Museum Authority Up for Grabs:
The Latest Thing, or Following a Long Trend Line?

by Daniel Spock

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A number of years ago, the Dalai Lama made a journey to my city, and the occasion spurred an outpouring of enthusiasm in the sizable Tibetan community here. Shortly afterward I got a call from a representative at the local Tibetan cultural center about a problem he hoped I could help him resolve. Members of the community had crafted a special throne for the Dalai Lama and, now that he had consecrated it by using it, they were stuck with a dilemma. Since there was no place yet to either store or display the throne properly, as sacred as it had become, did I think the Minnesota History Center might be able to display it for a period of time until a new cultural center could be built? I quickly agreed that, in the spirit of community engagement, we could explore the options. As it turned out, we had a great spot for the throne on a spacious stair landing on the main path through the museum. Problem solved.

But not quite. Following up with our registrar, she pointed out that the chosen location would be in direct sunlight much of the day which would surely cause fading and deterioration of the throne's upholstery. She, and our textile conservator, urged me to reconsider. Instead, I conferred with the Tibetans. In a meeting on location, I walked several of them through the problem, explaining the probability of sun damage. One of them looked at me with an expression of complete bewilderment and chuckling exclaimed, "But of course! This is the nature of all things." This spontaneous flash of Buddhist philosophy struck me then as a critical lesson to be learned through experience: If you invite people to *really* participate in the making of a museum, *the process must change the museum*. We exhibited the throne in the sun.

An Unsettled Landscape

A glancing look at the landscape of museums, as evidenced by any recent museum conference program guide or professional blog, might lead one to believe that a spontaneous eruption of new thinking, inspired by new developments in information technology, has captured the imagination of a significant corner of the field. Just what it is (or should be) in museums isn't entirely clear yet, but it goes by many names in the online universe. User-generated content. Crowd-curation. Open sourcing. Social media or networking. Viral marketing. In short, the Web now encompasses a panoply of hugely popular and highly participatory vehicles, enabled by new media, and clustered under the expansive rubric of "Web 2.0." If you were to see this phenomenon as a fad, or limited to the virtual sphere, you would be mistaken because all around us bedrock notions about information, who owns it, how it can be used, who gets a say and gets to participate, who the gatekeepers should be, are open to re-evaluation irrespective of what's happening in museums. The explosive growth of these new media can even be seen to call into question our relationships to real things and places, our sense of geographically-bounded community and social space. Traditional news media, book and music publishing are already swaying under the tectonic realignment, with the old business models perhaps lurching to extinction. Some speculate that museums, or certain types of museums, may face a similar crisis if they are not prepared to accommodate what is supposed to be a growing expectation that active participation in the generation of content by the public in the future is not optional but essential. In the broader society,

what is actually happening, whether museums are ready for it or not, is a radical redrafting of expectations about our collective social sphere, informational currency, and what it means to participate. This is big right now, and it's only going to get bigger.

Superficially, it would appear that museums are straining with characteristic sluggishness to determine what these rapidly evolving media spell for the practices of public programming. This may be driven by some insecurity that they'll be left behind and isolated as antiquated, unsustainable behemoths of another era, or simply because it's the newest shiny thing. A few provocative experiments using the capacity of the Web to draw users into the creation of actual "meatspace" museum exhibitions already exist. But a deeper look at the history of museums reveals another story. There has always been an ethos (though surely not universally shared in the field) of participation, inclusiveness and pluralism providing the groundwork by which the pioneering forays were conceived and through which future such experiments may thrive.

The Authoritative Museum

In the classical mode, museums have positioned themselves as authoritative cultural arbiters of truth, validity, or esthetic worth. This is the museum as canonical mirror, a reflection of academic discipline and highly specialized knowledge. In an art museum, the acceptance of an artist's work into the collection heralds the ultimate stage in the sanction of official connoisseurship. This is a chain that usually involves the commercial galleries, critical appraisal in the art press, then acquisition by an elite group of private collectors, all before

