



Figure 1 "Hear Our Voice" by Liza Donovan

CURATORIAL ACTIVISM:

TURNING ACTIVISM INTO PRACTICE

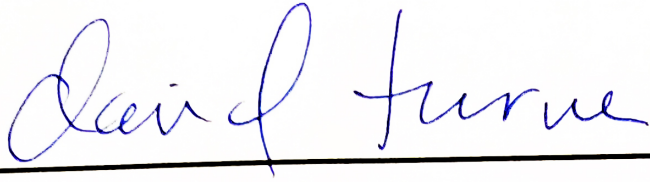
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MASTER'S PROJECT

Presented to the Arts and Administration Program of the University of Oregon in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Science in Arts Management.

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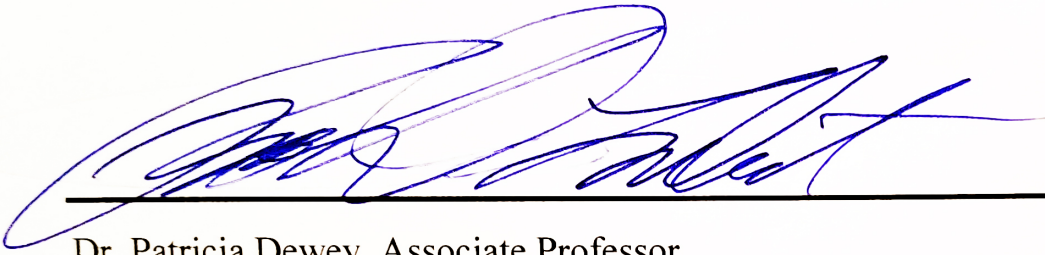


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Abstract

Museums are not perfect institutions-- they have a long history of marginalization of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality through “western” museological practices. With recent political upheaval, more people have been fighting for rights and recognition, and museums are put in the position of having to evaluate how they react to the changes around them. This research project is pursuing the concept of curatorial activism, as defined by Dr. Maura Reilly, in an attempt to find exhibits or displays that demonstrate museums’ increasing political activism in various sized institutions across the United States through detailed document analysis. Interviews with current museum professionals who have a history of working with marginalized groups will help to better understand institutional barriers, as well as how the role of the curator should be redefined. This research intends to provide a realistic overview of institutional change and provide a better idea of how any museum can incorporate these practices.

Keywords: Museum, curator, marginalized, activism, exhibits

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CONFERENCES

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

Background

Museums are generally highly regarded in today's society, most viewing them as trustworthy institutions (Marstine, 2006). However, the history of museums is, in part, based in the act of stealing from other cultures, removing objects from context, and then having "experts" from a Eurocentric perspective interpret and condense them for the general public. "The compromised version of art and history cultivated in our universities and practiced in our museums shortchanges the present by misrepresenting the past." This process allows for the museum to, in a sense, frame reality through their exhibits and create a hegemonic narrative (Marstine, 2006). While the evolution of museums has begun to move away from that, with new museology focused on diversification and inclusion, our standards for best practices are still acting as exceptions to the general standard of curatorial practice.

With the last year of recent political turbulence following the election, there have been many groups of people fighting to protect their rights and seeking proper representation. Museums are not immune to the pressure for change, and, while they cannot alter the past, they must choose how to react to change for the sake of their communities. "Curatorial Activism" is a term promoted by Dr. Maura Reilly to describe the practice of curating exhibitions for groups that have been traditionally marginalized by museological practices, such as women, artists of color, queer artists, and general non-Euro-Americans (Reilly, 2017). While Reilly focuses her thesis specifically on what she considers the art system, I will be applying her assumption of an

operating hegemonic narrative specifically onto museums to examine new methods of working with groups that have been traditionally marginalized in the history of these institutions.

The purpose of this research is to examine progressive acts of curatorial work that are emerging in response to political changes. Exhibits are examined to methods of being inclusive and working with marginalized groups. The intention is that these methods can be compiled and used as a reference for curators in institutions of all sizes as a realistic guide for change.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to find common factors in exhibits of curatorial activism to provide new methods collaboration with groups that have been marginalized by traditional curatorial practices. Traditional methods generally include relying on the authority of a single curator to create a narrative of a minority community through the use of museum collections, exhibit planning and design, and interpretive text without collaborating with any of the represented communities to provide input, insight, and cultural context. This project surveyed museum exhibits that focused on social and political activism as a main theme, and identified how museum professionals pursued nontraditional methods of representation and collaboration to create the exhibit. The outcome of this research will hopefully provide suggestions for methods of collaboration and shared authority for museum curators to incorporate into their practices.

Benefits of Study

This research has the potential be a beneficial stepping stone for other museums, particularly in the United States, seeking institutional reform in curation. First, it will provide museums of varying sizes the opportunity to review the methodology of curatorial activism, which will most likely align with what is considered best practices. Second, including acts of

activism into standard curatorial practice could help provide more inclusive practices during a time when representation is at the forefront of political debates. Third, this research will also hopefully provide a realistic view of the challenges involved while instilling change within an organization with traditional methods of working.

