

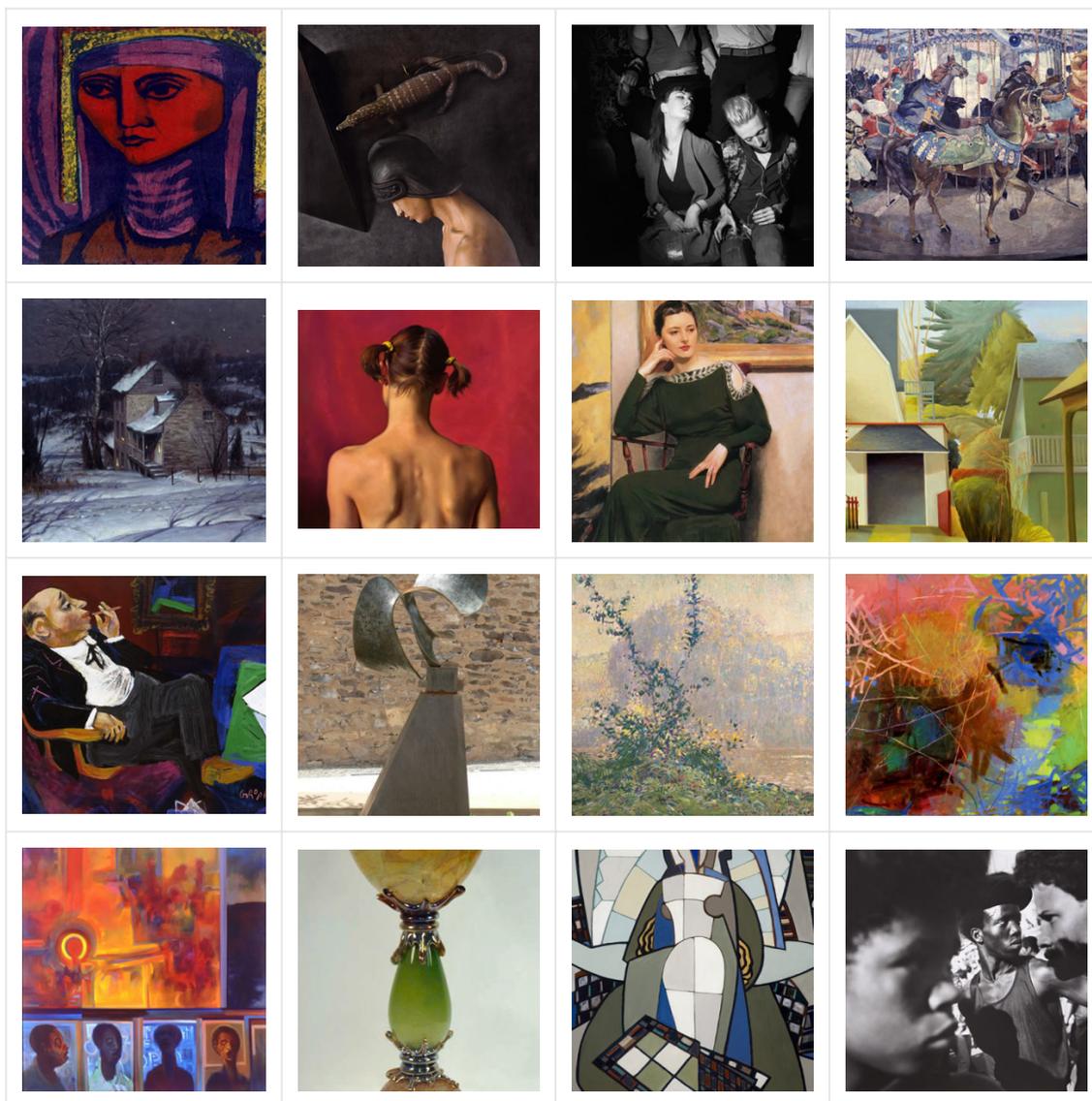
ISSUE NO. 7

Curating with a Click: The Art That Participatory Media Leaves Behind

Bonnie Ruberg

Abstract: At a moment when technological participation seems to promise to bring innovation and democratic access to the contemporary museum, the results from one community-curated exhibit suggest that conservative cultural biases continue to shape the American public's taste in art. In 2013, the Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania collected more than 10,000 online votes for their People's Choice exhibit. Voters were invited to choose their 'top' three artworks from among 125, and the twenty-five artworks that received the most votes were then displayed, while those that didn't make the cut stayed tucked away behind closed doors. Rather than promoting diversity by making curatorial practices interactive and accessible however, the People's Choice voting process rendered difference invisible. The result was an exhibit that appealed to the largest number of voters, yet excluded artwork that challenged dominant norms of gendered or racial privilege. Voters consistently chose realistic paintings of landscapes and white female subjects over abstract works, pieces by women, and images of people of color. The People's Choice exhibit serves as a valuable lesson about the use of participatory media in museums, and about the potential pitfalls of crowdsourcing in new media cultures more broadly, demonstrating the importance of self-reflection as a key component of participatory cultural programming.

