Museum Culture and the Inequities of Display and Representation

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Abstract

The politics of representation of art work in museums is a compelling subject for art educators from elementary to higher education. This paper examines how art educators, critics, and artists critique museum culture and curatorial practices. I begin by presenting examples of activism in the arts through the work of individual artists and collaboratives. The content of these works are commentaries on how cultural images represented in museums suggest tacit messages about power, history, knowledge, and identity. I conclude by suggesting how art educators might use students' personal experience and memory in order to encourage multiple interpretations of meaning in the making and viewing of art work. Students who make and view art as relevant and inseparable from the local community, might possibly penetrate the boundaries between looking and participating in art.

The limitations of the hushed and pristine gallery and the often-unreadable pages of art magazines are stunting the growth of an art that dreams—however quixotically—of striding fearlessly into the streets, into the unknown, to meet and mingle with other lives. (Lippard, 1997, p. 269)

The cultural, political, and social genesis of the public art museum in Euro-American society is a topic that invites more discussion in both higher and secondary education. Museum culture might seem benign, and even benevolent, for those who feel an affinity with its orientation toward preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. However, the monumental grandness of the large art museum's immaculate and solemnly imposing architecture, wall texts, and information desks may be intimidating for the uninitiated. The notion of the museum as sanctuary and arbiter of authenticity is perpetuated in the promotional materials for educators, and in the well-meaning but often history-laden, child-unfriendly, docent lecturers, "who, astonishingly, either stand there and tell them what they already see, or stand there and tell them what they do not see" (Burnham, 1994, pp. 521-522).

Reasons for the selection and display of works of art in museums are often omitted from pedagogical dialogue in favor of vigorously encouraging young people to become life-long museum goers. Just as the art museum traditionally makes implicit that understanding the objects in their collections is universal, inevitable, absolute, and transcends person, time, and space (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000), so do the educational materials housing and referencing museum art. Whether or not schools are in proximity to museums, and art educators have the luxury and inclination to visit them, the periodicals, books, and reproductions used by educators are dependent on museum collections (Blandy & Congdon, 1991). If representation shapes our way of knowing other cultures, then a more searching discourse about representation is needed in art education. Students need encouragement to deconstruct the control of knowledge and power, and to analyze the difference between objective knowledge and the cultural norms, values, and standards of society (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003).

In this article, I examine critiques of museum culture and curatorial practices. I consider claims that despite the gestures of a few innovative museums, the well-funded traditional art museum favors a particular aesthetic orientation that reduces
audience members to passive recipients of museum-sanctioned knowledge, ignores issues of power and representation, and misrepresents cultural identities. I explore emerging notions of audience engagement and community as a pedagogical strategy to encourage viewers to question whose heritage and experiences are represented in museums. I examine contemporary innovative museum practices and artists whose work alone and in collaboration are commentaries about the hierarchies and exclusions of large public institutions that display and represent artwork. I conclude that engaged art, inseparable from the local community, might possibly penetrate the boundaries between looking and participating in art, and I offer approaches to involve students in art inquiry/art making that engage new notions of the nature and roles of contemporary museum exhibitions.

Problems of Museum Representation

Douglas Crimp (1997) describes modernist art historians, art critics, and museum directors such as Norman Rosenblum, Hilton Kramer, and Rudi Fuchs as perpetuating the museum as ivory tower, favoring art that is autonomous and discrete and rejecting politics as a threat to matters of style.

