



# Is a “Virtual” Museum Still “Real”?

## A Conversation About the International Museum of Women

by Tisha Carper Long and Catherine King

**Tisha Carper Long** is an Exhibit Developer at the Oakland Museum of California's Natural Sciences gallery renovation project. She may be contacted at [tisha@museumca.org](mailto:tisha@museumca.org).

**Catherine King** is Vice President, Exhibitions and Programs, for the International Museum of Women. She may be contacted at [cking@imow.org](mailto:cking@imow.org).

---

If you would like to comment on this article or others in this issue, please log on to the NAME listserv at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NAME-AAM/>

---

The International Museum of Women (IMOW) in San Francisco, California, began its life in 1985 as the Women's Heritage Museum, and for its first two decades offered exhibitions and public programming in borrowed spaces in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. Ambitious plans to establish a physical presence at San Francisco's waterfront fell through in 2005 when project engineers discovered that the pier structure that was to underlie the facility was in far worse condition than had been believed. In the face of prohibitive costs to replace the pier, IMOW cancelled the project and set aside time for a serious reconsideration of its mission, purpose, and future.

The IMOW community, which by this time included an international exhibition advisory committee and a Global Council of 25 women in international leadership positions, as well as a strong base of local (San Francisco) supporters, reached a visionary and thoroughly modern decision: to allow the museum to grow as an almost entirely virtual, internet-based entity at <http://www.imow.org/home/index>. The considerable energies of the institution and its supporters then shifted to creating what may be the largest online environment enjoyed by any museum, found at [www.imow.org](http://www.imow.org).

Today, IMOW calls itself a “museum without walls,” and uses its global web platform and social media to invite and disseminate diverse and dynamic content on key contemporary issues for women worldwide. It organizes multimedia online exhibitions and temporary physical installations, hosts public programs, develops toolkits for educators, and orchestrates a speaker series drawing world-class authors, thinkers, and political leaders. IMOW aims

to act as a “creative catalyst,” using art and creative new media content to spark engagement in global issues of women's human rights.

Beginning with the launch of the 2006 exhibition *Imagining Ourselves: A Global Generation of Women* and continuing through *Women, Power and Politics* and the current *Economica: Women and the Global Economy*, the IMOW website today has garnered well over two million unique visitors and a participant base (exhibition registrants and content co-creators) of over ten thousand people from nearly every country in the world. IMOW currently attracts over 600,000 unique visitors from 200 countries to its multilingual online exhibitions per year.

Catherine King, IMOW's Vice President of Exhibitions and Programs, has worked in the field of exhibitions, media development, and public programming for museums, libraries, and educational organizations, both physical and online, throughout the United States. Tisha Carper Long, an Exhibit Developer at the Oakland Museum of California's Natural Sciences gallery and a former website developer at UC Berkeley, interviewed Catherine in person and—where else?—online, to learn more about the history, the mechanics, and the community-building potential of this “virtual museum.”

**TCL: Your first exhibition, *Imagining Ourselves*, was entirely user-generated, without traditional curatorial input. Was there anyone in the IMOW community who said, “Wait a minute! No edifice; no curator: are we still a museum?”**

CK: The question about identity came up frequently, especially in the early days.

**IMAGINING OURSELVES**  
a global generation of women

BE INSPIRED  
GET INVOLVED  
TAKE ACTION

INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM OF WOMEN

What Defines Your Generation of Women?  
selected theme

HOME | EXPLORE OTHER THEMES | STORIES | CONVERSATION | EVENTS | TAKE ACTION | ABOUT

REGISTER | LOGIN

Beautiful Bellies  
Christine Luksza-Paravicini  
United States | GALLERY | CONVERSATION

See Full Story »

RELATED ITEMS (11)

Giada Ripa di Meana Italy  
I am in my late twenties (approaching thirty). I have...  
GO TO STORY »

Valentina Campos Bolivia  
These days I believe in a turning back, a sprouting. I...  
GO TO STORY »

Zena el-Khallil Lebanon  
I met Wael, my husband, by chance or by fate, call it what...  
GO TO STORY »

Wehraneh Atashi Iran  
The presence of women is religiously prohibited in the...  
GO TO STORY »

©2008 International Museum of Women / Privacy Policy and Disclaimer / Translated by 101translations / Change Language

The content in this exhibit does not necessarily represent the opinions of the International Museum of Women, or its partners or sponsors.