Chapter 2

Research Design

Theoretical Framework

For this research project, I will be analyzing both historical and contemporary museum processes. First, I will be reviewing the effects of the civil rights movements on the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States was politically charged with activists demanding rights and representation in a government that consistently denied the multicultural nature of the country. These demands forced a wave of backlash on institutions, such as the Smithsonian, to respond and start representing those they have traditionally excluded. Comparatively, we are now at a similar point on a larger scale in the United States, with the last few years giving rise to familiar activist groups marching, protesting, and fighting to have their voices heard not just on Washington D.C., but across the United States. Examined through postcolonial theory, this literature review will review changes instituted during this time that impacted museological practices as a direct response to the influence of activist groups. This will provide historical context for the struggles and methods that emerged during this time, and allow for some level of comparison with how contemporary museums and exhibits are pursuing change.

The second focus of this research will present a series of contemporary exhibits in the United States for case study analysis. The themes of exhibits include addressing issues of representation within the institution, some element of social and political activism in the exhibit, and then processes, the critiques available, and community response, (when available) is used to break down identifiers for how curatorial activism is functioning in an institution and what is

done in terms of collaborative representation. Using grounded theory for this section, commonalities and methodologies determined from the analysis will provide a breakdown in contemporary methodologies for a museum to pursue advocacy in a time of political tension.

This research will focus primarily on art and history museums, and will be examining a range of different sized institutions to provide a realistic observation of methods for the use of future museums.

Methodological paradigm

This research will be approached with a critical, postcolonial paradigm in order to analyze ethical ideals within museum practice and how they are put to practice. Grounded theory will help to gather information and find patterns within the data collected to help provide common methods for including acts of activism in contemporary museological practice. The perspective of the paper is viewed through a postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial theory is based on European colonialism, and how the effects of colonization have shaped culture and what needs to be done to rectify it (Marstine, 2006). The theory began to emerge in museum studies back in the 1980s, very integrated with the development of “new museology” (Krepps, 2011). The postcolonial critique of museums recognizes the underlying issues associated with the museum concept and traditional practices, highlighting Eurocentric biases, the continuation of a hegemonic narrative, and using the museum collections and space as a means to perpetuate the power structures associated with colonialism (Krepps, 2011). Using this theory acknowledges that a systematic bias exists that prevents museums from representing the multicultural narrative in America properly and within the context of the different culture groups.

Research Approach

Document analysis will be used to find exhibits of curatorial activism and historical context, through news articles, exhibit reviews and books. Case study analysis will be used to compare different exhibits across the United States to find common factors in how museums are approaching this change. The scope of this research will be limited to art and history museums in the United States. Using available text, this research plans to evaluate how museums can incorporate methods of curatorial activism into standard curatorial practice.

Research Site Selection. The main criteria for featuring a museum or exhibit for review are that it must be an art or history museum in the United States, and the exhibit must have happened within the last 5 years. This will help guarantee that the exhibits are most likely to be responding to the recent sociopolitical movements, and that the museums are reacting in response to the unique and diverse populations that are in the United States. Museums and exhibitions that will be reviewed will depend on the text available.

Document Analysis. Exhibit reviews and analysis will be analyzed to identify patterns of methods. Documents specific to the museum will be used when available to help indicate the size of the institution, available funding, and demographics of community/general audience.

Research Question(s)

1. How can museums better incorporate acts of activism into standard curatorial practices?
 - a. How do acts of curatorial activism address issues of representation?
 - b. How do acts of curatorial activism change the role and responsibilities of the curator?
 - c. How do these changes function internally within a museum?

Definitions

1. *Curatorial Activism*: the practice of curating exhibitions for groups that have been traditionally marginalized by museological practices, such as women, artists of color, queer artists, and general non-Euro-Americans (Reilly, 2017).
2. *Museology*: what is traditionally known as museum studies, looking at the study of museums, curation, collections, programming and other associated museum work (Marstine, 2008).
3. *Marginalized*: Anyone who is not of the dominant Euro-American population who has been treated as less significant by museum professionals and practices in terms of representation and recognition.
4. *The Other*: in terms of museum work, it is the anyone that is not part of the traditional narrative, such as women, non-white and LGBTQ (Reilly, 2017).
5. *New Museology*: an ideological and methodological shift in museum practices consisting of the pursuit of critical reflection that examines unsettling histories with respect and inclusion to all parties, transparent decision-making, a shared power structure, decolonization and giving control of representation to those whose heritage is being represented (Marstine, 2008).

Research Bias

As a researcher, I bring my own set of biases to the data collection and interpretation. I approach the subject matter with a background in art and museum studies, and a strong interest in diverse and ethical representations in public institutions. My interpretation of best practices in relation to museum representation may be different from another researcher, but is better understood knowing my perspective on this analysis. Ideally, this research would be approached

with the idea that all institutions are different, and that no blanket solution to the issue of representation is being presented, but rather suggestions and background knowledge.

Delimitations

For the purpose of this study, only art and history museums have been examined. Both types of museums deal directly with issues of representation from minority groups and have a better opportunity to provide examples of radical change and best practices. Furthermore, only museums in the United States with exhibits from the last 5 years will be examined to provide a better understanding of the U.S.'s unique populations and to work within the recent timeline of recent political influences.

