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## **Public Scholarship as a Vocation<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract:**

The calling of public scholarship is inherently multifaceted, and often inherently controversial; public scholars have to accommodate different spheres of society, different cultural values and goods, and even different political agendas in their work. Unlike academic workers, public scholars rarely have the opportunity to do work that is driven primarily by intellectual agendas; yet they also have to sustain fidelity to the ideas, values and standards of the disciplines they practice - even when sustaining fidelity means criticizing the most cherished tenets of the disciplines themselves. In this paper I argue that to be successful public scholarship must be animated by pluralist conception of society, a vision of the social world that recognizes that all of us live among different and incompatible cultures and that even the cultures we claim as our own have incommensurate and incompatible standards.

**Key Words:** Humanities, Museums, Publics, Public Scholarship, Vocation

Scholarship has a vocation, precisely in the sense that Max Weber described it in his magisterial essay “Science as a vocation” (Weber1946b). We should not allow the term “science” in Weber’s essay to mislead us. In his terms and for his time, “science” referred to systematic knowledge. For Weber theology was as “scientific” as chemistry. And for Weber, the calling of science meant that no compromise was allowable between the goals of pure and disinterested inquiry and the vocation of the scholar. In his equally powerful essay “Politics as a vocation,” Weber defined “politics,” by which he meant actions designed to affect society, in rather different terms. Politics, for Weber, has a somewhat different and more complex value structure. Compromise, he believed, defined the very essence of political action, whether the “politician” was an official of the state or a journalist. While politics should have “unrealistic aims, he thought, the goal of achieving realistic ends, he believed, trumped the unqualified

pursuit of ends that should define scholarly action.

We might make two ironic observations at this point in history. First the academy no longer is as isolated from commercial life as it may have been in Weber's time and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, now called "curiosity-based or curiosity-driven research," seems rather threatened in today's environment and "practical" or income derived research is often more valued. Second, as Weber asserted, the art of compromise that defined what he called "politics" requires far more from actors than the relatively unambiguous ethical requirements of scholarship. Weber's forceful comments are as relevant now as they were in the second decade of the twentieth century, when he wrote them. Political action, by which Weber meant actions devoted to a cause and intended to bring about change, must be aware of "the knowledge of tragedy with which all action, but especially political action, is truly interwoven." (1946a:117) By this he meant to acknowledge the essentially failed nature of all attempts at change which, none the less, make the possible happen only when we "reach out for the impossible." (1946a:128) Weber sought to contrast the simplicity of the life of scholarship (science) with the difficulty of the life of practical action (politics), which he described as "slow boring through hard boards." and requiring qualities of judgement and finesse the he believed few possess. Scholarship for Weber requires only devotion to the pursuit of truth. "Politics" or public work requires sensitivity to the plural nature of life in society and the painful necessity to compromise with competing and conflicting goals.

Yet this is the situation in which many academics seek to put themselves. They want to speak to the public or even work with the public. Many believe that the isolation of academy

and society produces work of intolerable narrowness or limited relevance. None the less, except for a few honorable exceptions public scholarship rarely means that scholars seek to work *with* the public and treat the public as if it were composed of knowledgeable agents. It may be that such work requires far too many compromises and judgements for many of us are ready to make, no matter what our commitment to public work. Nor has public scholarship acquired the respect for the qualities of judgement and finesse it requires, no matter how fashionable it has become.

This may be where the humanities have the most significant role to play and can find a grounds on which to stand. Humanistic work, at its best, is deeply public in the sense that it often inquires into such matters as the meaning through which people seek to define and lead their lives, or the criteria in terms of which they make judgements, and even the values in terms of which they discriminate among products of art and culture. Ideally the Humanities seek out and cultivate ambiguity and complexity, are comfortable with conflict and contradiction and understand the deeply tragic nature of all goal directed actions. If this somewhat contentious set of assertions are correct, then the central problem of public scholarship for academics, who are not the only public scholars, should become how to cultivate positive attitudes towards work with and directed to the public in academic setting that do not value and often denigrate public scholarship. Even when it is valued most public scholarship defines itself merely as a matter of communicating more simply for less sophisticated audiences. The problem becomes “How do I tell my story to an unsophisticated public audience?” But the public scholars seek to communicate with do not have a single

mind, and are not disposed to passive acceptance of what they hear and have strong and preconceived attitudes and opinions about much of what the scholarly community wants to tell them. Even worse for this simplistic view, members of the public are active agents, who have highly developed ideas and criteria of judgement about the very matters that are the subject of scholarly communication to them.

