CHAPTER FOUR | PAPER

RETHINKING PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE IN A WEB 2.0 WORLD

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IN 2007 NINA SIMON argued that rather than simply engaging with Web 2.0 technologies museums should implement similar design strategies to create "meaningful visitor engagement" both online and on-site (Simon, 2007). Asking why museums allow visitors to participate online but not in exhibition spaces, Simon advocated a move towards a more holistic approach to visitor engagement. This 2007 article was a forerunner to, and test bed for, ideas that Simon further explores in her 2010 book *The Participatory Museum.* Central to this book is her argument that museums can't simply throw open the doors and invite people in, but instead need to "design for participation". *The Participatory Museum* was, and still is, a key text because it forges a new vision for what participatory practices could look like in museums now and in the future. Simon advocated the benefits of participation and participatory design which go beyond education departments and reach into every area of museum practice from marketing to collection policies. Building on the widely-cited work of Simon, this chapter examines the progress museums have made towards becoming more open, agile and participatory institutions since the publication of *The Participatory Museum* in 2010.

Participation creates a special bond between museums and visitors and Simon's book has been widely acclaimed as an important tool in helping museums develop that bond. Indeed, the challenge of designing for participation in an ever-changing digital world is not unique to the cultural sector; the challenges expressed by Simon are also mirrored by the creator of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, who reflects:

> I had (and still have) a dream that the web could be less of a television channel and more of an interactive sea of shared knowledge… I imagine it immersing us in a warm, friendly environment made of things we and our friends have seen, heard, believe or have figured out. (Rose, 2011: 96)

Whilst not exactly an accurate portrayal of what the web has become, the vision proposed by Berners-Lee is something which many museums are striving to become both on and offline. However, more than simply being a friendly and welcoming place, museums need to maintain their unique attributes as trusted and reliable sources of information. Tom Glocer, former CEO of Reuters argues that:

> If you want to attract a community around you, you must offer them something original and of a quality that they can react to and incorporate in their creative work. (Rosen, 2012: 15)

Creative work is not confined to professional "creatives". In a digital age, everyone is a creative producer, a publisher and distributor – from Facebook posts, to YouTube videos. Creative production and knowledge distribution has been changed forever by Web 2.0 technologies (Gauntlett, 2011), and so too has the demand for visitor led-participation in museums, from taking photographs, to live streaming a visit. Whilst this presents museums with new opportunities to invite visitors in as both users and visitors, Jenny Kidd argues that we must also consider the possible negative impact which open

participation can create. In *Museums in the New Mediascape*, Kidd flags the potential for visitor-created content to result in potentially "chaotic" modes of storytelling, where the narrative of the museum and visitor are indistinguishable (Kidd, 2014). Kidd's book takes an interdisciplinary approach to examining how we define and realise participatory practices in museums. By examining participation from a range of perspectives, including development, media studies and art history, Kidd presents a robust and at times critical theory of participation. Through a benchmarking audit of media content across twenty UK museums, Kidd identifies a diversity in practice from memes to social media and proposes a model of *The Transmedia Museum*. Through empirical research Kidd outlines how museum experiences have moved away from satisfying, contained experiences, to challenging and ubiquitous experiences which exist beyond the walls of the museum. When examining what participation means within the context of web 2.0 technologies and digital culture, complexity is at the heart of this new paradigm, a paradigm that is in a constant state of flux. For the purpose of this chapter, I consider (digital) participation, to be active engagement mediated by digital technologies. In other words, the act of creating digital content, be that while in a museum, or beyond the walls of a museum, and crucially content that is created through an invitation (what Simon would refer to as scaffolding), but also digital content created as the result of a visitor using their own initiative. Importantly, the quality and reach of such content is not of significance, instead this chapter focuses on the act of participating rather than the quality of content created.