Limitations

Curatorial Activism is not a common term in museum literature and it is not something that many curators identify as. Therefore, case studies may be limited in availability, lack detailed information on methods, and lack a diverse range of minority groups being represented in exhibits. It is the intention of the researcher to pursue all of these details to the best possible degree, but it is important to recognize that that the search may fall short in the act of researching. This study will also be restricted by the absence of on-site observations, and will have to rely on second hand perspective through document analysis.

Chapter 3:

Social Activism and Museums

Literature Review

The years following World War II highlighted the tensions of minority populations in nations whose history have been subjected to colonization, particularly from European countries (Simpson, 2001). This trend was prominent in the United States where groups of people that had been traditionally marginalized as a result of their differences in ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, and many others were beginning to vocalize the need for rights and representation (Simpson, 2001). Two of the most influential movements during this time, though certainly not the only or most significant, were black civil rights movements and the Native American cultural reclamation (Simpson, 2001). The 1960s and 1970s was a time of very intense political awakening in the pursuit to include multiculturalism in the American narrative.

Museums were not immune from this criticism, often coming under fire for the way that “minority” cultures were being represented in exhibitions that were created by a predominately white, male staff (Simpson, 2001). This created even more tension when the groups being represented had no power to change the misconceptions and stereotypes being promoted or excluded from the dominant white culture. In this chapter, we will be looking closely at how some of the influential movements during this time affected institutions in the line of fire.

History Museums: The Smithsonian

With the level of activity dramatically increasing in and around Washington D.C., institutions such as the Smithsonian were under particular scrutiny for their lack of

representation in the historical narrative presented in their exhibits. The Smithsonian at this time was a well-known, authoritative institution, but it was also a public, government funded museum, being a recipient of taxpayer income (Message, 2014). This led to even more criticism for the lack of inclusive collecting processes. During this time span of roughly 10-15 years, the Smithsonian had to figure how to address these issues in an a very antiquated system. Three elements that emerged during this time have carried forward to the bare significance in the evaluation of new museology: exhibit function, cause based collections, and community based museums.

Exhibit Function. Just prior to the political onslaught of the 1960s and 1970s, the Museum of History and Technology was shaping up to try an address the long withstanding issues that many had felt with museums. Frank Taylor was overseeing the development of the new museum, and used it as an opportunity to reshape the museum intent. Expanding upon ideas of the ideals of John Cotton Dana, Taylor thought that “museums should have a social remit and responsibility beyond pure research, and be more alert to public outreach and education (Message, 2014, pg. 60).”

In turn, this sparked an internal debate among the museum world of public edification versus research excellence--who did the museum really exist for? The concept of public outreach and education as the focus of the museum created new needs to be met-- communications strategies with the general public needed to be improved, reaching beyond the isolation of pure research to serve their communities. This included improved communication technologies and an element of community collaboration. At the time, this was not a universally accepted idea, and Taylor was met with resistance at all stages of development.

One of the reasons this particular change in development was important was because this attempted to view the exhibit function as a way to reach the general public in a more relatable way, and place more value in communications and programming. As a museum that would eventually attempt exhibits about civil rights, the relationship between the people and their government, and the history of the American people in general it would open up the idea of what a museum must do to be relevant to the people it tries to serve.

Cause-based collecting. When the time came for the museum to create an exhibit covering the topic of civil rights, the largest problem was the long history of neglecting African American history, causes, and general culture. There were no objects in the Smithsonian collection that they could use to create the exhibit (Message, 2014). This theme--the general lack of materials and objects-- continued throughout this time period.

The practice of gathering materials for specific cause-based exhibits was not exactly foreign (Message, 2014). However, in the years prior to the 1975 opening of *We the People*, there was no standard policy for collecting contemporary materials--and one did not exist even a decade after (Message, 2014). Curators would work covertly, often developing their own systems of collecting to bypass the process of accessioning materials (Message, 2014). It also created a bit of a struggle for multiple institutions to be attempting to gather the same material (though there were not the same amount of institutions as there are now), and address contemporary issues in the 20th century when they lacked the distance to create a reflective narrative (Message, 2014). It has been argued the reason behind the museum's inability to properly represent and balance political exhibits was the incompatible nature of traditional museological practices and a failure to collect contemporary objects in previous decades (Message, 2014).

Moving forward, cause-based collecting had become more mainstream in museum practice, but the attempt to create exhibits that respond to current events was still a struggle. Finding contemporary protest materials would often involve developing relationships with activists, which was not always a guarantee. Many activist organizations were resistant to work with a government institution (the Smithsonian, in this case) (Message, 2014). Along with how to obtain the material, it was also an issue of what *kind* of controversial material the museum was accepting. A new debate emerged from this process, one that would eventually contribute to the “history wars” of the 1980s and 1990s, was whether or not the national museum was “simply documenting part of the political culture, or whether it was bestowing historical credibility” (Message, 2014, pg 83) on objects that would be viewed as highly controversial and contradictory of the rise in American nationalism (Message, 2014). Regardless, this process allowed the museum to create better contrast between historical events and contemporary issues to make relevant content for their constituents, as well establish relationships outside the walls of the museum.