These attributes of members of the public are not often acknowledged in academic discourse about the public. The public tends to be an academic “other”, defined more in terms of stereotypes and broad strokes and less through actual interaction and communication. In what follows I attempt a definition of public scholarship that is both sympathetic to humanistic concerns and open to the possibility of scholarly work with members of the public that neither subordinates the scholarly self nor constructs different publics as lacking in skill and knowledge. The basis for this essay is derived from my experience as a curator in the Anthropology Department of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, a situation that was rife with contradictions between my definition of self as a humanistic scholar and my employment in an organization devoted to Natural Science and filled with the contradictions between working with publics and lecturing to the public that defines the experience of public scholarship.

### **Introduction**

I speak and write as a born again academic, a former museum curator who had once been an academic, and has now returned to the scene of his first crimes. I think I have some sense of how life is conducted in two kinds of institutions that I am going to call “academic”

and “public.” Obviously *all* organs of civil society concerned with the production and dissemination of knowledge are public, but they are public in different ways, with different but overlapping mandates and they make somewhat different but overlapping demands on their personnel. But I believe that academic institutions differ in significant ways from other kinds of public institutions, such as museums.

Of course the public institution I once worked in had its own specificity. It was not just the Smithsonian Institution, but the National Museum of Natural History, a peculiar institution if ever there was one. I also had the opportunity to work with the Smithsonian’s art and history museums. In the process I learned that tribal warfare was alive and well in my nation’s capital and that the more we had in common the greater was the distance among us. Then I moved to a university rhetorically committed to interdisciplinarity, but so radically departmentalized that the science departments would not ask an historian of science to participate in their plan to develop an introduction to science. I felt right at home.

With the hope of narrowing the distance among different kinds of museums, not to mention other public institutions I began to think about the broad category of “public scholars,” which I intend to refer to the large but often unacknowledged body of credentialed and uncredentialed workers who produce and disseminate knowledge for the various segments of civil society that we call “publics.”

This category can include many of the employees who work in museums, and even artists (especially if we assume that the act of producing art is also an act of producing and distributing knowledge.) I am drawing a contrast here between public scholars and academics.

The contrast is both ideal and real, but what I am trying to get at is the difference between producing knowledge that will be disseminated to a community composed of like minded and trained professionals, no matter how contentious, and producing and disseminating knowledge across a cultural and social *boundary*. The latter is for me a significant feature of public scholarship. The boundary may be defined by different languages and cultures or by different standards of rhetoric and truth. There can be fundamental differences between the rhetorical tools used in exhibitions and those used in a scholarly article - just as the classroom has its own skills and standards. Yet as educational institutions, museums and universities have much in common. Smithsonian researchers have found that the only significant shared attribute of their museum audiences that they can isolate is the possession of a education. It may be that the boundary between those who hold a college degree and those who do not have one is a boundary that American museums, at least, have yet to cross.

Yet the boundaries between the academy and other institutions of civil society have always been permeable and blurred. The popular image of the university as an ivory tower is now less than ever an ideal toward which academics should strive. The specialization and expertise that are necessary in technologically complex societies require that institutions of higher education play a major role in producing and reproducing knowledge and society. Increasing specialization in the production of knowledge often results in that knowledge being increasingly "owned" by people who possess the resources and credentials that enable them to operate at the highest levels of the national and international public spheres. The academy is thus pulled in two opposing directions at one and the same time, to produce specialists and

specialist knowledge and at the same time to be relevant and engaged in applying that knowledge to society.

Communication across the boundary between the credentialed specialist and the complex of communities that make up the broader society is but one casualty of an age of specialization. Limited access to the knowledge and symbolic capital of expertise also hinders the exposure that different communities composing the social fabric of societies have to one another.

As experts and specialists take advantage of the flow of information made possible by new technologies, other members of their societies may have ever more limited access to knowledge, experience and interaction with each other than they have to the different cultures presented to them in mass media. The unintentional product of the advanced stages of this process is that fewer opportunities are created for people from different backgrounds to explore what they may have in common and what may make them different, both across national boundaries and in the same society. Their interaction is replaced by specialists and experts who act as their surrogates but belong to transnational professional communities.

A second consequence of the separation of communities is that the knowledges local communities and different cultures use to manage their lives and solve their problems also become unavailable to specialists whose work it is to aid those communities. As the boundaries between communities harden, it becomes difficult for experts and specialists either to communicate across those boundaries or to work in multiple community settings.