Imagining Ourselves challenged conventional ideals of beauty in the female form. Image taken from the International Museum of Women website <http://www.imow.org/home/index>.

While the vision for how IMOW can best fulfill its mission has evolved over the years, the institution has remained true to its founding principles as a museum. The *Imagining Ourselves* project forged a new global online presence but was still very much developed as a museum project. As the centerpiece, the virtual exhibition was complemented by a traveling exhibition, a full-color 240-page catalogue, educational outreach, and public programs hosted by community partners across the globe.

In terms of curatorial input, project founder and director Paula Goldman and her international team of exhibition assistants and global advisors solicited creative work—art, film, photography, music, personal essays—from young women in their 20s and 30s responding to the question, “What defines your generation of women?” This international call for participation went out to young women throughout the world. The museum team carefully juried the submissions and selected the strongest work for development—a process of engagement between artist and museum staff. The resulting body of content features powerful, first-person voices and creative work of young women from around

the globe, who are too often unheard. Similarly, the museum’s subsequent online exhibitions *Women, Power and Politics* and *Economica: Women and the Global Economy* were curated by Masum Momaya and present a balance of museum curated and contextualized content alongside the creative work of our global community.

Although not presented in a permanent building, these projects have been developed as exhibitions. Innovative? Yes. Virtual? Yes. Still a museum? Yes! Since IMOW’s initial foray online, and as online journals, online universities, and online communities become more common, we are increasingly finding new audiences, especially among the younger generations, receptive to and energized by the concept of an online museum.

***TCL: The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines a museum as “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment***

Some might say that your site is more akin to an online publication.



The *Imagining Ourselves* exhibition curated artistic content about and by women from all over the world. Image taken from the International Museum of Women website <http://www.imow.org/home/index>.

(continued from page 43)

**for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” Some might say that your site is more akin to an online publication.**

CK: Just as institutions and models change, the definition of museum has not been static—it has evolved as the role of museums has evolved over the years. The ICOM definition demonstrates significant and expansive change over time. Among other things, the criteria shifts from “collections” (in 1946) to a much broader range of activities (in 2001) that include (viii) “cultural centers” and “intangible heritage resources (living heritage and digital creative activity).” Museums are no longer only about gathering, preserving, and presenting objects behind glass. They are increasingly (and progressively) contextual and human-centered and can encompass many things besides physical and permanent “collections.”

Much has been written about the evolving role of education and the gradual shift in importance of community to museums and these, too, are newer concepts. What is collected and how that work is presented has changed as well. Not too long ago it would have been unheard for a museum to exhibit digital

media in a gallery; that is commonplace today. Virtual exhibitions are also gaining traction and are created by traditional physical museums and virtual museums alike.

As a newer institution IMOW has had more freedom to develop its model as a museum. Setting aside what IMOW does not do (collecting and conserving tangible objects in a permanent physical building), our structure and the work that we embrace fits within the scope of museum work. We are a non-profit organization dedicated to curating the art and ideas of women around the world on critical social issues. We amplify women’s voices by undertaking research, seeking out the often unheard stories and artistic contributions of women, curating exhibitions, presenting public programs, providing educational resources and engaging in other activities related to the work of museums and museology.

As an institution we are affiliated with numerous local, national and international museum organizations. Although our vision of space has evolved from a local physical space to a primarily virtual and global space, the core organizing values of the institution have remained the same. IMOW has created a new

kind of museum space for women, a virtual one that allows us to reach around the world, achieve greater levels of communication, break down barriers, and connect audiences in ways not possible before.