Community Museum Movement. Established in 1967 in a predominately African American Community, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (now the Anacostia Community Museum) was established with the intent for community building and addressing issues of social prevalence that were not traditional topics that a typical museum would address (Simpson, 2001). This was a huge first step not only breaking the traditional museum structure, but it helped pioneer the stage for the “solidification of the metanarrative of black history” (Autry, 2013, pg. 70). The development of the community based museum helped establish relationships between higher institutions (the Smithsonian was the initiator of Anacostia) and the communities they existed in by focusing on public engagement and community building. By creating the

Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, it signaled the “grassroots appropriation and reinvention of museums as vehicles to awaken and deepen collective black consciousness and self-pride” (Autry, 2013, pg. 70).

The tribal museum movement acted as a larger scale version of this with a different community, and both share similar values associated with community based museums. Demonstrations for Native American rights was not just restricted to D.C. and the National Mall - there was a need for activists to advocate for change for the sake of their communities. While Native Americans during this time were not fighting for rights in the same capacity as other protest groups, but they were looking to claim their sovereignty (Message, 2014). They were looking to ensure not just access to resources that had previously been available to their people prior to colonization (like fishing rights, minerals, and land resources), but also to improve basic necessities, such as education and housing (Message, 2014). During the 1970s, the Smithsonian’s Office of Museum Programs stepped in to develop the Native American Training Program (NATP) that formed out of unique circumstances of tribal activism, curatorial advocacy, and the federal obligations associated with the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act in 1975 (Message, 2014).

Tribal museums were seen as a way to revitalize Native American communities. They would create jobs, stimulate tribal economies, and improve their relationships with the national growing tourism (Message, 2014). They also gained considerable favor when considering the community building capacity that their methods would encompass - both with their local community, and the larger national array of different museums and communities to support resource sharing and promote a new sense of identity (Message, 2014). These sites also created a connection between politics, culture and development that provided representations of “change,

conflict and hope” (Message, 2014, p. 139). These ideals helped provide a platform for the community-based museums we recognize today, which provide a broader range of activities than the traditional European model (Simpson, 2001). Integrating activities, community involvement, and new interpretation of collections is something that many institutions had been attempting to lead up to during this time, but could not fully manifest.

However, as with most things having to do with the relationships between the government and the Native American populations, there were many issues in how this attempted partnership was pursued. The American Indian Training Program (AITP) collaboration with the Smithsonian was a process that occurred largely off site, and was a very small-scale attempt to provide skills and training to run a museum. This distance between the tribal communities seeking opportunities and those providing them removed the community voice in how training was run and limited the number of possible participants (Message, 2014). Not to mention, as the 1970s progressed, the political atmosphere continued to shift and counter movements began to develop that were against the “special treatment” of Native Americans. This attitude eventually came to culmination a decade later when federal funding (and priorities) shifted, making many of these museums a drain on tribal resources. Thus, most of these community, cultural institutions did not meet new standards of practice.

Art Galleries and Museums: New York

While history was in the process of being changed over in the political hot spot that D.C. had become, much of the art scene still clung to the creative network of New York. This does not mean that main institutions were immune to protest and critique. Art museums through the early 1960s existed in a world defined by the hierarchal gates of white privilege and prestige, “visited by largely traditional audiences, and promulgating an ideal of self-restraint in their display of art,

history, science, and culture” (Harris, 1999, p. 38). As the sociopolitical nature of the era created harsh critique, it was apparent that the practices and policies associated with art museums reflected the hegemonic, dominant population that made them exclusionary in a time where multiculturalism was reaching heightened awareness (Harris, 1999).

Some of the largest art institutions in New York were facing demonstrations and protests from groups that emerged from the civil rights movement. In 1968, the Whitney Museum faced a campaign from the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition that criticized the lack of African American works purchased, artists on display, the bias and membership of the committees in charge of selecting works for purchase, and, of course, the lack of a diverse staff (Simpson, 2001). The following year, the Museum of Modern Art was targeted by a group called the Art Workers’ Coalition comprised of artists, writers, film-makers and other creatives (Simpson, 2001). They created a list of demands to better serve the African American and Puerto Rican communities, such as an artist committee to arrange for exhibits and a gallery dedicated to African American artists (Simpson, 2001). In the midst of these protests, they also vandalized the galleries with spilled cans of blood (Simpson, 2001).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art showcased the exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* (1969) that created a widely negative reaction amongst demonstrators. While the museum exhibited a number of works about Harlem, a predominately African American neighborhood, none of the pieces exhibited were actually from African American artists (Simpson, 2001). In an attempt to be at the forefront of this contemporary wave, the museum proclaimed its success to address controversial material prior to the review of the demonstrators (Harris, 1999). *Harlem on My Mind* sparked a series of angry debates about “distortion, responsibility, demagoguery, plagiarism, exploitation, and pandering” (Harris, 1999, p. 44) that eventually cultivated a picket

fence at a black-tie event, as well as some vandalization of artwork and museum walls (Simpson, 2001).

Some of these protests led to tangible progress, such as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition's meaningful discussions with the Whitney Museum about increasing representation (Simpson, 2001), or how this time period allowed for a greater expansion of what was displayed as art, including showcasing graffiti and kitsch work (Harris, 1999). However, it seems like the results of this time did not have quite the same effect on art institutions as it did on history museums, and notable progress is limited.

