



Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary

Beyond Individual Gumption: A Letter to the Field about Institutionalizing Engagement Curating

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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: *Curating, Community Partnerships, Museum Engagement*

Introduction

At the College Art Association’s 2023 annual conference the panel “All Ears? How Museums Use Community Advisory Groups to Listen and Act towards Local Relevance and Engagement” centered around the recent trend of community advisory groups in museums. This panel discussion offered scholars and administrators the opportunity to evaluate community-driven museum engagement and its effect at a variety of cultural organizations around the country. As stated by the panel chair, Daniel Tucker, “following years of experimentation, it is time to take stock of the efforts made in furthering community engagement across the field.” Each panelist presented a case study showcasing examples of effective community engagement through exhibitions and programming.

My letter is in response to this panel discussion and how engagement curating can be further institutionalized across the sector and beyond an individual staff member’s commitment to their community. As public perception of museums continues to shift, it is imperative institutions respond accordingly by reflecting the communities they serve. To remain relevant, the museum curator in particular is tasked with managing projects that attract a larger audience eager for meaningful engagement. As the role of the curator has been discussed in length over the past decade, I argue that the role of the curator is to act as the mediator between the institution and the public. This reinvention of the role is necessary to ensure curatorial engagement and community relevance remain sustainable.

Letter

What does institutional curatorial engagement look like? At the beginning of the panel discussion, Tucker referenced *The Participatory Museum* by Nina Simon in which the author challenges museums to reckon with their own lack of public relevancy and how to incorporate community participation in exhibitions and programming. Simon (2010, 232) argues, “a successful collaboration creates new relationships and opportunities that may span over many years.” The key component here is “over many years.” How can institutions facilitate meaningful collaborations that carry on for years to come? How can institutions evolve out of expertise of the scholar and instead invite expertise from the community?

One curator from the panel offered insight as to how their role shifted from expert to facilitator, demonstrating that engagement curating starts with a reimagined approach to organizing art exhibitions. Martina Tanga, Curatorial Research and Interpretation Associate at the MFA Boston, shared her on-the-ground approach to co-collaborative curatorial projects that involve the community from inception to completion.

At the beginning stages of the exhibition process, Tanga invited various constituents of the Black community in Boston to co-curate, *Touching Roots: Black Ancestral Legacies in the Americas*. From co-writing didactics, to selecting the artwork and objects on display, and curating the list of public programs, community stakeholders were integral to the development of the exhibition. Tanga offered institutional insight whereas community partners offered expertise on content important to the community that would have likely otherwise gone unnoticed. It is most common for art museums to invite community advisory groups to assist with the planning of an exhibition, but what makes Tanga’s process unique is that she included community experts in the research, development, and execution of the exhibition.

Tanga stretched beyond the normal reach of an art museum by incorporating community members as co-curators, stressing the “we” in curating the exhibition with each community partner contributing expertise. Through co-curation, the institution, staff, and community all had a stake in the outcome of the exhibition while simultaneously allowing room for creativity and a culture of un-learning for a holistic, relevant exhibition to transpire. Tanga did not have to include community members into the nitty-gritty of the curatorial process; by doing so, she allowed participants to show exhibition elements that would be important to the community. In short, it was not about the curator’s expertise but instead a facilitation between experts from the community and the institution—with the curator as the mediator.

This example demonstrates the curator going above-and-beyond their educational and professional training, setting aside scholarly expertise and inviting community expertise into the curatorial process. These unique circumstances are privy to the individual and institution. How can institutions build off of these case studies and ensure community-driven initiatives are embedded into the curatorial position? Beyond individual staff interest and commitment, how do institutions commit to embedding co-collaborative projects into the exhibition calendar?

During the panel's Q&A discussion, panelists and attendees spurred a dialogue about effective ways to embed community engagement into the ethos of the institution. Some argued that effective change can only occur when leadership (including the Board of Trustees) is involved, while others argued that specific funding dedicated to community engagement positions is the key to ensuring collaborative projects remain sustainable. In addition to board and funding support, I would argue restructuring the curatorial position to include engagement curating as a third opportunity to deepen community engagement. By recruiting curatorial professionals with community engagement experience, these individuals in turn will embed engagement curation into the ethos of exhibition planning—acting as a mediator between the institution and the public. By placing a higher emphasis on collaboration and audience-focused curatorial positions, institutions can ensure curatorial projects are reflective of the communities they serve. Not regulating community engagement to a specific department (and position) and instead requiring curators to engage with outside expertise will transform exhibition planning into a process that puts community awareness at the forefront, not as an educational afterthought.

In addition, in order to embed engagement curating into the ethos of the museum profession, it all starts with ensuring an institution's values are in line with community engagement initiatives. As museums across the sector put an emphasis on community engagement in their mission statements, this requires a revision of museum values which directly affects position descriptions and hiring practices across the organization, including the curatorial department. Value-driven curatorial engagement will allow museum staff to incorporate new methods of curating beyond the individual staff interest. By embedding community engagement into the museum's values, all three pillars (board buy-in, funding support, and restructured curatorial positions) are supported and built-upon, sustainability and intentionally. Reframing institutional values to reflect community engagement will act as a through-line for the organization restructuring the curatorial position and, in turn, reimagining exhibition planning to reflect community engagement.

For decades, individuals across the museum sector have taken it upon themselves to reimagine various methods of engagement. These grassroot, ad-hoc endeavors, although inspiring, limit the field's growth by putting the burden of community engagement onto individual staff's personal interest. Removing this burden and instead incorporating community engagement into the ethos of an organization through reimagined values statements and curatorial job descriptions will allow engagement curating to grow and evolve with the institution. Community engagement is integral to the success of an arts organization regardless of its location, size, and budget. Exhibitions are the main reason for visitation; it is time the community sees their own expertise within the curatorial process. Engagement curation in the twenty-first century relies on the notion that the curator acts in partnership with the community, mediating the interest of the public and the institution ensuring continued community investment in their cultural organizations.

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AI Acknowledgment

The author declares that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete essential authoring tasks in this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

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