In the preface to his 2012 book *What You Really Need to Know*

about the Internet, Naughton (2012) outlines the force at which this "new" media ecosystem demands organisational and institutional change:

> Our new media ecosystem is immeasurably more complex than the one in which most of us were educated and conditioned. Yet complexity is something that we have traditionally tried to ignore or control. Since denial and control are no longer options, we need to tool up for the challenge. In particular, we need to pay attention to how complex systems work, and to how our organisations need to be reshaped to make them cope with the complexity that now confronts them. (Naughton, 2012: 5)

This idea that denial is no longer an option is already evident in museum places and spaces. Walk into any museum and you will see a significant proportion of visitors with mobile devices in their hands. In the 1980s, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill wrote about the challenge facing museums as they were forced to compete with other leisure providers and justify their public subsidy. Today that competition has become fiercer and more difficult, with commercial lures, social networks and rival leisure providers all seeking to engage with visitors via their mobile phones (at times even when they are physically in a museum building). However, technology writer Rohan Gunatillake argues that by meaningfully engaging in conversations with their audiences, cultural organisations can work in partnerships to develop new business models fit for purpose within this new media ecosystem. A business model centred on the principles of openness, and designed like Web 2.0 to facilitate

dialogue and foster participation from allowing users to suggest exhibition topics (low-level participation), to choosing how a museum spends its annual collections budget (complete sharing of decision making) (Gunatillake, 2008). Gunatillake emphasises the need for those conversations to be meaningful and genuine – which he defines as "genuine dialogue, not the managed monologues that can too often be passed off as conversation". But more than simply talking to visitors, he asks "How can individual organisations look to bring the spirit of collaboration to their core?" (Gunatillake, 2008). Daniel Spock shares Gunatillake's view that control is at the centre of participatory museum practices, and poses the following question:

> Is there something fundamentally disingenuous about museums pursuing these participatory models, if control is bound to remain the prerogative of the museum? (Spock, 2009: 9-10)

Perhaps one way of challenging the inherent power imbalances of museum participation which is designed around scaffolding accepted modes of participation is to move beyond scaffolding towards an open-ended invitation to participate; from free Wi-Fi to allowing visitors to take photographs, there are many ways museums can move towards encouraging visitor initiated participation.

From commissioning to production and programming, Gunatillake advocates a move towards open innovation, which he describes as a spirit of engagement rather than a tangible process: "The spirit of open innovation is that there is just as much talent outside of your wall than within, indeed most probably more". However, like Simon (2007; 2010), Gunatillake

(2008) recognises that for "openness" to work engagement and input need to be facilitated and managed. If an organisation's invitation to participate is too open it will not motivate people to get involved and the experience for those who do participate will be messy and unrewarding. Further, mirroring Simon, Gunatillake also recognises that making the parameters of participation too narrow can also be problematic: "make it too closed however and it can feel exploitative and the potential value of collaboration partners will be quickly lost" (Gunatillake, 2007). Each project and institution is different and so too are the parameters needed to facilitate successful engagement, which is perhaps why Gunatillake chooses the rather ambiguous word *spirit* to describe the type of participation he advocates cultural organisations should engage in. His article leaves cultural organisations with three key qualities to strive towards: Participation, Conversation, Collaboration. Web 2.0 has provided museums with the tools to facilitate a new dialogue-based business model, one which recognises the value of visitors, whether through simple economics (more visitors will increase the case for public subsidy), or a more fundamental model which recognises the cultural value that visitors can add to the institutional knowledge of a museum and its collections. The concept of visitors adding value to museum collections and generating increased revenue is one which underpins the friends' scheme at Dallas Museum of Art (DMA). The DMA Friends scheme saw the museum move from a paid, to a free-entry model, with visitors required to become Friends in order to gain entry (Stein & Weiman, 2012).

Pursuing a vibrant community of engaged participation is the key to sustaining the relevance of the museum to its

audience, and the DMA has taken the first steps towards creating the knowledge, cross-departmental collaboration, and technical tools needed to form a replicable model for encouraging participation in art museums.

