

MUSEUM News

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Painting a tribute to Romare Bearden outside the National Museum of American Art.

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On the cover: Photographs of sculptures from the Seattle Art Museum's permanent collection, featured in "The Museum: Mixed Metaphors" (1993), an installation by Fred Wilson. Wilson used the photographs to demonstrate artists' attempts to represent members of cultures other than their own.

COMMUNITIES AND MUSEUMS

Partners in Crisis

BY IVAN KARP
AND
STEVEN D. LAVINE

Ivan Karp is curator of African Ethnology, Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C. Steven D. Lavine is president of the California Institute of the Arts. They are coeditors of Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture, published by Smithsonian Institution Press.

The 1990s begins as a troubled period for museums, but not for museums only. Virtually all cultural institutions have experienced a loss of authority in the past decade, and museums could hardly hope to be the only institutions to survive unchallenged. Now that the unprecedented economic expansion of the 1980s has been followed by the fiscal and social crises of the 1990s, museums along with other publicly supported and authorized institutions will be required to justify their activities and effectiveness. The freedom to choose more than a limited number of goals seems to be slipping away. Questions will be asked: What good do museums provide, and to whom? The answers to these questions, if they are to be satisfying, will surely have to be framed in terms of audiences served and service provided to civil society. As the recent difficulties of the New-York Historical Society demonstrate, no matter how precious the holdings or longstanding the tradition, institutions that are unable to demonstrate utility to patrons, public agencies, and changing audiences will be in jeopardy.

These are issues that surround the troubled but productive relations among museums and communities—not museums and *their* communities. The easy assumption that museums “possess” communities can easily be reversed. We examined these topics in a volume entitled *Museums and Communities*, in which we debated the ways in which museums and communities make claims on each other and examined the ways in which both were beginning to experiment with different forms of relationships. We believe that difficulty can be turned into opportunity. But that opportunity hinges on finding new ways of thinking and acting toward audiences

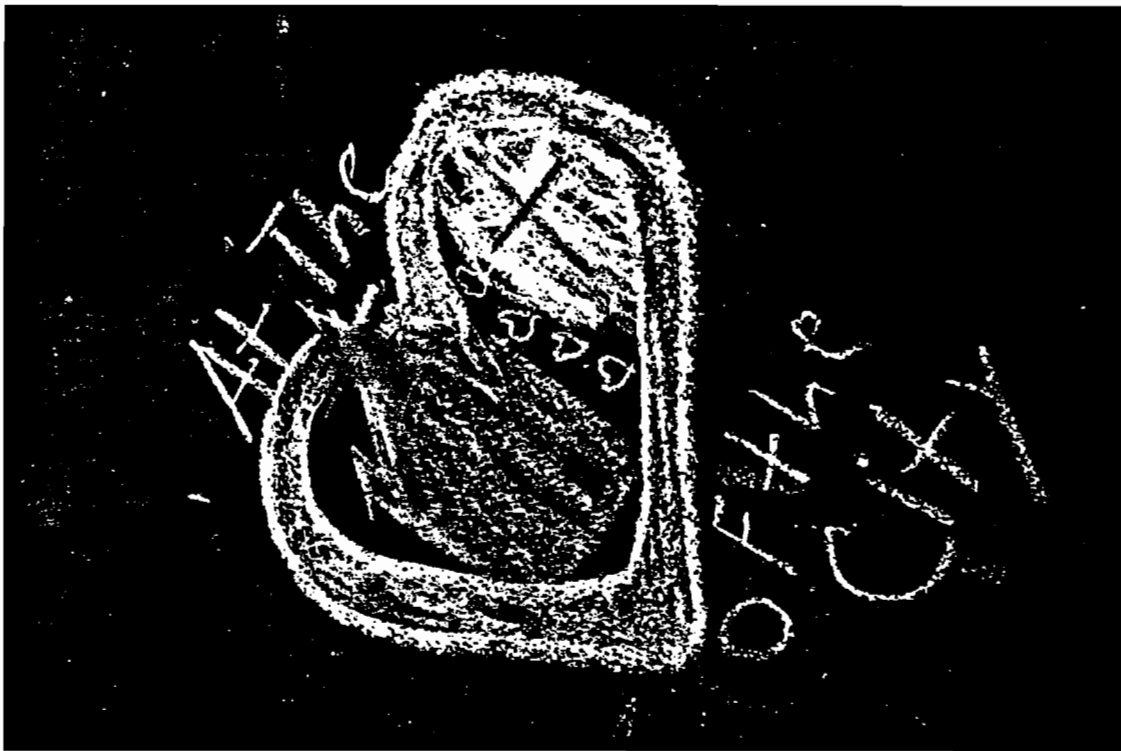
and the communities out of which they are formed.

