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Re:Public—Considering the Audience in Curatorial Practice

“Re:Public: Considering the Audience in Curatorial Practice”, and I’m going to start off with some images from the German photographer Thomas Struth, because, in this museum series that he did in the 1990s, he does place the museum audience between the lens of the camera and the works on the wall. I thought that was an interesting allegory for the talk I’m going to give. I think that Struth’s photographs also juxtapose stillness and motion, and the sense of the ephemeral and the timeless, in the way that the passing, changing audience moving in front of these works of art that probably have—well, hopefully have remained unchanged for centuries in these sort of hallowed halls of stillness and preservation. It’s an interesting contrast.

But when you look at Struth’s photographs, you also notice sort of a disconnect between the austerity of the architectural space and the rigid formality of many of the installations in the photographs, with the contemporary audience. There’s sort of a clash between the—again, the formality—and the casual appearance of the visitors. We see ball caps and cameras and bags and short pants and T-shirts. It seems this is indicative of a new kind of informality that’s infiltrated the traditionally high art/high culture cathedral-like atmosphere of the museum... And in these photographs, it’s interesting to look for evidence of the curator, and we see evidence of selection of works, their placement on the walls, the ways that didactic information appears in small areas and signs posted nearby, and I suppose one could actually identify the works on the walls and look into the assumptions that were made in the hanging, including classifications of works by genre, the placement of the works within a historical timeline, and the consideration of aesthetics in terms of the juxtaposition of the pieces, one adjacent to the other. So scholarly thought and curatorial rigour, of course, have constructed the exhibit, but I’d like to ask some questions about how the audience’s needs have been considered and how the audience experience has been shaped by the curator’s work, what sort of concessions have been made for the comfort, for the physical needs of the people

visiting the museum, and what tools have they been given to gain additional insights from their experience in the museum?

I think we all know that a museum can be a dynamic public space and a place where people come together for valuable exchanges and experiences around visual art, and the curator is in a very powerful and responsible position in this situation, sort of a catalyst in this chamber of elements, and the curator always has opportunities to put forth new ideas and, I think, to choose the focus for the audience's attention, and in terms of contemporary art, to bring artists and art and audiences together, setting off a chain reaction of questioning and response, really initiating dialogue. So the curator's interaction with the public is key to broadening understanding about the potential for art and for artists to change thinking, and to effect cultural change.

Today, curators are working within a museum world that's focusing more and more on visitor experience—we've been talking about that over the last day and a half—with the ultimate aim of increasing attendance, and recently I read a small item in *The Globe and Mail* that led with the headline, "Attendance at the AGO Rises Nearly 45 per cent", and the news brief spoke of attendance at the Art Gallery of Ontario in the fiscal year 2004/2005 reaching over 665, 000 visitors, and one-third of that total was attributed to the blockbuster exhibition *Turner, Whistler, Monet*, and the piece concludes with a note about the 207, 000, 000 expansion designed by Frank Gehry, pictured in the slide, and a projection that, during renovations, attendance may dip by about twenty percent, and this brief three-paragraph snippet in the paper set out some very broad assumptions that I think are typical of what's going on in this sector. First one, that the AGO has achieved success by increasing attendance. Number two, that the *Turner, Whistler, Monet* exhibit was deemed a success by volume of attendance in one respect, and that the Gehry expansion of the AGO is linked in part to increasing attendance in the future, and that the expenditure in terms of the renovation, in some way, is warranted, given that objective. I think that all museums want to attract new audiences, and sometimes this impulse prompts decisions that directly infringe upon curatorial autonomy and integrity. In 2004, an article in *The New York Times* critiqued a facelift and