Conclusion

The political upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s very heavily influenced the changes made in museums, with national museums like the Smithsonian attempting to make changes as they sociopolitical climate demanded it--particularly in regard to the African American and Native American civil rights movements. During this time, concepts of exhibit function, cause-based collecting, and the community museum began to take form and become mainstream through the development of exhibits addressing contemporary issues--though it was still not a perfect system. Despite making fundamental changes when looking at how to best present American history, art museums were still struggling with how to address the pillars of privilege that had created their lack of representation of marginalized communities, which led to more violent backlash. It is more than likely the slow changes that art museums have made has led to greater scrutiny in current times, which is why I will be taking a closer look at how art museums have attempted to address the new, and familiar, sociopolitical challenges of recent years in the next chapter.

Chapter 4:

Case Studies and Analysis

Fast forward to 2017, and we are at a similar point in museum history. Representation is still intertwined with groups of people who, despite the civil rights movements, are still underrepresented and fighting for recognition in this whirlwind change of federal administration. The reformation that social activism brought museums in the 60s and 70s is still instilled in museum practice. Cause-based collections has now become mainstream, with museums such as the New York Historical Society and the National Museum of American History collecting objects from current events, such as the Women's March that happened across the country on January 21, 2017 (Bowley, 2017). The ideology behind community museums follows much of what we consider to be new museology: decolonizing, inclusive, and giving those represented control of how to present their heritage (Marstine, 2006).

We have also seen attempts for museums to take on more social responsibility to push beyond the barrier of institutional neutrality that can be associated with museums. Movements such as the Portland Art Museum's *Museums are Not Neutral* campaign use shirts as a way to raise money for important causes both in and outside their community, such as raising funds for *United for Puerto Rico* after the recent devastation from hurricanes (Murawski, 2017). New groups such as the Museum of Impact create pop up exhibitions that focus on activating museum spaces and provides platforms to express the sociopolitical movements through elements of art, presentation, and activism (Museum of Impact, 2017). Museums have also put forth a significantly larger effort to develop a relationship with their audience to understand what their visitors experience (Marstine, 2006). In the roots of Taylor's concept of exhibit

function that emerged during the development of the Museum of History and Technology, we now have better communication strategies in museums to pursue a more educational role for the general public, even going so far as to avoid “museum speak” to break down the barriers between the visitor and the information received from wall texts, labels, and exhibits (Marstine, 2006).

However, while the 1960s and 1970s was a heavy critique of the lack of multiculturalism represented in the American history narrative, many of the museums under fire right now are art museums. This is possibly because of the role that art has taken in our contemporary society and how vast the definition has become. Perhaps the perception shift of what art is and how it should be affecting our country has shifted since the Culture Wars of the late 80s and early 90s. Regardless, art museums are still struggling with a lack of diverse representation in their collections and on their walls.

The museums that faced vandalism and protest in the civil rights era have not truly learned from their experiences. In 2015, the Whitney Museum of American Art christened its new location with the exhibit *America Is Hard to See*, showcasing works in its permanent collection and spanning a period from the 20th century to the present. The artists represented in this showcase averaged 69% male and 77% white (Reilly, Art News, 2017). Even more abysmal is that less than 4% of the artists represented in the Museum of Modern Art’s section for modern art are women or non-white (Reilly, Art News, 2017). Even by the act of including some minority artists in shows can turn into an act of tokenism, such as the Whitney Biennial in 2014 where a collective of predominantly black and queer artists, HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINAFRICAN?, withdrew their works out of protest for the lack of representation of African-American and women artists in the show (Gbadegesin, 2016). Even

the act of including a minority in a traditionally white institutional space does not “translate into substantive representation” (Gbadegesin, 2016). This then presents the question of: what is happening now to address this?

Curatorial Activism

When we hear the word “activism” it is easy to assume there are picket lines and protesters outside the doors. However, curatorial activism is not quite what it sounds like. The term is promoted by Dr. Maura Reilly (Art News, 2017):

“Curatorial Activism” is a term I use to designate the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art. It is a practice that commits itself to counter-hegemonic initiatives that give voice to those who have been historically silenced or omitted altogether—and, as such, focuses almost exclusively on work produced by women, artists of color, non-Euro-Americans, and/or queer artists. (para. 1).

While Reilly directs her theory and studies towards what she specifically acknowledges as the “art worlds,” I would like to expand this to include the broader spectrum of museum practices. As has been reviewed in previous sections, museums suffer from a lack of representation in their collections, exhibits, and often their staff. Many of the groups that have been fighting to be included in the American narrative have also been traditionally marginalized from museum representation. In the world of these institutions, many have not yet fully incorporated diverse or Other voices into their larger narrative (Reilly, 2018). Much of how the art world (such as art museums and art galleries) responds is to separate these Others into their own exhibitions, such

as Latin American Art or Women Artists, but not necessarily actively include them in the larger museum planning (Reilly, 2018).

While the term activism here might be used to highlight the fact that advocacy for marginalized groups is *not* standard practice, Reilly has provided a concept for which to locate not only individuals working on issues related to representation, but also *how* these issues are being pursued. In this section, we will be looking at exhibits that pursued a more collaborative route to representation in museums both in response to the current political climate, as well as out of responsiveness for community needs.