Specialization and expertise are both necessary and beneficial, but the separation of

societies into rigid classes of specialists and clients is neither necessary nor a social good. Social organizations based on expertise tend to ignore the body of specialists who operate in community settings, who may not be academically credentialed, and work across community boundaries. While these scholars and specialists may not have the same prestige and power as those who work in formal educational, research, consulting and development agencies, they are better placed to know and serve people who are not at the pinnacle of transnational social systems. I have in mind scholars and specialists whose work requires them to be intimately involved in more than one community and one cultural world at the same time, *and to connect those worlds.*

Museums can be institutions that reinforce the divide between specialists and clients or they can be institutions that regularly cross boundaries, for example, by working with community scholars or by bringing the museum into different communities. Thus the broad category of public scholars, based in communities or cultural institutions themselves, might include community physicians of the sort that John Berger described as “clerk recorders of the community,” museum curators interested in working with underserved audiences, community arts organizers and activists, health educators and activists, strike leaders and labor historians working with labor unrest, some documentary film makers, and folklorists and performers who seek to preserve and renew community-based performance forms.

What all of these figures have in common is that they are highly trained and technically competent scholars whose scholarship works in the service of understanding the perspectives embodied in the visual and verbal modes of communication of different cultures, of

documenting multiple forms of art and performance or of working on problems that people of different communities all face from a point of view that includes *their* issues and the knowledges they draw on to manage their lives. At the same time they work with local (vernacular) scholars who may not themselves be credentialed, including AIDS activists, strike leaders who have theories and ideas about the history of the relationship between labor and capital, so-called untrained artists (who are trained but not in academic traditions of art). Often public scholars work out of institutions of public scholarship, such as museums, which have the potential to become spaces for developing models of collaboration that might bring together participants from different cultural worlds, whose joint scholarship has the capacity to speak across many boundaries. The key to making scholarly work that is multifaceted and multi-perspectival, that extends across boundaries rather than reinforcing boundaries, is the mediating role played by public scholars themselves who work on the front line between the academy and communities, as well as between many communities. Museum professionals fit this definition of public scholars. They are asked to cross these boundaries continually.

The challenge for academics who aspire to do public scholarship and for public scholars themselves is to find ways of turning the spaces where they work into settings where they can draw on the best of the academy and of multiple communities.

Specialization is necessary and important but it too often produces disengaged scholars and professionals who are “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart,” in Max Weber’s evocative description of the modern predicament. In universities, in large museums, in think tanks and foundations, contemporary scholarship, teaching and service are

often far too self contained. In many public institutions service appears unconnected to scholarly goals and teaching or for that matter, exhibiting, is perceived as more a price to be paid for occupying an academic position rather than as an integral part of an academic calling.

Both academics and scholar activists badly need one another if they are both to work on the project of producing a society that can serve its diverse communities in a just fashion. The skills and systematic knowledge available in academic settings need to be paired with the local knowledges and sense of immediacy that comes from immersion in the life of communities.

### **A Definition of Public Scholarship**

Museums and universities alike, even private ones, are public places; they are enmeshed in the social fabric of the cultures out of which they grow. Thus, broadly speaking, all scholarship is public. It is made for communities of people and made out of the shared resources of those communities. Even the natural sciences have been culturally and historically shaped; scientists conduct scientific activities within the context of social concerns and needs. The humanities and social sciences must explicitly study what is publicly known, publicly evaluated, and socially experienced.

From a more restricted point of view, scholarship intersects with specific communities and publics. That is, scholars often address their work to particular communities--ranging from other scholarly professionals to members of the general public who visit museums, see films, listen to the radio, and so forth. Academics often address various publics or claim to express public points of view; frequently members of the public are both the subjects and

(often unacknowledged) collaborators of their research and writing.

Of course, the relationship between scholars and various "publics" has long been a source of debate. Some insist that scholarship may be divorced from personal interest. They hold that using certain methodologies, which they deem objective, will produce the distance between the student and the studied that is necessary to achieve validity. From this point of view communities are objects to be understood from without. Others argue that each culture has a set of standards that are neither commensurate with any other, nor are there any universal standards by which they should be judged. Communities can only be understood by their own members whose "voices" have been silenced by members of dominant cultures. The first position can be called "objectivist" and places the scholar in the position of the privileged knower. The second position is strongly relativist and identifies the members of communities as the only possible owners of knowledge about them. The first position fails to account for the ways that society itself is produced by knowledgeable agents, who make history - if not always under circumstances of their own choosing. But relativism has its flaws as well. It is simply unable to acknowledge or account for cultural, social and political diversity in communities; real relativists find themselves unable to exercise moral judgements when oppression is internal to different cultures and communities. They also fail to allow for the reflective examination of cause and pattern in human affairs that only distanced scholarship may be able to provide.

