

Diversity and Inclusivity in the Contemporary Museum

Maria D'Agostini

maria.dagostini@yahoo.com

Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

MA Arts Administration (Gallery Management)

Diversity and Inclusivity in the Contemporary Museum

Current statistical analysis of those who visit art museums (and who do not) show a great disparity. Socioeconomic and cultural factors are the primary influence on segments of the population who are identified as non-attendeers. Barriers exist.

I will explore several topics central to the best functioning of contemporary museums. I will focus on: A. How changes to the institution's environment may increase engagement, specifically for individuals who may not be familiar with museum practices and B. How the lack of representation in staffing (and as result, meaningful content) may contribute to the disparities in attendance. I will explore ways in which these institutions can adopt practices that promote inclusivity, address their immediate communities and engage a broader spectrum.

The arts will not remain relevant if exclusive to a few segments of the population. How can we, as art leaders, successfully promote diversity and inclusivity in our museums?

In a recent poll:

- 97% of Americans believe that museums are educational assets for their communities.
- 89% believe that museums contribute important economic benefits to their community.
- 96% would approve of elected officials who took legislative action to support museums.
- 96% want federal funding for museums maintained or increased (Cole and Lott page 35).

Data has shown the public perceives art museums (and their interactions with them) to be useful for the following reasons: “1) [their] need to satisfy personal curiosity and interest; 2) the wish to engage in a meaningful social experience with someone [they] care about, in particular children; 3) the aspiration to experience that which is best and most important within a culture; 4) the desire to further specific intellectual needs and 5) the yearning to immerse one's self in a spiritually refreshing environment” (Falk 245).

As shown above, art organizations are widely viewed as being of significant cultural value, yet a large segment of the population does not visit museums. Feedback collected from demographical studies are disconcerting: “While the U.S. population is already one-third minority, heading towards majority non-white, today only 9 percent of the core visitors to museums are minorities and approximately 20 percent of museum employees are minorities” (Cole and Lott 36). Socioeconomic influences impact attendance: “...Data [show] that every step of additional education—from “grade school” to “some high school” to “high school graduation” through college and graduate school—increases the likelihood that someone will attend a benchmark arts activity, with a college graduate being 48 percent more likely than someone with a grade school education to participate in these cultural activities” (Farrell and Medvedeva 14). The Center For The Future of Museums (an initiative of the American Association of Museums) has identified factors that influence attendance. These include:

- historically-grounded cultural barriers to participation that make museums feel intimidating and exclusionary to many people.
- the lack of specialized knowledge and a cultivated aesthetic taste (“cultural capital”) to understand and appreciate what are perceived by many as elite art forms, especially in art museums.

- no strong tradition of museum-going habits, whether these were fostered in childhood or other family experience and tradition.
- the [lack of] influence of social networks to encourage museum-going rather than other leisure activities...etc. (Farrell and Medvedeva 13).

Many art museums currently enunciate policies intended to diversify their constituencies, but many policies/practices have proven ineffective or are not allotted the necessary resources to become successful. Additionally, commentators have suggested these practices, while valuable, may lead to homogenous content or what is often referred to as the “Disneyfication” of the art world. There has also been resistance from curators and other managerial personnel who have felt these practices compromise the integrity of their spaces.

The lack of inclusion within the arts is problematic for its future sustainability. The traditional donor profile has followed the historic development of museum culture. The “Boomers” who currently provide the majority of charitable giving and support to art organizations may not be supplanted by younger generations and/or those within minority groups who do not participate in the arts (Cole and Lott 18). This lack of participation is a strong indication that museums have not adequately addressed the need to seek financial support from donors that may otherwise be difficult to access. Furthermore, organizations would be ill advised to rely heavily on governmental support in this time of uncertainty. Attracting a diversified audience is not only necessary for museums to fulfill their current role but also to meet their obligations of diversity and equity. Adapting to changing times and audiences will be integral to the very survival of museums as an institution.