Take the 'Curating with a Click' quiz (<https://adanewmedia.org/quiz/>) to try your hand at identifying which artworks People's Choice voters loved and which they hated. Or keep reading to learn more about the cultural biases that participatory curation makes visible.



When participatory curation turns museum visitors into gatekeepers, what art will they choose to put on display and what art will they choose to keep out of sight? The answers from one community curated exhibit suggest that conservative cultural biases continue to shape the American public's taste in art, even at a moment when technological participation promises to bring innovation and democratic access to the contemporary museum.

In 2013, the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania collected more than 10,000 online votes and 3,000 in-person ballots for their People's Choice exhibit, a celebration of the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary. Voters were invited to choose their 'top' three artworks from photos of 125 pieces selected by Michener staff to represent the museum's diverse permanent collection. In addition to the votes cast by museum visitors, online participants submitted their responses from across the Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York area. The twenty-five artworks that received

the most votes were then displayed in the Michener in the spring and summer of 2014, while those that didn't make the cut stayed tucked away behind closed doors or scattered elsewhere in the museum.

Adrienne Romano, the Michener's Director of Education, New Media and Interpretive Initiatives, conceived of the exhibit as an act of 'community curation,' using accessible technology to give a voice to the museum-going public. Inspired by the increasing popularity of new media in the fine arts and museums, programs like the People's Choice exhibit are part of a present-day sea change that hopes to democratize institutions of culture using the ethos of participatory media.

However, the problematic outcomes of the People's Choice vote make the exhibit a cautionary tale about the silent forces of discrimination that participatory curation brings to life. Rather than promoting diversity by making curatorial practices interactive and accessible, the People's Choice voting process rendered difference invisible. Voters consistently chose realistic paintings of landscapes and white, female subjects over abstract works, pieces by women, and images of people of color. The result was an exhibit that appealed to the largest number of voters, yet excluded artwork that challenged dominant norms of gendered or racial privilege. Like a mirror, the exhibit reflected back and reaffirmed the preexisting, normative biases of the voters, and further marginalized the already marginal.

Participatory media gave the Michener voters a choice of what art to see displayed in their museum; equally telling are the choices that voters didn't make. Behind the People's Choice exhibit lurked a second, shadow exhibit, the ghostly presence of the artworks that popular consensus had locked away by not selecting. What made the difference between a favorite and a reject? Data collected by Romano and shared for the purposes of this article reveals that the artworks that proved the most popular already reflected the world-views of white, middle-class voters — while the least popular artworks were those that challenged voters to see the world differently, or through the eyes of another.

The People's Choice exhibit serves as a valuable lesson about the use of participatory media in cultural institutions like museums, and about the potential pitfalls of crowdsourcing in new media cultures more broadly. Digital does not necessarily mean democratic; interactive might mean fun, but it doesn't mean apolitical. Participation can reinstate rather than revise the status quo. Therefore, in order to use the tools of new media responsibly, I argue that it is equally important to create interactive

experiences like the People's Choice exhibit, as it is to pause and reflect on their outcomes.

Art in the Age of the Participatory Museum

While the Michener, a regional fine art museum located thirty miles north of Philadelphia and named for local Pulitzer-Prize-winning novelist James A. Michener, is unique in its own right, it shares much in common with many other contemporary American museums, including its growing interest in using interactive technology to make the experiences of its visitors more participatory.

Across the country, cultural institutions are striving to reinvigorate public interest in the arts by promoting engagement through digital tools. According to Romano, the idea for the People's Choice exhibit came from a similar community-curated show at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, but institutions as notable and influential as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art have shaped exhibits around digital interactivity.^[1] Many others, like the Berkeley Art Museum, are using social media to encourage potential visitors to become involved in the daily life of the museum.^[2] Still many more have implemented touch-screens, digital kiosks, and QR codes into their exhibits, turning even objects from antiquity into multimedia experiences.^[3] Nina Simon, Executive Director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History and author of *The Participatory Museum* (2010), an influential handbook for curators interested in adding interactivity to their programming, identifies three main reasons for increasing visitor participation.^[4] First, she writes, participation makes museums more accessible. Second, participation allows visitors to construct their own meaning. And third, visitors' contributions can enrich and enliven museums themselves.