Case Studies

Case Study #1: *Object Stories*

Background. The Portland Art Museum is a moderately small institution compared to the previously mentioned counterparts, but it has been moving forward with projects that have pushed against institutional neutrality and attempt to embody the ideals of a community museum. One project that they work on is *Object Stories*, which brings the community in to interpret their collections in the galleries (Bench, 2014). This internal process for the creation and implementation for *Object Stories* has created a new, meaningful dynamic between museum departments, and has also allowed for the museum to establish community partnerships with other organizations (Bench, 2014). This is a program that aims to be inclusive of “the voices, stories, memories, and experiences” of the museum’s visitors and their community (Bench, 2014). It is with this project that the Portland Art Museum connected their extensive Native American collection with the source community of the objects, and allowed their local community to gain a better understanding of the context behind them.

Portland has the ninth largest Native American population in the United States, with a diverse number of tribes that are not being properly represented and severely underserved (Bench, 2014). While there are Native American service organizations that attempt to create a space for Native Americans and their youth to reconnect with each other through cultural activities, there is also a huge disconnect between Native American communities and many of the museums that house their cultural objects (Bench, 2014). With this in mind, the Portland Art Museum sought to forge a connection between the Native American community, their experiences, and their collections.

Partnering with the NAYA Family Center's Early College Academy, they worked on a new *Object Stories* exhibit where students choose an object from the museum's Native American collection, research the piece, and then record their personal narrative about the piece in question (Bench, 2014). More than two months later, the *Object Stories* gallery was exhibiting all of the selected pieces alongside the student's stories. This was a collaborative effort between the education staff and the curator for the Native American collections to bring Native American youth into the inner workings of the museum and create context for objects that were very closely related to their own heritage.

This project ended up growing even further, when the project expanded to the Alaska Native collection the Portland Art Museum has. The education and curatorial staff that worked with the aforementioned *Object Stories* installation also collaborated with an Alaskan artist and photographer to record a series with native Yup'ik elders, artists and youth (Murawski, 2014). These interviews included reflection of objects of personal significance as well as selected Yup'ik objects from the Portland Art Museum's collection. All of these stories were then

formatted with the *Object Stories* iPad app and shared in the museum galleries featuring an iPad listening station adjacent to their related objects (Murawski, 2014).

Analysis. Using the community format of *Object Stories* allowed the Native American community to find a way to represent their voice and provide cultural context to objects. This project broke traditional museum methodology by:

- Pushing the boundaries from monovocal (the institutional, hierarchical, “expert” voice) to a more polyvocal (multiple voices) institution by including community context and interpretation in the representation of objects (Bench, 2014).
- Connecting objects with their source communities and allowing them to speak personally about their culture, rather than it coming straight from the institution, and having that contributing to their representation in the museum
- Connecting Native American youth with objects of their culture to provide a stronger sense of identity rather than creating a sense of Other.
- The Native American art curator working on these projects was an actual Native American and a woman
- It was a project that was representative of the community that the museum existed in, and it was created out of a need that was in that community.

Undoubtedly, there were probably a number of institutional barriers, and took time to establish and create the community connections necessary to create such a project. *Object Stories* is a great example of how to begin to break down the barriers in place to create a more community oriented museum that uses polyvocality to allow communities to have a part in how they are represented.

Case Study #2: *Mi Tierra: Contemporary Artists Explore Place.*

Background. Immigration has always been a long withstanding issue in the United States, but with all the talk about building walls and travel bans, the issue has become one of the most significant debates in the United States today. In a timely fashion, the Denver Art Museum brought us *Mi Tierra: Contemporary Artists Explore Place* in February through October of 2017. Featuring a vast array of mediums, the show consisted of thirteen Latin American artists commenting on a sense of identity, place, social justice, history, and the concept of home through site specific installations in the museum (Smith, 2017). While not intentionally attempting to make a political critique, it became glaringly obvious that the show was going to take on a much different tone upon its opening.

Analysis. If we look closely at how this exhibit was pursued, we can begin to pinpoint elements that can make this an act of curatorial activism:

- The exhibit features artists that are Latin American
- By allowing the artists to create site specific installations, it breaks down a barrier of framing, or creating a specific narrative through collections, by allowing the artist to have more control over how their work is displayed in the space.
- The work displayed covers difficult and controversial knowledge coming from the perspective of those whose culture it is relevant to.
- The artists were selected not solely by the curator, but by an advisory panel of 13 professionals of Latin American heritage who are working in the arts, seeking to make the show representative of Latin American heritage.

- Some of the artists in the show collaborated directly with Denver’s immigrant population, such as Daisy Quezada using porcelain castings of clothing that was worn by recent immigrants during and after border crossings (Weathers, 2017).
- The artists chosen were younger, lesser known artists who came from the region (Pantuyeva, 2018).

The method of creating exhibits that address sociopolitical issues and the parties involved is becoming increasingly important when it comes to pursuing museum advocacy with minority groups, and establishing a new power dynamic that allows the population being represented to have some more control. This does not have the same level of polyvocality as *Object Voices*, but it does provide a more mainstream example of how curators can begin to break down traditional power structures in place. Despite a considerable amount of praise, there were still some elements of the exhibit that were lacking. Again, while not originally intending to purposefully address issues of immigration related to the sociopolitical upheaval from the election, it did time perfectly with the uprising of the new wave protest movements. In this sense, it came across as timid in addressing the topic of immigration--tiptoeing around it without ever actually taking a stance. This tepid response translates over to the title itself, which is too vague considering the curator and museum’s intent for the show to focus on Latin American artists. Not to mention, most of the press revolving around the exhibit could use a consistent identifier for the artists represented. Hispanic, Latino, and Mexican-American are all different identifiers for different populations. These are not universal terms, and the fact that this was not clearly established is potentially very offensive to the artists and how they choose to be represented—though not all of that is on the museum, a large part of that is in communications and marketing.