the museum finally comes around. Science museums, zoos, and aquaria of all stripes still traffic in ostensibly settled science fact. History museums also have typically tried to project narratives of settled fact, in the effort occasionally glossing over larger overriding problems of history that remain stubbornly unreconciled, or crashing into them headlong as in the case of the **Enola Gay** controversy. For many in the field, it has been difficult to see much value in democratizing the collection and display of museum content. For them, the "culture wars," as exemplified by exhibition controversies such as **Enola Gay** or **Sensation,** serve as a grim reminder of what happens when the righteous mob gets more leverage than it deserves, blotting out reasoned scholarship or the informed judgments of curators. In this defensive, superheated atmosphere, it has been hard to disaggregate positive active participation by the public from the perceived threat—that each concession to the public must necessitate in some way a surrender of control and curatorial prerogative. Each category of museum, no matter how forward-looking or enlightened, has a strain of institutional ambivalence toward the crowd. This sense is no doubt rooted not only in the elitism vested in the academy or connoisseurship, but also in the implicit moral uplift of the educational mission and a more or less realistic assessment of the limits of what visitors may actually know. Museums are supposed to know more and know better. Michael Kimmelman, art critic at *The New York Times,* speaks for many in the museum field when he says,

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to explain it eloquently, are still what separate museums from shopping malls. Museums need to reclaim the idea of quality because it is what people want when they go to museums: to be told what they should value, so that they can then decide for themselves whether or not to agree which is how a free democracy really works. Standards change, values evolve, but without them at any given moment, we are lost. (2001)

In the meantime, the crowd has rushed right into the parallel universe of the information age and seems largely indifferent to the authority issues that bedevil conventional museum thinking. And to say that museums have uniformly stood firmly in the authoritative guardianship role would be to ignore a countervailing strain of ambivalence in the field respecting that very authority, an ethos which eschews elitism, strives for more complex narratives, putting public participation, inclusion and varying perspectives ahead of owning the last word. Indeed, these museum trends were already robust well before the advent of Web 2.0. Decades ago, museum thinkers were already talking about a continuum of evolving practice from museums as private collections, to museums where visitors are tolerated, to paternalistic museums that try to elevate novice learners, to museums where authority and content creation is shared with the public in a dialogical process of civic engagement.

In fact, the preoccupation with the civically engaged museum is nearly as old as the American museum itself. In the early years of the 20th century John Cotton Dana was already talking about "a museum that shall interest and help its community." One only has to look at 1984's *Museums for a New Century*, 1992's *Excellence and Equity* or the essays of dozens of recent commentators. Cultural relevancy has its museum tradition too and, seen in this light, it's not surprising that many are now seeing the democratizing power of the Web as both inspiration and a potentially significant new tool for reaching and engaging the public in ways that resonate with the spirit of the civic museum. Conversely, online participatory strategies may also show potential for adaptation to more traditional museum programming. Surely, part of the twitchiness concerning the perceived museum authority crisis is a failure of imagination, an inability to see how the release of a measure of control might actually generate new possibilities and creative energy.

At the core of the civically engaged museum is a change in the terms under which museums and their exhibitions get negotiated and rendered into meaningful form. If, in the past, a museum perceived itself as a vehicle for transmitting information to the public in a unidirectional and authoritative fashion, today we are seeing museums trying to find a more open, flexible and responsive stance. The extensive study of the museumgoing public has led to a more complex sense of what effective museummaking entails. To engage the public is to know the public. To paraphrase Stephan Weil, making an exhibit for someone turns out to be a lot harder than merely making it about something (Weil, 1999). It's harder because a museum has to be willing to both listen and change

The Manifestations and Limits of Public Participation
As we all know, participation is coming to

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mean much more than just showing up and, in the time-honored fashion, entering a note in the visitor comment book. For some time now, museums have been experimenting with relaxing the grip on control, while affording museumgoers newer, deeper levels of participation, to the extent that the museum's presentation is changed in some outwardly noticeable way. Not all of these experiments have been equally successful; most are not entirely alike as models. Still, each foray gives us a different sense of where this question might be headed in the near future. In museums of history and culture, for example, this pluralistic trend has recently taken many forms. In one variant, museums have heeded the criticism that their narratives reflected privileged, unitary, majoritarian points of view and have sought to include the voices of members of social groups who have traditionally been excluded, not only from the museum's stories, but also from control of the storytelling process itself. A broader inclusiveness of multiple perspectives can be seen on a continuum as a more participatory stance toward content in the sense that it admits voices of those other than the curator. In the most progressive museums, it is now considered unthinkable to create an exhibition on, say, an indigenous culture, without intimately involving people from that culture in the creation of the exhibition and the telling of the story. The National Museum of the American Indian is, perhaps, the most ambitious recent example; the project relied on the active participation of representatives from dozens of tribal communities, and their voices and guiding hands are evident throughout. What any museum professional involved in such a collaboration will tell you is that these projects challenge all sorts of conscious and unconscious institutional assumptions,

