

*Challenging notions of Homogeneity and celebrating
'difference' in display, education and interpretation
strategies in museums and galleries*

Dr. Sylvia Lahav October 30 2018

Dr Sylvia Lahav is a lecturer at Goldsmiths College, University of London, in the Institute of Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship. Here she teaches an MA module called Education, Interpretation and Communication in the Art Museum and two post graduate courses, Museums and Galleries as Creative Entrepreneurs and Museums and Galleries as Creative Entrepreneurs.

Art History has taught us that the path we have taken in pursuit of grand narratives and an established artistic canon has resulted in an almost blanket acceptance of notions of what is great art and who are the genius artists. But in following this path, we have been guilty of devastating mistakes, and made ourselves complicit in the perpetuation of glaring omissions and an obstinate unwillingness to look at world art as precisely that, a history of the art produced in all corners of the world, rather than a history of the art produced by (mainly) white Western, dead men. As Michael O'Toole says, 'Art History compensates for our powerlessness in the face of comprehensiveness by narrowing and aestheticizing the totality of fugitive facts into a digestible narrative: not just **'A'** Story of Art, but **'The'** Story. This involves certain reductions, or oversimplifications, that are also of theoretical interest and political consequences' (O'Toole, 178).

Theoretical interest and political consequences are always present (and often dominant) in matters of cultural consumption and it is these considerations that frame the methodologies we adopt and the assumptions we make regarding a common good practice for museums and cultural

policy decisions. Curators have historically believed that they, more than anyone, are immune from discussions involving anything other than display related issues but as Mussai says, 'I believe in curatorial activism. For me, the provision of a critical context, to find a balance between aesthetics and politics is always key- to act with a sense of urgency, contemporary relevance and a commitment to the future'ⁱⁱ ¹

Happily, it is this sense of activism and revisionism that has meant that curators have of late, sought to address these historically skewed views of art history and Tate for example has now developed a particularly strident attitude to its collecting strategy, proudly announcing that it 'is committed to expanding the geographical remit of its collection'. They have set up a number of specialist committees, to expand the collection in a way that matches its ambition to be 'shaped by a truly global vision. In 2000, for example, the Board of Trustees extended Tate's collecting remit to include art from regions such as Africa, South Asia, Latin America, Australia, China, Eastern Europe, Russia and the Middle East. Diverse and inclusive, Tate's international collection continues to explore transnational themes and the diversification of form and material to be found in international contemporary art'. 'These groups include the North American Acquisitions Committee and Latin American Acquisitions Committee, which fund specific acquisitions acquired on behalf of the American Fund for Tate. In addition there are six further Committees; the Asia-Pacific Acquisitions Committee, Middle East and North Africa Acquisitions Committee, Photography Acquisitions Committee, Africa Acquisitions Committee, Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee, and the South Asia Acquisitions Committee'ⁱⁱⁱ.

So grand narratives like politically constructed walls and falsely erected barriers, are finally being revised and reassessed, even in extreme cases dramatically demolished and public museums are now aggressively and actively

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involved in collecting art from countries that have hitherto suffered neglect as well as a shocking lack of interest.

All well and good, collecting is now reflecting a new view of a new world but worryingly this geographical, intellectual and political pluralism seems to have by-passed the way in which we make decisions about display methodology, or seating or shopping or interpreting or educating. For some reason in these 'practical' matters we suddenly revert to a one size fits all strategy talking about 'museums' as if they are all created in the same mould and previously acknowledged 'best practice' in museum structure, management and policy remain unchallenged. If we are to really change our ideas of museum management these critical areas of our work must also be scrutinised, put under the spotlight and questioned in terms of what is assumed to be relevant, appropriate, right and good regarding many of the issues mentioned above as well as the continuing prioritisation of an accepted display methodology which takes its place assumes a dominant role in curatorial practice but must, as a matter of urgency, be replaced with a strategy which celebrates difference and specificity.

We need for example to ask questions like, how do we make decisions about museum interpretation (in each specific museum), what are the aims and objectives of museum education (for a specific collection and particular audience), and what is the nature of a successful museum communication strategy (how is marketing perceived and how is it used?).

We have worked hard to attract new audiences, build new spaces and create new ideologies but consultants still travel the world talking about museum issues as if they apply to any museum, in any part of the world with any type of collection and visitors as if they are all of these form a homogenised mass.

This paper is suggesting that rather than smugly producing a 'one size fits all' model of excellent practice, cultural consultants should apply themselves to trying to understand the particular needs of individual museums and culturally different groups of visitors.

Cultural difference is relevant not only for work that is collected but also the needs of the visitor, the methodology adopted for attracting visitors, access, income generation, exhibition policy, education. In short, a museum strategy that takes the best examples of good practice but also encourages debate around what it means to build a museum for the 21st century.