Objectivism and relativism are hotly debated in such divergent arenas of academic life in the U.S. as the political correctness debate, in the concerns about abandoning the canon in

study of literature and art; the substitution of non-western history for Western Civilization courses in history; and debates about sexuality and minority visions of identity. Even when the issues are connected to debates about what is critical for understanding other parts of the globe, the arguments often center on which cultural traditions to emphasize in the curriculum or the museum or in the nation. In the U.S. we have debated whether national history standards promote a “true” picture of the American past. These arguments are surface manifestations of underlying contests about what vision of society will prevail in a nation state, and even in the global public sphere.

Surely it is possible to take a third position that is neither objectivist nor relativist. I believe that all human existence is fundamentally plural. All societies are composed of communities that are both different from one another and yet also share some cultural traits and experiences in common. Cultures and societies are composed of incommensurate goods and value. If this is so, then rational procedure can not create a single hierarchy in which all cultures, values and goods can be ranked. The connections among them must be mediated. A fundamental goal of any plural social order is seek to specify what its members have in common and how they differ. The most fundamental freedom in a plural society is not the freedom to do something, but the negative image of the freedom to do, which is the freedom to resist the demand to do something.

A pluralist perspective argues that social experience itself is made of a patchwork of commonalities and differences. From this point of view a fundamental goal of society must be to tolerate and even celebrate otherness without seeking to own it. Pluralists seek to uncover

those shared aspects of culture and experience that can bring those who are culturally different together, and also to take the opposite task, to highlight those features of our lives that distinguish one community from another. The task of a scholar committed to a pluralist point of view is to stand both inside and outside of any given community at one and the same time. As it is impossible to stand in no place at all, this also requires public scholars to maintain simultaneous positions in more than one culture or community at one and the same time, and to strive to make connections among cultures and communities.

The goal of realizing a plural society can be vital for the institutions engaged in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Public institutions and public scholars have the potential to incorporate plural perspectives in their work, to recognize that sources of knowledge are as diverse as society itself and that academic and specialist scholarship in the broadest sense must strive to connect with knowledge produced outside of academic institutions.

In order to take this stance public scholars need to understand that knowledge produced within a single community or from a single perspective is just a starting point, and that knowledge produced within academic institutions is often incomplete and unconnected to the problems and prospects of contemporary life. Academic knowledge is shaped by 19th century disciplinary structures that can be significant impediments to good interdisciplinary work. I share Bruno Latour's bleak vision of an academy staffed by isolated scholars working on partial solutions to half problems:

Offer the established disciplines some fine sociotechnological network, some

lovely translations, and the first group will extract our concepts and pull out all the roots that might connect them to society or to rhetoric; the second group will erase the social and political dimensions, and purify our network of any object; the third group, finally, will retain our discourse and rhetoric but purge our work of any undue adherence to reality - *horresco referens* - or to power plays. In the eyes of our critics the ozone hole above our heads, the moral law in our hearts, the autonomous text, may be of interest, but only separately. That a delicate shuttle should have woven together the heavens, industry, texts, souls, and moral law - this remains uncanny, unthinkable, unseemly (Latour 1993:5).

Public scholars can not afford to work only on arbitrarily selected aspects of the problems they choose, or from a single perspective; nor can academics hope to produce significant results if they continue to do so. The world that specialization made no longer conforms to the forms of specialization that created it. Public scholarship has got to be organized by the acknowledgment that society is composed of people who live in complex and overlapping cultures and communities and have complex identities themselves; that the creation of identity is a complicated and enigmatic phenomenon; that knowledgeable actors produce society, but that the society they produce is not always the society they imagined; and that knowledge (out of which identity emerges) may be produced and disseminated in a variety of forms and by "experts" who may or may not be credentialed. As I imagine it, projects animated by the combined ideals of public scholarship and pluralism endeavor to bring together expertise derived from diverse contexts--and produced in forms that are more diverse

than the scholarly article--and to create a setting which does not establish hierarchies of knowledge without first examining how those hierarchies are made.