These principles, which are being adopted and debated across the fields of curatorial and museum studies, are inspired by the ethos of contemporary digital culture.^[5] Programming like the People's Choice exhibit combines the appeal of *Wikipedia*-esque, crowdsourced collaboration as described by Clay Shirky in *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (2009) with the emotional investment conjured by gamification, a term popularized by video game designer Jane McGonigal in *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011).^[6] Curators such as Simon see incorporating participatory media tactics into their museums as a chance to bring back the younger generations. 'Over the last twenty years, audiences for museums... have decreased, and the audiences that remain are

older and whiter than the overall population,' Simon notes, citing a 2009 report released by the National Endowment for the Arts. Rather than visit museums, younger, more diverse populations 'share their artwork, music, and stories with each other on the Web.'^[7] To attract a wider range of patrons and perspectives, she concludes, the contemporary museum needs to take lessons from the internet.

Throughout our discussions, Romano described her goals for the People's Choice exhibit in very similar terms. She expressed dismay that museum visitors today spend so little time actually looking at art. She expressed hope that by implementing more interactive programming she might reengage her public. She expressed excitement at the idea of giving her museum's community a voice, and she expressed her desire to make the experience of curating accessible and fun. In many ways, the People's Choice exhibit succeeds at accessibility. By making the link to the online ballot publicly available from the Michener's main website, and by making the ballot itself easy to use, the museum theoretically opened the curation process to anyone with a computer and an internet connection. Yet the resulting exhibit failed to bring diversity to the Michener. While it did put meaning making into the hands of the people, curation by popular consensus also foreclosed on the possibility of difference and dissent, reflecting and reinforcing dominant cultural biases.

The People's Choice exhibit at the Michener makes the potential pitfalls of incorporating participatory media into the contemporary museum particularly legible. Whereas the value of art has long been in its ability to challenge norms and structures of power, crowdsourcing culture leads to a culture of the crowd. At its worst, privileging the tastes of the many over the curation of the few re-marginalizes artists and artworks that have only recently been accepted for inclusion in mainstream museums. The same technology that seems to promise to re-popularize art has the potential to become a weapon against art that is powerful specifically because it is unpopular: hard to relate to, hard to accept, hard to see.

Yet all is not lost for participatory media in the museum. Taken as opportunities for cultural critique and self-reflection, programs like the People's Choice exhibit have an immense amount to teach about what the contemporary public wants in its art and why. When 13,000 people vote on their favorite images, what trends emerge? Which pieces are most beloved and which are most reviled? How do visitors talk about the pieces they adore and the ones they hate? As the Dia Art Foundation's Most and Least Wanted Paintings project has demonstrated, surprising insights emerge from studying

the unpopular.^[8] The People's Choice exhibit, as it appeared at the Michener, represents only the tip of the iceberg. Inside the data and comments collected by Romano and her team, a much richer story about participation and its demons waits to be told.

The Results Are In, and the Winner Is...

I visited the Michener Museum on a muggy day in July 2014 on a family outing, and found myself in the People's Choice exhibit. Though the information on the walls explained that the images in the gallery had been chosen by voters who were selecting their favorite works, it quickly became apparent that the network of cultural biases behind their decisions went far deeper than personal taste. Sure enough, the systematic analysis that I later conducted of the original 125 pieces from which voters selected confirmed that a telling handful of key elements had made the difference between the art that appeared on the Michener's walls and art that the popular vote left behind.

Verdant landscapes, wintry farmhouses, scenes of girlhood innocence: the work on display at the People's Choice exhibit made for a cheerful if largely homogenous sight. The presentation of the pieces was more unusual, however. In the spirit of participatory meaning making, traditional didactic texts describing the artists or their art had been replaced by comments from voters explaining why they liked particular pieces. Lining the walls in large vinyl letters were quotes from previous visitors expressing their appreciation for the beauty of the work in the room. At the center of the gallery, visitors were invited to continue the participation that had started with the online ballot by using a touch-screen kiosk to design their own "galleries," small collections of images from the original list of 125 works that they might imagine hanging together on a museum wall. Visitors were also encouraged to leave notes with their own thoughts on the art in the exhibit. Surrounded by artworks chosen through participation, the Michener's patrons continued to participate.

What struck me was the homogeneity of the results. The twenty-five pieces that made it into the People's Choice exhibit itself were distinctly similar in style, materials, and color scheme. Impressionism and realism prevailed as the preferred artistic styles. One among many impressionistic pieces, Edward W. Redfield's 1923 *The Burning of Center Bridge*, which finished fourth out of the original 125, used characteristic heavy brushstrokes and layered paint to portray a town gathered by a riverbank. *Countermeasure* by Alan Magee (2004), a representative from the equally popular contingent of realistic images, finished in fifth place. For this piece, Magee used computer imaging to render a pile of water-worn pebbles. With few exceptions, voters

favored painting above any other medium. Of the twenty-five pieces displayed in the gallery, seventeen (68%) used primarily oil or acrylic paint. This made paintings markedly more common among the winning artworks than among the full pool of 125, of which only 42% used acrylic or oils. The color schemes of the most popular pieces were also notably consistent. Voters seem to have preferred varied yet muted palates. The majority of pieces in the gallery glowed dully with warm, opalescent greens and blues and yellows, like colors of spring sunlight hitting the trees in Rae Sloan Bredin's *After the Rain* (1913), the third-place winner. Rarely did abstract forms, stark hues, or less painterly materials disrupt the tranquil rainbow of imagery the voters had selected. The voting process stripped the exhibit of its variety and its contrast.