Visitor Demographical Information

The conventional methodology to determine visitor satisfaction and/or engagement include: “comment cards, staff feedback, visitor surveys, formal visitor interviews, interviews with non-visitors, focus groups with visitors and non-visitors and observation/tracking” (Black 109). Significant trends in socioeconomics and cultural factors are also weighed and quantified to identify barriers. The specific methods (i.e. frequency of use and format) of research employed by individual art institutions is often determined by whether the organization has the necessary available resources. Interviews and focus groups are widely perceived as more effective measurements, but visitor surveys are used more due to their practicality and lower cost (Black 109).¹ The text, “Museum Marketing & Strategy” identifies segmenting markets (listed by group category): “Geographical (region, city or metropolitan size, density, and climate); Demographic (age, family life cycle, and gender); Income; Occupation; Education; Religion; Race; Nationality; Generation; Social Class; Psychographic (lifestyle and personality); Behavioral (occasions, benefits, user status, user rate, loyalty status, buyer-readiness stage and attitude toward product)” and additional subcategories or combined variables dependent on the type and needs of the studies conducted (Kotler 118-119).

¹ Sample visitor survey:

jsma.uoregon.edu/sites/jsma1.uoregon.edu/files/Sample%20Visitor%20Survey.pdf

By analyzing this information, a visitor profile of individuals who engage with the arts emerges, with a better understanding of those who choose not to. While demographical research is used by museums throughout the world, such research has been criticized as not effective, primarily because it can not consistently quantify individual characteristics or reach a large enough segment of the population in order to be fully informative. Author John H. Falk has argued visitor demographics do not provide an accurate assessment. He argues there is a misplaced focus on statistics, rather than individual attributes. Falk forwards a concept of *personality types* (or identity archetypes) that each visitor possesses and manifests within different periods of their visit; his theory asserts that museums should focus their efforts to appeal to specific identities, motivations and behaviors (Falk 158). He has stated, "...we need to move away from thinking about types of visitors to types of visits (which vary by identity-related motivations), and from exhibits and programs with specific, singular outcomes to ways of experiencing and using exhibits and programs that allow visitors to achieve multiple, personally relevant goals" (Falk 215). While flawed, visitor studies are consistently used and shared between organizations; they continue to be a cogent tool for museums to better understand their constituencies.

In addition to the issue of a lack of representation of distinct groups, art historians, writers and critics have suggested that museums have not evolved or properly adapted to contemporary society. Falk refers to museums operating with an *Industrial Age* business model versus a *Knowledge Age* model (Falk 181). Others have criticized arts institutions, specifically museums, for having an identity crisis; how to position themselves as historical institutions while still being relevant in present-time. Author Graham Black has stated:

The model (or purpose) of the 21st century museum is "[as] an object treasure-house significant to all local communities; an agent for physical, economic, cultural and social regeneration; accessible to all-intellectually, physically, socially, culturally, economically; relevant to the whole of society, with the community involved in product development and delivery, and with a core purpose of improving people's lives; a celebrant of cultural diversity; a promoter of social cohesion and a bridge of social capital; a promoter of social inclusion; proactive in supporting neighborhood and community renewal; proactive in developing new audiences; proactive in developing, working with and managing pan-agency projects; a resource for structured educational use, integral to the learning community; a community meeting place; a tourist attraction; an income generator and an exemplar of quality service provision and value for money (Black 4).

Museums can adopt or augment existing creative marketing strategies to attract new and/or diverse audiences. A "holistic marketing" concept or approach can be used to promote a visitor-centered environment. The text, "Museum Marketing & Strategy" lists four components: Integrated marketing, Relationship marketing, Internal marketing and Socially responsible marketing (Kotler 26-27). Integrated marketing manifests, "linking the product, price, place (distribution channel), people (staff) and promotion-known as the 5Ps-in a coherent marketing plan" (Kotler 26). Relationship marketing involves establishing sustainable relationships with everyone connected to the organization (26). Internal marketing consists of the connections between staff (having strong interrelations and support) and the organization's constituency; for the promotion of "consumer-oriented and centered" services (26). Lastly, Socially responsible marketing is defined as, "[marketing that] embodies a commitment to the community and society as a whole. It focuses on broader social, ethical, and environmental issues" (Kotler 27).

