



Viv Golding and Wayne Modest, eds., *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*

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THIS BOOK, edited by Viv Golding and Wayne Modest, came to us about two decades after the canonical publication by KARP, KREAMER, and LAVINE (1992). While both books explore questions about the purpose of museums and the “publics” they serve, the twenty-three contributing authors to the present book (including museum professionals and museum studies faculty) offer interdisciplinary perspectives, experiences, and insights into the practical application of museum theory since the 1990s, sharing the joys, pains, successes, and failures they experienced in collaborating with communities.

While community collaboration has become relatively standard in exhibition and program development, it is a process with which museums still struggle. How we define community and engage with it, how we share “authority,” and how we define “authentic” (as opposed to “tokenistic”) collaborations remain challenges that this book attempts to tackle. Karp described “every society...as a constantly changing mosaic of multiple communities and organizations” (1992, 3). Precisely because of this constant change, the museum’s ability to stay relevant depends on its ability to ride waves, and adapt to new methods and styles of communication as generations, demographics, and political climates change. Nearly all the authors of this collective work explicitly refer to the plurality of communities and their experiences, rejecting the notion of “culture” or “community” as bounded, pure, or homogenous.

Each chapter in the book’s three parts offers a case study that responds to specific questions and offers critical evaluation of a project. The authors argue that interrogation of museum practice can guide practitioners to develop exhibitions that more authentically engage communities, recognize diversity of experience, and honor multicultural publics. Additionally, museums can confront difficult issues of social justice by critically examining practice and thoughtfully turning attention to communities (not because we have to, but because we want to). Museums can take a moral or political position and acknowledge injustices and abuses committed by wider institutions of power, perhaps offering communities validation and even healing. Doing so does not have to compromise expertise, or reliability of content, but it *does* require inclusion of multiple (not necessarily *opposing*) perspectives. The book, however, does not attempt to make the reader think the process is easy—sticky-note pads are simply not the answer to all our problems.

In Part I, “Community Matters,” starting with Golding’s Chapter 1, authors interrogate the meaning of “community.” While raising some of the challenges associated with co-curation, collaboration, representation, and presenting diverse perspectives on an equal footing, authors ponder whether there exists a balance between dismissing the needs of diverse audiences and oversimplifying content for “lowest common denominator audiences” (25). The argument to work collaboratively with community is not without disagreement. Onciul (Chapter 5) makes the solid point that engagement is not necessarily the solution to representing complex issues faced by multifaceted

communities. She asserts that engagement can be both beneficial *and* detrimental, and that it “does not grant integrity or validity” to exhibitions. While this is bold in the context of “new museology,” it is truly important in considering difficult topics. Onciul builds on James Clifford’s concept of the contact zone with her notion of an “engagement zone,” and explores how power is negotiated and what is at stake for participants who enter complicated and capricious relationships.

The chapters in Part II, “Sharing Authority,” interrogate the power and authority of museums assumed by the “new museology” (clearly defined by Hutchinson in Chapter 9). Recurring concerns in Part II include the techniques of representation, the politics of display, and the task of negotiating authority in different ways by different people. Authors (such as Exell) suggest that for certain topics, some visitors prefer the museum’s authority over crowd-sourced information (another bold claim in the “new museological” turn), noting that some people lack confidence in exhibitions built on visitor opinions. Referencing Michael Frisch’s notion of shared authority, Hutchinson promotes the idea that together scholarly authority and experiential authority underscore one another’s agency, and she offers a more balanced view of the kinds of authority presented. Using equalized graphic techniques, she holds that different authorities (such as those of personal life experiences and historical facts) are given equal weight. Part III, “Audiences and Diversity,” acknowledges heterogeneous experiences within communities. Also, while the museum’s hegemonic authority is scrutinized, the hegemony of communities is also questioned. For example, in Chapter 13, Wood points to how dominant cultural values within communities can influence what museums do. She makes a good point, unique in the context of thinking about museum authority. Wood’s project, “The Power of Children: Making a Difference” at the Indianapolis Children’s Museum (presented in Chapter 13) brings civic engagement and social justice issues out of the “niche” museum. She attributes success to critical pedagogy, but makes clear the challenge of incorporating multiple experiences, beliefs, and knowledges into an exhibit that is essentially about racism. Chapter 14 likewise details challenges involved with exhibiting stories of racism, here as a commemoration of Britain’s bicentennial of abolition. Despite the good intentions of the organizers and their genuine consultation with communities, the project did not reach a satisfactory conclusion. Readers are privileged by authors’ exploration of practical issues that lead to what they conclude was a failure: the divide between community needs and museum goals, time limitations, the timing of community consultation in the exhibition development process, museum-held assumptions that representatives could speak for entire communities, and the lack of community understanding of how museums work.

An interview with Susan Pearce in the afterword is a particular highlight of the book. Pearce discusses the importance of physical and tactile elements in the museum experience, the difficulty of including complex, multiple perspectives in a single interpretive label, the (near) universality of material culture, and the ‘wow’ factor that objects can elicit. But while Pearce says she has always been open to sharing “authority,” she critiques curators for their opposition. While this may be so for some, at this point in our discipline’s history, most museum anthropologists, ethnologists, folklorists, and other curators with similar backgrounds have long understood the vital importance of (and found personal fulfilment in) collaborating with communities. Many mid- to late-career curators “grew up” on this theory, having been academically trained in

the “new museology” twenty-plus years ago; sharing authority on some level is now perhaps somewhat naturalized. Happily, the book helps us wrestle with *how* to share authority and engage multicultural (and changing) communities in changing times.

I find few weaknesses in this book. While these chapters are inspiring, working with communities, asking for their participation, expertise, and personal experiences, and to co-produce exhibition content is demanding not only of staff time, but also of participants’ time. We still lack guidance in compensating our “collaborators.” Few people have the luxury these days to volunteer on such time-consuming projects. People work, have children, and are burdened with real-world responsibilities. When asking for communities to commit to working with us, if there is not a solid contract for consultation work, is authentic (not “tokenistic”) collaboration equitable for communities?

Despite this insignificant shortcoming, this book is a significant contribution. Theoretical musings on museums and communities often fail to consider the very harsh realities of exhibition budgets, understaffed exhibition teams, unforgiving deadlines, and other constraints that don’t allow for the “ideal.” Much of the extant literature simplifies the effort and resources that go into engaged, democratic, participatory, community-centered exhibition development. These contributors nod to logistical complexities of the exhibition process and grant no illusion that collaboration is an easy feat or always successful, thus filling an important gap in museum studies literature. Additionally, practical application seen in these case studies transcends theoretical idealism regarding community engagement. Authors acknowledge that while issues of social justice need to be addressed by all museums, not every museum needs to tackle these issues in *every* exhibition, and museums should not be expected to deal with such issues in the same way. Finally, by interrogating the notion of “community” this book commands us to genuinely consider our multiple publics, the politics of recognition, and the impossibility of including all communities and all perspectives, and therefore to think about the implications of our choices. It also inspires us to move theories of multiculturalism into the public sphere, where more general populations can better understand that “community” involves “communities” and can perhaps more readily empathize with varying perspectives of important social issues, past, present, and future.

REFERENCE

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