***TCL: Museums have broadened their scope a lot over the past few decades, but even today, some museum professionals consider it beyond the purview of a museum to take an activist stance on social issues. Do you think that your activism also pushes the definition of “museum?”***

CK: I think it does and in many ways I see IMOW’s development as part of the trajectory—and in some cases at the forefront—of the broader changes in museum definition you’re referring to. *Excellence and Equity*, AAM’s landmark 1992 report, marked a new focus on the educational role of museums. The Museums and Community initiative was launched in 1998 to explore the potential for engagement between museums and their communities. After education and community, what is the next evolution? In the last ten years, the words “museum” and “social change” have been increasingly linked. Museum studies programs now offer courses in museums and social change. In 2008 the International Council of Museums (ICOM) theme for International Museum Day was “Museums as Agents of Social Change and Development.” I think we will continue to see more links between museums and social issues.

In the company of great institutions across the U.S. and abroad, IMOW is a leader in creating connections between museum work and social change. It seems natural for a museum that addresses women’s human rights to serve as

a bridge into activism for audiences. As a museum, IMOW serves as a “creative catalyst,” using the arts and self-expression as a portal for audience engagement in women’s human rights issues. We were thrilled that our *Imagining Ourselves* exhibition received the prestigious Anita Borg Social Impact Award for innovative use of technology to have a positive impact on the lives of women and society (<http://anitaborg.org/>).

For people coming to the website, a museum with a social change lens does not seem incongruous; they have an appetite for engagement and action. When we asked visitors in a recent survey what they want more of from the museum (i.e., content, community, actions), “taking action” was at the top of their list. Independent academic analysis of our exhibitions and programs shows that well over 50% of our visitors think differently about key issues and take action as a result of engaging with our content. I think that says a lot about the power of museums to educate, inspire, connect, and transform communities on behalf of social good.

***TCL: On your website, a mother talking about IMOW’s Women, Power and Politics exhibition said, “The exhibition opens a line of communication between me and my daughter...It is easier to begin the conversation with the website because she can see the power and the politics and art and how women can express themselves.” Is it easier to reach a younger audience online than in a physical space?***

CK: That quotation speaks to the power of the Internet to allow people of all generations to engage in and interact with important

Although not presented in a permanent building, these projects have been developed as exhibitions. Innovative? Yes. Virtual? Yes. Still a museum? Yes!

## The museum's new strategic plan outlines a commitment to organizing virtual exhibitions in multiple languages complemented by a "pop-up" physical museum presence in multiple global regions....

(continued from page 45)

### Suggestions for Further Reading:

- American Association of Museums. (2002). *Mastering civic engagement: A challenge to museums*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.
- Colton, E. L., and Offen, K. M. (2009). The International Museum of Women: A new space for women/The International Museum of Women. Un nuova spazio per le donne. (Published in Italian.) DWF (*donnawomanfemme*) 3-4, 83-84
- Goldman, P. (2007). Imagining ourselves: Cultural activism for women through technology and new media. *Museum international, gender perspectives on cultural heritage and museums* 236.
- Hirzy, E. C. (Ed.) (2008). *Excellence and equity: Education and the public dimension of museums*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.
- Offen, K. M., and Colton, E. L. (2007). The International Museum of Women. *Museum international, gender perspectives on cultural heritage and museums* 236.
- Offen, K. M., and Colton, E. L. (2010). Developing the International Museum of Women: Challenges and responses. *Heritage and Museography* 3. Barcelona.

issues in a very personal, intimate way. We have heard similar stories from other mothers, grandmothers, and educators. An advantage of online exhibitions is that they continue to reach new visitors and can be used by educators long after the initial presentation. For example, although we are no longer adding new content to *Women, Power and Politics*, it is now considered one of the most comprehensive online resources on women and global political participation.

Younger audiences are certainly a powerful base for us; roughly one-third of our audience is under 30, one-third is from 30 to 40, and one-third is over 40. One college student wrote,

It's been amazing to not only read about women's struggles but to then be able to discuss them with our class, and work out our questions about issues we come across. I've never heard so many of my fellow classmates really talk about democracy, oppression, gender roles, etc., until we started exploring all the articles in WPP. I also love how I can go to an "exhibition" while still sitting in our classroom. Having the museum online makes it a lot more accessible to me, especially since I don't have to pay an entrance fee, can stay as long as I want and visit whenever I want.

