



Meaning-Making in Nine Acts

by Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson

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Today, museums all over the world are faced with the opportunity to re-invent themselves and their relationships with their publics. But what will it take to do so? In 2011, the authors began the research project “ONLY CONNECT: Visitor-Centered Museum Interpretation”—at once a search for defining criteria of excellence across museum types and an opportunity to visit salient sites, observe and talk with visitors and fellow museum professionals, and report back to the field. Initially hoping to benchmark “best practices” in museum interpretation, we solicited nominations and criteria from more than 50 colleagues in North America and Europe. From that list, we distilled a small subset of museums that, with the help of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, we were able to visit, document, and describe. All told, we conducted 35 interviews, including 11 with museum directors and seven each with curators, educator-interpretive specialists, and cross-departmental collaborative teams.

We began the study by looking for innovative interpretive practices. What we found was something more: a visitor-centered focus leads to organizational transformation. Once a museum decides to shift its approach and place visitors at the center of its mission, how does it follow through on that goal? The following anecdotes offer a first glimpse of what we saw, a set of scenes that touch on the changes taking place in museum practice.

1. In-Gallery Learning Lounges: Integrating visitor-made imagery within an exhibition display

In the art galleries of the Oakland

Museum of California, we find English, Spanish, and Chinese texts at the entrance to each section. Community advisory groups suggested that this multi-lingual text would be enough; the museum need not triple all its object labels as well. These texts are placed against a colored background. The museum’s teen advisors had asked: “Why are all the walls so white? This place looks like a hospital.”

At the “People” wall in the art galleries, we find a salon-style array of portraits—many sizes, shapes and periods, returning our gaze. Some sitters are known and some not; some are painted by famous artists and others not. They were all fished out of storage.

Except two.

These two frames on the wall house luminous screens. They don’t stand out much at first, but you see them because they’re a bit brighter—and they *change* as the self-portraits drawn by visitors cycle through.

Down to the left there are two stools and a couple of stations: large up-turned touchscreens sticking out from the wall. On the left side, a thumbnail array of portraits drawn by other visitors who have passed through. If you click on any one of them, it will re-constitute itself, from Stroke One to the finish, before your very eyes. On the right, it’s your turn. A gridded mirror sits on the wall before you, a blank screen below with a row of color swatches lining its upper edge. Choose a color, look into the mirror, and start drawing.



Interactive portrait wall in the Gallery of California Art at Oakland Museum of California. Self-portraits drawn on gallery computer by visitors cycle through the screens on the wall of portraits. Photo by Dino Morrow. Courtesy of Oakland Museum of California, 2010.

What is it to make a self-portrait? Which lines do you make as you go? Which opportunities will you take along the way, which leave behind? What is the tone you wish to strike—or, having struck one, to balance, change, accept, reject?

When you're done, you look back at the screen to your left. You gaze with new curiosity and respect at the hundreds of compositions made by others who have sat in your place... And you look up at the wall to your right, hung with all those portraits drawn from "the morgue"—from Storage—and see yourself as part of a flickering continuum, a community across time, of creators and observers.

2. Words Matter: Bringing dull objects to life with a narrative arc

Everyone knows that decorative arts galleries from centuries past are a bore: the cases of porcelain and silver, the tapestries and furnished rooms that visitors walk by on their way to the Van Goghs and Monets. Yet here at the Detroit Institute of Arts, something different: as we enter this upper level gallery, we are confronted by a periwigged portrait on a

sign, posed at waist height before us. It reads:

Much of the art in this suite was made before the French Revolution for European aristocrats who lived grandly, luxuriously, fashionably. The works of art help reveal how the privileged few whiled away their days and how they perceived others in the world.

We look around with new eyes. The world has been overturned. We see luxurious works of art cast against their human cost. Permission has been granted to reconsider their value. That chased silver tureen with the hare, mushrooms and wild boar is magnificent. How was it made? And that other silver lid sculpted with game birds, fish, and flowers. Each piece is more extravagant than the last. How could people have the means, the desire, to surround themselves with so much bling? We don't have to like it; we're just fascinated by all this evidence of decadence, knowing the end is going to come with a slice of the falling blade.

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Minnesota History Center: Mock-ups of an exhibition-in-development about the Dakota Wars showing comments on post-its by Dakota descendants. Photo by Peter Samis.

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[At the Minnesota History Center]... you will find an entire set of galleries—one of two sets, in fact—where exhibitions are in development, in real time, at full scale.

In each of the subsequent galleries, the novel unfolds: we are invited to share in the circadian splendor of this decadent and doomed life.... Room by room, hour by hour we move through an aristocrat's day; we are even invited to take a seat at a dining table as a video banquet is laid before us using... the very same silver and porcelain that surrounds us in the display cases.... The patter of French voices—first the servants, then the gentry—take us on a virtual culinary excursion, embedding us in the lives of these objects and inserting these objects in our lives.