Too often the primary measure of service to audience and society has been the number of museum visitors. As elite museums sought to bring ever more people through their doors, they turned increasingly to devices such as blockbuster art exhibits and massively expensive halls of science and culture filled with the latest in video displays and electronic devices. The nervousness manifested in this museum emphasis on spectacle was itself exacerbated by the sense some museum directors felt that they were being overtaken by well-financed tourist attractions such as the major theme-parks, which themselves began to claim educational missions. As George MacDonald, the director of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, has pointed out, more Canadians visit

adopted by museums.

In the long run these strategies enjoy only limited success. Even when the demographics of museum attendance can be altered by various means of increasing the diversity of audiences, museum-goers and museum critics ask what value emerges out of the museum experience. In a world of increasing competition for scarce resources, museums and other cultural and educational institutions must justify their existence on the grounds of content and social relevance. Numbers will no longer be sufficient. The quality of the museum experience will be a significant measure of museum success.

The museum experience is no longer a transparent and untroubled phenomenon. John Falk's and Lynn Dierking's recent book, *The Museum Experience*, describes the re-



Disneyworld in Florida than all Canadian museums combined.

Museums now often acknowledge that more is involved than audience numbers; attendance does not necessarily predict the quality of the museum experience. At the same time as they have endeavored to increase attendance, museums have expanded their education departments and devised ways of attracting constituencies who have not thought of themselves as part of the mosaic of communities related to museums. Bilingual materials, festivals and special events, exhibitions aimed at particular populations, and focused marketing are among the strategies that have been

search that can be used to make exhibit content and design relevant to the audience. Experience can only be enhanced if the audience and exhibit makers communicate. Communication requires each side to speak the language of the other, demanding an openness to learning, experimentation, and changing exhibition design. This sort of openness may be fundamentally incompatible with very expensive installations and exhibits that necessitate an extensive allocation of initial resources, making museums resistant to change.

Instead of a model of communication in which exhibit designers and curators decide (Please turn to "Communities," page 69)

("Communities," cont'd from p. 45)

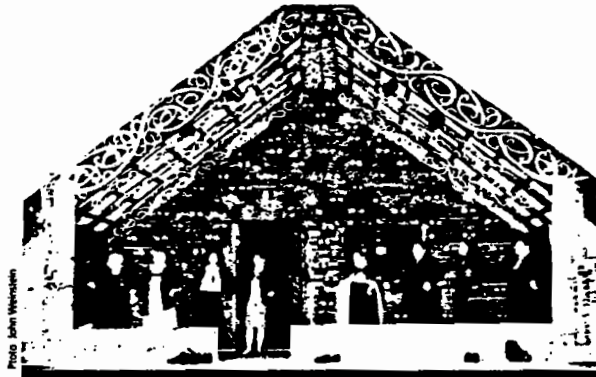
what visitors should be told and shown, interactive and experimental communication with audiences is beginning to be an important aspect of how some museums construct and plan their programs. This results in changes to exhibits and a broader set of programs. Educational programs are no longer restricted to the confines of the museum building and enormous efforts are put into the ancillary activities accompanying exhibits. At the same time audience responses are used in making changes to exhibits even after they are "finished."