modernization project at the Brooklyn Museum, saying that director Arnold L. Lehman's opening show, called *Open House: Working in Brooklyn*, including works by two hundred Brooklyn artists, was compromising the museum's standards. The authors write, "Mr. Lehman's efforts to concentrate on Brooklyn have raised concerns among many in the museum world, including some who work for him, that by trying to appeal to the broadest spectrum of visitors—and to more than triple the museum's attendance over the next decade—the museum will become a palace of popular culture rather than a place to see art." The article goes on to take note of the redesign of many of the galleries, the infiltration of plump armchairs and computer touchscreens, background music and panel televisions showing short documentaries. Image consultants trying to make the museum more welcoming even offered greeter training—so it's sort of like Wal-Mart—for everybody from security guards to curators, and curators were also instructed to write explanatory labels in short, simple paragraphs that, as some curators described, were to be written at the third-grade reading level.

The article also states, "There are fears that its curatorial staff and its world-class collection are being underused in favour of more shows like 'Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes and Rage' in 2000, or 'Star Wars', in 2002, a show of costumes and drawings from the movies, both of which packed in viewers but were derided by critics as little more than memorabilia."

The Brooklyn Museum's shift to audience-cultivation mode is driven by economics and an attempt to—a noble attempt—to connect with its immediate community. It is interesting to note that this is the institution five years earlier that weathered a real right-wing backlash to the *Sensation* exhibition of Charles Saatchi's collection of contemporary British art, and during that show, the museum also posted record attendance for that exhibit—and Jason mentioned as well this morning about how a good media scandal can really bring people through the doors. Like so many institutions, the Brooklyn Museum is attempting to change practices. They're trying to break down existing barriers, questioning their own relevance to their community. I think that the curator working within the regional public gallery system in Canada must also deal with the emphasis placed on engaging with an audience.

Audience development is a key criterion imposed by funding agencies at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels, and there are explicit expectations that public art galleries should be actively developing new audiences. These pressures definitely affect the whole institution, including curatorial decisions about exhibitions and programmes. As curators working in this climate, we must assume new skill sets and a fresh vocabulary around the value and relevancy of the project's engagement with the audience, getting beyond attendance numbers as the only marker of success. New performance measures should gauge impact and resonance with the intended and the broader artistic communities.

There has been much work done in recent years on the topic of visitor studies, and there are institutes in the Americas, Australia, and the United Kingdom that are devoted to that. They try to set out ways to create best-practice scenarios, increasing the institution's focus on visitors' needs. This information and study activity may align more closely with the interests of educators, development, and marketing officers in museums, but curators should really be interested in this too. There is an assumption that the issue of catering to an audience's needs traditionally meets with aversion in curatorial circles. It is assumed that curators believe that the exhibition is sacrosanct, and that scholarly work, whether contemporary or historical, should not be watered down for mass consumption.

In 1994, OAAG produced *Mapping a Future: Report on Audience and Stakeholder Research for Ontario's Public Art Galleries*. OAAG's study found wariness in curators—referred to as internal stakeholders—confronting issues of audience needs. The report states, “Much of the discussion reflected a palpable frustration between the internal stakeholder's real commitment to the goals of intellectual integrity, investigation, and rigour, and a suspicion that these might somehow have to be compromised in the search for increased audiences.”

I believe these assumptions are false and that these attitudes are changing, and I think that regional public galleries want to know more about their audience, towards making programmes more effective, relevant, better-used, and towards maximizing their impact. Of course, art in a museum has no impact without an audience, and there is no contemporary culture without a public. Curators make

decisions about exhibition constructs to serve an artist's work, but with some idea of a public in mind. In the process of defining the audience, one may consider many statistical factors, but demographic profiles are not enough. We need to be able to understand the audience's experience, their level of engagement, and their interest. Audience surveys, feedback forms, evaluation tools are all utilized in grappling with this responsibility. This information need not lead to reductive or prescriptive impulses in our output as curators, but instead should make us better prepared to find points of access into the artists' works in our exhibitions, collections, and programmes.

