

Title: Embodied Experience in the Museum Context: Museum Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art  
Rojina Sabetiashraf, University of Alberta, Masters in the History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture

Abstract:

In this essay, I propose to explore how COVID-19 affected museum visitors' experiences. This essay will study the museum's response to the pandemic, using digital spaces and social media instead of physical ones. By examining the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA) in Tehran, Iran, as a case study, I will examine how the physical characteristics of the space, the sensory qualities of the objects on display, and the movements and interactions of visitors influence embodied experiences in the museum. The essay will draw from Mieke Bal's theory on the act of looking and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective to understand how visitors interact with the museum environment and the on-display objects. It will also emphasise considering different types of embodiments in media spaces and to reconsider media and spatiality from a critical phenomenological perspective. This recognition will highlight the nature of the digital media space by challenging dominant narratives that favour some forms of embodiment over others. The study will explore how visitors engage with and perceive their museum experiences as well as how trauma and aesthetics interact.

Keywords:

Embodied experience, Museums, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Phenomenology, Social media platforms, Online museum spaces

## Introduction

“What happens when one painting in a particular museum room ends up next to another so that you see the one out of the corner of your eye while looking at the other?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mieke Bal, and Norman Bryson. *Looking in: The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam: Routledge, 2001), 161.

As I was viewing some artworks on Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was reminded of this question that Mieke Bal asks at the beginning of her chapter “On Grouping: the Caravaggio Corner.” This notion of spatial arrangement and perception becomes even more intriguing when considering the impact of the pandemic on museum experiences. In this essay, I propose to examine how the pandemic has affected museum visitors’ embodied experiences, including how the museum has responded to the crisis and trauma by using online spaces and social media platforms in place of actual physical spaces. With a focus on the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) in Tehran, Iran, which used the Instagram platform to display artworks during the pandemic, I will use a phenomenological and cultural studies approach to investigate how the physical characteristics of the space, the sensory qualities of the objects on display, and the movements and interactions of visitors themselves all influence embodied experiences in the museum. The phenomenological viewpoint of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Mieke Bal’s theory on the act of looking serves as the foundation for my framework in this essay for understanding the complex interactions between the museum environment and visitors. I argue that the dynamics of perception, spatial configuration, and sensory experiences in the process of meaning-making have been fundamentally altered by digital interactions, such as those made possible by Instagram. I use examples from my own lived experience as a frequent museum visitor who has shifted to remotely accessing online content in response to the restrictions placed on visiting actual exhibition spaces to support my argument.

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The role of the audience in the meaning-making process within museums is often underestimated, as curators tend to focus on their intended messages and interpretations.<sup>2</sup> However, it is important to acknowledge the influence museum visitors have on how they interpret the exhibits they see. Visitors actively participate in the process of interpretation and co-construction of meaning as they interact with the exhibitions and the layout and design of the museum, which may differ from the curator's intended meaning. Furthermore, visual dominance influenced museum layouts throughout modernity, which presented artworks as standalone objects in neutral settings to enhance their "aura." However, the evolution of our understanding and perception has sparked curiosity about the affective dynamics of museums.<sup>3</sup>

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### **Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Perspective**

Key findings in cognitive science research over the past twenty-five years have reinforced the idea that human thinking is profoundly embodied.<sup>4</sup> This idea has had substantial implications in a variety of fields, including philosophy, architecture, and museum studies.<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty argued that people are inherently physical beings that engage with the environment through bodily motions, senses, and experiences.<sup>6</sup> He claimed that visual contact with the outside world is not just a detached, rational procedure, but also a lived-out experience in which our

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<sup>2</sup> Monica Calcagno, and Claudio Biscaro, "Designing the Interactions in the Museum: Learning from Palazzo Strozzi," *International Studies of Management & Organization* 42, no. 2 (2012): 43–56, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41739589>, 43.