Where do we read in these texts [i.e., art museum displays] of the critique of the institutions of power that seek to limit the meaning and function of art to the purely aesthetic? Where is a discussion of the attempted dissolution of the beaux-arts mediums and their replacement with modes of production that could better resist those institutions? Where do we find an analysis of work by feminists and minorities whose marginalization by the art institutions became a significant point of departure for the creation of alternative practices? Where do we find mention of those direct interventions by artists in their local social environments? Where, in short, in these essays can we learn of the political critique that has been a major force in recent art? The answer is, of course, Nowhere. (p. 256)

Curating is often thinly veiled racism in which quality and taste, couched in the rhetoric of multiculturalism, goes unchallenged (Lippard, 1990). The taken-for-granted institutionalization of multiculturalism is in part perpetuated by the museum’s version of authenticity which easily replaces old stereotypes and assumptions about other cultures with new ones by introducing reworked buzz words and politically correct catch-phrases. Rather, the original intention of multiculturalism is to consider “the function and content of art, as a symbolic expression of belief about the nature of the world and one’s place in it...those social, religious, political, and individual spaces where meaning is contemplated and brought forward in visual form” (Delacruz, 1995, pp. 59, 60). Inequitable museum practices are inextricably linked to the ways minority peoples have been perceived and represented in the past, and many remain in the present. According to the Guerrilla Girls (2004), the number of women and minorities having one-person exhibitions has not changed substantially in the last 15 years. Between 2000 and 2004, the Museum of Modern Art’s solo exhibitions were 80% white males, 13% white females, 7% females of color, and 0% males of color. The Whitney Museum of American Art’s solo exhibitions were 50% white males, 30% white females, 7% females of color, and 13% males of color which, the Guerrilla Girls say, is as good as it gets in New York City. At the Guggenheim, 78% were white males, 11% white females, 0% females of color, and 11% males of color. No artists of African descent were represented. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 90% of its solo exhibitions went to white males, 8.5% to white females, and 1.5% to artists of color.1 However, the claim of universal representation, according to Ross (1998), remains the unquestioned purpose of the museum’s public function.

Changing the image of the museum from “temple to Town Square” is a timely discussion among several museum curators (Halbreich, 2001, p. 76). For example,
the director of the Walker Art Center, Kathy Halbreich, makes clear that it is a cultural center rather than a museum and, as such, its mission is to create opportunities that connect art to life (Halbreich, 2001). Because of its multidisciplinary programs, the Walker Art Center has been more aware of the “aesthetic hierarchy in which painting and sculpture are elevated above other media and in which popular culture is rejected” (p. 74). Carol Duncan (1995) cites the Art Institute of Chicago as boldly broadening the conversation with a diverse representation of artists and themes. On the other hand, small community art museums whose mission is to bring contemporary and provocative work to the public are often under financial pressure, as funders are unwilling to support what they view as unmarketable (Tucker, 1998). This was the situation faced by Marcia Tucker, former director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

The pressure to be bigger means becoming less focused, less inventive, less daring. Many organizations have simply abandoned interrogation, the research and development mode of exhibition practice, in favor of mainstream programming most likely to garner funding. Because it’s the sound bite that sells, easily digestible information is gradually replacing time-consuming experience as the operative mode of encountering art. (p. 2).

The process of dismantling the art museum as a temple of transcendent representation begins by informing students of the efforts made by selected innovative museums, cooperatives, and artists to engage individuals and communities in more meaningful and culturally authentic ways to exhibit contemporary and political artwork, and to encourage audience participation, dialogue, and debate. Current alternative approaches and sites for art exhibition that have captured the attention of the mainstream art world, and the artists in creating these sites, have challenged political and social agendas of traditional public art museums.

Power, Representation, and New Interpretive Communities

Demystification of the museum taken on by artists such as Fred Wilson, Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, recent art collaboratives, and their predecessors brings the politics of museum selection, representation, and omission to the surface. Through performance art, human exhibition, public art, street art, and spontaneous collaborations, these and other artists challenge, and sometimes taunt, museum curatorial practices and the public’s passive compliance. Artists and collaboratives are also bridging a gap between diverse public school students and the particular cultural past upon which museums have traditionally been built. They are protests, forms of resistance, that might help young people question the museum relic as an artifact of historical selection and cultural tradition. In the following paragraphs I discuss two art collaboratives of the 1970s in order to highlight a genre of art that influenced current collaboratives and artists who emerged from these organized efforts to shift dominant notions of representation.