In addition to an organization's implementation of a "holistic marketing" policy, it is imperative that a comprehensive and properly coordinated strategic plan is put in place and revised when needed. A strategic marketing strategy can streamline the organization's activities (again the 5Ps-products, price, promotion, place, and people are all factors). "Museums cannot satisfy the needs of all consumers. They have to decide how much effort to devote to each consumer group and then design their positioning and value proposition for each group" (Kotler 28). An in-depth analysis of an organization's strategic plan and marketing practices should be conducted. An arts organization should use the visitor services information available to them (i.e. the demographics of visitors and non-visitors they are hoping to attract) to establish their *product* (or programs and services that they will offer) and the appropriate *pricing* for their offerings. The organization's *promotion* should effectively work to incur interest in the offered services and to generate interest for the space. The *place* is the space itself or anywhere products are offered (28). The *people* (within this context) are the staff and/or those otherwise associated with the organization.

Creating Accessible Art Spaces

Museums must consider the differing motivations of their existing audience in order to present relevant content. "Six types of museum-going experiences have been identified as: recreation, sociability, learning experience, aesthetic experience, celebrative experience and issue-oriented experience" (Kotler 303). Using this information and focusing on the 5Ps (products, price, promotion, place and people) arts organizations can initiate practices to retain and attract new patrons. These may include: A. Providing free admission or low cost options for special engagements. B. Changes to the hours of operation to accommodate a larger audience. C. The creation of "cultural centers" that position museums in tandem with other cultural institutions (i.e. libraries or science centers) as an accessible resource. D. Using art spaces for "entertainment" by offering musical performances, food and drinks as an alternative for visitors who may not be interested in static arts. E. Organizations can promote and build upon the existing ancillary programs (i.e. drop-in art workshops, services for children and senior citizens) and create new programs that address the needs of their surrounding communities.

In addition to appealing to individuals who do not regularly frequent museums utilizing content creation, organizations can provide support for visitors who are inexperienced with how spaces are structured. Creating a more accessible environment can be achieved by changes in the museum/space's design. Two primary factors of effective museum design are: A. To create a space which is welcoming, easily navigated and encourages participation and B. To present secondary information (i.e. object labels and guides) in ways that can be universally absorbed.

Different modes of learning must also be considered. Author Graham Black suggests that a "mind-on rather than just hands-on" approach is preferable (198). Black states, "visitors learn by a mixture of: doing, thinking, watching, reading, listening, imagining, interacting (with staff and each other), discussing and assimilating" (198). A VAKT (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, and Tactile) concept should be considered when structuring ways in which an organization communicates with their audiences (i.e. interactive displays and guides). An amalgamation of the VAKT elements (a multi-sensory experience) can be applied to give audiences more ways to process information (Davis and Smeds 162). For example, the Detroit Institute of Arts offers

several digital amenities, including interactive kiosks and exhibits that are representative of this. In 2017, the museum introduced Lumin, a hand-held device that patrons operate to digitally enhance existing displays using augmented reality: “The DIA is the first art museum in the world to integrate this 3-D mapping and smartphone augmented reality (AR) technology into a public mobile tour” (*Detroit Institute of Arts to premiere Lumin*).

Although interactive technologies are useful, the conventional methods to guide and educate patrons are still significant; however, they must be properly constructed to be most effective. The labeling of works or other written materials should compensate for visitors who may have no formal background or understanding of art history/terminology. An effective display label should “attract the readers’ interest and draw them in; anticipate and answer their questions; use a reader-relevant approach; address the reader directly; write in language that’s easy to understand and use a friendly, conversational tone, active voice and vivid language” (Black 280). Additional documentation (such as signage, guides and maps) should not only be used for marketing purposes but also to clearly identify the perimeters of the space and provide useful information about the specific galleries. Technology-based interpretive tools (i.e. mobile-oriented devices, visitor-generated content and more conventional aids like audio guides or interactive displays) have become the norm. Many organizations have also placed gallery attendants within the space (in lieu of or with security personnel) to actively engage visitors, promote interaction and provide information when needed (Samis and Michaelson 17).