<sup>3</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, "Museum as an Embodied Experience," essay, in *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space*, ed. Nina Sobol Levent, Alvaro Pascual-Leone, and Simon Lacey (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 126–33, 239.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Kali Tzortzi, "Museum Architectures for Embodied Experience," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 32, no. 5 (2017): 491–508, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2017.1367258>, 494.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, "Embodied Agency," essay, in *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Essays*, ed. Henry Pieterma (Washington D.C.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, 1990), 1–21, 7.

perceptions are influenced by our physical interaction with the surroundings.<sup>7</sup> As he states, “[t]here would be no space at all for me if I had no body.”<sup>8</sup>

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology provides a starting point for reconsidering the ontological and epistemological status of looking. He considered vision to be a form of embodied engagement with the environment. With a fundamentally reversible relationship between the seer and the seen, the visible and the invisible, he saw sensory perceptions as providing an opening into the world in its pre-reflective rawness. He believed that the body, not just the eye or the mind, is what looks. Merleau-Ponty emphasises the importance of our daily interactions with the world by shifting our attention away from the visual sign’s structure and towards the event and significance of the visual experience.<sup>9</sup>

Merleau-Ponty emphasised the significance of embodiment in our thought processes, which is especially pertinent in the context of embodied museum experiences as opposed to online experiences. He argued that as evidenced by the perceived difference in the size of the moon at various positions in the sky, our perceptions are based on our movements as embodied agents in real spaces. Merleau-Ponty made a point about the influence of our movements in a horizontal space on our perceptual field, which has an impact on how we can perceive truth.<sup>10</sup> Our bodies are embedded in physical reality, which is missing from online interactions. Thus, the physical grounding we experience as embodied beings is absent in online interactions, including those related to museum experiences.

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<sup>7</sup> Claude Lefort and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 134.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2012), 117.

<sup>9</sup> Olga Belova, “The Event of Seeing: A Phenomenological Perspective on Visual Sense-making,” *Culture and Organization* 12, no. 2 (2006): 93–107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759550600682866>, 94.

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 55.

## Mieke Bal's Theory on the Act of Looking

Every time we encounter an event, it is experienced from a particular angle. Whether the events are imagined or based on real, historical facts, they entail a specific way of looking at things and an angle. Some people might make the effort to present the facts in an “objective” manner, but in reality, they are only presenting what they see or perceive, without any interpretations or comments. The position of the perceiving body in relation to the object, familiarity with the object, lighting, distance, and psychological attitude are all important factors in perception, which is a psychosomatic process. These elements have an impact on how people perceive things and the impressions they form and may convey to others. As a result, attempting to achieve objectivity is useless given the numerous factors that have an impact on perception.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of the importance of viewing multiple artworks together, Bal's observation in her chapter “On Grouping” emphasises the influence of positioning and juxtaposition in determining the meanings of artworks in museums. Bal gives an example of three artworks at the Berlin Museum. The positioning of Caravaggio's *Amor Vincit Omnia*, Baglione's *Heavenly Amor Defeats Earthly Love*, and Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas* creates a new dynamic that would not have been present had the works of art been shown separately or in a different arrangement. The curator altered the viewer's perception of Jesus' barely discernible leg in the painting by inserting *Doubting Thomas* between the two photos of nudity. Jesus' leg has a

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<sup>11</sup> Bal, *Looking in: The Art of Viewing*, 42.

subtle coquettish quality that might not have been noticed if it had been viewed in isolation because it is adjacent to Caravaggio's nude *Amor*, which has sprawling legs.<sup>12</sup>

In her allegorical museology theory, Bal emphasises the significance of understanding museum installations as discourses and exhibitions as *utterances* within these discourses. The “new” museology departs from the conventional method of museum curation by acknowledging the influence of display in influencing meaning and interpretation. According to this viewpoint, the complex interactions between pictures, words (captions), and installation components (like order, height, lighting, and combinations) are what create the meaning within a museum or exhibition. Together, these elements produce a constructive tension that enables a deeper and more complex understanding of the displayed artworks.<sup>13</sup>

### **Case Study: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art**

The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art offers visitors a distinct experience through its intentional emphasis on human interaction and activity (Fig. 1). The Tehran-based DAZ architects—Kamran Diba as the lead architect, Nader Ardalan, and the structural engineer Zareh Grigorian—were commissioned to design the museum.<sup>14</sup> The museum design was inspired by the works of Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Josep Lluís Sert, and Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as the architecture of Iranian traditional elements.<sup>15</sup> Diba emphasised that the ultimate purpose of architects should not be to build isolated, ostentatious, and aesthetically

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>14</sup> Talinn Grigor, *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs* (Pittsburgh, PA: Periscope Publishing, Ltd, 2009), 160-61.

