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Bully Pulpit Issue 3.1: What are Museums For?

Jacqueline Francis, Guest Bully Pulpit Editor

Robert A. Corrigan Visiting Professor in Social Justice, 2016–2017

College of Ethnic Studies and César Chávez Institute

San Francisco State University

francisj@sfsu.edu

Growing up, I knew what museums were for: they were places where you learned about things and learned how to do some things—prescribed ways of looking, listening, and occasionally, touching. Long before I met an art historian and long before I trained to become one, I knew that museums were sources and resources and that they were sites of social and cultural capital. I also did not expect museums to connect with me, and I did not care much if they did. In museums, I was learning about learning: museums exhibitions (and museum people) taught me how to form questions and where to look for answers. Present day museums everywhere have to figure out strategies to connect with audiences and attract new ones.¹ Sociologists have weighed in on the matter, and some museum administrators agree that this is an “adapt or perish” moment in our history.² Technology has proved to be helpful,³ however, patronizing visitors by merely amusing them with apps is not constructive. Museums are places for critical thinking and incessant querying. Museums tell their stories in mission statements, but hitting the “About” tab is just the first action taken by the curious minded who should be interested in the objective intention of a museum. Next should be these questions: “What do I want from the museum?” and “What does the museum want from me?”

It is a matter of investment from all concerned parties.

This brief bit is dedicated to Leigh Markopoulos (1968-2017).

Notes:

¹ Victoria Cohen Mitchell, “Yes, Great Art. Can I Go Now?” *Guardian*, September 3, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/04/art-bores-me-glad-other-people-like-it>

² Peggy Levitt, “Museums Must Attract Diverse Visitors or Risk Irrelevance,” *The Atlantic*, November 9, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/museums-must-attract-diverse-visitors-or-risk-irrelevance/433347/>

³ Sophie Gilbert, “Please Turn On Your Phone in the Museum: Cultural Institutions Learn to Love Selfies, Tailor-Made Apps, and Social Media,” *The Atlantic*, October 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/10/please-turn-on-your-phone-in-the-museum/497525/>