The Bronx Experience

“The liveliest events in the art world always happen when artists take things into their own hands” (Lippard 1980, p. 1). So begins Lucy Lippard’s review, Real Estate and Real Art a la Fashion Moda. The Real Estate Show was a culmination of a coalition called Collaborative Projects (Colab), formed in March 1977, whose mission was to create a sociopolitical and aesthetic discourse in communities. Their mission was a cultural concept born from a “crisis of faith,” and the solution a meeting ground for art and social activism (Lippard, 1980, p. 1). Colab was a resurrection of the 1960s and a survivor of the 1970s, a time in which alternative galleries became institutionalized and “others folded when artist organizers burnt out and retreated to their studios” (Lippard, 1980, p. 1). A group of downtown artists, disillusioned with high
rents, “door-to-door self salesmanship” (p. 2), and the art system, migrated to the South Bronx, broke into a city-owned storefront on Delancey Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and initiated the Real Estate Show. The show protested “absentee landlordism, eviction, developers, the city’s waste of space, greed—the whole notion of property in a capitalist society” (p. 2). This show was a cacophony of protest art, neighborhood graffiti art, an assemblage of neighborhood detritus, and ironic photo/text collages of fancy real estate advertisements. The show’s mission statement, as written in their handouts, was “to bridge the gap between artists and working people by putting art on the boulevard levels” (p. 2). Lippard described the look and feel of the show: “The walls were not white. The back door was the safest entrance. The Museum of Modern Art it was not. You could tell by the excitement” (p. 2). The then-barely known artists Jean Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf, Kiki Smith, and David Hammons started here.

The New York Housing, Preservation, and Development Department closed down the show shortly after it opened. Later, a group calling themselves Fashion Moda moved to a storefront on Third Avenue and 147th street in the heart of the South Bronx shopping center. Artist Stefan Eins closed his storefront gallery in then-fash-ionable SoHo, to reopen as Fashion Moda in the urban blight of the South Bronx. Bringing his artists with him, he celebrated the street life of the neighbors to create an egalitarian relationship between artist and audience as “a means of communication beyond ideology” (Webster, 1996, p. 3). They offered for sale everything remotely connected to art, such as “children’s work, toys, puzzles, inventions, painted signs, manufactured objects, live animals, and you-name-it” (Lippard, 1980, p. 3). Known for its past graffiti projects, Fashion Moda showcased artists with such names as MITCH, KEL, 139th, DISCO, 107.5, FUTURE, ALI, ZEPHER, CRASH, and Lady Pink (Webster, 1996).

**Current Mavericks**

The new art collectives of the past few years have been based on the countercultural model of Colab and Fashion Moda. Many exist and exhibit as virtual galleries, available to all and therefore difficult to be controlled by the market. Others are found in apartments, storefronts, arts schools and minivans…a multitasking mix of painting, sculpture, printmaking, design, digital art, video, zine production, and musical performances” ( Cotter, 2003, p. 5). They have names like Critical Art Ensemble, Temporary Services, Slanguage, Forcefield, Paper Rad, Flux Factory, YOMANGO, and Dearraindrop. Artists who work within this countercultural model and exhibit in actual space “insert ephemeral work into public spaces or bring otherwise invisible art into public” (Cotter, 2003, p. 5). For example, Temporary Services has been known to slip their artists’ books into public libraries and use curbside newspaper vending machines as galleries. YOMANGO makes shoplifting an act of civil disobedience with their special bags that make clothing disappear.

Most collectives are informal, often inviting anyone to contribute ideas and work. Others run low-tech exhibitions and workshops, usually in a member’s studio apartment. Still others, like Dearraindrop, are long-distance collectives working through email, while the members of Flux Factory live together in a loft in Queens. What ties them together is the political act of inventing platforms for displaying and disseminating work outside the mainstream art market. The disappointment of going solo in a competitive and prescriptive art market was often the catalyst.