New models of audience surveys take a very different approach to analysis, far beyond the passive hit-and-miss of question-and-answer. In 2001, England's West Midlands, the Wolverhampton Art Gallery, which is known for its innovative approaches to audience development, participated in a study to examine its relationship with visitors. Not only did the survey attempt to get the usual demographic details on the audience, but they also tried to analyze the actual experience that the audience had in the museum, the amount of time spent, as the research proposition states, the use of this time, but most importantly, the meaning that is attributed to the visit by the visitors. The survey set out to examine the audience's interpretive repertoire, essentially, what sets of ideas, vocabulary, and personal associations the visitor uses when confronting the exhibit, and also whether the gallery's texts and labels helped them to appreciate and understand what they were seeing. The survey looked at single adult visitors—men and women—and encouraged them to talk as they walked through the galleries, addressing how they were interpreting what they were seeing and their visit in general. The majority of the comments from the subjects focused on the visual qualities of the artworks, the sociocultural context of the works, and the process of making. Most visitors in the study did make use of some of the materials the gallery provided. In their analysis of the data, the researchers set out to map interpretive communities or groups of respondents who had similar elements in their interpretive repertoires, and then to consider the fit between those communities and those of the museum.

In this brief synopsis of this fascinating study, one can see that such an investi-

gation can yield useful information for curators. It can give us a better sense of what tools to provide for each of the communities of visitors. However, a word of caution appeared in the summary of the research. It states, “Art museum professionals share similar values, attitudes, and specialist knowledge, and as such can be seen as an interpretive community. The ways in which art curators talk about artworks amongst themselves are a reflection of the strategies for intelligibility and the frameworks for making meaning that they habitually use. The research has shown that even experienced and committed visitors who have already decided that they have at least some interest in art and its communities, and who would want to take this further, do not always share the interpretive strategies used by art museum professionals.”

So again, there’s a disconnect, so curators—and we’ve talked about this, Jason mentioned it this morning—we have to be sensitive to the language and terminology when creating access points to programmes, and in access points, I guess I mean each instance where information is exchanged with visitors: wall labels, text, video introductions, signage, handouts, tour scripts, hands-on activities, lectures, panel discussions, symposia, all those things. And the writing or language in each situation should be accessible to the intended audience, the most likely to access that information at that point.

I work in a community-engaged public gallery, and it’s at a distance from a large metropolitan centre. We’ve talked about that. The gallery’s the only vehicle for contemporary art for a large region of North Central Ontario and sometimes the only museum experience for many of the people that live there. It’s challenging for me as a curator to put together a programme of exhibitions that addresses issues in that immediate community but also offers some contribution to a dialogue around contemporary art on a national and international platform. This dilemma really fractures the concept of a single audience, and that’s a theme running through this paper. We have diverging interests from different interpretive communities, to borrow that phrase from the Wolverhampton model. Each requires different treatments from a variety of access points, and Jason was talking about language, and I was also mentioning that these access points can utilize language in different

ways—simple language on wall texts can contrast with the exhibition catalogue, of course, which is geared towards a more informed audience, and websites have different access points as well.

As a curator, I'm also considering issues of community responsiveness, and how our institution addresses cultural diversity and issues of access utilizing a broad definition of "public". Owen Sound is not ethnically diverse; however, we do have two neighbouring Aboriginal communities at the Saugeen and Cape Croker reservations, and work by Aboriginal artists is reflected, largely in the permanent collection and often in the exhibition programme, and we often utilize guest writers and curators from the Native community in our projects. However, it is difficult to sustain a relationship beyond the timeframe of the exhibition. This is an image of Mary Anne Barkhouse, an exhibition that we did this spring, that was touring from the Art Gallery of Peterborough with a wonderful text by Bonnie Devine. Mary Anne Barkhouse and Michael Belmore were featured in the show.

So I think that more work has to be done in terms of considering this audience for our institution in all aspects of our planning and communications strategy towards building that sustained relationship and, I believe, towards real change, that we have to involve voices from the Native community in our governance and administrative structures as well.