Museum expansions into spectacular display and education may contradict one another. The first tends to seek the lowest common denominator of experience in order to draw in a large audience and the second depends on experiences focused on and tailored to specific audiences. Neither is perceived in some quarters as an unalloyed good. Adam Gopnik's recent *New Yorker* essay on "The Death of the Audience" (October 5, 1992) has found many sympathetic readers. Gopnik decries the decay of disciplined and private viewing in quiet circumstances that was a primary use made of museums in his youth. Gopnik considers the ideal museum to be a sanctuary maintained for individualized and private forms of attention. He condemns the crowded, rushed viewing that accompanies so many blockbuster exhibits and rightly points to the demands these make on budgets and staff time.

Gopnik also condemns turning the museum into a tourist attraction, and argues that tourist experiences are incompatible with ideals of the museum experience. In a sense he accepts George MacDonald's definition of the audience problem facing museums but rejects MacDonald's solution. Both Gopnik and MacDonald present the problem as a choice between two incompatible alternatives. But the situation is far more complex and the solutions more various than either makes out.

Gopnik writes about art museums, and MacDonald about culture history (Please turn to "Communities," p. 79)

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("Communities," cont'd from p. 69) museums. Our work has been concerned with a broader range of institutions. Moreover, it is an open question as to whether museums were always the sanctuaries for the few with taste and inclination that Gopnik describes. The Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded as a museum of reproductions displayed in order to elevate the taste of the working class of New York City. Dress codes were enforced in many museums during the 19th century and more efforts were made to discipline parts of the audience than to provide a setting for relaxed viewing. What Gopnik takes to be an eternal ideal may be no more than a brief mid-20th century moment in the longer histories of museums. At the end of the 20th century even those museums that wish to may no longer be able to afford this ideal.

The problem may be that Gopnik tends to think that audiences exist outside of a museum's attempts to attract and imagine them. What Gopnik

actually describes is the dissolution of a particular audience whose education prepared them to define museums as a significant aspect of their lifestyle. People came to museums prepared to accept and enjoy what museums had to offer because their education fit with the content of museums. As Gopnik points out, they came from the same segment of society that produced many contemporary museum professionals.

Diversity was not an issue. Now it is. Audience members with diverse backgrounds and identities come to museums. Members of the audience belong to different communities, and to more than one community at the same time. When they enter museums they do not leave their cultures and identities in the coatroom. Nor do they respond passively to museum displays. They interpret museum exhibits through their prior experiences, culturally learned beliefs, values and perceptual skills as well as memberships in multiple communities.

Every society is made up of a

changing mosaic of multiple communities and organizations. Individual identities and experiences never derive entirely from single segments of society, from merely one of the communities out of which the complex and changing social order is made. Individuals move from ethnic communities to formal organizations such as professional societies and back to communities again. They experience communities and identities not as whole entities but through specific social events in settings defined as relevant to the community. Communities are often thought of as things, and called thing-like names, such as the "Irish," the "blacks," the "Jews," the "WASPs." But they are actually experienced as encounters in which cultures, identities, and skills are acquired. These settings can involve communal groups as small and intimate as the nuclear family or as large and institutional as the convention of a professional society. People form their primary attachments and learn to be members of society in these set-

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tings, which can collectively be referred to as the institutions of *civil society*.

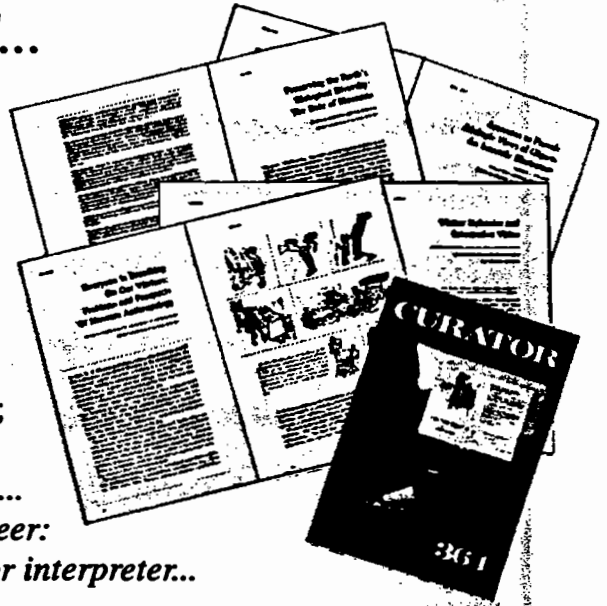
Museums and communities are only part of the mosaic of civil society, the complex of social entities in which we act out our lives and through which we fashion our identity. Periodically a "crisis in civil society" emerges in discourse and thinking about society, generally in periods of social upheaval such as we are currently experiencing. We need to think of civil society both as a site where legitimacy is asserted, where intellectual and moral commitment to the way a society is ordered and governed is communicated, and as a site for contesting assertions about who has the right to rule and define the different identities in society. This is how we view museums in *Museums and Communities*, as places for challenging and remaking definitions of who people are and how they should act.