Case Study #3: *Black Pulp!/Woke*

Background. *Black Pulp!* is a traveling exhibit that showcases the evolving perspectives of Black identity in American culture. Rare historical printed media, shown alongside contemporary works of art, create a timeline from about 1912 to 2016 (University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, 2017). The exhibition is curated by William Villalongo and Mark Thomas Gibson and features individuals that reshaped their concept of Black identity, with the intent to “take the tragic and painful points of history, from Jim Crow to World War II, and challenge them through biting humor, satire, and wit” (University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, 2017). *Woke!* brings together recent artwork created by the curators from the last few years. This time period highlights the atrocities done of police violence targeted at Black populations and the awareness of the general public due to news and social media platforms, along with the “cultural currents of the Black Lives Matter movement” that informed their contemporary narratives in their own creations and practice (University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, 2017).

Analysis. A breakdown of this exhibit highlights the pursuit of curatorial activism:

- By exhibiting both shows at the same time with the intent to view them in succession, it establishes a timeline to provide further context to the evolving of the current sociopolitical tensions.
- *Black Pulp!* is providing a re-interpretation of historic print materials by providing cultural context.
- *Black Pulp!* and *Woke!* are both directly addressing sociopolitical issues associated with the Black Lives Matter movement, police brutality, and appropriation of culture.
- Both shows feature contemporary artists that are people of color.

- Both shows were curated by two people of color who are culturally and socially relevant to the communities being represented.
- Both shows examined difficult realities of American history and culture.

Black Pulp!/Woke! is a great example of a museum exhibit that is directly confronting a political issue in a relevant way. However, it is worth noting that the University of South Florida's Contemporary Art Museum is an academic museum. An academic museum, often called a teaching museum, is a university museum that tailors their collections and exhibits to be relevant to incoming classes, teachers, and student researchers (Waxman, 2016). While academic museums are still generally open to the public, their visitor demographics and their funding sources are not always the same, which leaves more room to take risks and address controversial topics for the sake of education (Waxman, 2016). For this reason, the act of addressing a controversial or difficult topic for this museum might not have the same repercussions as other, non-academic museums. Regardless, the dual showing of *Black Pulp!/Woke!* was an impactful combination and illuminating to the journey and current happenings of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Findings

Sociopolitical topics

Each exhibit featured a topic that was relevant to the current sociopolitical climate in the United States, though each one varied on the local to national spectrum. *Object Stories* focused more on a local issue, which is not obviously “political” but dealt with an issue in Native American community that is due to a strained relationship with local and national governments. They sought to address a need in their community. *Mi Tierra*'s thinly veiled coverage of immigration applies both to a nationally recognized issue, but also to a local one-- Colorado has

a growing community of immigrants, making nearly 1 in 10 residents an immigrant, with the top country for immigrants in the state was Mexico (American Immigration Council, 2017).

Meanwhile, *Black Pulp!/Woke!* was directly addressing a nationwide political movement with Black Lives Matter, cultural appropriation, and police brutality.

Shared Authority

Each exhibit featured some level of collaboration with source communities. *Object Stories* brought Native American youth into the museum to work directly with the collections, which is generally not normal practice. Then both the Native American youth, and the Alaskan Native elders, were able to contribute their interpretations and cultural context directly to the objects on display and have it be part of the exhibit. *Black Pulp!/Woke!* had both curators worked directly with collections to reinterpret them and create a new narrative, and then the USFCAM brought both curators in to showcase their own work for further commentary. *Mi Tierra* did not come from museum collections, however, it was a collaborative effort to bring 13 artists in and create on-site installations. By having the artist create the space rather than the just the curator, it allowed the artist to have more control over the narrative being told.

By giving the communities being represented more control over how they are represented in a museum, it begins to breakdown the traditional power structures of the museum. This, in turn, creates a more collaborative process where the curators involved are bringing in community members to directly contribute to the process and removes the top-down approach to information being shared in exhibits. The key elements in shared authority is that collaboration is part of the creation, curation, and narrative in the exhibit, and that the perspectives shared are from those being represented. All of these exhibits attempted to pursue this.

Representation.

As curatorial activism focuses on those populations that have been traditionally excluded from the master narrative, it is worth noting that all three exhibits were working with minority communities. *Mi Tierra* and *Black Pulp!/Woke!* directly featured contemporary artists of color and focused on their perspective on current state of affairs. *Object Stories* did not, at least in the available text, work with any contemporary Native American artists, but did work directly with Native American and Alaskan Native populations so they may have their voices heard and be part of the exhibit about their culture.

Black Pulp!/Woke! and *Object Stories* also had curators that were people of color that were relevant to the represented populations. While *Mi Tierra* did not have a Latin American curator, the current curator did develop an advisory board of Latin American art professionals to choose the 13 artists to be featured.