I think that a sustained relationship with a regional audience that has developed over a number of years can be very rewarding for a curator. There's a sense of trust and goodwill that develops between the audience and the curator, and I think that in many cases that encourages an audience to engage with work which they might not have a natural affinity for, or there may be obstacles to their understanding of, and at our gallery we try and treat the exhibition programme as a course of study for our audience, building insight and understanding of larger thematic constructs from several exhibitions that may span over the course of a year or more, so there are echoes set up between exhibitions in terms of subject matter, conceptual strategies, and material investigations, that encourage comparison and lead our audience to summary positions on their awareness of trends that they're witnessing in contemporary art.

Tom Sherman wrote in his paper, called “The Finished Work of Art is a Thing of the Past”, “Audiences for art (the consumers of art) have to be creative themselves to find the products of artists valuable. If the work of art is an object, then the audience has to be able to decode the object to extract information encoded in it. This participatory investment is most commonly described as interpretation... With contemporary art, curators and critics offer their assistance in this information exchange.” And I agree with this statement and feel that the audience must be actively creative, thereby assuming responsibility and investing time and effort into their gallery experience. In making the tools available to precipitate this experience, I think that curators also have to be sensitive to all of their expectations that they set up in terms of the exhibition construct, in terms of time that the audience will spend with viewing the work and reading the text. And surveys and investigations such as the Wolverhampton survey probably offer information that can contribute to those sorts of decisions.

Again, going back to OAG’s *Mapping a Future*, in the summary section called “Experiencing Art Galleries”, it states, “Is such a commitment to grasping meaning on the part of an internal stakeholder possible, even desirable, for the occasional visitor? If she/he has to work so hard, what are art galleries expecting of the visitor? At the same time, there is also recognition of a dual responsibility: the gallery’s, to inform and interpret, and the public’s, to learning and self-education. Increasing the comfort level through access to information and personal contact was felt to be the most effective way of responding.”

In concluding, I’m going to make some recommendations, and I have dropped in some images from previous shows that I’ve worked on. So I’d like to summarize some of the main points covered in this paper relating to the curator’s relationship with an audience and to offer some recommendations for action in our interpretive community.

To be effective in the contemporary museum world, curators must access and utilize information on how their audiences respond and how they’re motivated, and this information can be used to build bridges to new audiences, and to give the public what it needs to engage with our work. And the audience’s particular interests can

set the agenda for information to be offered. As in the Wolverhampton model, the visual qualities of the artwork and the sociocultural context of the works and the process of making... those three clues that became apparent in the survey are areas to be addressed within the narrative plan of the exhibition construct. The choice of vocabulary and terminology that curators use is critical for good communication, ensuring that messages are readable and comprehensible. These messages may be crafted for a particular audience. Projects may contain layers of messages as well, in consideration of the variety of people who will interact with that product. And we must remember that there is no single profile of an audience, and that the concept of audience is complex and multifaceted. Curators must be active participants in setting goals and performance measures for their own programmes, clearly articulating the impacts that are expected from the exhibition. Assessment of success need not rely on attendance alone, but should encompass other types of impact, such as critical understanding, scholarship, research goals, the community's response, demonstration of relevance, significance to the collection, encouragement of diversity, and the engagement that happens with targeted audience.

And the curator as a catalyst can create avenues for personal contact between artists and audiences that may involve participation and exchange towards enhancing experiences. Curators must find a balance, a new balance, in producing a programme which is artistically led but audience-focused, and finally, curators must document and promote their own success stories, broadening understanding of the complex relationships that exist with particular communities on various levels for each and every exhibition and programme. We do this so well in our grant applications and internal stakeholder reports. I think it's now time that we should externalize that dialogue. Considering the audience in curatorial practice can contribute to excellence in our work by asserting relevance and meaning clearly and creatively.

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