DMA has developed a digital interface which allows both users (visitors) and museum staff to track engagement, from knowing a visitor's name, to when their birthday is, or how they take their coffee. They are using data as a means to develop a more relevant, and user-centric visitor experience. Whilst it could be argued that the motivation behind this approach is not about encouraging participation, but instead merely a business-focused customer service initiative, DMA Friends is a useful example of a museum seeking to develop a new relationship with visitors. A relationship which challenges the concept of "the visitor" by experimenting with the concept of "user", "friend" and "participant". By moving from a visitor to a Friends model of engagement DMA has changed the idea of a single visit towards an ongoing dialogue. Something which is evidenced in visitor attendance: one year after this scheme was introduced visitor numbers were up 23% on the previous year, with a 35% increase in first-time visitors and a 29% increase in minority ethnic visitors (DMA, 2015). Crucially, this new approach also led to an increase in donations: annual donors of $100-$500 went up 16%, annual donors of $1,000-$25,000 went up 19%, and contributed revenue from DMA partners rose by 5.5% within the first year of the introduction of this scheme (DMA, 2015).

The spirit of with

The innovation and creativity writer, Charles Leadbeater argues that there is a notable cultural shift away from things

being done *for* us towards a new model of things being done *with* us (2009). Describing how the age-old rhetoric of politicians working "for us" is being cast aside by a new rhetoric of "we did this together", he suggests that, "The spirit of with took Barack Obama to the White House as thousands upon thousands of volunteers organised over the web and took to the phones to get out the vote". The principle of *with* is that knowledge is co-produced and comes from multiple diverse sources including traditionally qualified experts but also enthusiasts and "Pro-Ams". This new ethos, which is being facilitated by Web 2.0, is already breeding new kinds of organisations from NetMums to Wikipedia. These organisations gain social capital not from the expertise of core voices, but from the diversity and multiplicity of voices which create content for them. Social capital is a term used to mirror financial capital, but social connections replace money in this system of capital (Gauntlett, 2011: 129). Although a number of writers have sought to define social capital, it is Pierre Bourdieu's three-tier model which provides us with the clearest insight into the complexities of capital within contemporary society (1986). Bourdieu defines capital as having three components: cultural, social and economic. *Cultural capital* refers to formal knowledge, education and an appreciation of high culture from opera to the fine arts. *Social capital* is based on one's network of friends, allies and associates, while *economic capital* is based on financial assets. In an increasingly networked world social capital has increasing importance for cultural organisations.

Inviting people in is not as simple as opening the doors – Leadbeater points out that if that was the case, "Starbucks could claim to be the world's leading art business" (2009: 10).

The challenge is to create an open culture and to work with diverse voices rather than simply a self-appointed guild of geeks. As Gauntlett reminds us, "social capital is a resource based on trust and shared values" (2011: 133). Trust is something which needs to come from both within and outside the museum institution, and understanding is central to creating a trusting relationship between participants and institutions.

This shift towards Web 2.0-led models of design, management and visitor experience challenges traditional models of participation in museums as they require participation to be more holistic than the traditional opt-in, time-constrained, workshop or programme facilitated by a member of staff. Instead, what we see is a push towards a model of mass participation. Visitors want to be able to opt-in and opt-out, through means and approaches museums may not be comfortable or even familiar with. The challenge, then, is for museums to support and facilitate emerging modes of digitally-enabled participation in a way which both protects and emancipates their collections. Within the context of ever-evolving participatory practices, Kidd highlights the need for continual professional development to support new ways of working, and the ever-changing relationships museum professionals have with their visitors:

> Those working at the sharp end of project delivery have to act in a number of roles: as facilitators, experts, institutional representatives, technicians and perhaps even counsellors. This simultaneity can be intensely challenging, and raises questions about the ethics of participatory work. Training in these areas is paramount, but time for staff development is at a premium. (Kidd, 2014: 15)

The useful museum

By moving towards a collaborative model of management and programming, museums can take steps towards becoming "useful" and "active" places. Reflecting upon his appointment as Director of MAK Frankfurt in 1999 with a mission to "reawaken the sleeping museum and to restore it to its former vitality", Bradburne examines the idea of the useful museum, suggesting that a museum must offer "facilities which can be used, rather than just visited" (Bradburne, 2001: 78).