**Fusco and Gomez-Pena: Art as Allegory**

“Culture and communal self-expression are perhaps most important sites of resistance, the signs of everyday life of an ongoing political struggle…among the many ways oppressed people have developed to
take their identity back” (Fusco, 1995, p. 35). One of the most strategic ways Fusco plays out this notion of taking back identity is with her caged human exhibitions with her then-partner, Gomez-Pena. Human exhibition is an ironic reversal of the five-century-old history of ethnographic exhibitions, while at the same time following the tradition of satiric spectacle in Latin America since the European conquest. Fusco has given the term “intercultural performance” to the practice of exhibiting indigenous peoples for aesthetic, scientific contemplation as well as entertainment (Fusco, 1995, p. 41).

The role of the “noble savage” in the Fusco/Gomez-Pena performances is intended to provoke and tease out the remnants of colonialism in post-colonial white European and American academics. Retelling the story from the lesser known perspective has become a way for contemporary artists to disrupt the multicultural complacency of stereotypes that result from static power relations in museums. Contemporary artists use allegory to isolate “what is culturally significant from the past and then interprets it in ways that give it relevance to the present” (Berger, 2001, p. 15).

As a result, the same intellectual milieu that now boast Neoprimitive body piercers, “nomad” thinkers, Anglo comrades, and New Age earth worshipers continue to evince a literal-minded attitude toward artists of color, demonstrating how racial difference is a determinant in one’s relation to notions of the “primitive” (Fusco, 1995, p. 6). It is this uncontested notion of the primitive that has political currency and remains intact in the spectator and consumer of ethnicity. Ethnographic spectacles reinforce difference by using the bodies and behavior of the other as evidence. For Fusco and Gomez-Pena, the confusion over the authenticity of the staged characters revealed that the audience still needed reassurance that a “true primitive” existed in order to define the Western self (Fusco, 1995).

Josh Kun (2000) places Gomez-Pena in the post-NAFTA Mexican art world of pioneers who found the public sphere fertile for their elaborate, politically charged, rock band-influenced performance art. Gomez-Pena continues to perform his challenging interactive installations, “these technological strategies of representation and activism” (Kun, 2000, p. 190), with Juan Ybarra, Violeta Luna, and Emiko R. Lewis. More recently Gomez-Pena entered the realm of what he describes as “object art” in a series of “PhotoPerformance Portfolios” (Gomez-Pena, 2005, p. 1), such as his Post Mexicans (2003), Ethno-Techno Evil Others and Identity Thefts (2004), and Post-Mexico en x-pana (2005). The Chica-Iranian Project: Orientation Gone Wrong in Aztlán is “a performance photo essay on the dangers of extreme profiling in the post 9/11 era” (p. 1).

Gomez-Pena infiltrated the first-world technology of cyberspace with “webbacks” and “cyber-immigrants” at a time when “there were no Chicanos in virtual space” (Gomez-Pena, 2000, p. 195). The egalitarian borderless and raceless zone—if one speaks English and owns a software-filled computer—becomes a battleground of transgression in the hands of Gomez-Pena.

Fred Wilson

Fred Wilson, like artists Pepon Osorio and Tim Rollins, began his work in the Bronx studio spaces of the Longwood Gallery. Growing up in New York City, Wilson spent much of his time in its museums, yet aware of the rift between himself and their rarified environments. Thus began his “deep and troubled love for them” (Helfand, 2003, p. 3). Now he has a paradoxical relationship with museums, at once a part and not a part of the tradition they embody. While Fusco and Gomez-Pena use their bodies to fabricate a counter-cultural history as it interfaces with the dominant culture, Wilson mines museum collections for their incongruities by presenting the politics and racism deeply embedded in museum conventions. This fascination led him to
find metaphors which showed how they inform, misinform, and consciously or unconsciously perpetuate prejudice (Berger, 2001). Wilson calls his rearrangements the "trompe l’oeil of curating" (Helfand, 2003, p. 1).