3. Co-Creating the Story: Inviting silenced voices into the gallery

In Minnesota, history is still very much alive. In fact, the “Indian War” of 1862 is still being played out on the walls of a room behind the scenes at the History Center in St. Paul. Come. Lift the heavy brown curtain.

There you will find an entire set of galleries—one of two sets, in fact—where exhibitions are in development, in real time, at full scale. These are not miniature mock-ups, or CAD software renditions. Rather, splayed across the walls are grainy

visuals and rough mock-ups of wall texts, printed out on large sheets of paper and taped up with no concern for finish. What should they say? What is the logic of the sequence? What has been left out? That is what the exhibition team is trying to determine.

The exhibit developers have invited members of the local tribes—descendants of the warriors who fought the state militia and the Union Army, and their families, who were herded into camps where they fell sick or were retrained in programs of de-culturation—to offer their input. Staff handed out post-its and asked: Tell us how to tell it. What are we getting wrong? Can you identify the people in this old photo? Leaving a notebook on a side table, they asked for longer reflections. Away from the museum, the staff reached out to people in their community long before they ever asked them in. They are aware that descendants of the militias who fought the Indians in the wars live on in the community, as well.

They are building relationships, healing. On one level, these galleries are just a byproduct along the way, a visible sign of a negotiation in progress. The real

work is going on in conversations—both out in the community and here behind the scenes. Eventually, there may be agreement—or at least a new level of understanding. There may even be an exhibition.

4. Public Works: Museums as community living room

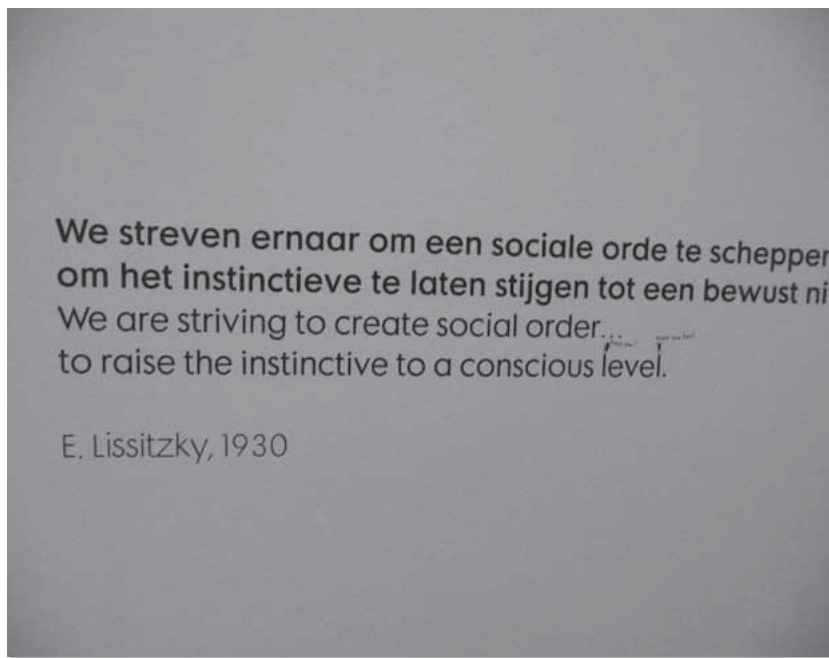
In a gallery titled “The Changing Landscape,” a young black couple sits at a small round table. She is wearing a headscarf. They are deep in conversation as their hands fit the final pieces into a jigsaw puzzle. It represents a painting by Arthur Dove which, not surprisingly, hangs on the wall before them. They have been here in this gallery—sitting, talking, looking, and fitting—for forty-five minutes. He is on leave from the army, and this is how they have chosen to spend their last day together.

Across the room is another small table, this one surrounded by a group of five teenagers. Sitting a few feet from a Richard Long sculpture of stone blocks arrayed on the floor in concentric circles, the teens are playing with a set of small red and white stones on the tabletop, trying out different arrangements, talking and joking as kids do, thoroughly engaged.

It’s Sunday at the Columbus Museum of Art, admission is free, and the community is connecting with the art.

5. Artists as Critics: Asking artists to comment on the walls of a “finished” exhibition

The Van Abbe Museum may seem an unlikely site of the largest collection of El Lissitzky’s art outside Moscow. How



Van Abbe Museum: El Lissitzky quote on wall (in Dutch and English) with Nedko Solakov’s graffiti repartee. Photo by Mimi Michaelson.

can they make the revolutionary idealism of these early geometric abstractions come to life almost a century later? Many generations have passed: the whole lifespan of Soviet history: arc of an Empire. We are surrounded by uptilted red and black squares, dynamic lines of force—vectors of progress, or so the artist believed. The museum makes many efforts to bring them to life: human-scaled 3-D sculptures based on geometric drawings; an installation of utopian architecture with Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* projected on one wall; embedded monitors displaying slide shows and archival film clips of artist collectives and avant-garde performances; posters and ephemera in a corridor display case; and quotes from Lissitzky himself, full of revolutionary promise, with the sans serif font set at raking angles against the white wall plane.