Summary

Social activism of the past did not act out in vain upon our museums. There has been a definite shift in priorities, and incorporating many of the methods that began to take shape during the civil rights movements as museums struggled to adapt to their new needs. However, there is still work to be done, especially when diverse representation continues to be a struggle for art museums across the country. As this frustration has led to a new form of advocacy, what Dr. Maura Reilly refers to as curatorial activism, in this highly political time, many art institutions are still stuck in the antiquated hegemonic narrative that denies women and people of color the right to be included. However, museum professionals, even in the pursuit of correcting these issues, should always be mindful that “progress is not simply about numbers,

but understanding this work, in the context of art history and museum practice, is essential”
(Kennedy, 2015).

Chapter 5:

Conclusion

As museum professionals, and the country as a whole, continues to navigate how to perceive and interpret the next few years of what may presumably continue to be a new wave of sociopolitical activity, there needs to be a commitment to following through with pursuit of change. Reilly's work suggests that curators take heed of the activists from the 1970s to present, and work to ensure that those that fought for the representation of non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual voices will not be in vain. There is no excuse not to include Other representation in any museum exhibit, collection, staff or board. Those that are perpetuating discrimination in any of these should be held accountable. Discriminatory practices are not a thing of the past, they persist today in any museum--large and small.

While I definitely agree that accountability needs to be had at all levels of the museum, I would also encourage a stronger pursuit of the museum as a community organization. The development towards being more inclusive of local communities has already contributed to changes in museum organization and function (Gray, 2015). The role that a museum plays within that community will require different forms of technical expertise and relationship building between the two, but this does not diminish the knowledge of the museum professionals (Gray, 2015). As Clive Gray (2015) states:

These newer community based forms of museum arrangement can be created through either the active encouragement of museum staff--usually through forms of curatorial activism-- or through bottom-up demand for control of how local communities are to be represented within the confines of the museum exhibition, with this having an added

impact on professional development amongst museum staff through the introduction of new skills and practices. (p. 127).

Museums have the potential to give rise to community development and empowerment, taking on a role where it is not directly political but provides the platform to do so. It is within this context that I make the next suggestions that are not necessarily new ideas, but need to be reiterated to fit the different types and sizes of institutions in the United States.

Know your community. First, every museum should have in depth knowledge of who is in their community and the history associated with them. Acting as outsiders that are telling the community around them what they should be learning or doing will just not work. Looking to the wisdom of John Cotton Dana, the founder of the American Association of Museums, a museum should learn what the community needs and then fit the museum to act upon those needs (Simpson, 2001). If we look at the *Object Stories* project, the Portland Art Museum knew that they were in a city that had a high Native American population and that this population was massively underserved. So they reached out to create this opportunity and included them in the process. Other aspects of knowing your community can include knowing more about the local demographics, understanding the historical and societal issues that have affected your community, and what you can provide them with your museum.

Be a part of that community. Second, every museum needs community partners. This includes local businesses that can act as sponsors for programming or events, but it also means developing relationships with the actual people in your community. Looking again to the *Mi Tierra* exhibit, they reached out into the community to find Latin American professionals in the art field to seek advice about who to feature and how to pursue it. It is important to reach beyond the walls of the museum and be inclusive not just in representation in exhibits, but also in

breaking down traditional power structures to have the community be a part of the process. This will look different for every relationship that is built with the museum, and relationship will have to be maintained--potentially requiring a different set of skills for the curator, manager, or any of the professionals involved.

Be an advocate. The root of what curatorial activism has brought us is the act of using advocacy to break the historical “normal.” However, advocacy should not just be about making statements during politically charged times. It should *always* be ingrained in the museum policy and methodology. The process of decolonizing the museum means recognizing and revealing the Eurocentric ideology and biases built within the museum concept and practice, and then making the effort and plans necessary to represent different voices and multiple perspectives within the museum (Kreps, 2011). This could be a difficult concept to grasp, but a great example to refer to is how *Black Pulp!/Woke!* broke down the biases within the historical representation of Black lives and imagery by contrasting them with contemporary Black artists in a show that was curated by Black artists as well.

Within each museum, there should be a constant survey of whose history is being displayed, whose perspective is voiced, and whether the population being represented is true to the population you exist in. Inclusive programming should exist to serve the communities that need it. While the people working in museums today may not be responsible for any historical foul play, it is up to the current players to learn from the past and move forward with a stronger sense of ethics and multiculturalism.

Suggestions for Further Research

In conclusion, a greater study is needed. Most of the data available is for very large, mainstream institutions, which is an extremely small number if you think about the 35,000

institutions labeled as “museum,” of which only 12% specifically identify as art or history museums (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2015). Each museum has its own responsibility to know the community they are in and advocate for them, which leads to a huge gap in available information because not enough individuals and states are investing the time and energy to know what these institutions, both large and small, are doing in each state. State-wide surveys of art and history museums, including local and smaller institutions, should take place so that each state can gain a better understanding of how their local and regional communities are being represented. Another area of focus for future research is how internal policy for these museums restricts or pursues advocacy for various identity related groups to better understand the barriers that occur internally. While there are undoubtedly numerous topics to be explored through further research, these were some common limitations found in the course of this particular study.

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