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Bully Pulpit: What are Museums For?

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Museums, first and foremost, not only contain representations, they *are* representations. Images and objects, which form the core and *raison d'être* for most museums, operate in terms of meaning on two levels: centripetal, or significance specific to the object, and centrifugal, or meanings layered on top by context or culture. Because of the power inherent in images, collections of these formidable objects themselves accrete power. These display and storage spaces—whether actual or virtual—may quickly become politicized, as the museum staff and the local community wrestle with the symbolic nature of representations.

As such symbolic institutions, museums play an important role in the community relationship to culture. On a base level, museums document culture; they record the material and visual existence of things. Museums, as organizations with the everyday constraints of limited resources (time, money, staff, space, energy, etc.), must decide what to collect and what to display. More often than not, museums confirm cultural assumptions for the viewer, for example, the academic-year production of an elementary school art program or a blockbuster presentation of

French Impressionist paintings. On the other hand, museums can also challenge the viewer, for example, with a show on nude portraiture or depictions of Abu Ghraib prisoner torture and abuse. As a practicing curator, I firmly believe that a museum should balance its collecting and exhibiting between these two functions, although with an accent on the latter. Woody Guthrie subscribed to a similar notion: “It’s a folksinger’s job to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable,” he once wrote.

This dynamic of operating between confirmation and challenge, comfort and disturbance, means that museums have the responsibility to function as a laboratory. In graduate school, our professors frequently reminded us that nothing about art history is an actual emergency! If museums give themselves permission to reduce their self-imposed level of importance, then an outlook of experimentation may arise. Rather than imposing answers with no room for discussion, museums become the locus of investigatory questions, open-ended environments with the prospect of community involvement in meaning making.

One way that museums can provide this service is by offering emerging artists the opportunity to display new work or mid-career artists the chance to take stock of their past production. These kinds of endeavors allow artists to see their production in a professional setting; sometimes it is the first time they have seen such an assembly of their art outside the studio and all together. In this way, museums provide important feedback to the artist, fostering a sense of accomplishment as well as the intellectual and emotional distance to evaluate the work and to determine next steps in the studio.

Exhibition opportunities are only one kind of conversation that can happen in a laboratory-oriented museum setting. And I firmly believe in the role that a museum can play as a forum for all kinds of conversations. In resonance with my comment about challenge above, I believe museums

should seek out occasions to intersect with difficult conversations that are already taking place in the community. As “containers” of culture, museums comprise images and objects that speak to the gamut of human thoughts and feelings. The items they contain can trigger, facilitate, or ameliorate tough topics, such as human trafficking, climate change, or gender inequality.

Lastly, museums are dynamos; they can function as engines and drivers for the community. Since the Guggenheim opened their Spanish outpost in the previously-depressed port city of Bilbao, many communities are now looking to museums to revitalize—or enhance—their local economies. As exciting destinations on the margins of the entertainment industry, museums can indeed—especially with blockbuster or controversial programs—attract visitors who then spread their disposable income among nearby establishments. I support the monetization of certain museum functions as it makes sense, for example, merchandise to support an exhibition or facility rental for an outside function.

Most importantly, in my opinion, museums operate on an additional economic level: they produce knowledge. One only need to think of other cultural incubators—the fin-de-siècle Left Bank, Alfred Stieglitz’s Gallery 291, Womanhouse at CalArts, or Houston’s Project Row House—to remember the intellectual, societal, and historical influence of these intersections of people and places. What are museums for? Museums exist to change and enlarge the thinking of students, staff, administrators, artists, other cultural workers, community members, and out-of-town visitors.