Bradburne develops the idea of the useful museum by suggesting that museums no longer want sponsors, instead they want partners. Furthermore, they no longer want visitors, instead they want users. Again we see the argument for moving visitors from the margins to the core, for changing how museums engage with visitors from finite workshops to museums shaped by and for visitors. One theme across the literature reviewed so far is that those who advocate co-creation, openness and partnership do it not based on wholesome ideals, but instead see it as a business imperative, something which is also evident in Bradburne:

> Returning to the idea of partnership, as an essential ingredient in a sustainable financial strategy based on use... a key difference between sponsorship and partnership is that partnerships – being long-term relationships – are based on shared values. It is no longer a case of taking the money and running as with one-time sponsorships. (Bradburne, 2001: 78)

In *Embracing the Desire Lines – Opening Up Cultural Infrastructure*

(2009) Fleming also notes the move towards porous organisational structures. These moves towards open and porous cultural organisations are a radical affront to traditional temples of power, those grand Victorian buildings that "for so long have stood steadfast as examples as symbols of cultural continuity and comfort" (Fleming, 2009: 1). For him, the need to become more open and porous is centred on the issue of relevance: cultural organisations need to appeal to the public if they are to survive. In a broad sweep he cites approaches ranging from "co-commissioning and co-curating, connecting the knowledge, content and tastes of different communities" and suggests that this should happen throughout the institution both onsite and online (Fleming, 2009: 13). However, again we are reminded that openness, partnership and collaboration in any forms are not easy: "to open the doors a little wider is to encourage vulnerability as much as innovation and opportunity" (Fleming, 2009: 20).

The open museum

At the 2011 Showcase conference, Andrew Hetherington of Business to Arts (an Irish version of the UK's Arts & Business) argued that simply "sustaining the sector is boring"; arts patrons have a role to play, arts audiences thrive on participation and seek authenticity (Murphy, 2011). Moving from a visitor model to one in which visitors are invited to become creative and active members of a museum community could provide museums with the opportunity to develop mutually beneficial relationships with niche groups and creative communities. Simon's *The Participatory Museum* presents a model based on scaffolding engagement and cites numerous examples of how such an approach can help museums

develop stronger relationships with visitors (Simon, 2010). This approach is exemplified by Open Field, a three year long project developed by Walker Arts in 2010 to challenge established ideas about what art and participation look like within a museum. The project invited anyone (not just artists) to propose an activity which would take place on the lawn of the museum with the least mediation possible. In an introduction to a book published as part of this project Sarah Schultz and Sarah Peters from the Walker Art Centre, explain Open Field's underlying principles:

> Grounded in the belief that creative agency is a requirement for sustaining a vital public and civic sphere, it nurtures the free exchange of ideas, experimentation and serendipitous interactions. Whether hosting a collective of artists building a schoolhouse, a pickling demonstration, or a raucous group of children rolling down a hill, Open Field attempts to break with a number of timeworn conventions about the role of museums, creativity and public life. (Schultz & Peters, 2011: 19)

This project is extreme in its openness and included activities as diverse as an Internet Cat Video Festival, and a workshop called Car Theft for Kids (which taught kids how to break into cars, and out of cars – should they find themselves in a hostage situation). In a publication associated with this project, Ippolito notes:

> It's a lot easier for museums to give lip service to the commons than to tear down the stanchions keeping the mummies and Monet's at arm's length. Yet museums

> must question their identity as gatekeeper, whether of the zookeeper or cashier variety, if they are to remain relevant in the age of the remix. (Ippolito, 2011: 74)

This project used four guidelines and twelve rules to guide participation; rules which sought to scaffold experience (for example, encourage people to participate) but discouraged reckless or dangerous behaviour were heavily debated within the museum. In a chapter titled When Bad Things Don't Happen, Peters reflects on the development journey within the museum, and the positive outcomes of the project (hence the chapter the title), which could be described as critical praxis since it tests, challenges and refines established theory and participatory models through creative practice. Open Field was the polar opposite of a curated exhibition with associated branding, but it was this imperfection and critical praxis that created a valuable dialogue about the role and purpose of Walker, a dialogue that happened not within the walls of the museum, but instead on its front lawn for all to see. A lasting legacy of the project is a move away from the list of rules that underpinned this project towards a new participatory framework called, "*meeting*, making opportunities for casual visitors to have encounters" (Schultz, 2015). The evaluation metrics for this project were based on sentiment rather than visitor numbers.

