



Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary

Museums Are the Site Where Meaning Is Made, Together

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Abstract: The following letter is in response to the panel “All Ears? How Museums Use Community Advisory Groups to Listen and Act towards Local Relevance and Engagement,” which was conducted on February 18, 2023 at the College Art Association and sponsored by the CAA Museum Committee. The transcript to the panel was circulated to museum professionals to respond to through the letter format based on their experiences and observations.

Keywords: *Community Engagement, Museum Engagement, Engagement Curation, Cultural Learning Pedagogy*

Letter

I am writing in response to the February 2023 CAA Panel Discussion on the use of community advisory groups in university art galleries and museums; I am inspired to share some thoughts on museums and community engagement through the prism of my cultural learning pedagogy, relational aesthetics, and placemaking and through thinking of what success in this area might look like and what engagement curation might be signaling for the future of practice.

I am also inspired by your concept of engagement curation, as a term to come to an understanding of and to critique the contemporary turn in museum practice in particular of including the voices of *communities of place*—and indeed, in my experience of such, with *communities of interest*, such as those that gather around particular artists, thematic concerns, and *communities of impact*, such as young people member groups.

My work in the museum space has been with socially engaged practice and deep and long-duration community collaborations into programming, curating, and governance. In the course of this work, I have come to ground my approach in what I call a cultural learning pedagogy.

This is one that holds knowledge as relational, pluralistic, participative, and co-created; works with cultural experience as a catalyst for personal and social transformation; facilitates the mediation and communication of ideas and supports understandings about the self,

society, and culture; and is an aesthetic and critical approach in arts-based learning that generates public benefits through socially embedded and embodied inquiry.

As a relational and co-constructed practice that works with cultural meanings, identities, stories, and artifacts, it is a critical and expressive material praxis through which to form and nurture engagement curation. It communicates meaning and mediates values that recognize the importance of including the multivariate cultural references of all participants in the learning environment.

My own road into a cultural learning pedagogy stemmed from the ethos of ‘mattering.’ Feeling that we matter is fundamental not only to our self-esteem and sense of being part of society but also to our health, happiness, and longevity. The museum has a role to play here, and when approaching engagement curation, the two questions of mattering were front and center when considering how we work: How do you feel you matter, and how does it feel when someone really listens to you?

One of the questions that is current in my practice—and that may help people think through the roles and responsibilities of museums and engagement curation—is: is the museum a relational object through which we can understand our lived experience?

In my own research, I see socially engaged artists, working in a placemaking context, use the objects created with their community participants, objects that helped start and mediate conversation across difference and through complexity, take on a relational role. The art encounters are those of Bourriard’s relational aesthetics theory, where the art practice takes its cue from human relations and their social context, and the art making creates the social environment.

In the purview of engagement curation, I see engagement curators use the art object—whether this be something from a collection or something created through a material or social encounter—as a means to talk through the matters of our contemporary lived experience. Such a social practice operates as a social interstice, a space that is located within an overarching system but that suggests other possibilities for exchanges within and without the museum, concerned with provoking and sustaining individual and collective encounters.

What this then leads me to is seeing the museum as that relational object made large. The endeavor of the museum is to be an object for our publics to navigate their way through their lived experience which goes beyond the museum as a site of co-creation of knowledge, but it is an embodied experience. The museum is the site where meaning is made, for developing empathy and democracy and for figuring out one’s place in the world. Here the museum is a cluster of artistic practices and learning pedagogies on a common trajectory that, via convivial modes of creative learning and social exchange with the public, are concerned with human interactions, social context, and collective meaning making.

If a museum puts engagement curation into action, what then would success look like? Offering this from my own experience, it may look like enjoyment in learner-led learning; implicit and explicit permission to challenge the already-known and take risks—as much for

the community as the museum and its staff; flexibility, contingency, creativity, and critical thinking—again in the individual or the group, within or without the museum; different forms of social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development; and for the public, a broader concept of art and artists that empowers their own creativity.

Look to Queens Museum, New York, and Manchester Museum, UK, on bringing the community into curation, and look to the exemplary work of Gibran Villalobos and Latinx curation across the US; read the new PhD thesis from Stella Toneen on museums and co-creation models and benefits, a collaborative study with Tate and Kings College London.

I have seen the relative success of engagement curation hinge on the quality of human connection. Such a practice has to include diverse voices and communities of place and interest or impact a meaningful platform within the museum from which to program, curate, or advise and be responsive agents for change.

What is engagement curation signaling for the future of museum practice? The re-examination and self-reflection of museums as to their roles and responsibilities, who they are working for and in service to, is a vital and necessarily ongoing endeavor. I can only hope that the turn to the social and to the civic will mark an epoch of engagement curation and lead to museums that are participative and practice-led, personalized with numerous ways to engage, and co-created through a variety of collaborative, partnership, and relational models that go beyond walls to new social and digital spaces and that hold a pluralist voice of the artist and the public, opening museums up to wider and deeper public access.

Such a turn will transform the museums' relation to the public, to the civic, and to itself.

Acknowledgment

Thank you to all the communities and colleagues I have worked with in museum spaces that have been leading change in our practices.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Dr. Cara Courage is a globally renowned placemaking leader, independent culture and place consultant director, and organizational change agent. Her most recent project is *Trauma-Informed Placemaking*, with Dr. Anita McKeown, a research and practice platform and forthcoming textbook (Routledge 2024). Courage undertakes research for her own projects and for academy and sector-commissioned partners in the USA, Australia, and the UK for national arts networks, cultural institutions, and local and central government. She speaks internationally on topics covering arts and place, placemaking, C21st museum, and socially engaged art, amongst others. Courage is editor and convenor of *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking*, co-editor of *Creative Placemaking and Beyond*, and author of *Arts in Place: The Arts, the Urban and Social Practice*.

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