We are continuing to experiment with ways to make our exhibitions accessible to educators and students through the creation of flexible education "toolkits," online-curated museums tours, and other methods of deepening our visitors' hands-on, facilitated engagement.

**TCL: You won a MUSE Award in 2009 from the AAM's Media and Technology Committee for**

***your active online community, which is hosted on your website. Congratulations! Can you talk a little about your decision to create that in-house social network?***

CK: Thanks! It was an honor to be recognized by our museum colleagues. The MUSE jury especially noted our success in engaging a truly global community, and that's what excites us the most about building a virtual platform without geographic borders.


We built our social network in response to our visitors. Audience impact evaluations in 2006 and 2007 for the *Imagining Ourselves* exhibition revealed that visitors saw the power of connecting with people who have similar interests in diverse parts of the world. They also indicated a desire to interact with each other and with the exhibition content in some of the sophisticated ways that were emerging on other social platforms. Instead of using an off-the-shelf product or an existing network like Facebook, in 2008 we built a "house social network" to further our goals of engagement by creating an online community and integrating those social media tools within the exhibition template.

Today, IMOW's community includes more than 10,000 registered participants from over 200 countries. Community members can create profiles, recommend and comment on exhibition stories, join conversation threads, share content with friends, and submit their own creative work for possible inclusion in exhibitions. The community has been especially successful for our most engaged participants: women who want to submit their own work and add their voice and personal creativity to museum projects.

International Museum of Women



PAUSE 1 2 3



# ECONOMICA

Be part of a new conversation on the global economy

Home

Welcome, IMOW Team!  
[View my profile](#) | [User directory](#)

EXHIBITIONS SPECIAL EVENTS JUST LAUNCHED

**Visit Economica Today!**  
*Economica: Women and the Global Economy* features stunning slideshows, essays from prominent leaders and more.  
[Enter the Exhibition>>](#)

**Jan. 26 Speaker Series**  
 Get tickets today to hear acclaimed author **Aminatta Foma** at IMOW's Jan. 26 Speaker Series in San Francisco.  
[Learn more>>](#)

**Focusing on Latin America**  
 In English & Spanish! This **Project of Economica** explores women's experiences in Argentina, Costa Rica & Mexico.  
[View the project>>](#)

LOG OUT

Subscribe to e-news

OUR COMMUNITY



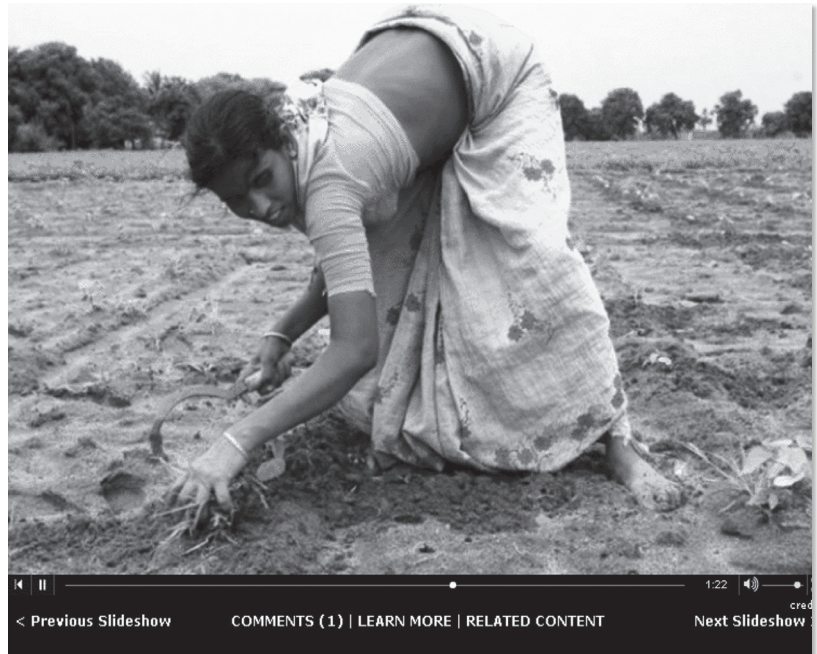
We Offer Multilingual Global Online Exhibitions:  
[Visite Económica: Las Mujeres y la](#)

IMOW's current exhibition *Economica* highlights the role that women play in the global economy. Image taken from the International Museum of Women website <http://www.imow.org/home/index>.