From visitors to users

> Most institutions prefer to experiment with participation behind closed doors. Cultural institutions have a long history of prototyping new projects with focus

> groups. Some museums co-develop exhibitions with community members, whether to represent the unique experience of certain ethnic groups or to showcase works of amateur art. These participatory design processes are often institutionally defined, time-limited, and involve a small number of visitors. (Simon, 2011: 3)

In an increasingly digital world, technology and remix culture has opened up the avenues to participation. No longer do visitors need to be invited to participate, nor does participation necessarily need to exist within the scaffolded confines of museum practice. Increasingly, participation is becoming self-directed, with visitor-generated participatory practices existing in parallel to facilitated participatory opportunities offered by an institution. For some visitors, this means a quick snap on their phone, the addition of a funny comment, a physical response such as copying the pose in a painting, or editing a work of art using digital filters or text overlay, while for other visitors participation can be more sophisticated, longer-term, and strategic, from dedicated blogs to websites and apps. Digital appropriation provides the opportunity for museum users to put a personal stamp on a museum's collection and for the most part to provide a positive addition to the work of a museum. These public modes of self-directed participation have the potential to gain memetic traits online, which can prove challenging for museums which are traditionally the party retaining the balance of power in participatory and co-created experiences. Self-directed participation exists beyond the parameters of governance and strategy and such participation is arguably more holistic and genuine, helping to put both

museum and visitor or user on an equal power footing.

There are numerous examples of projects which take the form of cultural appropriation initiated by individuals rather than museums. These include Nipples at The Met where an artist has undertaken the challenge of photographing every nipple on display in the Metropolitan Museum. Another project of note is Ugly Renaissance Babies a blog where people are invited to take photos of ugly babies in Renaissance paintings or to comment on those uploaded by others. A similar project, Gangstas of Art History, recontextualises traditional paintings by providing an alternative narrative; the blog's tag line sums up both its irreverence and cultural relevance: *Symbolic gestures? Nah. These guys and gals of art history were throwin' up gang signs like nobody's business*. These visitor-initiated participatory projects change how we perceive the paintings they feature. This phenomenon recontextualises the gallery space and creates alternative modes of interpretation which exist in parallel to that of the official museum narrative. There is limited evidence to show us what museums think about such approaches – but perhaps a truly participatory culture would see museums adopt and embrace such creative approaches to interpreting their collections.

It is important to remember that it is not just artists who are appropriating museum collections; everyday visitors are also adding narrative, content and context in a digital form. Whilst this is not a new, or uniquely digital, phenomenon, the reach of such participation is greater than ever before. No longer is such work contained within the confines of a community gallery space; now museums and visitors have equal access to social media platforms. As Figure 1 demonstrates,

FIG. 1: A MoMA visitor takes a smartphone picture. Photograph: Oonagh Murphy, June 2012.

some visitors will simply take an image and share it with friends via social media, text or email, while others will make their own mark on the collection and disseminate this. Figure 2 shows a visitor interacting with a work by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, on display at MoMA. The piece is part of a series called *Study in Perspective* in which the artist photographed himself sticking the middle finger up to places of power and influence. By replicating this action the visitor added a new layer to Ai Weiwei's work; rather than reading a label the visitor chose to engage with the work through his mobile phone.

These examples demonstrate that not all visitors engage with museums solely through the interpretative lens of the museum. Instead they use their own creative vision to interpret, reinterpret and engage with museum spaces and collections. It could be argued that all visitor experiences are inherently participatory since visitors always add their own layer of content and narrative to museum collections. Perhaps it is how visitor participation is mediated and not the intellectual exchange which has been radically changed through digital culture.

Psychology researcher Linda Henkel carried out two interesting studies with undergraduate students. In one she asked students to take photos of their museum visit, and in the other to take photos of details and elements of objects they liked (Henkel, 2013). After their visit, students were asked to complete a memory test. Henkel concluded that photography could impair a visitor's memory when they take a point-and-shoot approach. However the research suggests photos might help museum-goers remember their trip in the long term, but only if they actively review and interact with the pictures rather than just amass them (Cannon, 2013). This interactive

FIG. 2: A MoMA visitor replicates the action shown in Ai Weiwei's *Study of Perspective - Berne*. Photograph: Oonagh Murphy, June 2012.

approach is reflected in Figures 1 and 2.