### **Public Scholarship and Museum Controversies**

Public scholarship is no easy task. Public scholars must be specialists who cast a cold eye on their own specialisms, generalists who work across many boundaries and are keenly aware of how their work affects and is affected by the mosaic of overlapping communities with whom they work. And I haven't even mentioned that dreadful topic of all museum conferences, the crisis in funding.

For museums the demands of public scholarship can be seen clearly in the sphere of exhibiting. Exhibit making crosses an extraordinary number of boundaries. Exhibits are clearly forms of scholarly activity, but except in the smallest museums, they are not the solitary work of the library bound humanist, nor even the highly coordinated but socially isolated work of laboratory researchers. Despite what curators would like to think, exhibits are not made by heroic scholars closeted in studies writing scripts. In the largest institutions, the team that actually makes an exhibit is composed of a formidable array of specialists, who interact in terms of complementary skills and conflicting interests. Curators who hold the knowledge and define the interpretations to be exhibited confront designers who believe that theirs is a higher calling, that they have a true picture of the real arrangements of things. Conservators who feel that the very act of exhibiting will destroy an object jostle with script writers, exhibit developers, audience researchers and members of the education department, who are left to explain to the public what little coherence may have emerged from the unruly process of

exhibit making.

Obviously my description is extreme, unless you were employed by the same museum that I worked for, but the tendency to disorder is ever present in museum exhibits. And matched only by the order claimed by museums and expected by the public. Speaking of his library Walter Benjamin once said that “The disorder of a collection is matched only by the order of its catalog” (actually quoting Anatole France) (Benjamin 1968:60). True enough for museums, and even truer for their exhibits.

The internal boundaries and conflicts entailed by exhibit making are nothing compared to the external boundaries crossed in exhibit making. Exhibits, all exhibits, cross at least the boundary between the museum and its publics. This is a fundamental cross cultural experience that may include crossing more cultural boundaries than the one that separates specialists and the general public. The context of the exhibit may have its own cultural boundaries to cross, and museum audiences are more frequently than not composed of people who have complex identities and memberships in multiple communities.

The diversity of museums audiences should not obscure for us the one significant attribute they share with one another. Members of the audience expect museums and their exhibits to tell stories. Surely enough, museums do tell stories, and the stories they tell are inferred by museum publics from the order they attribute both to exhibitions themselves and the whole of the museums in which exhibitions are placed.

Museums tell stories through the use of visual and narrative devices in exhibits and in the spaces between exhibits, which are far more important that most of us think. Within

museums, the boundaries crossed among museum professionals and audiences involve exhibit makers and audiences alike in acts of mediation and representation -- translating meaning from one cultural system to another, specifying the different times, places, and contexts referred to by the museum and its exhibits, as well as creating different settings and contexts within the museum itself (permanent displays, gift shops, cafes, temporary exhibitions, entrance foyers, etc -- Andrea Fraser's performance art shows how important these differences are by blurring and playing on them) (Fraser 1991, 2006). But the stories expected and inferred provide cohesion for these acts; they are part of the interpretive process through which boundaries can be crossed or divisions can be deepened.

Broad exhibitionary narratives are associated with at least two sites. The first is the exhibition itself, but the second is the museum as a whole. As I try to suggest below, the overall arrangement of museums, especially the large art, culture, and natural history museums are not perceived as intentionally made by the museum professionals who work in them. But the very ways that museums sort themselves into different genres and the ways that they draw on their cultural authority lead audiences to expect that the narratives of exhibit halls are extended to the museum as a whole and vice versa. These differences in narrative expectations are part of the boundary between museum professionals and audiences. Museum professionals see different halls as different books in a library, while museum visitors may see them more like chapters within a single book.

The major American museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, create elaborate installations, and expend enormous sums on architecture in order to indicate

to their audiences that as they move through the museum, they move across times and spaces. They set up sequences of time and space which may seem haphazard to them and the audience, but they are sequential none the less.

Even when museum professionals protest that the sequence of exhibits is not designed to communicate messages and ideologies, members of the audience will find meanings in their experience of the museum. In the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, the entrance at one end of what was formerly the Hall of African Cultures was at the end of the Ice Age Hall. The last display in the Ice Age Hall showed a Neanderthal Man standing in a cave, perhaps in a ritual posture. Even I thought he looked a bit apprehensive. His field of vision took in the doorway and he gazed directly into a diorama in the Hall of African Cultures, the interior of a circa 1950's dwelling among the Himba of Namibia. The Himba in the house were dressed in customary dress, women's clothing derived from late nineteenth century missionary dress, while the Neanderthal man was dressed in skins.