<sup>15</sup> Amir Bani-Masoud, *Contemporary Architecture in Iran: From 1925 to the Present* (Independently published, 2021), 328.

spectacular monuments distributed across the city.<sup>16</sup> Instead, he called for architecture to shape and define a city's social and cultural sectors. Diba proposed a design plan for a museum on the outskirts of Farah Park in 1967, providing an alternate approach to urban development. Diba wanted to create a healthy dialogue between the cultural institution and the natural setting by situating the museum near the park. This viewpoint challenges the concept of exclusive, elite districts by emphasising the significance of designing socially and culturally relevant architecture.<sup>17</sup>

The museum is comprised of a number of interconnecting gallery spaces that circle an internal courtyard with sculptures. According to Diba, the interior courtyard is an open space for breathing and is also influenced by Iranian vernacular architecture, which is courtyard-based.<sup>18</sup> While moving around the galleries and taking in views of both the outside spaces and inner galleries, the layout encourages exploration and discovery. The design successfully strikes a balance between activity and relaxation, focus and reflection, and it gives the viewer an immersive experience. The museum's design concept focuses on establishing connections between many aspects, including the inside and outdoors, the public and private realms, and private and public areas. Exterior gardens surround the internal galleries, providing plenty of natural light, picturesque vistas, and moments of relaxation. These spatial connections are activated by the movement of people, with the central corridor acting as both the beginning

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<sup>16</sup> John Morris Dixon, "Cultural hybrid. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran; Architects: DAZ Consulting Architects and Engineers, Kamran Diba and Nader Ardalan," *Progressive Architecture* 59, no.5 (1978), 68.

<sup>17</sup> Niloofar Amini, "The Aesthetic Resistance of Iranian Architects and Artists during the Late Pahlavi Era," *Studies in History and Theory of Architecture*, no. 8 (2020): 197–212, <https://doi.org/10.54508/sita.8.15>, 204.

<sup>18</sup> Fereshteh Daftari, Layla S. Diba, and Negar Azimi, "Interview with Kamran Diba," in *Iran Modern* (New York, NY: Asia Society Museum in association with Yale University Press, New Haven, 2013), 79–86, 83-4.

and the ending point. A lengthy hallway that ends at the base of the spiral space is surrounded by galleries that are arranged in a circle and radiate out from the central core (Fig. 2). The museum comes to life as people pass through this architectural area.<sup>19</sup>

Diba's designs encourage visitors to walk through his project, an important aspect of his work.<sup>20</sup> Through its meandering layout and outside garden spaces, TMOCA improves social connections and offers spots for gathering and relaxation. Diba has emphasised his intention to influence and enhance human contact and activity within the museum's spaces. According to Diba, one of his "obsessions was to influence and intensify human interaction and activity."<sup>21</sup> The goal of Diba's design was to create a "sociable" facility that stimulates contact between staff members and visitors.<sup>22</sup> Examining, analysing, and interpreting the artworks on show stimulates the museum as a living thing. Diba's technique, known as the "human interaction-intensification programme," intended to improve human interaction within the museum through a thoughtful physical and spatial organisation.<sup>23</sup> This strategy aimed to improve the quality and quantity of interaction in the space.<sup>24</sup>

Bodily movement is important in the perception of space at TMOCA. Diba's work is known for its emphasis on promoting bodily experiences and engaging all senses in the perception of space. The bodily habit of living and perceiving space is profoundly impacted by culture since it

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<sup>19</sup> Staci Gem Scheiwiller and Alisa Eimen, "Shaping and Portraying Identity at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (1977-2005)," in *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity* (London: Anthem Press, 2014), 83–100, 88-89.

<sup>20</sup> Diba, *Buildings and Projects*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Eimen, "Shaping and Portraying Identity," 89.

<sup>23</sup> Diba, *Buildings and Projects*, 54.

<sup>24</sup> M. Reza Shirazi, *Contemporary Architecture and Urbanism in Iran: Tradition, Modernity, and the Production of "Space-in-Between"* (Berlin: Springer, 2019), 71.



is developed by a community's social institutions and collective experiences.<sup>25</sup> The cultural norms, beliefs, and practises that govern people's everyday lives have a strong influence on how they navigate and interact with their environment. This cultural impact can present itself in a variety of ways, including the organisation of public places, the placement of objects, and the rituals and behaviours associated with certain environments, in this case, a museum. Diba's insight regarding how Iranians walk indicates a more profound knowledge of the cultural and existential elements of bodily experiences. He emphasises that walking in Iranian culture is more than just getting from one location to another. Instead, it transforms into a complete physiological experience that involves the entire being.<sup>26</sup> Diba emphasises that walking is not only focused on reaching a specified location or covering a specific distance by emphasising the Persian phrase "ghadam-zadan," which translates to "taking a walk." Instead, it is a mode of expression that takes place in time and space. Walking becomes an embodied experience in which the physical body is inextricably linked to its environment, engaging with sensory, perceptual, and spatial cues.<sup>27</sup>

