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Bully Pulpit: What are Museums for?

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Today, museums and art institutions function as a place of worship. We visit them to reflect on our lives and make sense of the world around us. However, intellectual and creative pursuits, rather than religious ones, are held as the highest goals within a museum. While reflections on morality are certainly present in art, the nature of creativity is to allow for questioning and experimentation, unlike the tradition-based values of religion. By placing challenging thought and expression above all else, the museum is home to many varying and, at times, conflicting world views.

Curate comes from the word *cura*, meaning “to care.” While historically this has referenced the care of museum objects, increasingly it must mean to care for intellectual freedom, and also to care for the artists and the audience. One of the greatest challenges that art institutions face today is achieving a balance between higher pursuits and the pressures of donation-based fundraising. Broad audiences need to understand the purpose of the artwork; indeed, they may need to understand the purpose of art itself in society. This does not mean curtailing artistic freedom; in fact, it means just the opposite. Audiences need exposure, education, and challenges.

Artists also need the support and care of art institutions. The activist organization Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) has created a standard of honorariums for artists. Self-certifying as an institution means committing to pay all artists fair wages, separate from materials and production costs. One artist who was paid an honorarium for a group show at the Art Gym said that this was no small thing; it was

one of the few times she felt respect for the work that she was doing. Valuing art means both educating the public on its value and valuing the work of artists. Every institution should make W.A.G.E. standards a priority.

Above all else, museums must make room for artists to present their best work, and help audiences connect with that work at various levels. One of the greatest exhibitions I've curated, *kartz ucci: an opera for one*, was a project that required rethinking many processes in order to realize it. Kartz Ucci was a female digital artist of regional renown, who had passed away at the age of fifty-two. She had no gallery representation, no organized estate, and many of her works remained only on hard drives. Her work had often been presented as installations in which Ucci considered the space of the venue. It was almost impossible for many institutions to take on her work. But she had been an important artist and educator in Oregon and Canada, and her work deserved the attention of a large retrospective. We worked closely with her colleagues at the University of Oregon and did quite a bit of detective work to figure out which files represented her most finished works to date. (She revisited many of her works for new presentations or additional iterations between neon, sound, video, and book forms.) The result was beyond anything we could have initially conceived. We exhibited many of her projects in new installation form at the Art Gym, created a publication that included an artist-book-within-a-book, and presented her video *an opera for one* at the Hollywood Theatre in Portland.

Honoring Ucci's vision required taking risks in reinterpreting her projects both in the gallery space and in the catalogue. It took time and commitment by the Art Gym staff and the University of Oregon art faculty. It took fundraising via Kickstarter, as her exhibition was not eligible for much regional funding after she passed away. It took a village, and above all, it took care.

When thinking of the many issues that arise around what to present, how to inform multiple audiences, and how to fit programming into institutional and fundraising goals, the higher purpose can be lost. Every director and curator must come back to the mission of art at the end of the day. Museums and art organizations would not be here without the art; they are simply homes for the artwork and projects. They provide the stories for audiences and the means for the artists, all in order to serve and care for the art.