Less immediately apparent and yet all the more striking, the People's Choice exhibit included almost no work by female artists. Though the program was directed by a female curator, and though Romano reports that the Michener's largest demographic of regular patrons are women over the age of fifty-five, only two of the twenty-five artworks on display were created by women. Fern Coppedge's 1938 painting *The Road to Lumberville* — modestly sized, quaint in character, impressionistic in style — presents a row of snowy, sleepy homes at the edge of a rural village. [Figure 1] A photograph of a 2011 wooden table hand-crafted by Mira Nakashima, the daughter of famous Bucks County furniture-maker George Nakashima, highlights the elegance of the artist's design. Both appeal to Michener patrons through their connection to the local community. All other works in the gallery are the products of male artists. To some extent, this gross discrepancy does reflect an inequality in the original ballot, where twenty-seven out of 125 pieces were made by female artists (22%). However, it's the participatory voting process that has slashed women's representation to a mere 8%. Female artists, already in the minority at the outset of the People's Choice program, were all but erased from the gallery walls by voters, whose ingrained standards of taste seem to have driven them to identify work by men as what's 'top.'



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/issue7-Ruberg-Figure1-The-Road-to-Lumberville.jpg>)

Figure 1. The Road to Lumberville

Similarly, though the original 125 images selected by the Michener committee represented a wide variety of subject matters, the twenty-five artworks that voters chose fell predominantly into two categories: landscapes and girls. Most popular were landscape paintings, which accounted for nearly half of the pieces on display at the gallery. The second most popular subjects at the People's Choice exhibit were female bodies. All four of the top artworks that prominently featured human figures were portraits of girls or young women. In Joseph T. Peterson Jr.'s *The Twins: Virginia and Jane* (1917), twin girls, barely tall enough to lean their arms on the side table that stands between them, pose in matching pink dresses; they gaze with small, dark eyes at the viewer. Nelson Shanks' 2004 *Pigtails* presents a very different portrait of girlhood: an oil-paint study of a skinny, nude pre-teen who turns away from the artist, her short hair pulled into pigtails, her shoulder blades protruding from her exposed back. Hung on the walls of the museum, these works seemed out of place among the impressionistic

villages and nature studies. Yet the full list of rankings reveals that their inclusion in the top twenty-five was no accident. From among the original 125 artworks on the ballot, those that ended up in the gallery depict some of the only discernibly white, female bodies, and 100% of the white, female children. While some lesser-liked landscapes did not make the cut, and plenty of other subjects went entirely unrepresented, the voters granted top visibility to all images of white girls.

This same drive to fill the exhibit with young, female bodies may explain how Daniel Garber's *Little Girl Knitting* (1918), a charcoal drawing, came to take first place, receiving the most votes of any piece on the People's Choice ballot. [Figure 2] *Little Girl Knitting* seems an unlikely candidate for first-place popularity. It's not a painting. It has no color, only gray-scale tones. Yet it so charmed the 13,000 voters that it earned the position of honor even without many of the traits common to the other popular artworks. In Garber's drawing, a young white girl in a collared dress sits patiently gazing down at a pair of knitting needles in her hand. Her long, sandy hair drapes over her shoulders in two tightly braided pigtails. One wisp, which has escaped, rests on her forehead. Garber leaves the background of the portrait blank, shading it with sketchy smudges of charcoal that draw the eye to the girl's pale, innocent face. Divorced from context by her monotone backdrop, her downturned features obscured from view, the child is presented as timeless: an unassuming yet perfect little girl, precocious yet obedient, modest yet pretty. Seen by a modern-day viewer, she functions as a symbol for a simpler, sweeter time — both a time in the past of American culture and a time in the past of every growing girl-child. The image is masterfully rendered, but more than artistry what it puts on display is nostalgia.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/issue7-Ruberg-Figure2-Little-Girl-Knitting.jpg>)