In the past the finds he’s pulled from the dusty closets of institutional archives, from Italy to Chicago to New York to Maryland, have included a Ku Klux Klan hood, which he playfully/shockingly placed inside a baby stroller from the same period, or “mammy” and “pappy” figurines gathered from the flea-market collectors’ circuit, which he smashed to pieces while being videotaped, only to later reconfigure the wreckage into a baseball bat. (Helfand, 2003, p. 1)

With these ironic juxtapositions, Wilson pokes fun at the rigid rules that render museum-goers to hushed tones and careful distances from the masterpieces, “wrested from the culture it was originally created in, all of which are ingrained on your psyche on that first grammar school field trip” (Helfand, 2003, p. 2). Wilson also suggests a complicity of the audience in maintaining the distance between the artifact and its culture, artifacts that can be looked at, talked about, and owned, but never understood (Gonzales, 2001). He makes visible the hidden language of display and the inequity of collecting with an exuberance that seduces us to join him in the irreverent joke. Seeking to uncover forgotten history, he literally endows artifacts with voices which are then “transformed into ‘speaking’ rather than mute witnesses of past events” (Gonzales, 2001, p. 29).

Wilson’s exhibition, Primitives: High and Low Art, at Metro Pictures Gallery in 1991, was a critique of the provocative and well-debated 1984 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, “Primitivism” in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern. The museum’s press release stated self-consciously that the exhibition was “the first ever to juxtapose modern and tribal objects in the light of informed art history” (McEvilley, 1998, p. 150, my italics). Without intending to, the exhibition illustrates “the parochial limitations of our world view and the almost autistic reflexivity of Western civilization’s modes of relating to the culturally Other” (McEvilley, 1998, p. 149). In Friendly Natives (1991), Wilson parodies the aloofness of ethnographic exhibitions of natural history museums by labeling a family of enclosed skeletons, “Somebody’s Grandmother,” “Somebody’s Sister,” reminding “the viewer of the usual role of the tribal body and culture as neutral commodities subjected to the dehumanizing gaze of the anthropologist or curator” (Berger, 2001, p. 14).

Implications for Art Education: Participatory Aesthetics and Community

Viewing art might serve a greater purpose in education than memorizing the body of knowledge attached to the “great art” that has been worked over by the long procession of curators, historians, and critics (Blandy & Congdon, 1991; Hamblen, 1990). Many educators still use Western aesthetic standards in the selection, presentation, and discussion of art works other than our own, following the same practices of the museum (Gude, 2004). Dipti Desai calls for a “politics of location and positionality” (p. 115) when representing, teaching, and speaking for or about cultures that are not our own. Elizabeth Garber (2004) calls for critical inquiry as necessary in uncovering institutional subtexts and underlying agendas that break the cycle of social injustice. She defines critical inquiry as Paulo Freire (1970) uses it — to not only reflect, but also to act on the world in order to transform it. Elizabeth Delacruz (1996) suggests that we are whitewashing art, which means making it clean and noncontroversial, before the public schools’ consumption. Our preoccupation with the elements and principles of design does a disservice to our students who are therefore denied access to subject matter that is more compelling.

This manner of dealing with art objects misleads students into thinking that masks, sculptures, weavings, pottery, or
the other objects being studied that are produced by diverse cultures embody the same aesthetic criteria, meanings, functions, and values because they look similar. Students learn very little about these artifacts or the people who made them. (Delacruz, p. 91)

More specifically, Karen Keifer-Boyd’s (1997) “politics of display” project for pre-service teachers exposes the politically charged beliefs of museums by using Wilson’s work as a model. What Wilson did in real space, Keifer-Boyd’s students were asked to do in virtual space. Each student “captured” one museum site and then manipulated it in order to “highlight, expose, question, and/or provide an alternative to existing values expressed through the collection and its display” (p. 46). Students changed the context and, therefore, the meanings of their virtual museums, calling attention to museum’s deeply held cultural and historical assumptions.

Reclaiming the Streets

In the past we have made much of the idea of art as a mirror (reflecting the times); we have had art as a hammer (social protest); we have had art as furniture (something to hang on the walls); and we have had art as a search for the self. There is another kind of art, which speaks to the power of connectedness and establishes bonds, art that calls us into relationship.