The TMOCA responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of the museum by using Instagram as its primary platform for showcasing works from the museum's permanent collection. When physical visits were not possible, the museum was able to continue to engage with its audience and provide access to art through this shift to digital space. The museum's Instagram account provided audience members with new opportunities for engagement and interaction in addition to providing virtual access to the artworks. Visitors

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>27</sup> Diba, *Buildings and Projects*, 11.

could still take part in discussions about the art and offer their opinions through the use of captions, hashtags, and the comment section. Furthermore, the platform allowed the museum to reach a potentially broader and more diverse audience, as people from around the world could access and appreciate the collection without the need for physical attendance. By applying both Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective and Bal's theory on the act of looking to the TMOCA, it becomes evident that the shift to digital interactions, such as those facilitated by Instagram, fundamentally altered the dynamics of perception, spatial arrangement, and sensory experiences in the meaning-making process.

As an example, we see a painting by Mark Rothko from the museum's Instagram page titled *No.2* (Fig. 3). Compared to the actual painting in the museum space (Fig. 4), we have more information in the caption, as the caption for the physical exhibition only included the artwork information. However, on Instagram, a caption written by an art critic named Mehdi Hosseini accompanies the artwork. The caption reads:

Mark Rothko had a contemplative and mystical approach to visual expression, which he shared with a group of artists who aimed to evoke emotions through colour and atmosphere rather than movement. Rothko wanted to express human emotions such as tragedy and ecstasy, and the fact that people shed tears in front of his works is proof of his success in doing so. In *No.2*, he diffused the oil paint with diluted turpentine to create a faded, indistinct effect, blurring the edges of the forms and transforming them into a spiritual and mysterious effect. Rothko's aim was to transcend the physical manifestation of form and bring the viewer closer to a mystical experience, allowing them to participate in it as well.<sup>28</sup>

In the physical space of the museum, this painting was placed next to another painting by Rothko. In contrast, the placement and juxtaposition of the Instagram page is a grid (Fig. 5).

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<sup>28</sup> Mehdi Hosseini (@tehran.moca), 2020, "Everyday a new work from the TMOCA permanent collection" Instagram, 14 March 2020. Accessed April 12, 2023.

In the context of meaning-making, both Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective on the embodied experience and Bal's theory on the act of looking come into play when comparing the viewing experience of Rothko's *No.2* and the other painting in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art's physical space versus their Instagram presentation. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodied experience highlights the importance of being physically present in the museum space, as our sensory perceptions and interactions with the environment contribute significantly to our understanding of the artworks. This embodied involvement with the surrounding world is largely missing from the Instagram presentation, which restricts the viewer's sensory input to the visual aspect. Bal's theory, on the other hand, underscores the role of spatial arrangement and juxtaposition in shaping the meanings and connotations of artworks. My experience of seeing Mark Rothko's *No.2* in real life and on Instagram significantly differed in various aspects, which I will describe in the following sections.

**Embodied experience:** The viewer's embodied experience is an important aspect of their engagement with the artwork in a physical museum setting. They can get closer to the painting to better examine the colour, texture, and brushstrokes, and can even view it from different perspectives. As their physical presence and movements shape their experience and perception of the piece, the viewer's body becomes an integral part of the artwork's context. However, the viewer's embodied experience on Instagram is severely limited. They can only see the artwork through a digital representation on a screen, which limits their ability to interact with it as they would in a physical space. Instagram's inherent limitations as a digital platform prevent it from accurately simulating the embodied experience of seeing art in person. In a museum setting,

my embodied experience occurred through a direct, physical interaction with art, which enabled me to perceive subtle textures, colours, and dimensions firsthand. The interaction was multisensory; I could not only see but also move around the artwork, altering my viewpoints and distances. On Instagram, the engagement with art was predominantly visual. The tactile and spatial aspects of interaction were absent; I could not physically approach or move around the artwork, which resulted in a static and uniform perspective.

**Scale and dimensions:** In a museum setting, the viewer can appreciate the scale and dimensions of the painting. In my experience, the large size of the painting contributed to the emotional impact of the artwork. On Instagram, the size of the artwork is constrained by the screen's dimensions, which can alter the viewer's perception of the painting's presence and impact.