Figure 2. Little Girl Knitting

Of the 125 works on the original ballot, what made *Little Girl Knitting* the voters' number-one favorite, and what does it reveal about the social forces at play beneath their choices? The answer lies in the comments left by voters. Those who filled out paper ballots in-person at the museum in 2013 (rather than the online ballot) had the opportunity to explain what they liked about each of the three pieces they selected as their favorites. In their responses to *Little Girl Knitting*, voters consistently described the piece's charm through its ability to tug at their heart-strings and conjure up happy memories of family. 'It makes me think of... my mom and grandma,' wrote one visitor. 'It brings up fond memories of my childhood with my mother and grandmother, both

accomplished needle-workers,' wrote another. A third described how the drawing reminded her of her own daughter, who knitted as a hobby. These voters were drawn to Garber's drawing because they identified with it and felt connected on a personal level. They could see their relatives reflected back in the image of the young, patient child. The little girl in the artwork seemed to be their mother, their grandmother, their daughter, and themselves. Nostalgia and empathy set the terms for meaning making. Through *Little Girl Knitting*, the voters placed their own lives into the gallery.

In fact, this desire to see oneself reflected in art — to identify — can explain almost all of the trends in the top twenty-five pieces, as well as the trends in those pieces that never made it onto the gallery walls. When prompted for their thoughts on the artworks, voters rarely commented on the details of the images before them; they responded instead with their own feelings. George Sotter's 1949 *Untitled (Night Snow Scene)*, a twinkling winter farmhouse scene voted the number-two favorite of the People's Choice exhibit, received thirty-three hand-written comments, twenty-nine of which focused on the mood that the painting evoked. These voters noted that Sotter's piece makes them feel everything from tranquil and serene to cold and weepy. His painting reminded them of the places they'd grown up or snowy days from winters past. Throughout the exhibit, many comments left by voters emphasized a kind of solipsistic tautology ('I like it because I like it') and the aesthetic appeal of artworks that speak to them directly ('This piece calls to me'). For the participants in the People's Choice program, it seems that choosing 'top' works meant choosing works that showed them themselves. This self-oriented approach to curation was confirmed by the 'galleries' that visitors created at the exhibit's touch-screen kiosk. Many of these were given names such as 'Morgan's Kick Ass gallery' or 'The pictures I like.'

Though the People's Choice program was formed around the innovative principles of participatory media, and though it aimed to welcome diverse perspectives, the resulting collection of artworks on display was neither innovative nor diverse. The voting process had weeded out all images but those that a white, middle-class public found most relatable. Rather than an opportunity for learning new perspectives, the museum had become an echo chamber where voters in the majority found their tastes and world views confirmed by the crowd.

The Art that 'Community Curators' Would Rather Not See

If the top artworks that the 13,000 voters chose represented those that the crowd could most comfortably identify with — whether because of their subject matter or their style — the artworks that fell to the bottom of the barrel were clearly those that challenged that comfortable identification. Whereas the People’s Choice exhibit as it appeared in the gallery was characterized by impressionistic landscapes and painterly renditions of young female bodies, the exhibit’s shadow, those twenty-five least popular works that hung implicitly behind the favorites, was characterized by abstract imagery, sculptural materials, symbols of cultural otherness, and depictions of strong, self-assured people of color. These were the works that the voters, through the choices they did not make on their ballots, chose to hide from view.

Impressionism and realism had taken the top spots in the People’s Choice exhibit, artistic styles that offered voters safely sentimental and “objective” perspectives. These works jibed with the participants’ existing ways of seeing, presenting them with a version of the world that looked welcoming and true. By contrast, the bottom twenty-five artworks frequently represented the world through styles that challenged traditional artistic perspective. The more abstract an art piece, the more the voters hated it. Of the original 125 pieces on the ballot, twenty-seven could be classified as abstract. Twenty of those twenty-seven placed in the bottom half of the final rankings. Among the twenty-five pieces least liked by participants, nine were abstract. Since voters left comments on the pieces that they considered “top” and not those they considered “bottom,” we are left to infer through contrast what about the works repelled them. Abstraction, for example, seems to have denied them the ease of identification they sought in their favorite art. Making sense of the abstract requires a shift in perspective, a willingness to see what is hard to make sense of. How could voters identify with abstract images if they weren’t even sure what they represented?

Even less popular than abstraction was sculpture. While painting was clearly the crowd’s favorite medium, sculptures regularly fell in the lower 50% of the rankings, and accounted for ten of the twenty-five least liked artworks. Their subject matter seems to have mattered little to the voters. Some were figural, like Barry Johnston’s 1985 *King Lear*. Others were whimsical, like Greg Wyatt’s 1983 *Wind God*, a divine face blowing gusts of clouds that swirl serenely around the sculpture’s base. Material also seems to have made little difference to the voters. They disliked bronze sculptures, wooden sculptures, and steel sculptures alike. Joe Mooney’s 2006 *Phoenix: Continue*, the very least favorite of all the pieces on the original ballot of 125, had the unlucky distinction of being both abstract and a sculpture. [Figure 3] A collection of curved,

stainless steel sheets that curl upward in the motion of a rising bird, *Phoenix: Continue* appears benign enough, yet popular consensus firmly and definitively rejected it. That sculpture made voters feel alienated while paintings made them feel connected represents an unexpected insight revealed by the People's Choice process that merits future investigation.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/issue7-Ruberg-Figure3-Phoenix-Continue.jpg>)

