptual brand environment

WAVES is not a direct presentation of yachts and corporate history. It does not have a strong brand story. The official language presents the exhibition in waves, frequencies, movements, changes, arts, sciences and the sea. Metaphor is flexible, and thus it can connect Venice with water, cosmic

energy, sound, modern sculpture, and the architectural environment of Casa Sanlorenzo [10].

A curatorial argument should specify what the concept of waves enables us to explore critically or in art history. Does it reconsider sculpture as vibration? Connecting modern abstraction with ecology: sound and cosmology? Is it in conflict with the association of Venice and luxurious mobility with environmental instability? The exhibition raises these problems, but the language used by the public is generally limited to an accessible system. Interior space, garden, bridge,

artworks, sound and brand atmosphere flow together to create a unified sensory environment.

This way is reflected in the organisation of the works. Calder's mobile can be employed to demonstrate a problem of motion, stability and air. Fontana's cuts can be regarded as Spaces rather than flat pictures. Andreoni's sound installations can make low-frequency waves tangible, and Tony Cragg's sculptures can also give a sense of altered materials [11]. The above connections could provide the material for a curatorial argument on sculpture as energy and unstable space. However, all of these works fall under the general category of WAVES and are thus flattened; their individual tensions are reduced to a single, shared atmosphere.

Therefore, the exhibition function is that of a brand museum and does not take the form of a traditional company museum. It does not have a brand archive. In turn, it will build a brand world for the public to enjoy. All these are cultural symbols that create a sense of luxury for Sanlorenzo: the sea, movement, fine materials, soft light, and controlled space. Therefore, the difference between a sponsor and a curator has begun to disappear. Sanlorenzo no longer shows only foreign works of art; it has created a place to experience such art.

WAVES is better for viewers to compare specific works of art through the lens of curatorial discourse, such as a moving Calder and an opened Fontana. It is weaker when the exhibition language uses the wave as a universal connector. At that time, the curatorial argument will likely be a brand narrative of fluidity, elegance and resonance. The exhibition does not aim to promote the brand but to offer a cultural form of brand reassurance.

4.2. Sueño Perro at Fondazione Prada: archival argument within a branded institution

Sueño Perro is also a cultural institution for a high-end brand, but its discourse work is different. Fondazione Prada's text focuses on the artist, the cinematic medium and the archival conditions of the material. Although it is related to Amores Perros, the exhibition is not solely based on the famous movie. It shows new pictures that were previously cut, stored and later released after 25 years [12]. Therefore, the exhibition has put forward a specific curatorial proposal: a film is not a closed system, and its components can be arranged in various other ways by means of cinema and space.

The first kind of the official account is shown in 35mm film. Grain, flicker, warmth, projection and sound are not for decoration; they serve to show that cinema can be experienced as living material rather than just storytelling [12]. LACMA's later presentation makes this argument even more explicit by asking how many films exist within a film and describing film as composed of time, light and space [13]. It was not dark at the construction site; it was rather close to being so. The visitor saw the archival fragment directly and did not know that it belonged to a particular brand.

The Brand's Story Lives On. Fondazione Prada's institutional identity also includes cross-disciplinary experimental exhibitions of art, film, architecture and theory. The cultural capital of the foundation will be increased by the works of a foreign film director. However, the exhibition text does not need to impress the viewer with the world of Prada. It shows parts of life in Mexico City in 2000, including love, betrayal, violence and the socio-political environment [12]. Thus, the brand identity supports the platform; the problem the exhibition raises falls outside the scope of the brand. The

two are not the same. Sueño Perro is immersive but still has a problem. A visitor's path of projections, darkness, sound and archival images can be used to make the material history of cinema tangible. Thus, the exhibition narrative serves to mediate the curatorial argument rather than substitute for it.