Visitor appropriation is a significant and challenging phenomenon. While curators may find self-initiated participation irreverent, many visitors and non-visitors can relate to these images and stories more easily than to typical gallery labels. The creative content produced by visitors often has a vernacular or viral quality which encourages sharing. This memetic trend is problematic for museums. On the one hand it provides access to its collection to a worldwide audience, but on the other hand it may trivialise the collection. The meme of the museum artefact can become more (in)famous than the original.

Inviting disruptive ideas in

The Metropolitan Museum's 3D Scanning and Printing Hackathon, held in June 2012, provides a useful case study of the bureaucratic complexities of scaffolding participation and inviting open-ended dialogue with collections.

This two-day event was the culmination of months of internal and external negotiation, compromise and partnership development. The Hackathon was developed by The Met's Media Lab in partnership with MakerBot. The format provided the museum with a valuable opportunity to see how experts in this area, from both an art and technology perspective, could use 3D printing as a means to respond to the collection. As former director of the Media Lab, Don Undeen, explains:

> We wanted to learn more about this technology and its potential, and by working with artists in re-interpreting our collection, we're continuing the Met's long history of working with artists in this manner, in more traditional

> mediums. (Undeen, personal communication, 2013)

Whilst the Met's Hack Day was a much-negotiated event, in reality there is nothing to stop a visitor taking a series of still images and (using software such as 123D Catch which was used at the Hackathon) creating a 3D cache of the object and printing a 3D replica of a museum object at home. Since the Hackathon, a number of participants have visited other museums, such as the Art Institute of Chicago, to photograph the collection and create 3D scans of objects on display. By inviting open-ended participation, the Met has been able to build a community of co-creators, conspirators and agents of change, with whom they have continued to work through their Digital Media Lab.

In the Netherlands, the Rijksmuseum has made 125,000 high-resolution images available online, inviting visitors to use them freely for both personal or commercial purposes (Gorgels, 2013). This open invitation to participate can be seen as a radical approach to participation since the openness of the invitation lays the foundation for both "tyranny" and "chaotic" storytelling (Kidd, 2014: 13). Providing access and removing traditional rules for the use of images arguably helps challenge the power imbalances of participatory practices. Taco Dibbitts, Director of Collections at the Rijksmuseum, suggests images could be used to create such things as tattoos, iPad covers and more:

> If [visitors] want to have a Vermeer on their toilet paper, I'd rather have a very high-quality image of Vermeer on toilet paper than a very bad reproduction. (Siegal, 2013)

Whilst the approach taken by the Rijksmuseum is revolutionary,

it reflects the increasing pressure on museums to justify their value not just in terms of their ability to collect and care for objects but also "their ability to take such objects and put them to some worthwhile use" (Weil, 2003: 59).

Facilitating disruptive participation

In striving for greater participation, museums face a challenge: do they encourage open-ended participation or scaffold a more participatory model of facilitated visitor engagement.

New modes of visitor participation challenge the traditional power relationships which have underpinned museums from the enlightenment to the present day. Appropriation, participation and art did not begin with the internet: from Guttenberg's printing press to Andy Warhol's Soup Cans, what was once copying is now art. The difference is that those doing the copying may now have a bigger online following than the museum which owns the original, which can create a power struggle between a museum and its visitors. Gauntlett, for example, discusses how YouTube has changed user relationships with traditional media sources because of "the knowledge that they can be creators, and not just receivers, of inventive media'"(Gauntlett, 2011). The challenge for museums is to understand how this paradigm shift impacts visitor expectations and participatory practices. What is clear is that since the publication of *The Participatory Museum* we have seen a shift in the definition and parameters of participatory practice away from the education department and towards the broad business objectives of successful museums. The museums which truly embrace the principle of "with" rather than "for" recognise that there really is more knowledge outside the walls of the museum than within.

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