Civil society is the crucible in which citizenship is forged. As integral parts of civil society, museums often justify their existence on the grounds that they play a major role in expressing, understanding, developing, and preserving the objects, values, and knowledge that civil society values and on which it depends. Arguments about the social significance of museums assert that museums can provide services in ways that other institutions cannot. As repositories of knowledge, value, and taste, museums educate, refine, or produce social commitments beyond what can be produced in ordinary educational and civic institutions. The museum is sometimes held up as the antidote to the failure of families to engage in moral education.

These claims for the relevance of the museum suggest an active stance toward society. Yet they are often articulated within museums that maintain a fundamentally conservative position, defining the museum as a repository rather than as an actor. Conceptions of museums that are fundamentally conservative often serve to insulate museums from changes the wider social order experiences. But this form of protection also

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makes museums irrelevant to civil society and undermines the role of the museum in society at large. There is no escaping from the world. Either museums seek actively to use their resources to participate in society or they withdraw and disappear.

Experimentation, not conservation, should be the hallmark of museums. Experimentation can take many forms, but for simplicity's sake, we identify two significant forms it is taking in museums: experiments with exhibition content and design and experiments with the processes through which exhibitions are organized. Many experimental exhibits and programs will have elements of both types in their planning and execution.

In the anthropology exhibition opened in 1990 at the Birmingham (England) Museum and Art Gallery, an ethnography collection assembled under colonial auspices has been refigured as "Gallery 33, A Meeting Ground of Cultures," designed to "encourage visitors to examine assumptions they make about their own and other people's cultures."

The curator, Jane Peirson Jones, describes this process in her essay in *Museums and Communities*. She assembled an advisory group chosen not as representatives of other communities but for their specific expertise (a community worker, a journalist, an anthropologist, etc.). As she describes it, community involvement was significant but clearly within the boundaries of the role of consultant; the authority remained with the museum professionals, in a continuation of their more or less traditional role.

The Birmingham museum demonstrates how the concerns of current scholarship and the community come together in experimentation with content and format. One part of the exhibition utilizes interactive videodisc technology to allow the visitor to follow the histories of four collectors—four persons who have some connection with the objects in the museum's inventory. This focus on the collector fits with current anthropological concern to unveil and analyze the specific historical circumstances under which bodies of thought (and museum col-

lections) come into existence. Perhaps it also fits with the city of Birmingham's interest in transforming itself from a no-longer-economically-viable industrial center to a convention and cultural center. But more important is the way in which "Gallery 33" seeks to make current scholarship that is critical of museums part of the exhibit content. This is not an easy task, nor is it always seen as relevant by the communities for whom it was designed. As Peirson Jones notes, Afro-Caribbean commentators have pointed out that interest in collectors is primarily a Western preoccupation.

A crucial question this exhibition raises concerns the focus on the cross-cultural commonalities of human experience, on the subordination of cultural differences. One point of view might hold that this is an appropriate civic policy that forges a larger community, in at least some senses, from a variety of smaller communities, which all have their own different (and perhaps unavoidably conflicting) interests. Another point of view might argue that this sort of emphasis in an exhibit emerges from the interests of the elite and is thus more acceptable to a dominant fraction of the population, who need have no fear that their differences will be ignored, than to populations being alternately encouraged and pressured to adapt and assimilate.