But what’s this? Like insects on pristine typography, handwritten letters and words crawl along, undermining authority, looking back through the telescope at this 1920s vision of a great utopian future. Derisively. A contemporary Bulgarian artist, Nedko Solakov—born in a satellite culture and now freed from Soviet oppression—has been invited to crack open the tradition of the hallowed hall by writing graffiti on its sacred walls. So here

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in this gallery, the radical promise and its counter-narrative ride together. The graffiti tells us of the hard chasm between visionary ideals and real behavior.

6. Honoring Complex Truths: Using startling juxtapositions to provoke new insights

Encyclopedic museums have their virtues. At Kelvingrove, Glasgow's 19th century Edwardian palace of art and history (natural and otherwise), in place of the traditional "Arms and Armour" displays, we see the ingenious inventions humans come up with to protect (and assault) in a dangerous world. Large glass cases present the following combinations: articulated sections of a suit of armor juxtaposed with a lobster and an armadillo; juxtaposed photos of a spraying beetle, a soldier aiming a machine gun, and a jet fighter united by the caption: "The further, faster, and more accurately you can throw an object, the more chance you have of winning;" and the gaping jawbone of a great white shark transpierced by a swordfish blade, alongside an array of swords and spears. The entire installation comes under the name *Conflict and Consequence*. Its subtitle is "How we keep inventing new ways of killing people, and then wonder why."

7. The New Normal: Honoring visitors in large and small ways

At the Denver Art Museum, we appreciate the generations of deliberate and generous forethought that have gone into making visitors feel comfortable. Built over time, this value permeates the museum's internal culture. Witness the vast array of gallery seating and the venues that invite you to linger with the art, try your hand, and deepen your experience.

In the American Indian galleries, which cover a floor of the North Building, the sounds of the rainforest trickle in the background as we gaze upon a wall of Northwest Coast Indian masks, and see a video that melds redwoods and nocturnal rituals. Later, we marvel at the beadwork on shoes of all sizes and types, from baby moccasins to fancy dance footwear—some even incorporating the stars and stripes.

In the rear we find a workshop/studio space where visitors are invited to sit and set colored marbles into a Chinese-checkerboard-like matrix. The activity gives us some small sense of the meditative patience involved in developing an abstract yet sacred pattern. At this instant a couple appears, James and Janet. They engage us in conversation. We learn that James is of the Otoe/Missouria tribe; he's here in town to serve as judge at a local Pow Wow. They are particularly interested in Faw Faw Coats from late 19th century ghost dances. As we look at the coats and the labels on the platform, we notice there are photographs of warriors alongside.

"That's my great-grandfather," James declares. . . .

We ask: Why did the Indians incorporate the stars and stripes into their beadwork on the moccasins across the gallery? He tells us that this was the only way the overseers would allow them to continue beading, to maintain their tradition. A little bit of sly Indian humor in the face of the oppressor.

We take a picture of James and Janet, holding hands in front of the ghost dance coat, laughing. The photo of great-grandfather looks up from below.

8. Confronting the Grisly Fact:

Connecting with a personal story

The Ruhr Museum. In the shell of a huge, tarnished machine-age building, once a coal-washing plant, we progress through a pristine modern suite of exhibits, all done up in white. We don't notice the acoustic quality of the cavernous interior until we open double glass doors and pass into another zone, climate-controlled, silent. Within it, a forest of white columns reaches from floor to ceiling, each one holding a glass chamber, a display case like an aquarium. The one just before us reads *Atemlos*.

Breathless. We are looking at a black lung, suspended, lifted out of a body, isolated and presented like a grisly treasure. Two short paragraphs on the side of the white column—one in German, the other in English—tell us the story of a miner who once lived and worked in this valley, in whose body this charred husk of tissue once held the breath of life...until it could hold no more.

All around us, other pillars, each a reliquary, an icon of some personal story standing in for the whole, the collectivity: the living history of this spot on the planet.

9. Making Meaning

The practices we observed offer important lessons to share: honoring

controversial and complex truths; connecting past objects with present issues; presenting grisly facts; inviting new collaborators to co-create exhibitions; providing fresh ways of looking at stereotypes; offering places to linger or to try one's hand.... It is the museum staff's role to design for a multiplicity of experiences, to make sure that the broadest number of people can find their way into the objects we present. All of these approaches offer visitors multiple ways to connect and move *inside* a story. They also remind us of something more: the primacy of experience itself—be it aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, playful, spiritual, or a combination thereof. Museums are havens for felt experience. Anything that falls short of that mark is a failure to connect. Visitors must feel a stake in what they see, and as professionals it is our challenge to open ourselves up to the questions of others.... We must constantly reconsider our own discourse and actively seize the opportunities our publics offer to become more relevant to their lives.

The authors are currently writing a book with the working title ONLY CONNECT: Visitor-Centered Museum Interpretation, which will treat both innovations in visitor-facing practice and the changing dynamics behind the scenes that make it possible.

The Editor 

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