5. Comparative Discussion

5.1. From curatorial proposition to atmospheric coherence

The two cases differ in the extent to which the curatorial proposal aligns with the atmosphere. O'Neill's curatorial turn can help us understand this better: an exhibition becomes discursive when it takes a stand through the arrangement of works and public awareness of mediation [1, 2]. This location is relatively exposed in Sueño Perro. The exhibition proposes that the remains of a film can generate another kind of filmic and spatial reality; the archival fragment is not a secondary source but the object of inquiry itself.

The proposal is less specific in WAVES. The exhibition has a good narrative of the display but a weak curatorial argument. Its objects are spatially effective, but the wave metaphor is too general; it may explain everything and thus fail to move people. As Bal mentions in his talk on exhibition narration, movement can also be a kind of affect [3]. Therefore, WAVES is relatively convenient to add to a system of atmospheric expressions.

5.2. Brand museum, not museum branding

Both exhibitions are brand museums in the sense defined above; they both start with a brand and build cultural legitimacy through a museum-like form, rather than gathering public collections to gain recognition. However, what the two cases show is that this common institutional form does not determine the discursive outcome. WAVES takes the brand-museum concept to the extreme and dissolves the claim of exhibition into the atmosphere of fluidity and resonance of the brand. Sueño Perro is also in the same category of brand-founded cultural institutions, but it has shown that the form does not automatically reduce curatorial discourse to brand narrative. Museum branding and brand museums are thus different concepts that specify institutions; they do not indicate whether a curatorial argument will be effective. That result is not determined by who established the space, but by how the language of exhibition organises agency, objects, space and address.

5.3. Does curatorial text degenerate into brand narrative?

It may not be the case. Curatorial text is reduced to brand narrative when the three signs appear together. First, the exhibition concept is now a value word rather than a problem. Secondly, the object-text relationship turns particular works into evidence of the pre-existing brand atmosphere. Thirdly, most of the visitors are desired to feel a sense of belonging, refinement or immersion, rather than to face a critical question. Only some of these signs are displayed in WAVES.

A curatorial text should be appealing to the audience and does not need to be intellectually demanding. The required friction may be due to missing archives, a lack of historical materials, contradictory objects or a spatial sequence that is not entirely uniform. Sueño Perro creates such friction by using cut footage, cinematic materiality and the violence of the source film; the branded institutional frame is visible, but

the text still exceeds institutional self-description.

In terms of theory, brand narrative and curatorial argument do not need to be in opposition and can coexist. The brand supplies the funds and promotional support; curation produces knowledge. The fault is at the top level. If the brand narrative is the destination and curatorial language is merely decoration along the way, the exhibition will be a polished extension of the brand. Conversely, if the curatorial argument only sets out the problem and brand narrative does not shape access, there will be no exhibition.

6. Conclusion

Determine whether the curatorial discourse in brand museums has shifted from curatorial arguments to brand narratives since luxury brands started being displayed in museums rather than being sponsored by them. By comparing WAVES at Casa Sanlorenzo and Sueño Perro at Fondazione Prada, the paper shows that brand museums do not automatically exclude curatorial argument. Organise the display of agency, objects, space and audience in exhibition language.

WAVES shows how a brand museum can use artworks as components of an atmospheric brand environment. Although the wave metaphor connects sculpture, sound, Venice and space, it is also relatively general and can be applied to the language of luxury, fluidity and resonance. Therefore, the curatorial discourse is no longer a critique but a type of cultural comfort for the brand.

Sueño Perro shows a different possibility. Although it is under the auspices of a high-end fashion company, it focuses on old films, uses 35mm film, and is inspired by Amores Perros, so a sense of history can be felt. The exposition's story aims to make readers think more profoundly about cinema, memory and material culture, and thus departs from the conventional exhibition of Prada's brand image.

Thus, the problem is not whether a brand is present, but whether the exhibition can still present a claim beyond the brand's own description. When the brand's story is merely the destination and the curatorial language only decorates the road, the exhibition is an elegant extension of the brand. When the curatorial argument defines the problem and the brand only offers access, space and resources, a brand

museum can still have a critical effect.

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