**Spatial arrangement and juxtaposition:** The exhibition of *No.2* alongside other Rothko paintings had a significant impact on my interpretation and understanding of the piece. The spatial relationships between the pieces in the museum space reveal thematic connections, such as Rothko's exploration of colour, abstraction, and emotion, which allowed me to understand his creative vision. Furthermore, grouping multiple Rothko paintings together can highlight the artist's stylistic evolution over time and create visual contrasts that highlight the unique qualities of each piece. Positioning *No.2* alongside other works, whether by Rothko or by other artists, encourages dialogues between the works, which can improve the viewer's understanding of the themes, techniques, and concepts at work. Finally, viewing *No.2* in the context of other Rothko paintings heightened the emotional impact. It deepened my engagement and appreciation of the artwork and its surroundings. On the other hand, the

juxtaposition of *No.2* with other images on the Instagram grid may differ depending on the page being viewed, which results in new contexts and relationships that are not present in the museum setting. The layout of the digital platform, the algorithm-driven content presentation, and search results can result in unexpected pairings and sequences. These sequences potentially introduce new interpretations and meaning-making processes that may not have occurred within the confines of a traditional museum setting. While this may provide new perspectives, it may also lead to a disconnect between the original curatorial intent and the intended relationships between the artworks. On Instagram, the juxtaposition of a classic Picasso next to the Rothko, for instance, provided an unexpected contrast of form and feeling for me. The narrative was less about the dialogue the artists might have intended and more about the relationships formed between the pieces as they appeared on my digital canvas. The story unfolded in fragments, each square a chapter, distinct yet connected in the way they captured my attention and shaped my experience. While the museum offers a guided narrative through its curated walls, Instagram presents artworks in a way where the narrative was mine to create.

**Sensory Experiences:** In a museum setting, I could interact with an artwork using all of my senses and had a more immersive sensory experience. The visual aspect was enhanced by additional sensory inputs such as background noise in the exhibition space, potential tactile qualities of the artwork, and even faint smells of the surroundings or materials. This multisensory experience deepened my connection to the work of art and enhanced my comprehension and appreciation of it. Comparatively, Instagram is primarily a visual

engagement platform for engaging with art. The visual representation of the artwork on a screen limited my sensory experience. This reduced the depth of my interaction with the work.

**Contextual information:** In the museum, the artwork's caption included basic information such as title, artist, and date. On Instagram, additional contextual information, like the art critic Mehdi Hosseini's caption, provided deeper insights into Rothko's art style and techniques, which enhanced the viewer's understanding and meaning-making process of the work.

### **Concluding Remarks**

While exploring the particularities of embodied experience, it is important to consider the role of digital interactions, in shaping our perception and understanding of art. Although real-life events can be disconcerting, provocative, and social due to our ability to move around and experience full sensorial input, online interactions often limit our bodily engagement and visual sphere to a flat screen. Drawing from phenomenological thought, particularly Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the mind as being within a body, we can argue that the restricted use of our bodies in online contexts may result in limited forms of cognition and engagement with art, and therefore meaning-making.

However, it is also essential to acknowledge the transformative potential of digital platforms. The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art's innovative use of Instagram during the pandemic showcases the power of juxtaposition and spatial arrangement in redefining the meaning-making process. By integrating Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied experience and Bal's theory of viewing, we can explore new avenues for enhancing audience engagement and understanding within both physical and digital spaces.

The question still remains: Can we truly bridge the gap between physical and digital art experiences, or will each platform always offer distinct, complementary engagements?

Despite the limitations of digital interactions in the museum experience, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the value of adaptability and resilience in the face of challenges.

While physical museum spaces were closed, digital platforms like Instagram became significant for maintaining connections with audiences during a time of collective trauma. In a time of isolation and uncertainty, the digital museum experience enabled people to find inspiration in art while also creating a sense of community and shared experience. Moving forward, it is critical to consider how innovative online approaches can complement and improve traditional museum experiences while also challenging the traditional boundaries between audience, artwork, and space.

## Illustrations



Figure 1: Kamran Diba, *The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art*, 1977. Tehran, Iran  
<http://www.caoi.ir/en/projects/item/53-tehran-museum-of-contemporary-art-kamran-diba.html>.