Black outlines the effects of specific components (i.e. lighting, sight lines, object groupings and focal points) and the observable patterns of movement audiences often display within art spaces (279-280). Amongst the many variables the author lists, I have included the following:

- Exhibit elements near an exhibition’s entrance often get more attention.
- Large exhibitions have different averages for total time spent than small ones.
- The exit has a strong attraction; visitors often leave at the first opportunity.
- The time available for holding visitors’ attention is very limited. (Black 279).

In making use of the available data pertaining to visitor behaviors, organizations should augment existing, conventional methods. This includes encouraging audiences to have more freedom of movement; altering the “flow” of guests or the pathways established in the galleries. It has also been argued that incorporating communal rest areas (Black recommends they be circular areas rather than in lines) to promote interaction within the space is beneficial, “...evidence suggests that the exhibits that most effectively engage an audience are those encouraging social interaction, discussion, and involvement within and beyond the groups involved” (Black 202). Black includes “people watching” or observational learning as part of this effective engagement (202-203). Moreover, he argues that a variance in content, media and activities may be useful for lessening the mental and physical exhaustion and/or overstimulation that many museum visitors experience, what is commonly referred to as “museum fatigue” (Black 201).

Black describes audience behaviors in relation to museum design:

All of the elements relating to visitor motivation point to an audience which wants to make up its own mind on where to go, what to do, what to look at, how long to spend, etc. The intention in providing clear orientation, both at the entrance and within displays, is not to prescribe the route an audience should follow, the nature of the exhibits they should view,

the order in which they should do so, etc. Rather, it is simply to make sure the organizational structure is clear so that visitors know exactly what part of the museum or individual exhibit they are entering and can select for themselves. At base level this is a safety issue, applicable to all. It is also a psychological issue, in terms of both self-esteem and visitor empowerment (191).

Based on my research, I conclude that effective museum design must allow audiences a multitude of options so they may choose how best to experience the space. These options must take into consideration the different learning styles, personality types and other motivations that patrons may have. The spatial design, interpretive tools and other means to guide the viewer must heighten an understanding of the material and add to the overall experience.

Promoting Diversity

Many art institutions tend to be conservative with exhibition themes and ancillary programming; specifically those that are “family-oriented” or are characterized as “general interest” organizations: “Few general interest and even fewer family-oriented museums take on such topics [issues of racism or prejudice] with the specific intention to explore social justice or civic engagement” (Golding and Modest 217). A large number of these spaces focus their efforts on featuring “Blockbuster” exhibitions or similar content because they have proven to be useful for attracting audiences and often appeal to a larger segment of the population who may not normally attend arts events. While this is a positive aspect of these exhibitions, a common criticism is they do not often contain material that is relevant to multiple perspectives or display diverse aesthetics.

The “Blockbuster” exhibition may lack diversity because it is often comprised of works from permanent collections, loaned to other institutions (or in a network of institutions). There is a striking lack of inclusive representation in permanent museum collections. A recent analysis reflected the demographical makeup of the artists: “The study found that 85.4% of the works in the collections of all major US museums belong to white artists, and 87.4% are by men. African American artists have the lowest share with just 1.2% of the works; Asian artists total at 9%; and Hispanic and Latino artists constitute only 2.8% of the artists” (Bishara).

The demographical makeup of an organization’s immediate geographic community as well as those who are characterized as underrepresented groups within their region and abroad must be considered when developing content. Recent exhibitions or programs that have been successful in attracting diverse groups (from either the organization itself or other art spaces) should be assessed. This information can be applied to determine the potential value in change made to the organization (i.e. the marketing strategy, the strategic plan and the design and layout of the physical space) that are intended to attract and retain these demographics.

Leadership must ensure that policies and practices that will draw a more diverse constituency are made attractive to the museum governing boards or other managerial entities in order to be put in place. Curators have been at the center of critical forces from within and without: For some, curators have been persistently inattentive to the needs of diverse audiences. Others have accused curators of dumbing down complex concerns, often with too little

academic content, into sanitized forms for lowest common denominator audiences or of acting inappropriately as social workers preoccupied with social concerns they are ill equipped to address at the expense of their core duties of collections care and research (Golding and Modest 25).