Figure 3. Phoenix: Continue

Images of people of color also made notable appearances in the voters' least favorite artworks. As with female artists, the odds were admittedly never in their favor. Of the 125 pieces on the ballot, forty-three of which included representations of human figures, thirteen included images of people of color. None of these thirteen images appeared in the top twenty-five, 77% of them appeared in the bottom half of the rankings, and five landed among the twenty most disliked artworks. Importantly, the popularity (or relative unpopularity) of these pieces directly correlated to the way in which they depicted their subjects. Robert Gwathmay's colorful 1943 painting *End of Day* shows a small group of bent, exhausted African-American workers stumbling home from a hard day of physical labor; it ranked #44 out of the original 125. By contrast, Leon Levenstein's 1980 *Coney Island*, a black and white photo in which three African-American teens stand with set jaws, bold expressions, and strong body postures, came in at #101. Though not particularly popular, artwork that depicted people of color as filling acceptable and stereotypical social roles, such as laborer or jazz musician, were appealing to at least some voters. Artworks that challenged stereotypes and showed people of color as powerful, proud, or intelligent threatened to destabilize the presumed privileges of the participating public. It seems almost all agreed that these images should remain out of sight.

Foreignness also drove artwork to the bottom of the rankings. Almost all images in the top twenty-five either depicted landscapes from the American Northeast or Caucasian figures dressed in American clothing, or were created by American artists. Scenes and people that seemed foreign to the white, middle-class voting public consistently ranked among the voters' least favorite works. This was especially true of imagery that appeared Middle Eastern or African in origin. Henry Ossawa Tanner's 1910 etching *Gateway in Tangier* came in at #124 as the second least popular art work on the ballot. [Figure 4] Tanner, himself an African-American artist, sketched the dramatic silhouette of an arched doorway on a Moroccan city street. A veiled woman rests against the wall on one side of the doorway; on the other side, a small elephant carrying tanned hides awaits its owner. The scene, clearly marked as non-Western and non-Christian, offers the mainstream American voters none of the footholds of identification that drew them to their favorite works. The world as Tanner presents it challenges the primacy of the world as the People's Choice participants preferred to see it displayed on their museum walls.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/issue7-Ruberg-Figure4-Doorway-in-Tangiers.jpg>)

Figure 4. Gateway in Tangier

Art by female artists, nearly absent among the top twenty-five artworks, appeared twice as frequently among the bottom twenty-five. However, work by women most commonly ranked in the middle ranges of popularity, that gray area of images that mainstream consensus neither particularly liked nor disliked. Given the gender

diversity (perhaps even the gender bias) of the People's Choice voters, this confirms that identifying with pieces by female artists wasn't a clear-cut business. Because women's work more frequently questions dominant standards of representation, it rarely won over the hearts of the crowd. Of course, this is a trend and not a rule, and so some images by female artists, like Fern Coppedge's snowy winter scene, did appeal to some of the voters. Gender was an important factor in determining a piece's popularity, but it was not the most important factor.

Across the board, People's Choice participants chose not to vote for artwork that represented the world through abstraction and sculptural materials, and artwork that presented imagery that challenged racial and national privilege. The use of interactive media, which accounted for 10,000 of the total 13,000 votes collected, broadened the pool of voters beyond the local Doylestown community, allowing internet users from across the Northeast to add their voice to the curation process. This innovative effort to increase accessibility and diversity in curatorial meaning making, ironically, removed from view images that challenged the broader cultural status quo. Yet the information collected by Romano through the voting process has also offered valuable insights into the potential pitfalls of new media culture and the types of work that the American public, that same public that museums like the Michener hope to reengage with participatory exhibits, do and don't want to see.

Participatory Media as an Opportunity for Self-Reflection

Whatever its dangers, the use of participatory media in museums and other cultural institutions is sure to increase in the coming years. The People's Choice exhibit is not the Michener's first stab at incorporating interactivity into their programming, nor will it be their last. Romano is already in the midst of planning more ways to bring new media into visitors' experiences, and curators at museums around the country are surely doing likewise.

Far from advocating that museums return to their older models or condemning participatory culture as such, my point here is to argue for the value of community curation as a tool for social self-reflection rather than self-confirmation. Programs like the People's Choice exhibit collect rich pools of data about what participants like, what they dislike, and how they frame their relation to art. In the gallery, however, the exhibit told only part of the story. Instead of displaying just the twenty-five most liked artworks, why not display the twenty-five least liked artworks alongside them? The

cultural biases that drive supposedly apolitical factors like personal taste can be rendered legible if visitors have the chance to explore a fuller range of their own results. New media gives the public a voice, but, equally importantly, it gives the public the chance to stop and listen to what it is saying.