(Suzi Gablik, 2002, p. 114)

Activism in the arts is gaining momentum and offering new models for how art can look and be seen. The collective voice has been the source of social activism in the arts in the past century with such groups as the Situationists (1957-1972), Fluxus (1962-1978), and the contemporary Guerilla Girls. They found the street to be a viable place to begin.

The question of the equitable representation of heritage, culture, and identity might be solved by returning to the local communities where they arise. The intersection of land, history, culture, and politics in the community inform art from the point of view of participation rather than exclusion. Art as inseparable from its context takes on new meaning as narrative is written into place by its people. In a global world, “the local” has a quaint sound, an anachronistic concept whose relevance in education is questionable (Lippard, 1997). How can the concept of art in a social context find its way back into art schools and university art departments which, for the most part, have constructed firewalls that separate art education from public life?

The local streets have memory, history, and meaning for artists and nonartists alike. The community, as context for art making, might be a compelling place for students to find their own ways of representing personal and cultural history. Particularly for adolescents who are in the midst of constructing their own place in the world, place becomes endowed with literal and symbolic meaning. Artists who use the geography of place or possessions with cultural significance in their work, such as Fusco, Gomez-Pena, Wilson, and art collaboratives, are useful resources. Home, possessions, family, and memories take on new currency and become reasons to make art.

Classroom inquiries about objects. As a warm-up to making and looking at art, I ask undergraduates to bring in a significant object from home. Because ours is a sight-dominated culture, our thinking is oriented to linear, objective, and analytical systems. Therefore, I ask them to get to know the object by touching, smelling, and tasting. I ask them to remember the first time they encountered the object in great sensory detail. They write their sensory responses in single words which later become texts for their paintings. The object becomes the point of departure for art making grounded in the emblematic moments of their lives. With their senses activated, interaction between the students and artwork is qualitatively different. This interpenetration between self and world lays the foundation for aesthetic empathy. It’s the kind of relationship that takes the subject-object to a new mode of relatedness (Gablik, 2002).
Site specific and installation art as a basis of collective meaning making. To construct meaning within a group of participating viewers of art is to make new meaning together. A year of studio projects with my college students culminates in a site-specific installation. The purpose of transforming the site is to create a connection and understanding with the audience. A successful installation communicates the artist's meaning and transforms the space according to that meaning. I use Olivia Gude's (2004) strategy that asks students to inhabit the space, and focus on how it generates feelings in multiple sensory ways. Display, representation, interaction, and social discourse as content bring new possibilities to art and move it beyond its objecthood and towards experience, putting the power to measure the meaning and value of art squarely with the viewer as participant. In these examples, making, looking, critiquing, participating, blend together, and a fresh way of knowing the work of others emerges.

Concluding Insights

Students do not often come with the skills needed to locate themselves in the museum or in the history of art. Whether we are aware or not, the museum's aura of inevitability tells us who we are. Young people forming their identities are particularly susceptible to the unspoken messages of representation, and need our help in sorting out who they are and who the world has them believe they are. Developing identities through the use of the student's memory and community helps them to interpret works of art by constructing multiple cultural meanings.

A work of art is never fully completed, because it comes undone each time it is perceived by the viewer (Maxine Greene, personal communication, 1992). Students need to understand that art criticism, wall texts, catalogues, and docents do not have the final word. Each time I accompany students to a museum, I see art in a new way. Children and adolescents not indoctrinated into the world of refined taste bring honest immediacy to their response, unfiltered by cultural memory. We need to listen and learn from them.

Endnotes

1. As I write this article, however, Kara Walker is mounting an innovative show at this museum, honoring the Katrina Hurricane victims.

2. Positionality is based on feminist theory and practice in which embodiment, location, and partial perspective is inherent in seeing and viewing. This perspective replaces the modernist notion of the view from nowhere (Haraway, 1991).

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References


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