Figure 2: TMoCA Interior, Kamran Diba, *The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art*, 1977.  
Tehran, Iran, photo by the author, July 23, 2023.



Figure 3: Mark Rothko, *No.2*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 289 x 173 cm. The Collection of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran from @tehran.moca Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9uJygUIDt3/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==>.



Figure 4: *The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, "Exhibition of the Permanent Collection,"* February 27, 2017. Photo by Erfan Kouchari.

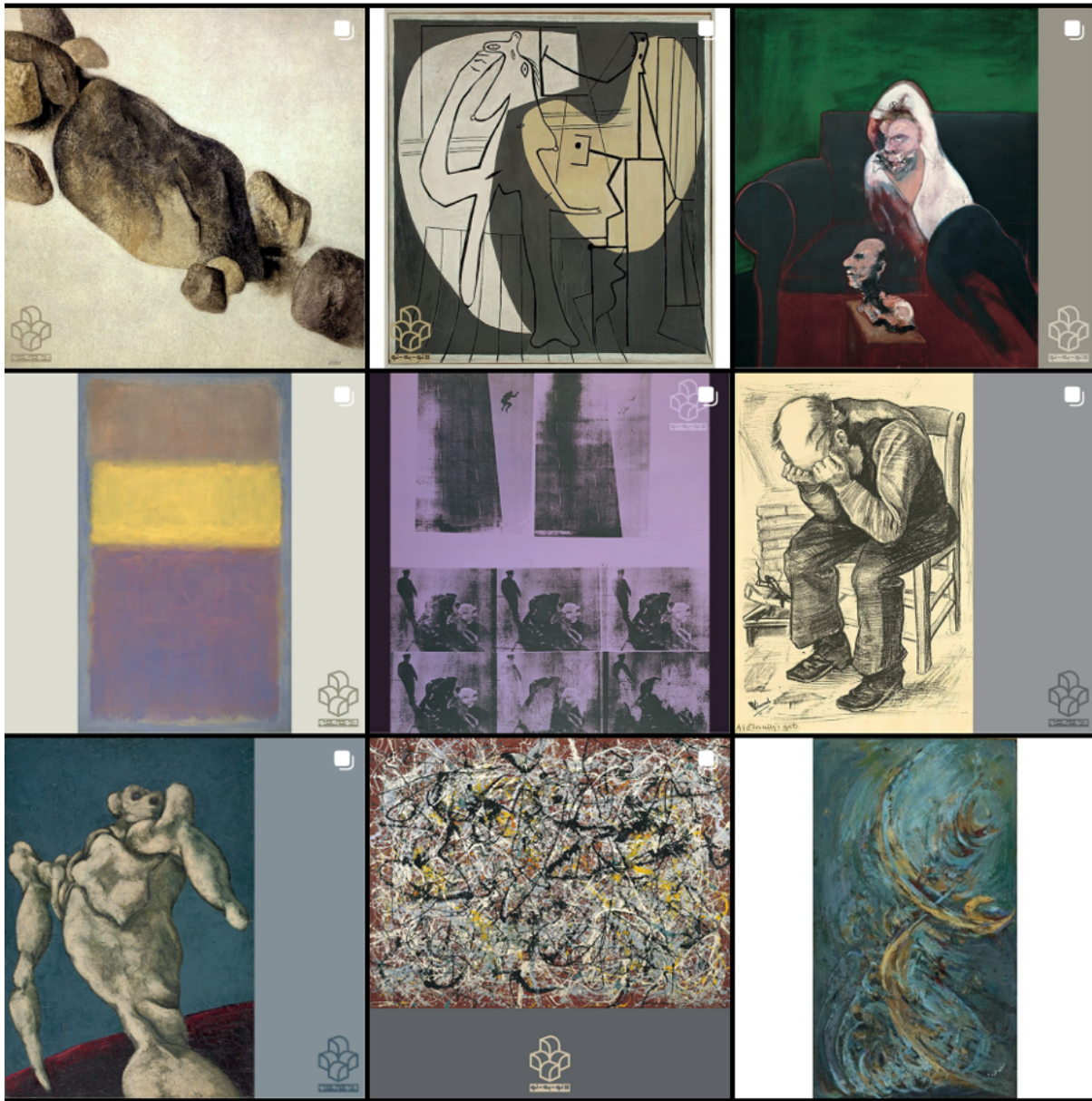


Figure 5: Instagram page for the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Accessed May 2, 2023  
<https://instagram.com/tehran.moca?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==>.

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