Acquiring art that is produced in areas of the world that is not as yet naturally accepted as the new 'New York' or Paris is actually a 'win win' for museums and galleries. The work is less expensive, the market is not already flooded and the shift in curatorial focus is seen as bold and forward thinking. Interpreting this new work also creates a new dialogue that is both politically and socially challenging.

So the work acquired and the interpretation of it, are both moving positively in the right direction.

But museums are buildings of finite space and concrete (in every sense of the word) ideas. Display must still 'fit' these empty vessels and look and feel right and display strategy must also accord with the modern visiting experience.

Rosalind Krauss says,

'The sudden opening in the wall of a given gallery to allow a glimpse of a far away object, and thereby to interject within the collection of these objects, a reference to the order of another. The pierced partition, the open balcony, the interior window - circulation in museums, 'is as much visual as physical and that visual experience is a constant decentering through the continual pull of something else, another exhibit, another relationship, another formal order, inserted within this one gesture which is simultaneously one of interest and

of distraction: the serendipitous discovery of the museum as flea market'^{iv}

And even though many museum collections are now more international, the way in which they think about their visitors is still treated as a homogenous entity.

Lectures for adults are still one hour long and more often than not take place in an auditorium, 'The traditional lecture is still one of the most common teaching methods, since it has the advantage of being able to reach many students' in one economical time slot'^{vi}

The economics of an hour-long lecture are obvious. As the article states reaching one hundred people makes perfect financial sense. But is an hour long lecture necessarily the most appropriate method of engaging adult audiences who are more used to the less concentrated manner of receiving information on their smart phones? The idea that children respond better to interactive shorter sessions in front of a work of art but adults need a more static delivery is, in my view another myth in the category of 'accepted' good practice.

School children have their tailor made sessions linked to the national curriculum and follow themes that are as much to do with history or geography or architecture or philosophy as they are about any formal qualities of what it means to make art.

We are facing a dilemma. The museum is presenting itself as a perfect space for individual thinking, risk taking and blue sky thinking as well as a fertile environment for plurality of interpretation and multiple meaning making (see Tate Modern's opening strategy document), but resources are finite and faced with the choice of more free education programmes or a new coffee bar or shop, the financial and commercial wins through and education is treated as a financially lucrative venture rather than an access for all opportunity.

And even more problematic, education must be sponsored and paid for and this inevitably brings a standardisation to the concept of 'free thinking' and new theory.

In Zygmunt Bauman's *The Individualised society*, he suggests that 'the overwhelming feeling of crisis experienced by philosophers, theorists and the practitioners of education alike, in a greater or smaller measure, that current version of the 'living at the crossroads' feeling, the feverish search for a new self- definition and ideally a new identity as well - these have little to do with the faults, errors or negligence of the professional pedagogues or failures of educational theory, but quite a lot to do with the universal melting of identities...^{vii}' (Bauman: 127).

It seems to me that there are three critical positions:

1. The museum is a universally understood concept with generic values and aims and objectives that can be packaged and sold across the world.
2. We can talk about good practice as it applies to display, interpretation, education even orientation as if these categories apply to a museum visiting public worldwide.
3. Every museum has a collection and can only be understood in relation to and respect of, that collection.

Taking these categories individually, the first and second, accepting generic values and commonly understood aims and objectives will immediately alert us to problems and difficulties.

I was recently invited by a cultural foundation in Doha to teach middle managers working in the museum sector adopt new ways of making their museums more entrepreneurial.

As a long-term employee of four of London's larger public museums (Tate Britain, Tate Modern the NPG, the V&A) and a lecturer in museums and entrepreneurship at Goldsmiths, I

felt that I knew something about this topic. Increasing visitors would always be crucial and addressing hard to reach specific audience groups like teenagers and non-white western visitors. Evening events, introducing music, refreshments and alcoholic beverages is always a good way of attracting visitors.

But these categories were fairly useless when applied to Doha. For one thing, it is more or less unheard of that group of teenagers might take public transport and visit later in the evening. Indeed public transport is almost non-existent.

Alcohol and music have no specific appeal and as staffing of major museums is predominantly Emirati there is no real appetite for late night events.

In addition to all these previously assumed to be 'win-win' methods of extending audiences, in conversation with my students I was told that one seriously neglected area of comfort for visitors was a lack of large seats that could be used by extended families, a common group of museum visitors in this part of the world.

So no accepted lines of communication here.