An earlier participatory exhibit at the Michener, one that did not use new media technology but still drew heavily from the spirit of digital participation, serves as a promising example of how visitor response can be given space to tell its own story. *Where Children Sleep*, a selection of photographs from James Mollison's series of the same name, was displayed at the museum in the spring of 2014.^[9] Mollison juxtaposes portraits of children from around the world with frank snapshots of the places they sleep. American children with elaborately decorated bedrooms were featured alongside children from other nations with living conditions that appeared comparatively cramped, unclean, or unsafe. The exhibit comes with a clear message about the distribution of wealth across the world and how it affects even the youngest global citizens. Perhaps predictably, Romano reports that *Where Children Sleep* received mixed feedback from Michener Museum visitors, some of who preferred to see less social commentary on the museum walls.

What made *Where Children Sleep* unique was its invitation to visitors to participate by speaking directly to the children in Mollison's photos. Index cards were provided for patrons to write notes to individual children. These notes were then posted on a large board of the gallery so that visitors could see what those before them had written.

The patterns that emerged among the comments are as fascinating and telling as the trends from the People's Choice exhibit. Here, the question was not which artworks the public liked best, but which children visitors chose to engage with. Many of the notes left expressed positivity and support, but an equal number expressed disapproval and judgment. Children who received the most messages were those with whom patrons could most easily identify, or those who fit into the sympathetic and stereotypical roles of foreign children in need. Children who received the fewest messages were those who were non-white and non-American, yet who appeared capable and strong. Whereas Jasmine, a four-year-old beauty-pageant queen from Kentucky with a bedroom littered with sparkling crowns, received eighty-nine messages (ranging from 'I love your outfit!' to 'Why are you a spoiled brat?'), twelve-year-old Lamine from Senegal, who poses bare-chested, sweating, and carrying a pick-ax in his portrait, received less than twenty notes, while Indira, a fourteen-year-old from India working to achieve her dream of

becoming a teacher, received twelve. [Figure 5] Visitors chose whom to speak to, and in doing so indirectly revealed their underlying biases about which children they could imagine as interlocutors, and which children to whom they imagined they had nothing to say.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/issue7-Ruberg-Figure5-Lamine.jpg>)

Figure 5. Lamine

Posted on the gallery wall, the hand-written index cards visitors left became their own interactive exhibit, a jumble of artifacts that gave subsequent visitors the opportunity to browse, searching for patterns, and make meaning. Imagine a version of this exhibit that incorporated digital media. Participants from across the internet could write notes to the children in Mollison's photos. Curators could assemble this material into interactive, informational, accessible interfaces, allowing users to explore a much more diverse array of responses and related data than could fit in one corner of one gallery.

This kind of self-reflective participation has the power to reinstate the very diversity of perspectives that popular consensus threaten to render invisible. Interactivity is by nature about the relationship between the self and another; I cannot interface with art without the 'I.' Manifesting the voice of the people through participatory practices runs the risk of simply reflecting the 'I' of the people back to the people, of holding up a mirror to the mainstream and further marginalizing those who fall outside of it. New media has the potential to precipitate our fall into this trap, but it also has the potential to help us out of it, to help us gaze into the mirror as a form of self-analysis. In order to achieve self-reflection, the public may need to see more than they want to see. The most

hated paintings may need to feature as prominently as the most loved. The most cringe-worthy, judgmental, and self-important comments may need to appear beside nuanced, thoughtful, and politically unblinking artwork. Fun is not the only type of engagement, nor is fun itself reducible to a simple pleasure. Overcoming a challenge is also participatory, an interactive exercise within the self. If playing the role of community curator is empowering, so is playing the role of community cultural critic.

As a representative example of the type of participatory programming that is becoming increasingly popular in today's museums, the Michener's People's Choice exhibit reveals a number of the biases that operate beneath the surface of the American public's interest in art. In keeping with old-guard traditions of the art historical canon, works made by men that depict nature and female bodies proved the most popular, while pieces made by women or images that depicted the world through non-mainstream perspectives were passed over by voters. Should other curators repeat the People's Choice program at their own museums nation-wide, the resulting trends may vary, but surely related patterns will shine through.

This modestly sized show speaks to social implications of much grander proportions. The results of the People's Choice exhibit serve as a challenge to curators, museum visitors, and new media scholars alike to continue questioning and reinventing the place of participatory media in cultural institutions. At a moment when participatory technology seems to promise the democratization of culture, it also opens up important opportunities to reflect on the voices that democracy leaves behind.