sometimes about the meaning of things, but also just what the facts really are and what kinds of documentation have real validity. What takes place is a new, negotiated meaning, or a multiplicity of meanings in contrast to one another. *The throne will fade.* In another strand, some history museums have made the discovery that quotidian social history—the everyday stories of individual people—actually resonates with museum visitors more than the customary dispassionate third person thesis. People seem to value the expression of a variety of personal perspectives and prefer to sort the meaning out for themselves.

The articles in this issue illustrate the range of initiatives that art, history, and science museums are taking to encourage visitor participation. But, for the most part, this is participation of a distinct kind. Science in particular draws a brighter line at content. If art museums aren't going to embrace an *American Idol* version of art anytime soon, where any voting person's opinion is as good as anyone else's, science museums will still have serious qualms about opening the door to a public content-creation free-for-all. Could we ever imagine a museum endorsing the validity of pop pseudoscience notions about, say, Creationism, the earthly monuments built by visiting space aliens, or sasquatch sightings? And no amount of earnest community collaboration is likely to compel a history museum to mount an exhibit it knows damn well contains information that is less than factual. There are limits, and the gatekeeping role is still serious business.

Since there are limits, and realistically there will always be limits for one reason or another, is there something fundamentally disingenuous

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References:
Kimmelman, M. (2001, Aug. 26) *Museums in a quandary: Where are the ideals?* The New York Times.

Weil, S. (1999). *From being about something to being for somebody.* Daedalus, 128 (3).

about museums pursuing these participatory models, if control is bound to remain the prerogative of the museum? For that matter, why should museums take what's happening online seriously at all? From a design standpoint in particular, how does virtual participation translate into a meatspace experience in any way shape or form that will prove satisfactory, not only for the museum, but for the rest of the public as well? Deeper, more open public participation in exhibition creation may be laudable in the abstract, but will the result be any good? And in the haunts of the collections storerooms there are still many who worry that the virtual will one day obliterate the value, and maybe the very materiality, of the authentic object. There have to be compelling reasons to pursue this avenue rising above the ritualized din of annual fad clatter.

Moving from Authority to Mediator

I think there are excellent reasons. But, first of all, I think we should seek to avoid the trap of thinking that all efforts to encourage and facilitate public participation are inherently destructive to a museum's position as a trusted source of information or good judgment. We may not be talking about such stark choices at all, rather pushing toward a model that is more conversational, more a set of negotiations and interactions, than a set of mutually exclusive ideologies. All technologies are in some sense neutral until they have been animated by human intentions; they are tools, adapted as all tools are for a limited range of tasks. Just imagine museums without electric lighting— they once existed. Museums have been exploring the surfaces and outer edges of increased public participation for some time through a variety of means. If we can

point to a number of successful endeavors along that trajectory in every category of museum, why wouldn't we seek to employ the latest technological tools for public participation where the manifest possibilities seem to intersect most powerfully with the current museum trend of pluralism? Why wouldn't a museum choose to hang out in a realm where millions of people are congregating and interacting on a regular basis and in ever growing numbers? It should be entirely natural for any institution whose mission is public engagement to want to put the harness on this horse.

Sure, there will be challenges inherent to these uncharted regions. Museums have always been more experiential than informational in the literal, word-based sense. For all of its social currency and nimbleness, the Web is still a relatively impoverished sensory landscape, merely screen-captured words and images when compared to the fulsome multiplicities of stimuli available in the real-world spaces of the museum. There remain significant differences between soliciting and moderating Web postings and wrangling a multidimensional exhibition experience out of the ether. Simply offering a participatory experience doesn't guarantee that it will be sufficiently compelling that people will want to do it. Museums will still have to negotiate thorny mergers and challenging relationships, in effect balancing the desire to engage a wider community with maintaining some core sense of institutional selfhood. This information revolution isn't so much an answer as it is a set of new questions to answer and problems to solve. So what are we waiting for? Let the work begin. ☀