**TCL: But now you have Facebook and Twitter sites as well. What is the added value of these external social networking sites?**

Our Facebook and Twitter presence allows the museum to extend out into the broader community. Our community can more easily engage with the museum, bring their own networks on board and ultimately grow the community.

Our social media mantra is that it is not all about us. We post information and seed conversations that our community is interested in. Practically, this means we feature an exhibition story or an artist profile and then we look outward to highlight current news, partner activity, or a new book or appearance by one of our Global Council members. We want our Facebook page to be a destination for people interested in issues important to women, not only a place to learn about our current exhibitions and projects. This deepens the museum's engagement with our community and creates opportunities for meaningful two-way communication.



The *Economica* website features a slideshow about the economic contributions of women in India. Image taken from the International Museum of Women website <http://www.imow.org/home/index>.

## Being a museum without a building is a new model that requires flexibility, responsiveness, reach, and innovation.

(continued from page 47)

### Suggestions for Further Reading Continued:

Puntenney, D. (2006). *Imagining ourselves: Engaging a global audience for positive social change*. Final Evaluation Report, Year One, September. Unpublished but available by contacting Catherine King.

Puntenney, D. (2007). *Imagining ourselves: Engaging a global audience for positive social change*. Final Evaluation Report, Year Two, September. Unpublished but available by contacting Catherine King.

Puntenney, D. (2009). *Women, power and politics: Amplifying women's voices, creating dialogue and inspiring action*. Final Evaluation Report, March. Unpublished but available by contacting Catherine King.

### **TCL: What plans does IMOW have for the near future?**

CK: For the upcoming *Young Women Speaking the Economy* exhibition we are working with young women from four diverse countries to share their untold experiences at this critical moment for the worldwide economy. This deeply collaborative project engages partner museums and universities in the U.S., the Philippines, Denmark, and the Sudan. The educational phase of the project immerses the participants in the content of IMOW's *Economica* exhibition as the basis for intercultural dialogue. The end result will include a dynamic online exhibition shaped by the creative work of the young women—writing, art, film, or other art forms—as well as culminating community programs in each country. Funding for the project comes from several competitive museum grant programs: the American Association of Museums' Museums & Communities Collaboration Abroad (MCCA) grant program and MetLife Foundation's Museum and Community Connections grant.

Also in development is a major new project focusing on the theme of Global Motherhood and Maternal Health that asks what is new about the global experiences of mothers and daughters. The exhibition will celebrate motherhood and explore how it intersects with critical global human rights issues, from poverty and economic empowerment to dignity and health. We will showcase women's art, stories, and creativity; celebrate women's accomplishments; and present opportunities for change and women-led solutions. As with past projects visitors can expect a vibrant blend of

museum-curated content, community voices, increased opportunities to take action, and use of social media to engage broader audiences.

### **TCL: Do you think that IMOW may try again—perhaps in another ten years—to build a physical facility?**

CK: In the future I don't picture IMOW as a single building located in one city with fixed hours and galleries. We intend to grow our audiences and to deepen our impact by strengthening and creating new global touch points, both virtual and physical and are exploring ways to increase the connection between the two. The museum's new strategic plan outlines a commitment to organizing virtual exhibitions in multiple languages complemented by a "pop-up" physical museum presence in multiple global regions that may take the form of international speaker events and temporary physical installations. I hope that our programming will increasingly include vibrant exchanges and partnerships with physical museums as well as other virtual museums, and with organizations that believe in the transformative possibilities for art, education, and ideas in effecting change and positively impacting communities.

Being a museum without a building is a new model that requires flexibility, responsiveness, reach, and innovation. I look forward to IMOW continuing to pilot a range of online and offline innovations in content, user experience, and modalities. In the coming years, I suspect that the question of whether a virtual museum is a "real" museum is one that younger generations won't even think to ask! ✨