Endnotes

1. See the Philadelphia Museum of Art's 2012 show *Craft Spoken Here*, the Brooklyn Museum's 2008 *Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibit*, and the Museum of Modern Art's many online interactive exhibits.
2. The Berkeley Art Museum's 2014 temporary sidewalk exhibit *What #isamuseum*, a series of banners posted at the construction site of the new museum building, invites passersby to tweet their answers to questions like "Is a museum a school?" and "Is a museum for everyone?"
3. *When the Greeks Ruled Egypt*, a 2013 – 2014 temporary exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago, serves as an example. Throughout the show, iPads were mounted near cases of

small archeological findings to allow visitors to interact with enlarged 3D renderings of the delicate, detailed object fragments under glass before them.

4. Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, Museum 2.0: 2010).

5. For more discussions about participatory museum programming, see *Museum Communication and Social Media: The Connected Museum* (editors Kirsten Drotner and Kim Christian Schroder, New York: Routledge, 2013) and Nina Simon's blog *Museum 2.0* (<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com> (<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com>)).

6. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

7. Simon, 1. To download the 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, visit <http://arts.gov/publications/2008-survey-public-participation-arts> (<http://arts.gov/publications/2008-survey-public-participation-arts>).

8. Dia Art Foundation's *Most and Least Wanted Paintings* are composite images inspired by the results of national surveys in which participants identified what they most and least liked to see in art. View the paintings at <http://awp.diaart.org/km/painting.html> (<http://awp.diaart.org/km/painting.html>).

9. The full series of James Mollison's photographs can be found in his book also titled *Where Children Sleep* (New York: Chris Boot, 2010).

—CITATION—

Ruberg, B., (2015) Curating with a Click: The Art That Participatory Media Leaves Behind. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, No.7.

doi:10.7264/N3PR7T8X (<http://dx.doi.org/10.7264/N3PR7T8X>)

This article has been openly peer reviewed at **Ada Review**

(<http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/ada-issue-7/curating-with-a-click-the-art-that-participatory-media-leaves-behind/>).



(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

This work is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-**

NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) .

Footnotes (returns to text)

1. See the Philadelphia Museum of Art's 2012 show *Craft Spoken Here*, the Brooklyn Museum's 2008 *Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibit*, and the Museum of Modern Art's many online interactive exhibits.
2. The Berkeley Art Museum's 2014 temporary sidewalk exhibit *What #isamuseum*, a series of banners posted at the construction site of the new museum building, invites passersby to tweet their answers to questions like "Is a museum a school?" and "Is a museum for everyone?"
3. *When the Greeks Ruled Egypt*, a 2013 – 2014 temporary exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago, serves as an example. Throughout the show, iPads were mounted near cases of small archeological findings to allow visitors to interact with enlarged 3D renderings of the delicate, detailed object fragments under glass before them.
4. Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, Museum 2.0: 2010).
5. For more discussions about participatory museum programming, see *Museum Communication and Social Media: The Connected Museum* (editors Kirsten Drotner and Kim Christian Schroder, New York: Routledge, 2013) and Nina Simon's blog *Museum 2.0* (<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com> (<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com>)) .
6. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).
7. Simon, 1. To download the 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, visit <http://arts.gov/publications/2008-survey-public-participation-arts> (<http://arts.gov/publications/2008-survey-public-participation-arts>) .
8. Dia Art Foundation's *Most and Least Wanted Paintings* are composite images inspired by the results of national surveys in which participants identified what they most and least liked to see in art. View the paintings at <http://awp.diaart.org/km/painting.html> (<http://awp.diaart.org/km/painting.html>) .

9. The full series of James Mollison's photographs can be found in his book also titled *Where Children Sleep* (New York: Chris Boot, 2010).

◀ PEER REVIEWED

Bonnie Ruberg (<https://adanewmedia.org/author/bonnieruberg>)

Bonnie Ruberg is a PhD candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, where she works across the departments of New Media, Gender and Women's Studies, and Comparative Literature. Her work focuses on gender, sexuality, and technology, and she has published and spoken widely about the intersection of queer theory and video games. She is the executive organizer of the annual Queerness and Games Conference, the co-founder of Berkeley's Game Design Workshop, and the lead editor of the volume *Queer Game Studies: Gender, Sexuality, and a Queer Approach to Games Studies*. Her research interests also include literature, history of art, the Digital Humanities, and fan studies.

ONE THOUGHT ON "CURATING WITH A CLICK: THE ART THAT PARTICIPATORY MEDIA LEAVES BEHIND"

Pingback: [**Now live: Ada Issue no. 7, Open Call! |**](#)



Copyright © 2012-2021. All work on this website is distributed under a Creative Commons license. The default license for the content on *Ada* is a **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 Unported License**. Individual article copyright terms may differ. Please refer to each article for its license.

Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology
ISSN 2325-0496