It has been contended a more diverse staff may result in programming that “speaks” to a more culturally-heterogeneous constituency. Author Lonnie G. Bunch III asserts, “if museums are to be welcoming places for people of different racial, ethnic, social, economic, and educational backgrounds, and if they are to use their collections to present a variety of perspectives, they must recruit, hire or select, and foster the professional growth of trustees, staff, and volunteers who reflect diverse audiences and multiple perspectives” (Cole and Lott 4).

One could argue the great disparity that exists in visitor demographics along racial and ethnic lines is directly related to the lack of representation in the workforce. A national survey of museum administrators reported: “only 4.2% of museum directors were people of color. Of that percentage, 1% were African American, 1.2% were American Indian, 0.5% were Asian American, 0.2% were Pacific Islanders, and 1.3% Latino” (Cole and Lott 4). The inequity in staffing also involves a lack of women in directorship roles: “Among the museums in the Association of Art Museum Directors, women make up slightly less than 50 percent of the directors. However, of the 243 members of [the association], there are only five African American women. It is also important to note that women lag behind men in directorships held at museums with budgets over \$15 million. And women (...) earn seventy-one cents to every dollar earned by male directors” (Cole and Lott 16).

The systemic bias in the arts also corresponds to the board of directors within national institutions: “The demographic profile of museum board members reveals considerable ethnic and racial homogeneity along with minimal age diversity. Board composition is tipped to white, older males-more so than at other nonprofit organizations. Forty-six percent of museum boards are all white, compared to 30% of nonprofit boards” (Cole and Lott 143). The variance between the board makeup of museums versus other nonprofits is not accounted for. My personal assessment is it may be due to the inherent conservatism that exists within museum culture and because of the long-established racial/socioeconomic profile of donors.

There is an acknowledgment this homogeneity places organizations at a disadvantage. “The data show that museum directors and board chairs are in agreement that diversity and inclusion are important to help advance their missions, especially when it comes to: ‘understanding the changing environment from a broader perspective,’ ‘understanding the museum visitors,’ ‘and enhancing the organization’s standing with the general public’ (Cole and Lott 143). “(...) 77% of museum directors and 66% of board chairs indicate that expanding racial/ethnic diversity is important or greatly important” (143). Additional surveys revealed: “64% of museum directors are dissatisfied with the board’s racial diversity. 43% of museum directors are dissatisfied with the board’s age diversity and 24% of museum directors are dissatisfied with the board’s gender diversity” (143). While those surveyed accept the inequity that exists is damaging, they admit negligence in changing the status quo. The same source material revealed: “only 10% of boards have developed a plan of action for the board to become more inclusive, and only 21% have modified policies and procedures to be more inclusive” (143). One could argue that the lack of

representation that exists within contemporary museum culture is perpetuated by the status of the board of directors. Building a diverse staff will require alternative recruitment procedures. In addition to improving/adjusting existing policies, it has been suggested that conventional practices that place certain candidates at an advantage (unpaid internship programs, for example) should be phased out (Cohen).

The article “Museums Are Becoming More Diverse, But There’s Still Work To Do” by Benjamin Sutton identifies small but significant improvements in the sector. This is based on two recent reports that “reflect a growing awareness among museums and arts organizations that the cultural sector remains less diverse than the whole of American society...” (Sutton). Amongst its many findings, the research also indicates a small increase in the hiring of women and people of color (Sutton). The article features commentary from Madeleine Grynsztejn, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the current president of the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) regarding recruitment policies:

It needs to be a very aggressive and proactive commitment to diversifying the professional pipeline (...) It needs to be a very aggressive and proactive sensitization to unconscious bias in how you post your job descriptions, where you post your job descriptions, and to commit yourself to mentoring and cultivating brilliant people who might not have the absolute standard resume at that moment (Sutton).