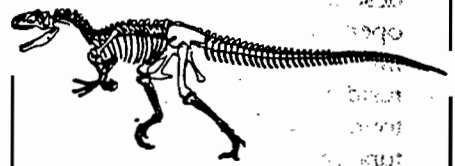
Our second example from *Museums and Communities* concerns a museum in the making that rigorously experiments with both content and interaction with the community of which it is a part. The New York Chinatown History Museum, described by its first director, John Kuo Wei Tchen, is devoted to the effort to "document, reconstruct, and reclaim" the history of a particular local ethnic community, while at the same time it casts its work in terms of the interconnectedness and the possibilities of broader civic and national participation. The museum staff's labors began in "personal memory and heritage," but they are also concerned with transposing those personal memories into a broader historical discourse, which clarifies "why life has become the way it is experienced." In the process, they combine

professional responsibility to their discipline with a sense of obligation to the community studied; they do not believe that one necessarily excludes the other. For example, they hope to overcome the overvaluation of the local which so often follows from social history, thereby contributing to the new synthesis for which many historians have called; at the same time, they hope to help Chinatown residents escape the limits of nostalgia and gain the "more integrative and inclusive community history [that] can help to counter the sense of marginalization and disempowerment."

Many museum officials and curators (along with others exercising cultural authority) have expressed reservations about what they see as both a disregard for objective truth and a movement toward cultural separatism implicit in African American, Asian American, and other ethnic-group-specific institutions. The Chinatown museum offers an example that might counter those fears. The valorization of a community's experiences—as in the museum's exhibitions on laundry and garment workers, which have their roots in the life histories of older members of the communities—creates an exhibition and programming environment "resonant with their personal experiences," one that allows visitors from the community to identify actively with the production of history. But this valorization is only a first step, allowing visitors to think actively about differences and continuities in the present.

This historical and moral/social project is possible because the Chinatown History Museum rejects any kind of ethnic essentialism. Its work stands firmly on the conviction that individual and collective identities are always complex and shifting. Within the Chinatown community, there are differences between a bachelor laundry worker and an import/export merchant with a family. Further, both participate in not only the history of New York but also that of the United States, each of which calls forth and shapes other and overlapping senses of identity.

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described as "a cultural free space for open discussion." Into this space are invited Chinese New Yorkers, other residents of the city's Lower East Side, tourists, and scholars and other cultural producers—in short, representatives of the varying groups who have defined the experience and perception of Chinatown.

With each, there is a process of discussion dependent on a kind of respectful listening that has not generally characterized the curator in authoritative cosmopolitan institutions. This listening characterizes the creation of exhibitions; equally, it becomes part of the exhibitions themselves; these include interactive installations that are designed to jog the memories of visitors and to create means for them to leave behind data, which will then become evidence for future exhibitions.

The Chinatown dialogic museum requires that every aspect of museum work and structure be reconsidered: archives, staff job roles, the allocation of organizational resources. This step is the key to the experiment. Even the

Chinatown museum has, according to Tchen, found itself overwhelmed with the new responsibilities it has taken on. Traditional collection-driven institutions, especially ones with a large number of artifacts to care for and display, have evolved structures to support that process. If active exchanges with communities are to become part of an institution's work, it will not happen by adding these activities at the margins, but by fundamentally reorganizing—with all that means, financially and organizationally.

All forms of experimentation, whether with content, design, or communities, address the relationship of museums to civil society, and become, almost by definition, attempts to alter relationships between museums and communities. Exhibitions can present the internal and differential experiences of various groups and may even trace how heritage interacts with history. Decisions about commonality and difference have, in turn, profound present-day social implications. As a society, we are debating how much difference is tolerable and

desirable. Given the influence of museums as valorizing agencies, whatever view is presented is (at least at this historical moment) of consequence. Even if the influence of museum exhibitions is less great than we like to imagine, museums will be challenged whichever direction they take. There is no way to avoid this challenge, and to duck it will simply render museums irrelevant. Rather, museums are summoned to treat challenges not so much as problems to be surmounted but as invitations to engage in conversations with shifting and multiple communities.

The fragile potential of the multiple relationships between museums and communities is never so important as it is in a crisis, such as the current crisis of civil society. Here museums may have special advantages. While museums have never been nor can they be neutral spaces, they can become public arenas, settings for examining civil society, in which the histories and creations of particular groups are represented for debate and reflection. ■



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