Then we move to display. Western museums of art like Tate and MoMa have commonly accepted that a thematic hang is preferable to one that is broadly chronological. Curators who were responsible for Tate Modern's new hang justify their decision as follows: 'works of art are rarely encountered in isolation. They are experienced in relation to each other and articulated by the architectonics of a building and the unconscious choreography of other people' (Tate Handbook: 31).

Choreography is not an uncommon way of thinking about the curatorial role in modern museums, 'Where once plain old chronology dictated how we consumed one story of art, now we are lulled into thinking that 'plurality' automatically stands for democracy. And all this cunningly incorporated

into displays choreographed by curators who choose to offer us art in their own newly devised patterns of theme and contrast, 'splicing and dicing art works into a kind of visual MTV'^{viii}

This notion of a choreographed, dream/derige-like experience of visiting an art museum seems at first to be very modern and contemporary but how realistic is this?

'The museum is no longer, according to Boris Groys, 'a place set apart for pure aesthetic contemplation, opposed to the external world of social praxis...rather it strives to 'erase the boundary between the museum and the surrounding world in order to lend the museum a social function and integrate it into its milieu while at the same time striving to conceive of the entire space of life as the object of aesthetic experience'^{ix}

Generic ideas about education are also dangerous. Art education varies massively from country to country and any assumption that children can be brought to museums as part of their national curriculum can only work if the said curriculum supports museum visits. Anna Cutler, Director of Learning at Tate says,

'Despite the differences inherent in the practices of the formal and informal, what one cannot help but notice is the way in which the organising structures of formal learning are often applied to the informal, such that the concept of departments, sixty-minute transmission models, courses, a teacher imparting information, and a raft of quantitative assessment methods is still apparent'^x.

Emily Pringle goes further and quotes from artist and researcher Graeme Sullivan, who 'identified that visual art practices can be understood to provide models for learning that facilitate recognition of not only what is known, but of how something comes to be known'^{xi}

One might think that orientation is wholly acceptable as applicable to all audiences but even here differences occur. Krauss again,

'The sudden opening in the wall of a given gallery to allow a glimpse of a far away object, and thereby to interject within the collection of these objects, a reference to the order of another. The pierced partition, the open balcony, the interior window – circulation in museums, 'is as much visual as physical and that visual experience is a constant decentering through the continual pull of something else, another exhibit, another relationship, another formal order, inserted within this one gesture which is simultaneously one of interest and of distraction: the serendipitous discovery of the museum as flea market^{xii}'

Krauss is evoking a particularly twenty first century mode of negotiating space but visitor research tells us something different.

We know, says NHM's Chief Executive Elinor James, that 'visitors to cultural venues are far from Homogenous'...at any one time there is a massive range of different visits happening in cultural venues: visitors with diverse needs and wants, all responding in different ways to the facilities, services and artistic offering^{xiii} .

There are numerous visitor survey studies that use various categories for dividing museum visitors by interest or motivation. Morris Hargreaves McIntyre describe the museum as Church/Spa/Archive/Attraction with the following visitor drivers: Spiritual/Emotional/Intellectual and Social.

These bland categories achieve in my view yet another distillation of the differences and variables in visitors and museum experience.

So do we simply give up? If it is unrealistic to ever believe that we can adopt an individual approach to individual museums. I think not.

I feel very strongly that museums of art are formed around collections that matter, that demand their own display ideas,

their own interpretation, their own learning opportunities,
their own orientation strategy.

And if we ignore this, we risk developing a colonial attitude
to the dissemination of our excellent but very particular
knowledge.

- ⁱ O'Toole, M. (1994), *The language of displayed art*. London: Leicester University Press.
- ⁱⁱ 20 Curators Taking a Cutting Edge Approach to Art History. Surya Tubach and Casey Lesser
- ⁱⁱⁱ (Tate, About us, <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/collection>).
- ^{iv} Rosalind Krauss, Postmodernism's Museum Without Walls
- ^v <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/may/12/university-teaching>
- ^{vi} <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/may/12/university-teaching>
- ^{vii} Bauman, Z. (2001), *The individualized society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- ^{viii} Jed Perl, Contemplation and Magic: On the Essence of the Museum, Oxford Slade Series p18
- ^{ix} Boris Groys, (1994) *The Struggle against the Museum; or, The Display of Art in Totalitarian Space.*, University of Minnesota Press
- ^x Anna Cutler What is to be Done, Sandra
<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/13/what-is-to-be-done-sandra-learning-in-cultural-institutions-of-the-twenty-first-century>
- ^{xi} <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/22/perceptions-processes-ananti-practice-around-learning-in-an-art-gallery>
- ^{xii} Rosalind Krauss, Postmodernism's Museum Without Walls
- ^{xiii} <https://mhminsight.com/articles/visit-modes-2526>