Neither the curator of the Ice Age Hall nor the curator of the Hall of African Cultures conspired with one another to make this transition. The halls had been installed about 15 years apart. For 25 years no audience member is recorded as having remarked that in the museum the Ice Age ended at a point where African culture, circa 1955, seemed to begin. In the early 1990's, however, this remarkable sequence began to attract notice. At least the audience response began to be reported to the museum. The museum received letters from scholars and the public describing their dismay at finding Africa put one step above Neanderthal man in a scale of cultural evolution. One woman wrote of seeing a group of primary school students in

which the black students were teased about their primitive status by the white students. The staff of the museum protested that this was not their intentions, that Africa didn't have an Ice Age, that the halls in the museum had no logical or narrative sequence, that the halls had been installed a different times and with rather different intentions, and so on.

I made all of those protests myself. I think they are valid, particularly when a scholar as distinguished as Mieke Bal interprets the culture halls of the American Museum of Natural History as if they were made at one point in time. Professional protests made with good intentions ignore a fundamental feature of museums, that they provide ready made narratives for interpreting the objects and displays in them. No matter how pluralistic and relativizing the curators of the Natural History museum in Washington might be, they work in a display and research environment that is dedicated to illustrating the theory of evolution. It is a small step for its audience to extend the theory of evolution from natural species to cultures, which in a natural history museum setting are easily redefined as natural species. Eventually the Hall of African Cultures was shut down. The new hall, African Voices, has an entrance in the same place, but Neanderthal man will no longer gaze into his African future. Still I am not convinced that the narrative of the museum will not determine the audience's interpretation. I once suggested that signs be put at the entrances of each of the culture halls stating "You are leaving the National Museum of Natural History and entering an evolution free space." Would they have worked?

As I've just argued, the difficulties of representation entailed by showing and telling stories about sequences of events over time or space are no less daunting than those entailed

in the task of capturing a moment in time. Problems of representation and mediation confront all museums and all exhibits and are exacerbated by the norms of showing and telling that museums set up for themselves, especially the norm that specifies that story telling must be a visual experience in museums.

I know that I am treading on thin ice here. Many in the museum community believe that narrative is best left to books, but I want to stress that seeing is part and parcel of the narrative process. The power of museum exhibits, in my opinion, is that the stories they tell are made in multimedia environments. They achieve the effects of the “real” in ways that are significantly different from texts and often far more effective.

This is due in no small part to the ways in which the combination of visual and textual means of communication produce an aura of authenticity in museums (Karp and Kratz 2000). Authenticity is both an effect that exhibit makers strive to achieve and an experience that audiences come to expect. But this is exactly the point where the vocation of public scholarship bears on exhibit making. Authenticity is a goal and an experience, but it is also an ideological effect. Authenticity, in other words, is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. It's not made by museum magic; it is the intentional outcome of a process that involves curation and design. It is simply an effect achieved by museum professionals.

The idea of the authentic legitimizes and authorizes museums, just as the hope of alleviation of suffering authorizes and legitimizes public scholarship and activism in health. I have no objection to those goals, but I strongly object to exhibits that use the ideology of authenticity to exempt their own content and work from criticism, that do not acknowledge

that they are made by fallible human beings and not god-like creatures. There are problems with art museums curators who claim that a lifetime of experience provides them with an eye that others do not have, or history curators who know the true story of times past, or even with exhibit designers who speak only to the divinity. These persons make knowledge claims that do not take into account the different contexts and structures out of which knowledge emerges and most certainly do not see themselves as involved in the task of crossing boundaries. The more exclusive their claim to authenticity, the less their exhibits share with audiences the criteria on which judgements were made, and the doubts that accompanied those judgements, the more an exhibit turns from a conversation into a lecture.

Lectures may work in the classroom and even in museum conferences, but they are a poor exhibiting strategy. They hide the contingent nature of all claims to authenticity underneath strong claims to unquestioned authority. Not only are boundaries left uncrossed, but educational opportunities are lost. We may be able to show our audiences the best of contemporary art, or how in the U.S. the West was won, or how the religion of another culture imagines the world. But if we can not show the process through which our judgments were made, that those judgments are provisional and not final, that there are bases on which our judgments can be contested, or that there are other stories we chose not to tell, then the final product is not a work of public scholarship. What we have in the end may be a well crafted exhibit, but it will also be an exhibit that chooses to remain on one side of a boundary and refuses the invitation of public scholarship - to take the risk of crossing boundaries.

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**Biographical Note**

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