Based on my findings, I feel the lack of representation in the arts community can be mitigated by an open dialogue that addresses exclusionary practices. There are many within and outside of the field who have questioned the outdated structure of art institutions; creating an awareness of existing issues. This dialogue must continue, intensify and result in clear and achievable goals. I believe that change will occur with continued internal and external pressure at every level.

An excellent example of the external pressure that may create change is the funding initiative proposed by Mayor Bill de Blasio. The New York Times article “New York Knows Its Arts Organizations Have a Diversity Problem. Now What?” by Julia Jacobs outlines the steps taken by both de Blasio and organizations within the city to put clear goals in place. “After years spent measuring and analyzing the problem, the city is now asking organizations to work on fixing it. In recent months, 33 cultural institutions on city-owned property submitted plans to boost diversity and inclusion among their staff and visitors; if they failed to do so, the city warned, their funding could be cut” (Jacobs). The article details the plans of several organizations (i.e. reaching goals and/or percentages related to diversifying the staff by specific end dates and enacting alternative recruitment policies). While the initiative has not yet been fully realized, it may prove effective for New York and could be applied to other geographical areas.

One could argue the systemic elitism found in museum culture has been a factor since its inception. We, as art leaders, must ask several questions: What role do the arts and its institutions play in contemporary society? How do art museums become relevant to a diversified audience? Does appealing to a wider audience signify we are compromising the ideals of our organizations? How do we structure spaces that promote inclusivity without compromising content and design?

In conclusion, information is available to assess the visitor profiles of regular arts attendees and the segments of the population who do not actively engage in the arts. This distinction is, most often, effected by socioeconomic factors and a lack of representation. The contemporary art museum must provide content that “speaks” to a wider, diversified public and provide spaces that are universally accessible and welcoming to both new and returning audiences. The spatial design, interpretive tools and other amenities should promote an understanding of the material, interaction and enjoyment. The great disparities that exist in this sector can be addressed by promoting the inclusion of multiple perspectives and voices. The challenge of leadership will be to develop art organizations that meet these goals.

Copyright by the author. All rights reserved.

Works Cited

- Bishara, Hakim. "Artists in 18 Major US Museums Are 85% White and 87% Male, Study Says." Hyperallergic.com, 3 June 2019, hyperallergic.com/501999/artists-in-18-major-us-museums-are-85-white-and-87-male-study-says/
- Black, Graham. *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Cohen, Alina. "How Art Museums Can Remain Relevant in the 21st Century." Artsy.net, 15 June 2018, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-art-museums-remain-relevant-21st-century
- Cole, Johnnetta B, and Laura L. Lott, editors. *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. Print.
- Davis, Ann, and Kerstin Smeds, editors. *Visiting the Visitor: An Enquiry into the Visitor Business in Museums*. Bielefeld, 2016. Print.
- "Detroit Institute of Arts to premiere Lumin." dia.org, Detroit Institute of Arts, www.dia.org/about/press/news/detroit-institute-arts-premiere-lumin-mob
- Falk, John H. *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*. Taylor & Francis, 2009. Print.
- Farrell, Betty, and Maria Medvedeva. "Demographic Transformation of the Future of Museums." American Association of Museums, The AAM Press, 2010. www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Demographic-Change-and-the-Future-of-Museums.pdf.
- Golding, Vivien, and Wayne Modest, editors. *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*. Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.
- Jacobs, Julia. "New York Knows Its Arts Organizations Have a Diversity Problem. Now What?" The New York Times, 29 July 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/07/29/arts/design/diversity-new-york-culture.html
- Kotler, Philip, Neil G. Kotler, and Wendy I. Kotler. *Museum Marketing & Strategy: Designing Missions, Building Audiences, Generating Revenue & Resources*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2008. Print.
- Samis, Peter S, and Mimi Michaelson. *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum*. New York [etc.]: Routledge, 2017. Print.
- "Sample Visitor Survey." jsma.uoregon.edu, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, jsma.uoregon.edu/sites/jsma1.uoregon.edu/files/Sample%20Visitor%20Survey.pdf

Sutton, Benjamin. "Museums Are Becoming More Diverse, But There's Still Work To Do."
Artsy.net, 8 February 2019, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-museums-diverse-work